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Despite being commonly understood as only an adjacent figure to the Beat Movement, Ken Kesey in his novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest provides a surprisingly representative manifestation of Beat Generation aesthetics and counter-cultural stance

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Introduction – Post WWII Conformity and the Beat Rebellion

*America when will you be angelic?
When will you take of your clothes?
(Ginsberg *Selected Poems - America*, ll. 8-9)*

Sociologists sometimes refer to the 1950s as 'The Age of Anxiety'. Americans found comfort in conformity and feared the unusual, the different, the atypical; anything unusual was looked on with suspicion for fear of communists, spies or rock and roll musicians. In the years of rebuilding and recovery following the disruption of the Second World War, elder Americans just wanted things to stay the same, live in comfort and without fear. But this need for crystalline stoicism meant that their fear was magnified, always present behind the wide smiles and waves to their neighbours in the morning. But before the war had ended, the rumblings of what would spook Mom and Dad so badly in the next decade and beyond had already begun: jazz was bringing together like-minded black and white young people and was gradually transforming into 'be-bop', Bob Dylan was getting bored in his middle-class, middle-American home, his sometime mentor Woody Guthrie had already penned his lonesome traveller autobiography; a proto-beat if you like, Elvis was practising the hip-swivelling that would spark outrage and disgust (and fear) amongst parents fearing for their little darlings fragile minds, and in 1944, at the tail end of the War, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs first met in New York, not knowing that they would form the nucleus of what would become known as The Beat Generation

This was not a group of people who specifically got together for some obscure literary purpose, this was a group of friends who had similar literary influences, who influenced each other, who wrote about each other, but who were brought together

because of the stifling environment of post-WWII America, the monotony of suburban life and the emerging consumer culture. The Beats amongst themselves stood for non-conformity, anti-authority and most of all – the first deliberate counter-culture.

The world they created at coffeehouses, poetry readings, literary soirees and jazz dens provided the launching pad for a broader-based movement of youth who...defined itself in vigorous opposition to the American mainstream.

(Puterbaugh 357)

This counter-culture was based around uncensored self-expression and a commitment to spiritual rather than material possessions. Post World War II, these artists knew the world had changed exponentially and that in order to live in it, they must defy the American Dream by affirming life in everyway possible, living and embracing extremes through narcotics, sex, art, travel, music – immersed in a haze of being and creating.

Of course, it would have been counter-productive for this group of free-spirited artists to in any way construct a criteria of what it was to be Beat – the fact that the Beat Generation very rarely referred to themselves as such, and that the term went on to be interpreted in numerous contrasting ways, illustrates how pointless this would be. But through a study of their work, the interviews they gave, the essays they wrote and their lives as a whole, it is possible to determine the aesthetics of the Beat Generation.

Beat Aesthetics

Beat writers have long been known for advocating spontaneity in writing. Kerouac was the biggest advocator of the style, or lack thereof, describing it as giving the reader:

The actual workings of your mind during the writing itself: you confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way...like a part of a river that flows over a rock once and for all and never returns and can never flow any other way in time.

(Kerouac 107)

This typically Romantic appraisal of the topic by Kerouac, who wrote all but his first novel in this style after discovering it from letters he received from Neal Cassady in the mid-forties, cannot detract from the fact that the supposed spontaneity of the Beats was embodied largely in their 'King' alone, and while most of the group did experiment with the style, it was not such an important facet as has been asserted by some. Neal Cassady did write his autobiography in his own inimitable spontaneous style and Robert Creeley has stated that he wrote his poetry 'without any process of revision' (Creeley 94). Although this spontaneity helped the Beat writers to break down barriers and move away from the poetry of the past, its importance should not be overstated as requisite to Beat writing. 'Spontaneous prose' is clearly evident in some of Allen Ginsberg's poetry and in 1966 he cited Kerouac as the greatest living poet, but for Ginsberg his true influences were the poetry of Whitman, Blake and Williams and it is in this tradition that he has followed, rather than simply being the foremost Beat poet. Burroughs on the other hand never indulged in spontaneous writing. Rather, he progressed from the factual reportage of his debut novel 'Junky', to the hallucinatory cut-ups of the Nova Mob quartet.

