

Aristotle or a post-modern anti-hero?

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In *On the Road* Jack Kerouac produces what has become known as the archetypal Beat hero, Dean Moriarty. An analysis of whether he is closer to a traditional Aristotelian hero or to the postmodern anti-hero will reveal much about the often contradictory forces at work within the “ rhythms of fifties underground America, jazz, sex, generosity, chill dawn and drugs . . . ” (Holmes, 1957). Before discussing which Moriarty is closer to it will be necessary to briefly define both the traditional and the postmodern hero, identifying what they hold in common and what divides them.

The traditional Aristotelian hero is a high-born man, normally royal or at least from the aristocracy who appears to be on top of the world at the beginning of his story. He has many advantages, both natural and acquired. He is often successful, popular with others and apparently happy. The tragic hero normally has something that has been called “ the fatal flaw” (Kaufmann, 1992). This flaw may be something he has no blame for, such as the heel that makes Achilles physically vulnerable, the jealousy that makes Othello emotionally vulnerable or the introspection that makes Hamlet delay so long. This fatal flaw often leads, in one way or another, to the downfall of the tragic hero.

So the traditional tragic hero falls from a high social position to disgrace and/or death through circumstance and through his supposed fatal flaw. Aristotle said that his fate should inspire “ pity and fear” within the audience (Aristotle, 2001). Pity for the fate of the individual tragic hero and fear that they might fall into a similar situation themselves. By contrast, the anti-hero is, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, “ a main character in a

dramatic or narrative work who is characterized by a lack of traditional heroic qualities, such as idealism of courage" (America, 1992).

Some clue to which definition of protagonist - hero or anti-hero - Dean Moriarty falls can be found within the fact that the very term "anti-hero" is in fact a Twentieth Century invention (Lawall, 1966). The idea of the anti-hero is in many ways linked to early twentieth century philosophies such as Existentialism, which suggested that life has little meaning and that no absolute standards of morality are relevant. The anti-hero creates his own sense of values, often from moment to moment, according to the needs of the moment. The postmodern anti-hero takes on similar propensities, although he is even more extreme. The "Man-With-No-Name" character that Clint Eastwood played in the 1960's spaghetti westerns is perhaps the classic postmodern anti-hero.

The world of these westerns does not have "good" and "evil" as could be identified by the white/black horses, the white/black cowboy hats and the handsome/ugly actors of the traditional Western. There are merely shades of darkness in the spaghetti western, and the same can be said for most of the characters in *On the Road*, set as it is within a world of constant wandering throughout America that is in some ways very similar to a western.

One of the most important facets of *On the Road* is the fact that there are two main characters. First, there is Sal Paradise, the titular narrator of the novel that has been more or less associated with Kerouac himself; and second, there is Dean Moriarty. The reader is rapidly and constantly drawn into views of Dean Moriarty. Sal describes him as "simply a youth tremendously excited with life" who possesses "a kind of holy lightning . . .

flashing from his excitement and his visions” (Kerouac, 1957). Later Dean is described as “ the holy con-man with the shining mind” (Kerouac, 1957).

So in the manner of both the hero and the anti-hero, Dean is a charismatic character who draws others to him through the sheer energy that he exudes and his apparent zest for everything life has to offer. But Dean is very low born. He is apparently the son of an alcoholic who was never really raised properly and who has had criminal propensities from a very young age. Dean has been in prison for stealing cars. While traditional tragic heroes may commit the most serious of crimes (often murder) they are not normally criminal in a conventional sense. There is something petty and hopeless about the kind of criminality that Dean Moriarty displays.

But in the best tradition of the postmodern anti-hero, Dean has learned a lot about how to live from his incarceration. He states, with characteristic bluntness:

Only a guy who’s spent five years in jail can go to such maniacal helpless extremes . . . prison is where you promise yourself the right to live. (Kerouac, 1957)

So the anti-hero discovers himself through falling from grace, even if he probably did not have far to fall in the first place. Rather than going to his death or languishing in the shame of his crimes he lives out the years of his imprisonment and then comes out to go “ on the road”. In one sense the novel shows what might happen when the tragic hero has fallen, been transformed and emerged as a postmodern anti-hero.

