

Analysis of the Female Characters in “On the Road”

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Abstract: On the Road is the masterpiece of Kerouac who is one of the most important writers of “Beat Generation” in America in the mid-20th century. It is acclaimed to be the Bible of “Beat Generation”. The novel narrates the stories of how Dean and his friends—some representative characters of the Beats travelled across continental U.S. several times and searched for new lifestyles and new faith on the road. In this novel, male characters are the main characters and the descriptions of all the female characters account for just one sixth of the whole book. Although the portrayal of the female characters is not profound like that of the male characters, the different personalities Kerouac endued the female characters are also the highlights of the novel. As a novel with strong nature of autobiography, Kerouac put his attitude and emotion into his portrayal. So it also can be a reflection of Kerouac’s female concepts. This paper aims at analyzing the female characters in On the Road by studying the types of the female characters in the novel and summarizing Kerouac’s female concepts reflected from the novel.

Keywords: Kerouac; On the Road; Female characters; Female concepts

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1 Kerouac and On the Road

Jack Kerouac, the author of On the Road, was an American novelist and poet. He is considered a literary iconoclast and a pioneer of “Beat Generation”^[1]. He was born in a Catholic worker’s family in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1922. And he was the first person who proposed the name of “Beat

Generation”.

Kerouac has created a total of 18 novels all his life, most of which are the nature of autobiography. He wrote his first novel The Town and the City between 1946 and 1948, and at the same time, he met Neal Cassady (the archetype of the protagonist, Dean Moriarty, in On the Road) in New York. Between 1948 and 1950, he travelled across America with Cassady and finally arrived in Mexico City^[2]. And this travel provided him an initial thought of On the Road and was recorded in the novel.

Kerouac completed On the Road in April 1951. “He completed the first version of the novel during a three-week extended session of spontaneous confessional prose.” But in fact, he had prepared long in advance before beginning to write over the several preceding years. The book is largely autobiographical and describes Kerouac’s road-trips across the United States and Mexico with Neal Cassady in the late-1940s, as well as his relationships with other Beat writers and friends. The novel had a long and hard time being published because of “its experimental writing style and its sympathetic tone towards minorities and marginalized social groups of post-War America”. After being rejected by several other firms and being amended for several times, it was finally published by Viking Press in 1957.

2 The Types and Features of The Female Characters in On the Road

On the Road is a novel with strong nature of autobiography, and all the protagonists are male characters. Although the writer mentions more than fifty female characters in the novel, the descriptions are short and their figures are quite fragmentary. There are about ten main female characters that have relatively clear personalities such as Marylou, Lee

Ann, Sal's aunt, Terry, Camille, and Galatea Dunkel^[3]. Although the portrayal of the female characters is not profound like that of the male characters, it presents readers different personalities of every female character. According to Kerouac's portrayal of the female characters, they can be divided into three types: the degenerate female characters, New Woman characters and housewife-type characters.

2.1 Degenerate Female Characters

Kerouac put the most efforts in the portrayal of Marylou among all the female characters. She was Dean's first wife and travelled with Sal and Dean on the road. She is a typical example of degenerate female characters.

In reader's first sight, Marylou was a beautiful woman. According to the description that "Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tresses; she sat there on the edge of the couch with her hands hanging in her lap and her smoky blue country eyes fixed in a wide stare", but "outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things." Unlike her appearance, she is a shrewish woman. She once "reported to the police some false trumped-up hysterical crazy charge" after had a fight with Dean, so "Dean had to lam from Hoboken". Another word to describe Marylou is "self-indulgent". In Part Two of the novel, when they stayed for a few days in Old Bull Lee's house, Marylou was addicted into the drugs. "She took tea, goofballs, benny, liquor, and even asked Old Bull for a shot of M". She didn't care about moral and chastity. Although Dean had married Camille after Marylou divorced with him, Marylou still got mixed up with Dean only because she wanted to revenge on Camille. To some extent, she is an evil woman. She knew she can't completely have Dean because he was too crazy, so she had "an envious and rueful love" for him "as though she wanted to cut off his head and hide it in her closet"; she wanted to have close relationship with Sal only because she tried to reach Dean through Sal.

2.2 Housewife-type Characters

On the Road, besides the people who were busy in their journey, there were some other people who acted as mothers and wives waiting for them at home. These women are tender, obedient, and full of kindness, love and responsibilities in hearts.

Terry, a beautiful, lively, kind and diligent Mexico

girl, could be regarded as a representative of the good wives in *On the Road*. Sal met Terry on his way back from San Francisco and fell in love with her in his first sight. She is an innocent girl who has pure and beautiful imagination of love. Sal wanted to went back to New York together with her but they lacked money, so Terry did her best to help him make money. When they had difficulty in making a living, she could live in a tent with Sal and cook delicious food for him, "it was Terry who brought my (Sal) soul back; on the tent stove she warmed up the food, and it was one of the greatest meals of my life"; she could pick cotton with Sal and even did better than him; she could sat mending clothes for him in the tent. Although their relationship had only kept for a short time, her precious tenderness left Sal deep impression: "she was a nice girl." He said before he left her.