It is tempting to argue that the apocalyptic visions that unravel throughout novels such as *Naked Lunch* and *The Ticket That Exploded* are examples of spontaneous prose, but the cut-up techniques Burroughs used in crafting these novels negates this since this process took hours of cutting and pasting.

The controversy the Beats courted from middle America stemmed largely from their open attitude to drug usage. They saw experimentation with drugs as a way of seeing things in a different way, as a way of indulging their senses in order to experience the essence of life, and a way of rebelling against the stoic nature of a liberally-oppressed society. The use and abuse of various substances was extremely important in shaping the Beat Generation's writings and world-views. None of the Beats ever shied from discussing or writing about their narcotic use and it was seen to be an important method of experimenting with and expanding their consciousness. Beat poet laureate Allen Ginsberg elaborates:

Well since I took a vow that this was the area of, that was my existence that I was placed into, drugs were obviously a technique for experimenting with consciousness, to get different areas and different levels and different similarities and different reverberations of the same vision.

(Ginsberg *Beat Writers at Work* 64)

While there is very little evidence of any of the prominent Beat novels being written entirely under the effects of a particular drug, there can be no doubting that experimentation with these substances shaped the work of the Beat Generation in the same way it would the music of the Beatles, the Doors, Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead in the subsequent decades.

There had always been an intrinsically religious nature to the Beats, both professed and Romanticised. Their rejection of the material lifestyles adopted as a fundamental strand of the American Dream in the fifties – car, suburban home, television, holidays – was a direct avowal to advocate spirituality over commerciality and the term Beat has been interpreted as both ‘Beatitude’ or ‘Beatific’. In particular, the philosophies of Eastern cultures were of particular importance to the Beats, with most of the writers immersing themselves in Buddhist and Taoist texts and trying at various times to adhere to the ancient mysticism of China and India.

The Beat poet Gary Snyder was the most strict in his Buddhist practices and therefore may not have been Beat in the outrageous manner that the group were portrayed as in the media, but his insistence to live in opposition to American capitalist culture reflects his personal Beatness. His influence through his calm, meditative manner is very apparent and it was under Snyder’s influence that Ginsberg became a dedicated Buddhist until he died, a feat reflected in one his most famous poems *Kaddish*. In his diatribe against conformist America ‘Poetry, Violence and the Trembling Lambs’, Ginsberg states how this spirituality is intrinsic to the Beat way:

Only those who have entered the world of Spirit know what a vast laugh there is in the illusory appearance of worldly authority. And all men at one time or other enter that Spirit, whether in life or death.
(Ginsberg *Beat Down to Your Soul* 221)

These attributes: spontaneity, the influence of drugs and an interest in Eastern religions are all ways in which the Beat writers are identified, but they are not essential and they are frequently interchangeable.

What the Beat Generation ultimately stood for was individuality and non-conformism, living life on your own terms and rejecting the society, the government and the corporations that viewed you as a clone, a pawn or a consumer. The Beat Generation, whether they meant it or not, were the first architects of counter-culture and a model of sustained, personal rebellion against the oppressive forces of America and its society's expectations. This is why they are remembered as important icons of American counter-culture and self-expression in a repressive environment, where conformity and compliance was encouraged and artistic freedom and independence stifled. Their free-spirited exploits encouraged generation after generation to follow their example and reject society in favour of living life and creating art on their own terms, to not only question, but challenge authority and become architects of their own destiny. This is the basis of Beat thought and the most intrinsic feature of the Beat aesthetic.

Readings of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Since its publication in 1962, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has had a broad appeal. It has been praised as one of the great twentieth century novels and has been adapted into both a play and a highly successful film. It has not, however, been read to be one of the pinnacle addresses of the Beat aesthetic. Despite the novel having been read and interpreted from so many different angles and dimensions, outlined below, and the fact that Kesey is known one of the great counter-culture icons, the novel's Beat elements are very rarely, if ever discussed. Of course, Kesey has been called a successor to the Beats, but the novel's themes have such an apparent Beat dimension to them that it is surprising that it has been somewhat ostracised from being a contemporary of the other great Beat works.