Dean does fall further however, especially as the novel continues and the novelty of being free to do as he wishes starts to wear thin. Thus his abandonment of his wife and child are brought to his attention, indeed he is confronted with it. Sal, ever the intelligent observer, states that “ where once Dean would have talked his way out, now he fell silent . . . he was BEAT” (Kerouac, 1957).

The protagonist of the novel goes through it performing decidedly un-heroic deeds such as this abandonment. He also expresses a constant and rather disturbing attraction for very young girls, often only 12 or 13, especially those who are prostitutes and thus totally vulnerable to his desires. Near the end of the novel he actually abandons Sal as he lies sick in Mexico City. Ultimately Sal comes to see Dean in a very brutal light, one that hardly meets any kind of definition other than a decidedly anti-hero:

. . . when I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes. (Kerouac, 1957) (emphasis added)

Dean is thus essentially a coward, and a lack of courage is never part of the character of a tragic hero, whatever other faults he may possess. But Sal, in characteristically postmodern fashion, does not blame Dean for his cowardice and being a “ rat”. The postmodern condition is one in which there are no absolute standards of ethics and thus everything is more or less forgiven.

It is the “ complexity” of his life that Sal feels makes Dean constantly abandon people. He is just another character who moves through an aimless world with little to concern him except an increasingly futile search for a purely hedonistic lifestyle.

The constant traveling in the book makes Dean an anti-hero rather than a hero. While many tragic heroes travel (Aeschylus, Odysseus) they nearly always have some kind of destination – whether it be ethical or geographical, in mind. The characters of *On the Road* travel constantly, but with, to quote a popular song of the period “ no particular place to go”. They travel for the sake of traveling. This aimless travel is a symbol for the lack of a higher ethical or religious structure within which to live. The characters of *On the Road* are sure of nothing, except that, as Sal says at the end of the book “ nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old” (Kerouac, 1957).

Dean moves from the West to the East to the West to the South . . . and on with a sense of rather melancholy endlessness. At the end of the novel Dean returns to the West Coast on his own, and Sal ruminates upon the sad meaninglessness of life. While much has happened in the novel in some senses, in the classic, Aristotelian sense very little has occurred that will permanently change people. *On the Road* has no simple dramatic structure. There is no climax and denouement. Rather it is a formless kind of a quest story in which the search is an end in itself.

This endless quest give *On the Road* a post-modern structure. The characters are on an existential search for themselves that seems doomed to failure. Dean Moriarty is the archetypal post-modern anti-hero within this

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quest. He draws people to him, and they travel thousands of miles in order to be a part of his wandering life. But when he loses interest in them he drops them with what appears to be a callous disregard for the consequences. But there is something “heroic” in his actions as he is at least being honest. He is being true to himself. If that “self” much of the time is cowardly, casually cruel, vaguely criminal and pedophilic in nature then he will still reveal it.

To conclude, it seems clear that Dean Moriarty, the protagonist of *On the Road* is far nearer to a post-modern anti-hero than to a traditional, classical hero. The world that he inhabits is one in which there is little meaning. It is an often dark, forbidding place in which the Cold War threatens nuclear missiles and in which a kind of despairing hedonism is the only course of action which seems relevant to most of the characters. They move around the country at an often dizzying rate, driving all night long for no apparent reason other than the fact they are moving. Romantic relationships are often little more than brief romantic liaisons and marriages are abandoned with the same disregard for consequences that the children that have come from them are thrown away. Dean Moriarty is a post-modern anti-hero, one that a myriad of similar figures have been more or less based upon in the fifty years since *On the Road* was first published.

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