On the Road Study Guide

On the Road by Jack Kerouac

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Introduction

The literary movement known as the Beat Generation exploded into American consciousness with two books in the late 1950s. The first, *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg, was published in 1956. The book achieved notoriety when poet and bookstore owner Lawrence Ferlinghetti went to trial for selling it in San Francisco. The second book had an even more profound cultural effect when it was published. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* published in 1957, was viewed as nothing less than a manifesto for the Beat Generation.

On the Road is the story of two young men, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, who travel frantically back and forth across the American continent seeking thrills. The novel is actually a thinly veiled account of Kerouac's own life in the late 1940s, when he fell under the spell of a charismatic drifter named Neal Cassady (represented by Moriarty in the novel). Every episode in the novel was inspired by real-life events. The book, which would probably be considered rather tame today, shocked readers in 1957 with its depiction of drug use and promiscuous sex. Many critics attacked the work as evidence of the increasing immorality of American youth. Other critics saw it as a groundbreaking work of originality. American readers, fascinated with the bohemian lifestyle of the characters, turned the novel into a best-seller.

The Beat literary movement was short-lived. Most of the work Kerouac published in the 1960s had been written during his creative peak in the 1950s. Beat literature retains its popularity decades later because the writers of the Beat Generation must ultimately be judged by their work, not by any real or imagined influence on popular culture. Allen Ginsberg's poetry is still revered. The nightmarish visions of William Burroughs continue to influence post-Modern writers. Finally, Kerouac's *On the Road* is still a campus favorite, and continues to draw scholarly criticism.

Author Biography

Kerouac was born on March 22,1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts. His parents, Leo and Gabrielle, were French-Canadian immigrants. "Ti Jean" (Little Jean), as he was known as a child, lived in the shadow of his sickly, angelic brother, Gerard. Gerard was barely ten years old when he died of rheumatic fever, and his death had such a profound effect on Kerouac that he later wrote a novel about his brother entitled *Visions of Gerard.* Kerouac had a lively imagination as a boy. He scripted his own "movies" and acted them out in front of the family Victrola and later illustrated them in his own comic books. He created a complex baseball game with an ordinary deck of playing cards that he would play throughout his life. In the early years of his life, Kerouac was a solitary child with few friends. However, he soon grew into a handsome, athletic young man.

Kerouac excelled at football in high school and attracted the attention of coaches from several major colleges. An athletic scholarship to Columbia brought him to New York City. He dropped out of Columbia when World War II started and enlisted in the navy, but he was quickly discharged for "indifferent character" because he refused to follow orders. He ended up enlisting in the merchant marine and worked on a ship that crossed the treacherous, submarine-infested waters of the North Atlantic. After the war, he returned to New York City to write and study. It was during this period that he met other bohemians, such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. It was at this time that the literary phenomenon known as the Beat Generation was born.

The Beat Generation espoused freedom, individuality, and experimentation in living and in literature. Kerouac discovered what he believed was an icon for this generation when he met Neal Cassady, a wild, magnetic, young drifter from Denver, in 1946. Although Kerouac recognized that Cassady was a manipulative pseudo-intellectual, he admired Cassady's zest for life and hunger for learning. Cassady ultimately inspired the character of Dean Moriarty in *On the Road.* Kerouac spent the next several years traveling across the country, both with and without Cassady.

In 1950, Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City,* was released to lukewarm reviews. The indifferent reaction to his first novel, although discouraging, did not prevent him from writing. Although his second (and most popular) novel, *On the Road,* was not published until 1957, the fifties were his most creative years. He wrote several novels in furious spurts between his first two published books. For example, he wrote *The Subterraneans* in a thirty-six hour, amphetamine-fueled marathon. The success of *On the Road* enabled him to publish, in quick succession, several of the books he had already written. Buddhism influenced some of his later work in much the same way jazz did. Unfortunately, the pressures of fame and the debilitating effects of his alcoholism affected his work in the 1960s. Although he was sometimes brilliantly lucid and clever during interviews for print and television in the late sixties, his drunken behavior often made him a sad caricature of himself. Complications from alcoholism led to his death in St. Petersburg, Florida, on October 21, 1969, at the age of forty-seven.

Plot Summary

Part One

In part one of *On the Road,* Sal Paradise, the narrator, is a young writer living with his aunt in Paterson, New Jersey, during the late 1940s. Sal is writing his first novel as he recovers from a failed marriage. In the opening of part one, Sal describes how he comes to meet a charismatic, exciting drifter and con artist from Denver named Dean Moriarty. Sal's curiosity is first piqued when he reads the interesting, lively letters that Dean wrote during his stay in a New Mexico reformatory to their mutual friend Chad King. By the time Dean arrives in New York City with his child-bride, Marylou, Sal is anxious to meet him. Sal describes Dean as "trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent□a side burned hero of the snowy West." Soon after the two young men meet, Dean leaves Marylou when she files a false police report after an argument. Dean goes to Sal to learn how to write. Although Sal recognizes that Dean is a con artist, he is inspired by him; he cannot resist Dean's zest for life and his endless search for "kicks" (defined here as almost any powerful sensory experience). Sal introduces Dean to his friend, poet Carlo Marx, and Dean and Carlo become inseparable. However, Dean and many of Sal's other friends head west to Denver in the spring of 1947. Carlo soon follows.

Sal saves up enough money to go west himself in July of 1947. He plans to ship out on an around-the-world liner from San Francisco with his friend Remi Boncoeur after a short visit in Denver. Sal's first attempt to travel west ends in frustration when he realizes he has chosen the wrong route. To make up for lost time, Sal spends half his money on buses to get to Joliet, Illinois. Once there, he begins to hitchhike, and he meets a variety of eccentric people on his way to Denver. He looks up his friend Chad King when he reaches Denver, and he learns that his clique of university friends has somewhat ostracized Dean and Carlo because of their weird, unpredictable behavior. Sal stays with Roland Major, a young journalist, in an apartment owned by the traveling parents of another friend. When Sal finally finds Dean and Carlo, he finds out that Dean plans to divorce Marylou (with the understanding that they will still see each other) in order to marry a woman named Camille. Sal's stay in Denver is a frenetic, ten-day whirlwind of revelry culminating in a wild trip to the Central City Opera. He finally leaves for San Francisco, realizing that he has spent very little time with Dean.

In San Francisco, Sal lives with Remi Boncoeur and Lee Ann, Remi's shrewish girlfriend. Remi, claiming to know a Hollywood director, asks Sal to write a screenplay. Sal becomes bored after finishing the screenplay and takes a job with Remi guarding the temporary barracks for overseas construction workers waiting to ship out to Okinawa. Sal spends more time drinking with the workers than he does guarding the barracks, and Remi makes a practice of burglarizing the cafeteria. After Remi is unsuccessful in selling Sal's script, the relationship between the three roommates deteriorates. Remi and Lee Ann end up having a ferocious fight and, afterwards, as one last favor, Remi asks Sal and Lee Ann to be on their best behavior when they take

Remi's visiting stepfather out for dinner. The dinner turns into a disaster when Sal gets drunk and sees Roland Major, who is also drunk, and invites him to their table. Sal regretfully leaves the shack in the morning while Remi and Lee Ann are asleep.

Sal heads for Los Angeles after he leaves Remi's place. He meets a pretty Mexican girl named Terry on a bus and begins a bittersweet, two-week love affair. They plan to hitchhike together back to New York City after saving enough money. After unsuccessful attempts to get jobs in Los Angeles and Bakersfield, they go to Terry's hometown of Sabinal to work in the cotton fields. Terry is reunited with her young son. Sal becomes frustrated because he cannot earn enough in the fields to support Terry and her son. Terry tells him she will join him later in New York. He leaves, knowing he will never see her again. Tired and depressed, he returns to New York City, and ends up in Times Square. He panhandles enough change for bus fare to get to his aunt's home in Paterson. He arrives to find that he just missed Dean, who is on his way to San Francisco, by two days.

Part Two

Sal doesn't see Dean for over a year. He finishes his book and goes back to school. He visits his brother, Rocco, in Virginia on Christmas in 1948. Dean shows up in Virginia in a car with his ex-wife, Marylou, and his friend Ed Dunkel. Dean has left Camille behind in San Francisco with a baby daughter. Although Ed's new wife, Galatea, had originally joined them on the trip, they abandoned her in Tucson because they found her troublesome. Sal and Dean move furniture from Virginia to Paterson, and return to Virginia to pick up Sal's aunt, all in thirty hours. They discover that Galatea Dunkel has appeared in New Orleans at Old Bull Lee's home. Old Bull Lee, an odd mentor to Sal, Carlo, and Dean, is not pleased and wants the men to come and get Galatea. After a brief stay in New York, Sal goes on the road again with Dean, Ed, and Marylou to retrieve Galatea in New Orleans and, from there, go on to San Francisco.

In New Orleans, the group stays at the home of Old Bull Lee and his wife, Jane. Lee is a middle-aged, well-educated, peculiar drug addict who tells bizarre, humorous stories and has strange, yet interesting, theories. Ed is reunited with Galatea and they decide to stay in New Orleans when Sal, Dean, and Marylou leave. The travelers drive west across Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, turn north in California, and finally reach San Francisco. Dean, in a hurry to get to Camille, deserts Sal and Marylou on O'Farrell Street. They have no money. For a few days, the two wander around the city, bumming money and sleeping in cheap hotels. Marylou grows weary of Sal and abandons him. Sal is depressed and miserable when Dean finally finds him again. They spend the rest of Sal's stay in San Francisco hopping from one jazz club to the next. Sal begins to get uncomfortable staying with Camille and Dean, so he returns home after receiving his GI check.

Part Three

Sal goes back on the road in the spring of 1949. He returns to Denver, but none of his old friends live there anymore. He works in a fruit market for awhile, but he soon becomes lonely. A rich girl he knows gives him one hundred dollars to travel to France; instead, Sal takes it and spends eleven dollars to get to San Francisco to see Dean again. Sal finds Dean in an awful state; when he isn't arguing with Camille, he is stalking Marylou around the city. He has broken his thumb in a fight with Marylou and his overall health is not good. Camille throws both men out of the house. They decide to go back to New York, and perhaps Rome and Paris after that. On the way to New York, they stop in Denver. Sal gets angry with Dean in a diner, but apologizes to him. They stay with Okie Frankie, a single mother that Sal knows, and Dean causes trouble when he tries to seduce the neighbor's daughter. Later that night, Dean steals several cars, one of them belonging to a local police detective. Sal and Dean flee Denver in fear the next morning. They make their way back east, with stops in Chicago and Detroit. Dean finds yet another girlfriend named Inez in New York City.

Part Four

Sal sells his book in the spring of 1950, and goes on the road again. At first, Dean stays behind with the pregnant Inez, but he later catches up with Sal in Denver. Dean easily convinces Sal to drive to Mexico City with him so Dean can get a Mexican divorce from Camille. They are joined by another friend, Stan Shephard. Driving through Mexico, they stop at a bordello and sleep in the jungle. Once they arrive in Mexico City, Sal gets sick with dysentery. Dean abandons him there to return to his women in the United States. Sal is hurt by Dean's behavior, but he understands the "impossible complexity" of Dean's life.

Part Five

Part Five is the epilogue of the novel. Sal returns to New York City and falls in love with a woman named Laura. They plan to move to San Francisco to live near Dean and Camille. Dean arrives in New York almost six weeks early, and Sal and Laura have no money to move. Dean turns back for San Francisco almost immediately. Sal senses that Dean is close to the edge of a breakdown when he sees him for the last time in a melancholy scene on the winter streets of New York City.

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

On the Road is the story of the travels of two young men who crisscross the United States in search of excitement and adventure. The story of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise parallels Jack Kerouac's own life when he partnered with a young man named Neal Cassaday, who is portrayed by Moriarty in the novel. The bohemian lifestyle and free spirited adventures of Moriarty and Paradise were magnetic for American readers in the repressed era of the 1950s. Kerouac's book gave rise to the Beat generation, which symbolized rebellion and self absorbed pursuits of pleasure and exploration.

It is 1947 and Sal Paradise is living with his aunt in New Jersey and attending college in New York City. Recently divorced, Sal is lonely, depressed, and in sore need of some excitement in his life. Sal's friend, Chad King, tells Sal about a friend of his named Dean Moriarty who will soon be released from a reformatory in New Mexico and who plans to come to New York. Sal is anxious to meet Dean and when Dean does finally arrive, he has brought along his girlfriend named Marylou. Dean shares with the others about his yearning to learn to write and hopes that some of his new friends will help him.

Dean finds employment as a parking lot attendant and spends time with Sal and some others, but soon meets Carlo Marx to whom Dean is instantly attracted. Dean and Carlo seem to have the same rebellious personalities and zest for life and Sal feels left out, although Sal acknowledges the great minds of Dean and Carlo and knows that nothing can stop this partnership or the energy forged from it.

Before long, Dean breaks up with Marylou and moves in with Sal for a while but ultimately leaves for Denver. A prep school friend of Sal's, Remi Boncoeur, has written to tell Sal about the possibility of hopping an ocean liner in San Francisco from which point they would sail the world. Sal is buoyed by this news, too, and vows to follow Dean out west. Despite his aunt's warnings, Sal leaves New Jersey with fifty dollars and the dream of finding knowledge and adventure.

Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

Kerouac immediately sets up the premise of the book with some foreshadowing by declaring that Dean was born "on the road," having been born to itinerant parents. This wanderlust is quite natural for Dean, yet Sal feels the longing for the road as well, even though he has spent quite an ordinary life on the East Coast. There is a bond between Sal and Dean, which will be explored fully throughout the book as Dean takes Sal with him "on the road."

Part 1, Chapters 3, 4 and 5

Part 1, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Once Sal arrives in Chicago, he spends some time sleeping and then walking the streets to see what the city holds. Wanderlust will not let Sal linger and he soon heads west again, getting rides from farmers and other drivers who take him as far as Des Moines. Waking up in a cheap hotel near the railroad tracks, Sal is temporarily disoriented by the room and the red light from the sunset and marks this place in time as the distinction between the East of his youth and the West of the future.

In Des Moines, Sal meets Eddie, another New Yorker hitching his way west. Sal's progress is slowed considerably with Eddie as long as people will not stop to pick up two men. Finally the boys meet a cowboy who has two cars and needs one of the boys to drive one of them to Montana. Eddie drives the second car while Sal rides with the cowboy.

When the boys and the cowboy stop for dinner Sal drinks in the local color at a diner and is filled with joy that he is seeing Western people, which means he is closer to his destination of Denver. Sal and Eddie receive job offers to work in a carnival but decline because the carnival work would delay their progress for too long. Eddie catches a ride with a trucker who can take only one of the boys so Sal waits until he finally gets a ride with a young man who takes him to Gothenburg, Nebraska.

In Gothenburg Sal hops on for the wildest ride of his journey when he gets a lift on the back of a flatbed truck already populated with other hitchers and drifters. The owners of the truck are two brothers from Minnesota headed to Los Angeles to pick up farm equipment. Not wanting to see the flatbed go to waste on the way out West, the brothers pick up anyone who can fit on the back as they speed across the plains.

Sal develops a friendship with a hobo named Mississippi Gene, who is harboring a younger blonde boy who is running from the law. Mississippi Gene knows Sal's friend Big Slim Hazard and the two men bond in awe over the circumstances that would bring them together in this vast country and the mutual friendship of Big Slim.

Although continuing on the trip through to Los Angeles with the crazy blonde brothers from Minnesota is appealing, Sal jumps off the truck in Cheyenne, determined to hitch south to Denver. One of the other flatbed truck riders, Montana Slim, stays with Sal in Cheyenne for the night where the two men party at the city's Wild West Days and hope to find romantic luck with two local girls.

Sal's luck with women is running out almost as quickly as his money and he spends the night sleeping on a bench in the bus station. The next morning after a small breakfast, he finds a ride to Longmont, Colorado, where he lies down under a tree at a gas station for a nap, but not until he has gazed at the Rockies in the distance. When Sal awakes,

he finds a ride with a Denver businessman and cannot believe his good luck to soon find himself in Denver and on his way to find his friends.

Part 1, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

Ironically, Sal has reached his destination the moment he leaves New York, because reaching a city or a place is not truly his goal. Sal's destination is adventure and he finds it at every turn and in every person he meets. Kerouac tells the story from Sal's perspective so it goes in and out of narrative and dialogue, which allows for more introspection. Sal is not at all a jaded New Yorker but rather a romantic at heart who revels in the sights of the wide prairies and the star-filled desert nights. Even the local characters in diners are delights to Sal, who drinks in every sight and sound along the way on his journey west.

Symbolically Kerouac notes the distinction of Sal's becoming a man during the scene in the rundown hotel room in Des Moines. Sal notes it as the mark between the East of his youth and the West of the future. The feeling of disorientation that Sal feels is similar to other rites of passage for young men in all great works of fiction with the coming of age as the theme.

Part 1, Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Part 1, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Summary

Having arrived in Denver, Sal finds the home of his friend, Chad King, and is told that Chad is at work at a museum studying American Indians. When Sal and Chad finally connect, Chad shares that he is no longer friendly with Dean and Carlo. There seems to be a rift between Chad and his group of friends and Dean and Carlo, and Sal is caught in the middle. Sal stays with Chad's family for a few days and appreciates the hospitality, especially in light of his diminished finances but is anxious to find Dean.

Arrangements have been made for Sal to stay in an apartment owned by the parents of another friend, Tim Gray. Sal is to share the relatively swanky apartment with another friend named Roland Major, who is also a writer and has come to Denver for some reflective time. Sal finds Roland pretentious but takes advantage of the free rent and Roland's generosity with the groceries.

At last, Sal is closer to reconnecting with Dean when he finds Carlo working in a department store. Carlo tells Sal that Dean is in Denver and is living a wild life complete with two girlfriends, his soon-to-be ex-wife, Marylou, and a new girl named Camille. It seems as if Carlo and Dean have continued their frenetic relationship and even take Benzedrine in order to stay awake and talk all night. When he gets some free time, Carlo takes Sal to Camille's apartment where Dean is surprised to see the newly arrived Sal.

Amazingly, Sal's hitchhiking buddy, Eddie, has also arrived in Denver and has found Sal. Dean is able to find jobs for Sal and Eddie, but Sal does not show up the first day, preferring instead to live off of Roland's continuing generosity for the time being. Dean treats all of Sal's friends as if they do not exist, even though the friends show the greatest deference to Dean.

One night at a party, Carlo reads some poetry he has written and Dean arrives to inform the friends that after his divorce from Marylou, he will live with Camille, but he first wants to make a trip to Texas with Carlo for another adventure. Carlo and Dean spend the night in deep discussion, to which Sal only listens and declares the two friends amazing maniacs.

Part 1, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

In this section it is clear that Sal's journey includes more than geographic discoveries. Almost immediately Sal is thrust into a rift between friends, the more established, secure types as opposed to Dean and Carlo, whose lives are driven by frenzy. Sal has a foot in both worlds and will soon be forced to make a choice between the security and blandness of the one faction and the lust for life of the other. Perhaps Sal will find that there is some benefit to both sides of the situation and that he can find a middle ground,

but currently he is interested in exploration and adventure. Ultimately there is a price to be paid for everything in life and Sal will learn what he is willing to give up for the sake of the wild side.

Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10

Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Sal has a chance to explore more of the outskirts of Denver and drives with his friend, Ray Rawilins and his sister, Babe, and some others to Central City, an old mining town in the mountains. While there, Sal escorts Babe to an opera held at the old town's opera house and later the group throws a party at an abandoned mining shack. People from all over the old town come in an out of the party until it becomes too boisterous for Sal and his friends. The next morning, the friends return to Denver and Sal contemplates leaving Denver for San Francisco.

Sal does not have much to stay in Denver for anymore, so Dean sets him up with a girl named Rita Bettencourt, a shy girl with not much ambition. Sal makes love to Rita but secretly plans to leave Denver in a few days so there is not much hope of any relationship developing between the two. Walking home after leaving Rita, Sal encounters some hoboes, joins them for a while, and feels the itch to get on the road again. Sal writes to his aunt who wires him fifty dollars, half of which Sal spends on a bus ticket to San Francisco and he bids his friends goodbye as he heads to California.

Part 1, Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Gratification seems to elude Sal as his vision of what the Denver experience would be has not comet to fruition. Dean and Carlo are so close that there is not much room for Sal, and the adventure is turning into an endless stream of frustrations. Sal is unable to find any other real friends and relationships with women are meaningless. It is symbolic that Sal comes to this realization while at the abandoned mining town where everything of any value has long ago been extracted. There is nothing more for Sal to take away from the situation, either, and his instincts to move on push him further to California where there is more promise.

Part 1, Chapters 11 and 12

Part 1, Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Sal travels to San Francisco to find his prep school friend, Remi Boncoeur, in hopes of hopping the ocean liner for a job. Remi had originally dated the girl who would become Sal's wife, but the two men hold no ill will over the situation.

Sal finds Remi living in an old shack in Mill City with a girl named Lee Ann, who is not pleased to have Sal's intrusion into the dilapidated lifestyle she shares with Remi. Sal stays in the shack, nevertheless, and tries to write, which is not very successful, so Remi finds Sal a job as a special policeman at the barracks where he also works.

The job entails policing a barracks of itinerant construction workers at night and Sal is not happy with the requirement of having to make one arrest per month in order to retain the position. Sal would rather drink with the workers than reprimand them. Sal and Remi begin to steal groceries from the commissary because Remi feels the world owes them some things.

Remi, Sal and Lee Ann go to the horse races one night where all their money is lost on betting and they have to hitchhike back home. This is the last insult to Lee Ann's dignity and she asks Remi to leave the house. Remi agrees, but asks that she and Sal remain for just one more Saturday night when Remi's stepfather will be in town. Remi would like to take all of them to dinner to show his stepfather that he is prospering.

The odd trio goes to dinner and the strained relationships are worsened when Sal spots Roland Major at another table. Roland joins the little group of diners, but his drunkenness ruins the evening. Instinctively Sal knows that it is time to move on again but waits to leave until he has had a chance to climb a mountain overlooking San Francisco, where he can muse on the country that lies between his origins and where he now stands, and how far he has come.

The next morning Sal hitches rides to Bakersfield where he buys a bus ticket to Los Angeles. He spots a young Mexican woman at the bus station and to his amazement the woman is on his bus. Soon Sal is sitting next to the woman whose name is Terry, and finds out that Terry is running away from an abusive husband and plans to stay with a sister in Los Angeles. The bus trip allows Sal time to establish a relationship with Terry and the two are inseparable for days.

Part 1, Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The theme of friendship is important to Kerouac as evidenced by Sal's multitude of pals. In this section, Sal reunites with a prep school friend who is vastly different from Sal's most recent acquaintances. Sal is able to make friends easily with many types of people and retain them for many years. Ironically, though, it is the reappearance of Roland

Major, a new friend from Denver, which brings a disastrous end to the visit with Remi in San Francisco. Although Sal has not seen or heard from Dean or Carlo in quite some time, he knows that he can find them and resume their friendships as well, so that although Sal's life seems untethered, he really does have a network of support and loyalty.

Part 1, Chapters 13 and 14

Part 1, Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Sal's money is running out and he and Terry cannot find jobs in Los Angeles, which Sal thinks is a jungle, so the pair decides to hitchhike to New York. No one stops to offer rides so Sal and Terry make it to Bakersfield on their own and hope to find work in the vineyards so that they can get the money to go to New York. There are no jobs there, so Sal and Terry hitch to Sabinal, Terry's hometown, where they connect with Terry's family and her little son, Johnny.

Sal finds a job picking cotton and loves working so close to the earth, but the job does not pay enough to provide for Terry and Johnny, so Sal leaves Terry and her son with her parents and heads back to Los Angeles. Terry and Sal vow that Terry will come to New York soon but they both know that this will probably never happen. Once more, Sal's aunt has come through with money, which is enough for a bus ticket from Los Angeles to Pittsburgh. With the last of his money, Sal buys salami and bread and makes sandwiches for the trip east.

Sal meets a girl on the bus and the two spend the time necking until her stop in Columbus, Ohio. Sal continues on to Pittsburgh where he disembarks and attempts to hitchhike, making it to Harrisburg where he meets a crazy old hobo named The Ghost. Apparently The Ghost spends his time wandering the back roads trying to make his way to Canada. The Ghost refuses a ride from a stranger but Sal takes the ride back into Harrisburg, where he sleeps at the railroad station and finds another ride the next morning.

At this point, Sal is starving, and informs the driver of the car who happens to believe that fasting is good for one's health. Sal curses his luck but eventually the man relents and gives Sal some bread and butter sandwiches. The man drives Sal all the way to New York City, where Sal is able to panhandle for the quarter bus fare to his aunt's home in Paterson, New Jersey. Sal devours all the food his aunt prepares and learns that Dean had stayed with his aunt and has just left on his way back to San Francisco. Sal muses that he has probably passed Dean in the night and falls asleep in his own bed for the first time in many weeks.

Part 1, Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

At last, Sal has a satisfying love experience when he meets Terry, so he has accomplished one of his goals, even though the affair is short lived. Financial realities of supporting Terry and her child ultimately sever the pair and Sal apparently feels no lingering feelings as he has an encounter with a girl on the bus east. This behavior is in line with Sal's intent to live in the moment, the hallmark of the emerging Beat generation of which Kerouac is proclaimed as a founder.

The introduction of The Ghost on the back roads of Pennsylvania is a symbol of the hopelessness and futility of a hobo's life and the mirror for what Sal's life could become, but at the moment Sal is intrigued with the old man's stories and does not project into the future to see himself in the same position as an old man.

Part 2, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Part 2, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

It has been a year since Sal has seen Dean; in the meantime Sal has gone back to school on the G.I. Bill to finish his degree. He sends a letter to Dean informing him that he and his aunt will be in Virginia at Christmastime to visit some relatives. One day Dean arrives in Virginia with Marylou and another friend named Ed Dunkel. Dean has just bought a new car and the three of them have driven from San Francisco in just four days. The trio had dumped Ed's new wife, Galatea, in a hotel in Tucson because of her constant complaining.

Dean's presence creates chaos in the home of Sal's conservative relatives, but Dean offers to drive back to New Jersey to take some furniture for Sal's aunt. The boys make the trip to New Jersey and back to Virginia to pick up Sal's aunt in thirty hours. While they drive, Sal confesses to Dean that all the frantic behavior is starting to wear on him and Sal wants to marry a woman named Lucille because he wants a woman where he can rest his soul.