Like many great works of literature, the novel has been criticised as well as praised. Ken Kesey has been called racist, sexist and misogynistic due to the novel's treatment of ethnic minorities and women. This stems from his portrayal of the black cleaners in the asylum as violent, sadistic rapists and his use of broad stereotyping in his treatment of the native American Indian narrator, Chief Bromden. Peter Beidler argues the latter point:

Take, for example, the stereotype of the Indian sidekick to the white leader. Chief Broom, like the Lone Ranger's Tonto and like Natty Bumppo's Chingachgook, is the loyal but rather uninventive companion to McMurphy, the flamboyant white hero.
(*Cuckoo's Nest* 6)

Although Beidler does go on to defend Kesey's stereotyping as inventive and in his essay 'Flying the Cuckoo's Nest' John W. Hunt defends Kesey's portrayal of Bromden as he emerges triumphant and free at the end.

In terms of the depiction of women in the novel, feminist critics such as Elizabeth McMahan argue that the novel is a reactionary fantasy of male supremacy due to Kesey's portrayal of women as emasculators. While Richard D. Maxwell defends Kesey's depiction of matriarchal tyranny by suggesting that the patients have collaborated in their own undoing and that McMurphy is their saviour.

The novel also draws some very obvious parallels with the story of the Gospels and some critics have read the novel as a true Christian allegory. Certainly McMurphy's initial period of temptation to give up the fight against Nurse Ratched after his conversation with the lifeguard could be read as a parallel between Christ's temptation in the wilderness, his fishing trip includes his twelve apostles and his martyrdom comes on the cross-shaped table of the shock shop. Although some critics such as Stephen Tanner advise against taking such comparisons too seriously, stating:

It is a mistake to do so. Kesey uses them playfully, intending more to excite archetypal reverberations for the action of the story than to make McMurphy restrictively a Christ figure.
(Tanner 37)

Others meanwhile see the Biblical similarities as something much more intentional and meaningful. In 'Christ in the Cuckoo's Nest: or, the Gospel According to Ken Kesey', Bruce Wallis argues that Kesey saw this novel as something as important as the Gospels, that could be read for hope and inspiration, and that not only was McMurphy modelled on Christ, but on Kesey himself in his subsequent leading of the Merry Pranksters around America.

The author seems to have presented in his novel a fictional program of action, which he thereafter attempted to translate into reality...the novel is replete with specific comparisons to Christ...that begins as a series of unobtrusive allusions in the early chapters, intensifies in the novel's third section (the fishing trip), and completely dominates the conclusion.
(Wallis 104)

Other readings of the novel include that of McMurphy as a traditional superhero or as being in the same tradition of the Grail Knight/Fisher King, citing his self-reliance and self-sacrifice or the simple good versus evil component of the story. Other commentators such as Robert Rosenwein and Ruth Sullivan have explored the novel's psychological dimensions, including a possible Oedipal element at its core.

There are a number of possible reasons that the novel has not been viewed as part of Beat literature: the fact Kesey was little more than an adjacent figure in the group, despite his friendship with Neal Cassady, or because he was the leader of the Merry Pranksters group who were equated as being more of a proto-hippy group than the more serious Beats. Kerouac himself, despite the respect he had for Kesey, viewed him in a suspicious light and felt that he had somewhat taken his mantle:

Kerouac had to watch a new generation emerge, one that seemed to regard Kesey in the same way as the Beat Generation had regarded Kerouac, as its spokesman. Kerouac considered this new generation 'disrespectful' and 'illiterate and thought Kesey was 'nuts' and 'too wild'.
(Drever 23)

Certainly, there are some differences between Kesey's work and that of the Beats. Many of these stem from his strong ties with his home in the rural west of America, rather than the cities, and the fact that he did not indulge in that most famous of Beat styles, 'Spontaneous Prose', but instead plotted his novels meticulously as M. Gilbert Porter (1982) points out:

