

“Being the Beats: How did the Beat Generation shape ideas of gender in 1950s America?”

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MHIS 365 From the Beats to Big Brother

Introduction

From the 1950s through to the 1960s, magazines, newspapers and TV shows bombarded Americans with images of the Beat Generation.¹ Simultaneously loved and hated, the Beats was a key group that emerged in response to the suburban consumerist culture of 1950s America and who established their identity through a rejection of the cultural values of their time, particularly in relation to gender expectations. The 1959 November edition of *Life* magazine highlighted that although the Beats were not alone in questioning the value of contemporary society and feeling stifled by the suburban conformity of their times, they were the only ones to have been sufficiently moved to reject them by ‘voicing their quarrel with those values’.² As writers, the clearest influence of the Beats can be seen through their work, most notably Kerouac’s *On The Road* and Ginsberg’s *Howl*, both of which represent the importance of how popular culture can potentially reveal anxieties and uncertainties about gender ideologies often overlooked by historians.³ With reference to these texts, this essay will examine the impact the Beat Generation had on the role of men and masculinity, their understanding of homosexuality, and how these focuses on being male subsequently affected their attitude towards women and women’s role in society.

America in the 1950s

Given the reactionary nature of the Beats’ ideology to their time, it is important to understand the context within which the Beats were formed and how their own ideas on gender were

¹ Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 20 (1997): p. 7.

² Paul O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around,” *Life*, 30 November, 1959, p. 130.

³ Jessamyn Neuhaus, “The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cook in the 1950s,” *Journal of Social History* (1999): p. 530.

developed. In many ways, the 'Beatdom' was a product of postwar disillusion and restlessness of America in the 1950s.⁴ The 1950s was a 'world in transition', caught between a post-Depression and post-WWII society that was also experiencing the start of the nuclear age and the Cold War.⁵ Both the wars brought about an environment thick with uncertainty and fear, termed by Ginsberg himself as the 'syndrome of shutdown' where society underwent a freeze which created 'intense fear', repression and hatred.⁶ Most significantly, these events disrupted family behaviour, traditional gender arrangements and patterns of sexual behaviour.⁷ Postwar relief alongside nuclear paranoia meant people made a return to the safety of the home and family. The home became a secure 'nest' that both men and women looked towards for personal fulfillment, resulting in a rise of marriages and children.⁸ The nuclear family became the ideal that encouraged men to demonstrate their achievements as the breadwinner of the family whilst women embraced the homemaker role due to limited opportunities in the workforce.⁹ Even cookbooks in the 1950s reflected the anxieties of the time with a growing popularity of canned soup in recipes.¹⁰ Due to the rising anxiety, traditional values became the safe choice, and society conformed to these ideals. Against this postwar backdrop, the Beats emerged in a route 'littered with old beer cans and marijuana butts' with the perspective that found society 'too hideous to contemplate', and instead sought to establish themselves in opposition to the cultural norms.¹¹ They rebelled against the conformity of their society, and as their work became popular culture, their attitude towards both men and women would influence counter-culture groups to follow theirs.

The Beats' on Men and Masculinity

⁴ O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," p. 119.

⁵ Tim Cresswell, "Mobility as resistance: a geographical reading of Kerouac's "On The Road"." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 (1993): 254.

⁶ John Tytell, "Art and Letters: The Beat Generation and the Continuing American Revolution," *The American Scholar* 42(2) (1973): p. 308.

⁷ John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Lee Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 233.

⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.157.

¹⁰ Neuhaus, "The Way to a Man's Heart," p. 537.

¹¹ O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," p. 115.

The Beats subverted the 1950s' status quo of men in society by challenging the idea of the breadwinner and re-inventing traditional understandings of male friendships. America in the postwar period saw a shift in focus towards men and masculinity, and the Beats took advantage of this in staging a rebellion against two key expectations. Firstly they challenged the 'mass, impersonal white-collar world' that many men became caught in, and secondly they rejected the suburbanised family life that work was meant to support.¹² This rebellion is illustrated clearly in Kerouac's *On The Road*, a novel that highlights Kerouac's discontent with society by telling a story of a male narrator who does the opposite of all traditional male expectations. Reflected in the title, Kerouac uses mobility to rebel against cultural norms. During a time when the breadwinner role was the 'only normal state for the adult male', main characters Sal and Dean are not the white-collar breadwinners of a nuclear family but gave up their family responsibilities to travel around America instead.¹³ According to Ehrenreich, the Beat hero was the male rebel who walked away from all responsibilities to 'hang out...in a demimonde inhabited by drifters, junkies, male prostitutes, thieves, would-be poets and actual musicians'.¹⁴ In the novel, this is seen as Dean leaves his baby daughter and pregnant wife to accompany Sal, and when asked why he acted 'so foolish' by his wife's friends he merely 'giggled' and 'made a little dance'.¹⁵ By rebelling against the hegemonic, suburban culture of the American Dream, the Beats loudly challenged the expectations of being a man.