On the return trip, Dean is relatively calm in deference to Sal's aunt in the back seat. Dean gets a speeding ticket in Washington and Sal's aunt pays the fine but not before venting her anger at the arresting officer because Dean had not been speeding, simply picked up because of the car's California license plates.

Part 2, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

At this point in time, Sal has been back home in New Jersey for a year and seemingly settling down by going back to college and dating a woman whom he plans to marry. There is still a spark of adventure left in Sal, though, when he writes to Dean telling him of his whereabouts over the Christmas holiday. To Sal's immense relief, Dean arrives in Virginia to save Sal from extreme boredom.

The two young men do admit to feelings of wanting to become established and settle down, yet their behavior is counter to those declarations as if they are frantically fending off the almost certain death they will feel by settling into ordinary lives.

Part 2, Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Part 2, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Sal and Dean sleep all day on New Year's Eve but go into New York City for the parties and celebrations, stopping first at the apartment of their friend, Tom Saybrook. Lucille joins Sal at the party but does not like Dean or the other friends or their negative influence on Sal, who sadly realizes that the relationship with Lucille cannot last much longer because of her insistence to change him.

The group goes from party to party at the homes of other friends and eventually ends up at a jazz club to hear George Shearing play the piano. Afterwards while smoking marijuana, Sal shares with Dean that Shearing's music made him feel as if anything is possible.

After the holidays, Sal decides to return to the West Coast with Dean and Marylou, much to Sal's aunt's dismay. Sal vows to return to finish his college education in two weeks, but feels compelled to make this trip one more time. Sal phones an old friend, Bull Lee, who lives in New Orleans and Sal and Dean make plans to head for Louisiana before driving back to San Francisco.

On the way south, Sal, Marylou, and Dean arrive in Washington, D.C. on Harry Truman's Inauguration Day and Dean is in awe over the military equipment which lines the streets. Later that day, Dean is stopped by a police officer for speeding and taken to the station for questioning because of Dean's suspicious demeanor. Sal ends up paying the twenty-five dollar fine, leaving only fifteen dollars for the remainder of the journey to California.

The boys offer a ride to a hobo named Hyman Solomon, who offers to get some money in Testament, Virginia, but who never returns when the boys wait for him. Dean, Marylou, and Sal leave the old man in Virginia and steal gas and food along the way under the noses of distracted gas station attendants.

Dean is overjoyed to see New Orleans, but Old Bull's enthusiasm doesn't quite match at the sight of Dean, whom Old Bull has always considered to be trouble. Sal, Marylou, and Dean stay with Old Bull for a few days to explore New Orleans and Sal thinks he could live forever and listen to the old man's stories. Old Bull warns Sal that Dean is getting crazier and that he should be careful.

Part 2, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

This section of the book touches on the deep subjects of religion and politics, quite a departure from the adventurous tone of the book up to this point. Sal admits to having dreams that death is chasing him, which he interprets as getting back on the road as soon as possible so that death does not catch him with unfinished business. There is

also religious significance in the name of Hyman Solomon and the town of Testament, both biblical references implying the entrance of religion into Sal's subconscious.

It's important to note that at this post-war period in America was the breeding ground for Cold War and atomic warfare fears. The symbolism of Dean and Sal riding through Washington on Inauguration Day and seeing the military equipment symbolizes the underlying fear of average Americans about this unseen threat to national security. Ironically, Dean is once again stopped by police in Washington D.C., another subtle reference to the power of government over the common man.

Stylistically, Kerouac begins to use metaphors, such as the way he describes a decision that he had made but has temporarily forgotten as "still hung on the tip of my mind's tongue." In a reference to the beckoning open road, Kerouac describes it as "the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there."

Part 2, Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Part 2, Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary

The visit in New Orleans is nearing its end and Sal notices that Old Bull is really only good in the mornings because fatigue and heroin use have him worn out by the afternoon. Nevertheless Old Bull takes Sal to the racetrack where Sal has a feeling to bet on a horse named Old Pops because the name reminds Sal of his father. Old Bull thinks it is a sign from Sal's dead father when Old Pops wins the race.

Soon after, Sal, Marylou, and Dean head west again and find themselves in Texas, stuck in the mud after being driven off the road by another crazy driver one night. Wet and muddy after releasing the car from its muddy trap, Sal and Dean return to the car and continue the drive with their patience wearing as thin as their wallets.

The trio stops to pick up a young hitchhiker named Alfred who is trying to get back home to Tulare, California. Sal is able to pawn a watch he received as a gift in order to buy enough gas to get the car to Tucson, where he borrows five dollars from his old friend Hal Hingham. Finally the friends make it to Bakersfield to drop off Alfred and Sal cannot help but feel pangs of guilt passing by the fields where he and Terry had worked and spent so much time together. As soon as Sal, Marylou, and Dean arrive in San Francisco, Dean deserts the other two with no money and heads off to see Camille.

Part 2, Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Analysis

Old Bull's recognition of Dean's madness is an element of foreshadowing the trying times to come for Dean personally and within his relationships. Despite Sal's respect for Old Bull, he always defends Dean as being filled with the zest for life and that is what people interpret as madness, which Sal feels is not going mad but living fully.

The description of the open drug usage by Old Bull and his wife was probably considered very daring at the time this book was published in the mid 1950s, which added another element of intrigue to the Kerouac mystique.

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

Marylou is familiar with San Francisco and is able to get a hotel room on credit for Sal and herself. The next few days are spent with Sal and Marylou alternately angry and compassionate with each other. The arrangement had been that Marylou would become Sal's girl in San Francisco, but now that they are here, Marylou admits that she only uses Sal to make Dean jealous and has no real interest in Sal personally. Marylou soon finds another man who has money and she does not even acknowledge Sal on the street when she passes him. Sal remains at the hotel when he is not walking the streets in delirium from hunger. Ultimately Dean returns to rescue Sal by taking him home with him to Camille's house.

Sal relaxes at Camille's for a few days and Dean quits his job as a door-to-door pressure cooker salesman and the two friends opt to explore the bars of San Francisco instead. Sal's aunt forwards Sal's G.I. Bill check and Sal, who is weary of the San Francisco scene, decides to make the trip back to New York. Once more Sal finds himself making sandwiches for a bus trip back east and refuses to part with any when asked by Dean and Camille. This refusal results in a sullen parting when none of them thinks they will see each other again and do not really mind the thought.

Part 2, Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

Kerouac's disdain for the dirge of gainful employment is symbolized by Dean's short-lived time as a pressure-cooker salesman. Kerouac's message is that any job that requires effort and routine has inherent stress that builds up and is ultimately toxic for any man with adventurous inclinations.

Again Kerouac introduces the element of spiritual education for Sal when describing his delirious state of starvation on the streets of San Francisco. The visions, sounds, and lights Sal experiences seem almost as if they are part of a religious experience from which he emerges to a place of deeper understanding and enlightenment. After this experience, Sal knows that Marylou is not the girl for him and that he needs to return to a normal, productive life in New York.

Part 3, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Part 3, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

The next year, in the spring of 1949, Sal returns to Denver where he works as a laborer and spends his nights walking the seedy streets. Sal's luck changes soon when he meets a wealthy woman who gives him a hundred dollars for a trip to San Francisco, because she knows that it what will make Sal truly happy.

Sal finds Camille's house in the early morning and Dean answers the door stark naked, which does not startle Sal in the least. Camille is pregnant with her second child and Sal's arrival signifies that Dean will become even less conscientious than before. Dean has injured his had in some work accidents and can no longer work properly, which means that Camille must work in a doctor's office and Dean stays home all day to watch their child and to keep the house. Before long, Camille has tossed Dean and Sal out of the house with their suitcases. The two friends decide to go to Italy because they have never been to Europe. Sal offers to buy bus tickets to New York where they can both get jobs and save the fare to Italy.

Part 3, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Sal acknowledges that the road is life. The lure of adventure is almost like oxygen for him and he wavers back and forth between migrant work and keeping company with wealthy women, but the road is the only sure thing that appeals to him. Several times in the book, Sal mentions that there is purity about the road and the center white line over which the left tires run. Perhaps Sal feels comfortable in the purity of seeing things from a distance. There are no complications and no commitments when one is speeding along. Ironically, in his quest to grab hold of life, Sal is doing the opposite and avoiding any real engagement with reality.

Part 3, Chapters 4 and 5

Part 3, Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

Dean has made arrangements for Sal and him to make the San Francisco to Denver part of their trip east by way of a travel-bureau car where drivers offer to take passengers in exchange for gas money. The driver of the car is a tall gay man and the other two passengers in the car are a couple who seem very leery of Dean's erratic behavior.

As the car glides slowly southward, Sal tells Dean about times when he was younger and imagining that he could hold a huge scythe out the car window and chop off trees and mountains at his discretion. Dean has also had dreams like that and the discussion leads to other dreams and the other passengers get increasingly more nervous at Sal and Dean's agitated behavior. The car only makes it as far as Sacramento and the other passengers override Sal and Dean in the decision to stay overnight. The next morning Dean takes the wheel and although they make much better time, the other passengers are scared to death of Dean's erratic driving and are all too happy to leave Sal and Dean in Denver.

Part 3, Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

Sal and Dean share so much, even the dream about the giant scythes to chop off trees and mountains along roadsides. For these two, the road is a metaphor for life and they want the discretion to eliminate anything they choose from their view along the way. This line of thinking is consistent with the selfishness and self-absorption of the Beat generation of which Kerouac is a great component.

It's interesting to note the introduction of the homosexual man into the story and the fact that neither Sal nor Dean will take the man up on his propositions. Exploration of homosexuality is still not discussed in 1950s America and perhaps Kerouac thought that any exploration in this area would be considered inappropriate, in spite of all the blatant references to heterosexual encounters throughout the book.

Part 3, Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Part 3, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Summary

It is in a restaurant in Denver that Sal and Dean have their first outright argument, when Sal thinks Dean is making fun of him for being five-years-older than Dean. Sal's outrage sends Dean scurrying outside but he eventually returns and tells Sal that he had been crying, which makes Sal feel very guilt-ridden.

Dean wants to devote some time on this visit to Denver to try to locate his long-lost father, yet does not find any positive information which prompts him to initiate a meeting with a cousin named Sam Brady. Dean's enthusiasm for meeting a family member is severely dampened when Sam shares with Dean that no one in the family cares to have any interaction with Dean or his father. Sensing that this bad news means it is time to leave Denver, Dean arranges for another travel-bureau car for the trip to New York the next day. In the meantime, Sal and Dean visit some bars and Dean steals some cars and the two narrowly escape Denver without arrest.

The travel-bureau car belongs to a wealthy man from Chicago who had been traveling with his family, which has decided to take the train back home. The man needs Sal and Dean to drive the car back to Chicago for him. With two college boys for passengers, Sal and Dean head the Cadillac east and Dean drives 110 miles per hour all the way across the plains and does not stop until he reaches the ranch of a friend, Ed Wall, in Colorado.

Part 3, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

Sal and Dean never seem to measure time and live as if life is just one big unending continuum with no need to mark or take responsibility for anything. That perspective would be perfectly fine if they did not engage other people into their lives. It is this gap in life views that especially alienates Dean from family and friends. The women in Dean's life, and now his family members, cut him out of their lives because he cannot commit and settle down. Ironically, it is not a disdain for any of these people that Dean feels, but rather the inability to make choices that puts him at risk in all his relationships. Dean wants to embrace everything and everyone who crosses his path and cannot choose one person, profession or even city in which to settle. Sal is Dean's only constant because Sal makes no demands and that is why the argument in the restaurant is so especially difficult for Dean, who cannot risk losing Sal above all others in his life.

Part 3, Chapters 9, 10 and 11

Part 3, Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Summary

According to Sal, Dean's soul is wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road. With that thought in mind, Sal, Dean, and the two college boys speed off into the night headed for Chicago. Dean plays speed tag with another car on the lonesome highway for sport and never takes a break to sleep, just continues speeding in his rush to see Chicago. The passengers in the car, which now include two hoboes, are petrified, but Dean is oblivious to their fears.

When the group reaches Chicago, Sal and Dean accept the generosity of the college boys and use their room at the YMCA to freshen up before heading out for a night on the town. After hiding the Cadillac in an alley, Sal and Dean go to jazz clubs to hear young musicians who remind them of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Theolonious Monk. Sal and Dean follow the young musicians to another club and know they have reached heaven when they spot George Shearing, who graciously makes a guest appearance. Dean even tells Sal that God has arrived.

In their attempts to impress women, Sal and Dean drive the Cadillac around Chicago and eventually damage the fenders and ruin the engine. When Sal and Dean return the car to the owner's garage the next morning, the attendants do not even recognize the Cadillac, but the owner never tries to contact the boys for any explanations.

The next leg of the journey to Detroit is made by bus and Sal is frustrated by a conversation with a country girl who lacks passion about anything and he feels sorry for the girl and her poor wasted life. Sal and Dean are forced to spend a few days on Skid Row in Detroit until they manage to wrangle a ride with a man who takes them all the way to Times Square in New York City.

Not long after this night, Dean meets a new woman named Inez at a party. They fall in love and move into a cold-water flat and Dean gets a job as a parking lot attendant. Dean files for divorce from Camille, who soon after delivers Dean's second child, a little girl named Joanie. Inez has a baby a few months after that and soon Dean has three children, a woman he lives with, and a wife in San Francisco. Sal comes to understand that going to Italy is now impossible for Dean and him.

