

القراءة على الطريق كرواية مضادة للثقافة

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Reading On the Road as a Counter-Culture Novel

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ملخص

ساد مفهوم الثقافة المضادة في الرؤية السائدة للمجتمع الأمريكي بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية، ليحل محل السعي لتحقيق الحلم الأمريكي. ورغم المزايا الاقتصادية العديدة التي تمتعت بها أمريكا بعد الحرب، إلا أن الحرب خلفت فوضى عارمة دفعت الفرد الأمريكي إلى إعادة تقييم مفهوم الحرية الفردية. وسرعان ما بدأت أصوات الاحتجاج بالظهور، بدءًا بقصيدة "العواء" الشهيرة لألن غينسبيرغ (1927-1996)، التي عُرضت لأول مرة عام 1955، وفي عام 1957، أصدر جاك كيرواك روايته شبه السيرية "على الطريق". تُظهر الرواية أسلوب حياة الشخصية المتنوع، الذي جمع بين المخدرات والجنس والحب الحر وحب الحرية والبوذية الزينية، مُحدثًا ثورة ثقافية ومُشكلاً ثقافة مضادة لازدهار الاقتصادي آنذاك.

ستتناول هذه الدراسة الثقافة المضادة في رواية "على الطريق" لجاك كيرواك، مُسلطة الضوء على هذا المفهوم الثوري في العديد من مواضع الرواية، مُعكسةً تصورات مجموعة من الشباب المُناهضين للثقافة السائدة، والذين يهدفون إلى الاحتجاج بأساليب غير تقليدية. تنقسم هذه الورقة البحثية إلى ثلاثة أقسام: يقدم القسم الأول الدراسة من خلال مفهوم الثقافة المضادة، وظهورها، وتأثيراتها على المجتمع الأمريكي. ويسلط القسم الثاني الضوء على حركة جيل بيت ووجهات نظرها. أما القسم الثالث، فيقدم قراءةً للثقافة المضادة لرواية "على الطريق" من خلال أسلوب حياة هذه المجموعة الشابة غير التقليدي. وسيُختتم البحث بخاتمة وقائمة بالمراجع .

Abstract

The concept of counterculture prevailed in American society's mainstream vision after the Second World War to replace the quest for achieving the American dream. Although America had many economic advantages after the Second World War, nevertheless, the war created huge chaos that made the American individual reevaluate the concept of individual freedom. But soon, protesting voices started to surface, starting with the renowned poem "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg (1927–1996), which was first performed in 1955, and in 1957, Jack Kerouac released his semi-autobiographical book *On the Road*. The novel shows the character's diverse lifestyle, which combined drugs, sex, free love, freedom-loving, and Zen Buddhism, revolutionized culture and came as a counterculture to the economic boom of the time.

The study will work on counterculture in *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac to highlight this revolutionized concept in many occurrences throughout the novel, reflecting the perceptions of a group of anti-culture young people whose aim is to protest using unconventional methods. The paper is divided into three sections: section one introduces the study with the concept of counterculture, its appearance, and its impacts on American society. Section two highlights the Beat Generation movement and their perspectives. Finally, section three provides a counterculture reading of the novel *On the Road* through the young group's unconventional lifestyle. A conclusion and a list of works cited will be provided at the end.

1.Introduction

This paper examines the sociopolitical milieu of the United States in the 1950s via the lens of Jack Kerouac's (1922–1969) widely popular book *On the Road* (1957). Thus, counterculture will be studied, and the paper will illustrate the socio-political context of 1950s American society. It should be clear that writers from the Beat Generation began to draw



attention to the fact that, in addition to the government's ongoing involvement in foreign conflicts, which continued to fuel militarism and the mistreatment of minorities, American society was becoming blinded by standardization and excessive consumerism in the late 1940s. Because their observations helped to initiate significant social movements, such writers greatly impacted the youth of the 1960s. It is a historical fact that after the end of the Great Depression and the Second World War, people in America sought to live in prosperity, and the suburbs became full of households, which led to a significant increase in the suburban population. Thus, modern sources of news, entertainment, and, most importantly, advertising emerged. In this way, manufacturers found and customized a variety of goods to meet the demands of middle-class American consumers.