In particular, the Beats also rejected male expectations of the 1950s by redefining masculinity to highlight the idea of male friendship and its importance over any other relationship.¹⁶ If masculinity was indistinguishable from the expected breadwinner role in the 1950s, then 'it followed that the man who failed to achieve this role was...not fully masculine'.¹⁷ The Beats rejected this openly by redefining their own masculinity in terms of the relationships and friendships they had with each other. It is significant that the Beat Generation was a largely

¹² Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Press, 1983), p. 52.

¹³ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁵ Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (England: Penguin, 2011 ed), p. 176.

¹⁶ Catharine Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," *Salmagundi* 58 (1983): p. 375.

¹⁷ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, p. 20.

male society and homosocial in nature.¹⁸ Ehrenreich has pointed out that the Beats' rejection of marriage did not represent a withdrawal from human attachments, on the contrary, the Beats were 'deeply, if intermittently, attached to each other'.¹⁹ This is emphasized in Kerouac's novel and Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, both of which highlight the importance of male friendship through a quest for experience that men bonded over.²⁰ Kerouac's novel, in particular, is based off the relationships that the Beats had with each other in reality, in this case Sal and Dean were based on Kerouac himself and fellow Beat writer Neal Cassady. In *On The Road*, one of the main themes that emerged is Sal and Dean's lack of commitment to traditional forms of a sexual relationship, that is a wife and a nuclear family, and instead preferred to spend time with each other.²¹ Sal commented that his friends 'danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after...because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved', a moment which highlighted the freedom that the Beats craved for men, and the desire that this be shared and experienced by men together.²² As Stimpson observed, much of Beat writing celebrated male friendship with writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg ascribing it a 'sublimity that soared beyond any explanatory theory of sublimation, regression or repression' and was rather a 'legend of male love'.²³ The Beats' emphasis on relationships between men, both in their work and in reality, diminished the cultural importance of family and men's role in it.

Furthermore, the Beats also rejected male expectations through an open confrontation on homosexuality, both within the Beats themselves and in their work. The start of the Cold War in the 1950s had seen the rise of masculine anxieties, and one belief that there was a connection between Communism and sexual depravity rose dramatically.²⁴ Fears of national security mixed with homosexuality was widespread in the government.²⁵ The nuclear family doubled in importance, becoming a matter of 'national security' as it was believed that those in

¹⁸ Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," p. 376.

¹⁹ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, p. 54.

²⁰ Tytell, "Art and Letters," p. 313.

²¹ Cresswell, "Mobility as resistance," p. 257.

²² Kerouac, *On The Road*, p. 7.

²³ Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," p. 377.

²⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 82.

²⁵ D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace," p. 228.

sexually fulfilling marriages would not be tempted by 'degenerative seductions', including both Communism and homosexuality.²⁶ The continuous threat of Communism meant a renewed need to maintain the 'American aesthetic of militarised masculinity'.²⁷ Persecuting homosexuals and anti-homosexual campaigns in the 1950s represented a widespread effort to 'reconstruct patterns of sexuality and gender relations'.²⁸ This attitude of fear was blatantly countered by the Beats, whose ideals of candor and honesty in resisting boundaries and constraints meant they could 'valorise the homosexual' as a rebel that seized freedom and proclaimed the 'legitimacy of individual desire'.²⁹ The group itself had several known homosexual and bisexual members including Ginsberg, Kerouac and Cassady. The members were known to have had sexual relationships with each other, most notably Ginsberg was known to have had sexual relations with both Kerouac and Cassady.³⁰ The Beats further 'textualised' the sexual body in their work, and this is seen most explicitly in Ginsberg's *Howl*.³¹ The poem was censored on publication due to its sexually explicit nature which openly celebrated not only homosexuality but also sodomy, writing that the best minds of his generation got 'fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy'.³² The poem is particularly significant as it is a reflection of one of the Beat Generation's most well known openly homosexual members, demonstrating a reckless attitude of rebellion against cultural expectations of masculinity. *On The Road*, while less explicit on homosexuality, hinted at them with the relationships between the main male characters of the novel in the sense that they were often 'sexually charged' with 'homoerotic desire'.³³ One of the reasons a man would not just 'walk out the door' in the 1950s was due to the 'taint of homosexuality' that was likely to follow.³⁴ Kerouac's novel openly rejected this by having his male characters walk out the door multiple times and letting the family ideal crumble

