

Mad to be Sincere:
Authenticity, Irony, and Kerouac's Response to Modern Reality

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the School of English and Modern Languages
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

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16 April 2015

Liberty University
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Master of Arts in English

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to:

Dr. Baggett, for patience, encouragement, and attention to detail;

Dr. Towles, for logical insight and unbridled honesty;

Dr. Babcock, for giving initial direction and for the insightful dialogues;

My mother, for instilling in me a love of literature;

Luca Coppa, for careful instruction and developing my voice;

My family, for the constant prayer and support;

My roommates, for helping me find balance;

Yemisi, for your love, support, and willingness to listen.

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Introduction

At first glance, the notion of a connection between Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and the ideas of David Foster Wallace and Lionel Trilling seems like a non-sequitur. Kerouac's semi-autobiographical novel deals with the travels of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in their quest for transcendent meaning. Trilling (1905-1975), a New York Intellectual, was a literary and cultural critic whose interests spanned from Matthew Arnold's poetry and Freudian psychoanalysis to the literary history of sincerity. Likewise, Wallace (1962-2008), as an author, essayist, and social commentator, was critical of television culture in the late twentieth century and campaigned for a renewed sense of sincerity, resulting ultimately in the movement of New Sincerity. However, the three authors relate in their treatment and discussions of sincerity. Specifically, each is concerned about the difficulties associated within sincere writing in late twentieth century American culture, and this concern presents a common thread between the authors.

Each author promotes the use of sincerity in literary writing that treats its subjects with "reverence and conviction" (Wallace 192)—a literature that believes what it attest and presents, as Trilling states, "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2). And through the congruence of the author's feeling with his attestations, they assert that works of literature can be sincere. *On the Road*, however, predates the writings of Wallace and others within the New Sincerity movement,¹ yet the novel possesses characteristics central to both Wallace's ideas on

¹ The New Sincerity is a relatively young movement. Barry Shank in *Dissonant Identities* notes that Jesse Sublett first used the term in 1984 to describe alternative bands against the irony of punk rock (148). Interestingly, New Sincerity's relation to music resonates with Kerouac's incorporation of jazz as a sincere aesthetic in *On the Road*. Moreover, Magill contends that the term evolved to include other aspects of art and culture (200). This New Sincerity focused on rediscovering the ideal of sincere communication in a postmodern ethos that subverts and precludes attempts at sincerity. Magill notes that the "New Sincerity movement began . . . as an effort to move beyond the ironic/cynical postmodernism . . . as the prevailing sensibility" (200). Hence, it is a direct response to postmodernism and works to remedy some of the central problems associated with postmodern thought. According to Magill, "New Sincerity tried to invent a . . . new sentiment, one that would encompass both the credibility of irony and the earnest" (200), and writers in the New Sincerity movement present this fusion in their works.

sincerity as well as Trilling's traditional notions of sincerity. Wallace and Trilling had different ideas regarding the nature and enactment of sincerity, and some aspects of the novel resonate with Trilling's traditional understanding of sincerity while others point towards Wallace's contemporary ideas. Through studying *On the Road* as a sincere novel, we see a level of complexity within a novel that has suffered from a wealth of negative criticism. Ultimately, this revelation illuminates the novel's literary value. This thesis, then, will focus on uncovering the ways in which Kerouac's novel both resonates with the traditional qualities of sincerity while likewise anticipating the New Sincerity of Wallace and other contemporary critics.

The notion of sincerity, as a congruent representation of the true self to an *other*,² has made a resurgence within contemporary literary discourse; while once considered banal, trite, and even saccharine by the modernists, the rising interest in sincerity has burgeoned into the movement known as The New Sincerity. Spearheaded by contemporary authors like David Foster Wallace, New Sincerity proliferated in the 1980s and has carried over into the early twenty first century. At its basis, New Sincerity reacts against the rise of postmodernism and the problems postmodern ideas create in terms of honest communication through language. Artists within this movement seek to faithfully convey an honest feeling to an audience, rather than rely on ironic revelry or self-glorifying prose.

However, as a concept, sincerity is grounded firmly in both cultural and literary history. From historically being considered an aspect of "a moral life"³ to functioning as a requisite for

² Sincerity involves an expressive subject—a self, speaker, or writer—capable of communication. In this scenario, then, *other* refers to the non-subject, an entity outside of the subject, receiving its expressive communication. This understanding resonates with the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* definition of *other*: "being the one or ones distinct from that or those first mentioned or implied" ("Other"). For sincerity to occur, the subject must be intent on communicating true feeling to an *other*, and this *other* must judge whether the expression is sincere.

³ See Trilling's connection of traditional sincerity with morality in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (2). According to Trilling, the quality of being sincere—a man's trueness to himself and consequently his trueness to others—was widely considered to be an aspect of an individual's morality. Thus, to Trilling, by being sincere, a man is likewise being moral both within himself—by being true to himself—and within society—through the avoidance of deceiving others.

good literature, sincerity's influence on both art and culture is undeniable. Philosophically, sincerity finds its basis in the ideas of Aristotle in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Here, he defines sincerity in its relation to truthful communication and honest behavior, regarding its nature as being "truthful both in speech and conduct when no considerations of honesty come in, from a habitual sincerity of disposition" (102-3). Likewise, to Aristotle, the sincere man possesses "moral excellence" and is a "lover of truth" while avoiding falsehood (103). While Aristotle's treatment of sincerity deals with its rhetorical nature, his notions also apply to language. Rather than a speaker being "truthful both in speech and conduct" (102), sincerity in language deals with the self's truthfulness in both attestation and feeling. Regardless, inherent in Aristotle's notion of sincerity is its moral nature.

Yet, within the New Sincerity movement, sincerity has come to designate an amoral understanding of the term. This sincerity differs from traditional understandings—as a means of communicating meaningful truth—in both its motive and its function within literary texts; rather than seeking to sincerely communicate a cogent truth in literature, New Sincerity produces a sincerity that is neither grounded in nor concerned with the moral obligation of truth telling but rather focuses on facilitating honesty through the earnest belief in a contradiction. In other words, New Sincerity indeed wants to say something—even if that something is devoid of objective truth.

This discussion of New Sincerity stems directly from the leveling effects of late modernity on literary and cultural history. Specifically, prior to the modernist era,⁴ sincerity had been a fixture of what Trilling calls "a moral life" (2), dating back to Aristotle. Trilling notes that sincerity predates the Elizabethan period and was a central aspect of nobility and morality

⁴ Trilling marks the modernistic period as the beginning of sincerity's decline as an ideal due to the rising interest in the author's "persona" in a text along with the devaluation of truthful communication as a literary objective (6-7).

awithin western ideology (12). Yet, in the early twentieth century, the aspect of performance central to sincerity—the motive of appeasing an *other* by being sincere—compelled modernist authors to repudiate the primacy of sincerity in favor of authenticity: a sole concern with the self and self-exploration. Trilling notes that through both the elevation of the writer to the position of artist and the relegation of the text to an aesthetic object, modernist writers embraced authenticity in their works (6-7).

While the notion of authenticity did not trump sincerity until the twentieth century, authenticity, like sincerity, is rooted in antiquity. Specifically, Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* proposes a specific type of inward turn that is central to authenticity. Couching his discussions in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the eternal nature of the soul, Augustine asserts that man should turn inward, within himself, to find truth (49). Likewise, in *The Soliloquies*, Augustine expands on this point: “Trust Truth. It cries out that it dwells in you, that it is immortal . . . Turn away from your shadow, and return to your inward self” (60). While twentieth century authenticity espouses this belief in the inward nature of truth, this modern authenticity rejects Augustine’s divine-based notion in favor of a self-centered framework.

In addition to authenticity, the arrival of modern iconoclasts like Nietzsche and his ideas regarding the will to power and the creation of social values independent of objective morality, combined later with Derrida and the breakdown of the signifier/signified binary in language, created more problems for sincerity. These notions fostered a cultural and literary context in which attempts to validate communication through sincerity were often perceived as either articulations of power—such as political manipulation—or antiquated, clichéd, and, ultimately, futile efforts to communicate intent in language.⁵

⁵ Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith provide a detailed picture of this context in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*. Through focusing on “Declining Sincerity” as a means of discussing a modernist culture in which

As a result of the apparent impossibility of conveying objective meaning in a literary text, postmodern authors resorted to irony over sincerity or authenticity as the primary mode of literary expression. The postmodern era brought about a class of literature that is exceedingly self-referential, self-indulgent, and ironically derivative, thus, fostering a literary atmosphere where it is almost impossible to say—with complete sincerity—what you truly mean. Roger Scruton refers to this form of postmodern irony as “pre-emptive kitsch”: “Such art eschews subtlety, allusion and implication, and in place of imagined ideals in gilded frames it offers real junk in quotation marks” (“The Great Swindle”).⁶ And while this variety of irony is effective in both avoiding the sentimental and fostering cultural criticism, a culture built on irony consequently precludes the ability incite cultural improvement through honest communication. Scholars like Wayne C. Booth have commented that the ultimate job of the ironist is to expose the contradictions and hypocrisies within society; he must first presuppose that reality is not the way it ought to be and then set out to ridicule and subvert the current status quo (224). Hence, irony’s function is solely critical. However, as David Foster Wallace notes, “Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage” (183). In the late twentieth century, Wallace and other New Sincerests sought to remedy the issue of irony in both culture and literature.

Interestingly, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) anticipates the New Sincerity of Wallace and his contemporaries in the 1980s and 90s by both responding to an American culture drifting towards irony in the 1950s and exhibiting the characteristics of New Sincerity as a mode of literary expression. Thus, the forthcoming discussion will focus on conveying the ways in

“subjects actually decline to participate in the culture of sincerity” (4), they provide further explanation for the cultural and literary conditions that brought about the decline of sincerity.

⁶ Works such as John Cage’s piece “4’33,” Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ,” and Andy Warhol’s pop art fit within Scruton’s definition of ironic, “pre-emptive kitsch.”

which Kerouac's seminal novel exudes the qualities of sincerity—not only sincerity in traditional sense but also a sincerity without predication in or concern for objective reality and ultimate truth, a New Sincerity foreshadowing that of Wallace. Furthermore, this amoral sincerity resonates with the work done by authors within the New Sincerity movement and exists as an early reaction against the overtaking powers of irony in the postmodern era. While Kerouac's call for sincerity is ultimately trumped by the rise of irony as a mode of literary expression in the early stages of the postmodernism that followed him, his novel is nonetheless significant insofar as it recognizes both the inadequacy of authenticity as well as the central problems of irony before it came to dominant art and culture.

The novel responds to the post-war conformity, modern malaise, and empty prosperity of 1950s American culture with a sincere message; Kerouac encourages his readers to strive for liberation from a culture that came to embrace unquestioning conformity as an ideology. His novel deals with marginalized individuals searching for a sense of enlightenment through cultural subversion, drug use, jazz music, and—most importantly—travel. Central to the novel are the themes of identity, the self, and realizing meaning within the universe, and these themes run opposite to the dominant culture of the 1950s in America. Thus, it is important to note that Kerouac's novel exists within a historical context defined by pseudo-prosperity. M. Keith Booker notes that the fifties present the rising issues of commercialization, advertising, conformity, and affluence for the dominant social class—white upper-middle class Americans (2). While, on the surface, this culture appears stable, beneath this façade exists postwar paranoia, anti-communist propaganda, and the looming, indefinite threat of atomic warfare. Allen J. Levine in *Bad Old Days: The Myth of the 1950s* provides some aspects of the decade's internal tension: “The Cold War, McCarthyism, racial segregation, self-satisfied prosperity and

empty materialism, coupled with ignoring poverty and other social problems, complacency, conformity, the suppression of women, and puritanical attitudes toward sex” (1). While much has been said about the culture of the fifties, one notion seems to encompass the era as a whole: that it was an embodiment of hypocrisy—a culture that ideologically displayed a disparity of appearance and reality.

Such a culture is a prime target for irony, and critics like Wallace have made the case that *On the Road* is ironic in its attempt to subvert the dominant culture of that time period. Indeed, the novel does expose many hypocrisies within the dominant culture of the fifties, and many have pointed out that Kerouac’s call to “cut loose”⁷ is so naïve that it must be taken as irony. Others, like Trilling, have made the case that the novel—as a reflection of the Beat Generation—embodies authenticity and that Kerouac’s focus is primarily on the exploration of the self in complete isolation and in opposition to others.

However, *On the Road* is neither authentic nor ironic, and such readings overlook primary aspects of sincerity that are central to the novel—the congruence of avowal and feeling in the aesthetic qualities of the text, Kerouac’s concern for honest communication, and the novel’s earnest treatment of its central contradiction. Ultimately, Kerouac’s novel presents a microcosm of the notions of irony and authenticity as ideologies within his characters, and Kerouac posits that neither irony nor authenticity is an adequate response to modern society.

In crafting his characters, it is important to note the influence of existentialism on the novel; specifically, Kerouac is writing in an era consumed by an existentialist ethos. While deriving many of its ideas from the nineteenth century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard,

⁷ John Updike, in his introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy*, expresses his disapproval and resentment over Kerouac’s “apparent instruction to cut loose” (x) and states that he originally wrote *Rabbit Run* as a reaction against the ideas expressed in *On the Road*.

existentialist thought primarily flourished in the twentieth century, spearheaded by figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger. According to Holman and Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*, existentialism's "significant fact is that we and things in general exist, but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning through acting upon them" (203). While critics differ regarding a concrete definition of existentialism, at its core, existentialist thought deals with the individual, his consciousness, his radical free-will, and his ability to create meaning in reality. Sartre provides a more succinct definition in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. He posits, "What they [existentialist critics] have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence" (20). Here, Sartre suggests that an individual's being—his creation of value, meaning, and identity—informs that individual's nature. In other words, the human self does not possess meaning independently but creates meaning through its consciousness. Ideas like these permeated culture in the 1950s, and Kerouac would have been aware of them in his writing when depicting sincerity, authenticity, and irony in the text. And, while authenticity is related to existentialism, Kerouac presents the shortcomings of this self-centered approach and instead campaigns for sincerity.

However, the main claim here is not solely that Kerouac's novel is sincere, but that it anticipates the movement of New Sincerity through its recognition of the cultural predicaments of the twentieth century through the novel's earnest treatment of contradictions. Like the New Sincerists, Kerouac confronts the problems of dehumanization, conformity, and modern malaise created by the rise of television, consumerism, and advertising in popular culture. His characters seek to repudiate these concerns and attempt to restore a sense of purpose, humanity, and meaning within their lives. Kerouac does not tackle these issues in a hyperbolic, ironic, or esoteric fashion; rather, he represents the honest journey for intimacy, purpose, and inspiration in

an increasingly impersonal modern world. The issue of sincerity lies not in the characters' search for their true selves but in the cogent representation of these selves to the reader and the earnest conveyance of the futility central to their quests.

Thus, in order to articulate *On the Road*'s connection to Trilling and Wallace's views on sincerity, this thesis must make some assumptions regarding the nature of sincerity: (1) that sincerity is capable of being expressed in language and is perceptible in a text; (2) that subjectivism⁸ is valid in regards to discussions of the self's ability to express itself; (3) that sincerity both possesses moral value and is a moral virtue. These assumptions are necessary in understanding the notion of sincerity within both the modern and the postmodern realm. In making judgments regarding the sincerity of a text, we must be able to perceive the traits of sincerity in the text itself. This perception of sincerity is contingent on the recognition of the self and its expression to others; likewise, the aspect of truth central to sincerity—the honest communication of what one actually feels to an *other*—points to its moral nature. With these assumptions in mind, we may seek to gain an understanding of *On the Road* as a sincere novel and as a work, in a sense, ahead of its time, in its depiction of ideals central to the movement of New Sincerity.

The discussion of *On the Road*'s sincerity will be threefold. First, I will provide a framework for the topics of sincerity—both traditional and New Sincerity—irony, and authenticity to apply to *On the Road*. Next, I will articulate the multiple aspects of sincerity in the novel through a discussion of its formal qualities. And, finally, I will examine the novel's

⁸ While subjectivism will not be exhaustively discussed in this project, the notion is important for understanding the possibility of sincere communication. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* provide a concise definition of the term: "This notion [Subjectivism] assumes that we, as individuals, have an "inner self" responsible for our conduct, performances, and speeches—in effect, all the ways in which we manifest ourselves to others" (3). Thus, subjectivism is concerned with the existence of the individual as a subject capable of expressing itself to others.

presentation of irony, authenticity, and sincerity in its content through both discussing the characters' differing responses to the disaffection within the novel's modern context and highlighting the suffering that results from the incorrect responses to modern reality.

While the communication of suffering within the novel is sincere, Kerouac's communication is devoid of an objective truth. The novel is not concerned with sincerely conveying truth but rather with depicting the earnest belief in a conscious contradiction. What Kerouac accomplishes in *On the Road*, in regards to anticipating New Sincerity, is a fusion of the earnest and the ironic. His ultimate message regarding the novel's quest for transcendent signification is that realizing the futility of the journey—the fact that Sal and Dean fail to achieve their desires in their travels—does not disqualify the journey's value. And this earnest presentation of this contradiction resonates with the notions of the New Sincerity

Chapter 1: On Traditional Sincerity

*“Below the surface-stream, shallow and light,
Of what we say we feel—below the stream,
As light, of what we think we feel—there flows
With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,
The central stream of what we feel indeed.”*

—Matthew Arnold

Introduction

Ultimately, sincerity, authenticity, and irony are concerned with the nature of both intent and feeling vis-à-vis the attestations of the true self. In discussing the topics of sincerity, irony, and authenticity, it is necessary to presuppose that this true self—the central locus of what drives a human being—exists and is capable of expression. In the introduction to *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal discuss this issue of the self’s ability for expression through the term “subjectivism” which assert that the individual’s inner self engenders all external manifestations—specifically, actions and speech (3). This belief in what Adam Kelly calls an “expressive subject” (“Dialectic of Sincerity”) is necessary in discussing sincerity, authenticity, and irony because each deals with the relationship between the subject—the speaker—and what it expresses. Claire Colebrook in *Irony* echoes the importance of subjectivism, asserting that “behind language, actions, difference and communication there is a ground or subject to be expressed” (20). Sincerity, authenticity, and irony, then, are simply manifestations of the subject’s expression—the attestations of the inner self. This inner self consists of the essential core of a human being, and questions of irony, authenticity, and sincerity revolve around the means of self-expression to an *other* through language.

