



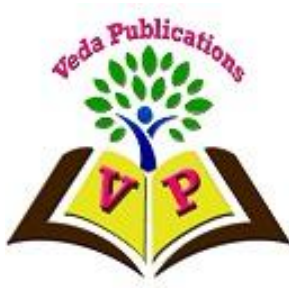
Jack Kerouac's Fictional Style: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT



This study entitled "Jack Kerouac's Fictional Style: A Critical Study" aims to explore the thematic, linguistic and structural patterns dealt in Jack Kerouac's fictions. This research shows Jack Kerouac's literary influences. It also shows Kerouac's fictional style and its narrative design. This further study presents Jack Kerouac's employment of automatic writing style and his spontaneous methods.

Keywords: *Experimental Prose, Spontaneous Writing, Linear Structure, Fragmentary, Juxtaposition of Images.*

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Jack Kerouac was born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac to a family of Franco-Americans as a French-Canadian child in working-class Lowell, Massachusetts in 1922. His parents, Leo-Alcide Kerouac and Gabrielle-Ange Levesque were natives of the provincial of Quebec in Canada. At an early age, he was profoundly marked by the death of his elder brother Gerard, that moved him to write the book *Visions of Gerard*. Kerouac's athletic talent led him to become star on his local football team and this achievement earned him scholarships to Boston College and Columbia University in New York.

It was in New York that, Kerouac met the people with whom, he was to journey around the world, and the subjects of many of his novels are from the so-called Beat Generation Which includes Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs.

This research aims to advance new readings of Kerouac's fictions in a contemporary literary and cultural context. It is particularly concerned with a deconstructive readings of Kerouac's novels. This research argues that, in its historical and thematic preoccupations Kerouac's fictions are vividly conversant with postmodern strategies.

With losing perspective of the late forties and fifties background from which, Kerouac's works emerged, the research explores the ways in which his thematic, linguistic and structural concerns interact with contemporary theory. Tracing the Kerouac's narrator's problematization of the search for meaning in an accelerating culture, it examines his fiction in the Post-War context of uncertainty and ambiguity. Kerouac approaches to the concept of simulation, his position towards western representations of Eastern Spirituality and his narrative constructions of ethnicity and identity.

When, Kerouac began writing as a child he mostly imitated the work of his favorite authors at the time: Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, William Saroyan, and Mark Twain (Maher, *Kerouac* 54). He was never content to imitate. Even though, that was precisely what he did with his first novel, *The Town and the City*. Kerouac considered the novel *The Town and the City* widely compared to the work of Thomas Wolfe, his worst book. By the time, he finished *Town*, he had already developed his friendship with Neal

Cassady and lived many of the events he writes about in *On the Road*. Regina Weinreich points out, as Kerouac neared the completion of *Town*, he "was already thinking beyond the Wolfe an style" (18). Essentially, Kerouac wanted to finish *The Town and the City* he could move on to a more experimental type of prose: "Spontaneous Writing."

The "Spontaneous Writing" mostly grew out of Kerouac's correspondence with Neal Cassady. In the spring of 1947, Cassady first wrote to Kerouac, that he hoped to "fall into a spontaneous groove" in his writing (Cassady 23). Finally, on December 17, 1950, Cassady wrote Kerouac a letter estimated in length from thirteen thousand to forty thousand words. It is known called it "the Joan Anderson Letter." It is the prose of Cassady's letter that amazed Kerouac. Cassady's Spontaneous Style in the letter gave Kerouac the idea for his more laborious spontaneous prose, which he first used in writing the scroll manuscript of *On the Road* and honed throughout his career. The novel *On the Road*, is a direct linear narrative, that shows elements of Kerouac's fully-formed spontaneous prose. Kerouac abandoned the linear structure for a "nonlinear one as he progresses toward the fulfillment of his writing ideals" (Weinreich 58). Kerouac realized that, he could not write the truth, he sought if he remained confined to a linear structure. He worked to perfect spontaneous prose, editing only to fix typographical errors.

This editorial style does not mean that, Kerouac never revised, that his revision process differed from the standard method. As the critic George Dardess points out, Kerouac's "artistic process is no less laborious, but the labor precedes and accompanies spontaneous writing." The revision occurs "only when the final phase has not been reached before the writing begins." It means that, the writer must "pursue the original method more vigorously and conscientiously" (732). Kerouac fully created the scene, dialogue, and idea in his mind before writing. The need to stop or to traditionally revise meant that, he failed in this task and should start over. For spontaneous prose to work, Kerouac called for first setting the object "before the mind" as if the writer were sketching the object (Essentials,



69). To accomplish this, Kerouac called this writing style as a "scribbled secret notebooks" (72).

