Symbolic Analysis of *On the Road*

Yuan Lv

Humanities College, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110136, China

Abstract

Jack Kerouac's On the Road is considered as one of the most important novels in the twentieth century. It holds a great deal of historical significance, showing a picture of American subculture which is characterized with sex, drugs, and lost youth, but this kind of subculture attracted little public attention of academic critics during the 1940s and 1950s. Reflecting on the social settings in which this novel was created, it is imperative for readers to get an idea of why this novel was not immediately recognized by critics after it was completed. After World War II, a sensibility began to take over the general consciousness. Conformity and normalcy had become standards of the time after the upheavals of wartime. But the novel On the Road is infested with the current contents which are inconsistent with the mainstream culture, showing to all of us an America totally different from the one organized with conformity and normalcy. The Beat pioneers sowed the seeds of discontent in the youth generation of America, which would evolve into a series of radical movements in the future to the 1960s and 1970s.

Keywords

Symbolism; spontaneous writing; Beat Generation.

1. Introduction

Jack Kerouac is a famous American novelist. Alongside William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac is considered as a pioneer of the Beat Generation and the Beat Movement. Kerouac is considered as a prominent novelist for his spontaneous writing and the contents and behaviors he descripts in the novel such as jazz, free sex, Buddhism, taking drugs, poverty, and travelling. His works stimulate several excellent writers later including Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Robbins, Thomas Pynchon, Lester Bangs, Will Clarke, Richard Brautigan, Ken Kesey, Haruki Murakami, Tom Waits, Bob Dylan, and writers of the New Journalism.

Jack Kerouac's works are the most influential among the writers from the Beat Generations. His works are most widely read which stirs up a great discussion among the masses. After the publication, he received more attention from the public. Some people regarded it as a masterpiece while others thought of his work is only a travelling diary. In 1957, Americans came to realize culture of the Beat Generation which mainly is through Allen Ginsburg's trial for his poet Howl. After the publication of On the Road, Kerouac became a representation and symbol of the Beat Generation. The interviews he received appeared in famous magazines such as like Life and Playboy, and people could see his appearance through televisions.

Although On the Road is about a story of two young men who were far from mainstream society, the culture of the Beat Generation gradually came into American people's consciousness and mind. The rights on TV were being discussed because figures of the Beats showed their appearance on TV one after another. Kerouac is a believer of the bohemian lifestyle; people can easily find their ideas and thoughts in popular American culture. The descriptions of the book mainly deal with American Hollywoodization such as the plot that Dean and Sal spend their time in a theater in Detroit. With the publication of On the Road, people can sense and realize culture of the Beat Generation strongly.

They are actually popular in the USA, but Kerouac and other members from the Beats are strongly criticized. Their behaviors are deeply blamed by mainstream culture for the Beats' behaviors cannot be accepted by American mainstream. The public think the Beats are all troublemakers. Edgar Hoover, who is the director in FBI, directly commented that communism and the Beat Generation are two biggest threats to American culture and society. It is true that each person can find several flaws and setbacks in American continent and On the Road. They feel in real life that African American figures are very promising. More or less Kerouac's tone in this novel is against racial discrimination and social struggles against mainstream society. However, opponents who support civil rights express the ides that this novel is glorified by black American culture which is unacceptable for white men.

2. Symbolic Connotations in the Main Body of the Novel

2.1. The Road of Freedom

When the Second World War came to an end, the USA became a powerful country. The public pay much more attention to money and social status. People in society have to sacrifice something free in order to live. At this time, American people lived under the pressure of Cold War and McCarthyism. Mainstream society was full of suspicion. Members of the Beats realized clearly the restriction and pressure from the main society. They rejected the authority and accepted social taboos and bizarre behaviors. In order to reject the repressive culture of mainstream, the Beats tried their best to find an outlet through behaviors that ordinary people cannot accept and understand. At the same time, they advocated and promoted sexual liberation and homosexuality. The Beats regarded women as sexual partners and refused to follow any commitment in accordance to traditional values. In other words, marriage is a kind of confinement of their freedom. In order to guard their freedom, marriage is not a consideration in their minds so there is an alienation and difference between marriage and freedom to them.

2.2. The Road of Identity

With the opposition of value system from mainstream society, main characters in this novel feel they are strangers in that society dominated by value system of mainstream. The Beats don't have ability to confirm personality. In terms of getting their personality and identity, the Beats try their best to run away restriction posed by mainstream society. Although they employ different methods to make their personalities come true, they cannot go beyond the boundary mainstream formulates.

