A Study on Self-discovery Consciousness in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

Yuan Lv

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

Abstract

The novel of *On the Road* describes the situation happened during the period of the late 1940s and early 1950s.When the Second World War was over, the economy in the USA developed fast, and living standard of the Americans was excellent. However, the USA followed the principle of conservative thinking. The spiritual world of the Americans was like a wasteland. It depicts the social background of America in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, which is also the preliminary part to understand the whole social background.

Keywords

Self-discovery; consciousness; Beat Generation.

1. Introduction

The influence of the Cold War exerted mutual fear between two groups separately led by the US and Soviet. McCarthyism made further effect in the United States. There is emotional impact of these changes and upheavals on the American society in American society. People begin to question the function of technology and science in the process of human development. The fear of the misuse of modern science and technology are misused. They don't believe in God any longer and start to consider the nature of man and man's ability of dealing evil. In their view, life is a huge joke and a kind of absurdity. The times between the 1940s and 1950s were a period which is filled with rich life and anticommunist atmosphere. America was the winner of the Second World War without any doubt; the very reason was the USA successfully got rid of the Great Depression. Materialistic thought spreads around the field of literature. The people who had spiritual journey easily walk into despair and depression. With this kind of background, people who live in that period had to desert happiness and freedom and live in social situation with restriction and rules.

2. Significance of the Movement of Beat Generation

The Beat Generation is a group of American writers who are enthusiastic and active in the 1950s.They rejected the culture of mainstream and look for freedom and identity. The term "Beat Generation" was created and founded by Jack Kerouac in 1948 in a process of conversation. There is a meaning of beatitude in terms of the meaning of word beat. They are blessed with God and life. Wandering in streets, travelling on the road and enjoying jazz music convey a cut from normal and ordinary lifestyle. They want to say goodbye to yesterday and say welcome to tomorrow. They want to know this society and world in a complete view which also leads to new kind of thinking way. The word "beat" is to exploit new styles of living way and consciousness.[1]

On the Road is the second novel by Jack Kerouac's second novel, and its publication should be considered as a historic event. The Sun Also Rises is regarded as the Testament of the Lost Generation, so we can say On the Road is the bible of the Beat Generation. It is a relatively simple story that tells two American young men, Sal and Dean travel around the continent. Their

ambition and dream are to search for spiritual rebirth and promising life. This novel consists of five various parts which descripts experiences on the road. The structure of whole novel is loosely knitted which is not be divided by Jack Kerouac in original edition. Critics hesitate to decide which figure is main character between Sal and Dean. This is the theme of pursuit that exists in the whole novel. Like jazz is always played at players' wills and feelings, this novel consists of Sal and Dean's experience, pursuit and enjoying.[2] Each journey on the road is a spontaneous repetition, but each time changes dramatically.

3. The Protagonists' Adventure on the Road

Americans sense what kind of life they should live. All Beat Generation's crazy behavior has social and mental reasons. Although life is a short period, it finally becomes a tragedy. Using his crazy even a little crazy behavior and thought, Dean frees Sal and a whole generation of Americans. Dean hopes people to be far from vanity and materialism. We don't need to worry about minute things. He is like a burning fire to light and liberate human being. He drives so fast that he becomes a powerful representation that can't be controlled. Although Dean has sorrow and pain, he doesn't lose hope and passion for further life. He is always on the road to a higher standard of life and spirit. Sometimes, losing things means gaining something.Dean and Sal are brave enough to face hardship in life. They both hope to have a better life and future.

The Beats are crazy people without any doubt. We cannot understand their behavior in a normal and usual view. According to words in novel, we can understand what they want to do actually. Dean isn't able to explain why he does those actions. His behavior doesn't belong to crazy action and absurdity. He wanders in the world, which likes legend of Odyssey. Dean successfully sheds moral and social burden. His journey is not only a journey but also an attitude and goal towards life. [3]

Dean and Sal rest in the back position of car. Then they talk with each other. They talk about players who played jazz last night. He attributes that feeling to something out of human being's bodies freely. He believes everybody has an inner spirit inside people's bodies. The two men both think they have inner spirit. Dean remembers days with his father together. Sal likes sitting in back seats of vehicles and feeding animals such as horses and cattle. A homosexual wants to seduce Dean when his car arrives in the city of Sacramento. Dean persuades him to drive for him another day so Dean has a good time in the City and Denver. By listening of instruments' play, Dean keeps in touch with players. This communication links his life with social life. Dean enjoys the wonder of music when he is in front of players. He is completely attracted by what players play and his soul and body dance with the tone of music. [4]

