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**BİR BAYAN BEAT ŞAİRİ OLMAK; DIANE DI PRIMA
BEING A FEMALE BEAT POET; DIANE DI PRIMA**

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Öz

Özgürlük bağımlısı, gelenek karşıtı Beat yazar ve şairi Diane diPrima politic ve sosyal alanda efsanevi düzeyde aktif bir yaşam sürerek, yalnızca feminist yönüyle değil aynı zamanda edebi sanat boyutuyla da kendi kuşağını en iyi temsil eden bir kişilik ortaya koyar. Yaklaşık yirmi dile çevrilmiş kırk üç kitabı yayımlanmış olan DiPrima, samimi, dolaysız ve deneysel şiiri ve insan doğasına karşı sağlam ve kendinden emin duyarlılığıyla Beat Kuşağı okurlarının dikkatini çekmeyi başarır. Geleneksel yazın ilkelerini dışlayan DiPrima, iğneleyici ve esinsel tarzıyla Beat Kuşağının feminen ve alternatif anne sesini temsil eder. Prima, kendini ve feminen şiiri açık bir şekilde ifade edebileceği bir şiir arayışındadır; bohem yaşamın feminen yönlerine, aşka, anneliğe, toplum ve özgürlüğe dikkati çeker. Parodi, yergi ve mizahla işlenmiş bir dil yeğleyerek, bay ve bayan arasındaki sessiz iletişimi ve dış dünyanın kalabalığında yalnız kalmış, kendine yabancılaşmış öz-yaşamı yansıtmaya çalışır. Bu makalede, Beat kuşağının feminen temsilcisi ve yazım üslubundaki karşıt sesiyle Diane DiPrima'nın şiiri incelenip örneklendirilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Beat Kuşağı, Beat Şiiri, Diane Di Prima, Feminen Beat Şairi, İçgizemsel Şiir.

Abstract

The freedom-addict, nonconformist Beatnik writer and poet Diane Di Prima has led a legendary political and social activism, which set a sample life style not only at a feministic level but also at a domain of literary craft that represents best of her generation. She has forty-three published books which have been translated into as many as twenty languages. And her candid, unequivocal and experimental poetry as well as her strong and self-assured precision for human nature receives a continuous attention of the readers of Beat Generation. With an iconoclastic, wry and meditative style, Di Prima represents the voice of the feminine and the maternal alternative of the Beat Generation. Her quest is for self-definition and a clear expression of feminine poetics; exploring female perspectives of bohemian life, love, motherhood, community and independence. Using parody, satire, and a humorous ironic language, she reflects on the voiceless communication between men and women and the alienated self living in the crowd of outer world. This article aims to analyze and illustrate the protest voice of Diane Di Prima and to exemplify her feminine poetics as a female Beat poet.

Keywords: Beat Generation, Beat Poetry, Diane Di Prima, Female Beat Poet, Feminine Poetics.

Introduction

During the last decades of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, "a new sexualization of American culture" is observed, which is "both material and rhetoric." (Bauer, 2009: 1) This magnetic change arrives at a supreme level after the two World Wars, and a new freedom-oriented socio-cultural uprising is practiced by the Beat Generation in the 1950s. This rebel generation has an innate mission of creating a culture for the political awareness as jazz-augmented hipsters of the Post Second World War. They were labeled as hippies, yuppies, and Civil Rights marchers of the late 1960s. They have often been referred to as a second Lost Generation because they lived after a destructive war and were living under the threat of the atomic bomb. Anti-hierarchical, anti-elitist, they were concerned with removing artificial barriers between their lives and art, so they naturally were "ready to accept an ethic without orthodoxy, without dogma, and one whose goal was the discovery of a state in which all differences and separations - from man to man or man to nature were dissolved" (Tytell, 1976: 26). So it is observed that "as a cultural phenomenon, the Beat Generation changes" the minds of Americans "more than any other twentieth-Century movement; its effects are still being felt today" (Warren, 1999: ix).

