

Kerouac's style in "on the road"



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Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* is a hallmark story of the Beat Generation, a movement defined by its rejection of conformity in favor of a search for deeper meaning. It is this search that serves as a catalyst for the majority of the action of the narrative, as the protagonist Sal Paradise travels across the country with a host of companions, the chief among them being Dean Moriarty. The story revolves around a series of excursions including trips to Denver, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Mexico. Sal and Dean both seem incapable of settling down, especially Dean, who oscillates among three different relationships and is married three times in the course of the plot. In the end however, Sal becomes disillusioned with Dean's thoughtlessness when he is deliriously ill in Mexico and Dean leaves him. He moves back to New York and elects to live a more sedentary lifestyle with a stable girlfriend. Dean visits, but he is no longer able to enchant Sal with his impulsive behavior and philosophical musings. A rift forms between the two, as Sal remains stationary and content and Dean continues to drift in his travels with reckless abandon, searching for the intangible meaning that will give purpose to his life. Throughout the novel, Kerouac's unique writing style helps to portray an era and the complex web of relationship that drive the story.

One of the primary elements of Kerouac's narrative is his use of characterization. Kerouac's cast forms a band of multifaceted individuals whom he describes in the context of their individuality and dynamic energy, the essence of his Beat Generation. Dean is immediately established as a scattered character who enjoys rambling and discussing metaphysical ideals. Kerouac depicts a conversation between Dean and his first wife Marylou, in

which Dean is restlessly pacing in his apartment, disturbed by a lack of activity. He tells her " In other words, we've got to get on the ball darling, what I'm saying, otherwise it'll be fluctuating and lack of true knowledge and crystallization of our plans" (3). He speaks in a way that makes the words seem to pour out of him in a stream of consciousness style. Dean is constantly eager to move and go, but it is never clear where he wants to end up. He simply does not want to remain in a single place too long, and often expresses this in extended and nonsensical sentences that portray his inner agitation and confusion. Kerouac also describes Dean's inconsistency through other character's opinions of him. Marylou laments that Dean will " leave you out cold anytime it's in his interest" (159) and Galatea scolds him for " having no regard for anybody but yourself" (183). Dean himself acknowledges his own discrepancy and characterizes himself as a constantly restive individual, saying, " my trunk's always sticking out from under the bed, I'm ready to leave or get thrown out" (239). The trunks serve as symbols of their traveling lives, and while Sal manages to figuratively and literally shut his away, Dean's is omnipresent and constantly inciting him to move. All of these revelations foreshadow the novel's conclusion, when Sal becomes painfully aware of Dean's true nature after he is abandoned in Mexico during his time of need.

Kerouac also uses charged descriptions to portray the frantic and searching atmosphere of the novel. Sal explains that he pursues people who are interesting and " burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars" (5). The use of repetition and figurative language convey a sense of how the people in Sal's life whom he

values are the ones who transfix him and possess multiple dazzling elements, managing to eclipse the other facets of his life. Sal and Dean are also endlessly seeking meaning in their journeys, and Kerouac compares the promise of the end of the road to an anticipated treasure. The ideal of San Francisco sparkles "like jewels in the night" (13). Before one of his and Dean's trips, Sal declares that he "suddenly saw that the whole country was like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there" (129). Again, repetition and simile highlight the promise of the journey and the destination, even though the pearl and the meaning that it represents remain elusive.

Kerouac also utilizes lyrical diction and syntax to express the action and mood of the novel. His words echo the short and flowing improvisational style of jazz music. His method employs a choppy synthesis of long and abrupt sentences, like when Kerouac describes a wild night in Denver, saying "everything swirled. There were scattered parties everywhere. There was even a party in a castle to which we all drove-except Dean who ran off elsewhere- and in this castle we sat at a great table in the hall and shouted" (152). The narration may be interrupted by brief explanations, but it maintains a steady rhythm that reads almost like poetry. Kerouac also adds characteristic slang, describing his friends as "the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time" (5). Kerouac's word "mad" becomes a motif that he uses to characterize his group for their probing and hectic nature. Kerouac also intersperses words like "kicks" (116) to label the action that he and Dean seek, and "Beat" (184) to label their movement. Kerouac's diction and

sentence structure make the novel unique and underscores the feverish excitement of the piece.

In *On the Road* Kerouac's use of characterization, description, and syntax help to define the originality of the work. He uses these elements to explain the wanderings of Dean and Sal, who travel with an irregular but constant pace that mirrors the progression of the text. In doing so, Kerouac defines a personal journey for meaning in the midst of a confused and muddled period of life.