²⁶ Victoria A Elmwood, "The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac's "On The Road"," *Western American Literature* 42(4) (2008): p. 337; May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 338.

²⁸ D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace," p. 236.

²⁹ Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," p. 376.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 385.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 374.

³² Allen Ginsberg, "Howl," The Poetry Foundation, available from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179381>.

³³ Linda McDowell, "Off the Road: Alternative Views of Rebellion, Resistance and 'The Beats'," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21(2) (1996): p. 415.

³⁴ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, p. 24.

altogether. Hence the Beats helped to reinterpret homosexuality by bringing the subject into the public sphere through their work and their own personal lives, and by doing so they called attention for a renewed examination of masculinity and the role of men in society.

The Beats' on the role of women

While the Beats' crossed boundaries and openly rejected accepted expectations of men and ideas of masculinity in the 1950s, they arguably did the opposite in terms of women's role in society. By emphasizing the importance of masculinity, the Beats diminished the role of women altogether. This attitude was evident from the start of their movement. Writing in the late 1950s, O'Neil highlighted the fascination that the public had with the Beats at the time and that one of the aspects that the Beats were most known for was their attitude towards women.³⁵ This attitude was prevalent to the extent where MGM's 1959 film *The Beat Generation* was dedicated to the proposition that the Beats were 'terrible fellows with women'.³⁶ It is perhaps in the personalities of the Beats themselves that their irresponsible and perhaps disrespectful attitude towards women shone through the most. Beats writer William Burroughs was often seen as a committed misogynist who has compared women to 'junk', and infamously accidentally killed his wife while trying to shoot a gin glass off her head.³⁷ Similarly, Kerouac had 'numerous liaisons' with women but reserved his real allegiance for his mother as marriage and parenthood were beyond him.³⁸ According to Ehrenreich, 'all of America' could see that the Beats were men who 'refused to undertake the support of women and seemed to get away with it'.³⁹ In addition, *On The Road* and *Howl* are typical of Beat literature in their characterization of women. *On The Road* presents women as insignificant compared to the men's friendships. Women that appear in the novel have little character and are almost always linked to a man or to the home.⁴⁰ The story remarkably begins with an offhand comment by Sal

³⁵ O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," p. 116.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 116.

³⁷ Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," p. 384

³⁸ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, p. 54.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Cresswell, "Mobility as resistance," p. 258.

about his recent split between him and his wife, juxtaposed with his meeting Dean Moriarty.⁴¹ From the beginning it is evident that Sal's meeting with Dean was far more important than his split with his wife. Similarly, there are a few significant lines in *Howl* that reflect a deprecating attitude towards women, emphasized particularly through coarse and explicit language where men 'sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset'.⁴² The poem's depiction of women also highlight a nameless interchangeability between them, from a 'million girls' to a landscape of 'innumerable lays of girls' that seemingly highlight the irrelevancy of women's identity.⁴³ These indifferent and derogatory attitudes seen in the Beats' work emphasizes the lack of respect in the Beats' attitude towards women.

