

Hallucinated State of Mind as an Inducement in Jack Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose Style"

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Abstract

This present research entitled "Hallucinated State of Mind as an Inducement in Jack Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose Style" aims to explore how Jack Kerouac used his drugs induced hallucinated state to employ "Spontaneous Prose Style". This research paper deals with Kerouac's selected novels *On The Road*, *The Town and the City*, and *Visions of Cody*. This study also presents Beat literary style. This study examines Kerouac's use of drugs like amphetamine, Marijuana, Benzedrine and alcohol. This study illustrates Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose Method" and "Sketching Technique".

Key words: Spontaneous Prose Style, Beat Literary Style, Amphetamine, Marijuana, Benzedrine, Sketching Technique, Pharmacodynamic Tendency, Unconscious.

Jack Kerouac is an unconventional and controversial American novelist. He was once called "most misunderstood and underestimated writer." Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts in an old manufacturing town on the Merrimac River. Kerouac's parents, both devoted to Roman Catholics came from rural communities in the French-Speaking part of Quebec, and French was the language spoken in the Kerouac's home.

Jock Kerouac's novels remain obscure. The obscurity results in misreading of his books and in way he presents his text, psychological, political, and artistic themes. Kerouac's

description and accomplishment was complex and paradoxical one. He is conservative in politics and sincere Roman Catholic. He is rebellious only in a traditional way, in the tradition of the individualism of Emerson and Thoreau. He was an egocentric romantic. In order to tell stories with energy and accuracy, he had to invent a new prose style. This style, which cost him considerable time energy, and pain to develop and sustain, he called it “Spontaneous Prose”. By means Which, he became known as “father of the Beat Generation.”

Jack Kerouac’s “spontaneous prose method” was inspired by his use of drugs while writing. While, there is abundant biographical evidence that, Kerouac used drugs frequently. attention has to be paid to their effects on the development of his style. This research attempts to demonstrate that, the altered states of consciousness produced by Kerouac’s drug use should be considered in conjunction with historical, cultural, and biographical forces in tracing the evolution of Kerouac’s creative growth and style.

As a member of the Beat Generation, Kerouac used drugs both as a social statement of rebellion and for artistic insight. In fact, he consciously entered into a well-established tradition of writers looking to drugs as modern-day muses. Within this legacy, drugs were commonly viewed as chemical gateways to a transcendental realm of visionary truth that the artists could enter and return with. Kerouac, who believed that the ossification of standardized written English into rigid forms of grammar and sentence construction curtailed its potential for complete communication and sought to a prose style, that would allow for a maximum of authenticity and fidelity to organic thought with a minimum of revision. Kerouac used drugs like amphetamine, marijuana, and alcohol, each of which offered unique modes of perception, to enter into new frameworks of consciousness, and then recreated these altered states in writing.

These three substances amphetamine, marijuana, and alcohol served as the basis in the development of Kerouac’s style. Amphetamine, in the form of the drug Benzedrine gave Kerouac the energy for his legendary typing marathons, allowing him to write the novels *On the Road* in three weeks and *The Subterraneans* in three days.

While writing *On the Road* in particular, Kerouac began formulating the stylistic approach, that he subsequently dubbed “spontaneous prose.” Its basic tenants, including a de-emphasis on revision, limited punctuation, and long sentences were encouraged by Benzedrine’s stimulant properties, which tended to focus Kerouac’s attention on the exterior world of events, temporality, and movement. His amphetamine-induced texts attempt to communicate accurately by confessing the minutia of surface details. Kerouac’s spontaneous style, is evolved into the “sketching” technique seen in the novels *Visions of Cody* and *Dr. Sax*. It is partially as a result of his marijuana-induced desire to share subjective perceptions truthfully. Rather than focusing on the exterior world, the marijuana texts look inward for authenticity. Marijuana helped Kerouac facilitate this inner orientation by its pharmacodynamic tendency to induce dream-like, associative states, when reproduced textually, these impressions seemed to resemble the unconscious structures of Kerouac’s mind, which he shared hoping for complete communication with universality of shared experience. Kerouac used both the amphetamine and marijuana modes to varying degrees interchangeably in most of his career. The first section of his novel *Desolation Angels* is written in sobriety and achieved their greatest synthesis. It demonstrates that, drugs were not the props to his style, but even in the absence of drugs, Kerouac’s prose retained its own essential, idiosyncratic features. Finally, in the latter part of Kerouac’s career, alcohol proved that, drugs could also negatively affect his style, as shown in the novels *Big Sur* and *Vanity of Duluoz*. Their return to a plainer prose some writings results in poorer prose which was no doubt the result of rampant alcohol abuse, and the unfortunate end to Kerouac’s life and writing.

