

129 QUOTATIONS



Jack Kerouac

(1922-1969)

Jack Kerouac wrote the picaresque novel *On the Road* (1957), an extension of Walt Whitman's vision in "Song of the Open Road" (1856) and the primary work identified with the "Beat Generation" of the 1950s. The Beats were not actually a generation but a subculture of bohemians in enclaves mainly in San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, who popularized rebellious attitudes and lifestyles. One of the senses in which they were "beat" is political. They were rebels without a cause, like the adolescent star James Dean in the movie. After victory in World War II, the economy was booming and millions of young people free of the war at last got married, bought new homes, formed families and were enjoying prosperity and a bright future. The contentment of the middle class depressed the Beatniks, who wore dark clothes and tranced out in smoky dark basement clubs, listening to cool jazz and bad poetry. In the 1960s the Vietnam War provided a hot cause and Beatniks morphed into antiwar revolutionaries and hippies. To the public Kerouac remains a charismatic icon. His effusive prose recalls Thomas Wolfe, but is even more Romantic. He is the only important American writer raw enough to believe in "automatic writing"—unedited spontaneous stream of consciousness. "That's not writing," quipped Truman Capote, "that's typing." John Updike parodied *On the Road* in "On the Sidewalk" and politically correct academics rejected all that Kerouac stood for: personal liberty, free speech, religious faith, transcendence and love of America. Kerouac died of alcoholism and romanticism at age 47.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, society, freedom, Existentialism, self-criticism, madness, Beat Generation, love, sex, women, the Road, Los Angeles, Times Square, America, pastoralism, Buddhism, Transcendentalism, dreaming, God, writing, style, critics, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Thomas Wolfe, 1960s countercultural revolution, Postmodernism, politics, summary of beliefs, advice, death:

YOUTH

You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values.

EDUCATION

You'd be surprised how little I knew even up to yesterday.

Colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middleclass non-identity.

SOCIETY

All of life is a foreign country.

A sociable smile is nothing but a mouth full of teeth.

FREEDOM

All I wanted to do was sneak out into the night and disappear somewhere, and go find out what everybody was doing all over the country.

I'd rather hop freights around the country and cook my food out of tin cans over wood fires, than be rich and have a home or work.

EXISTENTIALISM

I saw that my life was a vast glowing empty page and I could do anything I wanted.

SELF-CRITICISM

Don't touch me, I'm full of snakes.

My fault, my failure, is not in the passions I have, but in my lack of control of them.

I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another until I drop.

My manners, abominable at times, can be sweet. As I grew older I became a drunk. Why? Because I like ecstasy of the mind. I'm a wretch. But I love, love.

As far as I'm concerned the only thing to do is sit in a room and get drunk.

MADNESS

Bein Crazy is the least of my worries.

There are worse things than being mad.

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round heads in the square holes. The ones who see things differently.

Anybody who's never had delirium tremens even in their early stages may not understand that it's not so much a physical pain but a mental anguish indescribable to those ignorant people who don't drink and accuse drinkers of irresponsibility.

BEAT GENERATION

The only truth is music.

Better to sleep in an uncomfortable bed free, than sleep in a comfortable bed unfree.

They were...rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining.

It's the beat generation, its beat, it's the beat to keep, it's the beat of the heart, it's being beat and down in the world and like oldtime lowdown and like in ancient civilizations the slave boatmen rowing galleys to a beat and servants spinning pottery to a beat.

The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had...of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way—a vision gleaned from the way we had heard the word “beat” spoken on streetcorners 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...it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization—the subterranean heroes...taking drugs, digging bop, having flashes of insight, experiencing the “derangement of the senses”...prophesying a new style for American culture.

But as to the actual existence of a Beat Generation, chances are it was really just an idea in our minds.... In actuality there was only a handful of real hip swinging cats and what there was vanished mighty swiftly during the Korean War when (and after) a sinister new kind of efficiency appeared in America, maybe it was the result of the universalization of Television...but the beat characters after 1950 vanished into jails and madhouses, or were shamed into silent conformity, the generation itself was shortlived and small in number.

I think it's a lovely hallucination but I love it sorta.

LOVE

Love is all.

This was my girl and my kind of girlsoul, and I told her that.

We agreed to love each other madly.

In my madness I was actually in love with her for the few hours it all lasted; it was the same unmistakable ache and stab across the mind, the same sighs, the same pain, and above all the same reluctance and fear to approach.