Beyond the belief in the subject's ability to express itself linguistically, sincerity, authenticity, and irony deal with the exact nature of what the self expresses and how this expression is conveyed. Ultimately, each topic either emphasizes or deemphasizes the importance of the true feelings that an individual may hold and the ability to communicate these feelings to an *other*. Matthew Arnold points out just this in his untitled poem in which he posits that, beneath an individual's pretense and even consciousness, lies the principal core of his true feelings—the essence of what that individual feels most deeply and desires to express. The difficulty, however, arises in the means by which we communicate this feeling—namely, the subject of language. For instance, Adam B. Seligman in “Modernity and Sincerity: Problem and Paradox” expresses the difficulty that language poses for sincerity communication: “The need to establish society and morality on the basis of sincerity, though, runs into a deep problem. How can we express true sincerity except by filtering it through the social conventions of language? How are we to know if people's professions of sincerity are genuine or just acts of hypocrisy, representations of their true self or just what they would say ‘as if’ they were sincere?” (59). While Seligman is specifically discussing sincerity here, his thoughts on the problems associated with and language—namely, the potential for deceit—are pertinent to authenticity and irony as well. Just as we must discern sincerity through language, we must also perceive an individual's authenticity or irony through language which creates difficulty in terms of objective judgment.

Because, in literature, the means by which a subject expresses itself and its deeply held feelings is through language, the manifestations of this expression may differ. Fundamentally, sincerity, authenticity, and irony each treat differently what Arnolds calls “the central stream of what we feel indeed” (line 5). According to Lionel Trilling, an expression is sincere if it exhibits a “congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2), insisting that sincerity involves truthfully

conveying this true feeling to an *other*. Conversely, Trilling, Kelly, and Charles Taylor contend that authenticity involves isolated self-examination as opposed to self-expression to and communication with an *other*—the idea that an understanding of the self is more valuable than *other*-driven communication. Subverting both sincerity and authenticity, however, is the topic of irony—particularly in the postmodern sense— which, to David Foster Wallace and to Wayne C. Booth, precludes the self’s ability to communicate with an *other* and isolates the self within a cynical outlook. Ultimately, these notions—sincerity, authenticity, and irony—exist throughout literary history; however, within the last fifty years, these ideas have found renewed interest through the topic of New Sincerity—a movement arising in the late twentieth century which seeks to remedy the issues surrounding authenticity, irony, and traditional sincerity—in order to convey the similarities between this contemporary movement and Kerouac’s novel.

“The Public End in View:” Towards a Traditional Understanding of Sincerity

As a term, Sincerity is multifaceted: it can relate to both things and persons, to both works of art and interpersonal communication. As one of the most prominent modern thinkers on sincerity, Lionel Trilling offers a cogent definition of the term in his seminal work *Authenticity and Sincerity*: “The word [sincerity] as we now use it refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2). In Trilling’s view, sincerity requires the subject to mean, or actually feel, what it asserts, and, through this congruence, convey a truthful message. Similarly, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines the term as “the quality or state of being sincere: honesty of mind: freedom from hypocrisy” (“Sincerity”). These definitions point out the result of sincerity: the revelation of a form of truth. Ultimately, the word, dating back to the

sixteenth century (Trilling 12),⁹ has come to encompass a larger meaning. While the goal of revealing truth is central to sincerity, an in-depth study of sincerity raises questions relating to the self, language, and the manner in which we communicate. Moreover, we may apply the label to many things: people, literary texts, and all forms of communication may be called sincere. However, the difficulty arises in defining exactly what sincerity is, how it functions, and the means through which it manifests.

The topic of sincerity, in Trilling's understanding, is grounded in what he calls "the moral life" (2), meaning the cultural standard with which human beings conduct themselves in an upright and appropriate manner. In this rationale, the existence of sincere communication is contingent upon the congruence with which an individual conducts himself in a moral manner—both within himself and within society. Thus, being sincere, in a sense, means remaining true to a moral ideal. Trilling consents that modern culture proliferates the belief that "the moral life is in ceaseless flux and that the values, as we call them, of one epoch are not those of another" (1); however, he likewise implies that literature often dislodges this belief in the mutability of moral understanding.

Ultimately, Trilling predicates his discussion of sincerity on the objective of enacting a "moral life," and he proposes a somewhat objective understanding of morality. Trilling posits that, by looking to the great literature of the past, we may derive an understanding that the perceived moral differences between one epoch and another are less striking than first believed. To Trilling, "We all know moments when these [moral] differences, as literature attests to them, seem to make no difference, seem scarcely to exist" (1-2). Thus, Trilling contends that one of

⁹ To Trilling the birth of the word sincerity runs parallel with the rise of the individual (24). In order for sincerity to occur, the speaker must recognize himself as an autonomous individual self rather than a uniform piece of a larger social order.

the functions of literature is pointing out the moral similarities central to human life in general. He asserts that good literature subverts the belief in moral relativity as an extension of cultural difference, rather, implying that good literature's effect is to "put to rout, or into abeyance, our instructed consciousness of the moral life as it is conditioned by a particular culture" (2). This sort of literature ultimately rejects a relativistic morality by affecting us on an innately human level, intimating an unchanging human nature and a unified morality as opposed to a relativistic one. Trilling's belief in a unified moral standard within literature, however, is not unqualified; he consents that changes may occur in its representation but only changes in the manner with which the core moral ideal is revealed. Ultimately, while particular aspects of "the moral life" may change—due in large part to alterations in societal and cultural standards—the core essence of this moral ideal, in Trilling's estimation, remains fixed, and traditional sincerity is rooted in a faithfulness to this ideal.

Trilling's faith in the fixity of a moral standard derives from Friedrich Von Schiller's ideas regarding the "ideal man." In *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller states, "It may be urged that every individual man carries, within himself, at least in his adaptation and destination, a purely ideal man. The great problem of his existence is to bring all the incessant changes of his outer life into conformity with the unchanging unity of this ideal" (5). If there is a true ideal moral nature within man, then, to Trilling, sincerity first involves a desire to be true to this ideal. Hence, through a faithful attempt to understand his own true nature, Trilling argues, a man will come to realize the sort of noble morality that great literature reveals.

Thus, first, traditional sincerity is predicated in the desire to exercise "a moral life," and while the impetus for traditional sincerity is aligning with a moral standard, the manifestation of sincerity involves the process of communication—both verbally and literarily. For instance,

Alphen and Bal discuss the moral quality central to sincerity: “Traditionally, sincerity concerns a natural enactment of authenticity anchored in, and yielding, truth” (1). In Alphen and Bal’s estimation, truthful action engenders a truthful result; specifically, their mention of authenticity does not refer to the philosophical idea of authenticity—a topic that will be explored later in this chapter—but to the trait of remaining true to oneself. *Hamlet’s* Polonius echoes this notion of sincerity as truthful feeling in action:

This above all: to thine own self be true
 And it doth follow, as the night and the day,
 Thou canst not then be false to any man. (I. 3. 78-80)

Here, Polonius has a moment of revelation that goes beyond the foolish nature of his character: “He has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained” (Trilling 3). Specifically, Polonius’s words suggest that by being true to himself, man will be true to others—a harmony between what he says and what he feels—and this internal coherence within himself will preclude him from deceiving others and compel him towards a moral life.

To Trilling, the congruence of internal intent and external articulation produces a sincere message, and while the congruence of feeling and attestation is predicated in the enactment of “a moral life” through the goal of being true to others, sincerity itself is not a timeless moral value. That is not to say that being sincere is not morally valuable but that sincerity—as moral virtue—is contingent upon the notion of selfhood and, thus, is not a transcendent concept. In order to be true to others, one must first be true to himself, and this trueness to the self requires knowledge of the self as an autonomous individual. In fact, in discussing the topic of autobiography, Trilling suggests that the rise of sincerity was contingent upon man recognizing himself as an individual:

“at a certain point in history men became individuals” (24). Thus, in order to be true to the self and in order to be true to others by congruently articulating “actual feeling,” one must first recognize his selfhood—a notion tied to “a certain point in time.” Trilling admits to the fluidity of sincerity by stating, “at a certain point in its history the moral life of Europe added to itself a new element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity” (2). Here, Trilling consents to that fact that sincerity is not a transcendent moral value but that its rise runs parallel with the progression of a society. Thus, despite being grounded in the idea of “a moral life,” the issue of sincerity does not arise historically until the rise of the notion of the self.

Thus, when discussing sincerity, a congruence of feeling and attestation, we must focus on the aspect of true feeling which is central to the self. Seligman argues that sincerity “presupposed a self that could be fully grasped, a whole and complete inner state that could be judged for what it was, saved or damned, regenerate or unregenerate” (57). Like Polonius’s admonition, one must first know himself and be true to himself in order to be true to others. However, the judgment and enactment of sincerity is much less clear cut than Polonius’s words lead one to believe. For the listener, in order to discern whether a message is sincere, he must first judge the validity of the individual self who communicates this message. Alphen and Bal comment on this problem: “The issue engages a binary opposition of the starkest kind. Either the lover or friend is sincere and relational bliss follows; or he or she is outright lying, thus entailing a plot of insincerity and deception off which many a novel feeds” (1). Hence, when an individual communicates a message, the hearer must make a judgment concerning the intent of the person with which he communicates. For the person wishing to sincerely communicate, however, he must first judge whether or not he is in fact being true to himself.

Within Trilling's definition, the individual seeking to communicate with sincerity must have a keen knowledge of his true self, predicated on a desire both to convey truth and to behave morally. For sincerity to occur, one must first be true to his own self; however, Trilling contends that "it is not easy" (4). Often, like Arnold's poem, "the central stream of what we feel indeed" (5) is intangible and ineffable. While Schiller believes that all men recognize an ideal archetype of a man, neither he nor Arnold provides a logical means by which to achieve this end. Even Trilling consents that the process of recognizing the true, ideal self is more complex than it may seem: "If sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self, we can see that this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous effort" (5-6). The difficulty regarding understanding the true self lies in the means by which one recognizes its manifestation. In order for someone to be true to others, he must first be true to himself, and this characteristic is epistemologically difficult at best. How can one know whether or not his thoughts reflect his true feelings or if he is self-deceived and his feelings artifice? Because the topics of the self and self-actualization are central concerns in *On the Road*, the manner in which Kerouac articulates the self within the novel is significant due to the resonance between Kerouac's treatment of the self and the qualities of sincerity. Specifically, the novel both echoes aspects of traditional sincerity while mirroring some of the difficulties of being sincere.

Ultimately, the notion of being true to one's own self, or recognizing one's actual feeling for the sake of sincere communication, is difficult to achieve due to the possibility of different selves within an individual—namely, the binary of the private and public self and the self-deceptive knowledge of one's true self. First, regarding the public and private selves, Trilling contends, "I know that it [the public self] coexists with another self which is less good in the

public moral way but which, by very reason of its culpability, might be regarded as more peculiarly mine” (5). Thus, the sincere individual must discern his true self beyond his public and private selves. He must recognize the essence of his personality beyond the societal roles he may play. For Kerouac and his novel, these concerns manifest in both the novel’s autobiographical qualities and in the narrator Sal Paradise’s treatment of the self. Secondly, regarding self-deception, Anne Ozar in “Sincerity, Honesty, and Communicative Truthfulness” articulates the possibility that an individual may unconsciously fake sincerity: “Faking Sincerity involves a specifically self-referential type of deception; it involves deception about one’s own inner experiences, about oneself” (344). The inner experiences of the self may color one’s knowledge of himself; one may believe himself to be greater or lesser than he truly is. Likewise, this emphasis on knowledge of the true self is apparent in *On the Road*’s focus on self-discovery within a modern reality of confusion and disaffection. Thus, the issue of the self, vis-à-vis the topic of sincerity, engenders many difficulties in discerning the sincerity of an individual’s communication.

Yet, beyond the difficulties of deciphering one’s true self, Trilling’s notion of traditional sincerity reduces to a strikingly simple understanding: one should be true to his own self as a means of being true to others—rather than as an end in itself. Thus, while the initial emphasis lies on the individual in discerning his true self, this endeavor makes possible the consequence of being true to other people. Granted, within the notion of sincerity, the self plays a vital role; however, an individual’s attempt to know his true self must always maintain what Trilling refers to as a “public end in view” (9), which focuses on the ultimate effect of truthfulness to the self—truthfulness to others. There is a social aspect, then, that is central to the topic of sincerity; the emphasis and ultimate effect of sincerity is an honest communication with an *other*. Kerouac

appears to echo this quality of sincerity throughout *On the Road* by attempting to facilitate a dialogue between his narrator and the reader. Likewise, Trilling espouses this social aspect of sincerity with sincerity's moral effect in imbuing the *other* with a level of importance: "The moral end in view implies a public end in view, with all that this suggests of the esteem and fair repute that follow upon the correct fulfilment of a public role" (Trilling 9). Because sincerity deals with the enacting "the moral life," and the moral aspect of sincerity involves a truthfulness to others, the moral quality of sincerity is likewise its public quality. Moreover, in Trilling's estimation, this understanding of sincerity would become "a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years" (6). If one says what he believes, then he is both being true to himself and others, and this truthfulness fosters communal and societal improvement.

However, for Trilling, the supremacy of sincerity would not go unquestioned. At the start of the twentieth century, he asserts that society came to regard the public aspect of traditional sincerity as inauthentic. Trilling articulates that society demands that we project an impression of ourselves as being sincere beings. He asserts that the best way of accomplishing this projection is by actually being sincere—that we are who we profess ourselves to be. However, in satiating the societal demand to be sincere by being sincere, "we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity" (Trilling 11). In other words, in a modern context, roleplaying and performance are inescapable byproducts of sincerity; our understanding that society requires sincerity ensures that manifestations of sincerity cannot bypass the questions of performance and intention. Trilling argues that this occurrence fostered doubt regarding the possibility of true sincerity within a modern context, for, when individuals perceive the act of sincerity as a social

performance, sincerity itself becomes ostensibly impossible (11). This sort of compartmentalization of roles within sincerity—the temptation to act a part in order to please an *other*—presents one of the serious criticisms of sincerity in the twentieth century. John Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943), for example, levies a strong critique against Trilling’s understanding of traditional sincerity:

If candor or sincerity is a universal value, it is evident that the maxim ‘one must be what one is’ does not serve solely as a regulating principle for judgments and concepts by which I express what I am. It posits not merely an ideal of knowing but an ideal of being; it proposes for us an absolute equivalence of being with itself as a prototype of being. In this sense it is necessary that we make ourselves what we are. But what are we then if we have the constant obligation to make ourselves what we are, if our mode of being is having to be what we are? (101)

Ultimately, Sartre posits that an individual’s awareness of his sincerity necessitates his own insincerity and qualifies as what Sartre refers to as “bad faith” (101)—a repudiation of true individual agency for the sake of an ignorant assimilation to societal conditions. It is in this vein that Sartre asserts, “The essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith” (109). Because an individual’s desire to be sincere—for the ultimate goal of pleasing others—may compel him to behave within a certain role, Sartre dismisses sincerity outright. In this vein, *On the Road* seems to be conscious of the aspect of role-playing and performance within sincerity through its depiction of the conformity and uniformity of the dominant culture, and a remedying this issue manifests as a primary focus of the novel’s sincerity.

Moreover, within literature, this public aspect of sincerity—specifically, the temptation to role-play in order to please an *other*—increased the potential for kitsch art in the early twentieth

century and served to precipitate the demise of sincerity within literary discourse. As Roger Scruton in “The Great Swindle” explains, “The early modernists . . . were united in the belief that popular taste had become corrupted, that banality and kitsch had invaded the spheres of art and eclipsed their messages” (n.pag.). Out of the desire to role-play to please an audience, the public aspect of sincerity devolved into kitsch representations. Scruton describes the severity of this anemic artistic environment: “Tonal harmonies had been trivialised by popular music; figurative painting trumped by photography; rhyme and meter was the stuff of Christmas cards; the stories had been too often told. Everything out there, in the world of naive and unthinking people, was kitsch” (n.pag.). In response, “the great modern masters [became] preoccupied with personal concerns, with the self and with the difficulties of being true to it” (Trilling 7).

In other words, for the twentieth century modernists, the emphasis shifted from sincerity to a self-consumed authenticity. Where literary works once sought to reflect the “moral life” by faithfully conveying true feelings to an audience, literature in the early twentieth century came to reflect a more solipsistic understanding of reality. Trilling cites James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as being emblematic of the sort of authenticity central to modernist literature, asserting that they have no public aspect—“no manifest polemical intention” (106)—but instead deal intensely with self-reflection and the individualism of the autonomous self. Rather than seeking to be true to others—readers—a great deal of the works of the modernists sought strictly to focus inwardly on the self.

Chapter 2: Understanding Authenticity, Irony, and the New Sincerity

“What passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human . . . is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic.”