Moreover, by diminishing the role and importance of women, the Beats also conformed to the traditional expectations of a women's role. For women in the 1950s, marriage was often seen as the best possibility in life where consumerism and children were the ultimate reward, marriage offered material comforts and social standing.⁴⁴ Women's place was undoubtedly in the suburban home, being supported by their husbands.⁴⁵ The Beats' rejected the latter half of that ideal, that a man's place should be that of the breadwinning husband, yet still seemed to believe a woman's place was as a housewife. It seems ironic that the 'one mark of a cultural boundary' the Beats could not cross was the traditional role of the woman.⁴⁶ In *On The Road*, women are insistently connected to the home and to the private sphere. The theme of men 'on the road' reinforces from the start the gendered nature of the public as male and the private as female. According to Cresswell, it is firmly rooted in American ideology that travel and space was connected with masculinity whilst place and home was feminine, and the fact that Kerouac's novel seems to support this ideology makes it unsophisticated and stereotypical.⁴⁷ Almost every city in the novel is connected to a woman who is courted and then left by the men who saw the women's place to be linked to the home.⁴⁸ This is particularly evident in Sal's mind

⁴¹ Kerouac, *On The Road*, p. 3.

⁴² Ginsberg, "Howl."

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 161.

⁴⁵ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Stimpson, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," p. 378.

⁴⁷ Cresswell, "Mobility as resistance," p. 258.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 258.

when he commented, 'I couldn't meet a girl without saying to myself, What kind of wife would she make?', emphasizing the traditional domestic role that the Beats expected women to play.⁴⁹ This expectation is also expressed by Dean when he told Sal that 'in fact you're ready to hook up with a real great girl if you can only find her and cultivate her and make her mind your soul as I have tried so hard with these damned women of mine'.⁵⁰ The idea of 'cultivating' a woman brings to mind the expectation of a housewife ready and patiently waiting at home while men were free to have their own journeys and experiences. Elmwood has stated that it is possible the Cold War context of fear and uncertainty caused the Beats to revert to traditional roles in some aspects, such as the home as a 'sphere of femininity', while rebelling against cultural norms in other aspects.⁵¹ Regardless, it is a reflection of the conforming nature of the 1950s that even one of the most influential counterculture groups of the period did not counter everything, and that within the Beats' desire to reject the suburban culture surrounding them, they only thought to do so on behalf of the male and not the female.

Finally, perhaps the most significant evidence of the Beats' attitude towards women was the lack of female Beat writers. This lack of female Beats was noted even in the 1950s by O'Neil.⁵² Although they existed, the focus has always been on the male members of the group, and it is often easy to overlook the fact that the Beats had notable female poets and writers. Some of those best known today are Diane di Prima, Anne Waldman and Joyce Johnson, yet it is clear that these names lack the familiarity that Kerouac and Ginsberg's names have.⁵³ When asked why there was a lack of women poets in the Beat Generation, Ginsberg is known to have replied, 'Is it our fault that there weren't any women of genius in the group?'⁵⁴ However, these women are known to have made considerable contributions both to literature and to the emergence of the Beat Generation.⁵⁵ Ginsberg's attitude highlights the fact that the work and

⁴⁹ Kerouac, *On The Road*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 169.

⁵¹ Elmwood, "The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family," p. 339.

⁵² O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," p. 129.

⁵³ Amy L Friedman, "Being here as hard as I could: The Beat Generation Women Writers," *Discourse* 20 (1998): p. 230.

⁵⁴ Ara Osterweil, "Queer Coupling, or the Stain of the Bearded Woman," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 51 (2010): p. 33.

⁵⁵ Friedman, "Being here as hard as I could," p. 241.

attitude the Beats embraced celebrated 'men's bonds and sexual epiphanies' over women's.⁵⁶ Indeed, some critics have argued that the most gifted women of the Beats did not survive and live up to their male counterparts in history because they 'internalised their male Beat models' and deferred their own careers to care for their poet partners.⁵⁷ To subvert the male breadwinner role even further, according to O'Neil it seemed that what the Beats expected from women was financial support, 'chicks' who were willing to take care of their needs when necessary and nothing more.⁵⁸ This in itself is reflective of the Beats' understanding of a woman's place and her role to be submissive to that of a man's, even outside of the suburban home.

Conclusion

O'Neil wrote in *Life* magazine that 'Beat philosophy seemed calculated to offend the whole population'.⁵⁹ Yet in terms of gender and gender expectations, it would appear that the Beats were not as rebellious as they may claim. The homosocial male nature of the group ultimately saw the Beats' take a largely one-sided stance on gender. While they rejected and challenged male expectations of the time and redefined masculinity to their own terms, with regards to the role of women, the Beats seemed to have conversely conformed to social expectations of the 1950s and traditional definitions. Their influence in leading the rebellion of popular culture at the time saw the Beat Generation play a key role in terms of shaping gender roles for men and women, however as clearly reflected in the work produced, these roles had very different impacts on the two genders.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 231.