There is a long tradition of artists trying to reach a “pure language” through the use of drugs. Whether or not drug use could achieve this goal is debatable, but it certainly was common to frame this activity in mystical terms. Any drug-using artists portrayed themselves as some sort of medium, who could use drugs as tools, that granted access to divine realms of truth, which was then brought back and shared with the reader. Perhaps, the most infamous example is Coleridge, who claimed that his poem “Kubla Khan” was written after an opium-induced vision. Boon establishes the historical precedence of Coleridge’s act for future generation of writers seeking chemical inspiration: Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” gave first expression to one of the fundamental literary tropes of drug use. The sense that, words or

thoughts are being dictated to the writer by some unknown agency, without conscious effort on his or her part” (35). While the actual circumstances behind the composition of “Kubla Khan” were probably not so magical, the tendency to romanticize a connection between drugs and inspired writing is apparent. Another Romantic opiate-user, Sir Walter Scott claimed that, he did not recognize any characters, incidents, or conversation when he read the proofs of his novel *The Bride of Lammermoor* (Boon, 35). The tradition of drugs providing an unseen inspiration continued is apparent over a century later: William S. Burroughs, the most notable Beat opiate user, could not remember writing the notes later published as a novel *Naked Lunch* (199).

Not all Romantic writers have been as keen as Coleridge to play up their role as drug-induced prophets. Indeed, the history of drug use refuses to be defined by any one motive. Although every user has their own reasons, certain broad historical and cultural trends do seem to come and go. Coleridge later became ashamed of his opium use, when he discovered his visions came addiction (although the term “addiction” did not yet exist in the early 19th-century, which reveals a lot about their differing attitude from our own towards these substances), revealing another common trope of drug use (Boon, 35-36). De Quincey, who was also addicted to opium, invented the concept of recreational drugs use with his popular *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1822). Though, he is not the first person to use the drug for pleasure, he was the first to write about it in this way. By constructing a myth around his opium use, De Quincey offered the fantasy, truth and mystical substance allowing “transport to the realms of imagination” that, any one could partake of (Boon 37). Thus, different conceptual frames of drug-use span the spectrum from positive to negative. To Beat writers, drugs are alternatively Simultaneously enlightening, healing, recreational, addictive, and evil.

There one two opposing motivations for drug use, which will characterize author’s work. Once, the addictive properties of drugs became better known, subsequent 19th-century writers, among them Poe and Baudelaire, used opiates without acknowledging their influence on their writing.

For many writers, there was a desire to benefit from the visionary qualities of drugs without admitting their reliance on an outside source of inspiration. Kerouac’s literary drug use remains relatively unacknowledged, even by himself. Most likely, Kerouac downplayed

the creative powers drugs possibly instilled in him in order to give precedence to a creation of his own genius named “spontaneous prose”.

The Romantics were not the only writers to dabble in chemicals substances or opiates the only drug of choice. Anesthetics were especially popular with the Surrealists, allowing the user to shut down their body and give free reign to the mind. William James and Oscar Wilde had “mystical anesthetic revelations” experimenting with nitrous oxide, which seemed to allow them to transcend language temporarily to something more fundamental underneath it (Boon 109, 121-22). The problem was that, once language was left behind, there was no way to write about the mysteries discovered. William James dabbled with nitrous oxide and experienced moments of illumination while intoxicated, but forgot upon the fleeting epiphanies upon awaking.

Drugs were often coupled with other questionable techniques to achieve revelation. Yeats smoked hashish and practiced automatic writing, in which the writer often in a trance or acting as a medium, writes down impressions that seemingly do not come from their conscious mind (145). Although largely since discredited, Kerouac seems to have based much of his own idea of spontaneous prose on Yeats’ process, even trying his own hand at “automatic writing”. Kerouac, reveals Yeat’s influence on his own “spontaneous technique,” declares in his “Essential of Spontaneous Prose”: “If possible write ‘without consciousness’ in semitrance as Yeats’ trance writing allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and what conscious art would censor” (485). Both Yeats’ “automatic writing” and Kerouac’s “Spontaneous Prose” emphasize achieving a type of detached state in which thoughts flow freely supposedly from the unconscious mind, and are immediately recorded. There is significant methodological overlap between these writing practices and the literary tradition of drug use.

