

Hans Grim

The writing in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*¹ is remarkable because it is such an unfiltered account of bohemian life in the late forties. I argue that Kerouac's writing is not all that remarkable except for this fact. Drawing on my own experience as a touring musician, I know that life on the road is wholly different than life in the suburbs. Everything is heightened in that bubble of existence. Going on a road trip and writing about it is a sure-fire way to deliver a great story. After all what is a story, but a journey of some kind?

Jack/Sal speaks of his dream "...of going west, seeing the country..."² and there was certainly adventure to be had out there, but I would argue that a thousand miles or a hundred miles from home with his mother/aunt equated the same thing. When a person is away from home, they are in a constant state of adapting to new surroundings and situations. When you can easily catch a subway and lay down in your own bed that's very comforting. However, when your bed for the night is uncertain and undetermined that heightens the senses and demands a higher state of awareness. I believe Jack/Sal's quest for the West is really just a quest for that constant state of elevated existence that comes with travel. Traveling can be exhausting for this reason. However, Jack seems to hunger for that feeling of uncertainty and adventure and when he finds life getting routine and feeling like home he often finds a reason to leave or things just fall apart. At one point the West for Jack becomes like home with his Mexican girl and he could have settled down right there and embraced a life with her, but instead he chooses to leave comfort and return to his true home in the East.

The value of this novel is in its representation of his adventure, not in its creativity. I'm not sure this kind of story would be received with any fanfare at all today due to the increased transparency of life that manifests itself on the Internet. Streams of consciousness and

¹Kerouac, Jack, *On The Road: the original scroll (New York: The Penguin Group, 2007)*

²Kerouac p325

Hans Grim

depictions of different lifestyles abound in the blogosphere as well as in video format on YouTube. In the fifties there was no way to experience this lifestyle other than living it. I argue that Kerouac's account offers the closest thing to a YouTube view of life on the road that anyone at the time could get. It was unique as a travelogue in that it doesn't edit anything out about the goings on. My time on tour was filled with fascinating moments, but most of them I could never write about because of the personal nature of the content. The human struggles present on a journey are always deep and complex, but you don't often get a window into them as clear and unobstructed as Kerouac's account.

I thought it fascinating today in class when a student remarked that to know this was autobiographical cheapened it for her. She said she was much more impressed with the novel when she thought it was an invention of the mind and not a journal record. I have to agree with that assessment whole-heartedly.

Hans Grim

Work's cited (Chicago Manual Style)

Kerouac, Jack, *On The Road: the original scroll* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2007)