Ginsberg's *Howl*, being read at the San Francisco *Six Gallery* in 1956 virtually launched the Beat movement and inaugurated the manifesto of the Beat Generation. It certainly had an arduous background of struggle behind. Faas evaluates that "it was a poem written in a rapid outburst of creativity, after a long period of gestation" (Faas, 1979: 28). Steven Watson in *The Birth of the Beat Generation* defines the Beatnik way of life as "... a shared interest in spiritual liberation," and identifies beatnik literary style as "... a manifestation of personal content and open forms, in verse and prose"

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(Watson, 1995: 5). They are the pioneers of "poetry-with-jazz movement; most of the Beat poets at one time or another found themselves up on the stage, declaiming their verses valiantly above a walking bus" (Cook, 1971: 221).

Jack Kerouac, the beaten guru writer of the group, in a series of sometimes Benzadrine-driven or marijuana-inspired writing bouts, in spontaneous bop prosody sets down the picaresque narrative of his life that results in bringing about *On The Road*. *On The Road*, Edington summarizes, is about "...the many forms of spirituality we celebrated in our everyday struggles as we tried to survive and celebrate life in the highly repressive atmosphere of a new conformist America, that replaced the euphoria of the immediate post-World War II days" (Edington, 2005: xvi). On the other hand, Allen Ginsberg, the poet of "Howl" and "Kaddish" has the role of "a new hero to the young who found him a sort of self-appointed shaman..." and were convinced with "... his holiness of his mission as a poet" (xvii). Ginsberg is accepted as the poet who created the epic apologia of his generation. Then, the lives, the legend, and the literature began to fuse, and the Beat literati undertook the mission of offering countercultural visions of freedom and possibility.

Despite the power of normative postwar gender prescriptions, feminist scholars have shown that both media representations and individual experiences also offered possibilities for independence and liberation during the postwar era. Beat men held quite conventional views of women, expecting them to sustain ordinary domestic life, paying the bills and caring for children. In contrast, Beat women found that "their search for freedom and authenticity confronted them directly with the realities of the postwar sexual and gender order" (Anderson, 2003: 254).

1. Diane Di Prima (1934 -)

Diane Di Prima is a feminist writer, poet, and teacher; born and raised in Brooklyn as the only daughter of Francis and Emma Di Prima. Her rank within society can be evaluated as a college-educated, middle-class Italian-American. She attended Hunter College high school in New York City and was a member of the editorial board of *Scribimus*, the school paper. After two years at Swarthmore College, and in 1953, she left and decided to live in Manhattan to write full-time. The same year is "the time when she has an influential relationship with Ezra Pound who inspired her to have the desire to get in touch with other strong minds of the Beat poets such as; Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg" (Knight, 1996: 124).

Di Prima joined the Beat literati while living in Greenwich Village. She became a keen supporter of the Bohemian intellectual culture; which was made of well-educated, white middle-class individuals. The so-called bohemian intellectuals were not interested in middle-class values. They preferred a rebellious lifestyle that welcomed sexual freedom and the use of drugs and other inebriated agents. Di Prima then became one of the prolific writers of the group and found the opportunity to meet Le Roi Jones, Allen Ginsberg, Audre Lord, and Jack Kerouac, and soon shared editorship of *The Floating Bear* with Le Roi Jones. It was read as an underground bulletin of Greenwich Village from 1961-1969. Di Prima's first poems were published in *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* in 1958. *Dinners and Nightmares* (1960) was the first book of short stories.

As an assiduous organizer of the *New York Poets Theatre*, she worked with Jones, Fred Herko, James Waring and Alan Marlowe, in 1961. She assisted in establishing the *Poets Press* with Kerouac, McClure, Ginsberg, and Lord. In 1967, she traveled around the United States busy with poetry readings and was in San Francisco in 1968 to work with the *Diggers*, distributing free food; besides taking lessons of Zen Buddhism and the occult. Di Prima taught poetry at the New College of California, in San Francisco; the NAROPA Institute (the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics) in Boulder, Colorado.

