

THE REFLECTION OF BOHEMIANISM IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL  
*ON THE ROAD* BY JACK KEROUAC

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**Abstrak**

*Studi ini membahas tentang bohemianisme dalam novel autobiografi On the Road, karya penulis Amerika Jack Kerouac. Bohemianisme dianalisis berdasarkan teori bohemianisme yang diperoleh dari berbagai literatur dan teori sastra oleh DiYanni, Kenney, dan Guerin, untuk mengetahui unsur intrinsik dan ekstrinsik apa saja yang merefleksikan bohemianisme dalam karya literatur tersebut.*

*Hasil studi menunjukkan unsur intrinsik yang mengandung bohemianisme adalah karakter, karakterisasi, dan tema, sementara unsur ekstrinsiknya adalah biografi sang penulis itu sendiri. Bohemianisme yang terefleksikan di antaranya yakni kebebasan, pemberontakan, dan spiritualitas.*

*Kata kunci: bohemianisme, unsur intrinsik, unsur ekstrinsik*

1. Background of the Study

In order to reach self-actualization, youths tend to express their freedom to highlight their existence or identity. Nowadays, freedom of expression has grown to be more varied and irrepressible, particularly through internet access, in which everybody competes to show themselves. This elicits identity crisis, in which they begin questioning everything and they are likely to rebel against unsuitable point of views. In America, after the draining post-World War II, youths were directed to conformity. Despite this, there were several people who rebelled against the conformity by living a bohemian life. Young writers began showing their bohemianism through the medium of literature. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac was used in this study as the data source, because it deeply expresses the bohemianism of American youths in post-World War II era.

## 2. Problems

An analysis is conducted to solve several problems collected from the background as the basis. Therefore, the problems of the study were:

- a) What are the intrinsic elements of *On the Road* that reflect bohemianism?
- b) What did influence the author Jack Kerouac to imply bohemianism in *On the Road*?

## 3. Aims of the Study

The aims of this study are to answer the questions above as the problems. The aims of this study were:

- a) To identify the intrinsic elements of the novel reflecting bohemianism.
- b) To find out the inspiration for the author in implying bohemianism in the novel.

## 4. Research Method

The data used in this study was obtained from passages of the autobiographical novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. The data was collected through library research and analysed in comparative-qualitative method.

## 5. Result and Discussion

The intrinsic elements found in the novel were characters, characterization, and theme. These data below shows all found elements.

### Data 8

Still we couldn't sober up and didn't want to leave, and though we were all run out we still wanted to hang around with our lovely girls in this strange Arabian paradise we had finally found at the end of the hard, hard road. But night was coming and we had to get on to the end; and Dean saw that, and began frowning and thinking and trying to straighten himself out, and finally I broached the idea of leaving once and for all. "So much ahead of us, man, it won't make any difference."  
(Part IV, Chapter 4, p. 278)

In Part IV, before reaching Mexico, Sal, Dean, and their friend Stan, have fun in a brothel near Mexico border; however, even though they want to stay, Sal reminds his friends of “the end of the road” which offers “so much ahead”, so they don’t need to spend excessive time in the brothel. This is delivered in Sal’s thoughts and speech.

The characters in *On the Road* are not rebelling against authority; they are rebelling against conformity. In post-World War II America, conformity is the prominent condition when World War II is over. Soldiers came back home to their family, settled in a new life with steady job, the economy of the United States was growing, commodity was available in abundant. The portrayal of typical American family in postwar era gives a clue of how stagnant life can be. Even though it is not explicitly stated in the novel that the characters rebel against the conformity America offers, it is implied in Part IV, particularly when the differences between the United States and Mexico are specified. Mexico in postwar era is depicted as a poor country with friendly people and exotic music, a picture Sal and Dean don’t find in the United States. They are awed by finding cultural differences such as lazy, tender policemen, many mothers with sick children in hospital, Mexican girls on the way home from working in fields, poverty-stricken teenage prostitutes, Victor’s family who deliberately grow marijuana, weird bugs stinging their skin, tap water is not available to drink, cars with no mufflers (so the horn sounds louder and more frantic in Mexican dense downtown traffic), and crucifixes and weeds are sold in alleys. These nonconformities make Sal and Dean discover human qualities, something rarely found in the United States: “There’s no suspicion here, nothing like that. Everybody’s cool, everybody looks at you with such straight brown eyes and they don’t say anything, just look, and in that look all of the human qualities are soft and subdued and still there.” (Part IV, Chapter 4, p. 283) Mexico is the epitome of what Sal calls “the end of the road”, and what Dean labels as “heaven”.

#### Data 12

Dean stood before him with head bowed, repeating over and over again, "Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes." He took me into a corner. "That Rollo Greb is the greatest, most wonderful of all. That's what I was trying to tell you—that's

what I want to be. I want to be like him. He's never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it."