Working from his notebooks and occasionally from his memory Kerouac wrote in such quick bursts because he considered time to be "the essence in the purity of speech" (Essentials, 69). In this same manner, Dostoevsky, whom Kerouac admired and studied, also wrote quickly because the story was "already written in his head, although nothing was down on paper far" (115). Kerouac called for an "undisturbed flow of language from the mind" without pausing "to think of proper word. He named this phenomenon "blowing" because of its similarity to the music of jazz improvisations, most notably Charlie Parker.

The Jazz music severed as an influence to Kerouac's literary style. He largely based his spontaneous prose on the automatic writing of William Butler Yeats. According to W.B. Yeats's biographer Richard Ellmann, Yeats believed in "the power of a medium or automatic writer to transcend the boundaries of his own mind and knowledge" (197). Yeats's belief in automatic writing came to fruition shortly after his marriage, when his wife took up the practice. The words first came to her "in disjointed sentences in almost illegible writing. Ellmann describes the automatic writing process as "chiefly a matter of suspending conscious use of the faculties," resulting in writing, that features "many of the characteristics of dreams, being full of images, fragmentary, run together, by turns coherent and incoherent" (225). Many critics have said the same thing about Kerouac's work. They quoted words like "fragmentary" and "incoherent" to denigrate Kerouac's work rather than praise it as Ellmann does to Yeats.

Kerouac's description of his writing style in his essay "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" somewhat resembles the description of Yeats's method. Kerouac even suggests that, the spontaneous writer adopts some of Yeats's methods: "If possible write without consciousness in semi-trance" as Yeats calls it as, trance writing allowing subconscious to admit what conscious art would censor" (70). Kerouac alluded to the influence of Yeats.

His Spontaneous Writings deal with his friends, his lovers, and Kerouac himself. They are the true main character of his books. Essentially, Kerouac wrote about writing. Many of his books call attention to writing, either the writing of other books. Kerouac placed such importance on style that he negated the need to create his own scenes or characters. He created a style that presented real-life people and events in a way that a typical linear prose never could. As the critic Matt Theado states, Kerouac used linguistic innovations not only to tell the story but also to convey the appropriate atmosphere. The structures of his sentences, the rhythms and the juxtaposition of images, and the innovative phrases re-create the writer's feeling for the subjects of each work. In so doing, he manages frequently to relate the truth of a story but not his episodes adhere to biographical fact (5). Rather than using language to provide descriptions of scenes, Kerouac makes language part of the scene. Instead of creating lengthy prose to make a statement, Kerouac makes his statements through unusual syntax, repetition, and neologisms.

Reading Kerouac's books in order of their autobiographical chronology attempts to create a linear form, where none exists. Reading them in order of publication creates a false chronology based only on what a particular publisher thought would sell at the time. The only proper way to read Kerouac's books is the order in which, he wrote them. Kerouac's critic André Gide points out that, despite different characters and plots of the novelist Dostoevsky's books flows into the next: *The House of the Dead* leads to *Crime and Punishment*, which leads to *The Idiot* (113). Similarly, each of Kerouac's books flows into the next. But, thematic elements create the flow of Dostoevsky's novels. Kerouac's books flow from one to another because of his writing style. Not only does reading his books in the order in which, he wrote them reveal the progression of Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose, but it also presents the "Duluz Legend" in its spontaneous chronology.

The novel *On the Road* served as Kerouac's first attempt at "Spontaneous Prose," it still maintained a linear chronology and lacked the dream-like quality of Kerouac's fully-developed Spontaneous Prose. Tim Hunt compares focusing *On*



the Road, only Kerouac's second full novel and essentially an "apprentice work," rather than *Visions of Cody* to "passing over *Moby Dick* to pay homage to *Typee*" (xxxvii). Immediately after finishing *On the Road*, Kerouac began writing the book that he wanted to replace the existing manuscript of *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody*, which Regina Weinreich refers to as "a revised *On the Road*" (60). Even after *Road* was published, Kerouac still sought to replace it with the much wilder novel *Cody*. As a guest on *The Steve Allen Show*, Kerouac famously read passages from *Visions of Cody* when Allen asked him to read from *On the Road*. Kerouac made this unscheduled change because *On the Road*, despite being Kerouac's most well-known and widely-read book, fails to represent Kerouac's work.

Kerouac's conceived of *Visions of Cody* as a combination of *Ulysses*. (Nicosia 365). Through, his use of spontaneous prose, Kerouac approached a form that at times resembled the work of James Joyce. In Bloom terminology, Kerouac could not escape the anxiety of Joyce's influence. Sex and God are dominant motifs in the work of both Kerouac and Joyce.