But in the thriving years following World War II, several countercultural concepts began to surface among writers. These writers worked to highlight the hollowness of intense industrialization, a materialistic mindset, and media brainwashing because they threw away the capitalistic overproduction, aggressive advertising, and militarism that were brought about by the Cold War and were still pervasive in the mainstream media. Among these movements, the Beat movement was outshining the rest. Jack Kerouac was a key player in the movement, recognizing in his critically acclaimed novel *On the Road* the presence of an unseen America. According to Jamie Russell in *The Beat Generation*, postwar America can be defined as "America having irrevocably changed" (Russell 8). Hence, writers of that time sought to change and point out those difficulties, no matter how. Thus, the rise of many counterculture movements came, among which was the "Beat Movement."

2.The Beat Movement and Their Perspectives

It is essential to understand the Beat Movement and their perspectives to be able to highlight their counter-culture themes and techniques in their literary works. So, according to Yonghong Zhang, the Beat Movement was a loosely connected group of young American poets and writers in the 1950s. After World War II, they emerged as a significant force in challenging and refuting traditional cultural beliefs, challenging all established norms. It was Jack Kerouac who came up with the term "Beat Generation" in 1948, when John Clellon Holmes, a friend of Jack Kerouac, wrote an essay titled "This is the Beat Generation" for the New York Times Magazine in 1952 (Zhang 205). The first part of the definition of "beat" is "beatnik and beautiful." The movement centered on writers such as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac.

Key components of "Beat" culture included a rejection of conventional standards and a refusal of stylistic innovations; it also popularized drug experimentation. Nevertheless, it vocalized alternative sexualities and epitomized an interest in Eastern religion. The movement showed distaste for materialism and were close observers of the human condition. The history of Beat literature underwent a sea change in 1956 with the release of Allen Ginsberg's (1926-1997) "Howl". The poem's matter caused several people to be supersized. Matters like drug addicts, wanderers, prostitutes, and criminals are among them, which showed an internalized wrath (Ibid 206). Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is one of the Beat Generation's most important works of literature. This book tells the story of a group of people who explore the nation on a spiritual and geographical level. Kerouac depicted a life free from social constraints amidst the gloomy rigidity and mass materialism. In his view, adherence was one of the main issues facing postwar American culture. Everyone was acting in this society by their moral convictions. According to Kerouac, people in this culture were like insects; they worked for money and frantically gathered material possessions.

The main characters in *On the Road* are constantly on the move, expressing their enthusiasm to break free from the constraints of middle-class living and their discontentment with life. The middle class, as the center of American society, most often embodies the country's values, beliefs, and spirit. Thus, the middle-class youth's countercultural mindset grew in power (Ibid 205). This proves Harry Russell Huebel's view on Jack Kerouac as during his lifetime, Jack Kerouac was not so much recognized as a serious writer as so much was as an eccentric leader of a bohemian movement (5).

Additionally, what makes the "Beat Generation" a phenomenon that has preoccupied the mainstream's consciousness is their counterculture views on every aspect of life. Counterculture was the term coined by Theodore Roszak (1933 – 2011) in his book *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society*. Roszak stated that "the rational, science-based society of the twentieth century alienated men and women, especially the young, and propelled them into the search for meaning in drugs, spirituality, and dissent." (4). So, counterculture refers to a group of ideas, attitudes, and values confronting the mainstream culture—in this case, capitalism, Protestantism, and militarism—a counterculture is born. Nevertheless, counterculture also alludes to a particular group of individuals, those who leave straight society due to their refusal to live according to conventional norms. The rebellious mindset, thus, indirect educational institutions, drug usage, and unrestricted sex are all described



as new social practices. It is with this sense that Jack Kerouac wrote his famous novel *On the Road*.

3. Reading *On the Road* as a Counter-Culture Novel

3.1 An Introduction to *On the Road*

Giving biographical hints about Kerouac's life will enable the reader to understand his counter-cultural views better. In 1922, Jean Louis Lebris de Kerouac was born into a close-knit French-Canadian family in Lowell, Massachusetts. Leo, his father, was a printer. Being a lifelong sports fan, he supported Jack's aspiration to become a football hero, leading to an athletic scholarship at Columbia University (Huebel 5-6). According to Huebel, two very important elements shaped Kerouac's writing; first, the city of Lowell worked as "a salad bowl" of different ethnicities, giving Kerouac's writing a sense of universality, which immediately traveled into his themes and ideas later on. Second, the popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s also significantly impacted Kerouac's writing. Pop culture gave him his first ideas about America before either his family or his Catholic education did (6).