Roseanne Giannini Quinn identifies Di Prima as a versatile "dramatist, theorist, philosopher, teacher, activist and a poet," who produced as impressive a body of work as any of her male Beat counterparts; "including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac" (Giannini, 2003: 175). Besides the aforementioned works, she is the writer of many books such as: *The Calculus of Variation* (1972), *Loba*, (1978), *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1988), *Pieces of a Song* (1990), *Revolutionary Letters* (1971), *Selected Poems*, (1975), *Seminary Poems* (1991) and *Recollection of my Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (2001). It took her fifty years to write over thirty books and thousands of poems in addition to her epic, *Loba*. Her book *Memoirs of a Beatnik* has become her most-read work where she describes her feeling of participating in a Beat orgy. "The book provides a vivid picture of bohemian NY life in the mid-1950s" (Watson, 1995: 273).

She edited various anthologies of poetry and is the translator of *Seven Love Poems* (1967) from Middle Latin. She also wrote the following plays: *The Discontent of the Russian Prince*, *Discovery of*

America, Like, Murder Cake, and Whale Honey. "More than any other woman of the Beat, Di Prima has taken her place alongside the men as the epitome of Beat brilliance" (Knight 1996: 128).

2. Women of the Beat

The fifties is generally highlighted as the industrial age at its most insidiously rote and conformist. While The Beats were the only game in town or the only revolution going on at the time, "women of the Beat generation, escaped the eye of the camera, and stayed underground, writing" (Knight, 1996: 1). Beat women were not only writers but girlfriends, supporters, and mother figures of their generation. They appear in the Beat as amalgams or types rather than protagonists with distinct personalities. A similar anonymity encompasses many of the more recently minted beatnik women. The new generation includes substantial figures like Hettie Jones (Mrs. LeRoi), Diane DiPrima, Helen Dorn, (Mrs. Edward), Joyce Johnson, and Elise Cowen. Sex becomes a primary arena of development in three women: "Hettie Jones, Diane DiPrima, and Joyce Johnson who are the names recalled with the Beats" (Watson, 1995: 264). Older writers such as Ruth Weiss, Helen Adam, and Madeline Gleason worked at the same time as Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. But the younger female writers such as "Johnson, Jones, Lenore Kandel, Di Prima, Bremser, Janine Pommy-Vega, and Elise Cowen were the first full generation of the female Beat writers" (265).

Female beat writers do not criticize mainstream American life and are not trying to assert their places as artists and members of the Beat community. They are invisible as artists to their male peers and are invisible today in the popular perception of the Beat era (Ronna and Maria, 1999: 3). However, the poetry and fiction of Beat women comes into the printed files of the Beat archive; *How I Became Hettie Jones*, by Hettie Jones, *Off the Road* by Carolyn Cassady, *Troia: A Mexican Memoir* by Bonnie Bremser, and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* by Diane Di Prima; a file that inaugurates the basis of a substantial Beat women's literature.

The literature produced by women in Beat communities on the East Coast (Greenwich Village and, to a lesser extent, Harlem) and the West (North Beach and Venice) challenges stereotypes of the passivity and sexual frigidity of 1950s women. Many of the female Beats' tales deal with their auxiliary roles as wife, mother, lover, or muse. Their narratives often concern women's madness and suicide, their unregulated sexuality and reproductive roulette, their servitude as amanuenses. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima suggests that female Beats subscribed to what she called "our eternal, tiresome rule of Cool". To some degree, this ethos inhibited them from writing, but it also protected that writing behind a veil of silence. The enormous productivity of the Beat women suggests that this code of Cool provided a cover for female artists to develop their literary voices. (Ronna and Maria, 1999: 3-4) Female Beat writers have been shrouded in stereotypes of the beatnik chick; as Kerouac described them to be girls, who say nothing and wear black. Because of such marginalization, the work and the life-stories of ethnic minority and female Beat writers have not been enshrined in the hagiography of those years. Female Beat writers have been publicized in two recent anthologies: the first one is *Women of the Beat Generation* edited by Brenda Knight, and the second is *A Different Beat* edited by Richard Peabody. However, those volumes provide only a cursory first gloss in reconsidering female writers as figures of the Beat scene. The responsibility and dignity of a poet is outlined in poet's own words: she identifies that "the poet is the last person who is still speaking the truth when no one else dares to," and that "he is the first person to begin the shaping and visioning of the new forms and the new consciousness when no one else has begun to sense it" (Knight 1996: 128).

