

# GO: THE BEAT GENERATION FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Go*, the work of an informed observer or interpreter of the Beat group, can be seen structured as a descent into hell, and as a document whose value lies in presenting the Beat writers from a perspective that is critical and sympathetic. The novel shows the two directions the beat rebellion took, one as a defeated or beaten down movement, and another, as more idealistic and beatific.

KEY WORDS: Beat generation, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, down-trodden, beatific.

## RESUMEN

*Go*, la novela de un atento observador o intérprete de los miembros de la generación Beat, está estructurada como un auténtico descenso a los infiernos y también como un documento de sus actitudes y comportamientos vistos desde una perspectiva crítica. La novela muestra las dos direcciones que asumió la rebelión beat, como seres derrotados y beatíficos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: generación Beat, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Colmes, derrotado, beatífico.

*Go* (1952) was John Clellon Holmes's first novel, and as he admits in the introduction to the 1980 reprint, it was a book that was barely fictionalized at all. Most of the events and characters were taken from reality and even many of the dialogues were verbatim reproductions of actual conversations. As such it is an invaluable document of what was later to be known as the Beat generation, condensing real-life events from 1948-1950 into novel form. As a novel, it presents these real-life events structured to form a spiral which is at the same time a descent into hell and a progression toward self-understanding. As a document, its value lies in presenting the "core" group of Beat writers and other personalities associated with this movement at the end of the 1940s from a perspective which is at once critical and sympathetic. Seen from today, it is probably the "document" aspect which is the most important, but if viewed together with the form in which real-life



events and people are fictionalized, we can see not only a depiction of these times and people but also a critical commentary on them. As McNally says, *Go* is “one of the first public reflections on the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual deficiencies of the nation” (168). This article, then, seeks to analyze how the Beat generation is presented in the double perspective of document/fiction.

Holmes’ original idea was to structure the novel as a descent into hell, based on Dante’s *Inferno*, and although he has stated that as he wrote he “saw that the same hungers activated us all, and the thesis evaporated” (xxii), the overriding arrangement of the novel *is* that of a descent into hell. The book is divided into three parts. The first presents the life of Paul Hobbes and his wife Kathryn—that is, John Clennon Holmes and his wife Marian—as they begin to get more and more involved in the bohemian lifestyle of Paul’s Beat friends—Gene Pasternak (Jack Kerouac) and David Stofsky (Allen Ginsberg). Hobbes is trying to re-assimilate himself and find a direction following the war: he goes back to school, reads, and writes a novel without much real confidence. Although the parties in the first section are relatively tame, they are already beginning to decay, as Pasternak says of a party he dreamed about “And then everyone got so hung up on themselves” (5). Bill Agatson (Bill Cannasta), whose outrageous and often cruel antics derive from “a fatal vision of the world... (and his) inability to really believe in anything” (19), is gratuitously hurting Daniel Verger (Russell Durgin) who profoundly admires him. Part II marks the arrival in town of Hart Kennedy (Neal Cassady) whose constant movement involves everyone in chases around town trying to get hold of some dope. Hart loves life and his enthusiasm for everything is generally contagious. Pasternak and Stofsky adore him, and Paul is intrigued by his incredible capacity for movement. It is during Hart’s visit that Paul and Kathryn first smoke a joint, and they are likewise present when Hart and Ed Schindel (Al Hinckle) steal gasoline. This brush with illegality causes Kathryn to overtly protest, but Paul is quiet even though he is not at all comfortable with the idea of stealing. This causes Stofsky to savagely criticize him for his hypocrisy—for seeming to go along with everyone’s actions even though he secretly disapproves. Hobbes protests but begins to wonder about his own “lovelessness.” Kathryn wavers between conventionality and the need to experiment, and even sleeps with Pasternak, but she never quite accepts this way of life. She is anchored in conventionality, but it must be understood that she is also the one who works at a boring job so that Paul can dedicate his time to writing.

