On the Road: The Original Scroll by Jack Kerouac

A reproduction of Kerouac's original 1951 scroll draft of On the Road offers insight into the writer's thematic vision and narrative voice as influenced by the American literary, musical, and visual arts of the post-World War II period.


About the Author: Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1922. His first novel, The Town and the City, was published in 1950. He considered all of his "true story novels," including On the Road, to be chapters of "one vast book," his autobiographical Legend of Duluoz. He died in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1969 at the age of forty-seven. (Publisher Provided)

Questions for Discussion

1. In the first sentence of the scroll Kerouac meets Cassady "not long after my father died." In the novel, Sal meets Neal "not long after my wife and I split up". Why do you think Kerouac changed the book's opening? What effect does this have on the novel?

2. How is On the Road written that is different from earlier, more traditional novels? What kind of effect does this have on traditional plot? Does the form help to express the themes of the novel?

3. To some readers, Cassady's role in the scroll version is less pronounced than Dean's in On the Road. Do you agree?

4. Is Dean a hero, a failure, or both?

5. What is Sal's idea of the West compared to his idea of the East? Does this change during the course of the novel?

6. Characterize your experience reading the scroll. In your opinion, does the scroll possess literary merit on its own or is it simply a bibliographical artifact?

7. The scroll and novel attempt to honor jazz and to imitate it in its prose and structure. The use of hyphens in the scroll is reminiscent of musical notation. How does jazz music relate to the novel thematically? Do you find Kerouac's attempts amateurish?

8. At one point on the road, Sal wonders, 'for what's heaven? what's earth? All in the mind.' What is heaven for Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise? Do they share the same ideal, believe in the same kind of 'heaven'?

9. At the end of every adventure with Dean, Paradise returns home to his aunt, in Paterson, New Jersey. Is Kerouac's novel a convincing demonstration that mainstream middle-and-working-class values are inherently incompatible with the Beat lifestyle and philosophy of the road?
10. As the narrator, Sal reflects on the experiences he's telling about, saying things like, “Well, given what I know now,” or “Yeah...that never ended up happening.” How does this retrospective view effect the telling of the story? Do we view things differently, given Sal's insights into his past?

11. Sal and Dean discuss “it” throughout the novel and believe that each of their journeys is going to bring them closer to this “it.” What is “it”? Do Sal and Dean ever find “it”?

www.grpl.org/BookClub