

## ANALYSIS

*On the Road* (1957)



Jack Kerouac

(1922-1969)

“*On the Road*, written by 1951 but not published until 1957, expresses the new, although during his entire writing career Kerouac never discovered a distinctive style. He tried to write his way into a style, but could not find a unique voice. Kerouac intuited the subterranean world of the 1950s, but unlike (say) John Hawkes, he could not find either the prose or the right forms for his ideas. The first version of *On the Road* was presented to Kerouac’s editor, Robert Giroux, on a 250-foot roll of Japanese paper which ran continuously, one long paragraph, only slightly indented for margins, and punctuated according to energy rather than grammatical breaks. The desire to achieve spontaneity or to confess was not so much experimental or ‘a dare,’ as it was an obsessional need to find print forms for the continuing racing of the mind, a drug-induced vision, with wild swings of manic and depressive feelings.

The first paragraph of *On the Road*, reorganized and presented traditionally when the book was published by Viking in 1957, still suggests the need for spontaneity and rush. ‘I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up’... The narrator is confessional and, too often, self-indulgent and self-serving. The split-up between narrator and wife prefigures splits that would characterize all male-female relationships in the fiction and poetry to come. The birth of Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady) suggests the mythical hero, the figure shrouded in mist, the emergence of a Western type: mysterious birth, already on the road, in a car—the centaur standing in for modern, transitory man. Dean will be Kerouac’s Proteus and Prometheus, a man whose life, not his work, is the expression of how an era, otherwise constricted, can express itself.

Most significantly, the novel is an attempt to seek out another way of life, such as we find in the archetypal breakout novel, *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain’s young hero serves many functions, not the least of which is his use of the river as a means of regaining an Edenic existence. Kerouac’s narrator is named, suitably, Sal Paradise; and part of his quest for Eden is a lingering fantasy that it is achievable. One cannot fault young writers for their rebellion against fifties stooge and political deception; one can fault then for thinking that in running, jazz, drugs, dharma, or sexual combinations, they would find what Sal hopes to

find. Similarly, Dean's desire for elements that a stable life cannot provide is the need of every 'maker' or 'creator' for elements lacking in his society. That much is clear, and acceptable. But Dean's antics become increasingly tiresome when we recognize he confuses process with results. In turn, Kerouac's narrative seems incompletely thought out, the material for the book, not the book.

Jazz, grass, visions, and, occasionally, sex may provide the high that suggests paradise does exist. In this respect, Kerouac's characters validly reach for a life beyond a respectable middle. The 1950s would appear to enclose us in what Dostoevsky considered as the doom of 'cheap happiness,' what Nietzsche characterized as the fated life of the 'last man.' In their place, Kerouac, like Gaddis, Bellow, and Mailer in differing ways, offers the life of 'exalted suffering,' which can best be experienced in jazz....

Dean Moriarty as an avenging angel, as Prometheus, as the embodiment of vitality which can never express itself fully or sufficiently, is a brilliant idea, but, like the language, does not reach satisfactory form. That identification with cars is the sole area in which Dean (*the* Dean, the Christ, as it were) is supreme. Instead of a chariot, as in the myths, he drives jalopies and Cadillacs... He is superb with cars, so that machine and road afford him the opportunity to demonstrate a genius that has no other outlet in American society...he should be a medieval knight, a samurai, a defender of the faith. Instead, he is a seedy-looking, always hungry, half-educated, word-spouting young man without anything to his name except ex-wives and children strewn across the country. The idea is so interesting, such a prophetic view of so many young men, that the reader only wishes Kerouac had matured sooner, so as to catch the sense of Dean and his world more completely.

The form he uses, but without sufficient connotative value, is the journey. The road becomes not only the means of escape but the locus of life. Once one arrives, the place proves disappointing or unfulfilling, a form of marriage. But with people packing the car, Dean at the wheel, Sal Paradise next to him, 'life stories' as the form of entertainment, there is life. Riding through the desert or the plains is the trip to the moon, without the moon. Life in the cities is a series of juvenile encounters, of adolescent expectations of women, who are required to wait and serve, or drink and drugs, and male companionship—an extended fraternity party, or a shore binge by sailors. Whereas life on the road has a lyrical energy. If the world is dualistic, life on the road is the irrational, energetic principle, while life in the cities is enforced by reason; and one can break from reason only by way of excess."

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