

Beat Generation and Counter-
Culture: Introductory Lecture for
Unit V in the course “Modern
Poetry”

MA (English), MGCUB

- The Beat group of poets and artists was an offshoot of 1950s feeling of estrangement from the new American conception of fulfilment bred by materialism and conformity. These were a group of poets and novelists like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Writing in the early sixties, they were known for anti-establishment writings that opposed prevailing cultural, literary and moral values.
- Time period of Beat Poetry is generally taken as from 1955 to 1965.

- Bob Dylan, the Nobel Laureate was greatly influenced by Beat Poets, especially Jack Kerouac's *Maxico City Blues*.
- Beat generation was inspired by the Bohemian, Romantic, Dandy cult.
- Youth, in particular, was touched by the anti-establishment culture.
- Beat generation's emphasis on free-sex, drugs, anti-war, anti-racist, anti-commercial sentiments was a statement of their hatred against the elite culture.

- Counterculture was the term coined by Theodore Roszak, in his book *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society*. Roszak argued that “the rational, science-based society of the twentieth century alienated men and women, especially the young, and propelled them into the search for meaning in drugs, spirituality, and dissent.”

- Roszak parallels the notion of counterculture as “culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion”.
- Roszak’s *The Making of a Counter Culture*, traces the countercultural phenomenon beyond the American streets. He delineates it within the European consciousness stretching from Germany, England to France. He states that the “the heirs of an institutionalized Left-wing legacy, the young radicals of Europe still tend to see themselves as the champions of ‘the people’ (meaning the working class) against the oppression of the bourgeoisie (meaning, in most cases, their own parents)”

- Central to Roszak's thesis, is the apparent complicity of the dominant categories of political thought with what he calls the 'technocracy' (a managerial regime in which the whole of industrial society is subordinated to the controls of a technocratic elite) (56). He depicts how, "the technocracy grows without resistance, even despite its most appalling failures and criminalities, primarily because its potential critics continue trying to cope with these breakdowns in terms of antiquated categories" (8-9). Roszak contends how the non-conformist movement challenged the dominant structure of political parties like the Tory in England, the Republican in America, and the Communist in France (85).

- The young iconoclasts of the movement were mainly coming from the white, middle-class and privileged society who rejected the values of their own culture.
- Many of the social issues, the movement fought for were rooted in the real problems like race prejudices, voting rights, employment quotas etc.
- Civil rights movement was an important offshoot of this culture.

- The word 'beat' was used to signify, both beaten down (by the oppressive culture of the times) and beatific (many of the beat writers cultivated ecstatic states by way of Buddhism, Jewish and Christian mysticism/or drugs that induced visionary experiences) (Abrams 20-21).
- The Beat writers noted the emergence of capitalism as destructive to the human spirit and unethical to social equality. Beat poetry was chaotic and liberally sprinkled with obscenity. Allen Ginsberg's poem, "Howl" was ruggedly powerful and moving. Their approach of seeing the world was more bold, straight forward, and expressive.

- During the movement, American and European universities saw a huge rush of the students taking admission and radicalizing the atmosphere.
- Student movements were one of the central forces in the sub-cultural movement.

Work Cited:

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed., 2004.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969.