

# Good on the road by jack kerouac literature review example

[Transportation](#), [Road](#)



One of the most important novels in 20th century American history, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is an influential novel about the need to discover one's meaning in life, and often acts as the thesis for the Beat movement of the 50s and 60s. The novel follows Sal Paradise, a stand in for Kerouac, and his free-wheeling friend Dean Moriarty as they wander and hitchhike across the United States, searching desperately for belonging and a newfound sense of purpose in Cold-War America. This book provides an interesting portrait of 1950s America and the anxieties of its youth, showing the need to go out and find who you are. This was a fairly new thing, as the car was only recently becoming a common and affordable way to make long trips in a relatively short amount of time. Kerouac's words are strong and poetic, and the wandering story allows the author to show an American generation that lacks a sense of direction in life.

The book itself is essentially a fictional travel log for Sal Paradise, including his encounters with Dean Moriarty and other people, such as fellow beat poet Carlo Marx, an analogue for fellow Beat poet Allan Ginsberg. Much of this takes the form of several road trips Sal and friends take over the years, traveling by whatever means necessary to both ends of the country. The road in the title is the primary setting and metaphor for the book. The Beat generation was speaking out against their normal family, World War II-fighting parents and authority figures, thinking that normal family units and behaviors were not the way to live. To that end, they felt that personal experience and discovery needed to take place in order to have a spiritual experience and understand your place in the world. According to Sal, normal family life was like death, and that the only true life can come from

adventure and excitement:

“ the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘ Awww!’” (Kerouac 5-6).

For Sal Paradise, the main source for that excitement was Dean Moriarty. An endlessly carefree and fun loving individual, Dean Moriarty stands for the ideas of the Beat movement. He has a big sense of adventure, and always wants to move forward, find the next thing. There is a large bit of emptiness to Beat lifestyles, as shown by Dean’s constant drinking and sleeping with women, and his drawing of Sal and Carlo, among others, into that lifestyle. Dean Moriarty seems like a model for the Beat ideal, someone who is “ tremendously excited with life” and willing to go out to find what he wants out of it (Kerouac 4). Sal points out that “ He was BEAT — the root, the soul of Beatific,” making Dean Moriarty a role model figure that Sal must always weigh himself against if he wants to follow the romantic, roaming philosophy of Beat (Kerouac 195).

Their journey across the years is extremely broken up, as they move from city to city, experience to experience, ever setting down roots for very long. In each stop, Sal, Dean and their friends go out looking for women to have sex with, drinking and smoking along the way. Even when they find women, it ends in an empty longing for meaning: “ We lay on our backs, looking at the ceiling and wondering what God had wrought when He made life so sad”

(Kerouac 58). The Beat writers saw this sadness in life because of the lack of direction their lives had taken, and the desire to find freedom in a country that afforded them none (Johnson 22). Sal Paradise, in particular, is torn between the freedom that Dean offers him, with a romantic exploration of the whole of America, and the more stable, expected route of family that his parents' generation follow (Cresswell 249). It is the fact that he cannot decide which one to ultimately go for, and what meaning to give life, that makes life 'so sad': "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (Kerouac 126).

The road trip parks of the book are interesting, as they offer a look at life in these various American cities in the period of the 1950s. From San Francisco to Denver, to St. Louis, to Chicago, New York, and even Mexico City, Sal manages to find party after party, finding work as he can, including picking cotton. Here, we see the Beat attitude of the road, where the moment is all that matters, and the end of past experiences just means the beginning of new ones: "What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? — it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies" (Kerouac 156). Every so often, Dean pops in and out of Sal's adventures, living it up while he can but leaving Sal as soon as he is interested in something else. This causes Sal to become a bit more sad, as he starts realizing that Dean may not need him as much as he needs Dean.

One of the most interesting elements of *On the Road* is Kerouac's nervous, agitated yet very poetic words. Looking at it from a critic's eyes, it follows

the literature elements of being ' deterritorialized' - the words and experiences seem temporary and focused on capturing the moment as it happens (Abel 227). The rhythms of beat poetry are found throughout, and this unplanned journey across the country is suddenly given a spiritual importance: " What's your road, man? — holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It's an anywhere road for anybody anyhow" (Kerouac 251). Kerouac's use of repetition and short, effective sentences create a flowing structure that make it easy to read, yet packed with meaning. Like each stop on their journey, Kerouac's sentences never linger very long, but they make a huge impression. Sal carries a huge desire for meaning and purpose in life, which is why they are traveling the country. This carries an almost religious importance to their journey that is made clear by Kerouac's writing. As Sal's generation moves about looking for meaning, so does America, making *On the Road* as much of a tale about America's changing needs as much as anything: " Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" (Kerouac 119).

The main characters never really find happiness in *On the Road*. Between all of their failed relationships, divorces, and hardships, Kerouac seems to find pleasure in their sadness. There is a certain depression in Beat philosophy that is shown in Kerouac's writing, as meaning is shown to be taken from your personal preferences instead of by following what someone else says: " What difference does it make after all? — anonymity in the world of men is better than fame in heaven, for what's heaven? what's earth? All in the mind" (Kerouac 246). However, this seems to be the point of the Beat Movement, as they find a brotherhood and stability in their friendship no

matter their problems: "in the beatitudes according to Kerouac and Ginsberg, those who suffer are blessed, and the sacrament of friendship can redeem a portion of that suffering" (Prothero 221). In their minds, going out and finding who you are, living it up until the day you die, is preferred over the kind of stable normal lives that their parents' generation settled on. In this way, the Beat generation was a very rebellious one compared to the one before it, refusing to follow the old idea of the American Dream and instead making their own.

In Mexico, Sal and Dean believe they have found the ultimate place to find meaning in life, as they have left behind the confusion of America: "Behind us lay the whole of America and everything Dean and I had previously known about life, and life on the road. We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic" (Kerouac 276). However, there are downsides to that romantic Beat rebellion. Sal starts to grow distant from Dean, and notes the basic selfishness of that Beat attitude. He is abandoned in Mexico City by Dean, leaving him to reconsider whether or not this kind of life is the best one for him: "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 302). In the end, he decides that just moving from place to place is simply not enough, leaving the Beat lifestyle for something more. By ending Sal's personal journey in that way, Kerouac shows that, while the Beat lifestyle is romantic and spiritual for those seeking out important personal experiences, it cannot act as a substitute for real, meaningful life. There must be something more to life than wandering, but at

the same time, life on the road offers a lot of perspective and experience that is needed in people without direction.

In conclusion, the writing, themes and characters of *On the Road* create a portrait of a hurt America and a lost generation. Sal and Dean are at once full of young energy and suffering from not having the feelings to understand themselves and their country. This leads to their constant wanderings, only stopping for things that never seem to make them happy anyway. Kerouac's fun and energetic words show the nerves and passion of youth that is part of the Beat generation. The characters always move from subject to subject, searching for meaning. In the case of Sal, he learns a lot about himself in the time he spends with Dean. Most importantly, he learns he should not be like Dean forever, giving him the idea to settle down and truly find his purpose in life. The book does not claim to have any actual answers to what the purpose of life is, but it still shows a generation running out to try and find it. *On the Road* offers a picture of America as it was in the 1950s, a place of infinite possibility and endless sadness.

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