At the end of Part II, Kathryn has found Paul’s love letters to Liza, and wants to leave him. She cannot bear the fact that he has lied to her for three years. She is more concerned with a “new” morality here; it is a question of honesty vs. hypocrisy rather than a matter of physical fidelity. Paul becomes increasingly introspective from this point on. Part III moves from the “hot” world of Hart Kennedy to the “cool”, and increasingly illegal world of the underground with Albert Ancke (Herbert Huncke), Little Rock (Little Jack Melody), and Winnie (Vickie Russell). They engage in petty crime in order to support a drug habit, and Hobbes is gripped with a vision of their mortality as he wanders at the fact that this is *not* important to them—they are beyond any cares other than the present:

But looking back into the room where Ancke and Winnie were lighting up sticks of tea and trading opinions of mutual friends now in jail, he felt that he had dropped into a world of shadows that had drifted out of the grip of time, which was now inescapable to him; a world in which his values were a nuisance and his anxieties an affront. The fact that Winnie would get lax of breast and shrivelled of lip, that the nights and the streets would eventually begin to scar her clear skin until it dried and wrinkled away her youth; and that Ancke would one day be devoured by his own idea, the idea that he was slowly disintegrating, until there would be nothing left of him but a scabby, shrunken pod, beset by imaginary flies; the fact that this would relentlessly, certainly occur to them if they did not die first, some death of ironical viciousness in the bitter streets, or the madness of confinement in a cage; all of this was to Hobbes, at that moment, the most useless of insights. For them it did not exist, even as a possibility, for they had never given it a thought, and so to see it in their faces, to hear it like a prophecy in every word they spoke, pained only himself. At the instant of recognizing this, his interest in them turned to horror, and he got up to leave. (262)

Hobbes already senses that the move from “hot” to “cool”, the elimination of the senses through overusing them, is the beginning of the end. He also realizes that he is unlike these people.

Ancke involves Stofsky in crime by allowing Winnie and Little Rock to bring stolen goods to Stofsky’s apartment. Stofsky is incapable of throwing them out because he means to save them somehow—and because it is not in his nature to throw them out. Ironically, as they are transferring Stofsky’s journal to his brother’s house for safekeeping in case of a police raid, they are spotted by police driving the wrong way on a one-way street and in the chase the car overturns. Since Stofsky’s papers have his address on them, the police find them immediately, and since Ancke was incapable of getting rid of the stolen goods, they are all arrested. The arrest sobers their friends considerably, particularly because Stofsky was innocently involved. Hobbes’ own reaction to seeing Stofsky for the first time when he is out on bail scares him for its coldness: “And suddenly his part in all relationships seemed made up of actions blind and cowardly and base, even though they were unconscious” (292). But the final descent into hell came a week later, when Agatson was killed in a tragic accident. Fooling about on a subway train just as it left the station he pretended to climb out of an open window. Because he was drunk his friends tried to haul him back but his head caught against a platform column and crushed to death. In the ugly bar on River Street in Hoboken, where they go in the aftermath of Agatson’s death, Hobbes sees “the gnaw of isolation” in each of his friends and explicitly likens the place to the last circle of hell: “‘Abandon hope,’ he thought, for actually he was drunker than he realized. ‘Abandon hope all who enter here’” (309). Kathryn and Hobbes escape this hell as they just barely catch the last ferry back to New York, leaving the others behind. The novel concludes with Hobbes’s tentative reconciliation with Kathryn and with an image of his search for a spiritual home. This symbolic escape into domestic love as a means of salvation, however, is left doubtful, as the novel ends with Hobbes’ question: “‘Where is our home?’ he said to himself gravely, for he could not see it yet” (311).