Not nearly enough has been made of the role craftsmanship has played [in Kesey's writing], the clearheaded conceiving and constructing of parts to create organic wholes. Anyone who examines Kesey's working notes will discover that countless hours of careful thought went into the planning and revision of both novels.
(4)

But as has been said, many respected Beat writers did not use the spontaneous prose style and this was not a prerequisite to Beat writing. These details are primary though, and the fact of the matter is that the Beats themselves differed wildly from each other in their writings and beliefs. As Kerouac himself stated:

Snyder is not like Whalen, Whalen is not like McClure, I am not like McClure, McClure is not like Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg is not like Ferlinghetti, but we all had fun over wine anyway...There's no "Beat crowd"...'
(Kerouac 135)

The argument is not that Kesey was a member of the Beat Generation, that is obviously not the case, but that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* contains enough elements of the Beat aesthetic for their to be a case made that it has been overlooked as a major part of the Beat canon.

The novel has obviously been read as an anti-establishment tome and its motif of fighting against the omniscient Combine is a well-known counter-culture metaphor, but the aesthetics, beliefs and practices of the Beat Generation are widely apparent throughout the novel also, and it is certainly arguable that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is one of the most representative manifestations of what the Beat Generation ultimately stood for.

Cuckoo's Nest as a Beat Novel

I thought to myself, are you going to go down that road with Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac – at that time still unproven crazies – or are you going to the safer road that leads to John Updike?
(Kesey 209)

This section will explore the traditional and well-established themes and dimensions of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* from a Beat point of view. This will include Kesey's similar ideas about drugs and perception and how this influenced the novel, the aspects in the novel that relate to the Eastern and Naturalistic philosophies of the Beats and how ultimately the novel stands as a symbol of counter-culture not only in the same tradition as the Beat Generation, but as an integral part of it.

Kesey, like the Beats believed in experimenting with and going beyond the levels of his own ordinary perception and consciousness. To do this he took part in medical experiments in Menlo Park Hospital where he was given LSD and was asked to record the results of what he experienced. The doctors may have felt like they had hit the jackpot because Kesey was able to record the visions and dreamlike states he found himself in with great poetic fluency and these tests influenced Kesey's naturally curious mind greatly. Therefore when the novel begins as Chief Bromden, the narrator of the novel is floating in the midst of a severe fog, created by the omniscient Combine in order to keep the patients in a state of docile obedience, along with all its other mechanical numerations and servants, it is not hard to see what Kesey drew upon in order to create this hallucinatory imagery that becomes a motif throughout the novel.

Kesey has been quoted as saying that he wrote these first few pages, with their profound surreal imagery whilst under the influence of peyote, and not only that, but that he came up with the idea of having Chief Bromden as the narrator of the novel whilst under the effect of the drug, which many critics affirm to be the novel's masterstroke and is vitally important in setting the voice, mood and tone. As Barry H. Leeds states:

It is the Chief's highly subjective, hallucinatory first-person narrative that gives the novel its metaphorical richness, its peculiar horror and its ultimate emotional force.
(3)

The heightened consciousness and visions that Kesey experienced under these hallucinogens are akin to the drug and Zen philosophies advocated by Kerouac and Ginsberg. Kerouac has spoken extensively about the trance-like states he would find himself in during his marathon, all night writing sessions, induced by Benzedrine, and one of the biggest inspirations in Ginsberg's life was lying on his bed in Brooklyn and experiencing a vision of Blake. But surprising as it may seem, the most significant parallel to draw with Kesey is late work of William Burroughs.

The most dangerous [of all the Beat writers]. Not only was he the dark tutor of the young Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, but his entire life's work maintained a sustained, vitriolic – and hilarious – attack on the values held dear by mainstream society...he was anarchy's double agent, an implacable enemy of conformity and of all agencies of control.
(McAdams 171)

