On the Road, joining the likes of The Great Gatsby and Huckleberry Finn, has been called the Great American Novel. The claim entails more than merely being provocative or well-written, but further than that suggests that the book embodies some vital element of the American zeitgeist. In what sense can we talk about On the Road as capturing the American spirit of the 50s? To understand On the Road's place in American culture, we must first examine Kerouac's literary aesthetic, the place of the Beat generation along with its effect on the counterculture of the 60s, and the relationship between On the Road and contemporaneous cultural commentators.
The mythology of *On the Road* can be said to begin with the story of “the scroll,” a chief exemplar of Kerouac’s ideal of spontaneous prose. He famously promoted the novel as having been written in 1951 in three weeks, on one continuous 120-foot roll of teletype paper he called “the scroll.” This legendary tale of his composition was in fact spread by Kerouac himself in interviews in magazines and on television. Although it was technically true, the book was the culmination of a long creative process, and the rudiments of the novel were begun in small notebooks he took with him on his travels. Furthermore, his original manuscripts were rejected, and he was forced to revise and edit his original work before its eventual publication in 1957. Nevertheless, the idea of a frenziedly written novel, free from the constraints of self-censorship and intellectualization (not to mention paragraph breaks) captured the imagination of readers. Kerouac is infamous for his indulgence in hyperbole and exaggeration (perhaps that which makes him an ecstatic Beat poet is also what makes him an astute marketer), and the myth of the scroll is a prominent example of it. But the myth of the scroll is also a reflection of the aesthetic ideal to which the he aspired.

Kerouac famously explicated the Beat aesthetic in his “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” originally published in the *Black Mountain Review* in 1957, in which he stated that composition should be “wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better” (Kerouac 57). His aesthetic vision was strongly informed by jazz – particularly the bebop of such figures as Charlie Parker, to whom he often listened. Kerouac described the jazz aesthetic as “breathless,” “deep blowing” that was unself-conscious (Paton). His vision of his own art was that of the unfiltered, uncensored visionary, harkening back to the romantic and transcendentalists. Beyond jazz, the forefathers of the beat movement were embodied in Blake, Thoreau, Whitman, the patron saints of individuality (Malmgren). But the aesthetic itself is primarily one of spontaneity, self-expression, and the glorified moment of self-creation, which is the thrust of the Beatific vision which Kerouac saw for his generation.

Kerouac once said to John Clellon Holmes, “this really is a beat generation.” Holmes leapt up and said “That’s it, that’s right!” Holmes later articulated this story and his own definition of the Beat Generation in his article in *The New York Times* in 1952, going on to say:

Only the most bitter among [the Beat Generation] would call their reality a nightmare and protest that they have indeed lost something, the future. For ever since they were old enough to imagine one, that has been in jeopardy anyway. The absence of personal and social values is to them, not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. How to live seems to them much more crucial than *why*. And it is precisely at this point that the copywriter and the hotrod driver meet and their identical beatness becomes significant, for, unlike the Lost Generation, which was occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need for it (Holmes).

It is important however to draw the separation between The Beats, the Beat Generation, and the Beatniks, as they are very distinct cultural phenomena. When Kerouac pronounced his definition of the Beat generation, he explained that it meant more than being merely beaten down, but also beatific (of course, the word “beat” also has a musical connotation). Thus the word was an attempt to capture, in a sense, the holiness of the downtrodden (French). *On the Road*, as a story of a disillusioned young American artist flinging himself into the road in search of meaning and a way of life, replete with jazz, sex, and drugs was a compelling story to the young generation at the time.
But it is important to understand that at the time Kerouac wrote and published his book, the Beats as we call them now did not exist save in a relatively small group of friends essentially interconnected by literary efforts and adventures typified by Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, John Clellon Holmes, and of course Kerouac himself.

The Beat Generation on the other hand was the cultural outgrowth of much of the Beats’ writing and aesthetic, which arose in the early 60s. It was a cultural response of the youth growing up in a world characterized by McCarthyism, the Cold War, scientific rationalism, and the perceived stagnancy of mainstream American culture. Interestingly, in 1957, the same year as On the Road was published, the bestseller list was topped by a self-help book entitled Must you Conform? (Paton). The Beat Generation thus sprouted as a large-scale coherent counterculture, inspired by the Beats. It was characterized by several defining features, including drug experimentation, relaxed social and sexual identities, rejection of materialism and consumerism, exploration of Eastern religions, and the idealization of unself-conscious and orgiastic modes of being (Stephenson).

It is more difficult to pinpoint the origins of the “Beatnik” as a cultural phenomenon – which was essentially the mainstream cultural pejorative for young members of the Beat generation. The Beat stereotype was solidified by the first Beatnik character in television, Maynard G. Krebs in The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, which ran from 1959 to 1963. Krebs was a caricature of the young Beatnik, with a goatee and shaggy hair, disheveled apparel, who used characteristically Beatnik vocabulary and was a continual slacker. His recurring gag was that when somebody would mention “work,” he would yelp “Work!” and faint (French). Krebs serves as a very poignant magnification of mainstream cultural perceptions of the Beatniks and the Beat Generation on the whole – but to trace the origins of the conflict cultural, we must return to the publication of On the Road and the cultural reactions it elicited.