3. The Feminine voice of di Prima

Di Prima has reflections on specific feminine conditions such as; housework, pregnancy, financial struggle, under which female Beats strove to write. Her exemplary Beat aesthetic rejects boundaries between poetic sensibility and life; she deduces the life and poetic sensibility as a whole and outlines that "there is no part of yourself you can separate out saying; this is memory, this is sensation, this is the work I care about, and this is how I make a living" (Ronna and Maria, 1999: 4). Self-invention in the face of untenable cultural convention is the hallmark of the male hipster; Di Prima reinterprets and augments it, and makes it her own.

In the poem *The Practice of Magical Evocation*, Di Prima pictures the roles of femininity, and freely demonstrates them to the reader: 'I am a woman' she says 'and my poems are woman's'. While 'it is easy to say this' she argues, the reader has to see the picture behind, because, '... the female is ductile', she believes, 'and stroke after stroke' is 'built for masochistic calm'. Di Prima critiques that the woman is seen as a medium of 'calming down' the sexual gratification; which brings suffering, physical pain, and humiliation. No complaining is expected from the feminine side because 'the deadened nerve / is part of' a woman and she has an 'awakened sex', and 'dead retina'. Her definition gives an explicit scene about the feminine role of a woman; she has 'deadened' feelings, so she does not

complain or has no right to complain. She goes on, questioning the motherhood of a woman; mothers are endowed with 'pelvic architecture functional' and they 'bring forth men-children,' and she is annoyed by the fact that "only female is ductile" (Hoover, 1994: 273).

In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, Di Prima illustrates that she learned from her grandmother, Antoinette Mallozzi, what it meant to be "a woman in a house of dark and mellow light". She metaphorically discusses the conditions of her childhood; darkness, symbolizing ignorance, traditional lifestyle, the dominant masculine clichés and paternal family norms (Di Prima, 2001: 1).

In the *Song For Baby-O, Unborn* (Di Prima, 1975: 17) she speaks with her baby which is not born yet, and 'Sweetheart' she calls her 'when you break thru' she says 'you'll find a poet here; not quite what one would choose'. By these lines she implies the difficulties of the outer world, herself, the baby's mother, being one of them. The reality is that being a mother is not an easy responsibility and that the social conditions the baby is going to be introduced with are not tolerable for a mother. Before the baby is born, she shares her reality of life with her baby; 'I won't promise you'll never go hungry' she says and 'or that you won't be sad', because the mother believes that she lives in a 'guttled, breaking globe'. She cannot assure her baby about a wealthy, happy life, and she has some more news for her: 'but I can show you baby' she says 'enough to love to break your heart forever'. In these lines, she assesses that the nursing and nourishing conditions are not preferable to be born into; for the baby will be introduced to a 'guttled, breaking globe.' As for the mother, the only thing she promises to give her baby is "love" which will be as futile as other expectations for a woman.

Motherhood has carved unerasable memories within poetess mind. In her poem *Prayer To Mothers*, (Di Prima, 1990: 91) she ironically demonstrates what is believed to be and what is the reality of women in modern societies. Her address is 'they' standing for masculinity; 'they say you lurk here still'; here, women are regarded as 'lurking' individuals in the society and as if women do not deserve to live among men, while they should be living at 'some sacred mountain,' perhaps, in the depths of the earth or on'. Men do not tolerate women's presence so they say 'you walk (still) among men,' who are 'writing signs in the air, in the sand, warning, warning, weaving.' In these lines, Di Prima draws attention to the occult and ecclesiastical beliefs about women. The souls of mothers are believed to live among the living; the place where they go is perhaps 'a sacred mountain'. Men are the rulers, writing rules of life as the authorities of 'warning'. She goes on reflecting pictures of the human being with the following scenes: women are in 'the crooked shape of (our) deliverance', they are 'anxious', and they should not be 'hasty', they should be 'careful'. Here, Di Prima discusses primary tasks of mothers; they 'deliver' babies of 'crooked shape'. Whatever they do, they are not expected to do it in a hurry, they should be 'anxious,' and 'careful' not to spoil the original. In return for this, men, she argues, 'attend on births', they 'dance on' women's 'dead,' they 'croon, fuck, embracing'; in these lines she criticizes the husbands in masculine dominant society and shows the pressure in men-women relations, they 'wake us' she recounts 'like children from a nightmare.' Women are presented as naïve, pure and defenseless individuals and men are not aware of this. In the next three lines Di Prima defines men as soulless metal beings; they are 'the metal men who walk', she argues, and they walk 'on all our substance, crushing flesh, to swamp' she concludes. It is women's 'flesh' she critiques that men are interested, and use them like using a material, blatantly and intrepidly. She finally demonstrates whatever the souls and prayers of mothers are believed to function in an abstract world, they cannot prevent their lives from 'poison,' 'acid' and 'evil.' They are not able to save the human from worshipping material, misusing their life partners and becoming soulless creatures in a swamp.

