Benson Long

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John Tytell

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Kerouac & Burroughs

Beat writers, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, recreated the modern style of narrative. Their distinct personas greatly attributed to their unique writing styles. Their writing in several books incorporates many literary devices that are unique to the authors. Moreover, there is an evident transformation of narrative when comparing their earlier and later novels. In particular, the four books*—Junky, Naked Lunch, On the Road, and Big Sur—*that are discussed here provide a glimpse at Burroughs’ and Kerouac’s style but do not tell the entire story. There are noticeable similarities between Burroughs’ and Kerouac’s writing, in part because Burroughs was Kerouac’s mentor, but the disparities between them portray the beat writers in a new light and reveal why the beat generation are so successful today.

The childhood experiences that Burroughs went through may have contributed why he wrote what he did. Having suffered sexual abuse by his nanny and mental trauma through nightmares, he was prone to having fantasies that were not what a child would normally have. Certainly, his encounters in Tangier and with drugs impacted his writing as well and ultimately is why his literature is labeled as terrifying and realistic.

Kerouac recorded his experiences in a different style. He focused more on the American lifestyle that was burdened by conformity and material wealth instead of the junky, non-American lifestyle that Burroughs had. Being a former Buddhist, Kerouac associated life with sadness and suffering. He was uninterested in literary perfection or anything that drifted away from realism. This firm belief of Kerouac’s was what led to the spontaneous writing style that he is famous for today.

The beat writers considered anything and everything to be viable for writing. As a result, a limitless number of subjects could be written about. This put Burroughs and Kerouac at opposite extremes of a spectrum where their purposes for writing contrasted considerably. Fundamentally, Burroughs’ writing was complex and hard to follow whereas Kerouac maintained a straightforward style. In fact, Kerouac’s easy to read style may have been why youth were more attracted to his novels over Burroughs’.

*On the Road* became the book that propelled Kerouac into prominence. The story documented in the novel would become a <mainstay> in the literary world and be associated with Kerouac whenever his name was mentioned. The defining facet of Kerouac when he wrote *On the Road* was his ability to write spontaneous prose. This style was his attempt at reverting to a form of simplicity that was no longer seen in modern literature. He wrote poetry on the side in spite of not having much recognition. Kerouac emphasized that little distinction should be made between his prose and poetry and this supported his simplistic approach to writing as ideal because in essence, writing was just another way for him to record down his thoughts.

On the other hand, *Big Sur*, one of Kerouac’s last novels, served as a denouement to *On the Road*. Unlike the <relaxing> tone with which *On the Road* was written, *Big Sur* feels like a carefully written novel that is lacking features of spontaneity that was seen in Kerouac’s earlier works. The changes in writing style are illustrative of the life style changes that Kerouac went through.

*Naked Lunch*, and not *Junky*, would become the book that people around the world would associate with Burroughs. Nevertheless, *Junky*, like *On the Road*, is Burroughs’ biographical account of his underground drug life. Like Kerouac, the storyline is written chronologically, starting from his beginnings in New York City and ending up in Mexico.

The language used by Burroughs and Kerouac is a first point of difference that separates the authors from each other. *Junky* is the only novel of the four to use argot and have a glossary at the end. The use of argot highlights that Burroughs lived in a closed group and that no one but Burroughs and other junkies would understand the secret language unless they were initiated into junk. In the prologue, he describes junk as a way of life. Burroughs describes to readers the reality of living as a junkie by exposing the secret language and detailing how it feels to be a junkie. He continued using slang in *Naked Lunch* which, along with other aspects of the novel, probably caused his own brother to throw away his book simply because he could not understand any of *Naked Lunch*. In spite of deconditioning himself through drugs, Burroughs wrote for a particular audience. His writing may have been an attempt in deconditioning the reader from the traditional style of writing. In his atrophied preface that is found towards the end, he alludes to the traditional and genteel by referring to readers as “Gentle” yet it was clear that *Naked Lunch* was far from traditional.

Kerouac, in order to deliver an “undifferentiated consciousness” that is typical of the mind, shies away from conventional punctuation and keeps it simple. His paragraphs are deliberately long and, without the interruptions of dialogue, can span an entire page or two. Much like a conversation, Kerouac writes down words that are easy to read and comprehend, as if they were words that just come to mind when picturing the scene: “Yes, and it wasn’t only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more, and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow, in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic” (*On the Road* 9). This sentence would be considered by most people to be a run-on and much too long. Nevertheless, what it lacks in is made up for in what it is effective at accomplishing. This extract demonstrates the same realistic imagery that is used by Burroughs. However, because of the long, breathless sentence, the effect of the imagery is diminished. Furthermore, the “sound” of the mind is made apparent as if one’s thoughts were transcribed onto the paper, word for word. The talent with which Kerouac had in manipulating punctuation and grammar animated his narrative to a new level. In contrast, *Naked Lunch*’s excessive use of ellipses throughout serves Burroughs a different purpose.

A defining characteristic of Burroughs’ writing was his use of two modes of polarity to induce a volatile feeling in the reader. When Burroughs described his first experience with junk, he did it with graphic and cinematic imagery: “… A huge, neon-lighted cocktail bar that got larger and larger until streets, traffic, and street repairs were included in it; a waitress carrying a skull on a tray; stars in a clear sky. The physical impact of the fear of death; the shutting off of breath; the stopping of blood” (*Junky* 13). Following his nightmare, he abruptly transitions to a new paragraph as if nothing happened. Similar to a movie, his narrative represented the building up of tension with sound increasing in volume and just as tension suddenly stops, so does the sound.