"Get what?"

"IT! IT! I'll tell you-now no time, we have no time now." Dean rushed back to watch Rollo Greb some more.

(Part II, Chapter 4, p. 127-128)

The self-indulgence of the madness leads to Dean's question of the meaning of life, as in how Sal also questions the same focus. This is what brings them together in road trips searching for what Dean calls as "it". According to Dean's opinion, in order to find "it", he has to be like a particular person whom he wants to be: Rollo Greb, the "wild, ecstatic" friend of his.

Dean has also said that a blind jazz pianist, George Shearing, is "exactly like Rollo Greb" for Shearing's exciting, fascinating performance. Dean is so enthusiastic in seeing Shearing playing piano before his eyes, that he denotes Shearing as God. Not only does Shearing's performance leave a spiritual impression in Dean, Shearing's departure after the show also makes Dean in awe. This is seen from how even the empty chair the "God" has sat on has an impression of something spiritual in the form of silence.

Another jazz musician Slim Gaillard is whom Dean considers as God. Slim Gaillard is "a tall, thin Negro with big sad eyes" who always peppers up his singing and talking with "-orooni", which means nothing in particular. Dean is awestruck to interact with Slim.

Dean is depicted to wish to be Rollo Greb, whose excitement in life is what Dean wants to possess. They imagine themselves in other people's shoes, which they think they can fit in more than they do with themselves. The rebellion comes in the form of doing everything despite how futile it is, as long as it leads them to anything but a stagnant condition and situation of their life. They are trying to find themselves by rebelling against themselves first.

The basic question in life is: what is the meaning of life? This is what Sal and Dean try to find. The theme of spirituality is apparently contrast to several hedonistic behaviours behind bohemianism, however, the excessiveness of material things will

lead to a question of the importance of material existence. Bohemians rejoice life and revel in it so much; some will simply take it as relish, but some other will try to dissect about what is the point of all the things they are doing, and what is the point after having reached the point of all the things they are doing. Although *On the Road* implies hedonistic elements of self-indulgence and celebrates life with material aspects, spirituality is a highly noticeable theme in the novel. The most prominent part of this spirituality is the search for “it”.

The extrinsic elements found were taken from many aspects of Jack Kerouac’s biography. In this analysis below, one of the aspects shown is the similarities between Jack Kerouac and his pseudonym character Sal Paradise.

a) Being a Writer

Sal Paradise is portrayed as a young writer living in literary circles of New York City in the late 1940s, while Kerouac began pursuing his writing career by being involved in the groups of striving, young intellectuals, artists, and writers in the same era.

b) Rebellious Attitude

Sal Paradise gives up his college, saying his campus life “had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified”. He drops out and decides to write. Kerouac did drop out of Columbia University when his football career got soured, choosing to pursue writing career instead.

c) Vagabond Lifestyle

The novel clearly highlights the life on the road. This is what Sal has been through: wandering nomadically in many places across America, either by himself or with friends, especially Dean Moriarty. Kerouac also took road trips, particularly with his friend Neal Cassady (whom the pseudonym Dean Moriarty was modelled by) between 1947 and 1950.

d) Indulging on Marijuana and Bensedrine

Sal is depicted to take Bensedrine (or amphetamine, an addictive stimulant drug, was popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly used as creativity booster among artists

at the time). Kerouac was first introduced to Benzedrine in 1945, and had been taking it since.

e) Alcoholism

Alcoholism, or alcohol dependence, is exposed through Sal's frequent drinking. Kerouac himself was an alcoholic, and his death in 1969 was caused by hemorrhage due to long-term alcohol abuse.

f) Women and Affairs

Sal is indulged in sex; in this case, women play profound aspect of his indulgence. Kerouac had also had affairs with many women, particularly LuAnne Handerson, Neal Cassady's (Dean Moriarty) teenage wife.

## 6. Conclusions

From the analysis, it was concluded that the intrinsic elements of the novel reflecting bohemianism are plot, characters, characterizations, and theme. The characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty show bohemianism characteristics, such as their being struggling writers, their living in literary circle with writers and intellectuals, their wandering on road trips, their ignorance of social and moral rules, their indulge in hedonistic relish (parties, sex, drugs, and alcohol), and their spiritual search for higher truth ("it"). *On the Road's* bohemianism idea is exposed in the theme of freedom, rebellion, spirituality, friendship and trust.

The inspiration for Jack Kerouac to imply bohemianism idea in the novel is the author's own life. There is parallelism between Jack Kerouac and Sal Paradise, Jack Kerouac's background is identical to bohemianism, and Kerouac views of women also influenced the novel.

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