

From Movement to Meaning: Exploring the Existential in Jack Kerouac' Works

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Received Nov. 14, 2015

Accepted Dec. 15, 2015

“...The muddy cobbles and the Montana logs, the broken steamboats, the ancient signs, the grass and the ropes by the river. The endless poem. ...”

(Kerouac 144)

One of the most significant and memorable landmarks of the post-war American cultural and literary history was the emergence of a bohemian cluster of writers blanketed under the canopy of *Beat* writers that formed the *Beat* culture or the *Beat* movement in America. Soon to become one of the most important sources of the contemporary American counterculture, the *Beats* or the *Beat* movement brought the much needed breakthrough for the American soul that was hitherto feeding itself on post-war patriotic fervor and new wave of capitalism. The *Beat* writers/poets, fatigued with the mores and stereotypes of a spiritually defunct society, lacking originality and glory, became the apt progenitors or harbingers of the ‘*New Vision*’ which was unequivocally reflected in the bulk of their novels and poetry. This coterie of free, artistic souls included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neal Cassady, Gary Snyder and others who with their unique brand of a flamboyant, liberated and experimental writing and themes gave American people and literature an astonishingly new horizon to feel and explore. They wrote novels, poetry and non-fiction works that vented out their excessive existential ennui, and limned a beautiful panorama of life that they had embarked onto—the life of road trips, travel, adventure, friendships, love, drugs, Buddhist philosophy and way of living.

The fiction of Jack Kerouac was no exception. Like the other writers of the *Beat* ilk, he wrote novels that reflected the youth’s

exasperation, innocence, zest and spiritual yearnings. They are a powerful fictional signature of a generation baffled by the contemporary American society’s negation of human values which were most evidently evinced in the American assault on Vietnam, oppression of gays and lesbians, prejudices against racial minorities and such other oppressive paradigms of the establishment. The novels are an intriguing reflection of the zeitgeist of that time as it “...was a war with social overtones..” (Kerouac 35)

Among his most celebrated fictional works are *The Town and the City*(1950), *On the Road*(1957), *The Subterraneans*(1958), *The Dharma Bums*(1958), *Lonesome Traveler*(1960), *Book of Dreams*(1960), *Big Sur*(1962), *Desolation Angels*(1965) et al. The repertoire of Kerouac’s literary works is not only a critique of America gone wayward but it is a powerful compendium of the new counterculture’s or the *Beat* generation’s repugnance towards the same while talking about its own mass of existential woes and despair.

The Town and the City delineates the life-story of the protagonist who abandons his rural life and shifts to town in search of finding/forging an identity of his own. *Beat* figures like Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke, Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, Joan Vollmer and David Kammerer populate the story as the protagonist’s friends and the novel unfolds successively each character’s mishaps. With the central theme of home-leaving, the novel can be construed as the nascent commencement of Kerouac’s

existential odyssey. His next novel *On the Road* is considered as a cult piece of American literary counterculture giving a mesmerizing account of the quest that the protagonists Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty had embarked upon. Reminiscent of Mark Twain's *The Huckleberry Finn* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, *On The Road* beautifully delves deep into the existential themes of freedom, individuality, friendship and love and becomes a classic study of the inward journey of man. With his *Subterraneans*, Kerouac came forth with a semi-autobiographical account of his own life describing his love life and its tempestuous side. The novel is also a panoramic story of the subculture life -- entailing its enveloping smog and convergence of the artistic and visionary souls with their aspirations and dreams of cutting across the trite Americanism and forging new vistas and worlds. *The Dharma Bums*, like most of his fictional pieces, contains the real-life *Beat* figures as its characters: the narrator Raymond Smith who can be identified with Kerouac himself and the Buddhist poet Japhy Ryder as a thinly-disguised Gary Snyder. Herein again, the enigma of life is explored by Kerouac as we witness his protagonist Ray Smith going 'out there' in search of some fix, a fix that can reconcile him with life and its precariousness. The two seekers, Smith and Ryder, together as the titular Dharma Bums, hitchhike, traverse the countryside, go mountaineering, meditate, indulge in poetry and also party at nights, absolutely emancipated from their respective encumbrances and obligations of mainstream material lives. Sequestered from everything around, they live an idyllic life of harmony and sweetness. *Lonesome Traveler* happens to be an assemblage of sketches and short essays of non-fiction nature documenting beautifully Kerouac's different sojourns, jobs and experiences as a writer. With the sporadic dashes of poetry, aphoristic expatiations on life, truth, beingness, the *Lonesome Traveler* holds a true mirror to Kerouac's take on life. *Book of Dreams* an experimental piece of writing, taken as a rendition of his dream diary that he preserved from 1952-1960, can be