Part 3, Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

For the first time in their relationship, Sal is frightened by Dean's driving and contemplates his own mortality while huddled on the floor in the back seat of the car speeding across the plains states. Sal muses that Dean's frenetic behavior seems to coincide with personal losses as if Dean is trying to experience more and more so that there will be something to cling to or understand. Dean's lack of any boundaries in his relationships with women is another extension of this frenetic behavior, as Dean must

always be in pursuit of a new woman in the event that the current one might kick him out. Dean does get wistful at one point and tells Sal that his trunk is always halfway out under the bed just in case he gets the urge to leave or is about to be thrown out. Perhaps Dean is just running to stay ahead of rejection, something he learned early with the departure of his Skid Row father.

Part 4, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Part 4, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Camille finds out about Inez and the two women talk on the phone at length about Dean and have established a long distance friendship. Dean supports his and Camille's daughter, although his plans are to remain with Inez in New York. Dean gets word that his long-lost father is in jail in Seattle and would like to bring him and Dean's younger sister to New York to live if he can get the money saved.

Sal has the itch to go west again and Dean visits Sal before he leaves and the two men talk about what their children might think about them someday when they see pictures. There is no way by looking at photographs that anyone can tell how crazy and frenetic their lives have been. Dean also thinks it would be great if Sal and his future family could one day live on the same street with Dean and his family.

Once Sal arrives in Denver again he meets an old friend, Stan, in a bar and the two men decide to drive to Mexico together. Sal spends a pleasant week in Denver as Stan makes arrangements to leave and Sal feels as if the world has opened up because he has no dreams or preconceived notions. Just as Sal and Stan are ready to leave, Sal receives word that Dean has bought a car and is on his way to Denver to connect with Sal and drive to Mexico with him.

Sal knows that Dean has experienced madness again, but waits for his friend who arrives in a rush one day and is anxious to get to Mexico in order to obtain a divorce from Camille. Dean is full of travel fever again and knows that this time he and his friends will find the elusive IT for which they are always searching.

Part 4, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Sal and Dean jump in and out of responsible lives as if they are touching fire and seem to alternate the timing for their wanderlust. Sal has made some money by publishing a book and is anxious to travel again while Dean is trying to commit to the responsibilities of family life. At the core of each man is a burning desire to live according to what makes them happy at the time although there is passing conversation about their futures, neither one takes it too seriously. The only sure thing for each man is the other one.

This time, Dean has the excuse of a Mexican divorce to cloak his urge to head west again which gives Dean some freedom from responsibility and guilt. Dean's exuberance about every aspect of life is infectious to those around him for short periods but most cannot maintain any long exposure to his personal madness.

Part 4, Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Part 4, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

The three friends have barely left Denver when Stan gets a bug bite from hanging his arm out the car window. Sal determines that this is a bad omen about the trip and the men determine to find a clinic to get some medical attention for Stan whose arm is swelling ominously. Dean is especially excited to be headed south as most of their trips have been east or west in direction. The men all take turns telling their life stories and leave no detail untold as the night and the road stretch before them.

Stan gets some medical treatment in San Antonio and Sal and Dean explore the bars while Stan recuperates a short while. Not long after, the men cross the border into Mexico where they exchange their dollars for pesos and delight in the authentic towns and native people who watch them breeze by in Dean's old car.

When the trio reaches a town called Gregoria, they are ready for some beer and women and find a local man named Victor who directs Sal, Dean, and Stan to a whorehouse where they spend the afternoon. Stan is reluctant to leave when the night shift whores come in but Sal and Dean are anxious to get to Mexico City.

The headlights on Dean's car go out temporarily forcing the men to drive through a jungle area in complete darkness and they are aware of the intense heat and the undying sound of insects. Finally the lights come back; the trio stops the car to sleep but the insects and heat prevent any rest. Sal has the feeling of becoming one with the jungle as if he is being absorbed by the heat and essence of the environment. Sal watches a white horse approach and pass by barely missing Dean who is asleep in the road.

By morning the clothes of all three men are sweat soaked and covered in bugs and blood, yet they continue on and upon reaching the Montezuma River, see a young girl standing by the road and Dean tries to imagine how pure her life is and how peaceful her mind must be. At last Sal, Dean, and Stan reach Mexico City where they take in all the sensory triggers of the native people and their environment. Not long after the arrival, Sal gets dysentery and is in a delirious state when Dean informs him that he has obtained the divorce from Camille and is leaving for New York. Stan remains with Sal and it takes a long time for Sal to forgive Dean for leaving him in such a vulnerable condition in a foreign country.

Part 4, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

Kerouac uses the technique of foreshadowing with Sal's ominous feeling about the trip to Mexico due to Stan's bug bite and Sal will soon understand the full impact of that feeling. For the time being though, the travels are as they have been on all the other road trips, full of beer, women, and the exhaustion of driving without respite.

Kerouac makes some subtle references of a political nature by reiterating the industriousness of the native Mexican people, an opinion which is not widely held in America. Sal also comments on the friendliness and helpfulness of the Mexican police in the few encounters they have after crossing the border. This concept is also in stark contrast to the commonly held opinions of Americans.

Once more Kerouac puts the characters in a position of transcending their mortal selves by the marijuana, alcohol, and sex-induced haze in which the young men spend the afternoon at the whorehouse. Naturally what follows a transcendent experience is a greater knowledge of self or of others and that is soon to be revealed.

The men experience another rite of passage of sorts by traveling through the jungle in complete darkness relying only on their wits and instincts. The appearance of the white horse is also notable for its symbolism for purity and good fortune. Kerouac has taken the characters through their darkest night, the climax of all their road trips, and given them the promise of brighter futures.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

Dean makes it as far as Louisiana before his old car dies and he wires Inez to send plane fare. Upon his return to New York, Dean immediately marries Inez then leaves on a bus headed to San Francisco to see Camille and the two girls. Sal returns to the U.S. a month later when he encounters an old man with long white hair on a road in Texas who tells him to "Go moan for man." Soon after returning to New York, Sal meets a woman named Laura by chance who turns out to be the love of his life. Sal writes to Dean of his happy news and Dean replies that he will come to New York in six weeks to help Sal buy a car for a trip to San Francisco.

Suddenly Dean appears in less than a week and Sal does not yet have the money to buy a car and is not prepared to leave New York. On another sour note, Inez kicks Dean out of the house but a letter from Camille arrives informing Dean that he always has a place in her heart and in her home, a fact which pleases Dean tremendously.

Sal's long-lost friend, Remi Boncoeur, is in New York and has tickets to take Sal and Laura to a Duke Ellington concert. Remi will not include Dean in the evening despite Sal's wishes and Sal watches Dean standing on the sidewalk as the car carrying the invited parties swings away from the curb.

Sal does not enjoy the evening because of Dean's abandonment at the curb and he imagines Dean riding the lonesome miles back to California on a train. Sal does not see Dean again but thinks of him often as he looks westward sometimes and muses that no one really knows what is going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old.

Part 5 Analysis

Sal experiences one last epiphany on the road with the appearance of the old man with the flowing robe, which symbolizes a spiritual message to cultivate more compassion and depth in Sal's own interactions and perspectives. Following the experience, Sal finds true love, his restlessness is tamed, and he feels no more urges to spark mad adventures with Dean. Although the novel seems to end on a dour note, Kerouac actually tries to impart hopefulness by encouraging people to see their lives as adventures and to garner everything possible on every road traveled.

Characters

Remi Boncoeur

Remi Boncoeur is a friend of Sal's living in San Francisco with his nagging girlfriend, Lee Ann. Sal takes his first trip west, planning to ship out and work on a luxury liner with Remi. Instead, after writing a screenplay, Sal and Remi get a job guarding the temporary barracks of construction workers waiting to go overseas. The relationship between Remi, Lee Ann, and Sal begins to deteriorate when Remi is unable to sell Sal's screenplay. As one last favor, Remi asks Sal and Lee Ann to accompany him out to dinner, a futile attempt to impress his visiting stepfather. Sal gets drunk and runs into his friend Roland Major, who is also drunk, and they embarrass Remi. Sal, feeling terribly guilty, sneaks away from Remi's shack the next morning. At the end of the novel, Remi visits New York City and is with Sal and Laura the last time that Sal sees Dean.

Ed Dunkel

Ed Dunkel is one of Dean's friends. He works with Dean on the railroad in San Francisco. When they are both laid off, they decide to travel east to see Sal. Ed marries his girlfriend Galatea so she will accompany them and foot the bill. They abandon her in Tucson because she spends all her money staying in hotels. In New York City, Ed tells Sal that he feels like a ghost walking through Times Square. Ed discovers that Galatea is in New Orleans at Old Bull Lee's home and he travels with Sal, Dean, and Marylou to get her. Ed and Galatea live in New Orleans before moving to San Francisco and finally Denver. The last time Sal sees him in the novel, Ed plans to take sociology classes.

Galatea Dunkel

Galatea is Ed Dunkel's wife. Ed marries her in order to get her to finance the trip he and Dean are taking across the country to visit Sal. They desert her in Tucson when she runs out of money. She travels on to New Orleans and stays at the home of Old Bull Lee until Ed comes to get her. She and Ed decide to live in New Orleans. Later, they move on to San Francisco, where she tells Sal that Dean will one day go on one of his road trips and never come back. She ends up living with Ed in Denver.

Frankie

Frankie is the single mother with whom Sal and Dean stay for a brief period when they stop in Denver on their way to New York City. Frankie is a coal-truck driver with four children who likes to drink like a man. Dean tries to convince her to buy a car, but she refuses, angering him. He also creates a scene when he tries to seduce her neighbor's daughter. The men are later forced to flee her home when Dean steals a local detective's car.

Chad King

Sal is introduced to Chad King through the letters Dean writes to Chad from a New Mexico reformatory. Sal describes Chad as being a "Nietzschean anthropologist." Chad is the first friend Sal calls on when he reaches Denver for the first time.

Laura

In the epilogue, Sal meets Laura when he calls to one of his friends from the street outside her apartment building. Laura invites him up to her room for hot chocolate and they fall in love. Sal and Laura agree to move to San Francisco in order to live near Dean and Camille, but Dean arrives in New York City six weeks earlier than planned. Nobody has the money to actually make the move at that time, and Dean is forced to turn around and go back alone. Laura and Sal are on a date with Remi Boncoeur and his girlfriend the last time they see Dean. Dean is in pathetic condition and Laura pities him. Sal tells her that Dean will be all right.

Jane Lee

Jane Lee is the Benzedrine-addicted wife of Old Bull Lee. They have two children. Benzedrine and polio have affected her health. She hallucinates regularly. Sal describes the odd relationship between Jane and Old Bull Lee:

Something curiously unsympathetic and cold between them was really a form of humor by which they communicated their own set of subtle vibrations. Love is all; Jane was never more than ten feet away from Bull and never missed a word he said, and he spoke in a very low voice, too.

Old Bull Lee

Old Bull Lee is the strange, well-educated, drug-addicted mentor to Sal, Dean, and Carlo Marx. He has traveled all over the country and the world. He cherishes individual freedom and despises bureaucracy and the police. He is living in New Orleans with his wife, Jane, and their two children when Sal, Dean, Marylou, and Ed Dunkel arrive to retrieve Ed's wife, Galatea. He is glad to see Sal when the group arrives at his home, and he shares his odd theories and beliefs with him. He is curious as to what motivates Sal and Dean to travel back and forth across the country, but neither can give him an answer. He confides in Sal that he thinks Dean is going mad and he invites Sal to stay with him in New Orleans instead of continuing west. However, Sal leaves with Dean and Marylou when his GI check arrives. Sal later writes letters to him from Denver.

Lee Ann

Lee Ann is Remi Boncoeur's nagging girlfriend. Although Sal is attracted to her, he never acts on his desire. She and Remi argue constantly. The only time she is happy is when Remi takes her out to lavish dinners, which they really cannot afford. She is with Remi and Sal when Remi takes his stepfather out to dinner, and she is mortified by the drunken behavior of Sal and Roland Major. She is no longer Remi's girlfriend when he appears at the end of the novel.

Roland Major

Sal shares an apartment with Roland Major during his first visit to Denver. Roland and Sal spend many nights drinking and discussing author Ernest Hemingway. Roland believes that Dean is a "moron and a fool." Later, Sal sees him in San Francisco while he is out to dinner with Remi, Lee Ann, and Remi's stepfather. Both Sal and Roland are roaring drunk, and they embarrass Remi.

Carlo Marx

Carlo Marx, a New York City poet, is one of Sal's many friends. Sal introduces Carlo to Dean, and they become close friends as well. Carlo follows Dean to Denver near the beginning of the book. In an amusing scene, Sal listens as Carlo and Dean spend hours in a Benzedrine-driven analysis of everything they say and do. Carlo and Dean later visit Old Bull Lee, who is living in Texas at the time. Carlo makes a few other appearances in the novel, most notably in New York, where he poses the famous question: "I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" Neither Dean nor Sal can answer. "The only thing to do was go."

Camille Moriarty

Camille is Dean's second wife. Dean meets her in Denver and divorces Marylou to marry her. They end up living in San Francisco and having children. Dean regularly leaves her to go on the road. At one point, she throws him out of the house shortly after Sal arrives in San Francisco. Dean later divorces her to marry Inez, but he later returns to her.