This descent into hell marks one of the trajectories of the Beat movement. The move into hard drugs and petty crime was accompanied by a loss of feeling—heroin blocks out all feeling and desire. The only desire that exists is that of the next fix. It leads to delinquency and gratuitous violence “just for kicks.” This is the “beaten down” aspect of the Beat generation, the use of the word beat in the sense of exhausted, downtrodden, defeated, burdened with guilt. Norman Podhoretz sees this as an outgrowth of the Beat writers’ rejection of the intellect in favour of pure feeling and spontaneity (479-493). This is a rather harsh judgement, however, and only one side of the story. For in *Go*, parallel to the spiralling descent into hell, we have the story of Stofsky’s personal progression towards the light. Beginning with his encounter with Jack Waters’ insanity, on through his visionary experience with William Blake, Stofsky comes to an understanding of the universe—God is love, and the only impediment to love and good is the unconcern of the human heart. Although he is tortured by the idea of suffering, and does not understand its necessity, he decides to live by his vision. As a result, he embarks on a life of charity and humility, extending compassion and consideration to all. If Agatson embodies the psychic malady of our age, Stofsky “embodies the cure” (Stephenson 91). He sees that the only proper and practical response to the “secret lovelessness” of the world and to the helpless, frightened “creatureliness” of man is love, sympathy, and service to others. He is generally misunderstood, and even hurt in the process, as when he tries to love Winnie and Little Rock, but he maintains his humanity and his vision right through to the end. He is the most sympathetic character in the novel. This is due in part to the fact that Holmes allows him his own voice, the reader is able to see into his consciousness and understand his motives. Another contributing factor is that Stofsky is based closely on Allen Ginsberg, who was an essentially humane person. As Thomas Parkinson has said “Too little stressed in all the public talk about Ginsberg are his personal sweetness and gentleness of disposition. He was a person more cohesive than disruptive in impact...” (458). Perhaps to the more cynical, the figure of Stofsky flitting about and talking of his visions, trying to arrange his friends’ lives, and trying desperately to love, is a ridiculous one. I believe, however, that Holmes has painted a sympathetic, if sometimes comic, portrait. This is probably achieved because Paul Hobbes is open to Stofsky, and although he does not always understand him, believes in him. Stofsky represents, then, another side of Beat life—the “beatific” or sacred side. Here the rejection of middle-class American values is accompanied not by nihilism, but by a search for a higher truth and a better way of living.

On a less elevated, but more down to earth and “normal” level, we have the trajectory of Paul Hobbes. As we mentioned above, Hobbes is John Clellon Holmes’s fictional self, and as such stands very close to, but essentially outside of the Beats themselves. James Atlas writes in his foreword to *Go*:

Not that Paul Hobbes ...is any less dissipated than his friends, any less susceptible to the blandishments of squandered evenings at nightclubs or drunken parties. But he is skeptical, conservative, unpersuaded by the ephemeral delight his friends derive from their indulgences...Hobbes... is a mere tourist in the underworld night-

life of Times Square dives... He ventures into this world “suspiciously, even fearfully, but unable to quell his immediate fascination.” (xiii)

Hobbes makes forays into their world but retains a critical, if sympathetic perspective. This perspective is the strong point of the novel. Not everyone saw it that way, however. According to Michael Dittman, Holmes’s success and his refusal to adopt the stereotypical Beat lifestyle eventually caused friction between Kerouac and himself “indeed, throughout their lives, (they) kept an uneasy, love/hate relationship... Kerouac felt an intense insecurity and rivalry towards Holmes, fuelled in part by Holmes’s financial stability, as opposed to Kerouac’s own penury”(6). After Holmes completed the first draft of *Go* (originally called *The Beat Generation*) in the spring of 1951, he gave the manuscript to Kerouac to read. Kerouac was horrified at Holmes infringing on what he regarded as his territory, and in a letter to Allen Ginsberg he furiously commented “John Holmes is a latecomer, or that is, a pryer-intoer of our genuine literary movement... (he) is riding our wagon without knowing where actually it’s headed...” (345). Tensions arose between them. Kerouac felt that Holmes had exploited his friendship with them, and that had usurped his role as spokesman for the generation. Then he was jealous and resentful that *Go* had been accepted for publication while he could still not find a publisher for *On the Road* (1957). He took to writing inflammatory letters warning Holmes to stay away from certain topics which he considered his own. For Dennis McNally, *Go* was “the honest work of an intellectual trying to make sense of aliens, and Holmes succeeded as well as anyone not wholly of a scene could” (167). Holmes’s position as an outsider is considered an impediment, but I think we should consider the advantage that an outsider has. He can serve as interpreter of the Beat movement to a class of people who would be sympathetic if only they were exposed to it. He can also step back far enough to see both the good and the bad points, and this critical perspective is essential. Holmes, as Hobbes in the novel, is deeply affected by his friendship with the Beats and begins to question and grow inwardly in the course of the novel. He is shaken out of his complacency as he realizes that he is not as honest with himself as he should be.