—David Foster Wallace *Infinite Jest*

“To Thine Own Self be True”: Examining the Tenets of Authenticity

While sincerity enjoyed supremacy as a characteristic of a moral life for over four hundred years, by the twentieth century, sincerity had begun to decline, overtaken by the ideal of authenticity—the belief that truth to the self is an end in itself rather than a means. Particularly, the manifestation of this sort of authenticity in Kerouac’s novel necessitates an understanding of the concept. Questions surrounding the topic of sincerity in the twentieth century provided the avenue through which authenticity ascended as an ideal within literary and popular discourse. Specifically, Trilling’s contemporary Henri Peyre in *Literature and Sincerity* (1969) outlines some of the questions surrounding sincerity in the early twentieth century, noting the highly complex nature of sincerity as a reason for its decline. Peyre’s central question regarding sincerity is “[c]an literature be sincere?” (306), and he asserts that this question only raises more questions regarding the nature of sincerity:

Sincerity is to be understood on several levels: aesthetic (Does language necessarily betray? Does technique imply artifice and distortion?); psychological (Does sincerity to oneself ever penetrate into all that, in ourselves, lies hidden from us, impervious to analytical probing?); social (Is our social self to be slighted? Or do truth to others and the commitment of the author to wider groups constitute higher duties than those to ourselves . . . finally moral (for sincerity is

about the only criterion which has withstood the recent reevaluation of our ethical standards undertaken by literature). (306-7)

Questions like these, engendered a distrust in traditional ideas like sincerity and fostered a concern for the more personal qualities of the self central to authenticity. Trilling, Charles Taylor, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard have all provided theories regarding the term and have commented on its implications.

Ultimately, however, it is vital to treat the notion of authenticity as a broad idea, possessing consistent tenets and characteristics. Like sincerity, authenticity can be applied to both persons and things. Regarding objects, the word authentic usually implies a notion of originality—an authentic Beatles record, for instance, would be one of the original records released during the Beatles' tenure. Likewise, we can use the term authentic Persian rug with confidence that this phrase has little possibility of being misunderstood. While the authenticity of objects possesses a rather straightforward definition, the authenticity of a work of art—as opposed to the literal object of art itself¹⁰—or the authenticity of a human being is far more complex.

Whereas sincerity requires an individual to be true to himself as a means towards the end of being true to others, authenticity emphasizes the trait of being true to the self as an ultimate end. Trilling provides an explanation for the differences between authenticity and sincerity by emphasizing both authenticity's elevation of the self and its rejection of social concerns. He contends that defining authenticity is no easy task and that authenticity, in its nature, resists

¹⁰ When discussing the term authenticity in regards to art specifically, we can easily understand that the phrase “authentic Edvard Munch painting” refers to a work of art that was actually painted by the expressionist painter Munch himself; this clarity is due to that fact that the phrase is dealing with the authenticity of the literal object of the painting. Furthermore, the linguistic meaning of the label “Certificate of Authenticity” is usually not heavily debated. However, designating the authenticity of the art itself—Munch's depiction of the self and self-examination within the art itself—is less straightforward.

specific definition. However, Trilling proposes the broad notion that authenticity suggests “a more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’ does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life” (11). To Trilling, then, authenticity involves the moral experience of knowing the self and being true to the self in opposition to society—the self as a radical individual. According to Trilling, the advent of authenticity incited a reconsideration—and often a rejection—of the traditional virtues that once made up the nature of western culture (11).

Trilling notes that authenticity came to power in the early twentieth century with the rise of modernism. Modernist authors repudiated Wordsworth’s notion that poets were “men speaking to men” (qtd. in Trilling 7) and instead campaigned for the idea of the poet as a persona—an artist exploring his innermost self. Specifically, Modernism navigates the concerns about representation by developing critical theories that separate the author from the text—moving towards authenticity and away from sincerity.

For instance, the theories of New Criticism, specifically the fallacy of intention,¹¹ propagated the belief that viewing the author of the poem and its speaker as the same person was bad criticism and that the author’s intention and historical situation had no bearing within the literary work itself. Trilling contends that “[t]heir [the modernist authors] achieved existence as artists precluded their being men speaking to men, from which it follows that the criterion of sincerity, the calculation of the degree of congruence between feeling and avowal, is not pertinent to the judgment of their work” (7). Rather than viewing the self of the author as a storehouse of knowledge whose purpose is to supply others with truth, the self within modernism

¹¹ The essay “The Intentional Fallacy” by W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley states that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (468).

became an island, existing only for the authors own exploration. Accordingly, Trilling states, “The great modern masters [were] preoccupied with personal concerns, with the self and with the difficulties of being true to it. . . [They] were at the same time very strict in the insistence that the poet is not a person at all, only a persona, and that to impute to him personal existence is a breach of literary decorum (7-8). This sort of impersonality is logical considering the prominent literary theories circulating during the early twentieth century. New Criticism and its intentional fallacy, formalism’s militant emphasis on aesthetic, and Roland Barthes “Death of the Author” fostered a literary climate in which a work of literature existed more as an aesthetic object than as a communication of intent voiced by an author.

The principal difference, then, between sincerity and authenticity is the fact that sincerity’s end is *other*-centered while authenticity’s is self-centered. Adam Kelly observes this difference in his essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” emphasizing the centrality of communication within sincerity and self-expression in authenticity: “Whereas sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others . . . authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than *other*-directed communication” (132). Because authenticity prizes the inward feelings of the individual, the *other* that is a priority in sincerity is subsumed by the self and its ability to define and govern itself in opposition to those around it.

Thus, the rise of authenticity in the twentieth century removed the communal, communicative aspects of sincerity in favor of subjective monologue of selfhood. In this vein, both sincerity and authenticity exist within what Kelly refers to as a “surface/depth model” (133). By “surface,” Kelly is referring to observable action such as speaking or writing. Conversely, by “depth,” Kelly means the internal feelings of an individual. Sincerity distinctly

maintains a balance of both surface and depth. The phrase “I love you,” for example, is only sincere if the speaker actually believes what he or she says. First, on the surface, sincerity requires an attestation—a proclamation of intention or motive by the author, the words “I love you.” Second, sincerity preserves a harmony of depth within the self—the self actually feels or believes what it protests. This balance of surface/depth manifests a sincere message. However, authenticity displays as discord within the surface/depth model. Authenticity, instead, emphasizes a depth of internal feeling—an exploration of the author’s actual, internal self isolated from others. Yet this process disregards the surface aspect of the binary—the attestations of the work itself—thus, neglecting the public aspect central to sincerity. For instance, in *On the Road* the character Dean Moriarty embodies the notion of authenticity by viewing himself as the sole means of purpose and signification in the novel; his concern is only for cultivating a knowledge of the self, disregarding any concern for, and communication with, others. Authenticity’s disharmony within the surface/depth model not only prioritizes the exaltation of the self but also precludes the social aspect of communication and instruction that sincerity affords. For Kerouac, this sort of authenticity leads to despair and isolation because it cuts off the individual from those around him.

Whereas the inspection of the self within sincerity engenders a presentation of truth to an *other*—a person or readers—authenticity instead focuses solely on uncovering that “central stream of what we feel indeed” (Arnold 5), repudiating all conditions external to the self. This form of authenticity resonates with the negative aspects of modern individualism Charles Taylor refers to in *The Ethics of Authenticity*: “The dark side of individualism is the centering on the self which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society” (4). Like Trilling, Taylor’s authenticity is espoused with the elevation of

the self and the devaluation of the communal. Specifically, Taylor understands authenticity in terms of individualism: “Authenticity is a facet of modern individualism, and it is a feature of all forms of individualism” (44). However, unlike Trilling, Taylor believes forms of authenticity can be redemptive, yet his admission regarding the “dark side of individualism” shows his consciousness of the problems central to authenticity.

Again, for authenticity, any awareness of a public self—a self in relation to others—becomes associated with the inauthentic. Ultimately, within the modern framework of authenticity, the notion of the public self, “again an important characteristic of sincerity, becomes associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty” (Kelly 133). Moreover, Heidegger’s notion of the “ownmost self” along with the introspective confessional poetry popularized in the late modernist period only added to the privileged nature of the self in literature. Ultimately, due to the association of the public aspect of sincerity with dishonesty in the modernist period, the notion of sincerity itself became an antiquated notion, which is why “[w]hen we hear it we are conscious of the anachronism which touches it with quaintness. If we speak it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony” (Trilling 6). And, thus, authenticity ascended to primacy consuming the works of modernist authors like Eliot, Joyce, and Conrad. However, authenticity has not enjoyed the long reign of that of its predecessor, and, with the rise of the postmodern era, has given way to far less personal method of literary discourse. Hence, as Kelly notes, “with the rise of poststructuralism in the academy, and of postmodernism in the arts, the surface/depth model of the self assumed by both sincerity and authenticity would soon be superseded by the privilege afforded to the inaugurating powers of capital, technology, and especially language” (133)—namely, the subject of irony.

The Problem of Postmodern Irony

While Kelly connects the rise of irony in literary representation and popular discourse to the ascension of postmodernism, Kerouac represents several aspects of this sort of irony in his novel as a response to modern reality. Granted, Kerouac's novel is not postmodern, and designating it as such would be anachronistic; however, qualities of irony in the novel mirror qualities of postmodern irony. Thus, the discussion of postmodern irony is relevant to understanding Kerouac's representation of irony. Irony connects to authenticity and sincerity in its subversion of the two concepts. Irony both precludes sincere communicating and inhibits true knowledge of the self.

While not all forms of irony produce these negative effects, postmodern irony deviates from irony's moral purpose. In his treatise on the subject *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne C. Booth comments that "[f]or reasons I cannot pretend to fully understand, irony has come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether" (2). What Booth seems to anticipate here is the rise of postmodern, institutionalized irony that has become emblematic of the postmodern era. Moreover, viewing postmodern irony as an extension of television culture and capitalist exploitation, Wallace, in his famous essay "E Unibus Pluram," showcases the damning effects of cynical, postmodern irony within both literary and popular culture, highlighting irony's contribution to cultural decay.

That is not to say that irony has no positive characteristics. Irony, in its traditional sense, produces many beneficial effects. Moralists such as Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, and Flannery O'Connor have incorporated what Booth refers to as useful or "stable irony" as a method of collective moral instruction (27). In literature, this sort of irony finds its roots planted deeply in the canon, tracing back to the writings of Socrates. The key to stable irony, as Booth identifies it,

is the question of intent; the reader must be able to discern from the context of the text the double message that the writer is attempting to convey: “Some statements cannot be understood without rejecting what they seem to say” (1). Essentially, irony reduces to a deliberate disparity of appearance and reality in language—a consent by the author that he does not actually mean what he says—which leaves the reader to approximate its secondary message. Holman and Harmon define irony as “[a] broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance. . . Its presence may be marked by a sort of grim humor and ‘unemotional detachment,’ a coolness in expression at a time when one’s emotions appear to be really heated” (254). This variety of irony lends itself to moral instruction because it both points to the author’s intent and “reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds that contradicts a great deal that gets said about who we are and whether we can know each other” (13). Through a unity of both intent and perception, readers may glean a moral message through this sort of irony in order to gain a collective benefit.

Ultimately, this sort of stable irony is predicated in a “supreme moral justification” which presupposes that the current world is not the way it ought to be (Booth 224). The moral ironist observes a fault in the world and attempts to correct that fault via language. This is irony of O’Connor’s misfit, of Swift’s proposal, and of Twain’s witticisms. However, not all irony seeks to convey a moral message, and when irony is enacted for its own sake, the results can be alarming. This circular irony is the irony of postmodernism and is the sort of irony Kerouac presents as inadequate in his novel.

Booth refers to this sort of cyclical irony as unstable irony—language that is espoused with the ironic but is both deliberately indistinct and devoid of authorial intent. He asserts that, without pursuing the legitimate end of intending to say something, the writer of irony will not be

effective: “Even an artist who works hard to improve the quality of each half-perception is inevitably constrained from anything like the perfection of ducks or rabbits that he could achieve if his intention were not to be an illusionist” (128). Thus, where stable irony attempts to compel readers towards a moral message through deliberately not meaning what it says, unstable irony only pulls readers back into the irony itself, emphasizing the cynical, the absurd, and the nihilistic instead of pointing readers to a truth beyond the artifice. In this way, unstable irony precludes the communicative aspects of sincerity while likewise negating the earnest self-examination of authenticity. Rather than conveying a sincere message to an *other*, unstable irony does not convey a message beyond its critique. Likewise, instead of authentic self-discovery, this irony is stuck within its critical, cynical nature.

Within the postmodern era, when the validity of discourse, ideas, and language itself has been subverted by poststructuralism and deconstruction, the notion of conveying a truth in a text seems laughable at best—let alone the idea of pointing to a truth outside of the text through irony’s double meaning. Thus, this unstable irony becomes synonymous with what Wallace calls “postmodern irony” (165). Wallace has said much about the crippling effects of postmodern irony; however, his arguments focus on the ramifications of what happens when irony becomes institutionalized as the predominant mode of communication within a culture and when an individual appropriates this irony as a philosophical outlook. While *On the Road* does not deal directly with societal institutionalized irony, the novel addresses the ramifications of holding this irony as a cynical personal worldview.

Wallace believes that irony, while at one time useful in showcasing the corruption of American society, has devolved into a form of circular irony—evoking cynicism rather than social correction. He defines irony as “exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant,

between how things try to appear and how they really are” (182). While this definition may appear to emphasize irony’s capacity for social correction, Wallace sees irony as being symptomatic of the cultural decay in the postmodern era. He contends that irony, when over extended, has negative consequences:

Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks. (183)

To Wallace, the predominance of advertising in conjunction with the image-based discourse of television has created a culture stunted by circular irony with no aim at social correction. The television shows of the eighties and nineties,¹² for Wallace, exemplify this sort of futile irony. These shows were endlessly self-referential, rife with double-entendre, and overtly conscious of the fact that they never actually meant what they say. While at one time, ironic punchlines would invoke awareness of a larger issue, over time, this tactic became self-indulgent. In this way, the shows no longer evoked a socially instructive effect and instead reveled in their own irony. This quality of irony is applicable for individuals as well—specifically in *On the Road* through the cynicism of particular characters.

Moreover, within the circularity of postmodern irony, Wallace asserts that postmodern culture has co-opted this ironic stance as a form of self-defense against valid modes of inquiry. He postulates that postmodern irony has become a defense of the indefensible:

¹² Shows like *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *Alf* fit within Wallace’s criteria for jaded, cynical irony.

Today's irony ends up saying: 'How very banal to ask what I mean.' Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its content is tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself. (67-8)

Within this framework, both aspects of sincerity—avowal and true feeling—are indecipherable, buried beneath self-referentiality and recondite logic. Moreover, harnessing irony as a defense against criticism is a topic within Kerouac's novel, and Kerouac, like Wallace, portrays the futility of this stance.

In regards to postmodern irony, the question that Wallace posits is how can we, within the postmodern era, regain the ability to actually say what we mean when the predominant method of discourse subverts sincere attempts at communication? Within this scenario, any semblance of the wholeness of the inner self found in both sincerity and authenticity is absent. For Wallace and the New Sincerity movement, the answers to this inquiry lie not in a complete regression to the traditional sincerity of Trilling or the authenticity of the modernists but in a redemption within postmodern literature (Kelly 134). This redemption, this New Sincerity, attempts to recover the validity of sincere expression through an amalgamation of the earnest and the ironic, illuminating the possibility for sincerity even within a postmodern reality—even if it demands a sincerity unfounded in truth. Interestingly, Kerouac's novel mirrors these concerns. The novel's depiction of irony highlights irony's limited nature when applied as a cynical outlook and presents an alternative to this worldview. In this way, Kerouac anticipates the ideas central to the New Sincerity movement.

The Earnest, the Ironic, and the New Sincerity

As a movement, New Sincerity is relatively young, and, thus, criticism on the movement is limited; however, there exists enough contemporary commentary on the topic in order to understand its focus. Ultimately, a study of New Sincerity illuminates that the movement is concerned with regaining a sense of sincerity in art—literature, in particular—through a fusion of the earnest and the ironic. In this way, New Sincerity deviates from traditional understandings of sincerity because, within New Sincerity, the object is not necessarily in revealing a cogent truth. Rather, contradictions are central to New Sincerity as is apparent in its amalgamation of earnestness with the ironic. Interestingly, the reconciling of contradictions is a central concern for Kerouac's novel, and Kerouac's ideas surrounding this reconciliation are similar to that of New Sincerity. Thus, both *On the Road* and the New Sincerity involve the earnest treatment of an ironic subject and, in this treatment, recognizing its value.

The New Sincerity first appeared towards the end of the twentieth century. Jonathan D. Fitzgerald in his book *Not Your Mother's Morals: How New Sincerity is Changing Pop Culture for the Better* clarifies that the term “dates back to the mid 1980s” (175) and describes a movement “in which the postures of ironic detachment and cynicism have receded in popular culture and given rise to a spirit of earnestness” (175). The New Sincerity movement, then, is a direct response to the ironic postmodern milieu that Wallace describes in “E Unibus Pluram” and focuses on discovering a way to regain a sense of honesty within popular discourse and artistic representation. R. Jay Magill in his book *Sincerity* echoes this notion, stating that the movement began “as an effort to move beyond the ironic/cynical postmodernism . . . as the prevailing

sensibility” (200). Ultimately, this consciousness of the problems surrounding postmodern irony is the impetus for the New Sincerity movement as a whole.