In fact, throughout his entire writing career, Kerouac frequently downplayed his use of drugs. Even as a narrative element, Benzedrine is barely mentioned in *On the Road*, despite ample historical evidence that, it inspired many of the novel’s wild moments. No doubt, Kerouac was wary of cultural taboos condemning drug use. The society is hesitant to imbue drugs with beneficial qualities, preferring to label drug-induced visions as

hallucinations. Kerouac preferred to emphasize the spontaneous nature of his work, carefully concealing the care and preparation that went into it. In order to cultivate his public image as a genius capable of writing a masterpiece at a moment's notice. He comments, in his critical work "Anybody can Write", "but not everybody invents new forms of writing" ("Are Writers Made or Born?" 489). Thus, Kerouac drew on the long tradition of drug-inspired writing. He chose to take part in another myth. He is the self-inspired writer, who relied solely on his own talent.

There is concrete evidence of Kerouac's Benzedrine use documented in many of his other novels as well. After *On the Road*, he used Benzedrine to help write *The Subterraneans* (Nicosia 445), *Maggie Cassidy* (Amburn 181-82), *Visions of Gerard* (236), *Tristessa* (Charters 260), and *Big Sur* (326-27). His life-long romance with amphetamine was a result not only of its usefulness as a writing tool but also its addictive nature. The novels *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans* are examples of amphetamine-influenced texts, because they not only bear the plainest stylistic and thematic evidence of its presence, but were written at an early period in Kerouac's career while his aesthetic was still forming. Kerouac's early use of amphetamine shaped the direction his style would take in later works, even while not under its influence. However, more than biographical records, the best indication that Kerouac used amphetamine to write his novels is their comparable style. By analyzing the pharmacological effects of amphetamine on consciousness and language and locating these elements in the texts, It definitively ascertains the nature of its role in Kerouac's work.

Amphetamines and drug use occurs as part of culturally-constructed frameworks, it is essential to understand the basic history and belief structure associated with amphetamine. In both the inside community of users and the outside public mindset exist variable drug tropes of meaning, often contradictory but managing to coexist. For instance, opiates traditionally have been associated with pleasure or with images of death and sleep; more recently, their use has been co-opted by the medical establishment on one hand as tools of pain relief, and by the legal system on the other as health threats due to their physically addictive nature. The divine status once accorded to opiates by Coleridge and the Romantics has largely been transferred to the psychedelics like marijuana, LSD, and psilocybin mushrooms to the Beats. These Drugs substances became the symbols as well as the means to usher in a more enlightened age. It is no coincidence that, hallucinogenic mushrooms are often called

“magic.” In fact the term “hallucinogen” is unfavorable to many users of psychedelics. Because, it suggests falsehood and deceit images more favorable to drug opposition groups, who prefer framing these substances in a more negative light. Hence, the inside group of users prefer the name “psychedelics” (“mind-manifesting”). Amphetamine, as it is commonly known, belongs to a class of drugs known as stimulants. Pharmacodynamically, amphetamine works by increasing levels of nor epinephrine (a neurotransmitter related to adrenalin), serotonin, and dopamine in the brain, all of which help to enhance awareness and response. As a result of its vitalizing properties, amphetamine (in the form of Benzedrine) allowed Kerouac to write without a break for extended periods of time, and often through the night; it also stimulated his intellect and focus, allowing him to type faster and achieve the mental state he deemed necessary for spontaneous prose. However, beyond its stylistic effects, amphetamine was principally an auxiliary aid for Kerouac’s arduous compositional regiment. Kerouac was not the first person to take advantage of amphetamine’s utilitarian nature.

In fact, Kerouac’s spontaneous prose was made possible by advanced technology, and not just amphetamine. He also depended on the typewriter. Together, these inventions allowed a synergistic work-state, that served as the precursor to Kerouac’s spontaneous method. The peculiar form of *The Original Scroll* sparses punctuation, no paragraph breaks, and sheets of paper taped together are directly attributable to the mechanics of the typewriter. They enabled Kerouac to focus uninterrupted on words. Truman Capote remarked that, Kerouac’s work was typing, not writing.

