

## THE CENTRAL MOTIF OF A ROAD IN THE NOVELLA *PIC* BY J. KEROUAC

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**Abstract:** *The novella Pic by Jack Kerouac is the author's last work which reveals how his characters continue wandering on the roads of life. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the central motif of the road in this novella, which includes both a real geographical space (the characters' route from the East to the West of the country, where they hope to find their "paradise"), and a symbolic-philosophical space (the search for oneself and one's place in life, God in oneself, truth, inner maturity, etc.). The guide on the road (Slim) is especially important here. He turns out to be not just a companion, but also a spiritual mentor of the main character (Pic), a new saint, who is eager to spread his religion and share it with others. Thus, the road is not only a way of travelling, but it is a way of learning about life.*

**Keywords:** *Beat Generation, the central motif of a road, chronotope, Jack Kerouac, the novella Pic.*

### 1. Introduction

The motif of the road in the consciousness of the Beat Generation writers, such as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and others, has various manifestations: a search for oneself and one's way of living, endless mental travelling, a journey as a way to reach God, an escape from the society back to nature, refusal to grow up, an acid trip, a way to show urgent social problems, etc. The impressions received on one's way are the most important. All this is reflected in the concept of the Beat Generation writers, who were always on the road – literally and metaphorically. The road for these writers is equal to the life itself: a real trip in a real space is closely linked to the life and mental experience of a person. The freedom from all social conventions is only born on the road. Movement is the unconscious impulse of a person, something completely natural. The Beat Generation follows the first American pioneers, with the difference that they discover new space inside themselves. Thus, the motif of the road as a symbol of eternal human search comes to the fore.

### 2. Jack Kerouac's novella *Pic* as his final work

The novella *Pic* is about the themes and motifs that were most important for Jack Kerouac and other Beat Generation writers. The central motif here is the motif of the road, which is typical of all Kerouac's works, and *Pic* is no exception. Jack Kerouac is interested in the endless movement as a manifestation of one's

unconsciousness in his novels as well, for example, *On the Road*, *The Town and the City*, *The Dharma Bums*, etc. and in his essays.

### 2.1. Jack Kerouac's novella *Pic*: the background

Jack Kerouac's novella *Pic* is one of his last works and is "probably Kerouac's most curious book; it is unlike anything else he ever wrote" (Theado 2000: 171). The novella is a mixture of his early and late works, which he decided to combine in order to complete his book. It was published after Kerouac's death, in 1971. "Hunt also suggests that there were five drafts of *On the Road* overall: the first two unpublished, the third draft published as *Pic*, the fourth as *On the Road*, and the fifth as *Visions of Cody*" (qtd. in Dittman 2004: 118–119). The writer was inspired to create the story of an African American teenager, Pictorial Review Jackson, by his trip to visit his sister in North Carolina, at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, where he heard interesting stories of African American boys. The book also draws on his personal impressions, recollections and adventures from his travelling around the USA. Gerald Nicosia (qtd. in Theado 2000: 172) explains that the book combines various early pieces of writing that Kerouac had saved throughout his writing career: "the central plot and characters came from the story he had written in 1951 about a North Carolina black boy named Pictorial Review Jackson [to which he added] the story of the Prophet on Times Square, first drafted in 1941 for the Young Prometheans' study group, a chapter about a fudge factory deleted from *The Town and the City*, and the full story of the Ghost of the Susquehanna, much of which had been cut from *On the Road*". All these fragments became part of the plot of Kerouac's novella *Pic*.

The story is written in the first-person. The dialect the main character speaks confused some of the critics and seemed to be not quite what the real speech of African Americans sounds like (McKee 2004: 114, Dittman 2004: 119). However, Kerouac manages to render the authenticity with which *Pic* tells us his story, the conversational manner of speaking of the narrator.