The manner in which New Sincerity works to regain this sense of sincerity is through fusing the earnestness of traditional sincerity—a “congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 2)—with the ironic environment of postmodernism. Many of the ideas regarding the enactment of this New Sincerity stem from Wallace’s final admonition in “E Unibus Pluram” in which he proposes a return to sincerity:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘How banal.’ Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. (192)

Wallace’s concern for “single-entendre values” and “reverence and conviction” resonate with Trilling’s belief that sincerity involves actually believing in what one professes. This tactic, as Wallace notes, involves the risk of sentimentality and banality in a postmodern culture that has

difficulty taking anything seriously. However, this New Sincerity is more complex than a simple congruence of true feeling and attestation.

Rather, pulling from Wallace's proclamation, this New Sincerity manifests through the earnest treatment of an ironic subject. Jessie Thorn was one of the first to articulate this fused understanding of New Sincerity. Thorn uses the stuntman Evel Knievel as an example of New Sincerity's fusion of earnestness and irony. To Thorn, Evel Knievel exemplifies the qualities of New Sincerity by embodying both the earnest and the ironic in his own nature. He asserts that "[t]here's no way to take Evel Knievel literally," pointing to his gaudy attire and his exaggerated nature as a stuntman (qtd. in Magill 200). However, Thorn maintains that "there's no way to appreciate Evel Knievel ironically. He's too awesome" (qtd. in Magill 200), suggesting that Knievel presents something between both truth and contradiction. Here, Thorn contends that, regardless of Knievel's ironic nature, Knievel is both earnest and true in the fact that he actually does what he professes. He is both ironic in his nature and earnest in his actions. Magill calls this quality of New Sincerity the "sentiment of earnest yet ironic" (202). This notion implies the fact that the subject recognizes the contradiction of his own sincerity—the fact that he understands the ironic nature of his belief, yet he likewise treats it with earnestness. Ultimately, then, New Sincerity implies that the recognition of a contradiction does not necessarily negate its value.

Within literature, this fusion of the earnest and ironic fosters, for Kelly, a dialogue between the author and the reader, thus, resonating with the communicative, public aspect of traditional sincerity while possessing the complex nature of the New Sincerity movement. Again, the complexity surrounding New Sincerity stems from the topic of language—specifically, the consciousness of sincerity as a performance mediated through language. Kelly articulates this point, stating that Wallace's New Sincerity focuses on "combining the cultivation of sincerity as

a poetic value with an awareness of the materialistically determined construction of sincerity as a convention” (“Dialectic of Sincerity”). Here, Kelly asserts that New Sincerity involves the recognition of sincerity’s construction as a linguistic convention while simultaneously acknowledging its value. Kelly’s idea is clearly contradictory, for how can one believe in sincerity’s value while also recognizing its fabricated nature? Yet, regardless of the issues of language and sincerity’s construction, the recognition of the contradiction and the belief in its value is both earnest and ironic.

Moreover, this New Sincerity is communal in its ability to foster a dialogue between the author and a reader through the earnest projection of this contradiction. In this vein, Kelly asserts that the presentation of this earnest contradiction—the belief in sincerity’s value while recognizing its construction—“relinquish[es] the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgment” (145). To Kelly, the earnest presentation of contradictions compels the reader to make sense of this presentation. He argues that this process attempts “to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do” (145). In this way, New Sincerity resonates with the *other*-driven focus of traditional sincerity by welcoming the reader to take part in the conversation in reconciling the earnest contradictions of an author’s work.

Kerouac’s novel, while written before the articulation of these ideas, in fact, resonates with this process of facilitating a dialogue between author and reader through the presentation of earnest contradictions in the novel itself. In this aspect, Kerouac’s work anticipates the ideas of New Sincerity as well mirroring traditional notions of sincerity. Ultimately, the topics of sincerity, authenticity, and irony each manifest within *On the Road*, and Kerouac utilizes these

topics to discuss the proper and inadequate responses to modern reality. Through understanding the complexities of the topics of sincerity, authenticity, and irony, then, we may better seek to understand the complexities of *On the Road* itself.

Chapter 3: The Aesthetic Sincerity of *On the Road*

“That was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn’t know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and the footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds.”

—Jack Kerouac *On the Road*

Introduction

According to Trilling, in its traditional sense, sincerity involves “a congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (2). Within this definition, however, are imbedded questions regarding the possibility of the self recognizing this “actual feeling” or the tenability of language in conveying the inner feelings of the self. These concerns, echoed by both Trilling and Kelly, primarily deal with the ramifications of modern thought on sincerity. Because *On the Road* exists within an ethos where the possibility of truly sincere communication was unlikely, critics see the novel as either an ironic subversion of 1950s American culture or an authentic, introspective study of selfhood¹³. However, *On the Road* is neither ironic nor authentic in its treatment of the issue of the self in regards to other-driven communication; rather, Kerouac imbues the novel’s aesthetic with sincerity—both in its traditional sense and its new understanding—through the writing style itself. Whether through the novel’s autobiographical qualities, Kerouac’s formal incorporation of

¹³ Wallace believes the *On the Road* exists as a message of irony against the hypocrisies of the fifties, working to subvert the dominant ideas of the culture. Conversely, Kelly sees the novel as being consumed by authenticity because of its close proximity to modernism: “And the initial reactions to modernism—the existentialist and absurdist literature of mid-century Europe (which we might note draws its bearings from Heidegger’s notion of authenticity as a concern with the ‘ownmost self’ [*eigenste Selbst*]), as well as American Beat writing and confessional poetry—only added to the privilege afforded to authenticity, in that any demonstrable awareness of a public self, again an important characteristic of sincerity, becomes associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty” (133).

Jazz, or the earnest depiction of the self in writing regardless of its impossibility, the aesthetic of *On the Road* points to its sincerity. Moreover, each aspect of the novel's sincere aesthetic qualities fosters communication with an *other*, echoing the public, communicative aspect of sincerity.

Aesthetic sincerity is espoused to sincerity in its traditional sense of a congruence of attestation and intent; specifically, aesthetic sincerity applies to the veracity with which the writer conveys this congruence in a text. Ultimately, if an author believes and takes pleasure in what he writes, then his attestations will achieve an aesthetic sincerity. Matthew Arnold echoes this notion in his poem "A Caution to Poets":

What poets feel not, when they make,
A pleasure in creating,
The world, in its turn, will not take
Pleasure in contemplating. (Lines 1-4).

Here, Arnold contends that if a poet fails to feel and take joy in his writing, then the reader will not experience a pleasure in engaging it. This idea evidences Trilling's definition of sincerity whereby only through a true feeling can writing convey a true message. Moreover, according to Peyre, the belief in sincerity as an ideal aesthetic value proliferated during the romantic era. He contends, "The notion of that sincerity is the hallmark of quality in art . . . became so pervading . . . with the romantics that a collection of the pronouncements by distinguished critics in which sincerity is resorted to after other criteria have failed would be tedious" (136). However, Wordsworth's definition of aesthetic sincerity in his essay "Upon Epitaphs" is worth mentioning due to the resonance of his claims with Trilling's understanding of sincerity and its implications regarding *On the Road*. Like Arnold, Wordsworth believes that aesthetic sincerity begins with a

true feeling within the writer vis-à-vis his subject matter and that this feeling of engagement is perceptible by readers:

These suggestions may be further useful to establish a criterion of sincerity, by which a writer may be judged; and this is of high import. For, when a man is treating an interesting subject, or one which he ought not to treat at all unless he be interested, no faults have such a killing power as those which prove that he is not in earnest, that he is acting a part, has leisure for affectation, and feels that without it he could do nothing. This is one of the most odious of faults; because it shocks the moral sense, and is worse in a sepulchral inscription, precisely in the same degree as that mode of composition calls for sincerity more urgently than any other. And indeed where the internal evidence proves that the writer was moved, in other words where this charm of sincerity lurks in the language of a tomb-stone and secretly pervades it, there are no errors in style or manner for which it will not be, in some degree, a recompense. (n.pag.)

Wordsworth's claims suggest that the impression of an aesthetic sincerity in a text—the belief in the reader that the author is earnestly invested in his subject—can compensate for many formal and stylistic errors within it. Thus, the aesthetic sincerity of a work carries the potential to negate the work's technical and formal shortcomings. Such a notion, when applied to *On the Road*, a work that has received a wealth of critical disparaging for its stylistic faults,¹⁴ highlights an avenue through which we may seek to ameliorate the work's critical standing. Thus, through

¹⁴ One of the loudest and most prominent critics of *On the Road* was Norman Mailer who asserted in *Advertisements for Myself* that Jack Kerouac “lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty and a sense of the novel.” Likewise, Truman Capote dismissed Kerouac as an author altogether, stating, “That’s not writing, that’s typing” (n.pag.).

illuminating the aesthetic sincerity of the novel, we may likewise assert the novel's aesthetic excellence in spite of its perceived faults.

Indeed, the novel's content is espoused to sincerity and anticipates the tactics of the New Sincerity movement, yet, on its surface level, the novel provides a segue into the discussion of sincerity. In particular, the novel resonates with traditional sincerity in its aesthetic while likewise pointing to the idea of New Sincerity through its earnest depiction of the difficulty associated with articulating the self through writing.

Aesthetic Sincerity: Autobiography and Self-Disclosure

On its surface, *On the Road* presents us with a poetic, energetic, and descriptive prose; however, predicating this narrative style, the writing itself resonates with the notion of sincerity via the highly autobiographical nature of the text and its emphasis on the intense revelation of the inner self of the author to an audience. This goal of presenting the self to an audience echoes Trilling's public focus of sincerity. Ultimately, this communicative aspect is beneficial because it connects rather than isolates. Before understanding the connection of the novel's autobiographical qualities with sincerity, it is vital to understand the nature of autobiography in the novel. Specifically, Kerouac, according to biographical and historical accounts, hoped to convey in his novel the nature of his true self in relation to the events in the text whether historical or fictionalized. Granted, Kerouac's Sal Paradise is a character and thereby functions as the narrator of the novel, yet the existence of the original edition of the novel intimates that Kerouac intended a much more personal aesthetic. Joyce Johnson in her book on Kerouac *The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac* comments on Kerouac's original intentions for the novel. She states that in 1951 Kerouac originally wrote *On the Road* as a "true life" novel

and “was ready to give his protagonist/narrator his own name” (15). Beyond this point, she indicates that Kerouac desired that this version of himself in the text possess characteristics similar to his own life such as having a working-class upbringing and being from New England. Yet, as Johnson indicates, upon the novel’s publication in 1957, Kerouac’s publisher forced him to alter several similarities between himself and his narrator: “Due to intense pressure from the legal department of his publisher, Jack had reluctantly disguised not only the names and identities of all the other characters in the book but his own as well, going so far as to turn his mother into an aunt” (15). Ultimately, the character Kerouac intended to name Jack became Sal; however, Johnson indicates that Kerouac did not desire this change (15). Thus, in studying the aesthetic of the novel, it is important to recognize Kerouac’s original intention for the book’s presentation; namely, he wished for the book to be true to life and his experiences and desired that his characters and narrator reflect that reality.

While it may be argued that the name changes and alterations in the novel negate any similarities between the narrative and the real world of Kerouac’s experiences, the reason behind these changes mitigate such judgment. Specifically, as noted by Tim Hunt in *Kerouac’s Crooked Road: The Development of a Fiction*, the main reason behind Kerouac’s alternations to the novel—the name changes in particular—was pressure from his publisher: “To lessen the chance of libel suits, and by cutting or muting some details that might alarm the censors” (xxix). Thus, the reason for the alternations is not artistic but logistic; Kerouac intended for the novel to reflect his experiences and his personhood to such a degree of similarity that, if not for legal issues, the 1957 publication would have contained the real names of the people involved—Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsburg, William S. Burroughs, and others. However, it should be noted that the existence of real names and Kerouac’s actual experiences in the novel do not indicate that

Kerouac hesitated to embellish aspects of his experiences nor does it negate any of its connection to sincerity.

While Kerouac clearly exaggerates many of the events in the novel, his intention, it seems, is to convey a sense of truthfulness and verisimilitude to the events he actually experienced while on the road with Neal Cassady—to whom he refers in *On the Road* as Dean Moriarty. Thus, the problem in observing the novel as autobiography lies in Kerouac's clear exaggerations in the text; however, the novel bypasses any questions of historical legitimacy via Kerouac's revelation of the self. Critics often bemoan the sense of autobiography in the novel¹⁵; however, Johnson acknowledges that in the novel Kerouac “was not writing autobiography in the usual sense” (407) but more of a fictionalized biography of his own self. Hunt echoes this sentiment:

Kerouac . . . is writing a biography of his self-image. Autobiography in the ‘usual sense’ is unreflexive and anecdotal . . . But biography is reflexive and interpretative. Details of life are selected and arranged according to some principle of illustration. In *On the Road*, Sal is certainly an image of Kerouac but an image which Kerouac uses to measure his own growth. (5)

In this way, the novel functions as both a form of autobiography—“a biography of [Kerouac's] self-image”—and fiction, depicting both actual events and real people while simultaneously possessing the artifices central to fiction writing such as narration, plot, characterization, tension, and metaphor.

Furthermore, while Johnson lauds Kerouac's tenacity for self-exploration and his honest depiction of events, she likewise notes the fictionality of the work itself. In this vein, she states,

¹⁵ Hunt clarifies that the autobiographical impression given by the novel “is certainly what is meant when *On the Road* is criticized as being superficially autobiographical” (5).

“In fiction, nothing was fixed, anything could be altered; he [Kerouac] was appalled, in fact, by the ‘malleability’ of what his imagination came up with” (407). Hence, when Kerouac’s narrator Sal Paradise states his reason for going on the road with Dean: “I was a writer and needed new experiences” (9), Kerouac is not historically recounting his own feelings per se but mediating his self-reflections via his novel’s narrator. This mediation of the self through a narrator exhibits the “biography of . . . self-image” to which Hunt refers. Sal is not Kerouac but Kerouac’s self-image in the text, and ultimately, Kerouac’s self-image is determined to reveal its inner nature to the readers of the novel. Thus, while not simply autobiography, *On the Road* possesses traits of a refined sense autobiography through self-reflection mediated through the narrator.

The topic of autobiography in the novel is pertinent to the discussion of aesthetic sincerity due to the connection Trilling establishes between the autobiography and sincere expression. In discussing the sincerity of the self in regards to writing, Trilling contends that the sincere self, through autobiography, wishes to convey interior knowledge of the self to the public, resonating with the “public end in view” which is central to sincerity. According to Trilling, the genre of autobiography stems from the individual self’s need for expression—a self “bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity” (25). In this vein, Trilling asserts that the rise of autobiography proliferated from the recognition of the self’s own individuality and the desire “to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted” (25). Thus, the nature of autobiography demands that the self believe that it possesses both a level of import and something of significance to communicate. And this belief fosters an understanding of the self as an autonomous individual able to engage in meaningful *other*-driven discourse.

Trilling's thoughts on autobiography are espoused to his beliefs regarding the rise of individualism: "at a certain point in history men became individuals" (24). Yet his notions regarding the sincerity of autobiography transcend the topic of individualism when viewed under the light of Kerouac's utilization of autobiography in the text of *On the Road*. Specifically, Kerouac uses the autobiographical aspects of the novel to foster of form of self-disclosure, bent on communicating with an objective *other*.

Hunt clarifies that the novel's aesthetic is unique because of its effect in communicating to an objective reader: "The radicalism of the scroll . . . is not only a matter of violating the codes of the era's Containment Culture, nor is it only a matter of writing at high speed without regard for literary convention. Rather the radicalism of *On the Road* . . . is the step of writing as if the writer is an I speaking to a reader who is a you and as if both writing and reading unfold as if together in actual time" (xxxii). This technique places the reader closer to the author by removing the mediation between writer, narrator, and reader.

Unlike his modernist forefathers who elevated their positions as writers to the point of becoming personas, via his highly personal self-disclosure and his incorporation of autobiographical characteristics, Kerouac echoes Wordsworth's edict that poets ought to be "men speaking to men." While not strictly autobiography, as evidenced by Hunt, the novel contains autobiographical qualities that point towards sincerity through Kerouac's presentation of the self via the Sal Paradise. Mary Paniccia Carden in her essay "Adventures in Auto-Eroticism: Economies of Traveling Masculinity in *On the Road* and *The First Third*" discusses these autobiographical qualities. Carden sees *On the Road* as an "autobiographical novel [in which] Dean Moriarty, a thinly disguised Neal Cassady, initiates Sal Paradise (Kerouac) into the

traveling life” (85). Unlike Hunt, Carden sees the autobiography as possessing a central role in the novel’s aesthetic.

However, both Carden and Hunt believe that Kerouac’s central concern is the presentation of his true self within the text—whether that text is a “biography of his self-image” or an embellished, autobiographical personal history. She clarifies that “[e]arlier versions made no attempt to conceal makers of time and location, not to mention the identities of friends and acquaintances” which eventually resulted in “its present incarnation when Kerouac ‘decided to write the novel as if he were answer questions’” (85). Whether direct autobiography or a biography of the self, the topic of confession and self-disclosure is a central concern for Kerouac. Trilling contends that this topic of self-disclosure is central to form of autobiography: “But the form [autobiography] continues to press towards a more searching scrutiny of the inner life, its purpose being to enforce upon the reader the conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man because he has been true to himself, as he was and is” (23). In writing autobiography, the writer must then truthfully reveal himself if the reader wishes to perceive him as being true to himself and true to his readers.

