20th Century American Literature

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**Lecture Notes: Jack Kerouac, *On the Road,* and *Big Sur***

1. Biographical Information
   1. General Information: Born of French-Canadian parents in Lowell, Massachusetts, Kerouac’s first language was French. His father was a successful businessman but difficulties during the Depression led him to alcoholism. Kerouac tried to help the family and got a football scholarship to Columbia University in New York but quickly dropped out. He joined the Merchant Marines during WWII. In New York he met Ginsberg and Burroughs and Neal Cassidy, a self proclaimed “street cowboy.” Their friendship would form the subject of Kerouac’s greatest novel, *On the Road.* Kerouac was considered one of the leaders of the movement, an idea he always rejected. He was a lifelong alcoholic and died of internal bleeding at a young age. (1922-1969)
   2. Kerouac was different from the other Beats in several ways:
      1. Politics: Kerouac was more conservative that his politically radical friends. He believed in democracy and capitalism in ways that some of the others didn’t. He was still probably a little bit radical, but compared to the others he was pretty normal.
      2. Family: Many of the Beats had little contact with their natural family. Kerouac lived with and cared for his mother throughout her life, moving often so that she could be comfortable.
      3. Drugs: While the Beats were known for experimentation with drugs, Kerouac preferred alcohol and used it to excess. After he became popular his drinking increased to self-destructive proportions.
      4. Women: Kerouac wasn’t shy around women, and had many conquests, but his Roman Catholic upbringing and his mother’s influence made him a little less aggressive about sex than some of the other Beats.
   3. Character: After the publication of *On the Road* people sought out the Kerouac they thought they knew from the book. Most people thought that he was the “Dean Moriarty” character. But he was not. He was Sal Paradise. Watching others but not joining in, a follower rather than a leader, an admirer but not one seeking to be admired, the disconnection between his public persona and his private personality ultimately destroyed him.
2. Themes: The Search
   1. For the Meaning of Life: In it’s simplest terms, the book represents a search to find out how to best live our lives.
   2. Catholicism and the Search for God: Kerouac said: "Dean and I were embarked on a journey through post-Whitman America to FIND that America and to FIND the inherent goodness in American man. It was really a story about 2 Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him." [From Leland, John (2007). *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road*]
   3. For Whitman’s America: The story moves constantly across the American landscape and describes the people that Kerouac met along the way. He uses the places that people come from to explain their character. For example, Neal is from the “West” and Kerouac describes him as wild and passionate as a result. It is a direct descendent of the writing and style of Walt Whitman. In painting a picture of America, Kerouac is trying to understand himself.
   4. For Freedom (Independence from Cultural Constraint): Unlike the writing of Ginsberg in “Howl” (an autobiography looking out), *On the Road* and Kerouac’s other writings are autobiographical works looking in. Kerouac is very aware of what he is: an American, a Catholic, a man, a rebel, an angel, and a human with both good and bad qualities. In many ways he is trying to reconcile (or bring into harmony) all of these conflicts. In other ways he is seeking (like those around him) to escape from them.
3. Style/Language. Kerouac’s writing is…
   1. Spontaneous. Kerouac sought to record the raw experience of his life. He compared it to the style of the Impressionist painters like Monet who recorded their “impressions” of reality, painting quickly without worrying about the form or details of the painting. Kerouac wrote on a long roll of paper, finishing some of his books in as little as two weeks. His prose attempts to capture the impressions of his experience.
   2. Unpolished. Kerouac, unlike many other writers, did very little editing of his work. He didn’t want to destroy the “unfiltered” nature of his prose. As a result there are mistakes (intentional or unintentional), contradictions, breaks and inconsistencies in the plotline, and other “happy mistakes.” All of this is valuable to Kerouac, as it imitates the imperfect way that we remember our experience of reality.
   3. Musical. There is a musical quality to Kerouac’s prose. He is attempting to write motion, movement, ecstatic dance, and sensual experience. His prose reflects this through power and motion. He writes long sentences, incomplete sentences, presents fragmented images of life, hyper-realistic (authentic) dialogue, and first-person observations of real people and places in the sing-sing hip-hop of jazz.
   4. Observant. As pointed out above, the language that Kerouac uses is designed to put the reader in the places the author is describing. But not only that, he is also trying to give the reader an unobstructed view of his mind. Be removing the author as much as possible from the reader’s experience, he is attempting to give us a view of the world through his own eyes.
4. Texts:
   1. From *On the Road*
      1. “I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn’t know who I was — I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn’t scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.”
   2. From *Big Sur.*
      1. “And in the flush of the first few days of joy I confidently tell myself (not expecting what I'll do in three weeks only) 'no more dissipation, it's time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in woods like these, then just calmly walk and talk among people of the world, no booze, no drugs, no binges, no bouts with beatniks and drunks and junkies and everybody, no more I ask myself the question O why is God torturing me, that's it, be a loner, travel, talk to waiters, walk around, no more self-imposed agony...it's time to think and watch and keep concentrated on the fact that after all this whole surface of the world as we know it now will be covered with the silt of a billion years in time...Yay, for this, more aloneness.”
5. Discussion Questions:
   1. From *On the Road*
      1. Dean Moriarty doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would be a good friend. He is a thief, a drug addict and alcoholic, a bisexual womanizer. Why do women like him? Why does Sal Paradise like him?
      2. Sal describes Dean’s girlfriend Marylou as “a long-bodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman in a serious room.” Based on the other descriptions of her in the story and the reference to the painter Modigliani, what do you think this means?
      3. What was the “one and only holy and important thing in life” to Dean Moriarty? Do a little research about the life of Neal Cassady and try to explain why.
      4. In the movie Dean cuts the picture they take in half and gives part of it to Sal, but in the book Dean gives half of the picture to Carlo. Why do you think he cut it in half and why would he give it to Sal? Why to Carlo?
   2. From *Big Sur*
      1. Kerouac went to a cabin by the sea to recover from his alcoholism and to try to write. In chapter 8 he describes all of the things that he can see there and finishes with “There’s all that, and all my fine thoughts, even unto my ditty written to the sea “I took a pee, into the sea, acid to acid, and me to ye” yet I went crazy inside three weeks.” Why is the sea important?
      2. The end of chapter 8 says that there are “signposts of something wrong.” Choose a signpost from the story and try to describe what it means. What is wrong?
      3. Kerouac had hitchhiked all over America in *On the Road.* Now, just a few years later things have changed in America and nobody wants to pick up strangers along the road. He closes the section we read with the statement: “And NO RIDES a sign.” What is this sign? What does it say about America at that time? And what does it say about the narrator, Jack Dulouz?