

The romanticism of a bum named neal cassady



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Neal Cassady is the quintessential beat character who seems almost fictional because of how fantastical he is depicted. Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac illustrate Cassady as if he is an unattainable concept. However, he is just as real as they are. They convince him to try his hand at writing so the world can see the same potential for greatness that they see in him. He is the beat-est of them all because he had the hardest, grittier life. To be beat, is to have struggled and come out the other side a stronger person. To endure life's challenges and to still be able to enjoy the little things, is the only thing humans can hope for. It is the will to not give up on the world, even after seeing the worst it can do.

John Clellon Holmes was a fellow beat writer and observed many of the tales that Ginsberg and Kerouac told about the notorious Neal Cassady. He was a little older than them and was able to personally describe what the beat generation was like from the point of view of an outside insider. He defined the beat generation as " a generation of extremes . . . [but] no desire to shatter the ' square' society in which he lives, only to elude it" (Holmes 4). They only wanted to change the stereotypes and create a different form of communication. It was a period of emotionally overwrought memoirs that were meant to inspire a further discussion on human identity. Basically, there was a " lack of organized movements, political, religious, or otherwise, among the young" (Holmes 3). They were tired of using all their energy to fight for their beliefs when the government would just refuse to listen to them. They were considered a nuisance, even though they truly tried to stay under the radar. They chose to take the silent rebellion route instead by writing about their existential crises which many members of society, young

and old, could relate to. It was not necessarily the active role in making change but it was their way of refusing to conform to anyone's expectations. Another factor that made the writers of that time "beat," was their "almost exaggerated will to believe in something" (Holmes 3). They had stripped themselves raw of all labels and clichés, and bared their emotions to the world. Thus, they craved a spiritual focus that would help them understand why they were so intensely affected by their surroundings.

Cassady was one of the beat-est members of that generation because his writings were erratic and full of dramatics, always trying to get his readers to raise their eyebrows. He was able to embellish his own experiences just enough that they did not seem fake, only absurd like human nature. He had lived more and exploited society far worse than most of the beat generation, "I been arrested 10 times and served an aggravated total of 15 months on six convictions" (Cassady 195), and most had occurred during his childhood on the streets. His ability to sustain the consequences of an unjust life and continue fighting for his own individuality is what raised him above the more memorable members of that period. The beat generation was a transformative period in a time that truly fulfilled Cassady's lack of true human connections. He was Ginsberg's and Kerouac's greatest muse and how they made the writing movement so popular. Without his visions and unique commentary to guide the major beat writers, they may never have reached the level of fame they did by writing about the adventures Cassady took them on.

Cassady also tried to be more commercial in the beginning by striving to create pieces that were more formal and had a better chance of being

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published, but his soul was not in it. His real voice was exemplified in the personal letters he wrote to Kerouac. They were rambling messes but they demonstrated his spontaneity and emotional capacity to feel everything. One example of what he wrote about was: " I'm going to begin from the moment I left you & Frank & go to Now. This is such a gigantic task, I feel like Proust & you must indulge me" (Cassady 196). Cassady enjoyed sharing his story with Kerouac, and liked showing off his growing writing skills. He was only giving him a taste of his tale, but the way he delivered it was what influenced Kerouac's spontaneous prose. They all played important roles in motivating each other to write and remain excited about the future. Cassady also did not let himself be a victim to his feelings, but rode them in the sea of inspiration.

His exaggerated lifestyle was his niche and the reason Ginsberg and Kerouac wanted him to write his experiences. For example, in one of his letters to Kerouac he stated: " I feel like a remembering of things past. So, here's a brief history of arrests. A case history" (Cassady 193). His run-ins with the law were primarily in his past because he never had a stable home environment, and needed to find ways to support himself. Crime was the easiest job a boy living on the streets could start, and he happened to have a knack for it. Ginsberg and Kerouac were influenced by the adventures he took them on and created some of their best pieces because of their relationship with him. Therefore, they believed he could communicate their escapades even better because of his first-hand stories: " I became so engrossed in my eyeballs & what they brought me. . . that I looked out into the world as one looks into a picture" (Cassady 196). He utilized his mastery

of spontaneous prose to illustrate private topics, from his turbulent sexual encounters to his childhood on the streets to drowning his thoughts in a neon-lit prison. He is the epitome of a poetical character because he lives on the edge of society's expectations, never on the correct side but always able to pretend that he is. Cassady has a multi-faceted personality that makes it easy for him to fit into any social situation. He can transform himself into the persona that he feels everyone is yearning to be in that specific setting.

Underneath all of his facades, Cassady has a sensitive core that attracts men and women. He is also depicted as very egotistical, but that is only because he relishes in the attention, he does not solicit it. He is most himself when he is pretending to be greater than himself. When he is surrounded by people looking up to him for a joyride, he feels adored. Having lost his mother at a young age and then been rapidly forgotten by his father, he yearns for love. Even before she passed away, she had in a way abandoned him by letting his father have custody of him: " Little Neal went with his wino father into the lowest slums of Denver" (Cassady 218). Thus, began his life of desperation and the realization of his harsh reality. His father used his innocence to introduce him into a life of lying and stealing. He did not know better to resist and then it became his main focus. All he wants is to make people happy so they will want him, and not leave him like everyone else.

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