Trilling states that in autobiography “one’s only authority [is] the truth of one’s experience and the intensity of one’s conviction of enlightenment—these, and the accent of sincerity, clearly identifiable as such” (23). Where in autobiography sincerity requires the truthfulness of experience, in the novel, Kerouac seeks to likewise convey the truth of his own experiences; however, rather than literal experiences, Kerouac conveys the spiritual experience of an individual’s quest for fulfillment with truth. Indeed, Kerouac’s focus in the text is on self-exploration, but this presentation of the self is not *in vacuo*. Specifically, Kerouac’s focus is not for authenticity—the isolated exploration of the self, devoid of an objective reader—but for a

sincere communication with a reader, and the attempt to facilitate a dialogue between the readers and the text. An awareness of the novel's autobiographical beginnings, in conjunction with Kerouac's self-disclosure to the reader through Sal, ultimately engenders an impression of sincerity. We perceive Kerouac as being true to "he was and is" (Trilling 23), and through this truthful communication of the self, we sense his truthfulness to others. Thus, where critics have used the novel's autobiographical features as grounds for critique, the existence of these autobiographical factors intimate the work's sincerity.

The Jazz Connection: Avowal, Feeling, and Participation in Kerouac's Musical Prose

In addition to the autobiographical aspects of the novel, *On the Road* achieves sincerity through the musicality of its prose; specifically, Kerouac incorporates Jazz into the novel's aesthetic as a stylistic tactic, conveying the fluidity of life as he perceives it. In the novel, jazz takes center stage in two of Sal and Deans travels: Chicago and San Francisco. While the novel mentions jazz in New York, the two most prominent discussions of jazz occur in these two cities. Whether it is George Shearing's "ecstatic face" (128) in Chicago or Slim Galliard's "wild jazz sessions" (177) in San Francisco, jazz is a recurring theme. However, what Kerouac develops in the aesthetic of *On the Road* is a prose imbued with the musical qualities of jazz: aural pleasure, improvisation, and participation.

In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, David Foster Wallace admits that music is a valid form of influence on aesthetic technique; however, he warns against the utilization of this aesthetic tactic for its own sake: "We've seen that you can break any or all the rules without getting laughed out of town, but we've also seen the toxicity that anarchy for its own sake can yield" (51). The task at hand, then, is unearthing the purpose behind Kerouac's jazz aesthetic.

Rather than utilizing it for the sake of literary rebellion, Kerouac's jazz aesthetic resonates with the notion of sincerity through its concern with the unmediated presentation of the self to an objective audience—a presentation contingent upon the congruence of avowal and true feeling.

Interestingly, the feeling of jazz within Kerouac's prose is not a product of Kerouac's frantic writing style but an intentional technique of which he was conscious while writing the novel. James Campbell in "Kerouac's Blues" makes this point:

The improvisatory technique that Kerouac had evolved while revising the long scroll version of *On the Road*—'sketching,' he called it—was shaped by his belief that jazz was the essential American art form, and his feeling that no one before him had seen the potential scope of a jazz prose. Kerouac's model for this new and self-consciously American melody line was adopted from the tenor man, 'blowing a phrase on his saxophone till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his statement's been made.' (367)

To Campbell, Kerouac's utilization of jazz in the novel's prose stems from his own beliefs regarding the nature of writing. Kerouac, it seems, believed that the "jazz prose" in the novel would be something unique, revolutionary.

The method by which Kerouac infuses Jazz into the aesthetic of the novel is threefold: the treatment of jazz as a language, an emphasis on improvisation, and a desire to foster participation with an audience. Kerouac's treatment of, and attention to, these areas produce a prose teeming with energy, melody, and unpredictability. Douglas Malcolm's "Jazz America: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*" deals specifically with Kerouac's process of jazz incorporation in the novel's form. Malcolm believes that "a direct transportation of theory and practice from music to literature can be accomplished in the fashion

that Kerouac proposes” (85). While he ultimately proposes a reading of the novel that centers on the connection of jazz and African American culture, his analysis of Kerouac’s jazz aesthetic cogently displays Kerouac’s fascination with jazz as a formal technique. He argues, “Kerouac’s analogy with jazz is exact. Some of the choruses read like scat singing played back at slow speed, words ‘blown’ for their musical values or their primary link to the subject matter” (86). According to Malcolm, Kerouac intentionally chooses language for its musical effect as well as its topical significance.

For this reason, many famous passages in the novel maintain their resonance. Specifically, Kerouac’s description of Sal’s overwhelming attraction to madness presents these musical qualities: “The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’” (8). Here, Kerouac’s prose develops a melodic cadence and builds a rhythmic tension that heightens as the sentence goes on. The first clause—ending with “mad ones”—anticipates the quick succession of parallel phrases that follow—“mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved.” Likewise, the second half of the passage relieves this tension while likewise anticipating another succession of energetic prose. In particular, “the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing” forestalls the energy released at the end of the passage: “but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’” Here, Kerouac relies heavily on the sound of words, and the rhythm he creates slows and hastens much like a jazz solo. Likewise, this passage pays no mind to grammatical correctness; it contains a run on sentence as well as

created word, “centerlight.” Memorable passages like this exist throughout the novel, and, to Malcolm, they are predicated on Kerouac’s jazz aesthetic. Likewise, this passage resonates with Hunt’s ideas regarding a biography of self-image because the passage expounds upon Kerouac’s self by revealing aspects of Sal’s character.

In order to imbue the novel’s aesthetic with the feeling of jazz, Kerouac must first treat jazz as a language capable of transmuting into a literary text, and the qualities of jazz, in fact, harmonize with the qualities of language. Tenor saxophonist Stan Getz highlights the connection of jazz with language: “It’s like a language. You learn the alphabet, which are the scales. You learn sentences, which are the chords. And then you talk extemporaneously with the horn” (qtd. in Malcolm 89). While there are obvious differences in mediums, both language and music function in a Saussurean signifier/signified relationship. In language, the signifier/signified deals with words and their impressions, but in music, the signifier presents a note and the signified is the sound it creates. Malcolm clarifies that it may, in fact, be easier to communicate via language than with music: “But while musical improvisation is like speaking a language, the musician alone understands its grammar; although clearly he or she is able to communicate to a listener, the listener is much freer than in language discourse to interpret the sounds autonomously” (89). Thus, there is a level of subjectivity in interpreting jazz that is present to a lesser degree in language. However, there is a level to which jazz and language share similarities, and Alan Perlman and Daniel Greenblatt in “Miles Davis Meets Noam Chomsky” work to point out this similarities: “Improvising musicians are in much the same position as speakers of a language . . . Their improvisations are facilitated by their knowledge of the available harmonic and melodic possibilities and by their technical skill and imagination in combining and recombining these

possibilities in novel ways” (182). Kerouac seems to be conscious of this connection and incorporates jazz into the language of the text.

In Kerouac’s specific application of the jazz aesthetic, he values the characteristic of improvisation as being both central to jazz composition and his formal poetics. Hunt states that Kerouac’s “notion of improvisation informs the language of [his] writing at an exact technical level. Though Kerouac had neither the knowledge of a musician nor the critical vocabulary of a person learned in the subject of music, he clearly demonstrates a profound identification of the creation of music with that of literary works” (8-9). Beyond jazz, Kerouac himself was a proponent of improvisation and spontaneity in his work. His “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” published in 1958, one year after the release of *On the Road*, contends that the writer must cast off all external concerns and allow language to take over in the writing process:

Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion . . . Never afterthink to ‘improve’ or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind. (58)

Thus, as a general principle in writing, Kerouac was concerned with the notion of improvisation, and in *On the Road* this improvisation manifests in connection to jazz. While Kerouac does not directly mention jazz in this passage, the connection is logical based on his treatment of jazz in the novel. In a sense, Jazz accompanies the movement of the narrative; specifically, in their travels, Sal and Dean regularly visit Jazz clubs. Moreover, Jazz informs the novel’s central theme—the quest for self-signification—by giving the characters a glimpse into the sort of freedom they long for. Sal and Dean’s experiences in jazz clubs consistently involve moments of

transcendence when they realize the IT¹⁶ that they desire to attain, and the fluidity of jazz, along with its apparent lack of resolution, manifest in the novel's fluidity and improvisational qualities. In this vein, Malcolm writes, "Improvisation is the principal formal rule which distinguishes jazz from other types of music" (87). Hence, jazz, by virtue of its very nature, is linked with improvisation. Beyond this point, Stephen Nachmanovitch in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* posits that all art is, essentially, a variety of improvisation: "In a sense, all art is improvisation. Some improvisations are presented as is, whole and at once; others are 'doctored improvisations' that have been revised and restructured over a period of time" (6). Either way, the creative process involved in producing a work of art necessitates a form of improvisation to some extent; jazz is entirely spontaneous while writing is more of a "doctored improvisation," taking place over time and through revision.

Kerouac, however, takes the notion of jazz improvisation further by incorporating it into the novel's sentence structure. In an interview with the *Paris Review* Kerouac clarifies the influence of jazz on his writing: "Jazz and bop, in the sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made.... that's how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind" (qtd. in Malcolm 90-1). This tactic can be seen in Sal's declaration while watching George Shearing's performance in Chicago. While reveling in the joy created by the music, Sal states, "Every now and then a clear harmonic cry gave new suggestions of a tune that would someday be the only tune in the world and would raise men's souls to joy. They found it, they lost, they wrestled for it, they found it again, they laughed, they moaned—and

¹⁶ Kerouac's uses of the word IT in the novel to represent the ineffable desire of his characters. The ambiguous nature of their quest for signification particularly resonates with the word because Kerouac never informs us what IT represents. Rather, Dean uses the word to describe the transcendent quality he perceives in Jazz musicians—"that alto man last night had IT" (206). Thus, their journey for signification hinges on discovering the nature of IT.

Dean sweated at the table and told them to go, go, go” (241). While, at times, Kerouac’s sentences may seem longwinded, their function resonates with his notion regarding the length of a breath. As Malcolm posits, “Breathing punctuates his sentences, and the primary structure that controls his spontaneity is the physical dimensions of his writing surface” (91). Kerouac, ultimately, seeks to completely utilize the duration of a breath, to pack as much substance as possible into a sentence before its completion, much like a saxophonist strives to hit all the notes in a solo, even to the point of exhaustion.

Yet beyond the topics of language and improvisation, Kerouac’s jazz aesthetic points towards sincerity in its end of communal participation. Kerouac treats the jazz musicians in the novel as deities: “For him [Kerouac] and his fellows, jazz musicians provided an insider’s world of arcane knowledge that distinguished them from straight society” (Malcolm 99). This sanctification is due to their ability to foster within a large group of people a similar transcendent effect. Malcolm continues, “The characteristic which in Kerouac’s mind unites the historic musicians above all is their ‘madness’; the unavoidable implication is that the music they create derives not from rational thought but from visceral spontaneity” (96). This madness has a collective function in the novel. In opposition to modern, western music of impersonal concert halls, jazz necessitates interaction with an audience: “The African American culture from which jazz derived favored communal music which was participatory, unlike the Western tradition of classical music, which has sacralized the performer and proscribed audience involvement. In jazz clubs, audience and performers were not separated from one another; audience participation in the music was expected” (Malcolm 103). Malcolm traces this process back to the call-and-response technique of African American slave songs and religious music, and in each case the

effect is identical—the blurring of the line between performer and audience in favor of a collective experience.

For Kerouac, this collective experience is a form of frenzy and madness, but it also allows for a transcendence and a purity—or sincerity—of communication. Thus, the participation between the audience and the performer achieves, to Kerouac, a true, meaningful experience. For instance, at the Shearing performance, the pianist “was conscious of the madman behind him, he could hear every one of Dean’s gasps and imprecations” (128); likewise, Sal comments that the crowd as a whole was mad: “They were all urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it with cries and wild eyes . . . A six-foot skinny Negro woman was rolling her bones at the man’s hornbell, and he just jabbed it at her, ‘Ee! ee! ee!’” (197). Thus, through the truthful outpouring of feeling via improvisation, the music engenders a collective, participatory experience with others.

In the same way that sincerity involves a “congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 2), the subject of jazz in the novels involves a similar process—one that Kerouac mirrors in his jazz aesthetic. Unlike the impersonal, authentic prose of the modernists, Kerouac’s prose produces a collective experience within the reader through its aesthetic mirroring of jazz. Jazz, as Kerouac treats it, involves first a true feeling within the performer which is produced and refined through improvisation. Beyond this, the participatory nature of jazz ensures a collective response with an audience, functioning as a form of other-centered communication. Hence, the sincere jazz musician will produce his music through congruent representation of his true, internal feelings through his outward melodies. Like Arnold’s “Caution to Poets,” the jazz musician must truly feel what he creates in order for the audience to likewise enjoy the performance.

Kerouac mirrors this aesthetic sincerity in his use of jazz as a writing technique. Kerouac positions himself as a jazz musician, incorporating improvisational technique with a linguistic treatment of jazz. Moreover, just as jazz in the novel produces a communal effect through participation, Kerouac's prose similarly invites participation through its incorporation of jazz technique. John Leland in *Why Kerouac Matters* discusses the participatory nature of Kerouac's prose through his incorporation of jazz as a view of time. Leland states, "Sal's past and present are variations on the same themes, neither subordinate to the other. He organizes time the way a jazzman organizes successive choruses—each revisiting familiar terrain, adding the new and revivifying the old" (138). Kerouac, in treating jazz as an analogue for time, is able to bypass linear time and value the present. Leland goes on to posit that, through the treatment of jazz as a reference for time, Kerouac invites the reader to reconfigure time in the novel, and, therein, participate with the text:

Because Sal is always in the moment, he has no sense of proportion. Every gig he goes to is the best ever, every laugh is 'positively and finally the one greatest laugh in all this world.' Everything Sal experiences is bigger than the words he has for it, leaving the language overwhelmed, asking the reader to put it back together, reenacting Sal's enthusiasm in the process. Even ordinary experiences are exceptional because they're his, and surely no one ever experienced them quite the same before. (138)

Thus, in treating the subject of time in the same way a musician treats jazz composition, the novel welcomes both the interaction and participation of the reader in this chronological experience. Leland compares the novel's treatment of time via the jazz aesthetic to the experience of listening to a piece of music; when we listen to a particular song, we are caught in

the temporal moment the piece creates: “For the time you’re in it, it’s the best thing you’ve ever heard because it’s the only music that exists . . . But for the most part we live under more oppressive continuities. Sal lives this way all the time. In stepping across chronological time, he invites readers to ditch the causes and effects we suffer under” (139).

Thus, like the sincerity of jazz music, the novel’s aesthetic is sincere through its depiction of true feeling conveyed through improvisational language to facilitate a meaningful dialogue with readers, encouraging them to participate with the text. Through this process, Kerouac both harnesses jazz as an aesthetic technique and, within the formal qualities of the narrative, mirrors the understanding of sincerity as a “congruence of avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 2). This is evidenced by the purpose behind Kerouac’s technique of improvisation which is to display that which is “the most painful personal wrung-out” kind of writing (Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” 58). Thus Kerouac’s aesthetic techniques, specifically the utilization of Jazz through musical nature, improvisation, and aspect of participation, work together to reveal the nature of the self. This presents of truthful, real feeling, combined with the intention to foster a dialogue with an *other*, ultimately intimates the sincere nature of the novel’s aesthetic.

The Aesthetic Difficulty of Self-Knowledge

While the aesthetic sincerity of *On the Road* is discernable within its autobiographical and formal qualities, the process by which the self is revealed in a text presents difficulties in regards to sincerity; specifically, the novel’s depiction of the self through Sal intimates that the impossibility of displaying the self in writing. Throughout the narrative, Sal is intent on conveying the exact nature of his thoughts and impressions. Unlike Oscar Wilde’s critique of sincerity—“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will

tell you the truth” (Trilling 119)—Sal wears no mask and exhibits no pretense in his self-disclosure. Unlike Dean and Carlo’s futile attempts “to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on [their] minds” (*OTR* 42), Sal by virtue of his narrative style projects to the reader everything thought that crosses his mind. However, Sal’s honesty encounters a problem in regards to the nature of his self-disclosure.

In general, Sal desires to actualize real, tangible meaning within the world and, at least at the beginning of the novel, meets the world a sense of ideal naivety. Malcolm clarifies the nature of Sal’s desire: “*On the Road* involves the quest of Sal Paradise for transcendent signification in his life” (102). The question that rises, then, in regards to aesthetic sincerity is how can Sal’s—and ultimately Kerouac’s—language fully convey the nebulous spectrum of the self? Just as Dean and Carlo are unable to “communicate with absolute honesty” their inner natures, the fixed nature of language, it seems, precludes this sort of total honesty. As Leland notes, in regards to the narrator, the novel concerns “Sal’s search for a voice, one that aspires the . . . personal as well as collective, claiming redemption and forgiveness for all” (48). This task, however, is far from tenable. As a narrator, “Sal is not one of the mad ones . . . and he often gets tongue-tied or says the commonplace” (Leland 46). The undiluted conveyance of the self by such an individual seems, at least initially, unrealistic.

Hunt sees the novel’s narration as a presentation of the tension “between the enacting of the self as an individual free of society and the possession of identity within and from society” (188), and this tension obfuscates any coherent presentation of the self in the novel. Try as he might, Sal cannot fully convey completely what he wishes to express: “That last thing is what you can’t get . . . Nobody can get that last thing. We keep on living in the hopes of catching it once and for all” (Kerouac 48). Here, Sal seems to be aware of the shortcomings of language in

communicating the nature of the self. While the postmodern emphasis on the slippage of language had yet to take hold upon the novel's publication, the seeming impossibility of using language to communicate with absolute honesty is implied throughout the text. Kerouac's repeated use of the word "IT" as an encapsulation of complete meaning evidences this point:

He gets it—everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He's filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it's not the tune that counts but IT. (206)

Kerouac's use of "IT" seems to be a recognition of the inability of language to convey objective meaning; however, Kerouac's presentation of it is not ironic. Rather, the novel's characters earnestly believe in "IT" and chase it throughout the narrative as the object of their desires.

