

"The only people for me are the mad ones...": The Beat Generation & American Culture



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English 2316
Fall 2011
T/Th 11:30-1:00pm
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The Goal

This course will explore one of America's most significant counterculture movements: the Beats. We will read the foundational texts of writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Gary Snyder, as well as some more obscure or forgotten voices, contextualizing them within their time and tradition, and discovering ways in which we are still in dialog with them today. Though the Beat Movement was primarily a literary movement, the lives and times of the writers themselves will also be considered at length. Thus biographical and cultural context will be a part of the class, as well as some discussion of jazz, Eastern spirituality, drug culture, sexuality, concepts of sanity, race, gender, and class, and the evolution of the American Dream. If this sounds like we're covering a lot of ground, we are.

The class will include two short papers and a final project, but will be heavily weighted toward discussion and participation (as you'll see below). We will also have a number of optional out-of-class activities (film screenings, readings, some other stuff) that we'll discuss and (hopefully) be able to manage.

Though all of us live with the echoes of these writers every day, the Beats are still somewhat controversial in academic circles, and are not taught nearly as often as other literary movements. So we have an exciting opportunity here. It is my hope that everyone will emerge from this class not only with a more thorough understanding of this particular movement and the pressures that both formed it and were changed by it, but also what we can learn from this stuff today – why it all still matters.

What to Expect

This class is extremely reading-intensive. There will be poems, stories, essays and bits of cultural context to read for pretty much every class, and much of the course will be driven by in-class discussion of the texts. This means that you **MUST** keep up with the reading for each week.

This course is also extremely discussion-heavy. There will be moments where I lecture in order to contextualize what we're reading, but the bulk of the course will be driven by the conversation between scholars (you guys as well as me). I don't expect anyone to enter the class as an expert, but I do expect everyone to engage in the discussion. My advice: find things that are interesting and ask about them (ask yourself as well as the class). Being open and interested in the work is essential to getting through this course. It will be a long semester for the un-curious.

Finally, this course will be writing intensive. There are two papers to prepare, as well as a final project. It is an English course; this should not be a surprise.

Required Texts:

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

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

Further course readings on Blackboard will be required.

Grading Summary:

| | |
|-------------------|------------|
| Narrative Paper | 15% |
| Comparative Essay | 20% |
| Final Project | 25% |
| Participation | <u>40%</u> |
| | 100% |

Attendance Policy

This course RELIES on a conversation between people. Therefore, your presence is absolutely necessary (note: this means being on-time as well). We will be doing a number of in-class writing exercises that cannot be made-up, and most of the remaining assignments will be discussed at length in class. In addition, I will be taking attendance.

You get four absences for free. No need to excuse yourself or ask permission. No doctor's note, no coach's note. They're yours. Starting with the fifth, you lose 10% with every absence. We have only 29 scheduled class meetings, so five absences is almost 20% of the course.

Having a cell phone, iPod, or laptop out during class will be treated as an absence. As soon as class starts up, put this stuff away. I'm not a lecture-style professor anyway, but it also drives me nuts when people pull this stuff out in class, so if I see it, I won't even feel bad marking you absent. Also, I may or may not bother telling you that you've been busted (in most cases, I won't want to disrupt the flow of a conversation) but that doesn't mean I didn't see it. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Academic Support Services:

"In compliance with the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the **Center for Students with DisABILITIES (CSD)** provides 'reasonable and necessary' testing accommodations for qualified students with health impairments, physical limitations, psychiatric disorders, and learning disabilities." Students who want to know more about these services should consult the Student Handbook, or should contact CSD in Room 110 of the Justin Dart, Jr. Center for Students with DisABILITIES (building #568), 713-743-5400 (voice) or 713-749-1527 (TTY); www.uh.edu/csd.

The Class:WEEK ONE

8.23 - 8.25

Introduction & Opening / Setting the Scene

Read: *Beat Reader* xv-xxxvi (“Variations on a Generation”)WEEK TWO

8.30 - 9.1

Spontaneity / Jack Kerouac

Read: *Beat Reader* “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”Read: *Beat Reader* 187-211 Neal CassadyRead: *Beat Reader* Jack KerouacRead: *Beat Reader* from *Subterraneans*Read: handout (from *Town & the City*)WEEK THREE

9.6 - 9.8

On the Road

Read: part I & II

WEEK FOUR

9.13 - 9.15

On the Road

Read: parts III-V

Assigned: Narrative PaperWEEK FIVE

9.20 - 9.22

San Francisco Scene / Allen Ginsberg

Read: *Beat Reader* “Constantly Risking Absurdity”Read: *Beat Reader* Bob KaufmanRead: *Beat Reader* Allen GinsbergWEEK SIX

9.27 - 9.29

Modernism & the 50s / Sexuality & Sanity

Read: *Beat Reader* “America”

Read: handout T.S. Eliot

Read: handout Whitman, Ginsberg, etc.

Read: *Beat Reader* “A Supermarket in California”WEEK SEVEN

10.4 - 10.6

Howl

Read: *Beat Reader* “Howl”

WEEK EIGHT

10.11 - 10.13 Finishing Ginsberg / Culture in Flux

Read: handouts

Assigned: **Comparative Paper**

WEEK NINE

10.18 - 10.20 Gary Snyder / Buddhism & Eastern Spirituality

Read: *Beat Reader* from *Dharma Bums*

Read: *Beat Reader* Gary Snyder intro

WEEK TEN

10.25 - 10.27 *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* / City or the Woods

Read: handouts Gary Snyder

WEEK ELEVEN

11.1 - 11.3 *So we're not alone?* / Women & the Beats

Read: handout Joyce Johnson

Read: *Beat Reader* handout LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka

Read: *Beat Reader* Diane DiPrima

Read: *Beat Reader* Anne Waldman

Read: handout Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kendal, Elise Cowan

Assigned: **Final Project**

WEEK TWELVE

11.8 - 11.10 Other Figures / William S. Burroughs

Read: TBA

Read: *Beat Reader* Burroughs Intro

WEEK THIRTEEN

11.15 - 11.17 Language Theory / *Naked Lunch*

Read: handouts Cut-Up excerpts

Read: handout *Naked Lunch* excerpt

WEEK FOURTEEN

11.22 - 11.24 *Naked Lunch* / THANKSGIVING

Read: handout *Naked Lunch* excerpt

WEEK FIFTEEN

11.29 - 12.1 Ripples & Reverberations

THE END