

The influence of drugs on early beat poetry

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Drug Influence on Early Beat Poetry Kevin S. Connerty Axia College at University of Phoenix Drug Influence on Early Beat Poetry “ 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, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night . . . ” -Allen Ginsberg, “ Howl” The evolution of beat poetry came shortly after World War II. The war had left certain literary minds questioning mainstream politics and culture.

The literary minds concerned would soon be known as the Beat Generation, which was comprised of writers who went against the norms of conventional writing to express their interest in defying mainstream culture. Although beat poetry is known in the literary community as a radical approach to literary genius, there is evidence to show that early beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, and William Burroughs may have been influenced and affected by marijuana, amphetamines, and opiates while creating the literature that is now considered the foundation of beat poetry. Marijuana Marijuana may have played a part in the creative process for early Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, one of the founding fathers of the Beat movement. Allen Ginsberg was a radical and was seen as a guru of his time.

As a Columbia University graduate, Ginsberg wrote poems mostly commenting on his disapproval of middle and upper class morals. His use of profane and sexual language made him a staple in the early years of beat poetry. Ginsberg was open about many things including his homosexuality and his use of the drug marijuana. At local public happenings, Ginsberg would smoke pot, chant, and read poetry (pictured below). In his poem “
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America," Ginsberg states; " I smoke marijuana every chance I get. "

Marijuana contains THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol), a mild form of LSD, which causes change in brain function, behavior, and may cause hallucinations.

Also from his poem " America," regarding marijuana, Ginsberg states; " I won't write my poem until I'm in my right mind. " MRI studies have shown that chronic use of marijuana causes higher cognitive thinking, which is what Ginsberg may have been referring to. Marijuana, although used a creative tool for Ginsberg, may have been the downfall of Ginsberg and his career. As Ginsberg grew older, he lost his influence on many current beat writers due to the lack of refreshing maturity in his later works. Prolonged use of marijuana can alter or slow down the development in the brain, and although more studies are needed, marijuana is shown to cause permanent alterations and damage to the brain. Amphetamines Marijuana was not the only drug used recreationally among the circle of writers.

Amphetamines such as Benzedrine may have influenced and aided the Beat poets to feel free in their writing and performances. Amphetamines stimulate the central nervous system by increasing the amount of serotonin and dopamine. Serotonin and dopamine are both central nervous system neurotransmitters that cause changes in mood. Serotonin and dopamine, when raised, can reduce social withdrawal or lack of energy. The most common type of amphetamine used among the poets was Benzedrine. Originally used to cure narcolepsy and obesity, the drug came to be used recreationally within the Beat community.

Benzedrine was originally a plastic inhaler that contained a folded paper soaked in the drug (see below). Users would crack open the case and either swallow the paper whole or place it in beverages such as coffee and tea. Users of the drug experienced a euphoric stimulant effect, which caused excessive talking and insomnia. Beat writers such as Neal Cassady refer to being in a euphoric state when writing and performing as well as having the energy to stay up late and talk with colleagues in extent about world issues, government, and writing.

In an interview with Beat poet Charles Plyman, who lived with Cassady and Ginsberg in San Francisco, discussed the use of Benzedrine amongst fellow writers including Neal Cassady. Plyman states in regard to Cassady " We had criss-cross bennies (Benzedrine) in my day, we'd go down to Mexico on some really strong Benzedrine. He always liked any kind of speed before breakfast or after. " Opiates The most destructive drug used among the Beat community was heroin and other opiate derived drugs such as morphine. Although not as commonly used as marijuana or amphetamines, heroin played a role in the inspiration and destruction of William Burroughs, one of the founding fathers of the movement. Heroin is a highly addictive opiate that comes from the poppy plant.

The drug is known to cause euphoric affects followed by a mental state in which judgment is clouded. According to The National Institute on Drug Abuse (2008), " with regular heroin use, tolerance develops. This means the abuser must use more heroin to achieve the same intensity of effect. Eventually, chemical changes in the brain can lead to addiction.

In his early years, Burroughs (pictured below) wrote an autobiographical novel entitled “ Junkie”. “ Junkie” details chronologically Burroughs’ heroin use, starting from the moment he first touched the drug up until he wrote the novel as a full-fledged addict. The candid confessions within the text are what became known as Burroughs’ literary mark. Although “ Junkie” was a successful and remembered piece of literature, due to the amount of personal experience by the author, the use of heroin caused a downward spiral in Burroughs’ life. Burroughs would make trips to Mexico regularly, and leave his colleagues for long periods of time. He would do this in order to be located someplace where opiates were easily obtainable.

In his poem “ America”, Allen Ginsberg states “ Burroughs is in Tangiers, I don’t think he’ll come back it’s sinister. ” Ultimately, Burroughs’ heroin use led to lifetime addiction and clouded judgment. While under the influence of opiates, Burroughs accidentally shot his wife, Joan Adams, and killed her while trying to shoot a glass off her head. Conclusion After examining the history of the early beat writers, as well as medical fact, it is evident that hallucinogenic and mind stimulating drugs were used recreationally to provide creativity, energy, and inspiration for the era.

According to the Academy of American Poets (1997) “ The battle against social conformity and literary tradition was central to the work of the Beats. ” This battle against social norms alongside recreational drug use is the essence of the generation known as “ Beat. ” References America. (1992).

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