Sal fails to find his identity inside the society he lives, so he feels that that wanders outside the society. Because he cannot find his personality and identity, he realizes he doesn't belong to this society. In this novel, Sal experiences his identity at loss. His identity is marginalized by the vales from mainstream society. As a white man from middle class, Sal cannot feel the sense of belonging. He asks himself who he is. His loss of identity is more or less linked with the social condition after the Second World War.

2.3. The Road of Self-Realization

In On the Road, the main characters experience fantastic journeys in the whole American continent. They start their journey at the excuse of seeking for Dean's father. Father in this novel doesn't refer to biological father any longer. It symbolizes faith that has lost for such a long time. The main characters try their best to find belief or faith that give their living a direction but they don't make it. As a result of it, main characters endeavor to look for identity and enjoy the life every second in order to get true meaning in daily life.

Looking for father is vital and essential content in this novel. Dean starts his journey because he wants to seek for his lost alcoholic father. They insist in their dreams. Their pursuit is mainly

in spiritual level. They travel across the whole country with the smallest pretext. Their journey is about spiritual and emotional, which refers to inner and inward content. They come to sense they cannot get what they want in environment they live. They only turn to some other places and hope to own what they want, so they travel on the road one time after another time.

3. Symbolic Connotation in the End of the Novel

3.1. Sal's Return during the Spiritual Journey

The whole story is narrated by the tone of Sal. There is an important function in the development of story and plot. At last, he concludes his journey across the American continent. Their journey is filled with passion and enthusiasm. In another way, people can feel hopeless of this tone at the starting of the novel.

I first met Dean not long after my life and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead.

(Kerouac, 1969:1)

This novel starts with a narrators' dislike to American culture. Readers can see Sal hates the world he lives and all surroundings are hopeless and gloomy. With the introduction of Sal, this character and Dean begin to travel on the road.

Then we continue to analyze these paragraphs in Part One. After encountering Dean, there is energy and passion be brought to Sal's life. He becomes energetic and has impulse and drive in daily life. Sal's name means rebirth from original life, which refers to savor in Italian language. The name of Paradise means soul with new life in Christian legend. The suggestion of Sal' name expresses mental death at the start of the novel and gains new hope and rebirth with the coming of new life experiences.

3.2. Symbolic Meaning of Spontaneous Writing

Spontaneous writing refers to rebellion of social culture and writing skill. This skill deserts traditional and conventional literary rules. This kind of writing skill pays attention to passion and energy. When they are in the process of using this skill, they can show and express what they think sincerely and directly. It is a writing skill that owns extreme freedom in writing, which is unprecedented. It doesn't care sentence structure, theme and grammar. It urges people to use true feeling and passion to express. Writers can show what they want to say without any interpretation. The theme of Spontaneous Writing is to seek for original truth and fact so we can own and get extreme pleasure in Kerouac's novels.

Black people's culture influences this writing skill greatly. Jazz plays important function in it. As a representative of the Beats, Kerouac admits he gets insight and passion from this kind of black music. There is a good comparison he makes. In some way, this writing skill looks like breathing of a male singer. It looks look a male player plays the instrument. He doesn't breathe when he plays until he needs breathing. Using this method, Kerouac changes the whole sentence into fragments. The Beat Generation and Jack Kerouac both don't accept culture and values of mainstream. Black people's culture attracts them very much. The culture of black people develops in the people who don't have privilege and care. We can also touch and feel atmosphere of stream of consciousness.

4. Conclusion

There is a great of historical significance in this novel which express a kind of subculture that is filled with free sex, taking drugs and misery. Although it receives little attention from the public at first, people come to pay much attention to this novel gradually. With the consideration of social condition in that time of creation, we can know more or less why this work didn't get people's recognition and attention. When the Second World War was over, sensibility takes place of public consciousness. Unity and conformity were popular and necessary after the period of the war. The novel is full of plots and descriptions that are quite different from standard and culture of mainstream.

Generally speaking, people have to admit On the Road is composed of trips from the eastern and western regions one time after another time which involves taking drugs, crazy parties and having free sex. It is well commented for there is a vivid and clear description of subculture in the USA. On the Road is also a good preparation and pavement for the following development of jazz and literary.

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