2.3 New Women Characters

New Women emerged in 1920s in America with the development of feminism^[4]. They were a group of women who bravely fought for economic independence, equal opportunities, and equal marriages, and they got higher education and jobs with higher salaries than their seniors^[5]. "Although the terrible influence of Great Depression broke their dream, the growing awareness of freedom and independence still influenced American women's spirit."

On the Road, Kerouac portrayed two important female characters with the spirit of New Woman: Camille and Galatea Dunkel. They are brave, independent and yearn for love, equality and freedom, and they got higher education and had their ethical lines, which is different from degenerate women's self-indulgent freedom. They loved their husbands had clear awareness of responsibility for family, but they were not that obedient to the male like housewife-type women.

Camille was Dean's second wife. According to Carlo's narration, Camille fell in love with Dean when they first met each other. She picked him out among a room of men and only let him enter her room, which showed her bravery of seeking love and awareness of freedom. She was very kind and diligent. When Sal was abandoned by Marylou in San Francisco, Camille helped him. Sal gave her compliment that "Camille was a relief after Marylou;

a well-bred, polite young woman". After Dean's thumb got injured, he spent a hard time supporting his family. During that period of time, Camille went out to work and asked Dean to stay at home. All she wants is Dean's staying at home and acting dutifully. But Sal's coming broke her dream; Camille threw their luggage out of her house disappointedly. She was very sad after Dean left her again. But she was strong enough to bestir herself; she told Galatea she never wanted to see Dean again and began to support her family on her own. Although Dean made her disappointed, from deep inside, she loved Dean and she wanted to live with him. In Part Five, Camille asked Sal to pass on a letter to Dean. It said: "My heart broke when I saw you go across the tracks with your bag. I pray and pray you get back safe...I know you'll make it but I can't help worrying - now that we've decided everything...Dear Dean, it's the end of the first half of the century. Welcome with love and kisses to spend the other half with us. We all wait for you." Finally, "Dean's life was settled with his most constant, most embittered, and best-knowing wife Camille."

3 Kerouac's Female Concepts

Kerouac created several unforgettable female characters in *On the Road* and showed different attitudes towards them. And his attitudes are decided by his female concepts.

3.1 Kerouac's Traditional Female Concept

According to the analysis in chapter II, the female characters in this novel includes three types: the degenerate female characters, housewife-type characters and New Women characters. Kerouac portrayed these figures with different personalities and moral characters, and his attitudes towards them are different. For the degenerate female characters, Kerouac showed both his love and averseness. He loved their beautiful appearances, but hated their shrewishness and self-indulgence. In general, Kerouac held negative attitude to them and always disparaged them. For housewife-type characters, Kerouac held positive attitude to them and gave them compliment; he respected and loved those selfless mothers as well as tender and obedient wives. For New Women characters, Kerouac gave them understanding and sympathy more.

By studying Kerouac's different attitudes to the

three types of female characters, we can find out that he judged them by the traditional values^[6]. That's the reason why the women with traditional virtues were respected and praised, and the women lost the traditional virtues were disparaged and criticized.

In summary, Kerouac was influenced by the traditional values when he portrayed the female characters. In a large part, his female concept is a traditional domestic female concept: "family is where a woman should stay, and piety, purity and obedience are the basic virtues she should have."

3.2 Kerouac's Open Female Concept

Although Kerouac held the traditional female concept and approved the Beats' treatment towards the female, he was not a male chauvinist. There are two open aspects in his female concepts.

Kerouac held the ideal of universal love for women, which means he almost showed his sympathy, pity and concern to all the women. For example, Sal felt sorry after he criticized Terry's motherly instincts, and he "thought of poor Terry and wondered what she was doing now" in his travel after he left her. Even to Marylou, Sal often showed his concern. He cared about her life; when he travelled to a place they had been, he missed Marylou very much, "same place Marylou and I had held hands on a snowy morning in 1949, and where was Marylou now?"

Kerouac hoped there should be harmonious relationship between men and women, and he also pointed out how to achieve that. Sal was always hoping to get along with the female harmoniously. He thought firstly men and women should communicate with each other and understand each other. Dean said to Sal: "I've always dug your feelings, and now in fact you're ready to hook up with a real great girl if you can only find her and cultivate her and make her mind your soul as I have tried so hard with these damned women of mine." "Make her mind your soul" referred to the communication and understanding between men and women. And secondly men should get rid of self-centered awareness and admit their faults. Sal once deeply regretted abandoning Terry, "all my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley." The "white ambitions" referred to white men's self-centered awareness. The male should get rid of self-centered awareness if they

wanted to keep a harmonious relationship with the female.

In summary, Kerouac's female concepts consist of two sides: on one hand, Kerouac admitted the Beats' female concept, and he himself always used traditional concepts to evaluate the female; on the other hand, he had a open female characters and showed sympathy and concern to the female.

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