

On the Road Passage Analysis 1: Text, Prompts, and Notes

Read the following passage carefully and respond to the prompts below with short analytical essays.

Yes, and it wasn't only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more, and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow in spite of our differences in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic. His dirty workclothes 5 clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills. 10 All my other current friends were "intellectuals"—Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-everything drawl—or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the *New Yorker*. But Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his "criminality" was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a 15 wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other, "so long's I can get that lil ole gal with that lil sumpin down there tween her legs, boy" and "so long's we can eat, son, y'ear 20 me? I'm hungry, I'm starving, let's eat right now!"—and off we'd rush to eat, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, "It is your portion under the sun."

A western kinsman of the sun, Dean. Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds— 25 what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off.

Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.

[from the end of Part 1, Chapter 1]

Prompt #1: How is this passage representative of the style of the novel? Discuss the aspects of its style that contribute to the effect of the passage (and the novel). What rhetorical devices does Kerouac employ? What poetic characteristics does this style contain? What tone does it convey? How does the style express the theme of *carpe diem* suggested in the passage?

Prompt #2: Based on your understanding of the novel, what is the "pearl" referred to in the last line of the passage? Discuss the nature of this "pearl," and describe the attempts of the characters in the novel to obtain it.

Prompt #1: Style

The primary goal and effect of Kerouac's stylistic choices are to convey a sense of the state of mind of the characters in the story: an exuberant, chaotic delight in new adventures; a desire to intensely experience everything and everyone around them—to constantly be aware of the present as it unfolds, moment to moment. He wants the reader to experience the state of being of people “on the road”—constant, restless movement from one experience and feeling and place to the next.

One particular aspect of this effect is that the text feels as though it is meant to be read aloud. In reading it aloud, one experiences the story in time, as it was originally experienced—as ephemeral, transitory events that don't necessarily allow for reflection—and the story is more keenly *felt* rather than *thought*.

diction: extreme, strong, vivid verbs and adjectives that convey intensity of feeling and experience as well as a sense of chaos and exuberance

- mostly colloquial; not overly intellectualized
- replete with descriptive detail, vivid imagery

examples:

- the description of Dean on line 4: “his suffering bony face...his straining muscular sweating neck”
 - these adjectives convey the intensity with which Dean feels and strives: his sensitivity and the force of his desire and personality
- line 15: “wild yea-saying overburst of American joy”
 - conveys a sense of exuberant, unrestrained affirmation and action; even the noun “overburst” implies action, and the adjective expression “yea-saying” incorporates an action

syntax: long, varied, complex sentences rush from one idea, image, or description to the next with a chaotic, restless rhythm of pauses, but few full stops—constant movement from phrase to phrase

- mirrors the state of mind of the characters: although it's not quite stream-of-consciousness, it gives a sense of each phrase being formed on the spur of the moment
- variety of phrase and clause types, liberal punctuation of different kinds: commas, dashes, hyphens, apostrophes, quotation marks, semicolons, exclamation points and question marks
 - gives sense of chaotic excitement as opposed to ordered calmness
 - frequent contractions reflect sound of spoken language, lack of formality, rapidity of expression
 - incorporated quotations take the reader out of the reflection of the passage and into the original moment of happening: “I'm *hungry*, I'm *starving*, let's *eat right now!*” (line 20)
 - dashes: disrupted flow, off-kilter rhythm
- parallelism and repetition of structures and phrases intensifies and emphasizes ideas and feelings
 - “I could hear a new call and see a new horizon” (line 23): emphasizes the depth of the narrator's sense of longing for new experiences
- long descriptions with multiple adjectives and little punctuation give a feeling of rich detail being captured as quickly as possible:
 - “nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk” (lines 10-11): complexity and richness of Carlo Marx's manner that can't be captured with spare descriptions

rhetorical devices: passage is replete with a great variety of rhetorical devices that convey intensity of experience, feeling, and conviction

- paradox: “his dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor” (lines 5-6)
 - Dean manages to look more graceful, more appealing, more comfortable in his simple clothes than people wearing much more expensive clothing because of his state of mind and manner
- personification: “the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy” (line 7)
 - comparing Dean's exuberance to a person renders it more powerful and vivid
- rhetorical question: “what did it matter?” (line 25)
 - conveys narrator's nonchalant confidence about the value of his experiences: his conviction and the rightness of his decision can't be doubted

