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A Modernist Analysis and Reading of *Big Sur*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the novel *Big Sur* to show how the writer engages his audience in an imaginative interpretation of the Modernist thinking. Following the stipulations of modernist aesthetics, this article explores the representations of the disruption of the established order and the paradigmatic shift that Modernism signals in *Big Sur*. Through a meticulous analysis of style and theme, the paper argues that while some critics view the novel as fraught with some pervasive nothingness, the novelist has a point to make, that is, people's search for something to believe in as the established order is being disintegrated or has undergone some degree of collapse. Despite the overwhelming advertently usage of strange language with a disruptive syntax in *Big Sur*, which may be disturbing in the reading process, Kerouac's novel remarkably typifies Modernist work of literature in terms of style and themes.

Keywords: Modernism, Jack Kerouac, Socio-cultural and political disintegration, allusion.

I. Introduction

Jack Kerouac was one of a group of American writers and thinkers who marked literary and artistic creation of the 1950s and 60s America. These artists known as the Beat Generation distinguished themselves in their shockingly free attitude towards drugs, alcohol, sex, music, and writing (Engel 258). Kerouac lived a lifestyle of hard drugs and drinking which ultimately took its toll on his body and mind. He became sick and disintegrated as he had to deal with reality of delirium when he tried to withdraw from alcohol. At the time of publication of *Big Sur* (1962), he was still consumed by alcoholism. Jean Marie Clifford recalls that Kerouac would not survive cirrhosis caused by his excess and indulgence in drinking because he later passed away in 1969, at the age of 47.

In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, one learns that before, *Big Sur*, Kerouac had published *On the Road* in 1957, a groundbreaking novel, which brought him fame. However, *Big Sur* hints at darker period of his life. It describes some delirious episodes and alcohol-driven nightmares in a visceral and intense manner. The narrative focuses on August and September of 1960, describing the novelist's time in San Francisco and in the woods of Big Sur, California in the cabin of a good friend and fellow Beat writer, Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Kerouac reveals himself with his revolutionary writing style in a number of ways. Indeed, prose style wise, the narrative is remarkable in its free-form thinking, free-association. Then grammatically speaking, the novel presents a lack of grammatical concern, which does not hinder its outstanding fluidity and rhythm, to cite a few of its characteristics.

Structure wise, *Big Sur* is divided into (38) brief chapters; this structuring makes the narrative fluid and helps the novelist to encapsulate each episode within his chapter divisions. Notwithstanding, the novel can be divided into three (3) big chunks based on Jack's three visits to Monsanto's cabin.

As the novel unfolds, the main character's (Jack's) mood becomes more and more pathetic, he seems lost and indulges in binging. Jack Kerouac's novel is fraught with "a pervasive nothingness" (Harma 1) and portrays a decadent world in which the protagonist, Jack Duluoz plunges in nightmarish episodes of delirium trying to find a savior and something to believe in which displays, as the narrative does, some amazing features of Modernism.

II. Modernism: A brief Overview

Beginning in the mid- and late nineteenth century, Astradur Eysteinnsson asserts, Modernism, as a concept has gained literary appraisal since it brings about a paradigmatic shift against the established literary and aesthetic traditions of the Victorian era. Though the term Modernism resists and defies definition, Peter Faulkner views it as all the different trends of art that appeared in the twentieth century. Modernism (a literary and art movement) distinguishes itself from the Victorian aesthetics by portraying society in a continual disintegration. "It refers," Nina Baym explains, "to work that represents the breakdown of traditional society under the pressures of modernity" (1803). Indeed, Modernist aesthetics "signals a historical change on the literary scene" (Eysteinnsson 3).

Though Modernism appears as an "*oppositional aesthetics*" (Eysteinnsson 4), It inherits

decadence and aestheticism (art does not need to have a moral purpose) that began in the Victorian era. Indeed, Modernist aesthetics exposes the world as a place where people strive to search for meaning because for the Modernists, “the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies” (Baym 1803). In a similar vein, Mariwan Nasradeen Hasan Barzinji opines that First World War had significantly influenced modern life as it made many people pessimistic, hopeless and worried (48). This feeling of loss and pessimism pushes people to look for something to believe in as the established order is being disintegrated or has undergone some degree of collapse. Kerouac’s novel remarkably typifies Modernist work of literature in terms of style and themes in the way it captures the Modernist mind and the prevailing assumptions that the existing political and social structures cannot hold.

