

JACK KEROUAC, THE BEAT GENERATION AND *ON THE ROAD***Nino Davitashvili**

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Abstract

The mid-twentieth century in American literature is connected to the Beat Generation which managed and changed traditional social values, materialism and conformity. “Never in the history of literature and literary movements has so much been owed to so few. Three men - Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs – became the core of the literature and social phenomenon that (to borrow Burroughs’ comments about Kerouac’s most famous novel) ‘sold a trillion pairs of Levis and a million espresso coffee machines, and also sent countless kids on the road’ “(Russell, 2002:7).

The Beat phenomenon transformed the way of life of American society. It gave the way for the hippies, punks, ravers. It also appeared to be the first movement in Western culture connected to literature, music and films. The freedom the Beats brought to America was totally different from existing world of work, responsibility and money. The Beats began to bring a new lifestyle which as quite different from the mainstream. “As with most literary movements, there is not a birth date for the Beat Generation. No one ever issued a manifesto or printed off a pamphlet announcing the arrival of the Beats, it simply happened. Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs met in New York in 1944. They were introduced through a series of mutual friends, liked one another and began to hang out together. The three of them grew a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, the Beat Generation itself” (Russell, 2002:10).

Key Words: American literature, Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, the Beat Generation, the 1950s in America.

Introduction

According to Zhang: “The Beat Generation was a group of loosely-bound young poets and writers in US in the 1950s. They challenged all the traditional cultural values after World War II. The phrase “Beat Generation” was invented by Jack Kerouac in 1947. The phrase was introduced to the public in 1952 when Kerouac’s friend John Clellon Holmes wrote an article “This is the Beat Generation” for the New York Times Magazine. The word “beat” refers in part to beatific and beautiful. Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, along with the writer William Burroughs, formed the center of the movement launched by this generation” (Zhang, 2013:205).

This movement associates with Jack Kerouac, whose novel *On the Road* published in 1957, became a symbol of the era. This novel is not only a narrative text of travelling across the United States, it is an exploration of identity, freedom and picture of the postwar society. The unique narrative style gives a vivid presentation of the youth and depicts cultural and psychological situation of this period. “Kerouac’s *On the Road* is also one of the most influential writings of the Beat generation. This book describes a group of people traveling both geographically and spiritually in the country. In a dreary conservatism and mass consumptions era, Kerouac described a life which was rid of social pressure and shackles. He saw obedience as a big problem in a postwar American society. In this society, everyone was doing what they thought they should do. Kerouac believed that in this society, people earned money and desperately accumulated material wealth, just like insects. He beloved that the American society made people pay the price, but people do not really know what they lost in their lives; they didn’t know why they continued to do so or where to go” (Zhang, 2013:207).

It is correct to say that Kerouac believes that many Americans have lost their aim and life is pointless for them. That is why the characters of *On the Road* always move, look for new adventures. They are greatly dissatisfied with life and try to overcome some restrictions. “As the focal point of the

American society, the middle class most typically reflects the spirit of the American nation, beliefs and values. However, in most of the postwar middle-class youth's eyes, the traditional beliefs were becoming increasingly disintegrated and no trace of new faith was a view. In panicky embarrassment, the countercultural mentality of the middle-class youth was accumulating power" (Zhang, 2013:207).

Methods

The method applied in this article is *literature review method*. The article analyses Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and the Beat Generation.

Result

The beat Generation emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and it was a response to the rigid social norm and growing consumerism of post-World War II America. Writers associated with this movement reject conventional values and sought new forms of spiritual and artistic expression.

Jack Kerouac in *About the Beat Generation* writes:

"The BEAT GENERATION, that was a version that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wider way, in the late Forties, of a generation crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful and an ugly graceful new way – a version gleaned from the way we had heard the world "beat" spoken on street corners on Times Square and in the village, in other cities in the downtown city night of postwar America – beat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction – we'd even heard old 1910 Daddy hipsters of the streets speak the word that way, with a melancholy sneer – It never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality who did not grow up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization – the subterranean heroes who'd finally turned from the "freedom" machine of the west and were taking drugs, digging hop, having flashes of sight, experiencing the "derangement of the senses", taking strange, being poor and glad, prophesying a new style for American culture, a new style (we thought) completely free from European influences (unlike the Lost Generation)... (Charters, 1995:559).