Thus, the earnestness applied to the search for meaning in spite of the apparent deficiencies in language at conveying meaning signal a different type of sincerity altogether: the notion of New Sincerity. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace admits to the inadequacies of language; however, he likewise contends that "language and linguistic intercourse is, in and of itself, redeeming, remedy-ing" (33). Despite the difficulties of language, Wallace consents that language is all we have in terms of a viable means of meaning making a communication. Imbedded within this logic is the ironic concession that language cannot accomplish what it sets out to mean yet still contains value. In this way, Wallace's thoughts reflect the sentiment of New Sincerity through the fusion of earnestness and irony. New Sincerity recognizes the irony of its adherence communication via language while likewise

maintaining an earnestness towards the redeeming quality of language and literature. R. Jay Magill's treatise *Sincerity* provides a similar understanding of the term: "The New Sincerity tried to invent a shiny new sentiment, one that would encompass both . . . irony and the earnest" (200). Ultimately, then, what New Sincerity campaigns for is the "sentiment of the earnest yet ironic" (Magill 202); the knowledge of an object or idea's passé, sentimental, or ironic nature combined with a complete earnestness of belief, interest, or investment.

This sort of earnest irony applies to sincerity in its resonance with Trilling's emphasis on genuine feeling and outward attestation. Regardless of the perceived irony of a given subject, the artist possesses the possibility to be fully invested in it and communicate this feeling to an audience with a sense of legitimacy. While this understanding does encounter issues due to the aspect of intention—the difficulty of knowing whether an author's interest in a passé or ironic subject is legitimate—that is necessary for its occurrence, this sort of earnest irony does resonate with Trilling's grounds for sincerity.

In terms of *On the Road*, it appears that Kerouac incorporates a similar sort of earnest irony in Sal's depiction of both his true self and the esoteric ideals of the characters around him. Sal admits that through his journey, he becomes unable to know even himself:

That was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and the footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. (14)

Where Sal's travels do not result in his recognition of his true self, the actual prose of the novel cannot likewise seek to capture the entirety of Sal Paradise. Ultimately, by setting self-actualization and signification as its ultimate goal, the novel creates an impossible task: the embodiment of the self in language. Likewise, the indefinable nature of the object of fulfilment—the "IT"—that Dean seeks so relentlessly, is also unable to be expressed coherently in language. Yet, the impossibility of language in conveying the self and an object of ultimate meaning—an impossibility that Kerouac seems to recognize in the text—does not negate the earnestness of Kerouac's attempt. In fact, on this topic, Magill states, "The inability to articulate feeling has become the best evidence for its sincere, overwhelming power" (206). And it is through this fusion of the earnest and the ironic that the aesthetic of *On the Road* finally points to New Sincerity.

Chapter 4: *On the Road*: Embodied Irony, Authenticity, and a New Sincerity

“Sal, we gotta go and never stop going ‘till we get there.’

‘Where we going, man?’

‘I don't know but we gotta go.’”

—Jack Kerouac *On the Road*

“The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere.”

—David Foster Wallace “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”

Introduction

Where the aesthetic techniques Kerouac utilizes in *On the Road* both resonate with traditional sincerity and point to the notion of New Sincerity, within the novel itself, Kerouac provides a microcosm of the topics of irony, authenticity, and sincerity. Specifically, Kerouac wishes to convey the inadequacy of irony and authenticity as responses to modern life by illuminating the fact that each path leads to a type of suffering. Both Kierkegaard and Wallace have commented on the centrality of suffering within irony and authenticity, yet, in each case, this suffering manifests differently. Thus, ultimately, Kerouac’s views on suffering vis-à-vis irony and authenticity are both critically and philosophically grounded. In showing the eventual faults of irony and authenticity in his narrative, then, Kerouac points to an alternate path—

sincerity. Yet Kerouac's utilization of sincerity does not completely resonate with sincerity in its traditional sense, focusing instead on the conscious recognition of the futility in his search for fulfilment while simultaneously maintaining an earnest belief in its value through confessing this realization to an audience.

Within this discussion, we must understand the novel's situation within the waning period of modernity; historically, *On the Road* exists at the cusp of the modern era, on the verge of rising postmodern attitudes. Regardless of the increasing notions of early postmodern thought, however, the novel functions under the weight of a modern malaise and disillusionment with reality, and Kerouac, in his characters, presents several attempts to cope with this disenchantment. In Old Bull Lee, he presents the rising attitude of irony, anticipating Wallace's views on institutionalized irony, through Lee's unqualified cynicism with dominant society and the contradictions central to his character. Moreover, through Dean, he presents the prominent attitude of authenticity, portraying the damning consequences of authenticity—trueness to oneself in opposition to others—as a sole ideal by highlighting Dean's existential angst via his drug use and self-delusion.

In each character's case, the result of their stances is suffering. In Sal, however, Kerouac presents a voice of sincerity beneath the modern malaise. Sal recognizes the suffering central to each outlook and, instead, projects an honest message in regards to his experiences. Throughout his narration, Kerouac's confessional tactics point to the self's need to reveal itself to an *other*, and his methodology points to both legitimate feeling and truthful attestation. The sincerity of Sal's confession, however, is devoid of sincerity's traditional goal of truth-telling due to a conflict within Sal's character. Sal both realizes the impossibility of his quest for "transcendent signification in his life" (Malcolm 102), while likewise retrospectively treating this quest with an

earnest sense of value. Looking back on the events in the narrative, Sal—as the narrator—recognizes the irony of his quest; however, his depiction contends, in earnest, that the journey possesses a legitimate value. Through treating his subject matter with “reverence and conviction” (Wallace 192), Kerouac has incurred critique for being overly sentimental;¹⁷ however, the discussion of New Sincerity in the context of Sal’s narration necessitates a far less simplistic understanding. Through Sal’s fusion of the ironic with the earnest that Kerouac anticipates the New Sincerity of Wallace and Kelly; ultimately, what Sal presents in recounting his travels across America is an earnest devotion to a conscious illusion.

Modernity and Malaise: The Disillusionment Driving *On the Road*

Through his characters, Kerouac reflects several cultural concerns central to 1950s America, and these concerns engender their responses of irony, authenticity, or sincerity. To understand the nature of these responses, we must first recognize the cultural and historical milieu surrounding the novel. Critics readily treat *On the Road* as a historical artifact due to its widespread impact on 1950s and 1960s counterculture and its place, along with Allen Ginsburg’s “Howl,” as the testament of the Beat Generation. Written in 1951, though not published until 1957, the novel encapsulates the ethos in which it was written. Robert Hipkiss in *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism* states that Kerouac became the “new symbol of flaming American youth, the American hero of the Beat Generation” and “the most singular hero of the road America has ever had” (32-3, 42). Likewise, Stefano Maffina in *The Role of Jack Kerouac’s*

¹⁷Fred Setterberg in his article “Rising from Jack Kerouac’s Couch” lambastes the novel for its immature sentimentality: “The characters were hopelessly confused . . . And they were lost . . . too often they were even sentimental . . . And I felt it impossible to skirt the obvious conclusion that Sal Paradise was a stone loser” (98). Likewise, Lionel Trilling’s protégé, Norman Podhoretz, in his attack against the Beat Generation “The Know Nothing Bohemians” states that in *On the Road* “[t]here are intimations . . . of a kind of know-nothing populist sentiment, but in other ways this attitude resembles [the] belief that bums and whores and junkies are more interesting than white-collar workers of civil servants” (31).

Identity in the Development of his Poetics articulates that “*On the Road* . . . became the official Bible of a generation and of the sixties counterculture, thanks to the writer’s enhancement of personal freedom, universal love, and quest for one’s own self, that could be achieved thanks to solitary travels on the open road” (21). While much has been said regarding the novel’s cultural influence, little work has been done regarding the cultural influences upon the novel itself. While Kerouac’s central focus throughout the work is the achievement of self-actualization through travel, he reflects many of the cultural attitudes prominent in the 1950s—namely, the disillusionment resulting after World War II, the paranoia over the Cold War and communism, the conformity of dominant culture, and the desire for liberation from these strictures. This desire specifically manifests in the text through the responses of irony and authenticity, and Kerouac conveys the inadequacy of these reactions in pursuing true liberation.

On the Road reflects the concerns of American culture at the end of the modern period, displaying a culture left disappointed and stifled by the false promises of modern society. With the modern age came a complete reevaluation of tradition; William Harmon and Hugh Holman provide an account of this process:

Modern implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the rhetoric by which they were sanctioned and communicated. It elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward, and it prefers the unconscious to the self-conscious. (298)

Moreover, within the modern period, thinkers like Charles Darwin and Friedrich Nietzsche proposed radical new worldviews that challenged the old ways of thinking, while advancements

in technology and science promised that man would eventually save himself. M. Keith Booker in *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War* discusses this cultural environment. He claims that the ethos of 1950s in America was mixed. On the one hand, there existed overwhelming anxiety over the looming threat of atomic warfare and nuclear holocaust. Yet, on the other, faith in mankind's ability to save itself through advancements in science and technology spread throughout the decade. Booker clarifies that the scientific and technological advancements of the decade ranged from mundane household items like vacuum cleaners to significant advancements in communications and the medical field. However, permeating all these advancements was the belief that in "science to make life better on all levels" (2). Yet, Booker clarifies that the inventions of science would likewise incur negative side effects: "On the positive side, the 1950s were the decade in which space flight . . . became a reality; on the negative side, the same technical advances in rocketry also enabled the development of the intercontinental missile" (2).

Thus, while the 1950s produced many benefits within modern society, the decade likewise contributed to a further disillusionment with modern civilization and ultimately a modern ethos of disillusionment. "The 1950's in America," Booker states, "were informed by a radical doubleness . . . a fundamental characteristic of capitalism itself. . . The overt doubleness of American culture in the 1950s can thus be taken as a reflection of the increasing ideological hegemony of capitalism in the decade, as the last remnants of agrarian alternatives to capitalism were swept from the American scene" (4). The loss of these alternatives is palpable in Kerouac's novel, specifically, in Sal's desire for simple life of manual labor—as seen in his episode with Terry—and Bull Lee's rejection of city life altogether.

Likewise, the disillusionment central to the decade was exacerbated by the looming fear of atomic warfare which engendered a society paralyzed by the constant threat of a nuclear

apocalypse. In addition to this point, Booker clarifies that “one of the central experiences of the decade was fear and not just of nuclear war . . . [but also] surrounding the Cold War confrontation between capitalism and communism” (5). In *On the Road*, the characters wish to escape these concerns and repudiate the fears of the decade. As Lars Erik Larson in “Free Ways and Straight Roads: The Interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950’s America” writes, “Kerouac’s roads grant his protagonists freedom on a great number of different levels, including departures from capitalism, family kinships, adult conduct, heterosexuality, race, and nationality” (35). In this way, the protagonists in the novel attempt to legitimize their lives and experiences through a liberation from the strictures of modern society.

What the characters in *On the Road* desire to escape from, then, stems from the notion that the modern period, while producing many societal benefits, engendered, for the individual, a disaffection with reality. Charles Taylor in *The Malaise of Modernity* defines this process as the rise of modern malaise: “I mean by this [modern malaise] features of our contemporary culture and society that people experience as a loss of a decline, even as our civilization ‘develops.’ Sometimes people feel that some important decline has occurred during the last ten years or decades—since the Second World War, or the 1950s” going as far as to state that “the whole modern era from the seventeenth century is frequently seen as a time frame of decline” (1). Here, Taylor’s description of 1950’s culture is significant due to its resonance with both the novel’s treatment of 1950s culture and Booker’s historical account of the era’s disaffection. Regardless, the novel’s characters exist within this period of modern malaise and actively seek to find a means of purpose and fulfillment within a culture that offers little in the form existential signification.

Ultimately, then, the characters in the novel desire a sort of freedom from the dominant society of 1950s America. Taylor calls this desire modern freedom:

Modern freedom was won by our breaking loose from older moral horizons.

People used to see themselves as part of a larger order. In some cases, this was a cosmic order, a 'great chain of Being,' in which humans figured in their proper place . . . This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. People were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly theirs and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate. Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders. (*Ethics of Authenticity* 3)

For the protagonists of *On the Road*, "discrediting" these ideals is a primary focus, and Sal and Dean invest their attention into discovering not only self-signification but also a complete sense of freedom. "This renewed sense of vision," Hunt sates, "admits not only the real joy of vision, but the real suffering and failure of those who choose to live on the margins of society to preserve freedom of action and imagination" (235). This repudiation of social norms, however, is not an ironic subversion of cultural norms in the way Wallace might imply.¹⁸ Kerouac is not campaigning for an ironic subversion of the dominant culture through casting off these values, nor does he deploy rebellion for its own sake. Rather, the repudiation of cultural norms in the novel stems from a sincere desire for freedom from a dominant society for the goal of self-signification, not subversion. Rather than cultural critique, Kerouac desires the liberation that the

¹⁸ Wallace believed that the writing of the Beat Generation was fixated not on sincerity but on the ironic subversion of the dominant culture: "The reason why today's imagist fiction isn't the rescue from a passive, addictive TV-psychology that it tries so hard to be is that most imagist writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context" (173).

road represents as a means of transcending the malaise of modernity: “Because he had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it and because there was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars” (23).

Thus, due to the modern malaise central to the cultural condition of America in the 1950s, Kerouac’s characters reflect the desire to achieve modern freedom from this disaffection and, instead, attempt to uncover true meaning through the liberating quality of travel. Several characters recognize this sort of modern malaise, however, and each appears to respond in differing ways. Hence, while both modern malaise and the desire for modern freedom proliferate in both the novel and in 1950s culture, the means by which an individual seeks to achieve this modern freedom differs greatly. Kerouac, within the content of *On the Road*, presents these very responses through some of the novel’s key characters.

“Critical Anti-Everything Drawl”: Embodied Irony in Old Bull Lee

As a response to modern malaise, *On the Road* presents several attempts to discover a sense of freedom and regain a sense of purpose within a fragmented, disillusioned modern reality. One response of import is that of the character Old Bull Lee who completely repudiates the norms of dominant society with unbridled cynicism. While Lee’s presence in the novel is brief, his ideas have a significant impact on both Sal and Dean’s ideology. As a mentor to Sal and Dean, Lee figures himself as an enlightened sage of the Beat Generation; however, what Lee’s character reveals is not an intellectual illumination but, rather, a position of irony. Lee’s experience of the world is negative, and his reaction to reality is both critical and caustic. However, his critiques of society often lack predication, and the irony of his condition is that his lifestyle cannot reconstruct any of the societal hypocrisies he bemoans. In this way, Lee points to

Wallace's understanding of postmodern, cynical irony—an irony that makes the speaker unassailable to questioning while rebelling for its own sake.

In the novel, Kerouac describes Lee as “a man who earned little and spent all of it together with his wife on drugs, this caused him to have the lowest food bill as they never ate, nor did the children and they did not seem to care” (136). This initial introduction evokes a sense of radical irresponsibility and dangerous action, yet Kerouac treats Lee as a sort of inspirational father figure and teacher for Dean and Sal who go to visit him while in New Orleans. At one point, Sal states, “Jane sat at his feet; so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo. We'd all learned from him” (138). Throughout the narrative, it seems that Dean and Sal look up to Lee due to the extreme nature of his rejection of dominant society. The intensity of this rejection is apparent in Sal's description of Lee's house: “The house was a dilapidated old heap with sagging porches running around and weeping willows in the yard; the grass was a yard high, old fences leaned, old barns collapsed” (141). Like Sal and Dean, Lee experiences disillusionment with modern reality and wishes to unearth a sense of significance in existence. While Lee possesses a similar motivation to Sal and Dean, the manifestation of Lee's desire for modern freedom illuminates the irony central to the condition of his character.

In particular, Lee's disaffection with modern reality stems from his perception of societal hypocrisy. He believes that science and manufacturers are actively holding back mankind's potential through the spread of faulty items: “They prefer making cheap goods so's everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow” (149). While his critique of faulty goods and services works to subvert the capitalist, consumer nature of American society in the 1950s, his criticisms ring hollow due to his inability to point towards

any societal improvement. In his dismay over faulty goods, Lee focuses specifically on the object of shelves and proposes building his own shelf. However, his postulation is rife with irony due to the reader's contextual awareness that he cannot actually produce a shelf that will last, as he believes, "a thousand years" (149). In his diatribe regarding the shelf, Lee presents the cyclical irony and cynicism of his condition:

Why, Sal, do you realize the shelves they build these days crack under the weight of knickknacks after six months or generally collapse? Same with houses, same with clothes. These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last forever. And tires. Americans are killing themselves by the millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They could make tires that never blow up. (149)

Lee goes on to discuss supposed advancements in health and dental care; however, he undercuts his ostensive outrage with the hypocritical nature of his own character. In reality, Lee cannot produce the sort of shelf he imagines; likewise, his disgust over "Americans . . . killing themselves" conflicts with the self-destructive tendencies he possesses—his extreme drug abuse and is neglect for his wife and children. The disparity of Lee's attestations and his actions exhibits a sense of irony within the readers. We recognize his protestations as being ironic and question the sincerity of both his qualms with society and his remedies for its ails.

