

Thesis Abstract

This thesis establishes the Beat Generation as part of the American literary canon despite its rejection of the literary establishment and academic criticism of its day. The portrayal of the American postwar zeitgeist in Beat literature is examined through the innovative literary techniques proposed by Jack Kerouac based on jazz characteristics. The revitalization of poetic and narrative form are identified in Allen Ginsberg's earliest published poetry, notably "Howl; for Carl Solomon" (*Howl and Other Poems*, 1956), Kerouac's novels *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* and his long poem *Mexico City Blues*, respectively. The emergence and peak of the initially marginal Beat literary movement that gave rise to the affiliated beatnik subculture illustrates the tradition of avant-garde art becoming incorporated into establishment culture.

The first chapter outlines the political and cultural hegemony of the conservative fifties in America with focus on cultural and historical aspects relevant and parallel to the surfacing and development of the Beat/beatnik counterculture, i.e. Cold War policies, McCarthyism, poetic movements, the emergence of bebop and its innovations. The second chapter provides an in-depth analysis of Beat writing in reference to jazz as subject-matter and as influence on both narrative structure and poetic form. Themes of "new America" are explored in Ginsberg's poetry and Kerouac's spontaneous bop prosody is applied to his experimental novels and *Mexico City Blues*. Additionally, the nature of performance in regards to poetry readings of Beat literature is examined. The third part presents the contemporary critical reception of the Beat movement at its peak in the mid- to late fifties along with the warped perception and portrayal of the Beat counterculture by mass media.

By providing an overview of both contemporaneous literary criticism of the Beats and media reception, the thesis reevaluates the position of the Beat Generation in the American

literary canon, situating it in the sociological context of the bohemian beatnik subculture that emerged in the late fifties due to medially sensationalized coverage of the literary movement. The in-depth analysis of spontaneous poetics in Beat literature serves to contrast the concurrent reactionary literary criticism of the American academy. The contemporaneous formative power of mass media is illustrated on the dissemination of the beatnik subculture that has impacted popular and critical discourse on the Beats.