The Beat Generation refuses to follow existing experiences in America. They want to redefine the meaning of assistance in Modern America. "The American Beat Generation in the 1950s is a reflection of the reality in which the youth's wishes to change social life and realize their ideas couldn't be well met. Therefore, to correctly respond to youth issues and continuously eliminate antagonism and conflicts between the youth and the society should be a major concern of the whole society in the process of modernization" (Zhang, 2013:209).

Kerouac's *On the Road* reflects the cultural rebellion. The novel characters neglect stable careers, traditional family structures, material success. Their lifestyle is defined by spontaneity, movement and emotional intensity.

The characters almost never plan anything. They follow impulses without planning. They hitchhike, change their destinations and have no decisions about their next destination. They admire the present moment and experience excitement from it. They take spontaneous decisions in relationships and in love affairs too. They enjoy life as series of immediate moments.

Discussion

The novel *On the Road* is one of the most successful novels by Jack Kerouac. In *New York Times* we read that it was a historic occasion, the clearest and the most important utterance made by the generation Kerouac named as "Beat" and Kerouac was an avatar of this generation. *The New York Times Book Review* names Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as *Huckleberry Finn* of the mid-twentieth century.

In her book *The Portable Jack Kerouac* Ann Charters wrote:

"In 1961, after publishing a dozen books, Kerouac wrote in *Big Sur* that his "work comprises one vast book". In this framework, his best-known book, *On the Road*, in which he appears as the narrator, "Sal Paradise", who tells the story of going on the road with his buddy "Dean Moriarty", is only one part of the larger whole. "Sal Paradise" is one of Kerouac's many pseudonyms, like "Jack Duluo", the preferred name for himself" (Charters, 1995: xvii).

On the Road is considered to be a semi-autobiographical novel. “All of Kerouac’s writing is autobiographical, but he fictionalized the stories about his direct experience by changing the names of the real-life characters he described and by altering the settings of his narrative if he or his publishers feared libel action would be taken by the people he was writing about... Certainly Kerouac never presented his work as “autobiography”; he called his books “true-story novels” and insisted “narrative sections of one long life story is what my ‘novels’ are.” The term “autobiographical fictions” suggests that Kerouac took a literal approach in his book as (“autobiography”) but combined it with his view of himself as a storyteller, free to change fact into fiction and use different narrative strategies in the various books (“fictions”). But this term is also unacceptable: Kerouac’s approach to creating narratives solidly based on his direct experience is a world apart from Jorge Luis Borges’s brilliantly imagined “fictions,” and the term is indelibly linked to the South American writer’s short narratives” (Charters, 1995:8-9).

On the Road is a semi-autobiographical novel with some interesting characters:

➤ Sal Paradise, a narrator of the novel, is a protagonist man and represents Kerouac himself. He is a young character searching for freedom and experience at the same time. his journey across America represents the authors own journey and adventures.

➤ Dean Moriarty is a person inspired by Neal Cassady. He is one of the most dynamic and important characters in the novel. He is wild, energetic, spontaneous, dynamic, charismatic and fond of life and movement:

“... Dan was the son of a wino, one of the most tottering bums of Larimer Street, and Dean had in fact been brought up generally on Larimer Street and thereabouts. He used to plead in court at the age of six to have his father set free. He used to beg in front of Larimer alleys and sneak the money back to his father, who waited among the broken bottles with an old buddy. Then when Dean grew up, he began hanging around the Glomar pool-halls; he set a Denver record for stealing cars and went to the reformatory. From the age of eleven to seventeen he was usually in reform school. His specialty was stealing cars, gunning for girls coming out of high school in the afternoon, driving them out to the mountains, making them, and coming back to sleep in any available hotel bathtub in town. His father, once a respectable, which is worth than a whisky alcoholic, and was reduced to riding freights to Texas in the winter and back to Denver in the summer. Dean had brothers on his dead mother’s side - she died when he was small – but they disliked him. Dean’s only buddies were the poolhall, bays. Dean, who had the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint, and Carlo were the underground monsters of that season in Denver, together with the Grand Street” (Kerouac, 1983:38-39).