In addition to the irony palpable within Lee's insipid worldview, we sense an explicit quality of Wallace's postmodern irony in Lee's societal critiques—namely, his deliberate stance of cynicism and self-aware affinity for the revolting. As Wallace states, "Irony . . . serves an exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing . . . But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks"

(183). Like Wallace's view of irony, Lee's criticisms have a strictly "negative function" throughout his encounters with Sal and are devoid of any attempt at social improvement. In this way, Lee's character anticipates what Wallace believes to be the central flaw of postmodern irony: "The assumptions behind this early postmodern irony . . . were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom"

(193). What Wallace points out here is that consciousness of a problem does not necessitate a viable solution, that postmodern irony assumes nobility in its critical function, but that it fails in regards to producing improvement.

This myopia is present in Lee's criticisms; he implicitly assumes that his critical ideas will point to a solution while this is not necessarily the case. For example, Lee's criticisms of the New Orleans bars scene lacks any realistic avenue for improving the problem he perceives:

The ideal bar doesn't exist in America. An ideal bar is something that's gone beyond our ken. In nineteen ten a bar was a place where men went to meet during or after work, and all there was was a long counter, brass rails, spittoons, play piano for music, a few mirrors, and barrels of whisky . . . Now all you get is chromium, drunken women, fags, hostile bartenders . . . just a lot of screaming at the wrong time and deadly silence when a stranger walks in. (146-7).

Despite any validity within his ideas, Lee, in this statement, assumes cynicism as his default stance; he criticizes a social flaw while offering no alternative. In this vein, Wallace asserts that the postmodern ironist employs "weary cynicism to try to seem superior" (184). Thus, what Lee's variety of cynical irony produces is not a transcendent, superior path for social improvement but rather a means by which he may act with impunity. Wallace continues, "And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to

interdict the question without attending to its content is tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself” (184). What Wallace asserts, in other words, is that the critical function of a cynical irony for the sake of rebellion makes the postmodern ironist unassailable to critique. Like a poet criticizing his work before reading it, this irony works as a defense mechanism, precluding the possibility of incurring criticism by preemptively employing it.

In regards to the novel, Lee makes his own questionable lifestyle unassailable through his consciousness of his own ridiculous nature. For instance, Lee recalls his response to when his friends ask him why he chooses to live in such an ugly environment: “I like it because it’s ugly” to which Sal comments, “All his life was in that line” (144). Lee’s conscious attraction to ugliness stems, it appears, not from an attempt to improve society but out of a desire for rebellion for its own sake. This rebellion, however, fails to produce for Lee the sort of freedom he desires. Allard Den Dulk in his essay “Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self” discusses the limitation freedom offered by this sort of irony: “Through irony the individual obtains a negative freedom, a freedom-from. As such, irony constitutes an indispensable step toward freely choosing a personal interpretation of one’s moral life, a positive freedom, or, a freedom-to. However, irony cannot be the source of that ‘positivity,’ because of its pure negation” (47). For Lee to gain a “positive freedom, or, a freedom-to,” he must search for this freedom outside of his negative, cynically ironic stance.

Lee, however, seems content to revel in his cynical, rebellious appreciation for the distasteful as Sal recounts:

Once I knocked on his door in the 60th Street slums of New York and he opened it wearing a derby hat, a vest within nothing underneath, and long striped sharpster

pants; in his hands he had a cookpot, birdseed in the pot, and was trying to mash the seed to roll in cigarettes. He also experimented with boiling codeine cough syrup down to a black mash—that didn't work out too well. (144)

Here, Lee exhibits all of the cynical, rebellious, and negative traits of postmodern irony while failing to possess any path towards betterment. Ultimately, Lee has overextended irony to the point of situating himself within its grasps. On this note, Dulk warns, “Irony, in its liberating potential, should be employed only temporarily” (47). However, he likewise adds that irony, when applied as a personal worldview, can be used “to avoid all commitment, all responsibility, and to retain . . . negative freedom” (47). When this sort of ironic mentality is elevated to a personal ideal—what Dulk calls “the ironic-aesthetic life-view”—the result paralyzes the individual. This is indeed the case with Bull Lee. He is neither willing to find a path to true freedom, nor is he able to shake the irony that relegates him to a strictly negative, and seemingly nihilistic, figure in the narrative.

Thus, due to his adherence to cynical irony as a personal ideal, Lee must succumb to the ultimate result of his adherence: suffering. As Dulk states, Lee holds to a worldview of “total irony that is no longer a means to overthrow hypocritical, unquestioned truths, but rather an instrument of cynicism, that makes it incredibly difficult for individuals to realize a meaningful life” (48). Wallace goes as far as to say that this sort of irony causes “great despair and stasis in U.S. culture” (171) while Dulk further comments that “[i]n the end, the aesthetic life-view leads to despair” (48). Because this ironic “life-view” does not enable true freedom for the individual, the person with this view will possess only a negative relationship with reality. Ultimately, Dulk contends that “by neglecting reality, by not realizing a new, freely chosen relation to that reality,

the self is also neglected” (48). Thus, for someone with this ironic stance, the result is not only a negative outlook on reality but also the isolation of the self.

For Lee, a character Sal describes to be “anti-everything” (7), the result of suffering is apparent in the text via the impoverished nature of his life and his self-delusions and despair due to his drug use. Lee’s volatile outlook regarding the hypocrisies of society manifests not only in his irony but also in his physical rebellion against the body itself. Lee believes that his drug use will cause him to transcend the limitations of the physical body and achieve a sort of transcendence. Even Sal, however, perceives the irony in Lee’s belief and attests to the extreme nature of his addictions as well as the physical toll they take on him: “Old Bull had seven separate personalities, each growing worse and worse on the way down, till finally he was a raving idiot and had to be restrained with chains” (144). Here, Sal’s commentary provides the knowledge necessary to perceive the irony of Lee’s belief in physical transcendence through drug use, and, as a whole, Kerouac’s presentation of Lee in the text is colored by the knowledge of the contradiction within Lee’s character. Ultimately, it is suffering, not transcendence or self-signification, that manifests through Lee’s ironic outlook.

The Mythology of the Self: Authenticity and Dean Moriarty

Where Old Bull Lee’s stance of irony leads him down a path of suffering and despair due to its lack of positive freedom and cynical nature, Dean Moriarty’s insistence on the virtue of authenticity drives his character, impels his self-absorbed actions, and produces despair through the alienation from those around him. Here again, Kelly’s definition of authenticity, borrowed heavily from Trilling, provides an important aspect of Dean’s outlook: “Authenticity conceives truth as something inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than

other-directed communication” (132). Kerouac reflects these qualities in Dean. Like Lee, Dean senses the malaise central to the modern condition; however, rather than adopting a cynical attitude, Dean turns inward and desires, above all else, to remain true to himself as an ultimate ideal. This faith in himself as opposed to the cynicism of Lee’s outlook distinguishes Dean from Lee as a character who values authenticity over irony. Throughout his travels with Sal, Dean’s insistence on remaining authentic causes Sal to view him as a sort of persona,¹⁹ elevating his status from a wondering conman to “a sideburned hero of the snowy West” (Kerouac 2). For Sal, it is this very quality of Dean’s authenticity that attracts him to Dean’s life on the road. As Karen E.H. Skinazi qualifies in “Through Roots and Routes: *On the Road*’s Portrayal of an Outsider’s Journey into the Meaning of America,” Dean’s affinity for the road and his mythical nature occupies much of the novel’s focus: “Throughout *On the Road*, Sal appears to be hovering in the hero’s shadow—in a liminal space that is both in and outside the spotlight, following the hero, Dean, in his conquest of the continent, but unable to appropriate the land as Dean does” (87). Dean’s mythological nature is espoused to his focus on the self and the creation of the self via Dean’s focus on authenticity over community and the self over kinship.

At least initially, the novel introduces Dean’s authenticity in Sal’s description of first hearing about the character who would come to consume much of his life. In the first place, Kerouac imbues Dean’s character with a sense of mystery, a mystery which Sal finds unquestioningly appealing:

¹⁹ The notion of viewing the self as a persona is a central quality of authenticity according to both Trilling and Wallace. Trilling believes that, in the twentieth century, modernist poets elevated themselves to the point of becoming arcane personas rather than men speaking to other men (7). Likewise, Wallace points out the ascendancy of persona in his 1997 interview with Charlie Rose when he qualifies the modern insistence on persona bled into the postmodern era: “[Postmodernism] was the first text that was highly self-conscious, self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers and the fact that the readers probably knew that” (n. pag).

First reports of [Dean] came to me through Chad King, who'd shown me a few letters from him written in a New Mexico reform school. I was tremendously interested in the letters because they so naively and sweetly asked Chad to teach him all about Nietzsche and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew. At one point Carlo and I talked about the letters and wondered if we would ever meet the strange Dean Moriarty. This is all far back, when Dean was not the way he is today, when he was a young jailkid shrouded in mystery. (3-4)

Here, the nostalgia of Kerouac's narrator is palpable, and this passage evokes the sense that the impression of Dean's character produces a sense of honesty and self-reliance that is lacking in Sal's life. Beyond the initial impression of the passage, the mention of Nietzsche is significant due to the philosopher's critical estimation of one of the proponents of authenticity. Jacob Golomb in *Nietzsche and Zion* discusses Nietzsche's views on authenticity: "Nietzsche's ideal of authenticity calls for an ongoing life of significant actions. It is actions that shape our authenticity . . . Nietzsche's account of authenticity is modeled on the aesthetic ideal: spontaneous creation of one's self and life" (215-16). Moreover, his authenticity connects with the outlook of egoism because, at its core, both egoism and authenticity involve a complete truthfulness to the self as an ultimate ideal.

For instance, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche contends that "egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul" (405), asserting that, for this enlightened individual, the subjugation and sacrifice of others for personal benefit exists as simply "the primordial law of things" (405), and Dean's actions appear to resonate with Nietzsche's ideas. As an individual, Dean sees himself as the ultimate end of all actions in the narrative. Kerouac portrays Dean's view of himself as the locus of all action throughout the narrative. As Sal recognizes, "He [Dean] was conning me and I

knew it (for room and board and ‘how-to-write,’ etc.), and he knew I knew” (4). Here, Kerouac establishes how Dean views himself strictly in relation to those around him; he values other insofar as they benefit his own needs. Nietzsche goes on to qualify, “The noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges ‘what is harmful to me is harmful in itself’; it knows itself to be that which first accords honor to things; it is value-creating. Everything it knows as part of itself it honors: such a morality is self-glorification” (395). Dean reflects this sort of “value-creating” and “self-glorification” through the manner with which he lives his life. He is free from the societal pressures of God, family, and country, and, instead, determines what has value in his life by focusing on what elevates his authenticity of selfhood. It is no accident, then, that Kerouac conveys Dean’s desires to learn about Nietzsche, for the connection to Nietzsche at the opening of the novel likewise connects Dean with the notion of authenticity.

In the novel, Kerouac reveals the extent to which Dean values authenticity and qualifies the nature of his authenticity primarily through Dean’s self-mythologizing and his relationships with the other characters in the narrative. Hunt clarifies that Dean “must rely on his own resources, primarily his cunning, to keep the gas tank full and everyone in motion” (12). Unlike Sal who has his aunt and her resources to fall back upon, Dean must be solely self-reliant. Hunt contends that Dean is “running from the superficial banalities of modern America but [is] equipped only with a superficial idealism and the complete faith in self” (30). Dean’s total reliance on himself as the source of meaning in the universe manifests in his resolute nature. Where Sal is uncertain that they will be able to find what they set out for in their travels, Dean’s self-reliance provides him with certainty. *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* by Erik Mortenson defines the nature of Dean’s authenticity in the text:

“Dean’s authenticity resides in his knowledge that we will all get there anyway, and thus there is no need to do anything but simply experience the moment as it unfolds” (28). Here Dean’s predilection for inward truth resonates with the certainty with which he approaches their journey. Dean’s authentic nature convinces him that, through being true to himself, he will achieve a sort of transcendence and “know what IT is and . . . know TIME” (*OTR* 197). On his way to Denver, Dean confides in Sal the nature of this inward belief:

They have worries, they’re counting the miles, they’re thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they’ll get there—and all the time they’ll get there anyway, you see. But they need to worry and betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny, their souls really won’t be at peace until they can latch on to an established and proven worry and having once found it they assume facial expressions to fit and go with it, which is, you see, unhappiness, and all the time it all flits by them and they know it and that too worries them no end. (197)

To Dean, people who worry in this way are inauthentic in that their concerns lie not on discovering and communing with the true nature of the self but with extraneous concerns. These concerns outside of the self, to Dean, negate the meaning and joy of existence. In Dean’s estimation, rather than existing in the moment, worry compels the individual out of himself through its connection to the external world—an external world of modern malaise, anxiety, and uncertainty. As Mortenson states, “The passengers in *On the Road*, however, fail to use their anxiety [worry] to catapult themselves into an authentic relationship to the world” (29). To Dean, focusing on concerns external to the self produces anxiety while fixating on the self engenders meaning through authenticity.

Dean's certainty within himself—predicated in his adherence to personal authenticity—presents the reason for Sal's mythological treatment of him in the text. Sal states that Dean exhibits "the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being" (184); elsewhere, Sal comments that Dean possesses "the tremendous energy of a new kind of American Saint" (34). Ultimately, in Dean, Sal finds the embodiment of the complete and total freedom offered by the sole adherence to the self. Moreover, this trait of Dean's appeals to Sal because he, like the passengers on the trip to Denver, cannot repudiate the external concerns of reality. This is the radical nature of Dean's authenticity; he is the sole character in the novel that behaves with total disregard for the concerns of others—even to the extent of deserting Sal in Mexico in their final journey in the novel. Similarly, Hunt adds that "Dean is so intensely into his own world, as Sal discovers, that no one else's exists" (33). Because of the unique nature of Dean's authenticity in the novel, Sal deifies him and portrays him an enlightened individual, elevating Dean to the sort of persona reminiscent of the modernists' view of the poet as an isolated persona. This sort of solipsistic view of reality is consistent with authenticity's valuing of the self and the focus of self-exploration rather than other-directed communication.

Due to the extent of Dean's authenticity—the elevation of feeling while disregarding its attestation—Dean is unable to clearly communicate with others and instead isolates himself from those around him. Dean's faithfulness to the self and the present causes his actions and language to be frantic and erratic. Mortenson contends, "Dean is frenetically living in the moment, trying to stay within the ever-unfolding horizon of the 'now.' . . . Dean accepts the belief that life must be lived in the present and practices this knowledge by filling each of these moments with as much activity as possible, attempting 'to do everything at the same time'" (31-2). Because of Dean's

self-absorption and the highly personal nature of his ideas, his utterances often fail to actually communicate with another individual.

To Dean, the highly personal nature of his feeling is all that matters, and the congruence with which he expresses his feelings matters little to him. However, the novel asserts that, carried over time, this inwardness not only precludes true communication but also isolates the individual: “He [Dean] couldn’t talk anymore. He hopped and laughed, he stuttered and fluttered his hands and said, ‘Ah—ah—you must listen to hear.’ We listened all ears. But he forgot what he wanted to say . . . And he stared with rocky sorrow into his hands. ‘Can’t talk no more—do you understand that it is—or might be—But listen’” (306-7). Here, Dean’s authenticity—his adherence to his own interior beliefs and self in opposition to others—drives him so far into himself that he cannot communicate whatsoever. To Kerouac, it seems, that by focusing on authenticity and repudiating those around him, Dean becomes isolated within himself and cut off from others. Dean believes that, by turning inward, he may find answers and peace within himself, and he likewise seeks to exercise the primacy of the self within the narrative through the exploitation of others for his gain. Again, however, for Dean, this results in suffering.

Over the course of the novel, Dean exploits all he encounters. Hunt believes this flaw stems from his intensity, which is an extension of his authenticity: “Dean’s intensity is the source of both his transcendence and his tendency to victimize those around him” (71). The self-absorption central to Dean’s outlook of authenticity relegates those around him to the point of indifference. On this topic, Hunt states, “Dean does not grow in the way Sal does. His trips end in defeat quite different from Sal’s partial defeat of losses and gains. Dean leaves his wives and children for the disorder of the road only to settle with a new woman and new children, creating an increasingly oppressive ‘order’ of domestic and economic obligations” (23). While Dean goes

on the road to search for a type of modern freedom and self-actualization, in reality, he entraps himself through his insistence on authentic behavior. “Dean,” Hunt states, “stands for the ultimate conflict between the will and all else even at the expense of its own destruction” (70). Though Dean’s authenticity, then, he eventually destroys himself in the novel which intimates Kerouac’s view of complete authenticity as an improper response to modernity.

Thus, through Dean’s individualistic authenticity, he likewise alienates himself from those closest to him and prompts the suffering he experiences at the novel’s resolution with Sal’s rejection of him. Thus, Kerouac connects authenticity with suffering. Golob’s commentary on Kierkegaard’s authenticity illuminates the centrality of suffering within authenticity: “Always to have to choose freely and create one’s own self is to be in a constant state of ‘dread’ or anxiety” (56). This dread or anxiety stems from the fact that being necessitates the possibility of dying, and throughout the narrative, Dean attempts to differ this existential dread by cheating time and remaining in the present. Thus, Dean’s frenetic nature and his insistence on movement and cheating time radiate from his need to prolong the dread of his mortality:

One needs to continually move in order to stay in sync with time, to always live on its perpetually unfolding edge. Realizing that life will end, he seeks to make the most of it by maximizing his understanding of every moment. Focusing exclusively on the unfolding moment, Dean avoids the trap of seeing the present as anything but what it really is—the final and ultimate reality. (Mortenson 33)

Hence, through Dean’s desire to be true to himself, and in doing so maximize every experience for his own interest, Dean works to exist strictly in the present via his insistence on movement; through this process, Dean hopes to defer the dread of his own possible death.