We turned at a dozen paces, for love is a duel, and looked at each other for the last time.

And the story of love is a long sad tale ending in graves.

SEX

Offer them what they secretly want and they of course immediately become panic-stricken.

She was a nice little girl, simple and true, and tremendously frightened of sex. I told her it was beautiful. I wanted to prove this to her. She let me prove it, but I was too impatient and proved nothing.

It was not a conquest. She was out like a light.

WOMEN

Paris is a woman who was penetrated by the Nazi invasion.

But, outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things.

Sometimes during the night I'd look at my poor sleeping mother cruelly crucified there in the American night because of no-money, no-hope-of-money, no family, no nothing, just myself the stupid son.

My aunt once said that the world would never find peace until men fell at their women's feet and asked for forgiveness.

THE ROAD

My eyes were glued on life and they were full of tears.

We've got to go someplace, find something.

I've been reading Whitman. ["Song of the Open Road"]

The road must eventually lead to the whole world.

All he needed was a wheel in his hand and four on the road.

Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road.

Ma feeds my cats.

There was nowhere to go but everywhere, so just keep on rolling under the stars.

And before me was the great raw bulge and bulk of the American continent; somewhat far across, gloomy, crazy New York was throwing up its cloud of dust and brown steam. There is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded—at least that's what I thought then.

Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.

I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night.

As we crossed the Colorado-Utah border I saw God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say, "Pass here and go on, you're on the road to heaven."

LOS ANGELES

The smog was heavy, my eyes were weeping from it, the sun was hot, the air stank, a regular hell is LA.

I could hear everything, together with the hum of my hotel neon. I never felt sadder in my life. LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities; New York gets godawful cold in the winter but there's a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in some streets. LA is a jungle.

Somebody had tipped the American continent like a pinball machine and all the goofballs had come rolling to LA in the southwest corner. I cried for all of us. There was no end to the American sadness and the American madness. Someday we'll all start laughing and roll on the ground when we realize how funny it's been.

It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes.

Here I was at the end of America...no more land...and nowhere was nowhere to go but back.

TIMES SQUARE

I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic air of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream-grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City.

He wasn't drunk on liquor, just drunk on what he liked—crowds of people milling.

AMERICA

America is a lonely crock of shit.

This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do.

Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car at night?

It is possible for the human spirit to win after all.

I have finally taught Dean that he can do anything he wants, become mayor of Denver, marry a millionairess, or become the greatest poet since Rimbaud. But he keeps rushing out to see the midget auto races.

PASTORALISM

If you own a rug you own too much.

Manana is a lovely word and one that probably means heaven.

Happy. Just in my swim shorts, barefooted, wild-haired, in the red fire dark, singing, swigging wine, spitting, jumping, running—that's the way to live. All alone and free.

Ah, it was a fine night, a warm night, a wine-drinking night, a moony night, and a night to hug your girl and talk and spit and be heaving going. This we did.

I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way.

BUDDHISM

My serious Buddhism, that of ancient India, has influenced that part in my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious, almost as much as Catholicism has.

The part of Zen that has influenced my writing is the Zen contained in the haiku.

TRANSCENDENTALISM

To me a mountain is a buddha.

The secret of this kind of climbing, is like Zen. Don't think. Just dance along.

I remembered the famous Zen saying, "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing."

Jumping from boulder to boulder and never falling, with a heavy pack, is easier than it sounds; you just can't fall when you get into the rhythm of the dance.

The closer you get to real matter, rock air fire and wood, boy, the more spiritual the world is.

No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength.

Not only was there no traffic but the rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover, this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool.

Let the mind beware, that though the flesh be bugged, the circumstances of existence are pretty glorious.

I felt sweet, swinging bliss, like a big shot of heroin in the mainline vein; like a gulp of wine late in the afternoon and it makes you shudder; my feet tingled.

I hope it is true that a man can die and yet not only live in others but give them life, and not only life, but that great consciousness of life.

DREAMING

Dreaming ties all mankind together.

The world is nothing but a dream.

Bleary eyes, insane mind bemused and mystified by sleep, details that pop out even as you write them you don't know what they mean, till you wake up, have coffee, look at it, and see the logic of dreams in dream language itself, see?

GOD

God is an Indian giver who gives only occasionally.

I say that we shall all be reborn with the Only One, and that's what makes me go on.

