

Idealism and the road
in the late 1940s vs.
the 1960s in on the
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In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American dream.-
Bruce Springsteen, "Born to Run" And I said, "That last thing is what you can't get, Carlo. Nobody can get to that last thing. We keep on living in hopes of catching it once and for all."-Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* One of the first American ideals was that of the rugged individualist: the explorer-hero, in the tradition of Lewis and Clark and Davy Crockett, as well as the cowboy. America, especially the western part, was a new, exciting frontier yearning to be explored. However, once most of the continent had been explored and industrialization created large urban and suburban areas where people could spend their entire lives, much of the urge to explore was lost. Travel was not necessary to see the rest of the world; magazines and the radio made that possible. America was prosperous and complacent. However, after the Great Depression and especially after World War II, a new generation felt the urge to see America, to search for truth. They were disillusioned; an overwhelming anxiety swept the nation, evidenced, for example, in the film noir style of the late 1940s. Jack Kerouac, for many, symbolized breaking free from this anxiety, breaking free from the "feeling that everything was dead." (1) He created an ideal that future generations of young people would follow in astonishing numbers. Between 1946 and 1952, Kerouac criss-crossed the United States with his friend Neal Cassady; the journey is documented (fictionalized only slightly) in his book *On the Road*, which was published in 1957. Kerouac (Sal Paradise in the book) was actually following Cassady (Dean Moriarty), a fact that is often overlooked. Much of the reason that Sal followed Dean was that Sal was a writer looking for new experiences. Dean, for Sal, was the embodiment of the American dream: As we rode in the bus in the weird phosphorescent void of the Lincoln Tunnel we

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leaned on each other with fingers waving and yelled and talked excitedly, and I was beginning to get the bug like Dean. He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life... (4) Sal also links Dean directly to a distinctly old-western ideal by describing him as "a young Gene Autry (a sideburned hero of the snowy West)." (2) Dean is the antithesis of the pretentious intellectual culture in New York in which Sal feels out of place. He is perhaps a shady character given his past, but this matters little to Sal. Dean leaves for Denver, and Sal leaves several months later to join him in the West. Sal has some trouble getting there, but it is on the road, exploring, that he will discover his own inner confidence and joy. By the end of his first journey alone he is ecstatic: meeting exciting characters, seeing the changes in scenery; almost all of the words he uses seem to be superlatives. However, there are hints throughout *On the Road* that this new brand of idealism is not perfect; the West is not an unfettered paradise. In his poem, "Denver Doldrums," Sal's friend Carlo Marx describes the Rockies as "papier-mache," (47) meaning that it could all collapse at any time. "The whole universe was crazy and cock-eyed and extremely strange," Marx says. Sal soon returns to the East, which he describes as "brown and holy," in comparison to his new idea of the West as "white like washlines and empty-headed." (79) He has to keep moving; there is no end. At the novel's conclusion, Sal has found love, as well as confidence, but he is still moving, not yet completely satisfied. Sal has also come to realize that he cannot simply follow Dean, as Dean is more lost now than Sal was at the start of the novel. As Kerouac "shambled after" Neal Cassady when he was disillusioned with the world surrounding him, a generation later, young people began to "shamble after" Kerouac. On the Road was published in 1957, when America's consciousness was again

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beginning to shift, and the book spurred this movement even further. William Burroughs recalls: The Beat literary movement came at exactly the right time and said something that millions of people were waiting to hear.

You can't tell anybody anything he doesn't know already. The alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction were already there waiting when Kerouac pointed out the road. The Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, for example, took to the road; they were young people on the fringes of society who had just returned from the war. But while Kerouac was seeking spiritual fulfillment on his journey he called the Beat Generation " basically a religious generation" the Hell's Angels were simply attracted to the hedonistic lifestyle that the road entailed. They were completely reckless and extremely violent. This corruption of Kerouac's purpose colored much of the youthful rebellion of the 1960s, with an excellent example being the riots at the 1968

Democratic National Convention. Easy Rider, directed by Dennis Hopper and produced by Peter Fonda, who both starred in the film, was released in 1969.

The heroes of Easy Rider, Wyatt (also called Captain America) and Billy, take to the road on motorcycles, much like the Hell's Angels, but their spiritual quest is more similar to Kerouac's. The promotional posters for the film read,

" A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere." Like the Beats, Billy and Wyatt were not saints; the movie starts with a cocaine deal and is followed by numerous scenes of LSD and marijuana use. However, the two, Wyatt especially, are introspective, intelligent, and nonviolent. Like Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp (for whom they are named), Billy and Wyatt are men of the free-spirited West. Mardi Gras is their apparent destination, but to

them, the road is much more fascinating. While the Beats did not rebel

against America so much as embrace all of its facets, Billy and Wyatt see <https://assignbuster.com/idealism-and-the-road-in-the-late-1940s-vs-the-1960s-in-on-the-road-and-easy-rider/>

themselves as being pitted against all those who are not like them. This is quite representative of the culture of the 1960s, when the line between young and old, radical and conservative, became increasingly distinct. Rage builds up in the rednecks whom they encounter in Texas. As George Hanson, the ACLU lawyer they meet in Texas says, " They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to them (What you represent to them is freedom." These rednecks who envy their lifestyle so much are the ones who eventually cause the deaths of Wyatt and Billy, in addition to George Hanson himself. Unlike the Hell's Angels, Wyatt and Billy die because they are not out for revenge; like Kerouac, they (Wyatt in particular) harbor little initial fear or distrust of strangers. While Kerouac does make a move toward happiness and finality on the road, Wyatt and Billy are unable to do so. They encounter and subsequently reject various places where they have the opportunity to settle—a ranch, a commune. The ranch is just not right for them, and the commune just does not live up to the ideals it has set forth for itself. By the end of the journey, they still have yet to find anything worthwhile on the road, as Wyatt says to Billy, " You know, Billy. We blew it." Easy Rider does not just differ from On the Road in the fact that the soundtrack is rock and roll instead of jazz. It differs because the 1960s was a violent era that was heavily polarized, despite the fact that, like Wyatt and Billy's journeys, it started out with an invigorating idealism. While On the Road provides hope for the future, Easy Rider clearly shows none.