While this action may seem like a logical step, the novel articulates that Dean's position is unsustainable—as evidenced by his exhaustion and ultimate inability to communicate. In this vein, Dean's eventual despair resonates with Kierkegaard's second notion of despair in *Sickness unto Death*: “Despair about the eternal or over oneself” (360). Kierkegaard is indeed a proponent of authenticity; however, his authenticity is contingent upon the individual's connection to and recognition of the divine. Dean, however, does not possess this sort of divine connection. Rather, “He thinks he is in despair over something earthly and constantly talks about what he is in despair over, and yet he is in despair about the eternal; for the fact that he ascribes such value to the earthly, or, to carry the thought further, that he ascribes to something earthly such great value . . . is precisely despair about the eternal” (360). While Dean does not directly talk of his despair, we sense its constant presence through his insistence on movement as deferral; ultimately, his authentic commitment to experiences and the present moment point towards his eternal anxieties. Thus, by presenting Dean as a response of authenticity to modern malaise, as well as connecting this sort of authenticity with inevitable suffering, Kerouac intimates that authenticity—like irony—is an inadequate remedy to the issues of modernity and that it, when utilized like Dean, results in despair.

Sal's Sincerity: The Earnest, the Ironic, and the New Sincerity

Within the movement of New Sincerity, the enactment of sincerity involves the earnest treatment of an ironic subject—an adherence to and belief in a contradiction, insisting that contradiction itself does not negate value. This belief is similar to the cliché notion that it is not so much the destination but the journey that matters. For instance, Kerouac recognizes that the treks across America will not result in the attainment of true meaning and signification that his

protagonists seek, yet he contends that the journey itself—while futile—contains value. Specifically, this notion applies to *On the Road* via Sal's personal growth within the novel both as a character and as a narrator. Within the novel's content, there is a schism between the character Sal's naivety and his experience as the narrator. The novel makes it clear that narrator Sal is looking back in retrospect on the events he describes, and this distance engenders a judgement within the narrator in regards to young Sal's actions. Narrator Sal, in looking back, recognizes the futility of character Sal's actions and journey, yet his treatment of these events is earnest, not ironic. Rather than dismissing the experience on the road as naïve lark devoid of purpose, narrator Sal reflects on these experiences to, as he puts it, "figure the losses and figure the gain" (92); hence, he insists on reconciling meaning from seemingly meaningless experiences.

The distance between Sal the narrator and Sal the character allows for the sort of reflection that facilitates New Sincerity. From the onset, Kerouac establishes the distance between the two Sals by conveying the narrator's conscious position as a character looking back and recalling the novel's events:

I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. (3)

Here, at the novel's opening, Kerouac showcases the narrator's self-conscious nature; the narrator's language—which consists of admissions that there are aspects he "won't bother to talk

about” and that the events of the novel deal with “the part of [his] life you could call [his] life on the road” (3)—intimates a level of self-awareness within Sal for his position as a narrator.

As a narrator, Sal is older and possesses more life experience, but as a character Sal is naïve and engages the world with wide-eyed enthusiasm. Carol Gottlieb Vopat calls this distance between character and narrator Sal’s “double vision” (437), noting the complexity within Sal’s character: “Kerouac equips his narrator with a double vision, enabling Sal to comment on the people and events of the novel as he saw them when they happened and as he views them now that they are over, a sadder-but-wiser hindsight which acts as a check upon his naïve, indiscriminating exuberances” (437-8). Vopat rightfully asserts that Sal’s distance and “hindsight” as a narrator enables him to judge the events in the novel; however, despite his backward perspective, Sal does not negate the experiences of his younger self. Hunt recognizes this fact: “Kerouac and his narrator, though wary of Sal’s earlier foolishness, are unwilling to dismiss it for fear that that might mean dismissing the vitality that went with it” (6-7). Sal’s perspective allows him to see the error of his former self, yet he still treats the experiences with a sense of earnestness.

Sal’s “double vision”—his dual roles as experienced narrator and naïve character—complicates a simplistic understanding of his character. Unlike Lee, Sal the character is not disillusioned with reality; rather, he encounters reality with optimism and wonder. This quality is evident in his initial attempt to follow Route 6 all the way across the country: “On the roadmap was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I’ll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started” (12). As a narrator, Sal recognizes the impossibility of this idea; the very notion of staying on one road to get across the country points to character Sal’s naivety. Upon

failing to follow Route 6 and realizing the foolishness of this idea, Sal the narrator contends, “It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads” (13). Possessing knowledge of Sal’s initial naivety and the futility of his idea, Sal the narrator could easily convey Sal’s romantic plan with irony—pointing out the foolishness of his naïve nature. However, Sal the narrator reconciles value in character Sal’s idealized notion through the illuminating the value of myth: “If you drop a rose in the Hudson River at its mysterious source in the Adirondacks think of all the places it journeys by as it goes out to sea forever” (12). This commentary by the narrator is not ironic; instead, it is an earnest attempt to depict the value of Sal’s belief in mystery, myth, and transcendence—even if this belief is folly.

This narrative tactic, of acknowledging the folly of a belief while positing its value, points to the fusion of earnestness and irony central to New Sincerity. Leland echoes the dual nature of Sal’s narration by asserting that Kerouac’s narrator is “acknowledging the magic of myth without wholly stepping in it” (22). The mention of the Hudson, for instance, elevates Route 6 to mythic level; likewise, the “rose” seems to be an analogue for Sal, which speaks to both his purity and fragility. The analogy of the rose and the Hudson, then, affirms the mythic nature of Sal’s belief while his ultimate failure presents the folly of this belief. Leland furthers the belief that Sal the narrator both values the mythic while recognizing its falsity: “If *On the Road* is a spiritual quest, it cannot love only the factual. Myth has truth, too: it delivers truth of the past in the present. But you can’t go around with stars in your eyes” (22).

Just as Sal the narrator both recognizes the folly of myth while asserting its value, he understands the futile nature of his quest with Dean while simultaneously insisting that their quest is worthwhile. Leland contends that Sal’s “double vision” allows him to embody both the

naïve and the enlightened, thus, affirming the value of both innocence and experience. According to Leland, Sal is both the most naïve and the most knowledgeable character in the novel: “When we see Sal gazing on Dean for the first time, full of wonder, we are doing so through eyes that have already seen Dean in collapse or as the destructive wraith rampaging across the desert” (22). In this way, Sal both appreciates Dean’s mythic nature while likewise understanding his eventual failure. Leland states that Sal “tips his hand in his opening description of Dean, characterizing him as ‘not the way he is today,’ a view of Dean at two points in time, reached only after the book’s action is complete” (22-3). While Sal’s initial impressions are naïve, his “double vision” allows him to gain a more complete understanding.

This ability to view the narrative at two points in time—as a character and a narrator—enables Sal to articulate meaning within contradictions, by affirming differing states simultaneously. He can both recognize Dean’s ultimate failure while esteeming Dean’s free-spirit, energy, and mythic nature. Due to his foreknowledge, narrator Sal understands the specious nature of Dean’s attestations, yet Kerouac maintains that Dean’s ideas contain value. This tactic “employs,” to Leland, “a jazz way of knowledge, completing a chorus by improvising on it from every angle, with each version contributing to the whole” (24). Here, the mention of jazz, while resonating with the idea of the novel’s aesthetic sincerity, points towards Kerouac’s desire to reconcile two contradicting notions. Ultimately, the narrator posits that Dean is both a lunatic and a saint, and this treatment of Dean is earnest while recognizing the contradiction of his character.

In this vein, Hunt states that, in addition to acknowledging the folly of Dean’s absurdity and Sal’s naïve outlook as a character, “Sal also recognizes in his earlier self a positive sense of ‘mystery,’ an engagement with things, that he has lost and would like recover. Sal is willing to

recognize his earlier limitations but avoids condemning them in order not to dismiss the positive along with the negative” (7). Thus, in his attempt to “figure the losses and figure the gain” (92), Sal as a narrator treats the contradictions of the novel with earnestness. The narrator recognizes the ultimate failure of his and Dean’s quest for transcendent meaning, but Sal’s narration imbues this futile endeavor with value: “Kerouac wants to be able to express the value in feeling wonder at a ‘young jailkid,’ the value in seeing freshly, if imperfectly, from a perspective that temporarily precedes society’s categories, without being trapped by the limitations of that wonder” (Hunt 8). Granted, recognizing the futility of the quest while insisting its value is ironic; however, it is the earnest belief in this value—despite its impossibility—that is sincere.

Moreover, beyond the fusion of earnestness and irony within Sal’s narration, Sal’s “double vision” facilitates a two-way dialogue within the narrative—between Sal the narrator and Sal the character and between Sal’s contradictions and the reader’s reception. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to recognize the earnest treatment of contradictions within the narrative, and the reader must judge whether this conveyance is, in fact, sincere. This facilitation of dialogue, to Kelly, resonates with Wallace’s beliefs regarding New Sincerity in literature: “In Wallace’s terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal the reader’s attestation and judgment” (145). By obfuscating the depiction of the self through Sal’s “double-vision,” Kerouac “relinquish[es] the self to the judgment of the other” (Kelly 145) and admits to possibility for multiple truths to exist simultaneously.

The earnest treatment of contradictions moreover obscures the presentation of a single authorial intent, allowing for no easy interpretation of Sal’s true motive. This ambiguity, what Kelly calls “withholding of the secret” (144), facilitates a dialogue with the reader, leaving the

reader to reconcile the tension, contradiction, and ambiguity. Furthermore, the admission of this ambiguity—Sal’s earnest treatment of the novel’s contradictions—functions as a truthful confession of “the unconditional secret” which produces “epistemological humility” (Kelly 143)—the admission of and faithfulness to the contradiction which, to Kelly and Wallace, is sincere. Trilling anticipates the possibility of contradictions yielding truth and sincerity in *The Liberal Imagination*: “A culture is not a flow, not even a confluence, the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate—it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions” (9). Kerouac, as a writer, resonates with Trilling’s claim because the contradictions central to Sal—both as a character and as a narrator—imbue the novel with power. The dialectic he creates between the earnest and the ironic fosters both a dialogue between narrator and character as well as between the text and the reader. And the confession of the irreconcilable nature of these contradictions—the simultaneous futility and value of the journey—conveys a stark sense of honesty and a congruence of feeling and attestation.

Ultimately, as a response to modern malaise, the novel implies that a sincere adherence to contradictions, a faith in the value of folly, is the best way to cope with modern reality. Rather than turning inward like Dean and becoming self-consumed in internal despair or adopting Lee’s cynical, ironic nature, Sal possesses the courage to admit that he cannot provide objective answers to the questions the novel poses. Rather, through recognizing the contradictions within his own story while insisting on value within the contradictions, Sal projects the notion of New Sincerity. And while this sincerity does not necessarily convey a moral truth,²⁰ it is a conveyance

²⁰ Magill himself writes that New Sincerity “does not necessarily correlate to objective truths; it correlates to inwards states, which surely are not always aware of the facts” (224). For instance, the communication of an internal contradiction can be sincere; however, what is communicated is not necessarily true—but a congruence of external attestation and internal true feeling.

of human nature—the inability to reconcile contradictions between naivety and experience. And, in this way, Kerouac, as Wallace puts it, “treat[s] old untrendy human troubles and emotions . . . with reverence and conviction” (192). Ultimately, what the complexities of Sal reveal, as an anticipation of New Sincerity, is that New Sincerity involves being true to a contradiction, and, in this performance, recognizing its value.

Conclusion

“So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars’ll be out, and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all the rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.”

—Jack Kerouac *On the Road*

Through the framework of sincerity, authenticity, and irony, we may see how Kerouac’s *On the Road* is neither ironic nor authentic but that it possesses both characteristics of traditional sincerity while anticipating New Sincerity. Trilling’s thoughts on sincerity and authenticity, combined with Wallace’s views on postmodern irony and New Sincerity, contribute to understanding the novel as a microcosm of these topics. Essentially, the characters’ actions present their responses to the modern malaise of the novel’s historical context. Through observing the presence of irony, authenticity, and sincerity in the novel, we perceive Kerouac’s views regarding the correct response to modern reality. Namely, Kerouac posits that both irony and authenticity fail to remedy the malaise of modern existence, and he asserts that a new type of sincerity—projecting honesty through the earnest belief in the value of contradictions—points to the most viable means of coping with reality.

While this project focused specifically on revealing the several aspects of sincerity in *On the Road*, it could not address the implications regarding the nature of objective truth within the movement of the New Sincerity. Rather, the central task of this study was to present the novel's sincerity in opposition to the prominent sensibilities of the time—authenticity and irony—in order to display the similarities between Kerouac's reformulation of sincerity and the ideas of the New Sincerity movement. In this way, this project succeeds in revealing the nuanced qualities of sincerity inherent within the text.

Yet, in terms of objective truth, New Sincerity presents an interesting possibility for further study. Two question, in particular, encompasses this discussion: how does the fusion of the earnest and the ironic within New Sincerity function in relation to truth, and can true value exists within a contradiction? Future studies regarding the sincerity of *On the Road* might focus on answering these difficult philosophical questions in an attempt to reconcile New Sincerity with objective truth. Because the reconciliation of value from contradictions drives the final message of the novel, uncovering the worldview that informs this message would benefit both this project and advance the study of the novel in general. For this sort of study to occur, however, we must both understand the role of sincerity in the novel and recognize its function.

At the end of the novel, rather than subscribing to a cynical, ironic outlook or reveling in an authentic self-absorption, Kerouac proposes a stance of epistemic humility, one that recognizes both reality's contradictions and the value within those contradictions. As Sal the narrator admits in the final passage, "Nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old" (293). Here, Sal's admission resonates with the fusion of the earnest and the ironic in New Sincerity. In particular, he admits to lacking any true, objective knowledge of reality while likewise consenting to knowing universal truths like death and old

age. In denying that he possesses objective knowledge while simultaneously affirming it, Sal presents an ironic message. However, he resolves the ionic contradiction of this statement by contrasting it with an earnest sentiment: “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (293). These lines resolve the tension established by the beginning of the passage:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, and all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying . . . and tonight the stars’ll be out, and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear? (293)

The resolution to “think of Dean Moriarty” (293) exists as the response to this contradicted passage. In these last lines, Sal comments that, in moments when he recognizes the contradictions of reality, he thinks of his friend Dean which seems to provide him with a sense of value and peace. This peace within the tension—the understanding of value in spite of contradictions—manifests as a message of epistemic humility and anticipates the ideas of the New Sincerity.

Yet, the fact that Kerouac never reconciles the contradictions in the novel—instead finding value in the tension—may be problematic to some. In general, criticism regarding the novel regularly finds fault in one aspect or another, and readings that laud the novel’s literary excellence possess limited company in critical discourse. Whether they focus on Kerouac’s oppressive treatment of women by reducing their agency, his utilization of racial stereotypes, or the unorthodox nature of his prose, critics treat the novel as flawed literature—possessing worth

more for its cultural and historical significance than its literary excellence.²¹ The discussion of the novel's anticipation of New Sincerity, however, reveals a level of honesty, foresight, and complexity within the text and both elevates its critical standing and negates these criticisms.

Specifically, observing how *On the Road* is neither ironic nor authentic but an embodiment of both traditional and New Sincerity amends the novel's critical position and designates it as good literature by highlighting its sophisticated treatment of sincerity.

Overwhelmingly, critics overlook the central qualities of sincerity in the novel. Granted, *On the Road* possesses some flaws for the contemporary reader in terms of race and gender;²² however, understanding the novel's complex message regarding the inadequacy of both authenticity and irony and the validity of sincerity refutes superficial criticisms of the work. Attacks on the novel's treatment of women or its racial appropriations fail because they focus on inconsequential particularities within the text rather than its larger meaning. Kerouac is writing in a historical context informed by existentialism and suffering from modern malaise, and his novel works towards remedying these pressing issues through the presentation of sincerity.

Understanding the novel as a sincere response to the issues of its time invalidates the inconsequential criticisms that have surrounded the work. Specifically, the larger scope of the novel's presentation of sincerity and its anticipation of New Sincerity reduces the significance of criticisms that lambast its particular details, revealing these reproaches to be less appropriate works of literary criticism and more petty reactions based on personal and political agendas. As a work of literature, the meaning and significance of the novel transcends these concerns and

²¹ *Salon's* "Was Jack Kerouac really a Hack?" by Joseph Lapin outlines the prevailing critical attitude towards the novel: "He [Kerouac] is admired for his historical place, but just bring up his style and people will laugh. Many professors and critics find his writing naive: plotless and pointless" (n.pag.).

²² Malcolm's couches his discussion of the novel's use of jazz within the framework of racial appropriation (85-90). Likewise, Leland notes that Kerouac's depiction of women does, in fact, limit their agency (94).

focuses on presenting a solution to the problems surrounding its modern context. In other words, attacks on the novel fail to see a level of nuance and complexity within the text, and this failure speaks to the myopic, reductive nature of these criticisms. Thus, observing the novel's sincerity highlights the intricacy of Kerouac's narrative and displays its merit as excellent literature.

In this vein, the presence of sincerity in the novel finally repudiates superficial criticisms by situating the novel within a larger literary tradition—the use of sincerity as a literary ideal—and showcasing its foresight in anticipating New Sincerity. Through the embodiment of irony and authenticity in the characters, Kerouac presents the incorrect responses to modern reality, highlighting the centrality of suffering and despair within both worldviews. Ultimately, taken together, the congruence of avowal and feeling in the novel's aesthetic qualities, Kerouac's focus on honest communication, and the earnest depiction of contradictions within the narrative collectively display a message of sincerity.

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