Another poem that handles the predestined social role of women and criticizes traditional superstitions and beliefs is *The Loba Addresses The Goddess* (Carters, 1992: 533-534). Addressing the *Creating Power*, Di Prima starts her poem with reflections on the predestined feminine endowments of women; 'Is it not in your service that I wear myself out?' she complains. Here, Di Prima assesses that God knows the characteristic features of women, and what they are created for; he knows that women are used by men, but still they do their best to reconcile with tradition and superstition. She reminds God that mothers are 'running ragged among these hills, driving children'; by this line, the poetess draws the readers' attention to the traditional beliefs, the cliché roles given to women with unquestioning obedience. A mother, she evaluates, '...wear exhaustion like a painted robe', like a valuable present, the hard and tiresome tasks are given to women. She is not alone, 'I & my sisters' she says, implying all women sharing the same fate, are wasting lives at home; 'wresting the goods from the niggardly', they lead a life not only under the pressure of traditions but also try to challenge with poverty. The daughters witness 'dying fathers,' because they do not have social rights to be cured at hospitals, so the fathers are 'healing each other with water & bitter herbs'. Here Di Prima criticizes

parent-children relationships, drawing our attention to the fact that many people are grown up with unrecoverable childhood traumas.

She rejects the weaknesses that men dominant society suits for women; 'when we stand naked in the circle of lamps, beside the small water, in the inner grove' she says, 'we show no blemish, but also no superfluous beauty'; women, she argues here, are naïve and frank in their affairs with men, and their beauty is not a 'superfluous beauty'; here the poet discusses that feminine beauty is without 'blemish' before they have an affair with men. But 'their bodies' are 'burned off in the watches of the night'; here she defends that it is men who spoil the lives of women and consume their time. Romanticism is a feature that women are easily affected by; it is a fact that they enter into a mood of persuasion by 'mantle of stars,' but they unwillingly bear the last episode, as they 'lean mournful', and the end is a 'ragged triumphant,' for them as they are 'Shaggy as grass' because their 'skins' 'ache of emergence dark of the moon.' In these lines, the poet examines the agony and ache of the feminine partners and draws our attention to the unhappy memoirs of complaints about women's experiences of depression in middle-class upbringing.

Her poem Marriage is an individual monolog reflecting feminine desires compared with masculine ones. The characters in the poem are a husband and a wife, the wife is the narrator.

This husband of mine thinks the sea is to visit

In the summer

Whereas I find it the thing to live beside

Desiring as I do to step

into it every morning: cold and gray

Or not, as the sun

Rises, before the tasks start

That my skin and hair should taste salt and I

Could easily live on seaweeds, calms

Breathing that air

He says it would give him arthritis

Yet we are better matched than most, we recognize

This is a thing of value, a bone of contention

Between us. (Di Prima, 1978: 58)

This poem is an outstanding scene that compares rational manly likes and sensuous feminine desires. For the husband, the sea is to be visited once a year, 'in the summer' because he has inflammation in his joints. But for the wife, its beauty must be part of her life. She desires to 'step into it every morning,' without caring the 'cold,' so that will have her 'skin and hair taste salt,' thus feeling the sea on her body. The final message is that the reason on one side and the senses on the other, men and women are inevitable parts for creating happiness.

