

Study on Symbolic Features of *On the Road*

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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.

Keywords: symbolism; spontaneous writing; Beat Generation.

1. Introduction

Jack Kerouac is a famous American novelist. 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 describes in the novel such as jazz, free sex, Buddhism, taking drugs, poverty, and travelling. Jack Kerouac's works are the most influential among the writers from the Beat Generations.

2. Symbolic Connotation at the Beginning of the Novel

Road means a kind of new life, and new hope arises from it. If we haven't found true meaning in traditional life, the only way left is to look for and exploit a new way of life. Hoping to find true meaning in actual life, they have to experience unknown world. Although they don't know what will happen on the road ahead of them, they don't know whether they can get a ride, where they go next station and they sleep. The only thing they have is indeterminate hope. Because of this reason, it makes people hopeful and excited. The road, as a symbol of road, has a striking contrast with the paragraph describing the reason that Sal set out on a journey.

3. Symbolic Connotations in the Main Body of the Novel

3.1 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.

3.1.1. Alienation from Mainstream

The postwar America saw its great economic booming and entered into a period of abeyance. It strongly paid attention to essence of rules and showed a reasonable explanation of restriction in that time. Living in this society must follow the sacrifice of freedom and lack of personality. This influences greatly on politics and thought of America in that period. The US and the Soviet Union developed their military power greatly, especially the mass destruction.

3.1.2. Drug Addiction

In order to refuse mainstream values and thought, the members of Beat Generation tried their best to find some outlets, which includes taking drug. Members in this group want to write articles in a state of ecstatic way. They write down what they experience in their lives. When he composed his novels, Kerouac also took drugs in the period of writing. When Sal and Dean are on their journeys, they use different drugs. It seems that drugs are inevitable for them. They claimed they benefited from taking drugs a lot. They also felt this way can release and liberate their souls.

3.2 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.

3.2.1.The Lack of Identity

So far as identity concerned, it refers to a people's demand of excellent personality, which points to relationship between people and world. It especially equals people's inner and outer performance in the development of psychology. We can regard it as an adaption towards social order and values.

At first, Sal rejects values from mainstream society while he longs for his identity to be accepted in dominant society. Sal realizes something precise in the west life that he has been pursuing. Going to the West is like a beckon that give some directions for him to go.

3.2.2. Seeking for Identity

The main characters in this novel both feel their individuality at loss. They cannot stabilize their individuality in society controlled by middle-class. The Beats have to seek for their sense of belonging in some other places. They build again their individuality by means of alienation and self-marginalization. Their lives are outside mainstream society and they want to be black people or Mexican, but they dislike being white men. In the final part of their travelling, main characters go to Mexico to look for a wonderful world where is like paradise. At the end of their journey, he central characters headed for the magic land-Mexico to seek for the Garden of Eden. Without any doubt, people who live in today's society are greatly influenced by materialism.

4. Symbolic Connotation in the End of the Novel

4.1 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.

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.

In the final part of the novel, Sal stays on a pier in New York City considering American Continent he and his friends wander all the time. They look for father who has never been lost for such a long time. In order to make future life comfortable and acceptable, Sal has to create a fashionable moral value that is different from the life on the Road. Only by this way, it can make people adapt living he chooses at last.

4.2 Hopeless Return to the Mainstream

Every journey is related with Sal and Dean's travelling on the road, which reflects Kerouac's personal travelling experiences from 1946 to 1950. Each trip has similar aspect, they both link with Sal's depression, reconsideration and alienate from boring and dead life in the end. Each final has a similar general comment. Excitement in the beginning is turned into an uninteresting and boring conclusion. Kerouac's dream is to find a life suitable for him and shoulder hard duty to regain identity and individuality in the middle of Beat Generation and working class. At last, he realizes all his ideas are in vain. The next paragraph can explain the reason of his hopeless return to the mainstream society.

In the final section, Sal considers his issues in value system. He has been considering how to run away from mainstream he dislikes. At last, Sal let Dean leave from back seat in Cadillac when they go to a concert. At first, we can say Sal realizes pure and clear eyes. He loses the battle that he fights

with mainstream completely and accept middle class' convention and moral values. We will imagine the picture of Sal sitting "on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey" at sunset." Mainstream looks like a trap, main characters in this novel cannot escape from it forever.

5. Conclusion

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. More importantly, this novel doesn't belong to a dissolute novel. We can see some descriptions unacceptable in mainstream culture but those plots link with social existence and cultural background closely. From this novel, we are well aware of Sal, Dean and other protagonists are both very kind-hearted and heart-warmed. These main characters own same nature which consists of some virtues and importance.

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