

# The Beat Generation & American Culture

## Chuck Carlise

This course explores the origins, major works, and cultural after-effects of the Beat Movement. Students will explore the movement's significant texts as well as the biographical and cultural contexts in which they were written – including discussion of jazz, Eastern spirituality, drug culture, sexuality, concepts of sanity, race, gender, and class, and the evolution of the American Dream.

This course will be writing intensive, reading intensive, discussion-heavy, and interdisciplinary. It will feature weekly readings, in-class lectures and discussions, and several out-of-class film screenings and other events (attendance at two is required – including a one-page response on the films rolled into the “Out of Class Participation” grade).

Final grades will be based primarily on class participation and two essays and a final writing project. The first essay will be narrative in nature: students will critically explore the idea of friendship and influence in their own lives. The second will be a comparative essay that compares a figure or work from the course to a contemporary analog. The final project will be either (1) an exploratory essay in which students use Beat texts to explore a larger critical or philosophical idea (Mark Doty's “Form, Eros, and the Unspeakable: Whitman's Stanzas” is my paradigm for this style); or (2) produce a creative response to the course, along with a written critical introduction. By the end of the course, students should not only have a deeper understanding of the Beats and their cultural milieu, but also become better practiced in several types of academic investigation and college-level writing.

### Attached:

- Required Texts
- Grading Summary
- Course Calendar

### Required Texts:

*The Portable Beat Reader*. Ann Charters, ed. Penguin, 1992.

*On the Road*. Jack Kerouac. (Any unabridged edition.)

Further course readings on eCommons/Canvas will be required.

### Grading Summary:

Narrative Paper	20%
Comparative Essay	20%
Final Project	30%
Out-of-Class Participation	5%
In-Class Participation	<u>25%</u>
	100%

## Course Calendar:

### Week One            Setting the Scene: How to Understand the Beats

Tues:    Syllabus & Discuss Generations

Thurs:    50s Context

Reading: **Ann Charters**, “Variations on a Generation” (Charters xv-xxxvi)

Reading: **John Clellon Holmes**, “This is the Beat Generation” (eCommons)

Optional Screening: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)

### Week Two            Jazz / Spontaneity

Tues:    Jazz

Reading: **John Leland** – “The Golden Age of Hip, Part 1: Bebop, Cool Jazz, and the Cold War” (eCommons)

Thurs:    Kerouac & Spontaneous Prose

Reading: **Jack Kerouac** – biography, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”; (Charters 8-10, 58-9)

Reading: **Neal Cassady** – biography (Charters 187-190)

Reading: **Ann Charters** – “The Best Minds of a Generation” (Charters 1-8)

Optional Screening: *The Source* (1999)

### Week Three            Jack Kerouac / *On the Road*

Tues:    *On the Road*

Reading: **Jack Kerouac** – *On the Road*

Thurs:    *On the Road*, cont’d

Reading: **Jack Kerouac** – *On the Road*

Optional Performance: Jazz Performance (TBA)

### Week Four            San Francisco Scene

Tues:    *On the Road*, finish

Reading: **Jack Kerouac** – *On the Road*

Thurs:    San Francisco Renaissance

Reading: **Ann Charters** – “Constantly Risking Absurdity” (Charters 227-33)

Reading: **Bob Kaufman** – biography & all poem selections (Charters 328-9)

Reading: **Jack Spicer** – “Imaginary Elegies I – IV” (eCommons)

Reading: **Lawrence Ferlinghetti** – “Dog” (eCommons)

Optional Out of Class: Poetry Reading (TBA)

**Week Five**            Allen Ginsberg / “Howl”

Tues:    “Howl”

Reading: **Allen Ginsberg** – biography, “Howl,” “America,” “A Supermarket in California” (Charters 71-7); “On Neal’s Ashes” (eCommons)

Thurs:    “Howl” & the World

Reading: **Lawrence Ferlinghetti** – biography; “Horn on Howl” (Charters 245-8)

Optional Screening: *Howl* (2010)

**Due: Narrative Essay**

**Week Six**            Gary Snyder / Spirituality & the Natural World

Tues:    Nature & the Spirit of the West

Reading: **Gary Snyder** – biography, “Mid-August by Sourdough Mountain Lookout”; “Milton by Firelight” (Charters 288-90); “Water”; “Hay for the Horses”; “Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier than Students of Zen”; “After Bamyian” (eCommons)

Thurs:    Spirituality and Zen

Reading: **Jack Kerouac** – excerpt from *Dharma Bums* (eCommons)

Optional Out of Class: Santa Cruz Zen Center (TBA)

**Week Seven**            William S. Burroughs / *Naked Lunch*

Tues:    Desperation, Drugs, & Paranoia

Reading: **William S. Burroughs** – biography (Charters 102-4); excerpts from *Naked Lunch* (eCommons)

Thurs:    Mind Control & the Cut-Ups

Reading: **William S. Burroughs** – *The Soft Machine* (eCommons)

Optional Screening: *Naked Lunch* (1996)

**Week Eight**            Fellow Travelers, part 1: Women, Race & the Beats

Tues:    Race, Gender, & the Era

Reading: **Ann Charters** – “A Few Blue Words to the Wise (Charters 331-8)

Reading: **LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka** – biography & all poem selections (Charters 339-342)

Reading: **Diane DiPrima** – biography & all poem selections (Charters 360-3)

Thurs:    A Woman’s Place?

Reading: **Joyce Johnson** – excerpts from *Minor Characters* (eCommons)

Optional Out of Class: (TBA)

**Week Nine** Fellow Travelers, part 2: *The New American Poetry*

Tues: The New American Poetry

Reading: **Black Mountain School: Robert Creeley** – “I Know a Man” (eCommons)

Reading: **New York School: Frank O’Hara** – “The Day Lady Died” (eCommons)

Reading: **Gregory Corso** – “Bomb,” “I Am 25” (eCommons)

Reading: **Lew Welch** – “Chicago Poem” (eCommons)

Thurs: Confessional Poets

Reading: **Sylvia Plath** – “Lady Lazarus,” “Daddy” (eCommons)

Reading: **Anne Sexton** – “With Mercy for the Greedy” (eCommons)

Reading: **Robert Lowell** – “Acceptance Speech for Pulitzer Prize” (eCommons)

Optional Out of Class: Art Gallery Visit (TBA)

**Week Ten** Legacy of the Beats

Tues: Beats vs. Beatniks

Reading: excerpt from **Norman Mailer** – “The White Negro” (Charters)

Reading: excerpt from **Anatole Broyard** – “Reflections on the Hipster” (Charters)

Thurs: Legacy

Listening: **Bob Dylan** – “It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding,” “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” **Janis Joplin** – “Mercedes Benz,” **Patti Smith** – “Horses,” **The Clash**, “Ghetto Defendant” (eCommons)

Listening: **Anis Mojgani, Patricia Smith, Regie Gibson, Saul Williams** (various poems)

Reading: **Hunter S. Thompson** – excerpt from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (eCommons)

Optional Out of Class: Post Class Salon (TBA)

**Week Eleven** Finals Week

**Due: Comparative Essay**

**Post-Script:**

The above is calibrated for a lower-division literature course and emphasizes direct engagement with the materials of the Beat Movement. An upper division course would likely add readings such as Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse,” Alan Watts’ “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen,” and a section to discuss the existing literary arguments that the Beats engaged (with readings such as T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and selections from both Whitman and the English Romantics, as well as the Harlem Renaissance).