Dean Moriarty

Dean Moriarty is the pivotal character of *On the Road.* His arrival in New York City changes Sal's life. Dean is handsome, charismatic, and exciting. His zest for life and learning is infectious. He finds something to "dig" about every person and circumstance. He dreams of being a writer like Sal or a poet like Carlo, but he can rarely sit still long enough to create anything substantial. However, he serves as inspiration to both Sal

and Carlo. Sal believes Dean is a "new kind of American saint" and a "HOLY GOOF." Sal appreciates Dean's instinctive refusal to conform and his philosophy of living in the moment.

Dean also has a dark side. He lived on skid row in Denver with his drunken father through his childhood, and most of his teen years were spent in reformatories. He is a con man, a thief, and an unrepentant womanizer. He can be selfish, deserting his friends when he finds it in his own best interests. His behavior is often dangerous, but of course this is one of the qualities that makes him attractive to so many people. Dean's crazed energy ultimately consumes him. As early as part two, Old Bull Lee suggests that Dean may be going mad. By the end of the novel, Dean is barely able to put together a coherent sentence. He is a pitiable figure at the end of the story. The last time Sal sees him, Dean is wandering in rags on the frozen streets of New York City.

Inez Moriarty

Inez is Dean's third wife. He meets her in New York City when he and Sal arrive from San Francisco. Dean goes to Mexico to get a divorce from Camille in order to marry Inez, who is pregnant. After Dean gets the divorce in Mexico, he leaves the feverish Sal to return to New York City to marry Inez. He promptly leaves her after the ceremony to return to Camille in San Francisco.

Marylou Moriarty

Marylou is Dean's young, flirtatious first wife. Dean meets her in a diner after being released from the reformatory and falls in love with her. Marylou continues to have a relationship with Dean after he divorces her to marry Camille. After the divorce, Dean picks her up in Denver when he decides to meet Sal in Virginia. She travels with them to New Orleans and on to San Francisco. She has an affair with Sal after Dean leaves them on a sidewalk in San Francisco, but she leaves him because he can't support her. Even after marrying Camille, Dean stalks Marylou in San Francisco. He watches her bring home a different sailor every night. Marylou finally marries a used-car dealer. The last time Dean sees her, he gives her a gun and asks her to kill him. When she refuses, he attempts to strike her and breaks his thumb.

Sal Paradise

Sal Paradise is the narrator of *On the Road.* At the beginning of the novel, he is living with his aunt in New Jersey and writing a book. Sal is an intelligent, romantic idealist with many friends. He meets a charismatic drifter from Denver named Dean Moriarty in New York City. Although Dean is five years younger than Sal, he shares Sal's love for literature and jazz and they quickly become close friends. Sal recognizes that Dean is a shameless manipulator, but he longs to travel and Dean's manic energy inspires him to wander around America in the search of "kicks."

The novel covers approximately four years in Sal's life; during that period, he travels thousands of miles. His travels to Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Mexico City. Along the way he is introduced to many eccentric and interesting characters, and he falls in love more than once. The cross-country journeys that he takes, alone and with Dean, seem pointless to many of the other characters. However, to Sal, each trip itself is far more important than any actual destination. He learns from Dean that the quest to live in the moment is a spiritual one. He searches for meaning in all of his experiences and in all the people he meets on the road because, as Dean tells him, "Everybody's kicks, man!" Sal and Dean see that all of America is "like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there."

Sal's friendship with Dean is, of course, at the center of the novel. Even when Sal isn't with Dean, Dean is never far from Sal's thoughts throughout the book. Although Dean has many weaknesses and faults, Sal loves and admires him in spite of them. Even after Dean abandons him in Mexico City, Sal still considers moving to San Francisco with his girlfriend Laura to live near Dean and Camille. Sal's capacity for love is one of the qualities that make him such a likable character. It is this quality that makes the final scene in the novel, when Sal sees Dean on the cold streets of New York for the last time, so poignantly sad.

Sal's Aunt

Sal lives with his aunt in Paterson, New Jersey, at the beginning of the novel. She nurtures Sal when he returns home from his trips on the road. She bails Dean out when he is caught speeding in Washington, D.C., while he is moving furniture for her from Virginia to New Jersey. At the end of the novel, she is living in Long Island and she advises Dean to take better care of his children.

Stan Shephard

Stan Shephard leaves his parents in Denver to travel with Sal and Dean to Mexico City. He is stung by an unidentified insect as they drive out of Colorado, and his arm swells up. Dean stops in San Antonio to take him to a clinic to get a shot of penicillin and they continue on to Mexico City. Sal never tells what happens to Stan after Dean abandons them.

Terry

Sal meets Terry, a pretty Mexican girl, on a bus in Los Angeles. They have a short, bittersweet romance. They plan to get jobs and save money so they can move to New York City together. When they fail to find jobs in Los Angeles, they go to Sabinal, California, Terry's hometown, to get her son and work in the cotton fields. Sal is frustrated by his inability to earn enough in the fields to support Terry and her son and he decides to return home. Terry promises to meet him in New York City, but Sal knows that they will never see each other again.

Themes

Friendship

There are entire paragraphs listing the names of Sal Paradise's friends in *On the Road.* The nature of friendship is an integral theme of the novel. Sal, being a good-natured person, has a diverse collection of friends. Some are artistic types, such as the bizarre poet Carlo Marx. Others, like Old Bull Lee, are wildly eccentric. Surprisingly enough, Sal even has some ordinary, everyday friends, like Chad King. Sal also has many brief yet memorable friendships on the road. Of course, the most important friendship in the novel is between Sal and Dean Moriarty.

The powerful bond between Sal and Dean drives the story. Soon after Dean arrives in New York City, Sal becomes addicted to Dean's effervescent personality. Sal recognizes that Dean is manipulating him, but Dean's relentless energy captivates him:

As we rode in the bus in the weird phosphorescent void of the Lincoln Tunnel we leaned on each other with fingers waving and talked excitedly, and I was beginning to get the bug like Dean. He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con man, he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him. He was conning me and I knew it (for room and board and "how-to-write," etc.), and he knew I knew (this has been the basis of our relationship), but I didn't care and we got along fine□no pestering, no catering; we tiptoed around each other like heartbreaking new friends. I began to learn from him as much as he probably learned from me.

What Sal learns from Dean is to live completely in the moment, to savor every experience. Sal's friendship with Dean is at first so strong that he is willing to follow Dean anywhere without a second thought. As they travel back and forth across the country, they share each other's life stories, dreams, philosophies, and visions. Together, they work themselves into a music-driven frenzy in countless jazz clubs, and they wallow in drunken debauchery in a Mexican bordello. Sal wants to be with Dean just to see what will happen next.

Of course, like most true friends, they have stormy moments. Sal is slightly jealous after he introduces Dean to Carlo and they become close. Sal also actually makes Dean cry during a petty argument they have in a diner. However, Dean is much more selfish than Sal. He abandons Sal on the road twice. The first time, he leaves him on the streets of San Francisco with Marylou, and with no money. Even worse, Dean later abandons Sal in Mexico City while he is feverish with dysentery. But Sal, ever the understanding friend, always forgives Dean. Ultimately, Sal comes to pity Dean. At the end of the novel, Sal is settling down with a new lover in New York City. Consumed by his wild compulsions, Dean is ragged and nearly incoherent the last time Sal sees him. Although Sal knows he will never forget Dean, the scene is a depressing finale to an extraordinary friendship.

Rebellion

Youthful rebellion in American literature can be traced back to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* The rebellion of the characters in *On the Road* is a bit different from the revolt of sixties youth against the establishment (although a very convincing argument can be made that people like Kerouac's characters influenced that upheaval). It is not a violent or political rebellion; it is a rebellion of mind and spirit. It isn't that Sal, Dean, and the others don't believe in the "American Dream"; they simply don't buy into the popular conception of it. These characters rebel by disassociating themselves from society rather than directly attacking it. They embrace the role of the outsider through their use of drugs, their promiscuous sex, and their general disdain for traditional, middle-class American values. Freedom to live in the moment is their goal, and damn the consequences. For example, Old Bull Lee has a "sentimental streak" for the America of 1910 because:

you could get morphine in a drugstore without prescription and Chinese smoked opium in their evening windows and the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone.

Dean especially seeks this "wild and brawling" freedom. He rebels against any kind of responsibility. Dean doesn't want to overthrow the government, but he doesn't want a government, or anyone else for that matter, to have control over him, even if it means becoming a denizen of skid row. In a memorable passage, he describes these feelings to Sal:

You see, man, you get older and troubles pile up. Someday you and me'll be coming down an alley together at sundown and looking in the cans to see.

You mean we'll end up bums?

Why not, man? Of course we will if we want to, and all that. There's no harm ending that way. You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you and you cut along and make it your own way.

Thus, their rebellion is passive. They seek not to quash authority, but ignore it completely.

Time

Time, and the individual's subjective relationship to it, is an important theme in *On the Road.* Sal mentions few dates in the novel; time is kept more by season than anything else. The events of the novel run into each other and blur, as events do in real life. People pop up and disappear, only to reappear, again as they do in real life. Dean tells Sal several times that "we know time." By this, he means that they know they have no

real control over time, and thus they should live as completely as possible in the moment.

This is why Dean's insistence on punctuality is a great joke throughout the novel. He is always on some sort of "schedule." One example of his ostensibly diligent timekeeping is when he schedules his next rendezvous with Camille after Sal arrives in Denver for the first time:

It is now exactly one-fourteen. I shall be back at exactly three-fourteen, for our hour of reverie together, real sweet reverie, darling ... so now in this exact minute I must dress, put on my pants, go back to life, that is to outside life, streets and what not, as we agreed, it is now *one-fifteen* and time's running, running□

Well, all right, Dean, but please be sure and be back at three.

Just as I said, darling, and remember not three but three-fourteen. Are we straight in the deepest and most wonderful depths of our souls, dear darling?

The irony in this passage, and in several others where Dean maps out his detailed schedules, is that Dean is a man who strives to live totally in the present, thereby denying the existence of his painful past and his apparently hopeless future. Because Dean "knows time," he believes that the present moment is all he has.

Style

Setting

The characters in *On the Road* travel through countless cities across the United States and Mexico. Major portions of the novel take place in New York City, Denver, San Francisco, southern California, New Orleans, and Mexico. Although Sal's constant traveling gives some of his place descriptions a generic feeling, many of his depictions are vivid. For example, when he first arrives in Mexico City, he sees:

thousands of hipsters in floppy straw hats and long-lapeled jackets over bare chests padded along the main drag, some of them selling crucifixes and weed in the alleys, some of them kneeling in beat chapels next to Mexican burlesque shows in sheds. Some alleys were rubble, with open sewers, and little doors led to closet-size bars stuck in adobe walls. You had to jump over a ditch to get your drink, and in the bottom of the ditch was the ancient lake of the Aztec. You came out of the bar with your back to the wall and edged back to the street. They served coffee mixed with rum and nutmeg. Mam bo blared from everywhere. Hundreds of whores lined themselves along the dark and narrow streets and their sorrowful eyes gleamed at us in the night.

However, the roads of America are the main setting of the novel. Sal hitchhikes with oddballs, rides on flatbed trucks with cowboys, and haunts bus stations with bums. Sal and Dean spend most of part two driving across the southern United States in a dilapidated Hudson that Dean buys in San Francisco. They later ride across the western prairies in a Cadillac limousine obtained through a travel bureau. Thus, the title of the novel is the most accurate description of the novel's setting.

Roman à Clef

A *roman à clef* (translated from French to mean "novel with a key") is a novel in which the characters are real people with fictitious names. *On the Road* is a thinly fictionalized account of Kerouac's life in the late 1940s. Sal Paradise is Kerouac's alter ego. Kerouac was a recently divorced writer who traveled back and forth across the country with an energetic and charismatic drifter from Denver named Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty). Kerouac counted among his friends the wildly eccentric poet Allen Ginsberg (Carlo Marx), and the decadent bohemian William Burroughs (Old Bull Lee). Al Hinkle (Ed Dunkel), Carolyn Cassady (Camille Moriarty), and Henri Cru (Remi Boncoeur) are just a few of the many other friends and acquaintances of Kerouac making appearances in the novel.

Sal's travels throughout the book closely parallel Kerouac's real-life adventures. Like Sal, Kerouac fell in love with a Mexican girl in southern California; like Sal, he was forced to flee Denver because his friend stole five cars in one night. Kerouac was abandoned on the streets of San Francisco and in Mexico City by Cassady, a man he

considered to be like a brother, the same way Sal was deserted by Dean. Kerouac was disappointed by Cassady in the same way that Sal is disillusioned with Dean at the end of the book. One only has to read a biography of Kerouac to find the "key" to this novel.

Anti-hero

Dean Moriarty is a classic example of an anti-hero in American literature. Anti-heroes lack the established traits (bravery, honesty, selflessness, etc.) of traditional heroes. Although Dean is intelligent, likable, and bold like many heroes, his total rejection of responsibility marks him as an anti-hero. Dean is an inveterate thief; although he has spent most of his life in reformatories, he continues to steal throughout the novel. He is a con man who has no qualms about manipulating even his best friends. He is a womanizer who marries and plans adultery in the same sentence. He betrays friends without a second thought, as he does when he twice deserts Sal. However, Dean remains a sympathetic character because of Sal's sensitive portrait of him.