Much of this description could also be applied to Kesey, but it is in the surrealist metaphors of the all-controlling Combine, and Burroughs' post-apocalyptic *Nova Mob* novels that the comparisons are to be made. Both these works were formed explicitly from experience with hard drugs – Burroughs claims to not be able to remember writing any of *Naked Lunch* under the haze of heroin withdrawal – and the experiences had under the effects of the drugs led to the analogous frightening and

profound surrealist images of society under the control of a mercenary mechanistic authority, in both these novels. The comparisons can be made even more explicit when it is realised that in *Naked Lunch*, what appears to be a literal prophecy of post-apocalyptic America is actually taking place in William Lee's mind as he undergoes drug rehabilitation. The parallels with Chief Bromden's state of mental rehabilitation and his nightmares of the Combine illustrates that although the two novels were written and published almost concurrently, and that Kesey and Burroughs never met, they were kindred spirits of a sort. Both novels begin with a short, fearful statement, indicating that all is not right in the worlds these novels inhabit: 'I can feel the heat closing in' (Burroughs 17), 'They're out there' (*Cuckoo's Nest* 3).

Of course *Cuckoo's Nest* is much less experimental than Burroughs' dada-esque *Nova Mob* quartet, but the similarities in the nightmarish metaphors contained in both, and the fact that both have professed similar attitudes to the influence of drugs on their writings, suggests that *Cuckoo's Nest* has Beat elements from even the least likely of sources.

Two of the biggest themes in the *Cuckoo's Nest*: death and rebirth and nature versus machinery, are also topics dealt with extensively by Beat writers in terms of their interest in Eastern philosophies and their rejection of material possessions in favour of living with nature. The psalms contained in Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* for example deal explicitly with reincarnation, and arguably his most accomplished work 'The Dharma Bums' details his hiking trip into the mountains with Gary Snyder, who was many of the Beats' Buddhist and naturalistic guide.

Ginsberg's 'Howl' famously berates the worshippers of Moloch, fallen angel of gluttony, and in his poem 'A Buddha in the Woodpile', Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes: 'If there had been only/one Buddhist in the woodpile/In Waco Texas/to teach us how to sit still' (Ferlinghetti ll.1-4), condemning the folly of American life in favour the calm, meditative one offered by nature.

At the beginning of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the patients in the hospital are as good as dead. Every sensuous, free urge has been stifled under the manipulative, matriarchal system of the Big Nurse and the patients have no hope in themselves or in the world. Most of the patients are in the hospital by their own free will, unable to live in the outside world due to fear, oppression, paranoia or weakness; they are in a perpetual state of purgatory inside the white walls of the hospital as close to death as a conscious human being can be. It is of course McMurphy, the free spirit who brings life back into the hospital and begins his sacrificial mission to resurrect these men. By the end of the novel, McMurphy has sacrificed himself in order for the men to be reincarnated into bearers of their own destiny away from the now demolished matriarchal tyranny of Nurse Ratched.

The Chief in particular is the focal point of this theme of reincarnation. He was the one most at the mercy of the Combine but becomes one of the two main components in the primary conflict of Nature against Machine in the novel. Bromden as a native American Indian is a man of nature who lost his mind as the result of fighting a war against machines in World War II.

Due to becoming a 'malfunctioning part', he has been placed in the hospital, which he sees as a factory for the Combine, fixing mistakes made in society in order to return 'a functioning, adjusted part' (14) back into the world.

Kesey forces us to abstract from this extreme case [Chief Bromden] that our own identity as self-determining individuals have been considerably eroded and are further threatened by a computerized civilization...Chief Broom is the tangible representation of the human alienation produced by the system.
(Leeds 16/17)

The Beat Generation of course rebelled against what they also saw as the mechanisation of society, both through mass production and mass conformity, and fought against it in the same way McMurphy and then Chief Bromden do. At the beginning of the novel, Bromden and the rest of the patients are completely under the control of the Combine, its strength greater in the vulnerable world of the hospital. They are held by wires, controlled by knobs and gears from behind the glass panel in the control room were Miss Ratched watches. When McMurphy enters, a natural element that does not compute with the mechanistic workings of the ward is introduced. The battle of Nature versus Machine begins as soon as McMurphy enters the ward and Bromden equates his entrance with his childhood on the commune, smelling a man of 'dust and dirt from open fields, and sweat, and work' (*Cuckoo's Nest* 98).