Moreover, a third influence on Kerouac and his writing was Neal Cassady (1926 – 1968), whom he got to know with the help of his college classmates in New York; it was during this friendship that the crazy "road years" started. In addition, Cassady also encouraged Kerouac to write about his subject, which was his own life; hence, he was drawn to the force of autobiographical fiction (ibid 9). *On the Road* was the first indication of Kerouac's newfound abilities. It was completed in three weeks of uninterrupted writing. While Kerouac made revisions to get it published, this was nevertheless his first attempt at interacting with readers based on Cassady's suggestion to integrate biographies into his writing (Huebel 11). The novel chronicles the narrator's adventures, Sal Paradise, and Dean Moriarty. The story is considered a story of initiation, where the characters seem to be confused as they roam from New York to Mexico City, San Francisco, and Denver (Huebel 12). *On the Road* reflects upon different themes and concepts, among which counter-culture summarizes all.

As far as his style and techniques of writing, Kerouac writes with deliberate disregard for grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules, this is known as the "alternative form." Like his beat literature, Kerouac questions both modern writing styles and conventional American norms. Like the rest of the Beat writers, he abandons convention in favor of more creative writing. Stated differently, Jack Kerouac seeks to reject the formalist's literary forms and structures. Moreover, to convey ideas, emotions, and facts, Kerouac employs a rather fragmented presentation in

his writing style. According to Alexandra Konrádová, Kerouac's style of writing can be divided into three areas: spontaneous writing, writing under the influence of jazz music, particularly bebop, and the influence of Eastern philosophy and literature (Konrádová 8). This division can be seen in his seminal novel *On the Road*, especially the spontaneous element. Next, the idea of counterculture will be explained in the novel thematically and technically. :

3.2 On the Road as a Counter-Culture Novel

This novel can be read from the lenses of the concept counter-culture on two levels: thematically and technically:

3.2.1 Reading On the Road as a Counter-Culture Novel Thematically

It is good to start by shedding light on the general meaning of the novel; being "on the road," or traveling, is a wonderful metaphor for the author's uncertainty because travelers are never truly at home or their destination. They're going through a process in which the scenery viewed from the road highlights this transitional state. The journey is the focal point, not the transformation of the passengers, which will never show up. The Beats' aspiration for a countercultural lifestyle is first expressed through the character's actions, making the characters the core of the rebellion. The road is where the characters' journey begins and ends. Thus, the novel deals with several main themes that reveal the concept of counter-culture, mainly alienation, how Kerouac's characters use displacement as a form of resistance and escape and a concentration on Jack Kerouac's counter-culture movement, and his presentation of gender-neutral sexual liberation, and how these are reflected in the book.

First, alienation, an act of removing oneself or one's affections from something or somewhere they were previously attached, is one of the main themes seen in the individualism of the male characters in the novel, mainly Sal Paradise. This can be seen when Sal expresses his desire to truly "be" a member of the racial marginalized community by engaging in the isolation and alienation of minorities throughout the book.:

"I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned. . . . I was only myself, Sal Paradise . . . wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. (Kerouac 180)

This speech by Sal shows his discontent with the conformity of the American society, this discontentment sees itself in an act of isolation and



disillusionment, Sal here wishes to belong to a different race, he wishes to belong to a race that is happier than the Whiteman. He believes that the white race is not true, and that is why he prefers to live in isolation as he can't mingle with the surroundings. Furthermore, Sal believes that "the road must eventually lead to the whole world," which is one of the reasons he drives across America (Kerouac 230). He states the fact that he feels alienated that is why he takes the road as his companion which will eventually lead him to his other companions around the world.