The responses of contemporaneous critics upon the release of the novel were varied. It is well-known that Gilbert Millstein of The New York Times lauded the novel as “a stunning achievement,” defending its plot and characters, saying “the search for belief is very likely the most violent known to man,” and in his praise immediately paved a place for On the Road as a great novel (Millstein). But other reactions were less positive, as should be expected for a novel that borders at times on the glorification of debauchery. Norman Podhoretz, a contemporary at Columbia University and notable critic, rallied strongly against the book, claiming that the essence of Kerouac’s manifesto was “kill the intellectuals who can talk coherently, kill the people who can sit still for five minutes at a time, kill those incomprehensible characters who are capable of getting seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause” (Akers). Time magazine
famously dubbed Kerouac the “latrine laureate of Hobohemia” (Paton). But despite the range of reactions from cultural commentators, the vitality, freshness, and honesty of Kerouac’s writing and philosophy spoke to his readers.

But the Beat project, this search for a way of life and meaning, is it worth it? Is it right path? Why does it still speak to us? William Everson argues in an essay entitled “Dionysus and the Beat Generation, that the Beat Generation was attempting “to fuse Eros and Agape in a profane synthesis, but by settling for ecstasy at any price, it rove[d] restlessly from the delirium of sensational licentiousness to compulsive flights at the infinite through drugs or dithyrambic aestheticism. … But because in its protest against stodginess it repudiate[d] true order, not simply the Apollonian order of contingent effects, but the veritable order of interior synthesis, it oscillate[d] between an оргiastic sexuality and an incoherent elation. The way of perfection is hard, rigorous, and disenchanting, as the great religions have ever taught” (Everson 25). To put it simply, one might argue that the Beat Generation supplanted the quiet, meditative path to personal salvation with a wild frenzy of equal parts ecstatic, romantic, platonic love. The see-saw of mindful love and the reckless self-throwing into the body. It is perhaps a stage of life through which everybody, and perhaps even American culture on the whole, needed to pass through and make sense of, in its continuous search to make sense of itself.

Through spontaneity, self-expression, anti-intellectualism (and an occasionally flitting sense of responsibility), Kerouac embodied for the new generation a coherent and empowering response to the world they had inherited. Though there is plenty of debate to be had about the virtues and faults of the Beat Generation and the movement that it created in American culture, at the point that On the Road became a cultural phenomenon, and Kerouac himself enshrined as a sort of cultural figurehead, Beat was here to stay. It was finally Kerouac who said – “woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind’ll blow it back” (Stephenson).

Works Cited


Sal,

This project is a well-written and evocative piece of writing. I think you make a good point about the separation of the Beats, the Beat Generation, and the "Beatniks." I'd like to hear more about the difference between those who were actually influenced by the Beats and the stereotype created by opponents as a way to understand the growth of the counter-culture in the 1960s.

My main comment is about the Everson discussion. You write:

To put it simply, one might argue that the Beat Generation supplanted the quiet, meditative path to personal salvation with a wild frenzy of equal parts ecstatic, romantic, platonic love. The see-saw of mindful love and the reckless self-throwing into the body. It is perhaps a stage of life through which everybody, and perhaps even American culture on the whole, needed to pass through and make sense of, in its continuous search to make sense of itself.

First, that is not a simple point, and I think you could expand this discussion into two paragraphs to allow the ideas time to develop. You say in the next paragraph that Kerouac presented a "coherent and empowering response" to the world, but I would need you to develop the logic from the lengthy quote above to that idea further in order to be convinced.

Finally, I would like to see you come back more explicitly to the start of your essay—"On the Road"'s position as a "great American novel" and Kerouac as an icon of American literature. That would wrap up your project more clearly.

Best,

Tracy

Charles on May 8, 2012 at 10:41 am said:

You are right.

Obviously, revision is a great issue for every writer. Most of them resort to it, but some of them do not need it. Or rather some
Kerouac: The Cultural Resonance of On the Road. Kurt Vonnegut: Goodbye Blue Monday. Bibliography and Reception. We can see that his works were closely linked to his own experiences. When it comes to On the Road, it really looks like an autobiographical work. Indeed, the characters are taken from Kerouac’s relatives. He, the narrator, is named Sal Paradise, his friend Neal Cassady who initiated him to travelling adventures is named Dean Moriarty in the story, William S. Burroughs is Old Bull Lee and Allen Ginsberg is Carlo Marx. Moreover, he took numerous notes during his own travels across the US to write On the Road, and these travels are often exactly the same as those he did. Fifty years ago Jack Kerouac’s dazzling novel On the Road became the blueprint for the Beat generation and shaped America’s youth culture for decades. In Minor Characters, her illuminating memoir of life among the Beat writers, Joyce Johnson, who was with Kerouac on that day in New York, captures the seismic resonance of that single review. ‘I was aware of its cultural weight in the canon of alternative literature before I read it, and even though I never had an intense love affair with it, there was no denying that the lives these guys lived was properly edgy in a way that my generation’s wasn’t.’ Kerouac: On the record. 1922 Born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts to French-Canadian parents. On the Road is a novel by American writer Jack Kerouac, based on the travels of Kerouac and his friends across the United States. It is considered a defining work of...