"Spontaneous Prose"

Although Kerouac's later works were much more experimental in terms of style and narrative, *On the Road,* his second novel, was a breakthrough for him. He discovered his voice while writing the novel, and he began to develop his practice of "spontaneous prose." (He later wrote two short essays on his methods at the request of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" and "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose.") Kerouac wanted to write in the same manner that a great bop jazz musician, such as Charlie Parker, played his instrument, and thus he invented a form of writing he called "bop prosody." Improvisation, passion, and spontaneity were the most important elements in this technique; traditional grammar and punctuation were irrelevant. Several passages in *On the Road* are early demonstrations of this method. A powerful example is the last paragraph in the book, an elegiac passage mourning the end of the road for Sal and Dean:

So in America, when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars' ll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh-Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, and darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.

This passage demonstrates Kerouac's technique. It is one long run-on sentence, with a few pauses (as a saxophone player must pause for breath), filled with vivid, poetic

imagery. Kerouac continued to use these methods, sometimes with radical effects, in his later work.

Historical Context

The last part of World War II was the birth of the atomic age. The United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing Japan to surrender. The United States emerged from the wreckage of the war as the leader of the Western world. Veterans returned to their homes, families, schools, and jobs. The United States was poised to become one of the greatest economic powers in history. However, there was an increasing anxiety caused by the atomic bomb and the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

On March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill, the prime minister of Great Britain, gave a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in which he declared: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." Churchill warned that the United States and its allies had to be on guard against Soviet expansionism. His remarks seemed prescient when, in June 1948, the Soviet Union began the Berlin blockade, cutting off Berlin from the West. The United States began a vast airlift to keep Berlin supplied with food and fuel. In August 1949 tensions increased even further when the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic device. The events of the late 1940s led to the anti-communist witch-hunts engineered by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

On the Road is not a political novel, but it is hard to imagine that Kerouac was not influenced by the atmosphere in America at the time. The horrors of the war, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the growing sense of intolerance in the United States had to offend his sensibilities. If anything, these events pushed him even further into his disassociation from the values of the society in which he lived. There are a few passages in the novel that hint at Kerouac's concerns, for example when Old Bull Lee discusses with Sal the possibility of mankind one day communicating with the dead:

When a man dies he undergoes a mutation in his brain that we know nothing about now but which will be very clear someday if scientists get on the ball. The bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world.

Here it is demonstrated that even these characters, living outside of "respectable" society, cannot escape the shadow of the bomb.

The Beat Generation

In his book, *The Birth of the Beat Generation,* Steven Watson writes:

By the strictest definition, the Beat Generation consists of only William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Herbert Huncke, with the slightly later addition of Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky. By the most sweeping usage, the term includes most of the innovative poets associated with San Francisco, Black Mountain College, and New York's Downtown scene. Using the broad definition, the Beat Generation is marked by a shared interest in spiritual liberation, manifesting itself in

candid personal content and open forms, in verse and prose, thus leading to admiration for Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and other avant-garde writers.

According to Ann Charters, editor of *The Portable Beat Reader,* the word "beat" was "primarily in use after World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted." The word's street usage was introduced to Kerouac by a Times Square hustler and drug addict named Herbert Huncke. Kerouac was attracted to what he believed to be the elusive, mysterious quality of the word. In a later conversation with his friend, writer John Clellon Holmes, Kerouac first coined the phrase that captured the essence of the vision he shared with Ginsberg, Burroughs and others. Charters writes:

As Holmes recalled the conversation, Kerouac replied, "It's a kind of furtiveness ... Like we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge that there's no use flaunting on that level, the level of the "public," a kind of beatness□I mean,

being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all *really* know where we are□and a weariness with all

the forms, all the conventions of the world__ So I guess you might say we're a *beat* generation."

Holmes went on to write an essay for *The New York Times,* "This Is the Beat Generation," in an attempt to describe the disaffiliation with society that many young people, such as Kerouac, felt in post-World War II America. However, it wasn't until Kerouac published *On the Road* in 1957, shortly after Ginsberg published *Howl and Other Poems,* that the Beat Generation and the Beat literary movement captivated the American public. There was some public backlash (for example, *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen snidely coined the word "beatniks" in reference to the West Coast youth involved in the movement), and in reply Kerouac wrote that "beat" also had a deeper spiritual meaning, as in "beatific." However, Kerouac himself had little patience with the "hipsters" wearing their goatees and berets; he thought many who jumped on the Beat bandwagon were poseurs, even conformists. Later, in the sixties, Kerouac disassociated himself from the "beatniks" as they evolved into "hippies."

Critical Overview

When Viking published *On the Road* in 1957, the *New York Times* gave it a rave review and the book rose to number seven on the best-seller list. In his *New York Times* review, Gilbert Millstein announced that the book's publication was a "historic occasion." Millstein accurately predicted that many other critics would not agree. Indeed, the critics were divided; some, like Millstein, thought the book was extraordinarily original. Others, like Norman Podhoretz, claimed that the novel was an adolescent, even incoherent, work. There were also critics somewhere in the middle who believed that although Kerouac exhibited flashes of true talent in the book, the novel as a whole had too many weaknesses to be considered a masterpiece.

Critics like Millstein stressed the spiritual qualities of Kerouac's novel. Millstein wrote that the "frenzied pursuit of every possible sensory impression" by the various characters in the novel are "excesses ... made to serve a spiritual purpose, the purpose of an affirmation still unfocused, still to be defined, unsystematic." In other words, the characters are on a quest for belief in something, anything. Ralph Gleason, in *Saturday Review,* touched on the search for affirmation and spiritual dimension of the novel when he denied that *On the Road* is a "beat" novel:

Even though Kerouac himself□and many of his admirers□speaks of "the beat generation," this is not true. To be beat means to be "beat to the socks," down and out, discouraged and without hope. And not once in *On the Road,* no matter how sordid the situation nor how miserable the people, is there no hope. That is the great thing about Kerouac's book, and incidentally, this generation. They swing. And this ... means to affirm.... And, unlike a member of a generation that is really beat, Kerouac leaves you with no feeling of despair, but rather of exaltation.

Of course, many other critics found Kerouac's novel to be tedious and morally bankrupt. Norman Podhoretz accused Kerouac of being a solipsist (a person who believes that the self is the only existent thing) in his essay "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," published in the collection *Doings and Undoings.* He claimed that *On the Road* is so "patently autobiographical in content" that it is "impossible to discuss [it] as a novel." Edmund Fuller, *in Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing,* wrote:

On the Road is Kerouac's Hell. Dante once took us on a tour through Hell. The difference is, that Dante knew where he was□Kerouac doesn't.

Podhoretz and others charged that Kerouac's use of hipster slang and spontaneous prose was nothing more than meaningless babble, an "inability to express anything in words." Herbert Gold called Kerouac a "Pseudo-Hipster" in his review published in *The Nation.* In an article in *The Anti-och Review,* Freeman Champney attacked what he recognized as misogyny (hatred of women) in the novel:

it is [hard] to see the beat way of life as holding much joy for its women. They have a very rough time. Their only real functions are as audience and as erotic furniture (sometimes as providers and meal tickets). They may come along for the ride, but they don't dig the deeper secrets of life, and their demands for attention and consideration can be a real nuisance. And they turn out badly. They flip and they suicide; they become whores. Or they turn into nagging shrews who challenge the very basics of beatness by demanding regular hours and incomes from their men.

Many critics approached the work much more thoughtfully; that is, they weren't overwhelmed by the sheer exuberance of the work, nor were they offended by its lack of convention. They were thus better suited to delineate the novel's strengths and weaknesses. David Dempsey, in his *New York Times Book Review* article, pointed out that:

Jack Kerouac has written an enormously readable and entertaining book but one reads it in the same mood that he might visit a sideshow□the freaks are fascinating although they are hardly part of our lives.

His final statement in that article was probably the most even-handed summation of *On the Road* made at the time of its publication:

As a portrait of a disjointed segment of society acting out of its own neurotic necessity, *On the Road* is

a stunning achievement. But it is a road, as far as the characters are concerned, that leads nowhere□and which the novelist himself cannot afford to travel more than once.

Critics continue to write about the novel and, as when it was published, there are a variety of opinions as to its literary merit. Many of the articles written since the book's initial publication go a bit further than mere reviews. For example, several articles discuss the influence of jazz on Kerouac's style, and several others have noted the influence of Kerouac's study of Buddhism in *On the Road* and his other novels. The book's enduring popularity with both critics and readers suggests that the novel has already been accepted as a major work of the twentieth century.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Akers is a freelance writer with an interest in Beat literature. In the following essay, he discusses the early criticism, cultural impact, and contemporary relevance of On the Road *and the Beat literary movement.*

When it was published in 1957, *On the Road* fascinated America with its seemingly aimless outcasts seeking thrills across the continent. It is the autobiographical account of Jack Kerouac's life in the late 1940s. Kerouac was recognized as the father of the Beat Generation with the publication of his novel. The Beat literary movement actually started with a small group of bohemians living in New York City during the mid-1940s. The group included Kerouac, poet Allen Ginsberg, and professional eccentric William Burroughs. The men were trying to define a "New Vision" in literature, and they discussed and criticized various works of literature and theories of writing. Kerouac met a charismatic drifter from Denver named Neal Cassady during this period. Cassady ultimately inspired the character of Dean Moriarty in *On the Road,* and he inspired Kerouac himself to go on the road. The manic movement of Sal Paradise in *On the Road,* with and without Dean Moriarty, is directly patterned after Kerouac's real-life travel during the same period. The novel shocked many readers of the late 1950s with its depictions of pointless travel, drug use, and promiscuous sex. And although some critics were excited by Kerouac's style, many thought Beat literature was adolescent, even immoral. However, the novel continues to be popular both as a critical subject and with readers (especially college students). It is interesting to review the novel and its early criticism with the hindsight of knowing the impact it had on American culture after its publication.

Both Gilbert Millstein and, to a lesser extent, David Dempsey, wrote favorable reviews for *On the Road* in *The New York Times* when the book was first published. Millstein believed that the novel depicted a quest for spiritual affirmation. The characters behave excessively, he wrote, because "the search for belief is very likely the most violent known to man." Because of this theme, and what he believed to be the beauty of the writing, Millstein insisted that *On the Road* was a major novel. Millstein's colleague at the *Times,* Dempsey, agreed that the novel was a "stunning achievement," but he believed that the characters acted out of a "neurotic necessity" rather than a spiritual one. Like Dempsey, many critics were impressed with Kerouac's raw talent, but still found flaws in the novel. For example, they noted the lack of characterization. Dempsey wrote that Kerouac's characters "are not developed but simply presented; they perform, take their bows and do a hand-spring into the wings." Gene Baro, in the *New York Herald Tribune,* also pointed out that the novel's characterizations are "given and illustrated rather than developed." These critics, and several others, considered Kerouac to be a major talent despite the flaws in his second novel.

Of course, there were many who were not infatuated with Kerouac's style. In his book *The Birth of the Beat Generation,* Steven Watson noted that "[a]fter the rave in the *New York Times* [for *On the Road],* the positive reviews were more temperate, and the negative reviews outdid one another in bile." The attack on the novel, and on the Beat

literary movement in general, was led by intellectual Columbia graduates Herbert Gold and Norman Podhoretz. In an essay published in *The Nation,* Gold claimed that Kerouac had "appointed himself prose celebrant to a pack of unleashed zazous." Podhoretz, who was Ginsberg's contemporary at Columbia, fervently scorned Kerouac's work. He could be especially vicious in his criticism, as when he stated in his essay "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," first published in the *Partisan Review,* that he believed Kerouac's manifesto to be: "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." It should be noted here that Kerouac was never convicted of murder.

The problem with Kerouac's most vehement critics was their inability to criticize *On the Road* strictly on its literary merit. Podhoretz treated *On the Road* as if it were a threat to Western civilization rather than a uniquely stylized autobiographical novel about people on the fringe of society. What Podhoretz really seemed to resent was Kerouac's spontaneity, which, in his opinion, was a lack of control. Podhoretz has been quoted as saying, "Creativity represents a miraculous coming together of the uninhibited energy of the child with its apparent opposite and enemy□the sense of order imposed on the disciplined adult intelligence." In this quote, he indicates that while the exuberance of a child is welcome in the creative process, adult supervision is required. Kerouac certainly did not subscribe to this, as shown by several items on his "list of essentials" in his "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose":

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy ... 2. Submissive to everything, open, listening ... 7. Blow as deep as you want to blow ... 28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better ...

Kerouac imposed no restrictions on his creative "child," and this is perhaps what offended Podhoretz more about *On the Road* than anything. Podhoretz was unable to recognize any of the intelligence and poetry of the novel because he not only disapproved of Kerouac's lifestyle, he also found Kerouac's creative philosophy abhorrent. Currently, Podhoretz is a senior fellow at a conservative think tank, the Hudson Institute. It is strange to consider that Kerouac, who became friends with conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr. and supported the Vietnam War in the 1960s, was closer to Podhoretz in political ideology than in artistic theory.

Despite some lukewarm reviews and the furor of conservative intellectual critics, *On the Road* was a popular success. Several books Kerouac wrote during the 1950s were quickly published and he became a celebrity. Kerouac tried to explain the Beat phenomenon to middle-class America in various print, radio, and television interviews. He emphasized the spiritual dimensions of his work and the word "beat." Kerouac was credited with an entry in the Random House dictionary with the definition of the Beat Generation:

Members of the generation that came of age after World War II, who, supposedly as a result of disillusionment stemming from the Cold War, espouse mystical detachment and relaxation of social and sexual tensions.