It is quite possible that, in the novella, the writer wanted to employ the exact same motifs as in his novel *On the Road*, but using a different social group. Kerouac's novel *On the Road* is autobiographical, it describes the real travels of the writer and his friend Neal Cassady across the USA. It is about four journeys of the writer around America. The novel is subjective, it is based on the perception of the road by an intellectual, who makes up his mind to travel across the country for some new experience. *Pic* tells us about completely different people, mostly hipsters. A hipster is an ideal character for the Beat Generation writers: s/he is anti-intellectual, s/he does not study, does not want to create anything, and distances himself/herself from any work. Thus, the novella shows a typical hipster on the road and also tells us about one hipster bringing up another in his own image, as the teenager *Pic* is being brought up by his brother Slim.

If the novel *On the Road* is about the travel of the characters over several years, the novella gives brief descriptions of *Pic* and his brother's trips on the road of life. It follows that a set of main motifs from the novel are reflected in the novella, either fully or by common features. We should also note that some motifs are presented in broader lines in the novella than in the novel. Thus, the central motif embracing all the others is the motif of the road, the eternal way (central for the whole Beat Generation), as the characters of the novella *Pic* are experiencing an eternal search.

One may say that the novella *Pic* is a synthesis of the creative author's ideas, a summary of the writer's whole life and experience; it is some kind of experiment. It is an example of Beat Generation literature – a work that touches upon motifs typical of the Beat Generation writers.

## 2.2. The road as a system

In the novella, the road is presented as a complete system: it is a real geographical space and a symbolic-philosophical space. Besides, the road can be seen from a historical perspective: Jack Kerouac is interested in the parallel between pioneers and contemporary young people, going along the same way. Thus, in the novella, the road is something sacred and forbidden, and it is also the way of the main character in his new life.

A story about the facts of life of the Beat Generation is presented through the perception of an eleven-year-old African American boy, Pictorial Review Jackson, who is talking about his adventures firstly to God, and then to his deceased grandfather. The images of God and grandfather are inseparable in the mind of the character. His grandfather's disease, with his subsequent death, was a great shock for Pic. Suddenly, his elder brother Slim appears in his life, but the relatives are strongly against his taking Pic with him to New York:

No, Slim, no, that boy's sick and go hungry and catch cold and ever' single thing in the world will happen to him and he'll turn bad, sinful bad, with that man, and the Lord shall drop it on my soul like the hot irons of hell and perdition, on your soul too, and on this house. (Kerouac online)

Slim is Pic's spiritual mentor and guide into a new life. Matt Theado (2000: 174) writes: "Slim, is a black version of Dean Moriarty. He is city-smart and wily, both energetic and able to live by his wits". He was rejected by his family just like Dean. It is Slim who opens the road to Pic and turns it into a spiritual search. It should be noted that a reader cannot perceive Slim as a person who takes upon himself the responsibility of bringing up his younger brother. The character is in fact immature, he is an eternal child. In reality, what we see are two teenagers, one of whom rebels against the world, escapes from reality (literally) on a real road (roads) and unconsciously teaches his brother how to live.

Pic and Slim feel like orphans of the universe, they are complete strangers to this world, discarded onto the road of life. They are not only travelling in search for happiness in a physical realm, but are also trying to find their roots that seemingly do not need to be looked for, as they have relatives. But kindred blood means nothing in this case, since it doesn't accept vagrants like Pic and his brother. This alienation is revealed not just by a simple blood relation, but by the trip that the characters undertake, a trip that speaks first and foremost about their search of themselves, of their own identity. Slim has been wandering about for quite a long time and knows who he is, while Pic is facing a moment of initiation.