⁵⁷ Osterweil, "Queer Coupling," p. 33.

⁵⁸ O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," p. 129.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 115.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Ginsberg, Allen, "Howl," The Poetry Foundation, available from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179381>.

This poem was one of the most well known works by Ginsberg, was an especially helpful perspective by the fact that Ginsberg was one of the most notable homosexual writers in the Beats. It was especially useful in providing insight towards attitudes on women.

Kerouac, Jack, *On The Road*. England: Penguin, 2011 ed.

Kerouac's novel is the epitome of what the Beat writers were about, hence it is one of the best texts to use as a primary source. It was helpful in reflecting how attitudes towards both men and women were evident in the Beats' own work.

O'Neil, Paul, "The Only Rebellion Around," *Life*, 30 November, 1959, pp. 114-132.

O'Neil's article gave perspective on the acceptance and rejection of the Beats during the 1950s and touched on reasons why American audiences were so fascinated by the group.

Secondary Sources

Cresswell, Tim, "Mobility as resistance: a geographical reading of Kerouac's "On The Road"." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 (1993): pp. 249-262.

*This article was useful in establishing the gendered dualities between female and male illustrated by a geographical metaphor in *On The Road*, it gave me insight as to the fact that male was associated with travel whereas female was with home and domesticity.*

D'Emilio, John, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America" in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Lee Peiss and Christina Simmons. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, pp. 226-240.

D'Emilio's chapter gave great information on the ways homosexuality was perceived during the Cold War and the fears and anxieties associated with it. It was especially useful in providing context.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. New York: Anchor Press, 1983.

Ehrenreich was one of the most useful sources I found on providing information about the gender expectations and roles during the 1950s in America. The book was particularly insightful on male roles.

Elmwood, Victoria A, "The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac's "On The Road"," *Western American Literature* 42(4) (2008): pp. 335-361.

Elmwood provided helpful insight as to the dynamics in male relationships during the 1950s as well as context towards the role of men in a the suburban family, arguing that the Beats sought to avoid domesticity and instead sought to replace it with a new masculine family.

Friedman, Amy L, "Being here as hard as I could: The Beat Generation Women Writers," *Discourse* 20 (1998): pp. 229-244.

Friedman's article told me a lot about the female writers of the Beats, many of whom were unfamiliar to me, and gave reasons as to why these writers are not as well recognized as their male counterparts.

May, Elaine Tyler, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

This was a good source in providing context of postwar America, in particular the attitude towards the American nuclear family and consumerism in everyday life.

McDowell, Linda, "Off the Road: Alternative Views of Rebellion, Resistance and 'The Beats'," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21(2) (1996): pp. 412-419.

McDowell helped to give insight on Kerouac's On The Road, giving context and understanding to the novel, especially in highlighting how the personal aspects of Kerouac and the other Beat writers' lives may have affected the content of the novel.

Neuhaus, Jessamyn, "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cook in the 1950s," *Journal of Social History* (1999): pp. 529-555.

Neuhaus provides context regarding gender roles and the role of women in the 1950s, her perspective is particularly useful as she argues for the use of culture in history and the importance of 'cultural history' itself.

Osterweil, Ara, "Queer Coupling, or the Stain of the Bearded Woman," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 51 (2010): pp. 33-60.

Osterweil mainly provided information on Ginsberg's attitude towards women and gave a little insight as to the role women played in his life.

Petrus, Stephen, "Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960." *Studies in Popular Culture* 20 (1997): pp. 1-17.

This article gave a good basic overall view of the Beats and what they were about, as well as the influence they had on audiences then and later countercultures.

Stimpson, Catharine, "The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation," *Salmagundi* 58 (1983): pp. 373-392.

Stimpson's article was particularly useful when writing about the Beats' attitude towards men and the homosocial nature of the Beats. It highlighted the shift towards masculinity and talks about how the Beats exalted in male friendship for the future of America.

Tytell, John, "Art and Letters: The Beat Generation and the Continuing American Revolution," *The American Scholar* 42(2) (1973): pp. 308-317.

Discusses the Beats' reaction to the context of the Cold War and the fears and anxieties of the time, it was a useful source in gaining some background knowledge of the Beats in particular.