

Fremont Great Books Discussion Questions

“On the Road” by Jack Kerouac

May 28, 2022

1. “On the Road” was written in 1951 as a single scroll (via typewriter) typifying Kerouac’s “spontaneous prose” ideal (typos and all), a literary cousin of improvisational jazz. The novel was published 6 years later in 1957 in a more traditional format. Does the language (dialogue or narrative) of the novel feel spontaneous, free, energetic, and genuine 71 years later?
2. Jack Kerouac minted the term “Beat Generation,” promoting a positive connotation to the word “beat” (i.e. upbeat, beatific, Catholic Beatitudes, beats of music) instead of the older meaning of being tired and downtrodden. According to Beat poet Allen Ginsberg (fictionalized as Carlo Marx), the [“the essential effects” of the Beat Generation](#) include
 - Spiritual and sexual liberation
 - Freedom from censorship.
 - The right to explore drugs without criminal consequences
 - Music (specifically rock, rhythm and blues, and jazz) as real and true art
 - A focus on ecology and appreciation for indigenous people
 - Resistance to the military-industrial complex
 - Appreciation of the weird and unusual

Were you aware that the Beat culture was going on in the late 1940s? Do you associate a lot of these “effects” with the counterculture movement typically associated with the 1960s?

3. What is the meaning of being “on the road?” Can anyone who is “on the road” truly have a home or can they find true satisfaction in desire for going somewhere without having a home base? Can women, in the novel’s oeuvre, be “on the road?”
4. Dean is obsessed with finding, acquiring, and having sex with “girl” after “girl.” Sal consumes pie ravenously as he crosses the country “because it is nutritious and nutritious.” Do you think “On the Road” idealizes consumption, already a characteristic tied to post-World War II American society?
5. The postwar 1950s included various flavors of assimilation (desegregation, nationalism, anti-Communism, terminating indigenous American tribe sovereignty). In Chapter 13, Sal says he wants to be “Negro” and picks cotton while imagining being a slave. At another point, he idealizes being Mexican. Are Sal’s wishes naïveté, an attempt to be more exotic than he is, an interest in finding the oneness of all people, cultural appropriation, or something else?
6. Is the novel a buddy story, a love story (as suggested by George Dardess), a coming of age story (do coming of age stories always have to be set during characters’ tweens/teens?), or some other classification?
7. What part do women play in the relationship between Sal and Dean? How are women generally portrayed? As the story progresses, do women’s place in the novel’s universe change?
8. Sal goes from expressing admiration for Dean’s outlook on life to painting him as down and out, miserable, an idiot, and an imbecile. Do you think Sal’s opinion about Dean’s character and intelligence is ever completely resolved? Is Dean a hero or a villain in the novel (or both)?
9. Many of the characters in “On The Road” have potentially meaningful names. Do you think these or other character names add additional meaning to the novel?
 - a. Sal (short for Salvatore) Paradise: does Sal act as a savior for others or for himself? Does Sal have a savior complex?
 - b. Dean Moriarty: references to the actor James Dean or Sherlock Holmes’ arch nemesis, Moriarty?
 - c. Carlo Marx: Karl Marx’ theories were the basis for Communism
 - d. Galatea Dunkel: Galatea is the name of Pygmalion’s statue that comes to life

Fremont Great Books Discussion Questions

“On the Road” by Jack Kerouac

May 28, 2022

10. Sal’s experience on his first road trip is different from his subsequent trips. Does he (or do you, as the reader) view these journeys any differently? What does Sal’s continual movement between mainstream middle-class America culture and the Beat culture say about Sal and the perceived incompatibility of the two cultures?
11. Sal and Dean believe that their journeys bring them closer to "IT." What is "IT" and do Dean and Sal ever find "IT"?

Additional Resources:

Open Yale Course Lectures on “On the Road” by Professor Amy Hungerford:

<https://oyc.yale.edu/english/encl-291/lecture-8>

<https://oyc.yale.edu/english/encl-291/lecture-9>

Mini biography of Jack Kerouac: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jack-kerouac>

Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose essentials:

<https://www.openculture.com/2013/10/jack-kerouac-explains-the-nine-essentials-of-writing-spontaneous-prose.html>

Jack Kerouac reads from “On The Road” on the Steve Allen show in 1959:

<https://www.openculture.com/2011/09/jack-kerouac-reads-from-on-the-road.html>

Ginsberg, Allen *A Definition of the Beat Generation*, from *Friction*, 1 (Winter 1982), revised for *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965*.

1989 Documentary on the Beat Generation: “The Source”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1hgl2WtUCM>

Discussion questions sources:

<https://www.penguinrandomhouseaudio.com/discussion-guide/540750/on-the-road/>

<https://www.gradesaver.com/on-the-road/study-guide/essay-questions>