He resembles freedom and rebellion and, of course, the Beat Spirit. Dean Moriarty carries the idea of freedom. He is admirable and destructive at the same time. His impulsive behaviour and huge energy serve for this. The character helps the author to reflect absolute freedom. At the beginning of the novel Sal introduces him to us:

“Dean is a perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles. First reports of him came through Chad King, who’d showed me a few letters from him written in New Mexico reform school. I was tremendously interested in the letters because Nietzsche and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew. At one point Carlo and I talked about the letters and wondered if we would ever meet the strange Dean Moriarty. This is all far back, when Dean was not the way he is today, when he was a young jailkid shrouded in mystery. The news came that Dean was out of reform school and was coming to New York for the first time; also, there was talk that he had just married a girl called Marylou... My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry-trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent _ a side burned hero of the snowy west” (Kerouac, 1983:3-5).

Dean tries to find meaning within the chaos. The relationship between Sal and Dean is central point in the novel. It is not only their friendship which reviles the main topic in the novel. The relationship between them represents a philosophical dialogue between stability, action and movement as well.

➤ Marylou is Dean’s young wife. She is a person with free spirit and leads the free, unconventional lifestyle. “Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tresses... she was awfully dumb and capable of doing terrible things” (Kerouac, 1983:5).

- Carlo Marx is a character based on Allen Ginsberg. He is poetic and intellectual, and often engaged in philosophical conversations. He represents the artistic soul of the Great Generation.
- Old Bull Lee represents William S Burroughs. He is an intellectual person with philosophical ideas about society.
- Camille is Dean's stable partner representing domestic life and responsibility, and is quite different from other characters representing chaos.

The most dominant topic is freedom in the novel. The characters seek liberation from social rules and limits any time. Their journey and road are a symbol of limitless possibilities.

Kerouac created his fiction and they were based on his real-life experience. "Creating works of fiction based on his real-life adventures, Kerouac used pseudonyms for himself and the "characters" in his books in order to avoid libel suits. In 1965, when he wrote to Holmes that he welcomed the idea of an anthology of his writing, he expected that the names of the people who appeared in his books as "fictional" characters closely modeled on his friends Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs" (Charters, 1995: xx).

The characters' experience shows that Kerouac represents freedom as a complex and often contradictory experience. The lifestyle leads to instability, disillusionment and exhaustion as well as characters experience some movements of discovery and exhilaration.

The novel proves that absolute freedom may be liberating and destructive. We get a question – can real freedom exist without responsibility?

While experiencing freedom the characters of the novel search for identity. Sal's journey is not only physical. He travels around the country and introduces different people, cultures and understand his desires. The journey in the novel represents constant movement reflecting an internal restlessness – a great desire to avoid fixed identities and social labels. Sal fights to find himself. All this is characteristic of the postwar period. A quick modernizing world carries a sense of uncertainty of individual identity.

It is especially interesting to follow the writers' expectations at the beginning of the journey:

"Then came spring, the great time of traveling, and everybody in the scattered gang was getting ready to take one trip or another. It was busily at work on my novel and when I came to the halfway mark, after a trip down South with my aunt to visit my brother Rocco, I got ready to travel west for the very first time... my whole experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell... I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds – what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off.

Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line pearl would be handed to me" (Kerouac, 1983:8-11).

Travel takes a central part in the novel. The American landscape is a backdrop for the characters' journeys and it represents isolation.