We see an objective criticism of the narrator's own marriage in Poem In Praise Of My Husband (Taos). In the first lines of the poem she is quite confessional; 'I suppose' she says 'it hasn't been easy living with me either,' 'with my piques, and ups and downs,' and 'my need for privacy'; questioning the feminine privacy, she evaluates that women have a 'loer pride' draws the attention to the fact that it is not easy to get along with a feminine life partner. They might be 'weeping in bed' when their partner is 'trying to sleep.' In the following lines, she focuses on her husband's perturbing behaviors; 'and you,' she complains 'interrupting me in the middle of a thousand poems'. She is patient and is not calling 'the insurance people' at 'the time' her partner 'stopped a poem.' She concludes her evaluation on wife and husband, or marriage saying 'we cling to each other as if each thought the other was the raft'. (Di Prima, 1990: 63) Here she demonstrates that women and man should 'cling to each other', be thoughtful and patient to catch happiness and to share the beauty of life.

Childhood memories and recollections about family members are the central themes of many of her poems; for instance, her father is described as: '...the fierce wind, the intolerable force, that almost broke me ...' But 'in my dreams' she adds, 'you stand at the door of your house, and weep for your wife, my mother.' (Di Prima, 1990: 114) She reflects the lack of communication with her father but is worried about her mother, and what she expects may only come true in her dream. While home stands as the source of sorrow and agony, nature is where she finds happiness. In her poem "Backyard" addressing Brooklyn, she defines the village life as living with angels; but her father stands as a character who spoils her happiness in a dreamy life where she 'never cries'.

'where angels turned into honeysuckle & poured nectar into my mouth

where I French-kissed the roses in the rain

where demons tossed me a knife to kill my father in the stark
simplicity of the sky
where I never cried...’ (Di Prima, 1990: 141)

In *Nightmares*, she reflects on the annoying issues of daily life in the fifties; for instance, a book which is mailed by her mother cannot be delivered to her on the ground that she does not have an ID with her. (Di Prima, 1974: 45) Nightmare 5 is about the dialogue between her and the man who comes to cut the meter off. (Di Prima, 1974: 46) Nightmare 9 is reporting her experience with a cop, picturing the formal oppression, human rights and the defaults of racism:

“Keep moving said the cop. The park closes at nine keep moving dammit. God damn thing you think you own the park. Not talking huh not going noplac? We’ll see. Send you up for observation a week of shock will do you good I bet. And he blew his whistle.

Whereupon white car pulled up,
White attendants
Who set about their job without emotion.

It wasn’t the first time they had seen a catatonic tree.” (45)

Another poem she focuses on the rights of citizenship is Nightmare 12. It is about an experience at a clinic; she is there because she twisted her foot, but to cure her, she says, ‘they took out the eyeball of her eye and wash it in the basin.’ (Di Prima, 1974: 46)

Conclusion

Beat subculture was no less stunted in its gender relations than postwar culture generally, but it was more than simply a representation of sexual and social rebellion. (Anderson, 2003: 263) As a dominant feminine voice of the Beat generation, Di Prima’s approach to social events is as realistic as it is autobiographical. She reflected her thoughts with an ironic and harsh language. Robert Creeley, in the foreword to *Dinners and Nightmares* (1974) identifies Di Prima, as one of the major feminine voices of the Beat poets, who focuses on “the search for human center” and he argues that “she did, and stayed open, as a woman, uninterested in any possibility of static investment or solution.” (Di Prima, 1974: 1) She deserves more attention than she has received; for she “has a distinctive style of her own, modulating with determination, generosity, and self-awareness” (Foster, 1992: 191).

She has sometimes been called the archetypal Beat woman because she played a key organizational role in Beat-related activities. She has a model personality of Beat qualities which can be summarized as absolute independence, wide sexual experience from mid-teens on, familiarity with drugs, the Village, jazz, and bohemian lifestyle. “At the age of fourteen, she decides that she will live the life of a poet.” (Watson, 1995: 270) “The Beat renounces the goals and aspirations of the conventional world: they see traditional values as deadening awareness, brutalizing feeling, and distorting the responses of the individual, therefore they celebrate a new moral and ethical position intended to salvage human dignity” (Holladay, 2009: 157).

To conclude, we can say that Di Prima, represents a powerful feminine voice of her generation, and with her reflections, in her works, she takes us into a bohemian world; where we can find happiness and joy as well as poverty and pain. We can also witness the resistance of The Beat Generation to the traditional popular culture, and the cliché norms and values of the materialistic society about the feminine world.

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