

Writing Seminar II: The Beat Generation

K10.0661, Spring 2008

Thursdays, 3:30-6:10

412 Silver

Penny Vlagopoulos

Email: ptv201@nyu.edu

Office: 715 Broadway, Room 404

Office Hours: Thursdays, 2:00-3:00 p.m. or by appointment

Phone: (212) 998-7372

Mailbox: 715 Broadway, 4th Floor reception area

Course Objectives

This course will help you improve your writing, both structurally and analytically. In addition to working on developing good arguments and strengthening your use of grammar, logic, and style, you will learn to refine your research techniques, including the use of the library, the principles of documentation, and incorporation of sources. You will write a series of shorter papers in preparation for a longer final research paper and presentation. Generally, we will spend the first half of the class discussing methods of analyzing texts, while the second half will be devoted to examining your papers and reviewing the mechanics of writing. A considerable amount of class time will be spent in workshop format, and you will be expected to share your writing and to participate in group critiques.

To be *Beat*, according to Jack Kerouac, meant being “watchful, catlike, inquisitive...It’s a sort of furtiveness...Like we’re a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there’s no use flaunting on that level, the level of the ‘public,’ a kind of beatness—I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all really know where we are—and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world.” As John Clellon Holmes explained it in his book *Go, Beat* meant a “bottled eagerness for talk, for joy, for excitement, for sensation, for new truths.” For Amiri Baraka, “The Beat Generation was a whole bunch of people, of all different nationalities, who came to the conclusion that society sucked.” Cultural critic Ann Douglas uses a broader approach: “The Beats’ primary purpose was to eliminate, by whatever method, the false note, the borrowed tone. As writers, what they shared was an insistence on immediate experience, a constant, palpably autobiographical focus, a distrust of conventional collective solutions, a keen comic eye for the incongruous and absurd, a restless push toward the Third World margins and urban back lots of industrial civilization, and a style intimately entangled with the arts of memory, honest at all costs, always alert to the funny, sad rhythms of the particular body moving through the strangeness of space and time.” From its inception, the Beat Generation has been redefined and reassessed in innumerable ways, inspiring an endless stream of passionate followers and critics. We will trace its articulations through the social, political, and cultural imperatives of its era, while considering the lasting legacy of both its aesthetic innovations and its challenge to conventional modes of defining self and society. At the heart of our analyses will be an examination of the formally experimental literature produced by the Beats, but we will also explore their intersections and exchanges with other expressive mediums.

The Beats were fundamentally preoccupied with technique. In turn, you should keep a methodological framework in mind as you write about their works. You will have some opportunity to write creatively, but the primary goal of this course is to develop your expository writing skills. The final research project will be based on one aspect of the Beat Generation that appeals to you.

Required Texts

William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*
Johnson, Joyce. *Minor Characters*.
Kerouac, Jack, *On the Road*.
Kerouac, Jack. *The Subterraneans*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
Readings on Blackboard

Required Films

A Streetcar Named Desire. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1951

Recommended Texts

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Sixth Edition. New York: MLA, 2003.
Hacker, Diana. *The Bedford Handbook*. 7th Edition. New York: Bedford/St Martins, 2006.

Required books can be purchased at Bluestockings, 172 Allen St. between Stanton and Rivington. Phone: (212) 777-6028. **Note: a Bluestockings employee will be coming to our 2nd class meeting with books for purchase.**

Required Writing

Three essays, 3-5 pages, first and final drafts.
One research paper, 10 pages, including outline.
Final presentation, 10-15 minutes, on research topic.

Essays should be typed, double-spaced, with 1” margins on each side, and stapled. You are expected to follow the MLA standard for using sources, which will be discussed in class.

Late papers will not be permitted.

Grading

Essays will comprise the majority of your grade. Papers may be revised for a possible grade change, but they must be submitted to me no later than one week after I have returned them to you. The final research paper will count as 2 papers. Class participation, attendance, and final presentations will also contribute to your final percentage.