construed as Kerouac's exercise in stylistic and writing skills with the Freudian concept of dreams playing an important role in an artist's/ writer's process of writing. Defying any genre-categorization, the book with its freely-juxtaposed dream images, comes to ratify Kerouac's original attempts at an avant-garde way of writing. *Big Sur* describes the three significant sojourns of Kerouac, disguised in the novel as Jack Duluoz, at his friend's place (the actual friend here is Lawrence Ferlinghetti) and the former's debilitating health in the wake of his eminence as an established writer and the concurrent smothering public glare and attention that he gets. Unlike Kerouac's other novels, the protagonist herein is famous but like his all other novels the deep exhaustion with life is seen here also and the desire to renounce everything and sip on the nectar of wilderness is on a high. *Desolation Angels*, a thematic successor to *The Dharma Bums*, once again shows Kerouac at the existential crossroads torn between the call of peacefulness in the wild and the enticement of the flashy city-life. This novel too burns with the existential anguish, dilemma and thirst of the *Beat* angels.

Kerouac wrote his novels in what he defined as the 'spontaneous prose' style of writing whereby he wrote as if from a reservoir of unconscious imaginary/artistic triggers. A perusal of his writings at times baffles the readers and we begin to find ourselves stunned by the very beauty of the spectacle of his gigantic, free-flowing prose.

Kerouac's fictional oeuvre reverberated the mood and spirit of his generation that was besieged by the overwhelming questions of the life that they were living. The youth wanted to initiate an inquiry into the whys and hows of life, of society. They sought answers to the state of things as they were. Through his writings, Kerouac as a representative youth, wanted to look at the world around him in a different manner so that he could elicit his interpretation of the world he inhabited and could come up with his set of valid values. His genre of literature -- a nomadic, bohemian corpus of his travels, adventures, sojourns, road trips drenched in

philosophical musings, meetings with friends, spiritual retreats, Buddhist experiences --- comes to coalesce a fiction of sublime vision and beauty that transcends all hitherto known literary genres. Heavily influenced by French symbolist writings, the Whitmanian verse and the deliberate use of alcohols and drugs like marijuana, morphine, Benzedrine, Jack Kerouac was surely on the right road to newer revelations and insights on life. The wallowing in of drugs was a means to both spiritual and creative ends.

A scathing critique of the ongoing sociological, cultural and political upheavals in contemporary America, the works of Kerouac lampooned the man-engineered paradigms of destruction and oppression. The evil of war and political hegemony is castigated by Kerouac in his novel *On the Road* when one of the characters exclaims, "...The bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world.."(Kerouac 139)

In his *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac rhapsodizes about the alleys of life wherein man is perennially embroiled. Spiritual meanderings, visualizations of God, man as embodying Godness, his inevitable return from the natural world to the concrete jungle of city-life replete with its nebulousity and fever --- come to form the spirit and content of this novel. Very beautifully Kerouac brings home the crux of life that lies in mutual empathy and benevolence. He sees man in God and God in man. His abstractions point out how eventually he, like many others who tread the temporal world' pathways, would end up returning to it.

"...Because sensation is emptiness, old age is emptiness. - "T's only the Golden Eternity of God's Mind so practice kindness and sympathy, remember that men are *not responsible in themselves as men* for their ignorance and unkindness, they should be pitied, God does pity it, because who says anything about anything since everything is just what it is, free of interpretations. - God is not the 'attainer', he is the 'farer' in that which everything is, the 'abider' - one caterpillar, a thousand hairs of God. - So

know constantly that this is only you, God, empty and awake and eternally free as the unnumerable atoms of emptiness everywhere....

...Murky human ideas smoking like factories on the horizon through which I would walk, forward..." (Kerouac 112)

The burning desire to unravel the mystery of life is explicitly conveyed in *On The Road* too, when the protagonist utters in astonishment and dismay,

" What is he aching to do? What are we all aching to do? What do we want?.."(Kerouac 221)

The *road* becomes a powerful metaphor for life and the trajectory to fulfillment of his spiritual goals. Kerouac foresees something magical and absolutely pure in the existence of the road, as though it symbolized for him *life* itself, "...we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.." (Kerouac 192) The road trip undertaken by Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty becomes an eternal epiphany of sorts for them. They keep rolling on the road to knowing. There is a conspicuous hankering for the *IT*. This *IT* can be interpreted as the ultimate truth, the final destination, God or some absolute consummation,

"... 'Man, this will finally take us to IT!..' (242)

Having copiously expatiated upon the pictures of life, his perspectives on it, Kerouac also ends his literary odyssey with all openness for the readers to either accept or reject his understanding and notions about life and which proves his catholicity as a writer and human being too. He says, "When you've understood this scripture, throw it away. If you cant understand this scripture, throw it away. I insist on your freedom..." (Kerouac 16)

Works Cited

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