Starting on the way that Slim will lead him on, Pic fears to face the unknown, but, despite his fear, he follows his guide. Pic is looking for an excuse for himself, as if he had forgotten something, but, at the same time, he clearly realizes that all this is his fantasy. The further he goes, the more involved in the road he becomes. His brother understands Pic's state and tries to relieve his mind

by citing from the Bible, and emphasizing that Pic is getting old and is afraid like an adult:

“Po little boy,” he say, and give a sigh, and hitch me up higher on his back. “I guess you’re as much scared of ever’thing like a grown man is. It’s like the man say in the Bible – A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. You ain’t scarce eleven years old and already knowed that. I don’t guess you didn’t. Well, I come and made a vagabond out of you proper,” and we walk along and come to see the lights of town up ahead, and he don’t say nothin. Then here we go step on the road.” (Kerouac online)

It is obvious that, for Slim, wandering is not the worst way. Wandering is a kind of destiny when every person becomes an outcast and a wanderer; that is why Slim sees nothing wrong in such a lifestyle. Slim and Pic are two outcasts, they are different from all the others and their family. They are two lonely strangers who have met now and are going together: “Then we’ll unnerstand each other fine and be friends to go out to the world together” (idem).

It is not surprising that the characters of the novella are a teenager and an adult male. This is a reference to Ross Posnock’s book “Philip Roth’s rude truth. The art of immaturity” (2006), in which the author introduces the phenomenon of immaturity and defines it as a way of existence which is opposed to the prevailing norm. Posnock cites Dean Moriarty from Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* as an example of “immaturity”:

The ultimate hipster and “holy goofball,” virtually a Platonic model of midcentury American bad boy immaturity, Dean is oblivious to norms or routine, feasts insatiably on what comes his way, relies on his prodigious energy to get the maximum kicks. Driving back and forth the length of the United States whenever, Dean’s anarchic, improvised life of spontaneity mocks obligation and is at first exhilarating to his friend Sal. In his openness and immunity to inhibition, Dean’s consciousness is rapturous, pure, sensuous receptivity. But, finally, for all his energy, an air of futility surrounds him, exhausting Sal and everyone else. The painful ending, when a desperate Dean arrives impromptu in New York to see his old friend only to be turned away, expresses Kerouac’s own unease with Dean’s empty freedom. Immaturity as valiant protest against spiritual torpor is not confined to hipster hedonism (Posnock 2006, online).

Immaturity is a rebellion that can be realized through an escape from society or a search for alternative ways of existence. Jack Kerouac called this phenomenon of immaturity a “revolution of morals”. A tendency towards “immaturity” has been traced in literature since the period of Romanticism, where a rebel character stands for the freedom of choice and life. In American literature of subsequent periods, there are a number of examples of works about children and adolescents, their rejection of reality, and rebellion (e.g., M. Twain *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, J. D. Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye*, etc.). Literature about children is becoming more adult literature, which is proved by Pictorial Review Jackson from Jack Kerouac’s novella. It is important that immaturity is not defined by the age of the character. “Adulthood” means seriousness, and “immaturity” – creativity. “Adulthood” disturbs spiritual life, makes people think about material things. The Beat Generation wanted to be “Peter Pans”. Their rebellion against the absence of action and against rigidity shows how they feared to grow up, to self-identify and

admit that life will inevitably end. A road becomes the most important motif for going away into eternal life, into a “childhood paradise”. The two characters of different ages were introduced in the novella on purpose: Pic is eleven and his brother Slim – 20-25. Jack Kerouac wanted to show how real physical age cannot comply with the psychological age. Spiritually, Pic and Slim are, obviously, peers. As the novella progresses, we continuously notice Pic’s unusually wise thinking, his reflections are deeper than those of Slim. Slim pulls Pic out of the adult world to save him from growing up.

However, the characters become internally mature during their travel – real and mental. The chronotope of the novella includes real geographical (the motif of movement to the West) and symbolic-philosophical spaces (the search for Paradise, the way to a new life, a search for oneself and a search for God in oneself).