Class Attendance and Participation

Class attendance is mandatory. If you need to miss class for any reason, please let me know ahead of time. More than two unexcused absences will result in a lower grade. Class participation is also mandatory. Since we will be analyzing readings and evaluating student papers in a seminar environment, the success of the course depends on your input. You are expected to contribute to class discussions and to constructive criticism of peers' writing. You should be aware that anything you write is subject to class discussion.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to refrain from any form of academic dishonesty, which includes, but is not limited to, presenting oral or written work which is not entirely your own, unless otherwise approved by the instructor. Penalties for infractions may be severe. You must be careful to cite your sources and avoid any suggestion of copying another person's work.

Background: The Beat Generation and the Cold War

January

24: Introduction.

31: Discussion of reading. Discussion of Paper #1.

Reading due:

Gregory Corso, Selections from "Variations on a Generation"
Ann Douglas, "City Where the Beats Were Moved to Howl"
Barbara Ehrenreich, Selections from *The Hearts of Men*
Allen Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra" and "America"
Jack Kerouac, "About the Beat Generation," "Lamb, No Lion," and "*Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation*"
Tom Lutz, Selections from *Doing Nothing*
Norman Podhoretz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians"
Begin *Naked Lunch*

Optional Reading: George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"
Norman Mailer, "The White Negro"

February

7: Discussion of reading. **Writing workshop.**

Reading due: First half of William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

Writing due: Rough Draft of Paper #1

8 (optional): Columbia University Howl Festival: *On the Road Turns 50*

3:30-5:30 p.m.: *On the Road: Then and Now* Panel discussion with Ann Douglas, Joyce Johnson, John Leland, and Penny Vlagopoulos

5:00 p.m.: The Author as Artist: Jack Kerouac & Friends (Reception and viewing of exhibit at Rare Book & Manuscript Library)

7:30 p.m.: HOWL: Reading of Original Student and Alumni Poetry

8:00-10:00 p.m.: HOWL: Readings and Jazz in Honor of Columbia's Beats

14: Discussion of reading.

Reading due: Second half of William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

21: Discussion of reading.

Reading due: First half of Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Neal Cassady, Letters and excerpt from *The First Third*

Writing due: Final Draft of Paper #1

22: Class trip to NYPL exhibit: Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac On the Road (Meet at exhibit entrance at 2:00 p.m.)

28: Discussion of reading. **Writing workshop.**

Reading due: Second half of *On the Road*

Writing due: Rough Draft of Paper #2

Improvisation and Abstract Expression: Jazz, Art, and Performance

March

6: Discussion of reading.

Reading due: Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*

Jack Kerouac, "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" & "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose"

Ann Douglas, "'Telepathic Shock and Meaning Excitement': Kerouac's Poetics of Intimacy"

13: Screening of *Pull My Daisy* and Guest Lecture by David Amram

Reading due: David Amram, "This Song's For You, Jack" and selections from *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac*

Anatole Broyard "Portrait of the Hipster"

Jack Kerouac, "The Beginning of Bop"

Eric Lott, "Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style"

Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process"

Optional Reading: Ralph Ellison, "Blues People"

LeRoi Jones, selections from *Blues People*

Writing due: Final Draft of Paper #2

20: Spring Break

27: Guest Lecture by Ed Adler on visual art and the Beats
Library Tour.

Reading due: Ed Adler, Selections from *Departed Angels: The Lost Paintings*

Evening: *Screening of A Streetcar Named Desire*. Time and place TBA.

April

3: *Discussion of A Streetcar Named Desire. Writing workshop.*

Reading due: Brian Hasset, “Abstract Expression: From Bird to Brando”

Writing due: Rough Draft of Paper #3

Beat Women

10: Discussion of readings.

Reading due: Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters*

Selections from Bonnie Bremser, *Troia*

Gregory Corso, “Marriage”

Selections from Diane DiPrima

Selections from Hettie Jones

Writing due: Final Draft of Paper #3

Final Research Project Proposal

The Beat Legacy

17: Discussion of readings.

Reading due: Kurt Cobain, Selections from *Journals*

Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent”

Daniel Pinchbeck, “Children of the Beats”

David L. Ulin, “The Disappearing Bohemian”

24: Finish discussion of readings. Student presentations.

May

1: Student Presentations

Writing due: Final Research Paper.