III. Kerouac’s Aesthetics of Breaking Sentence Structure and allusions in *Big Sur*

Big Sur is a novel full with an unusual English syntax and littered with outstanding allusions.

a. Disrupted Syntax in *Big Sur*

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac’s style of writing may appear overwhelmingly strange to an average prose reader. Dave Engel in her review contends that Kerouac’s “prose was anything but spontaneous and was in fact highly-crafted on such models as natural speech and jazz music” (258-259). Indeed, the whole novel is written with disrespect of common English grammatical rules in terms of spelling and punctuation. To begin with, instead of complete English sentences with full stops, the writer uses some long dashes which may confuse the reader throughout the narrative. The following sentence, if we can call it a sentence, illustrates Kerouac’s unique style:

Big elbows of Rock rising everywhere, sea caves within them, seas
plollocking all around inside them crashing out foams, the boom
and pound on the sand, the sand dipping quick (no Malibu Beach
here). (Kerouac 15)

The spelling of the word “plollocking” and the lack of a conjugated verb in this passage show the Modernist attitude towards art. The display of the stream of consciousness through the use of disintegrated language mirrors the disintegrating world that the novel is about.

In a similar vein, the narrator does not follow the order, unity, or sequence that we know

as something paramount in the Victorian novel. Kevin J. Hayes categorizes Kerouac in the group of writers who write just like they speak. For instance, in the middle of his description of the beach and his experience during daytime he jumps to a Haiku as follows:

Summer afternoon –
Impatiently chewing
The jasmine leaf. (Kerouac 34)

This lack of transition matches the modernist style as the writer attempts to expose a restless quest for something to believe in. The novelist has a point to make and his words are not actually “futile attempts to communicate truths that were inexpressible” (Genter 27). Interestingly enough, Kerouac is not that interested in creating a ‘new literary aesthetics based on rhythms of human speech’ as claimed by Kevin J. Hayes rather, his disrupted language connotes the disruptive world that the novel is about. His words are, indeed, an artistic attempt to represent Modernist truths.

b. Allusions in *Big Sur*

Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* is one of the twentieth century novels that make use of noticeable allusions. The novel will become almost an empty space when one takes away the allusions from it. These allusions not only add to the literariness of that novel as a modern work of literature but also point at the modernist attitude and malaise that the writer attempts to share with his audience. Indeed, the employment of allusions in the work of literature, especially the way Kerouac does it, reveals the modernist dimension of his novel. Some of these allusions range from Emerson's “self-reliance” (Kerouac 30) to Blakean mysticism (Kerouac 36, 37, 41), especially when Jack says, “when I look into Joey Rosenberg's eyes I instantly realize it IS Him, Jesus” (Kerouac 73). However, his use of allusion becomes more pronounced with the “Second Coming” (Kerouac 73, 183), an allusion that he uses ironically.

The “Second Coming,” in many Christian theologies, refers to the anticipated return of Jesus to this world from Heaven. Indeed, in the Christian world view, Jesus is supposed to come back on earth for a second time to save humanity from calamity and the harshness of the Last Judgment. This return of Jesus is believed to accordingly fulfill the features of prophecy which

includes the Last Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and then God will establish his Kingdom on Earth, which some Christians refer to as "Reign of God" (Mat. 24:27, Cor. 15:23). This belief is an important element of Christian religion even though some Christian denominations, for instance, Full Preterists, refute it by contending that the event has already happened. In Islam too, there is reference to the second coming of Jesus, son of Mary, as stated in the following verse: "And (Jesus) shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment): therefore have no doubt about the (Hour), but follow ye Me: this is a Straight Way" (Koran 43:61).

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac artistically alludes to this religious event in an ironical way to portray people's skepticism about religion. A direct reference to the second coming is made in the novel when the narrator posits that Jesus is already back, he sees Him in the eyes of his friend Joey Rosenberg as he says:

"He" being Joey and all the disciples are following him on a march to New York after which they expect to keep going walking on water to the other shore – But of course (in my reverie even) I scoff and don't believe it (a kind of story daydream I often do) but in the morning when I look into Joey Rosenberg's eyes I instantly realize it IS Him, Jesus, because anyone (according to the rules of my reverie) who looks into those eyes is instantly convinced and converted – So the reverie continues into a long farfetched story ending with thinking I.B.M. machines trying to destroy this "Second Coming." (Kerouac 73)

The question is who those I.B.M. machines are; Kerouac may probably refer to the modern advancement in technology and science which causes some skepticism about religion. If Jesus is back, can he be assimilated to an ordinary human being? Can God be equal to man? This constitutes the paradox of this novel for many believers and its lack of religious morality.