### 2.3. A road as a real geographical space

The road as a real geographical space is presented in the novella through the route of the characters: a no-name tiny town, North Carolina – Washington, district of Columbia – New York, New York – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – Sacramento, California. A movement from east to west shows the way to “paradise”, to sacred California, a beloved place of the Beat Generation, where a spirit of freedom is felt. Moreover, the journey of the brothers is a repetition of the itinerary of the first American settlers, who discovered new spaces. A literary parallel with a frontier novel by F. Cooper is appropriate (Spanckeren 1994: 49). In his novels, F. Cooper mirrors the history of America in the context of frontier exploration, a gradual movement from the north-east of the continent to the west. Moreover, “Cooper evokes the endless, inevitable wave of settlers, seeing not only the gains but the losses” (idem: 24). Slim compares himself and Pic with the pioneers:

In those times ever’body was here, and come from New York where we was, with pushcarts and oxes over the hills that truck groaned on, in rain and high weather, and suffered and died jess to reach it here. It was the beginnin of the big long push to California... (Kerouac online)

Pic indeed goes on the same way as the pioneers: he sees everything for the first time, learns a lot of new things about his country, experiences new feelings. He is close to the national tradition of frontier in this respect. Pic reminds us of F. Cooper’s character Natty Bumppo (known as Leatherstocking), who is the first famous frontiersman in American literature: “He is idealized, upright individualist who is better than the society he protests. Poor and isolated, yet pure, he is a touchstone for ethical values and prefigures Herman Melville’s Billy Budd and Mark Twain’s Huck Finn” (idem 1994: 23). Pic tends to identify himself as a real American, i.e. a man who is close to nature and loves freedom (Native Americans were such people). The journey takes Pic’s breath away, stirs a peculiar, strong feeling of life in him; he thinks he sees the world for the first time only now. The character opens new horizons and transits from the old world to a new one as he steps on the road. For Pic, there is no way back to the previous life; now it is important to move forward, without looking back at the past. The whole space, together with Pic, is rushing forward. A man’s movement is in the movement of the world’s energy. Internal development happens due to the external movement.

The essence of the West is discovered in the novella in comparison with the East, namely with New York. Kerouac uses motifs associated with a confrontation between God and the Devil. New York is associated with Devil's nature:

Atlantic Ocean is got the Devil for the wind in the wintertime, and the Devil's son carries it down the streets so's a man can freeze to death in a doorway. God brought the sun over Manhattan Island, but the Devil's cousin won't let it in your window unless you get yourself a penthouse a mile high and you don't dass step out of it for a breath of air for fear you'll fall that mile, if you could afford a penthouse. (Kerouac online)

If New York is associated with Devil's nature, then "God" itself is going to be California. New York introduces itself to Pic in Times Square: it is a big city, with a busy life and a lot of people of different nationalities, a city which lives its own life, and Pic feels there like a speck in the ocean.

The character's attention is drawn to the figure of a grey-haired old man of 90, with a sack on his back, who appears as a "preacher" threading his way through a crowd in Times Square during the sermon of the Salvation Army. He says that time has come "to mourn for humanity" (idem). His gesture – a raised right hand – seems to show the direction one needs to go for happiness, to the West. The old man is like a sign for Pic and his brother; the old man appears suddenly in front of the crowd, and disappears just as suddenly. Later, Slim and Pic will see this old man from a lorry window, when he was going to the West, in spite of the bad weather and rain. The image of the old man is shown in contrast to the "preachers" of the Salvation Army in Times Square, whose speeches sound ironic to the public and to Pic. The old man symbolizes freedom; he doesn't invite people to follow him, while members of the Salvation Army try to persuade people that their way is the only right one and that they are the only carriers of true faith.

The main characters are saying good-bye to the city in their minds, but there are hints of a possible return, which reflects the perception of the world of the Beat Generation: a road without a specific route, and ideas born along the way. Slim says:

We'll come back to Times Square sometime, but now we gotta go across that night, like the old man with the white hair, and keep goin till we get on the other side of this big, bulgin United States of America and all the raw land on it, before we be safe and sound by the Pacific Sea to set down and thank the Lord. (Kerouac online)

For Pic, New York is becoming a place where technology has supplanted nature. Skyscrapers obscure the sky:

I look straight up oncet and I look again and don't see but the most p'culiar brown air in the sky above the tall walls, and I seed it was on account all the lights of New York paint-up the nighttime way high yonder, and do it so much it don't need no more'n a few feeble stars in it. (idem)

Scary and foggy New York appears in Pic's imagination as something huge. Technology has also supplanted spirituality, and this is evident in a "sermon" about the mystery of television, which fills a person's entire life and does not leave one time for oneself. Thus, New York is represented in Pic's mind as a frightening agglomeration of glass and concrete buildings.