Hobbes cannot decide whether he belongs to “this beat generation, this underground life” (126), or to the “square” or more conventional world of responsibility. He lies somewhere between both worlds. Part of him rejects traditional middle-class values, as when he is disappointed with Christine for having told her husband about her affair with Gene:

Some trust in him had been violated by her reversal, an obstinate belief in the possibility of an impossible situation. People never proved to be either as noble or foolhardy as he wished them to be. His bitter, fond dreams of them always fell apart like the makeshift self justifications they were, leaving him feeling sorrowfully faithless. (164)

Yet he is not completely comfortable in the Beat world either:

Now he sat, taking as an assurance of the attitude Christine had rejected, Hart’s excited unbuttoning of his shirt to the waist. That Hobbes felt discomfited and



alien in *The Go Home* arose, he was certain, from an imperfection in himself, some failure of the heart; for Stofsky had set him wondering. (164)

Hobbes is also frightened by Agatson, the nihilist, who represents to him the burned-out hipster, the figure at the end of one of the Beat roads, the one that leads to crazy behaviour that is essentially meaningless. Referring to Agatson, the narrator recounts:

His eyes burned right into Hobbes' for a second. But in them there was no recognition, nothing sane or reliable, only an imbecilic steadiness. It was the stare of a man to whom everyone is really a stranger, who passes through fevers and anxieties alone and has never thought to confide or complain to another living soul; a man possessed of a rage that is always frustrated, that has enthralled his waking nature, and which has no object; the sort of rage that only the obliteration of a world could sate. (272)

The author here, through the perception of Hobbes, is in basic agreement with Stofsky's vision of the malady of the world: man's aloneness and lack of love is the cause of his frustration. Agatson's problem is that he does not communicate with anyone, not even his women, who are usually notably destroyed by their relation to him. Hobbes' sensibilities are not disturbed by the superficial transgression of bourgeois norms; rather he sees beyond them into their underlying cause—frustration from lack of real human interaction. On the other hand, the relation that exists between Pasternak, Stofsky, and Kennedy is essentially supportive—they help each other to survive and even be happy as they search for some ultimate meaning of life. Their road can be beatific mainly through their brotherly support system. Hobbes, then, has discerned both the positive and negative side of the Beat movement, and although the novel ends on a pessimistic note, the final outcome is left open. Hobbes is a better person, at least, because of his contact with these people.

Another critical position toward the Beats is that taken by some of the women in the novel. Cynthia S. Hamilton thinks that Holmes' depiction of women is noteworthy, "while he never challenges traditional gender roles, Holmes' more nuanced portrayal of women and his recognition of self-serving male behaviour sets him apart, especially from Kerouac" (121). The women most extensively treated—Kathryn, Christine, and Dinah—are not really Beat at all. Yet these are the kind of women that the men who form the nucleus of the Beats prefer. The others—May, Winnie, Georgia, Bianca—are mainly types, not individuals, and as such typify the "Beat woman." The Beat women are affected, cool, and burned out. The only possible analysis given is that it is perhaps their relations with Beat men that burn them out, at least in the case of Bianca and May, who have loved Agatson. We are not given any real insight into them, however, and this is one of the flaws of the novel. They are there as a contrast to "natural" women, such as Pasternak prefers. Speaking of Christine, he says: "...After all, she's just one of those crazy, warm little girls you meet at a dance in Harrisburg, or even hitch-hiking around South Carolina. And that's the kind of girl I can understand, not these New York bitches!"

(55). For Pasternak, Georgia is “...one of those emancipated women who’s really cold as a snake...” (57).

