

BEAT POETRY

Borrowed from the slang of jazz musicians and street hustlers, “beat” originally meant down and out, but writer Jack Kerouac also claimed a spiritual dimension for the word, using it to describe a beatific state. Reacting against post-World War II middle-class materialism and conformity, as well as the predominant mid-century aesthetic of academic formalism, Kerouac and his fellow Beats sought transcendence by embracing **jazz** and such **counter-culture** phenomena as illegal **drugs** and **Zen Buddhism**. Generally **meant to be performed** and heard, Beat poems often sought to shock their audience out of complacency. Ginsberg’s *Howl*, for example, made liberal use of bold, explicit gay imagery. The United States government reacted to *Howl* by seizing 520 copies and putting the book’s publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, on trial for obscenity. He was acquitted, and *Howl* has gone on to become a staple of college reading lists. The Beat influence lives on in the Spoken Word poetry movement.

Years of Prominence: 1950’s – 1960’s.

Geographical Locale: Urban centers, especially San Francisco & New York.

Primary Practitioners: Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Diane DiPrima. Although not directly connected to these poets, the LA street poet Charles Bukowski shares their outlier aesthetic and counter-culture sensibility.

For further study:

<http://www.litkicks.com/BeatGen/>

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-beat-poets>

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/browse#page=1&sort_by=recently_added&school-period=150

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat_Generation

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-beat-poetry.htm>