The battle goes back and forth suggesting that the fight to live in a way opposed to the hypocrisy of society is not a simple one, and the forces of the Combine will work hard to create an assimilated mechanistic society. Whilst on the way to the way to the fishing trip towards the end of the novel, Bromden feels tense travelling through a suburban neighbourhood, seeing so much evidence of the Combine at work: 'five

thousand houses punched out identical by a machine and strung out across the hills outside of town.' (*Cuckoo's Nest* 228). In these later stages of the novel though, the imagery of machinery and the Combine are pushed to the background, as the patients are becoming more free, breaking away from the restraints of the wires on which they had been hung for so long. The battle between Nature and Machine, led by McMurphy and completed by Bromden does not end until McMurphy extinguishes the power of the Combines chief of staff, the Big Nurse, by exposing her large, natural breasts. The Combine is able to get rid of McMurphy after this but by then his sacrifice has led others to escape its imprisonment, Chief Bromden symbolically using the large control panel to escape to freedom and the natural world.

The entire battle between Nature and Machine that runs throughout the novel is symbolic of the counter-culture battle against the oppressive forces of conformist society. When the novel was written, America was becoming industrialised and jobs were being created at a vast rate, creating the nine-to-five lifestyle that claimed to encapsulate the American Dream. The Beat Generation were the first to rebel against this conventional slavery and the hypocrisy that came along with it, this was why they sought solace in things that could not be touched by this greedy, suspicious society. In his placement of Nature against Machine, Kesey is offering an allegory of how independence, individuality and personal freedom instead slavery to a job, government or corporation is possible and should be fought for.

This avocation of non-conformism and counter-culture is how *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* can most accurately be read as a Beat novel. Its anti-establishment

subject matter articulates in a fully coherent manner the rebellion of the Beat Generation, the reasons behind it and why this so worth fighting for.

In the novel the Combine can be read to stand for a variety of oppressive forces: the American government, the corporations that were gaining power at a phenomenal rate, the conformist attitude of American society resulting from a post-World War II and subsequent Cold War fear of the unknown, and also the Totalitarianism of the Communist bloc at the time. In this respect the comparisons between Kesey and the Beats are very apparent when you consider that neither were simply anti-American, but anti-authority universally. As Gary Snyder observed:

[West Coast Beats] were openly political and, in terms of the Cold War, it was a kind of pox-on-both-your-houses position. Clearly our politics were set against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and China, and at the same time would have to truck with corporate capitalism.
(Snyder 284)

Kesey acquiesces with this statement when discussing his novels:

They were allowed in all the communist-bloc countries because the authorities considered them anti-American. Totalitarians never see themselves as being totalitarians; they see that in the other guys. And *Cuckoo's Nest* is, to some extent, anti-American. It's about American terror. Big Nurse works for an American bad guy, the Combine, the inhuman part of American industrialism.
(Kesey 220)

The novel is explicitly about escape and freedom from this imposed fear. In the novel McMurphy guides the patients away from the false sense of fear inflicted by the Combine, under the supervision of the Big Nurse and her subtle threats. Harding fears his wife's latent sexuality in comparison to his own effeminacies, Billy his overbearing mother and Chief Bromden the world in which he lives, which he clearly

sees as the manipulative, controlling state it is, in spite of, not because of his schizophrenia, and his realisation of this is a huge factor in his decision to fight.

It is Chief Bromden who most clearly achieves the freedom Kesey and the Beats lived for, as he escapes the fog and at the end of the novel understands that although the Combine will continue to operate against him and every person, it is possible to defeat it through his own personal unquestioning freedom and salvation. At the beginning of the novel when Bromden is submissive to the forces of the Combine, he feels safe in the fog. He knows that it is the Combine working against him, but consents that it is easier and safer to accept defeat: 'You had a choice; you could either strain and look at things that appeared in front of you in the fog, painful as it might be, or you could relax and lose yourself.' (*Cuckoo's Nest* 122/123). At the end of the novel he has come to the realisation, through McMurphy, that even though it may be harder to fight back against the oppressive forces represented by the Combine, and be part of the system, the rewards for resisting are much greater. Through resistance and non-acceptance of a pre-ordained fate, imposed by the societal powers everywhere, personal freedom and independence can be achieved.