The most well-known section of *Visions of Cody* is a long transcription of conversation during four consecutive nights at the Pomeray (Cassady) household. The use of the tape transcript in the midst of Kerouac's prose creates the disjointed feeling that, the reader has wandered upon a stage play in the midst of the book. Although, they do not make use of audio recordings like Kerouac, both Melville and Joyce insert similar sections into their work. In the case of Kerouac and Joyce often extends for multiple pages before a single sentence ends and it creates a rapid succession of dialogue and stage direction, that conveys quick exchanges to a much greater extent than prose could. This allows the author to study his subject in a way traditional prose

In the tape section, both Jack and Cody slip into a "Stream-of-Consciousness Monologue" akin to Molly Bloom's monologue. The hectic dialogues and, tortuous soliloquies, and the influence of Kerouac's masters permeate his revised road novel. Despite the influence of both Melville and Joyce on *Visions of Cody*, the book is ultimately Kerouac's. He consciously attempted to write like Melville and

Joyce Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* would not be the experimental success that, it is Kerouac's originality and spontaneous prose carry the book.

Kerouac's critic Gerald Nicosia criticizes that "it lacks the original conception" of Kerouac's other books (518). His other critic, Paul Maher refers to his style "a startling work of literary experimentation" (Kerouac 326). While the concept of a dream-like book, however, might have originated with Joyce, Kerouac's prose is as original as any of his other writings. Kerouac's biographer, Ann Charters states that, Kerouac uses "his own mind as raw material" (xi). Unlike the work of Joyce, Kerouac has no H. C. Earwicker or Molly Bloom on whom to base any semblance of a story. He did not even have his friend Lucien Carr, about whom Kerouac originally planned the book, but who refused to allow Kerouac to use him as a character model. Jack Kerouac's novels do not have plot. His novels are series of observations and linguistic experimentation. He uses his language rather than Joyce an influence. Both Kerouac and Joyce emphasized the sound of a sentence, but each had a sound of his own. Like "Joyce who always wanted to write blind what the sea said," Kerouac, as early as *On the Road*, wrote "train sounds, the push-pull of boxcars, the scream of loud steam-fueled horns" (Kerouac 263).

While the writing, especially the heavy use of long dashes as opposed to the shorter dashes of Emily Dickinson, the only female writer Kerouac praised, is distinctly Kerouac, the use of sound recalls Joyce's writing of sound.

Taken in its entirety, the "Duluoz Legend" also shows the influence *Finnegans Wake* had on Kerouac. Completely circular, infinite in the sense that the reader could perpetually read through the circle without ever coming to an end, the *Wake* begins mid-sentence and ends with the first part of the same sentence. To complete the final line, the reader must start over at the beginning. Similarly, to complete the chronology of Duluoz, the reader must return to the beginning. As stated earlier, a proper reading of the "Legend" occurs in the order in which Kerouac wrote it, beginning with *On the Road* and ending with *Vanity of Duluoz*. In linear terms, however, *Vanity* immediately precedes *Road*. In narrating his early adulthood, the middle-aged



narrator of *Vanity* nears the conclusion of his story with the annulment of his first marriage. *On the Road* begins “not long after” the annulment (1). To read what happens after *Vanity of Duluo*, the reader must return to the first book of the “Legend” and start all over again. In *Finnegans Wake*, the dream is circular; in the “Duluo Legend,” Jack’s entire life is circular.

Interestingly enough, Kerouac became motivated to write *Vanity of Duluo* (which he had attempted to write much earlier in his career, prior to the publication of *On the Road*) by reading Richard Ellmann’s biography of James Joyce. Having slowed his writing pace because of depression brought on by the harsh media portrayal of his work and his life, Kerouac became “reinvigorated by linking his own circumstances with Joyce’s.” He determined that writing the remaining segment of the “Duluo Legend” would create a complete saga that would stand as “no less an effort than Joyce composing *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*” (Maher, Kerouac 448). The fact that this final installment created the circular nature of the “Legend” indicates the anxiety of Joyce’s influence rather than a conscious decision on Kerouac’s part to have his saga resemble the *Wake*.

Matt Theado states that “Spontaneous prose is Kerouac’s foremost literary characteristic and may yet be his chief claim to literary longevity” (6). Spontaneous prose is certainly Kerouac’s claim to literary genius. His general prose favorably compared to Thomas Wolfe, Kerouac did not want to showcase his talent as a writer but his genius. By developing spontaneous prose, Kerouac created a new form of writing that, built upon the work of past masters Herman Melville and James Joyce. It also opened the door for postmodernism. By exhibiting a firm grasp on his literary predecessors and their tradition, they set forth, Kerouac fits into his own literary period, which Ronna Johnson calls it pre-postmodernist” (Johnson 24). As Kerouac’s critic Daniel Grassian puts it, Kerouac is “somehow suspended between modernism and postmodernism” (126). This liminal quality is a direct result of his genius of spontaneous prose.

When, the reader realizes that, Kerouac like Joyce, Sterne, and Melville, does not write linearly. Therefore It cannot be understood linearly. To understand Kerouac, the reader must ingest the work

as a whole and realize that, Way Kerouac writes a passage is often more critical to its understanding than any narrative that, the passage relays on. In spontaneous prose, Kerouac created an original style, that produces an “uncanny statement”. That will ultimately stand as the mark of Kerouac’s genius.

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