Yet, by equating God to man and the destruction of the belief in the "Second Coming," Jack portrays the decline of Christian belief in some people. He urges his audience to contemplate the degradation of some fundamental elements of Christianity which is no longer a sustainable structure for many people. Unsurprisingly, right at the beginning of the novel, we can see Jack Duluoz saying, "the church is blowing a sad windblow "Kathleen"" (Kerouac 3),

and later he asserts, “you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil [,] and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness” (Kerouac 111). This demonstrates his inner lack of confidence in religion and that of other people in a much more broad meaning. It follows then that, the novelist ironically alludes to the “Second Coming” in a kind of parody, just in the same way he views other religious beliefs and socio-political institutions.

In his allusion to the “Second Coming,” Kerouac might have also read and have in mind William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” a poem which uses the Christian allegory to portray the same modernist attitude depicting a world in which “things fall apart” (line 3), a world full with disillusionment and skepticism about socio-political structures and a place where “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” (l 7-8). Indeed, Kerouac, like Yeats, views this world as in a gradual disintegration, especially when Jack Duluoz remarks that “God is really getting mad for such a world and’s about to destroy it” (Kerouac 183). In his effort of making fun of religion, Duluoz goes on to say, “The Second Coming, tick tock,” before he cries out “O hell, I’m sick of life” (ibid.). This way of viewing religion matches the modernist attitude towards the quest for meaning and something to believe in. Indeed, the “Second Coming” is one of those allusions that Kerouac utilizes to empower his artistic ability by depicting the modernist malaise and attitude towards religion. Kerouac, however, alludes to that Christian (or Islamic) belief to portray some disturbing skepticism regarding people’s faith and the ongoing falsehood of, if not the lack of sustainability of, religious structure and the quest for something to believe in which constitutes the key element of his novel.

Moreover, the way Kerouac alludes to the “Second Coming” deviates from its original meaning, at least for certain Christian denominations. The protagonist of the novel refers to the “Second Coming” in a funny way, almost showing the disintegration of religious belief of the modern world. He cannot see the possibility of any return of Jesus to earth as he has already seen Him in the eyes of his friend. The allusion to the “Second Coming” well fits in the general development of the novel and further helps the work to better portray the modern world attitude towards religion just like the way the novelist repeatedly refers to Blake and his mysticism.

There is no wonder that most of the allusions used in the novel coalesce to show the main character’s skepticism about the sustainability of religion, society, and politics. In them, the novelist represents the modern mind as a mind in search of refuge from the starkly mundane world.

IV. Themes in *Big Sur*: Modernist Attitude towards Religion, Government, and Institutions

Big Sur encapsulates many themes including madness, mortality, man and the nature, transformation, suffering, isolation, and spirituality. Jean Marie Clifford posits that the novel appears on the surface as a fictional rendering of true events in the life of its author, Jack Kerouac, a life damaged by excess in alcohol and drugs as he struggles to overcome his desperate search for innocence. Moreover, some critics like Tanguy Harma in her “A Sense of Dooming Boom: Kerouac’s Psychopathic Aesthetics of Speed in *Big Sur*” view in his characterization a move towards self-destruction and a style that makes the novel appear as a pervasive nothingness (1). However, a discerned reading of this novel would reveal it as a representation of modernist attitude towards religion, government, and institutions as opposed to the claim made by Tanguy Harma in her “All Wet Black Sunken Earth Danger: Cosmic Alienation and Disintegration in Jack Kerouac’s *Big Sur*” where she opines that the book is about “physical decay and mental annihilation” (3).

Religion wise, the quest for something to believe in along with modernist malaise constitutes one of the major themes developed by Kerouac in *Big Sur*. The novel opens with an atmosphere of sadness and melancholy along with a feeling of sluggishness. Indeed, right in the first sentence, the reader learns that “the church is blowing a sad windblow” (Kerouac 3). Then, later on Jack Duluoz posits that “you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil [,] and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness” (Kerouac 111). This implies the degradation of the sustainability of Christianity which some people no longer believe can fully offer hope and happiness. Also, in the narrator’s mother’s letter, she urges her son to “pray the real “God”” (Kerouac 51). This quickly brings to the mind the question: which “God” is the real one, The Catholic, Protestant, Buddha, and what else? In his search for sustainable religion, Jack Duluoz considers Buddha and its long-held myth about “lovemaking and eroticism” (Kerouac 76), but he later realizes that “Buddha just logically disconnected all creation, ...a chain of illusions” (Kerouac 77). In other words, the novel portrays Buddha worshipers as people who live in illusion; he is not a god that can bring solution to the modernist world. Thus, Buddha, too, is not worth to be worshiped; and probably is not the ‘real God’ that the narrator implies.