The fog can be seen to represent the blanket of fear the American government had wrapped around its citizens at the time. The major powers in the world, whether it is government, church or corporation, have for years manipulated the minds of a largely unquestioning society into thinking that they are at risk from a hidden, but deadly enemy. In the 1950's, the American people, still tense from the War, were convinced by their government that they were under threat from Communism and that those

elements within society that refuse to conform to the superficialities of the American Dream were to be viewed with suspicion and fear.

The Beat Generation was formed as an alternative to such blatant manipulation and not only refused to live in fear to what was different, but embraced it as a the true essence of life, American or not. They were demonised and harassed by the mass media at almost every level, from dismissal and censorship of their work to criticism of their lifestyles and beliefs. They refused to abdicate or compromise themselves in any fashion despite having to endure arrests, censorships and degradation. Beat poet Michael McClure surmised this defiance:

Those who believed in the Tribe knew in some secret place in their awareness that it didn't matter whether it lasted or not; a spiritual occasion has a set of laws other than the ones that extend the life of the one-dimensional society.
(Puterbaugh 360)

The hospital in *Cuckoo's Nest* can be seen as a microcosm of society as a whole, and the patients, the Beat pioneers, including Kesey, who attacked the system and won through independence and autonomy and counter-culture.

Counter-culture and what the Beat Generation ultimately stood for was a need for self-reliance. The fact that this is a virtue admired by American culture and a principle that is also advocated by right-wing American militia groups such as the Kentucky State Militia and the Ohio Unorganized Militia Assistance and Advisory Committee, is an irony that certainly was not lost on the Beats or Kesey. The Beat aesthetic was concerned with the saving of the self through voyage and discovery. In *The Art of Grit*, M. Gilbert Porter states: 'The real enemy in Kesey's view is the failure of self-reliance growing out of fear' (p.7).

In the novel the patients, initially imprisoned by fear, go on a voyage led by McMurphy and at the end of the novel are self-reliant and free.

Self-reliance takes into account all those things already discussed about this novel and this movement: independence, individuality non-conformism and freedom. Peter Beidler suggests that this is one of the most important aspects of the novel and what it stands for:

[Self reliance] is made up in part of self-confidence (knowing that you *can*), in part of self-trust (knowing that *you* can), in part of self-consciousness (*knowing* that you can), and in part self-control (acting on the knowledge that you can)
(Beidler 49)

Beidler's assertion of self-reliance being the most important aspect of the novel is that which provides the most accurate means of reading it as a Beat novel, it is what this movement started and which has continued in various forms since: Jazz, LSD, Marijuana, Hippies, James Dean, Andy Warhol, Punk, D.I.Y., Skateboarding, J.G. Ballard, Sonic Youth, Hunter S. Thompson, Marcel Duchamp, Rave, Ecstasy, Chuck Palahniuk, Fugazi, Fanzines, Andre Breton, Bret Easton Ellis, James Chance, Tracey Emin, Dischord Records...Those that live on the margins of society are the most remarkable and free; they burn brightest, and Kesey should be remembered as an integral part of this tradition. The Beats were the first to acknowledge that those who live normal lives the way society expects them to are dulled by their own mediocrity and Kesey uses a beautiful metaphor to illustrate this in *Cuckoo's Nest*:

The stars up close to the moon were pale; they got brighter and braver
the farther they got out of the circle of light ruled by the giant moon.
(*Cuckoo's Nest* 153)

The Beats unwittingly were the protagonists of counter-culture. What they began has transformed in many ways over the years and still exists today in many shapes and colours of defiance. As the originators, the Beats began a cultural movement that is accurately prescribed in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

The novel was formed through a combination of personal experience, drug experimentation, consciousness exploration, boundary breaking, dissent and a clear value of the alternative lifestyle. That description surmises much of the Beat aesthetic and although Ken Kesey has never been considered a true Beat hero, there can be no denying his contribution and the elements in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that point to a true Beat outlook and the novel as a landmark in the history of counter-culture.

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