

## **Allen Ginsberg**

and the  
**Beat Movement**

“The only thing that can save  
the world is the reclaiming of  
awareness of the world.  
That’s what poetry does.”

—Allen Ginsberg

## **Essential Questions**

- What events led to the emphasis on conformity in the late 1940s and 1950s?
- What were the specific features of American society that the Beat Movement protested against?
- What is the function of art in an era of conformity?
- Is censorship of art ever justified?

## **The 1950s: The Age of Conformity**



Conformity made people feel safe in the Cold War era, when nuclear war seemed not only possible but imminent

The Beat Movement arose in the wake of World War II, when there were two superpowers remaining after the conflict: the United States and the Soviet Union. These two nations waged a “Cold War” that centered not only around military threats but political and social values as well. America had a two-party political system; the Soviet Union had only one, the Communist Party. Americans were profoundly religious in the 1950s, with over 60% attending weekly services. The Soviet Union was officially atheist and actively persecuted those who engaged in religious practices. The American economy was a free-market capitalist system; the Soviet Union had a planned, state-run economy in which no private enterprise was allowed. As the Soviets began to establish influence over the countries of eastern Europe after the war, the United States feared that the USSR had ambitions to conquer the democracies of western Europe and, ultimately, all of the Western Hemisphere. When the Soviet Union exploded its own atomic bomb in 1949, the United States feared that its military superiority was at risk. The government planned civil defense measures and recommended that people build bomb shelters for their families. No longer did communism pose a threat to American values—it also now threatened their very lives. These fears led people to focus on things that made them feel secure, particularly home and family.



Emphasis on:

- Family togetherness
- New consumer products



In the 1950s, pent-up spending power from wartime employment translated into a booming economy fueled by the needs of new families for homes and consumer goods. Suburban townships such as Levittown in Pennsylvania grew, offering houses that returning soldiers could afford with mortgage help under the G. I. Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act). Products that hadn't been made during wartime such as cars, refrigerators, and washing machines became available again, along with new inventions such as television. Magazines, movies, and television shows all reinforced the value of family and the joys of materialism.

**Picture source:**

- Kitchen Aid photo: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KitchenAid\\_Model\\_K.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KitchenAid_Model_K.jpg)

# The Beat Movement

Movement of poets and writers:

- Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti



Poets Peter Orlovsky and Allen Ginsberg



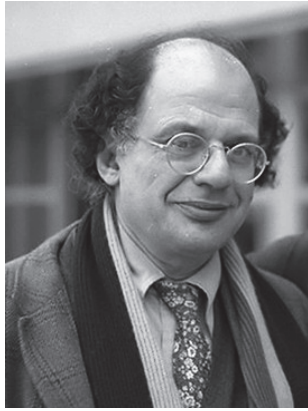
William S. Burroughs

Beat poets and writers broke new ground in both subject matter and style. They rejected the dominant American values of conformity, materialism, consumerism, and militarism. Jack Kerouac, whose book *On the Road* was a seminal text of the Beat Movement, told of his travels around America. He had no goal except to follow the road wherever it took him. William Burroughs, in *Naked Lunch*, wrote in a matter-of-fact way about his heroin addiction, which he had no plans to overcome. Poets such as Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti recited their work in coffeehouse, often accompanied by jazz musicians. In addition, Ferlinghetti opened City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, which served as a gathering place for his friends. He also put out books by many of the Beat poets who had encountered problems getting their work published by more traditional publishers. Many of the Beats experimented with drugs—particularly marijuana and other hallucinogens. Many of them were also attracted to eastern religions, especially Buddhism. They were concerned with resisting authority, artistic and personal freedom, and celebrated the sexual, aesthetic, and spiritual. They rejected the classical and modernist forms of writing in favor of free verse, stream of consciousness, and an authentic personal voice. They were influenced by earlier writers and poets such as William Blake, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Henry David Thoreau.

## Picture sources:

- William S. Burroughs: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_S.\\_Burroughs\\_at\\_the\\_Gotham\\_Book\\_Mart.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_S._Burroughs_at_the_Gotham_Book_Mart.jpg)
- City Lights Bookstore: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:City\\_lights\\_sf.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:City_lights_sf.jpg)

## Allen Ginsberg



- Influenced by the poets Walt Whitman, William Blake, and William Carlos Williams.
- Experimented with form
- Addressed topics not usually found in American Poetry including drug use and his own homosexuality

Allen Ginsberg, considered by many to be the premier poet of the Beat Generation, was born in New York in 1926. Ginsberg's father, Louis, was also a poet. Ginsberg attended Columbia University for a while, but dropped out to focus on his own work. He traveled around the United States and was friends with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, the inspiration for the character of Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. Ginsberg also moved in Beat circles with other poets such as Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane Di Prima, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure. He had several love affairs with other writers (including William Burroughs) before he met Peter Orlovsky, who would remain his partner for the rest of his life.

### Picture source:

- [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Allen\\_Ginsberg.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Allen_Ginsberg.jpg)

## **Ginsberg gained national fame with his poem “Howl”**

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed  
by madness, starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at  
dawn looking for an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient  
heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the  
machinery of night”

In his epic poem “Howl,” published in 1955, Ginsberg depicted a world that had betrayed democracy and the American dream. He used poetic images to protest censorship and celebrate erotic love, including his own homosexual love affairs.

## Poetry in Trial

- 1956—Lawrence Ferlinghetti published “Howl”
- 1957—Ferlinghetti prosecuted for publishing an “obscene” book
- Judge Clayton Horn ruled the book was not obscene because it had “redeeming social value.”



Lawrence Ferlinghetti

“Would there be any  
freedom of press or  
speech if one must reduce  
his vocabulary to vapid  
innocuous euphemisms?”

—Judge Horton

Although the prosecution described “Howl” as “filthy, vulgar, [and] obscene,” nine literary experts testified as to the poem’s importance as social commentary and its artistic achievement. If the book was declared obscene and Ferlinghetti was convicted, the San Francisco police were prepared to raid dozens of bookstores to remove other controversial books as well. At the time, most states and cities had censors who restricted books and movies that did not conform to the majority’s values. Judge Horton’s decision in the “Howl” trial set a new standard for freedom of artistic expression.

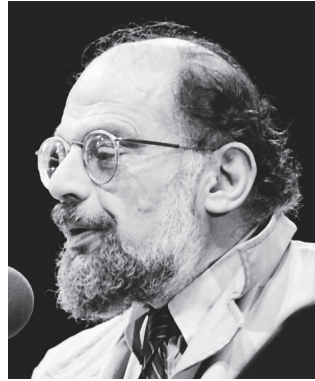
### Picture source:

- <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CaptureD37.jpg>



## Later Years

- 1979—Inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 1984—Won the National Book Award for poetry for *Fall of America*
- 1993—French government awarded him the *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* (Knight of Arts and Letters)
- 1997—Died in New York City



In his later years, Ginsberg won many awards for his work. He also studied Buddhism and Hinduism and became a peace activist, traveling the world, reading his poetry, and demonstrating for the rights of the oppressed.

### Picture source:

- [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Allenginsberg\\_cropped.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Allenginsberg_cropped.png)