Much to Kerouac's dismay, mainstream culture trivialized his work with "beatnik" clichés. The commercialization of Beat culture included several awful "B" movies and many paperback novels with beatnik themes. Perhaps the most egregious example of this fad was in the television series *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-1963). One of the characters on the series, Maynard G. Krebs (played by Bob Denver, whose later claim to fame was as the title character in *Gilligan 's Island),* was a perfect illustration of the beatnik cliché. Krebs wore a goatee, used hipster slang, played the bongos, and avoided work whenever possible. The "beatnik" craze in American culture was, thankfully, shortlived. Of course, the passive beatnik evolved into the active hippie. *On the Road* was one part of the social and cultural forces that led to the youth revolution of the 1960s.

However, the continued popularity of *On the Road* can't be explained as mere nostalgia. Recently, the book was ranked number 624 in sales on the Internet bookstore Amazon.com. This is actually very impressive considering that the store has hundreds of thousands of titles. Young people are the book's most avid fans. Thus, Millstein's early praise of the book's "spirituality," embodied in the characters' "search for belief," has proven to be prescient. The search for identity or belief is a universal experience, and it is especially pertinent to young people. For example, it is hard to deny the youthful energy of the following passage from the novel:

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 exploding like spiders across the stars.

It is this yearning, this desire to have "everything at the same time," that attracts so many readers. Sometimes, Sal's search for meaning seems futile, and instead of joy there is melancholy, as when he arrives in Times Square after one of his western sojourns:

I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic horror of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream□grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City.

The strength of *On the Road* is in its vivid portrayal of both the joy and the pain of being young. It is one thing to criticize Kerouac's verbosity, repetitiveness, and sentimentality; it is quite another to dismiss his work entirely because his characters lead unconventional lifestyles, or because his creative philosophy involved using emotion rather than "craft." Even after forty years, *On the Road* remains a vital work.

Source: Don Akers, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Vopat defends Kerouac against critics who deem him unworthy of consideration as an important American writer.

Nothing has been published about Jack Kerouac for seven years. Most of what has been written is either hostile or condescending or both. While it may perhaps be true, as Melvin W. Askew suggests, that to speak of Jack Kerouac in the same breath with Melville, Twain and Hawthorne is to leave a smirch on the configuration of classic American literature, Kerouac has, as they have, provided an enduring portrait of the national psyche; like Fitzgerald, he has defined America and delineated American life for his generation. Certainly, Kerouac is not a great writer, but he is a good writer, and has more depth and control than his critics allow. *On the Road* is more than a crazy wild frantic embrace of beat life; implicit in Kerouac's portrayal of the beat generation is his criticism of it, a criticism that anticipates the charges of his most hostile critics. For example, Norman Podhoretz' assertion that the Beat Generation's worship of primitivism and spontaneity ... arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling, parallels Kerouac's own insights in *On the Road.*

In that novel Kerouac makes it clear that Sal Paradise goes on the road to escape from life rather than to find it, that he runs from the intimacy and responsibility of more demanding human relationships, and from a more demanding human relationship with himself. With all their emphasis on spontaneity and instinct, Sal and his friends are afraid of feeling on any other than the impassive and ultimately impersonal wow level. For Sal especially, emotion is reduced to sentimentality, role-playing and gesture. His responses are most often the blanket, indiscriminate wow! or the secondhand raptures gleaned from books and movies; he thrills to San Francisco as Jack London's town and melodramatically describes leaving his Mexican mistress:

Emotionlessly she kissed me in the vineyard and walked off down the row. We turned at a dozen paces, for love is a duel, and looked at each other for the last time__ Sal is continually enjoying himself enjoying himself, raptly appreciating his performance in what seems more like an on-going soap-opera than an actual life: She'd left me a cape to keep warm; I threw it over my shoulder and skulked through the moonlit vineyard__A California home; I hid in the grapevines, digging it all. I felt like a million dollars; I was adventuring in the crazy American night.

Sal's self-conscious posturing undercuts his insistence on the life of instinct and impulse, and indicates his fear of emotions simply felt, of life perceived undramatically and unadorned. He responds to experience in a language of exaggeration; everything is the saddest or greatest or wildest in the world. Although on page 21 he meets a rawhide oldtime Nebraska farmer who has a great laugh, the greatest in the world, a few pages later he encounters Mr. Snow whose laugh, I swear on the Bible, was positively and finally the one greatest laugh in all this world. Reality is never good enough; it must be classified, embroidered and intensified; above all, the sheer reality of reality must be avoided. Sal's roleplaying shelters him from having to realize and respond to actual

situations, and to the emotions and obligations, whether of others or of himself, inherent in those situations. He is protected from having to face and feel his own emotions as well as from having to deal with the needs and demands of other people. What Sal enthuses over as a California home Kerouac reveals as a place of poverty, frustration, anger and despair, but Sal's raptures cushion him from recognizing the grimness of the existence to which he is carelessly consigning his mistress and her small son, a child he had called my boy and played at fathering. By absorbing himself in the melodramatics of a renunciation scene, Sal is protected from the realities of Terry's feelings or her future, nor must he cope with his own emotions at parting with her.

Kerouac's characters take to the road not to find life but to leave it all behind: emotion, maturity, change, decision, purpose, and, especially, in the best American tradition, responsibility; wives, children, mistresses, all end up strewn along the highway like broken glass. Sal refuses responsibility not only for the lives of others but for his own life as well. He does not want to own his life or direct his destiny, but prefers to live passively, to be driven in cars, to entertain sensations rather than emotions. A follower, Sal is terrified of leading his own life; he is, as Kerouac points out, fearful of the wheel and hated to drive; he does not have a driver's license. He and Dean abdicate self-control in a litany of irresponsibility: It's not my fault, it's not my fault ..., nothing in this lousy world is my fault. Both of them flee from relevance and significance, telling long, mindless stories and taking equally pointless trips. They avoid anything□self-analysis, self-awareness, thinking□ which would threaten or challenge them, for with revelation comes responsibility for change and, above all, they do not want change. They demand lives as thin and narrow as the white lines along the road which so comfort and mesmerize them, and are content with surfaces, asking for no more. Thus they idolize Negroes as romantic and carefree children, seeing in the ghetto not the reality of poverty and oppression, but freedom from responsibility and, hence, joy.

Sal and his friends are not seeking or celebrating self, but are rather fleeing from identity. For all their solipsism, they are almost egoless. They do not dwell on the self, avoid thinking or feeling. They run from self-definition, for to admit the complex existence of the self is to admit its contingencies: the claims of others, commitments to society, to oneself. Solipsism rather than an enhancement of self is for them a loss of self, for the self is projected until it loses all boundaries and limits and, hence, all definition. Sal in the Mexican jungle completely loses his identity; inside and outside merge, he becomes the atmosphere, and as a result knows neither the jungle nor himself. For Sal and Dean, transcendentalism, like drugs, sex, liquor, and even jazz, leads not to enlightenment but to self-obliteration. Erasing both ego and world, nothing remains save motion and sensation, passive, self-effacing and mechanical. Only the sheer impetus of their frantic, speeding cars holds their scattered selves together.

Their selves have no definition and their lives no continuity. Nothing is related, neither self nor time; there is no cause and effect, life is not an ongoing process. Rather, there is only the Eternal Now, the jazz moment, which demands absolutely nothing. Their ideals are spontaneity and impulse because both are independent of relation to what has gone before and what may come after. Spontaneity and impulse are the ethic of disjunction, recognizing neither limit, liability or obligation. Their emphasis on

spontaneity is a measure of their fear of life. In their cars they are suspended from life and living, as if in a capsule hurtling coast-to-coast above the earth. They seek out not truth nor values but this encapsulated almost fetal existence as an end in itself, an end that is much like death.

For even their much touted ideal of Freedom is in reality a freedom from life itself, especially from rational, adult life with its welter of consequences and obligations. Dean is utterly free because he is completely mad. He has defied maturity and logic, defied time with its demands that he grow up to responsibility. Like Nietzsche's superman, he is beyond good and evil, blame and expectation, nor must he justify his existence through work and duty, a state Sal sorely admires: Bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness□ everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being. Sal's own longing for freedom is embodied in a mysterious Shrouded Traveler, a figure who unites the road and death. In many avatars, he pursues Sal in his headlong flight down the highway, offering, through solitary travel, the lost bliss which is the death of the self: The one thing that we yearn for in all our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that we probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death.

Free love is rather freedom from love and another route down that same dark deathwish. For Sal the lovebed is the deathbed, where he goes to obliterate himself and to find the safe lost bliss of the womb, blindly seeking to return the way he came. But Sal is only able to find this particular version of lost bliss when he has reduced his partner to the non-threatening role of fellow child. He has trouble succeeding with adult women; he fills Rita with nothing but talk and is convinced Theresa is a whore until he discovers with relief that she is only a baby, as fragile and vulnerable as he:

I saw her poor belly where there was a Caesarian scar; her hips were so narrow she couldn't bear a child without getting gashed open. Her legs were like little sticks. She was only four foot ten. I made love to her in the sweetness of the weary morning. Then, two tired angels of some kind, hung-up forlornly in an LA shelf, having found the closest and most delicious thing in life together, we fell asleep ...

Sex here is not a wild explosion but the desperate, gentle solace two babes in the woods haltingly offer each other.... Sal says he ought to be seeking out a wife, but his true search is, as is Dean's, not for lover but for father, for someone to shelter him from life and responsibility. He turns to Terry not for ecstasy or even sensation, but as a respite from his search, an escape from the demands of life: I finally decided to hide from the world one more night with her and morning be damned.

In short, for all their exuberance, Kerouac's characters are half in love with easeful death. And this Sal Paradise and his creator well know. Neither is deceived about the nature of beat existence. Kerouac is able to step back from his characters to point out their follies; to show, for example, Dean's pathetic justification of life on the road.... Sal himself is able to articulate his own fear of feeling and responsibility and his resultant, overwhelming emptiness:

Well, you know me. You know I don't have close relationships with anybody anymore. I don't know what to do with these things. I hold things in my hand like pieces of crap and don't know where to put it down.. It's not my fault! It's not my fault! ... Nothing in this lousy world is my fault, don't you see that? I don't want it to be and it can't be and it *won't* be.

He realizes that he has nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion, and marks the deaths of his various illusions with the refrain, Everything is collapsing.

Kerouac further points out that the shortcomings of his characters parallel the shortcomings of the country to which they are so intimately connected. Kerouac's response to America is typically disillusioned. America is a land of corruption and hypocrisy, promising everything and delivering nothing, living off the innocence and opportunity, the excitement and adventure of the past. In particular Kerouac indicts America for failing to provide his searching characters with any public meaning or communal values to counteract the emptiness of their private lives. Sal looks to America much as he looks to Dean, to provide him with direction, purpose and meaning, to offer him a straight line, an ordered progression to a golden destination, an IT of stability and salvation. But IT never materializes, and the straight line itself becomes an end; the going, the road, is all. Dean's response to continual disillusionment is to forsake the destination for the journey: Move! Sal follows his leader but eventually becomes disgusted with the purposeless, uncomfortable jockeying from coast to coast, just as he becomes disgusted with Dean. Unlike Dean, Sal is able to recognize and identify his despair and, ultimately, to act on the causes of it; where for Dean change is merely deterioration, Sal undergoes true development.

In addition to Sal's growing insight, Kerouac equips his narrator with a double vision, enabling Sal to comment on the people and events of the novel as he saw them when they happened, and as he views them now that they are over, a sadder-but-wiser hindsight which acts as a check upon his naive, undiscriminating exuberances and provides a disillusioned alternative view of the beatifics of the beat generation.

While the younger Sal idolized Dean upon first meeting him, the older Sal reminds the reader that this is all far back, when Dean was not "the way he is today ... ," and notes that the whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dust cloud over the American night. He observes the sad effect of Time upon his old friends who once rushed down the street together, digging everything in the early way they had, which later becomes so much sadder and perceptive and blank. He corrects himself when his earlier view of Dean intrudes upon the more precise voice of his older self: Dean ... had finished his first fling in New York. I say fling, but he only worked like a dog in parking lots. Sal continually checks and repudiates his youthful self, and deflates his naive view of Dean and life on the road: I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds□what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off.

Sal's double vision does more than correct his impulses. It projects the reader forward in time and provides the sense of continuity the disjunctive characters, including the younger Sal, lack. This older voice offers relations and connections, causes and effects, connects past with present and projects into the future. It firmly anchors reader and narrator to the familiar world of change and conjunction. It knows the discrepancy between appearance and reality and realizes sadly that Time eventually captures even frantically speeding children. It is the view of a man who has, in Dean Moriarty's words, come to know Time, it prepares the reader for Sal's eventual disillusionment with beat life and the sordid hipsters of America.

Sal's double vision is proof of his eventual recapitulation to time and change, a recapitulation which he battles for most of the novel. It is this battling, perhaps, so constant and monotonous, which has infuriated readers used to traditional novels of development and makes them wonder, indeed, whether anything happens to anyone in the novel at all. Sal alone of the characters continually perceives the futility and insanity of his journeys, yet continually makes them, always with the same childlike innocence and expectation, always to follow the same pattern of hopefulness ending in disillusionment as he learns and relearns the same weary lessons about America and Dean Moriarty. Nonetheless, Sal does finally accept the obligations of his insights and revelations, decides to bear the heavy weight of change and responsibility, and grows up to understand, evaluate and finally repudiate Dean Moriarty, the American Dream, and life on the road.