The novel further depicts the falsehood of, and the declining trust in, government and its institutions. Jack, for instance, questions the behavior of judges, army generals, and governors

when he posits:

Not so much that I'm a drunkard that I feel guilty about but that others who occupy this plane of "life on earth" with me don't feel guilty at all – Crooked judges shaving and smiling in the morning on the way to their heinous indifferences, respectable generals ordering soldiers by telephone to go die or drop dead... awful huge faced monsters of men just because their shirts are clean deigning to control the lives of working men by running for Governor saying "Your tax money in my hands will be aptly used. (Kerouac 166)

This demonstrates the modernist attitude towards the political institutions, as people's trust in these institutions declines due to the way the political actors behave. Jack goes even further when he asserts, "I felt completely nude of all poor protective devices... I have been fooling myself all my life... I'm just a sick clown and so is everybody else" (Kerouac 41). The expression "protective devices" here refers to the socio-political structures, which when working properly, protect common citizens from governmental abuse and other injustices.

However, the novel portrays the state of the judiciary system which uses "crooked judges;" the army with its incompetent generals; and the political leadership with its politicians, who are no longer different from "awful huge faced monsters" (Kerouac 166). The judiciary system, to begin with, when working under 'crooked judges' with 'heinous indifferences,' the judicial protection becomes subsumed by corruption which in turn leaves the citizens in insecurity. This exacerbates the feeling of malaise that the novel delineates.

In a similar vein, the army generals, who normally manage people's safety under a good security planning and management of their staff, have no effective tactical strategies. They indulge in a lazy sluggishness; the only thing they can do is to take their phones and give orders to soldiers as suggested by the block citation mentioned above. This brings in many casualties in the rank of their soldiers whom they send on the battle field just to "die or drop dead (Kerouac 166). Finally, the narrative represents people's disillusionment when political leaders have become monsters by lying to people on how they would manage their tax money.

These three elements mentioned above are normally the structures that would work

towards achieving people's welfare. Nevertheless, the narrator reveals that these structures have become weak and poorly implemented. This creates a feeling of being unprotected and unsafe on the part of the populace as suggested by the word 'nude' when Jack laments: "I felt completely nude of all poor protective devices" (Kerouac 41). Hence they are no longer protective and sustainable institutions.

V. Conclusion

The exploration of *Big Sur* from Modernist lenses reveals this novel as an illustration of Modernist art work. Indeed, the artistically crafted style and careful development of themes in *Big Sur* coalesce to make that novel a quintessential modernist literary work. It instantiates an artistic representation of the modern attitude towards art and literature. The novel does not have a clear (if not, any) moral purpose. Though the reader is just introduced to the bewilderment of a mind in search of meaning, Kerouac's impressive use of allusions points to the literariness and Modernist taste of the novel. To further stress the Modernist aspect of this novel, the editors of *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th edition, observe that "Kerouac's writings reflect a frenetic, restless pursuit of new sensation and experience and a disdain for the conventional measures of economic and social success" (<https://encyclopedia.2.thefreedictionary.com/John+Kerouac>).

Despite the presence of some bawdy language in *Big Sur*, Kerouac has achieved a certain degree of literary accomplishment through the amoral feature of, and the seeming lack of message in, his work. The reader just enjoys the novelist's craftsmanship and contemplates the main character's adventures and fate in his quest for a sustainable structure that he may believe in. The novel shows that the institutions that are supposed to help people achieve happiness and a good living no longer hold. Kerouac wittingly crafts his pessimism and that of the common Modern man by making his creation Jack Duluoz remark that "this world is "just an inhospitable madhouse of the earth" (106). Notwithstanding, The novel falls short to hint at the way out to the Modernist dilemma. Kerouac totally disregards the fact that one of the writer's missions should be to contribute to finding the solutions to contemporary challenges in their art works.

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