Another major city is also connected to the east coast of the country – Washington, the capital and political center of America. Pic gets to know the capital in transit, while sitting in a bus. He only hears how the city hummed and does not have time to really see anything. His brother's only remark about Washington is that it is the capital where the president and "all those others" live (Idem). This is not the city where people come to earn money, but the center of political life. The novella does not pay much attention to the city, because this place cannot attract Slim; he needs to move on, to the west, where there is more nature than people.

At the end of the journey, the characters come to Sacramento Valley – this place is associated with purity and hope for a new life. Jack Kerouac leaves his characters here and puts an end to their wanderings. However, the text does not indicate that California is the final destination in the "route" of the characters. Slim is a hipster, which means that he will not stop when he reaches his "Promised Land", since movement is associated with freedom – both physical movement and the choice of one's life path. Slim's way is mental, while Pic will continue the physical path in the future. This is how the characters' rebellion is realized, which may look like an escape from society or a search for alternative ways of existence.

#### **2.4. A road as a symbolic-philosophical space and motifs associated with it**

A symbolic-philosophical space is presented in the novella through a number of motifs that complement the main one: music as a rhythm-forming motif and the motif of madness as an approach to God.

It should be mentioned that on their way to the West, Slim and Pic meet the same "old white man with the silver hair flowin around his head (...) he looked pitiful and grand all at the same time for an old man" (Kerouac online), he resembled Christ, "trackin along like that in this dismal world" (idem). For the Beat Generation, not only the presence on the road and the journey along it become important, but also the motif of searching not so much for oneself as for God in general and for God in oneself, in particular. The way that God himself walks along acquires sacred motifs. In this movement to the West for a better life, one can see the movement of the characters in search of God, who seems to show them the direction. Slim embodies a generally accepted thought by the Beat Generation: all people are wanderers on Earth. The Beat Generation is known to have shown an interest in Zen Buddhism by looking back at oriental values. Zen is not a religion, but an interreligious individual practice, a return to the unconscious. There are no teachers and mentors in Zen, one has to learn for oneself what is important for returning to the unconscious. Zen is based on meditation, it is a state of feeling emptiness, which is the basis of everything. A person is drawn into the stream of life and becomes emptiness. The goal of Zen is pure enlightenment, when a person separates himself/herself from the things, and culture, and religion imposed on them. Consequently, the Beat Generation does not accept what comes from the outside, they look for the divine in themselves. This is their way of building a relationship with God.

In addition to meditation, the energy of movement contributes to the entrance into the unconscious: "A man's got to live and get there, Slim always said about that. 'Life is a sneeze, life is a breeze,' he said" (Kerouac online). It is movement that measures time and life. First, you need to move for practical reasons, because the only way to survive on the road is to walk. Secondly,

movement is given a sacred meaning, where it symbolizes movement from oneself to God, or vice versa, movement to oneself, to the depths of one's self. It is no coincidence that the church becomes a staging post for the characters, where Pic sings prayers in the choirs. It is interesting to note that religion is becoming an important vector for the entire work. God is mentioned in every chapter in different contexts. So, the beginning of the novella is marked by the story of the grandfather, who saw how God climbed over their shabby fence. The figure of God is not the last one in Slim's mind. God blessed the land for which the brothers are heading. There is an overground layer in the novella: spiritual motifs prevail over earthly ones, and then a road becomes not just a real reflection of physical movement, but the path to God of two lost souls.