Second, the theme of displacement also participates in the recognition of the character's desire to voice out their counter-culture voices. For the characters in the novel, moving is vital, as both Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty come to realize, that they both abandon their jobs to travel the world, choosing to either hitchhike or rely solely on cars. Mobility brings in new activities for Sal and Dean, who relish every moment spent on the road. Examples of activities that represent the symbolism and significance of the road include eating, sleeping, having sex, and meeting new people along the way before leaving them behind; as not only a way to travel but also a way to live by, this is declared by Sal "Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalks again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life" (Kerouac 209), for Sal, the road is his way of living, it is his home, he doesn't see the road as displacement, rather it is his new nonconformity method of living. In addition, for Sal and Dean, the road marked the beginning and end of their friendship:

"I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. (Kerouac 1)

Sal explains how their friendship and the start of their mobile lifestyle are tied to the road. This friendship that starts on the road, in their times of displacement, also helps them to get over illnesses that are not normal but rather ones that make them feel "split up" from inside and leave them feeling dead spiritually. Sal states that displacement and the fact that he abandons women are two facts that let him and Dean live the sort of life they have been wishing for. Moreover, it leads them to live a nomadic lifestyle, "We immediately have a woman departing and a male friend arriving" (Kerouac 258).



In addition to rejecting society, mobility took on a new significance for the Beat Generation; it became a struggle against the standards of 1950s society and the typical American middle-class family. According to Kerouac, the American society of the time required them to adhere to specific customs and behaviors, which every member of the society had to follow. While those actions would have appeared to most people as typical norms for leading a typical life, Sal claims that mobility is the Beats' response to any social values because, for them, those boundaries are just threats to their freedom, as expressed in these lines.:

This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do. So what if a bunch of men talk in loud voices and drink the night? But Sledge wanted to prove something. He made sure to bring me along in case they jumped him. They might have. They were all brothers, all from Alabama. We strolled back to the station, Sledge. (Kerouac 66-67)

Sal uses talking out loud and excessive drinking as examples of how he intends to challenge Americans' social norms to convey his idea of disapproval. In this situation, Sal decides to travel the entire nation with his friends in protest.

Third, a new consumer culture is beginning to permeate the conservative society of America then; items like cars and TVs are becoming more commonplace in American lives. In response, a counterculture movement emerged that was at odds with the prevailing society and culture, to use Cresswell's phrase: "The counterculture as a 'movement' has all the characteristics of an 'oppositional' movement- the provision of alternative facilities for the production, exhibition and publication" (249). For the characters in *On the Road*, madness is a way of living since it goes against the norms of the dominant culture:

"the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles (Kerouac 6)."

For Sal, his only comrades are those who like to live madly and do things opposite to what the dominant culture expects them to do even in their ways of being saved from dangers. He likes to burn down to live the happy life he desires. Moreover, in the book, Kerouac's characters' nonconformist outlook mirrors their sexual and homosexual liberation as an external manifestation of their counterculture ideals. The sexual



liberation that the book offers is limited to what men want. The advocate for sexual relationships is Dean Moriarty, who has many heterosexual relationships in the novel; Sal describes sex as having a significant role in Dean's life since, to him, "sex was the only holy and important thing in life" (Kerouac 2). For instance, Dean's wife Marylou is described as "I saw what a whore she was" (Ibid 170) by Sal after she leaves him and goes off with the owner of a nightclub. Marylou's actions are a symbol of the opposite of the conventional American family, in which wives are expected to care for their children, obey their husbands, and, most importantly, engage in sexual relations with their spouses alone.

One more counter-culture idea in the novel that supports its anti-culture themes is the idea of homosexuality. Sal's interest in homosexuality is also problematically highlighted by his visit with his friend Remi to gay bars early on in the novel. Even Sal finds it difficult to understand why he behaves in a homophobic manner: "I've traveled to San Francisco on multiple occasions with a gun, and on one occasion, I pulled out my weapon and said, 'Eh? Well? Are you saying something? Remembering Sal, he ran off. That decision has always baffled me; I knew queers throughout the county" (Kerouac 73). These regular visits to gay bars and even the audacity to recall them in the novel stem from a deep desire of this group of Americans to go against what is prevailing in society, among which lies homosexuality.

Furthermore, wherever Sal goes, he describes the "queer saint" (Kerouac 5) in the pool hall in what Dean later calls "frosty fagtown New York" (Ibid 135). Even on the West Coast, where Sal discovers that Los Angeles is full of "handsome queer boys" (Ibid 87), this suggests the nomadic style to which these individuals lead even if there is no direct act of homosexuality between the main characters. Yet, they celebrate it and deal with it as the norm. On the contrary, they deal with normal marriages and relationships as strange, which is why the characters celebrate both heterosexuality and homosexuality.

