

NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

White, W. (2014). The "Beats." Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

The "Beats"

Other than the hidden pockets of subterranean narcotic use described in other posts on this section of the website, the 1950s were to a very real extent the calm before the polydrug storm of the 1960s. The decade of the fifties was a period of conformity and complacency--a period of patriotism and "red" paranoia that gave America Joe McCarthy, HUAC hearings, spy trials, and bomb shelters. The only people who seemed to want to make ripples were a rebellious assortment of artists and writers who were called "beats" or "beatniks." The names most associated with this pocket of youthful rebellion included Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer. Some site the public reading of Ginsberg's poem *Howl* in 1955 as the beginning emergence of the "beat Generation" while others site the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957. The beats were a white band of chain smoking, occasionally dope smoking, hard drinking non-conformists who distinguished themselves by their eccentric ideas (self-indulgence, sexual liberation, drug legalization), beards, speech (Black argot), and musical (jazz) and literary (poetry) tastes.

Drugs were not a dominant motif of the Beat culture except for such rare drug connoisseurs as William Burroughs. Burroughs 1953 book *Junky*, published under the pen name William Lee, revealed the existence and nature of the underworld American drug culture of the 1940s and 1950s. But Burroughs background of heroin addiction was an exception in the Beat culture. References to drug use arose only occasionally in the Beat writings of Jack Kerouac and Norman Mailer and appeared publicly primarily in isolated newspaper accounts of a celebrity drug arrests. LSD use was limited to military and medical experiments and marijuana was well-hidden within America's subterranean subcultures. All of that was about to change as America placidly entered the 1960s. The youthful pessimism that the Beats had tried to tap was held in abeyance amidst the new climate of optimism that accompanied John Kennedy's election to the Presidency. This seed of emotional discontent that rose again in the 1960s would be surrounded by a new menu of psychoactive drugs.

While some view the "Beat generation" with warm nostalgia and view their drug experimentation as relatively benign by today's standards, it is important to note that this era like the one that followed it produced its share of drug-related casualties. Beat figures such as Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac were among these casualties. Cassady died of an overdose of alcohol and barbiturates in 1968, and Jack Kerouac died of liver damage in 1969 at the age of forty-seven after a losing battle with alcoholism. Burroughs was also something of a tragic figure. Following two days of partying in Mexico, he shot and killed his first wife trying to shoot a shot glass off the top of her head. After shedding his heroin addiction (via treatment with apomorphine), Burroughs continued his career as literary cult figure and perennial critic of American drug policy. (Smith and Luce, 1971, p. 4; Cook, 1971, p. 176))