The road is a metaphor for life and its journey. The road in *On the Road* is an unpredictable, open-ended, filled with hardship and excitement as life itself. Kerouac's cities, highways and rural areas are symbols of the dynamic energy. They represent complexity of American society.

One of the distinctive characteristics of *On the Road* is its style which is often called "spontaneous Prose". Deeply influenced by jazz music, Kerouac liked its improvisational nature. The influence gave the novel, rhythm, structure and language. The prose is characterized by long, flowing sentences, minimal punctuation and it carries a sense of immediacy. This style creates the impression of unfolding the narration in real time, mirroring characters' impulsive actions and emotional intensity. "Kerouac wrote jazz, improvising on the page like Charlie Parker on the saxophone... Kerouac tirelessly chased melodies and practiced chord changes as he recorded the conversations he overheard moments after they happened and his observations in the little spiral notebooks he invariably kept tucked nearly out of sight in his shirt pocket" (Charters, 1995:10). Jazz also serves as a thematic element within the novel. The characters often are engaged with jazz culture, they attend performances. Jazz music is a symbol of freedom, creativity and show breaking the conventional boundaries.

Kerouac's novel criticizes materialistic values dominating in the postwar American society. The pursuit of wealth, stability and social status are rejected by the characters. They are replaced by emotion and personal expression. The characters' attitude towards rejection by emotion and personal expression.

The characters' attitude towards rejection of materialism often is a reason of poverty, instability and difficult relationships that they experience.

The novel cannot be considered as a pessimistic version of life and freedom itself. It owns an optimistic sense of them. However, *On the Road* gradually reveals a sense of disillusionment. The characters' journey is not an idealistic experience. It fails to provide lasting fulfillment and the characters' relationships become strained.

The novel had a profound impact on American culture and literature. It really inspired a young generation and made them review existing social norms, and helped them seek new ways of living. The novel had a huge influence on the hippie movement later in the 1960s.

Kerouac's experimental style served to redefine the narrative form and gave birth to a new approach of storytelling. "The editorial style does not mean that Kerouac never revised, that his revision process differed from the standard method... Kerouac fully created the scene, dialogue, and idea in his mind before writing. The need to stop or traditionally revise meant that, he failed in his task and should start over. For spontaneous prose to work, Kerouac called for first setting the object "before the mind" as if the writer were sketching the object... Kerouac wrote in the quick bursts" (Deepanrajan, 2017:266-267).

In Kerouac's writings "he not only recorded what happened to him by recalling or inventing a myriad of minute details dredged up out of the recesses of his apparently inexhaustible memory, but he also shaped these details on the pages of his manuscripts with the consciousness that they must be read as fiction in order to hold together as a coherent story. Although Kerouac insisted that his writing style of spontaneous prose, he had created a "new literature" that would make all previous fiction obsolete, he considered himself as old-fashioned story-teller" (Charters, 1995:8).

On the Road is considered to be an example of cultural relevance and artistic innovation.

Conclusion

To Conclude:

- *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac serves to explore human desire for freedom;
- its characters, thematic depth, dramatic narrative style, the spirit of the Beat Generation and difficulties of postwar American society make a huge influence on the readers;
- the value of conformity and materialism are a topic of discussion among the readers of *On the Road* too;
- the journey in the novel stands for an ongoing search which is followed by discovery and uncertainty;
- the novel also deals with the topic of identity;
- it is Kerouac's Road which is not only a physical path but a metaphor for endless process of discovering identity or self-understanding;
- the Beat Generation was a group of loosely-bound young poets and writers in the US in the 1950s;
- they challenged all the traditional cultural values after World War II;
- the phrase "Beat Generation" was invented by Jack Kerouac in 1947;
- the phrase was introduced to the public in 1952 when Kerouac's friend John Clellon Holmes wrote an article "This is the beat Generation" for the New York Times Magazine;
- the word "beat" refers in part to beatific and beautiful. Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, along with the writer William Burroughs, formed the center of the movement launched by this generation.

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