3.2.2 Reading *On the Road* Technically

Most of the novel revolves around three sides: Jack himself, Neal Cassady, and the road (Campbell 106). Kerouac uses little technique in this novel; he uses spontaneous prose in the novel as he states, "I got the spontaneous style of *On the Road* from how good old Neal wrote all his letters to me, all in the in the first person, fast, mad, confessional, and completely serious" (Berrigan 108). He calls this writing "wild form" that goes beyond traditional writing. The novel has several technical elements that go along with the main characteristics of Beat Generation techniques such as the use of Jazz music to give the writing a sense of breath and incorporating a sense of musicality. This incorporation between jazz and writing sees itself in Kerouac's attempt to improvise between language

and music. For example, Sal's obsession with madness is described in rhythmic flow: "he is mad to live, mad to talk, and mad to be saved" (Kerouac 90).

There are many clues of this incorporation; for example, when Sal and Neal visit many jazz clubs throughout the novel all over the United States of America, this technique also enhances the novel's theme, which is the quest for self-signification through attaining a sense of freedom. In the novel, this jazz improvisation is incorporated into the novel's sentence structure since he uses very long sentences that go hand in hand with the long breath needed to perform jazz, for example, "In the empty Houston streets of four o'clock in the morning a motorcycle kid suddenly roared through, all bespangled and bedecked with glittering buttons, visor, slick black jacket, a Texas poet of the night, girl gripped on his back like a papoose, hair flying, onward-going, singing, «Houston, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas - and sometimes Kansas City - and sometimes old Antone, ah-ha!» They pinpointed out of sight." (Kerouac 93).

Reading this very long sentence, one can notice that it needs a very long breath to finish since it runs through four simple sentences to make one complex sentence. In the same way, a jazz performer would need the same length of breath when performing his musical pieces. Kerouac also attempts to exaggerate in the novel; this use of exaggeration as the main figure of speech is done on purpose, which is to give a sense of truthfulness to the novel. Kerouac writes a fictionalized biography of himself: "The greatest ride in my life was about to come up" (Kerouac 17). Kerouac uses the word "greatest" to give a better inside into his psyche and present the image best. *On the Road* is filled with exaggeration and hyperbole. There are feelings of happiness and sorrow, ecstasy and disappointment in pursuing knowledge.

Another technique that the novel incorporates is characterization; Kerouac's use of characterization mainly serves the purpose of Wordsworth's notion in writing literature that literature is mainly written to serve men: "men speaking to men." *On the Road* reveals a second story about how the Beat Generation as a signifier was contained, read, and made to mean a rhetorical story, the story of how a term, a phrase, or utterance contains and discharges meanings. This is done through the writer's use of characterization. The main characters, Sal and Neal, carry the main themes and principles of the Beat Generation summarized in a quest that exhibits ways of countering the conformity of the era (Llano 34). Such as in this quote: "I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night..." (Kerouac 80). In this quotation, Kerouac reveals one of the main important principles of the Beat Generation which is the principle of madness and the idea that all life is an act of madness that will eventually lead us to madness. Thus, it is through characterization that Kerouac is enabled to frame the main features and themes of the Beat Generation, which is why *On the Road* is considered the manifesto of the Beat Generation.



4. Conclusion

The decades following the Second World War were different from the outer look of the American society at that time, which gave the illusion that American society was enjoying great economic success. Some counter-culture movements and trends were opposite the mainstream beliefs, among which was the Beat Generation movement which encompassed many outcast writers, poets and artists. Ultimately, *On the Road* by Kerouac, is considered the mouth speak prose work of the movement and its mottos. The novel is regarded as the primary literary work that challenges the conventional social pressure of the time thematically and technically. In this trend, the novel covers several counter-culture themes such as alienation, displacement, the madness that goes against the consumer society of that time, and finally the theme of homosexuality. On the technical side, *On the Road* is also considered a counter-culture novel when it comes to the analysis of its techniques, such as using spontaneous style in writing which Kerouac calls "wild form", incorporating Jazz music with prose, and its use of figures of speeches such as hyperbole. Finally, technically, the novel uses characterization to reveal its main themes, since Kerouac makes the main characters Sal and Neal carry the main themes and principles of the Beat Generation summarized in their quest that exhibit ways of countering the conformity of the era.

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