The Beats

- The **Beat Movement** refers to a group of writers who became well known during the 1950s and early 1960s.
- Three major works of the Beat Movement are

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956)

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957)

William Burroughs's Naked Lunch (1959).

Howl

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,

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,

who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Black-light tragedy among the scholars of money and war.

who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull,

who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall

- *Howl* and *Naked Lunch* were the focus of obscenity trials that helped to liberalize what could be published in the United States.
- The term “beat” carried contradictory connotations of “beat down” and “beatific” or “on the beat.”

- Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* coined the term “beatnik” in 1958, playing on the current news of Russia’s satellite Sputnik.
- The stereotypical beatnik of popular culture was a bearded, bongo-playing, slacker nonconformist, as humorously portrayed by Bob Denver’s character Maynard G. Krebs in the situation comedy *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*.

Beats and the Sixties

- Some ideas associated with the Beats were carried over by the hippies: anti-materialism, open sexuality, spontaneity, interest in Eastern spirituality.
- Stylistically, the Beats--associated with somber black clothes, sweatshirts, goatees, and black leotards--gave way to the more colorful and eclectic apparel of the hippies.
- Whereas the Beats tended to be cynical about the possibility of progressive change, many in the sixties counterculture, encouraged by Kennedy's election and Castro's revolution, were hopeful that social action could lead to change.