- metaphor: “a western kinsman of the sun, Dean”
 - Dean is as bright, striking, powerful, and full of energy as the sun itself
- allusion: “as saith Ecclesiastes, ‘It is your portion under the sun.’” (lines 20-21)
 - the narrator’s and Dean’s experiences are spiritually significant, as if prophesied and validated by the Bible
- hyperbole: emphasizes good-humored, powerful desires
 - “I’m *starving*” (line 20): exaggerates Dean’s physical, sexual, spiritual appetite
- antithesis: juxtaposition of Dean and Sal’s other friends highlights Dean’s distinctive good qualities
 - much of first paragraph goes back and forth between positive descriptions of Dean, negative descriptions of Sal’s other friends
- climax: long sentences sometimes build up to excited climax
 - sentence beginning on line 16 begins as a reflective, negative sentence but builds up to an exuberant conclusion with Dean’s remarks about being hungry
- alliteration and consonance: give a poetic feel to the text, as something that should be read aloud
 - “straining muscular sweating neck” (line 4): repetition of “s” sounds gives emphasis to description
 - “nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk” (lines 10-11): repetition of “s” and “t” sounds
 - “New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons” (lines 16-18): repetition of “n,” “t,” and “p” sounds

Prompt #2: The “Pearl”

The title of the novel suggests constant movement: the characters are constantly in search of new experiences, sensations, scenes, people, places. The point of being “on the road” is not to reach a particular destination but to give themselves a constant stream of opportunities for these new experiences. They are exuberantly in search of adventure.

Being “on the road” is also a metaphor for the human experience of time: the ceaseless change and renewal of the moment. Time is by definition transitory, and human experience is thus defined by the inexorable progress of time from moment to moment. The goal of being completely “in the moment,” being “in the here and now,” is a concept that plays an important role in Eastern philosophy, which the characters are influenced by. Instead of becoming lost in abstract thought, distracted by worries and speculation about the future or by reflection on the past, one tries to be keenly aware of each feeling and sensation as it happens. The human tendency is to want to stop time, in a sense, by reflecting on things, but to be “in the moment” requires letting go of what has happened in favor of what is happening.

In this passage, the “pearl” is initially identified with the phrase “girls, visions, everything.” It is, in part, sexual desire, which provides opportunities for intense sensation; intense sensation is one way to “bring oneself into the present.” But Sal’s desire for “visions” shows that the pearl is also a kind of more overtly spiritual goal that involves perceiving something that one is not normally able to perceive. And identifying it with “everything” suggests that it is not something specific and finite, but something that can potentially be achieved through any experience.

The description of Dean and Sal’s fascination with Dean are also important clues to the nature of the pearl. Dean is “a kinsman of the sun” who is “eager for bread and love,” has an “excited way of speaking,” and is characterized by “a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy”; he exists in a constant state of exuberant hunger for new experiences. He gives free expression to his feelings and desires, and he has boundless energy. Dean is contrasted with Sal’s other friends, who are either overly intellectual and critical or cynical and bored; they lack Dean’s positivity, passion, sensitivity, and capacity for excitement and adventure. The vitality of Dean’s personality and way of life are “a new call” for Sal and show him “a new horizon”; he wants to live life the way Dean does.

Thus, the “pearl” is not a *thing* that can be obtained once and for all. It is a *state of being* that must be achieved again and again, in each moment. It consists in the ability to focus intently on each sensation and feeling and experience as it happens and to give free and natural expression to one’s thoughts, desires, and emotions—to rid oneself of any inhibiting or limiting habits that prevent one from achieving this state of being. When one exists in this state, one experiences life intensely and joyously, as an exuberant spirituality, and one has a deep sense of the wonder and beauty of existence. In this state, one perceives even ordinary things and feelings and events as profound and fresh; one appreciates the significance of everything and everyone. For most people, this state is difficult to achieve and can only be experienced for short, unsustainable periods of time before it is compromised by the demands of human life and human habits of thought and behavior. Dean is a heroic and inspirational figure to Sal because he is one of the few people who have the capacity—the energy and the sensitivity and the desire—to sustain this state of being for long periods of time, and Sal strives to be like him in this sense.

The “pearl” is also a vision of *truth*: this sense of the beauty and wonder of the universe, this feeling of embracing everything, is the ultimate truth for spiritual seekers like Dean and Sal. But it is not a truth that can be captured in words, that can be precisely defined; instead, it is a mystical truth that can only be *experienced*.

Ultimately, the title and the search for this pearl are ironic: Dean and Sal are in restless search of something that is constantly present, always here and now. A spiritual quest in the form of physical movement is one means to the end of achieving this state of being, but in fact such a quest is unnecessary. The sensory and social and emotional stimulation provided by a journey may be helpful, but the physical journey should not be confused with the spiritual journey. Unfortunately, human nature often leads people to engage in mere self-indulgence as a poor substitute for true spirituality, and it seems that the characters in the novel often fall prey to this confusion while on their journey.