

Danny Lanzetta

In Defense of Jack Kerouac and Other Flawed Literature

Jack Kerouac isn't very popular on the Internet this week.

Despite Stephanie Nikolopoulos' claim in *The Millions* to the contrary, it isn't shocking that most women aren't enamored with Jack. Apotheosizing the grotesquely misogynistic Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*) into some sort of beatific saint would be enough to make Kerouac a pariah among feminists. But he also has a history of more subtle offenses, like turning women into idealized, romantic objects for his poetic nostalgia (Maggie Cassidy), or what Eftychia Mikelli calls the "fetishization of the exotic woman" (Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans*). There is a time and place to defend Kerouac's literary merit. (He's certainly not the only writer whose light has lessened under ethical scrutiny.) But that place is not here.

There is a misguided notion among many lovers of literature that a great book must somehow be wonderful in all aspects, as if an objectively "great novel" is something birthed whole from the holy womb (there's my Kerouac influence) of art, complete with compelling narrative, flawless dialogue, fleshed out characters and an acceptable moral center. In Amanda Marcotte's recent piece in *Slate*, "Women Aren't Dating Their Books," she writes, in response to Nikolopoulos' (admittedly stereotypical) assertion that women prefer Jane Austen because she writes men, like Mr. Darcy, who will "put a ring on it:"

"I have an alternate, though perhaps less interesting, theory: It's because Jane Austen writes clever books that are fun to read and *On the Road* is babbling nonsense that mainly appeals to men under the illusion that it's somehow daring to be disdainful of women."

Later, Marcotte critiques Nikolopoulos' inability to understand Kerouac's female characters as "just more evidence that Kerouac-haters are correct in thinking he can't handle characterization" and furthermore, Nikolopoulos is aligning herself with "a man who doesn't appear to think women can be relatable at all." Surely, very few would argue with Marcotte's basic premise that Kerouac, as a writer of women, leaves a lot to be desired. There are many instances in *On the Road* when it feels as if the female characters exist only as props for the men to use in their never-ending, self-indulgent pursuit of "kicks."

And to that I say: So what?

Simply put, one doesn't read Kerouac for clever female characterizations (male either, for that matter) or his progressive views on women any more than one would read Jane Austen for thematic variety. But there is room in the vast enormity of literature for books which excel so thoroughly in specific ways that their flaws, while acknowledged, become part of the allure. We can always argue about which books are the best ones. But outside of the walls of the formal academy, where fewer and fewer of the brightest minds are finding cover these days, most of what we like is simply that: what we like. We can invent theories to back up our preferences, as both Nikolopulus and Marcotte are guilty of in their pieces. But to dismiss *On the Road* the way Marcotte does, as "babbling nonsense," is ultimately a form of ignorance, the ignorance that comes when one reads literature as having some sort of moral responsibility. And not only that, a responsibility that must reflect the morality of a particular type of reader.

This doesn't mean there are no objective measures of literary quality, or that you can't find Kerouac morally and artistically repugnant. But his detractors consistently overlook--or outright diminish-- that he not only captured a zeitgeist moment of the 1950s for the restless souls (yes, usually men, because they had the privilege to be restless) sick of America's post-war conformity, but also hit the raw nerve that is the anxiety of the restless soul of everyone, everywhere. Forever and ever!

Another anti-Jack piece by Katie J. M. Baker on Jezebel this week states:

"Whenever anyone tells me they 'adore' *On the Road* -- which doesn't happen that often because I don't hang out with sixteen-year-olds -- I can't help but think she or he isn't particularly well-read, just eager to come off as adventurous, spontaneous, and/or sexy."

The first thing many critics, like Baker, do when they put down Kerouac is denigrate the most enormous aspect of his achievement: 50 years ago, he wrote a stylistically shocking and completely personal account of his search for meaning that somehow continues to resonate with the fundamental itinerancy of our youthful selves, that unbridled, narcissistic urge to be, go, live anywhere and everywhere at once. Is it "mature" writing? Probably not. But that word is used a lot in literary (and other) circles to check the impulses of the untamed, to judge feelings that don't necessarily fit in anymore with the routines we're all forced to adopt. Jack Kerouac dared to write down and validate those feelings that absolutely do not go away. It's part of what ultimately killed him. But instead of always criticizing his fans, the "sixteen-year-olds" (an exaggeration, anyway, of Kerouac's demographic), perhaps we ought to wonder why so many of us are so quick to ditch the beautiful madness of those youthful impulses.

Kerouac's work is undoubtedly sophomoric at times. He is hopelessly naïve about people, which sometimes leads to this and other times just comes off as laziness, a selfish desire to write the way he wanted to write and live the way he wanted to live, collateral damage be damned. But all of that is part of who we are as well. And his blemishes shouldn't diminish his other achievements. Literature is not philanthropy. We cannot--and should not--scrub out the ugliness, especially since exposing that ugliness is much of literature's value anyway. It's true that, sometimes, a person's books reveal things we're uncomfortable knowing about them. But Kerouac's work--not just *On the Road*, but also the lesser-known novels--is a testament, not to his own greatness (which is debatable), but to the greatness that can arise in the midst of, and possibly because of, a writer's artistic and personal failures. I, for one, refuse to dismiss anyone who is inspired by Jack Kerouac, in the same way I wouldn't dismiss otherwise terrific writers like Amanda Marcotte and Katie Baker, who, when it comes to Jack, miss the point.

Danny Lanzetta is an author and spoken word performer. His most recent novel is *Gadfly*. He is a professor of English and a former child actor. You can read more of his writings and rantings at dannylanzetta.com

www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-lanzetta/defending-jack-kerouac-an_b_1797698.html

08/17/2012 1:40 pm