Cinematic imagery was balanced with realistic and perhaps terrifyingly accurate descriptions of objects and people. For example, Burroughs’ description of Mary was realistic yet causes the reader to doubt whether such a person would exist: “There was something boneless about her, like a deep-sea creature. Her eyes were cold fish eyes that looked at you through a viscous medium she carried about with her. I could see those eyes in a shapeless, protoplasmic mass undulating over the dark sea floor” (*Junky* 19).

A recurring motif in Burroughs’ works is the fear of insects. Insects are responsible for decomposition of the dead body and naturally have a negative implication. Burroughs avoided writing about events that had already happened but strived to write the now and predict the future. These aspects made it seem as if his novels were science fiction. “So this man walks around in the places where he once exercised his obsolete and unthinkable trade. But he is unperturbed. His eyes are black with an insect’s unseeing calm. He looks as if he nourished himself on honey and Levantine syrups that he sucks up through a sort of proboscis” (*Junky* 111).

Burroughs was far from one-dimensional and balanced the prevalence of realism and terror in his writing with parody. He belittles the ‘fags’ in queer bars and describes them as “puppets on invisible strings” (*Junky* 73). The ‘fags’ are dramatized in an attempt to parody the zombie-like, homosexual stereotype that was popular in the 1950s. Burroughs magnifies his use of parody in *Naked Lunch* through Doctor Benway and the farfetched practices that occurred in the operation room. “Thought he was on the farm cleaning a chicken. I told him to go put his head back in the oven, where upon he had the effrontery to push my hand, severing the patient’s femoral artery. Blood spurted up and blinded the anesthetist, who ran out through the halls screaming” (*Naked Lunch* 27). This scene can only be thought of as comedic and anything but realistic. Burroughs furthers his comedy act with a menu that contains “Clear Camel Piss Soup with boiled Earth Worms” and a “Limburger Cheese sugar cured in diabetic urine…” (*Naked Lunch* 125). Not only is the menu ridiculous, but customers are reluctant to protest because of an intimidating *Chez Robert*. Burroughs writes his book as if it were a seesaw that rocks back and forth excessively with parody on one end and realism on the other.

The element of character development seems to be nonexistent in *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*. The lack of a dedicated protagonist with the exception of characters that made reappearances like Doctor Benway served to highlight the science fiction and documentary realism aspects of the books. With no main character to follow, a technique of fragmentation is possible and effective. The fragmentation frequently seen in *Naked Lunch* may have been accidental but contributed to the seriousness of the message that was being conveyed. Much like a kaleidoscope, everything that happened in *Naked Lunch* was unexpected and in disarray because that was what Tangier represented at the time: a mess. The dystopian world of interzone meshes perfectly with the atmosphere Burroughs created and that is a dark and horrific one in which the future is realistically dictated by a technological evil.

Kerouac does the complete opposite and has the reader follow the development of characters in his novels. A point of view that the reader can actually understand is provided. “I’ve fallen asleep in a strange way, with my hands clapsed behind my hand thinking I’m just going to sit there and think, but I’m sleeping like that, and when I wake up just one short minute later…I’m sitting smiling in the sun, the birds sing again, all’s well again” (*Big Sur* 187-188). The prolonged sentence paragraphs offer insight into the mind of the character and what their personalities are like as if the reader has known them for years. The following sentence is just a five word sentence: “I still cant understand it” (*Big Sur* 188). Kerouac juxtaposes an incredibly long paragraph with a daringly short one and leaves the rest for interpretation to the reader whereas Burroughs would have presented the reader with a list of complex ideas and even more complicated arrangement of those ideas. The vastly different approaches that Burroughs and Kerouac have in expressing their ideas is in the minute details.

*Big Sur* is the novel that reveals the evolution of Kerouac as a writer. John Tytell in *Naked Angels* best describes the biggest flaw of Kerouac and his writing style by saying “that spontaneity is lost in the retelling” (*Naked Angels* 209). Whether it was the passing time that took its toll on his mind or the culmination of excessive drinking, Kerouac presents readers a new narrative style in *Big Sur*. Despise for the illiterate and allusions to symbols with negative connotations like death became common: “I suddenly look at the fish and feel horrible all over again, that old death scheme is back only now I’m gonna put my big healthy Anglosaxon teeth into it and wrench away at the mournful flesh of a little living being that only an hour ago was swimming happily in the sea…” (*Big Sur* 169). One may dare say that Kerouac, towards the end of his life, was more relatable to Burroughs in writing than ever before.

The differences between Burroughs and Kerouac create a clear distinction between them as novelists. However, it is also true that these differences are what brought the two together as friends. Their talents and struggles established the legacies they left behind. The special thing about the beat generation is how they all shared a common goal but the routes each member took towards that goal were exceptional. Unfortunately, the merits of Kerouac and Burroughs could not have been fully appreciated in the four works that were analyzed. The geniuses that were Kerouac and Burroughs is reflected in their entire collection of narrative and reading all of their stories would prove that they were masters of their trade.