4. The Protagonists' Self-Discovery on the Road

The important and central theme in this novel is to look for freedom and identity on the road. The trip in the novel is continuous pursuit for freedom and identity. This process occupies most time of the Beats. Sal speaks in the tone of Kerouac while Dean represents figure of Cassidy who is another character in this novel. People also reconsider virtues and flaws during their trips. They are not satisfied with journeys form one place to place, from one country to another country. Their life is predetermined by mobile lifestyles. Movement is their eternal theme. They final purpose is to find the life they hope to have and enjoy. Dean is a suitable character on the road for he was born on the road. Owing to this very reason, Dean spends his youth and childhood travelling on the road. He changes destinations from one place to another place, one girl to another girl, one custom to another custom without any stop. Dean tries his best to understand girls, literary works and jazz music. He also wants to deal with love in a successful way.

Continuous travelling can be considered as an escape from today's lifestyle. However, he often forgets what he seeks for on the road, so he fails to answer Dean's question. That is where they will go on earth. Their behaviors make them be far away from individual and social responsibility. With all these transparent thoughts and ideas, they are on the road to Christianity, Buddhism or Black people's culture. In some sense, their journeys are pilgrimages. With the failure of finding true life in their mother country, they are on the road to a new destination Mexico. Sal hopes to own what he wants to have but he suffers failure one time after another. It reflects conflict between the primitive world and the modern society.

Dean and Sal dance with several girls crazily in a Mexican brothel. Their behaviors convey their different characters. It seems like Dean and Sal lack knowledge about Mexico. They travel around the country without definite purpose and experience purposeless journey. Although some people are poor, they can enjoy complete freedom. In Kerouac's opinion, poverty is not a kind of suffering. It is a kind of freedom. Like African American's culture, Kerouac deeply knows his condition. He and other contemporaries are being marginalized in life. [5]When Sal and Dean see Mexican people enjoy a comfortable life, they are moved and decided to experience it.

The experiences Dean, Sal, and Stan have on the top of mountain represents something mysterious they never experience and see. They are on the road to travel, but the meaning they travel is far beyond where they stay and travel. Sal and Dean gradually come to know the meaning of their journey is not on the road itself. Its meaning is in the process of travelling. Their physical existence is actually on the road but their spiritual existence is beyond here. Because these two main characters are white Americans, they cannot exploit true meaning behind Mexican culture. There is a great difference and gap between what they want and what they can be given. Sal is in low spirit when he realizes his journey and road in an environment with pure standard. He remembers the latest atomic weapons which can destroy everything within several seconds. All modern culture and construction will be cleared away in a while.

Moriarty is described as a rebellious figure in plots of the novel. Their journey is reflected by descriptions of adventures and racial discrimination. The Beats' goal is to meet their desires and demands. They reject both social disorder and established political systems and rules. Their most friends and relatives are outside their lifestyles. [6]People need to pay attention to this point; each character is described by Kerouac's words and behaviors. Of course, Kerouac himself is also an original figure in this novel. People in that period are strongly influenced by repression and depression in psychology and physicality. When they were children, world was filled with wars. Their life is tied tightly. Some young men serve in military forces to fight for mother country and world peace. After war, their mind is narrowed and cornered because of nuclear power and mental control. Bourgeois' ideas exist as a mainstream so other mental theories cannot influence and exist in mainstream society.

5. Conclusion

Most critics consider the novel On the Road as one of the most important novels in the twentieth century. 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. It represents a longing for American Dream and a rejection with public attention and morality. The subculture represented by the Beats wasn't minded and cared until 1950s.

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. Although it includes descriptions about something unacceptable in modern society, we must admit importance and significance of On the Road. It is well commented for there is a vivid and clear description of subculture in the USA. This kind of subculture is influential and powerful. On the Road is also a good preparation and pavement for the following development of jazz and literary.

References

[1] Kerouac, J. (1959). On the road. The Viking Press

[2] Skau, M. (1999). "A clown in a grave": Complexities and tensions in the works of Gregory Corso. Southern Illinois University Press.

[3] Hunt, T. (2009). Hidden roads: Improvisational textuality and On the road. Illinois State University.

[4] Fromm, E. (1949). The art of love. Stravon Publisher.

[5] Izant, E. M. (2008). Altered states of style: The drug-induced development of Jack Kerouac's spontaneous prose. Brigham Young University.

[6] Honkala, E. (2002). The Beat generation. University of Oulu.