If there can't be love among men let there be love at least between men and God.

Wishing there was a personal God in all this impersonal matter.

I looked up at the sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved.

WRITING

I'm going to marry my novels and have little short stories for children.

I know the secrets; I dig Joyce and Proust above Melville and Celine.

I'm writing this book because we're all going to die.

It's only through form that we can realize emptiness.

Something that you feel will find its own form.

Write in recollection and amazement for yourself.

Work from the pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea.

Man, wow, there's so many things...to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears.

I wanted to put my hand down to an enormous paean which would unify my vision of America with words spilled out in the modern spontaneous method. Instead of just a horizontal account of travels on the road, I wanted a vertical, metaphysical study.

I want to work in revelations, not just spin silly tales for money. I want to fish as deep down as possible into my own subconscious in the belief that once that far down, everyone will understand because they are the same that far down.

Books, smooks, this sickness has got me wishing if I can ever get out of this I'll gladly become a millworker and shut my big mouth.

STYLE

Goddam it, feeling is what I like in art, not craftiness and the hiding of feelings.

I got the idea for the spontaneous style of *On the Road* from seeing how good old Neal Cassady wrote his letters to me—all first person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed.

All my editors since Malcolm Cowley have had instructions to leave my prose exactly as I wrote it. In the days of Malcolm Cowley, with *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*, I had no power to stand by my style for better or for worse. When Malcolm Cowley made endless revisions and inserted thousands of needless commas...

By not revising what you've already written you simply give the reader the actual workings of your mind during the writing itself—you confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way... Well, look, did you ever hear a guy telling a long wild tale to a bunch of men in a bar and all are listening and smiling, did you ever hear that guy stop to revise himself, go back to a previous sentence to improve it, to defray its rhythmic thought impact?

As for my regular English verse, I knocked it off fast like the prose.

CRITICS

If critics say your work stinks it's because they want it to stink and they can make it stink by scaring you into conformity with their comfortable little standards. Standards so low that they can no longer be considered "dangerous" but set in place in their compartmental understandings.

I have been writing my heart out all my life, but only getting a living out of it now, and the attacks are coming in thick. A lot of people are mad and jealous and bitter and I only hope they also can be heard by an expanding publishing program the size of Russia's. Because it's not a question of the merit of art, but a question of spontaneity and sincerity and joy, I say.

HEMINGWAY

God how right Hemingway was when he said there was no remedy for life—and to think that negative little paper-shuffling prissies should write condescending obituaries about a man who told the truth, nay who drew breath in pain to tell a tale like that!

Hemingway was fascinating, the pearls of words on a white page giving you an exact picture.

GERTRUDE STEIN

Never interested me too much. I liked "Melanctha" a little bit.

THOMAS WOLFE

Wolfe was a torrent of American heaven and hell that opened my eyes to America as a subject in itself.

1960s COUNTERCULTURAL REVOLUTION

The Beat group dispersed...in the early sixties, all went their own way, and this is my way: home life, as in the beginning, with a little toot once in a while in local bars.

I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray [get high], making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.

I don't know one hippie anyhow... I think they think I'm a truckdriver. And I am.

This is my part of the movie, let's hear yours.

POSTMODERNISM

When you start separating people from their rivers, what have you got? Bureaucracy!

This feeling may soon be obsolete as America enters its High Civilization period and no one will get sentimental or poetic any more about trains and dew on fences at dawn in Missouri.

All my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons.

All these people thinking they're hardheaded and materialistic practical types, they don't know shit about matter, their heads are full of dreamy ideas and notions.

The rooftops of Berkeley looked like pitiful living meat sheltering grieving phantoms from the eternity of the heavens which they feared to face.

Great things are not accomplished by those who yield to trends and fads and popular opinion.

The best teacher is experience and not through someone's distorted point of view.

They build their own Hells.

POLITICS

I'm pro-American and the radical political involvements seem to tend elsewhere.

SUMMARY OF BELIEFS

Some's bastards, some's ain't. That's the score.

It makes me proud to love the world somehow—hate's so easy compared.

I believed in a good home, in sane and sound living, in good food, good times, work, faith and hope. I have always believed in these things.

ADVICE

Believe that the world is an ethereal flower, and ye live.

Live, travel, adventure, bless, and don't be sorry.

I have nothing to offer anybody but my own confusion.

DEATH

The dream is already ended and we're already awake in the golden eternity.

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