Dean offers Sal more than direction and meaning; he simultaneously provides both a quest and an escape, a hiatus from adult life and adult feelings, a moratorium on maturity. Sal associates Dean with his own childhood: "... he reminded me of some long-lost brother ..., made me remember my boyhood.... And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge

Indeed, although Sal is older than Dean, he regards Dean at first not so much as long lost brother but as Father whom he passively follows, trusting to be protected, loved and directed. Sal is disenchanted with Dean at the end of Part Two not because Dean has proven himself a poor friend, but because he has turned out to be yet another bad father: Where is Dean and why isn't he concerned about our welfare?

Sal's emotional maturation is evident in his first lover's quarrel with Dean. Enraged by Dean's casual reference to his growing old (You're getting a little older now), Sal turns on him, reducing him to tears, but immediately afterwards realizes that his anger is directed at aging rather than at Dean: I had flipped momentarily and turned it down on Dean. He takes responsibility for hurting Dean, and apologizes to him, humbly and lovingly: Remember that I believe in you. I'm infinitely sorry for the foolish grievance I held against you.. He sees that his present anger springs from sources buried in his youth (Everything I had ever secretly held against my brother was coming out ...). This insight into himself helps him to understand Dean, who is, like him, mired in a past whose anger and frenzy he is compelled to act out, but, unlike Sal, without benefit of apology or insight: "All the bitterness and madness of his entire Denver life was blasting out of his system like daggers. His face was red and sweaty and mean." Regarding his

friend without desperate idealism, Sal sees that Dean's frantic moving and going is not a romantic quest for adventure or truth but is instead a sad, lost circling for the past, for the home and the father he never had. He sees that both he and Dean are as frightened and lost as the Prince of Dharma, going in circles in the dark lost places between the stars, searching for that lost ancestral grove. The road on which they run is all that old road of the past unreeling dizzily as if the cup of life had been overturned and everything gone mad. My eyes ached in nightmare day. True to his vow, he takes Dean back to New York with him, yet knows that for them a permanent home is impossible. Their marriage breaks down; Dean returns to his crazy welter of wives and children, Sal to his aunt and his disillusionment.

In Mexico Sal hopes to escape from the self, civilization, and their discontents. At the bottom of his primitivism is a desire to confront the primal sources of pure being, to discover life as it was shapeless, formless, dark before being molded into self or society; in short, to find once and for all the womb he has been seeking all his life. If nothing else, he hopes to search out his final, true and ultimate parents among the Indians who are the source of mankind and the fathers of it.

But the strange Arabian paradise we had finally found at the end of the hard, hard road is only a wild old whore house after all. The Indians are coming down from the mountains drawn to wrist-watches and cities. They and the Mexicans welcome Sal and Dean not as brothers or fellow children, but as American tourists to be exploited. The brothel where they converse for their ultimate mind-and time-blowing fling is a sad, frantic, desperate place, full of eighteen-year-old drunks and child whores, sinking and lost, writhing and suffering.... Their great primitive playground is no more than a sad kiddy park with swings and a broken-down merry-go-round ... in the fading red sun.... And in that sad kiddy park Sal leaves behind his faith in the possibility of an infantile paradise and, with it, his faith in Dean.

Dean first induced Sal to accompany him over the border with the happy announcement that ... the years have rolled severally behind us and yet you see none of us have really changed.... In Mexico Sal finds this denial of time not a reprieve but a condemnation. Dean cannot change and he cannot rest, not even in the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin childlike Mexico City. Wedded forever to his terrible, changeless compulsions, not the love of his friend nor the possibility of paradise can stay him from his rounds. He leaves the delirious and unconscious Sal to return to all that again, for, as he himself announces, the road drives *me.* Sal understands and pities him ("I realized what a rat he was, but ... I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes"), realizing his friend is the least free of anyone. Dean leads not a primitive life of spontaneity and instinct but instead a sorry, driven existence of joyless sweats and anxieties. Sal has a vision of Dean not as sweet, holy goof but as the Angel of Death, burning and laying waste whatever he touches....

Returning to America, Sal meets up once more with the Shrouded Traveler, a symbol of the fatal lure of the road and the restless, nomadic beat life. Sal wonders if this tall old man with flowing white hair ... with a pack on his back is a sign that I should at last go

on my pilgrimage on foot on the dark roads around America. He wonders, in short, if he ought to become the Ghost of the Susquehanna, to enter the darkness from which the old man appeared and into which he vanished. He responds to the romance of this suggestion, but is haunted by its loneliness. Later, in New York, he calls out his name in the darkness and is answered by Laura, the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long. Settling his dreams of paradise and salvation in her, he gives up the road.

In a sense, Sal's growth as an adult can be measured through his responses to Dean and in the changing aspects of their relationship. Sal moves from idolatry to pity, from a breathless, childlike worship of Dean as alternately Saint and Father, to a realization of Dean's own tortured humanity, marked by Sal's attempt to be brother, then Father, to his friend, sensitive to Dean's needs without melodrama, facing responsibility and decision, allowing himself to feel blame and love, yet, eventually, for the sake of his own soul, rejecting, deliberately and sadly, his lost, perpetually circling friend.

When Dean arrives to rescue him once more from the world of age and obligation, Sal refuses to go. He discards Dean's plan to leave for San Francisco before he himself is absolutely ready (But why did you come so soon, Dean?), and, deciding that he wasn't going to start all over again ruining [Remi's] planned evenings as I had done ... in 1947, he pulls away from Dean and leaves him behind.

In the course of his scattered journeys Sal has learned, perhaps to his regret, what rather tentatively might indeed finally matter, and to this tenuous value he cautiously decides to commit himself, giving up the ghost of the Shrouded Traveler, of Dean Moriarty and Old Dean Moriarty and dead America, and accepting in their place feeling, responsibility, and roots□not in a place but in another person, Laura. Sal's relationship with Dean has served as an apprenticeship during which he has learned how to accommodate to intimacy, as his disillusionment with America has prepared him to look beyond the road for salvation and paradise. Neither America nor Dean can successfully order his life, provide him with direction or meaning. Neither can father him; ultimately, he must father himself, must look inward for purpose and belief. For America has lost her innocence and her sense of purpose just as Dean has and, like Dean, is continually making bogus attempts to pretend it still has all the potential and grace of its youth....

On the Road ends with an elegy for a lost America, for the country which once might have been the father of us all, but now is only the land where they let children cry. Dean Moriarty is himself America, or rather the dream of America, once innocent, young, full of promise and holiness, bursting with potential and vitality, now driven mad, crippled, impotent (We're all losing our fingers), ragged, dirty, lost, searching for a past of security and love that never existed, trailing frenzy and broken promises, unable to speak to anybody anymore.

Source: Carole Gottlieb Vopat, "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road: A* Re-evaluation," in *Midwest Quarterly,* Vol. XIV, No. 4, Summer, 1973, pp. 385-407.

Adaptations

There are two audio-book versions of *On the Road.* The first is an abridged version read by actor David Carradine available on Penguin Audiobooks (1993). The second is a complete version, recorded in 1995 and read by Tom Parker.

Topics for Further Study

Kerouac sought to write as some of the great jazz musicians played. Listen to some of the great jazz musicians, such as Charlie Parker or Miles Davis. What, if anything, does this music share with *On the Road?* Was Kerouac successful in emulating his musical heroes?

Research other American literary movements, such as the Transcendentalists of the mid-nineteenth century and the Lost Generation of the 1920s, and write an essay comparing them to the Beat Generation.

Discuss the female characters in *On the Road.* Several critics have complained that Kerouac's work is misogynistic. Do you agree or disagree and why? Rewrite a scene in the book from the viewpoint of one of the female characters.

Discuss the religious allusions in the novel. Create a hypothetical religion centering on Dean Moriarty. What would be the major beliefs of such a religion? What kind of ceremonies would this religion practice?

Use a map of North America to plot out Sal's travels throughout the book. Use different colored markers as a key for each trip. See if you can locate a map of the United States from the late 1940s to determine what roads existed at this time and estimate the mileage. Discuss the creation of the interstate highway system during the Eisenhower administration. What effects did the system have on American culture?

Compare and Contrast

1946: The Nuremberg trials end in the conviction of fourteen Nazi war criminals.

1995: Several Serbian leaders are indicted by the United Nations for war crimes committed in Bosnia. Further indictments are expected when Yugoslavia's armies march into the province of Kosovo in an effort to drive out ethnic Albanians in 1999, yet another instance of "ethnic cleansing."

1947: The House Un-American Activities Committee begins hearings and indicts the "Hollywood Ten" for contempt, leading to a blacklist of alleged communist sympathizers in this era of "McCarthyism."

1999: A controversy erupts when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gives an honorary "Oscar" to film director Elia Kazan. Kazan, the director of classics, such as *On the Waterfront* and *East of Eden,* gained notoriety when he named several colleagues as communist sympathizers. Many in the audience refuse to applaud when the award is presented to him.

1948: The Soviet Union begins the Berlin blockade, cutting Berlin off from the West. The United States begins a massive airlift to provide Berlin with food and fuel. The Berlin Wall is ultimately erected, and it serves as a symbol of the division between the freedom of the West and the totalitarianism of the East.

1999: Torn down in 1989, the Berlin Wall is only a memory. Germany is unified as one country in 1990 for the first time since World War II. The Soviet Union collapses and its various republics declare independence. Today, the United States and its allies draw some of the Soviet Union's former satellites into NATO. Russia's attempts to evolve into a more democratic society throw the country into economic chaos and it turns to the United States and the world community for support.

1949: The American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute warn that cigarette smoking may cause cancer.

1990s: The tobacco industry is forced to settle dozens of class-action lawsuits when it is found liable for the effects its products have had on public health.

What Do I Read Next?

Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) is the chronicle of two men searching for the Zen meaning of Truth as they travel the West Coast. Kerouac used his friendship with Buddhist poet Gary Snyder as the basis for this novel.

The Subterraneans (1958) is the story of a writer's interracial relationship amid the backdrop of New York City hipsters. Kerouac based the novel on a real-life romance he had with Alene Lee, a beautiful young black woman who mingled with the denizens of Greenwich Village.

For those interested in a "key" to *On the Road,* as well as the novels mentioned above, there is an excellent critical biography of Kerouac by Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe* (1983).

Kerouac was deeply influenced by Southern author Tom Wolfe, whose first two novels, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935), were autobiographical accounts of his early life in North Carolina and his later travels to Harvard, New York City, and Paris. The novels are expansive and romantic, filled with lush imagery and humor.

The Portable Beat Reader (1992), edited by Ann Charters, is a great collection of work by dozens of beat poets and writers. It includes excerpts from three of Kerouac's novels, as well as some of his poetry. It also includes "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg, and several pieces by William Burroughs.

Another great novel of youthful alienation is J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The protagonist, sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield, is one of the most beloved adolescents in American literature. The story details three days in Caulfield's life after he flunks out of prep school. It is a sad, funny, and deeply touching novel.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) is a classic anti-establishment novel. Small-time con artist Randle McMurphy feigns mental illness to avoid prison. When he is committed to a mental hospital, he winds up in a power struggle with the head nurse. The book was also made into an Oscar-winning film in 1975 starring Jack Nicholson.

A proponent of the New Journalism of the 1960s, Tom Wolfe (not the same writer mentioned above), spent several months with novelist Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters as they rolled across the country in their bus. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) by Wolfe is an intriguing documentation of the psychedelic era. Neal Cassady and Timothy Leary are among the many oddball occupants of the bus they called "Further."

Further Study

Lee Bartlett, "The Dionysian Vision of Jack Kerouac," in *The Beats: Essays of Criticism,* edited by Lee Bartlett, Mc-Farland, 1981, pp. 115-23.

Lee uses psychoanalyst C. G. Jung's theories to illuminate the connection Kerouac makes between the jazz musician and the Dionysian writer.

Jim Burns, "Kerouac and Jazz," in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Vol. III, No. 2, Summer, 1983.

Explicates the references to jazz pieces and musicians in *On the Road* and other Kerouac works.

Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Years with Kerouac, Cassady, and Ginsberg, New York, 1990. The memoirs of Neal Cassady'*s wife.

Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography,* Straight Arrow Books, 1973, 419 p. The first biography of Jack Kerouac.

Warren French, *Jack Kerouac,* Twayne, 1986, 147 p. Analyzes the novels that comprise "The Duluoz Legend" as an extended effort by Kerouac to recast his life in the form of a literary legend analogous to the Stephen Dedalus novels of James Joyce.

Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book,* St. Martin's Press, 1978, 339 p.

An oral history of Kerouac and his friends.

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Early analysis originally published in the February 1958 issue of *Esquire* that emphasizes the importance of the spiritual quest to the Beats.

Granville H. Jones, "Jack Kerouac and the American Conscience," in *Lectures on Modern Novelists,* edited by Arthur T. Broes, et. al., Books for Libraries Press, 1972, pp. 25-39. Defines the individualistic philosophy Kerouac advocated in his fiction and life as a distinctly American phenomenon.

Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1940-1956,* edited by Ann Charters, Viking, 1995.

Annotated letters from Kerouac's pre-fame period.

Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac,* Grove Press, 1983, 767 p.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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