One can also find a motif of madness in the novella. This is associated with the motif of the sacred in the novella. The first ghost, resembling God's apparition, that goes to California is the old man in Times Square, mentioned above. The second ghost appears first in the novel *On the Road*, and then, in more detail, but in the same context, it is displayed in the novella *Pic* as a separate chapter. This image is totally copied from the novel: Kerouac uses the same name and a similar plot twist. The two characters meet the ghost of Susquehanna on the road:

He was a funny old man, was short and thin, all weazled up his face that had such a long horny nose, and looked so shrunk and wan under his hat I wouldn't recognize if I seen him again. (Kerouac online)

Slim and Pic, interested in a strange character, rush after the old man who talks continuously, does not hear anything around, speaks into the void with himself. Soon the characters realize that this old man is a madman, who goes no one knows where, and his shadow, like a ghost, disappeared into the darkness. This character is a ghost who migrated from the novel *On the Road* to the novella and becomes a significant image in the context of Kerouac's entire work. The Beat Generation was looking for an entrance into the unconscious through drugs. The madman is the brightest embodiment of the energy of the unconscious, since he is free in his actions and he is most often driven by the impulse of a mad idea. Hence, the madman on the road is the one who sees everything at the source as it is. Madness allows you to go out into the over-reality, which is associated with the mental way of the characters, in particular, feverishness and Slim's eternal desire for movement. He also seeks a way into the unconscious through music, which will be discussed below.

So, speaking about the motif of madness and its significance for the mental path of the characters, it can be noted that there are scenes in the novella in which they meet madmen; they arouse genuine interest in Slim, since it is they who are the bearers of faith and truth, no one can show them the way, they choose their own path. In the context of the novella, we associate this with a spiritual search for oneself, when nothing can prevail over one's own vision of the world. It is important to enter the unconscious when a person becomes a sage. A madman for the Beat Generation is equal to a sage who knows everything. Slim strives for such "pure" wisdom.

Another important motif connected with the road and the reflection of internal life of a spirit is music. Slim is African American, a bebopper. It is known that the Beat Generation associated their art with the bebop music performed by African American musicians in bars. The motif of music is an important aspect of the novella. Certain music preferences have become fundamental symbols of the



common cultural and philosophical movement represented by the Beat Generation writers. The motif of movement correlates with the motif of music in Jack Kerouac's works. The writer included jazz music – bebop, bop – in his works. Slim, like Dean Moriarty in the novel *On the Road*, thinks and acts in the rhythm of jazz, improvising. Playing the saxophone, he understands this music, feels connected with it, believes in the power of art that doesn't divide people by the colour of skin, financial status, etc., but unites people. He tries to awaken the best qualities in people and to give them joy by playing the horn. On stage, he is ready to tell the audience his story, even reads them a prayer that can unite all people. Slim has his own faith, despite the fact that he often refers to the Bible. He is an eternal child, but at the same time he tries to teach his brother to live according to his commandments. Thus, music becomes the fundamental principle of motion for the character:

Slim, he was walkin up and down where he was and jess carryin along that jump-song goin as fast, well, like that bus I was tellin you about earlier. (Kerouac online)

It is the nervous improvisation of bebop that helps Slim feel the pulse of life, as it fills it with bright colours – this is a continuous movement of life. The penetration into the unconscious is carried out through music, which often becomes the most important element of John Kerouac's works and the Beat Generation writers in general. Bebop is a transformation of movement into music.

### 3. Conclusion

The motif of the road can be considered as one of the central motifs of the novella. In a real geographical space, this is the movement of the two brothers from New York to California, where they dream to find their “paradise”. Pic goes the way of a pioneer, moving from fear to acceptance. We can observe the spiritual formation of the characters in a symbolic way. Pic is searching for his own truth, which lies beyond religious boundaries, the characters are searching for themselves, for God in themselves, and this search is endless. The road is an important meaning-making element in the novella *Pic*, since it is not only a way of travelling or escape, but also a method of understanding life.

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