For Beat men, the Beat lifestyle is not transferable to women; they are to be natural but at the same time put up with the lifestyle of their men without being corrupted by it. Most of all, they serve to support their men economically. Both Kathryn and Dinah work, while Paul and Hart do not. This preference for natural women has its drawbacks, however, for although they love their men and go along with their lifestyles, they are basically faithful to middle-class values such as fidelity and consideration for others, values which are probably shared by Stofsky, Hobbes and Pasternak, but which clash at times with their “hot” lifestyle. The most blaring example is Dinah, Hart’s former wife, who is with him on his trip to New York (LuAnn Henderson in real life). She goes along with Hart, understands, defends, and accepts his flaws, yet blows up when one last incident of (unconsummated) infidelity comes up. She does not really accept his ways after all. Kathryn’s anger when she finds that Paul has been writing love letters to another woman for three years is more in the vein of a “new” morality. He has destroyed the trust between them and this she finds hard to forgive. Only Stofsky, who is gay, sees how the men are hurting the women by not being honest with them, by not treating them as fellow human beings but rather as rare, different beings. He questions Hart as to why he feels he has to deceive Dinah, but Hart’s answer is far from satisfactory: “But why are you trying to put me down, man? That’s the way women are. They get all hung up on those things. You and I know that! That’s their level. *We* understand all about that” (169). Hart appeals to masculine common understanding—women are the inexplicable *other*. Stofsky does not agree; he seems to be the only one who believes that women are to be treated as equals. On the other hand the men are in awe of these women because they feel that women are somehow closer to the essence of things than they are. After Kathryn tells Paul her impression of Christine and the reasons for her actions, he reflects:

He wanted to escape, only incidentally for Christine, from the inevitableness of Kathryn’s view, which she offered to him with such casual, womanly surety. Before it, as at the recollection of a past guilt, he, as a man, felt suddenly prey to all fleeting, mannish pretensions—a barren Adam confronted with his rib’s fecundity. (129)

The “natural” women have no need of intellectual pretensions; they already understand and accept the universe. The Beat men spend hours and hours trying to find the answers. This awe of woman as “other” has the negative side effect of placing women in a position where their difference can be used to oppress them. It is obvious that the Beat generation, for all their breaks with convention, still hold to a traditional idea of women. Moreover, they tend to make use of the women who love them for financial as well as emotional support. In this sense, break with the middle-class value, especially prevalent in the 1950’s, that the husband is the breadwinner and the wife stays at home, is liberating only to the men in question—the women go out to work at boring jobs so that the men may stay at home and write.



Holmes probably (guiltily) recognized this injustice, as it is quite clear in the novel that women are getting the short end of the deal, although it is not a major theme. His treatment of Beat women is unfortunately superficial, however, and it would be nice to see a more profound treatment of these women.

Holmes' distance from the "core" group of Beat friends also gives us a rather demystified picture of Neal Cassady. As Hart Kennedy, he comes across as a crazy, fun, "hot", but essentially superficial figure. From the novel we cannot really understand the fascination that Cassady held for Kerouac and Ginsberg, but perhaps this is a flaw in the novel rather than a flaw in Cassady. As a person who is profoundly open to life and constantly on the go, never tiring, he is admirable, but Holmes suspects that his lifestyle can cause hurt to others (such as Dinah/LuAnn), and fails to find anything deeply meaningful in it. Hobbes finds Kennedy's uncritical affirmation of all experience unacceptable and thinks of him as a conman or a sort of "half-intellectual juvenile delinquent" (96).

What we have in *Go*, then, is a complex view of the Beat generation in its formative years. Holmes presents a picture of an intense lifestyle justified by a rejection of the particularly stifling conventional norms that held sway in America at the end of the 1940's and throughout the 1950's. He sees at least two different directions which this rebellion could take: one which would lead to consummate indifference toward the world and other people, where the only goal is to crush out feeling, specifically at the end of a needle, and another, idealistic and beatific, which would seek salvation for self and others through more love and more honesty. Holmes' critical distance, while not condemning, allows us to see both the positive and negative aspects of this group of people, who were after all, human beings, who each in their own complexity realized the "movement" in an individual way.

From the today's perspective, we can see that the Beat movement did not die in the early sixties, as many claimed it had, but rather pervaded massively the next generation that again took two roads—one which was the hippie route, founded on pacifism and universal love, but which also dissolved in a haze of drugs; the other, a movement of political action which broke away from the Old Left and after consolidating itself around the anti-war movement, channelled itself into particular liberation movements whose effects can be vastly appreciated in America even today. Perhaps the rebellion of the sixties would have taken place even if there had been no Beat generation, but I, for me, think it doubtful.

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