Kerouac relied on the typewriter and amphetamine as tools (one mechanical, the other chemical) does not deny his personal voice. Furthermore, new inventions allow new modes of communication to flourish. The drugs like amphetamine were crucial components in formulating Kerouac’s aesthetic appears valid as Kerouac’s style grew out of the spontaneous processes enabled by technology.

These two exterior bases of Kerouac’s composition method: the typewriter and amphetamine both enabled an increased capacity for speed, not only physically, but also mentally. It comes as no surprise then that, Kerouac’s amphetamine-induced work is fundamentally concerned with issues of speed and its effects on temporality and mobility.

Both the automobile and the road are central symbols in the novel *On the Road*, and along with the typewriter and amphetamine, expanded modern perceptions of movement by altering possibilities of time and space, allowing for greater personal autonomy.

There is a concern with time, space, and possibility in Kerouac's first published work, *The Town and the City* (1950), which explores the tension between the limited rural past, represented by the town, and a diversified modern civilization, represented by the city. Stylistically, this novel is a sprawling, lyrical saga more in the flavor of Thomas Wolfe. The Beat critic, John Tytell, in his study of the Beat Generation, *Naked Angels* (1976), describes the novel *On the Road* as "characteristically American in its search for a fluid, unshaped life, free of preimposed patterns, fearing most the horrors of states, of staying in the same place without the possibility of change" (23). Ironically, Kerouac made use of mechanized possibility to access the comparatively antiquated, the rural world. He complicates themes of the natural, authentic, and the artificial. The employment of fabricated technological offer an *On the Road* to flee from the city back to the "purity" of the countryside.

On the Road, then, is more concerned with the *perception* of speed, with time and movement as subjective phenomena rather than objective forces. The critic Boon points the possibility of representing speed on a textual level which is exactly what Kerouac attempts to convey in *On the Road*. The perception of speed is the defining characteristic of the novel on a number of levels. Inspirationally, Benzadrine is used to write the text as well as during many of its scenes literally in the constant movement of cars across the country symbolically as part of the modern American identity. It is also thematically a concern with the experience of temporality and stylistically through the spontaneous energy of the brisk prose. As, it is opposed to the novel *The Town and the City*, which explored these concepts on a narrative level, Kerouac sought in *On the Road* to create a style, that could act as a direct embodiment of his technologically altered sense of time and space.

While, Kerouac utilized the typewriter and to Benzadrine during the writing of *The Town and the City*, it took a further impetus to crystallize these technological aids into Kerouac's unique compositional technique, spontaneous prose, which in turn resulted in the production of the novel *On the Road*. Kerouac's decision to use Benzadrine consistently over

a short time frame (twenty-one days), as opposed to its periodic use during the multi-year composition of *The Town and the City*. What gives *On the Road* its unique style. Spontaneous Prose is not a priori invention as a product of intense Benzedrine use and the typewriter, the combination of which allowed for the linguistic outpouring, that became *On the Road*. However, it was Kerouac's choice to use these instruments of production, and certainly others have used them with remarkably differing effects. Kerouac and his style were influenced by other personal and social factors, all of which contribute to the exceptional genotype, that is *On the Road*.

Benzedrine by far Kerouac's favorite writing tool, he was also quite fond of marijuana. The books Kerouac produced under its influence, *Visions of Cody* and *Dr. Sax*, are often considered to be two of Kerouac's best works. Kerouac's utilization of speed, time, and the external world of details as a means of creating, what he felt to be a more honest language. However, as part of his artistic quest to communicate his mind authentically, Kerouac pushed his style into new realms, exploring the interior structure of consciousness through associative techniques designed to allow a more direct transfer of meaning to the reader. This new approach to his fiction, which came to be called "sketching," was part of Kerouac's natural stylistic growth, and also the drug marijuana played a key part.

Kerouac began working on *Visions of Cody* after completing the first full draft of *On the Road* in April 1951. There is reliable evidence that, Kerouac smoked marijuana constantly while writing *Visions of Cody*. Since, it was written over an indefinite time frame and in separate sittings. Kerouac's frequent marijuana use while writing the text, as recorded in Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee's oral history, *Jack's Book*: "He would blast, get high, and then he would write all night. The reason why, those sentences are so long and exfoliating and so incredible is because of pot" (77). The novel *Visions of Cody* is a series of vignettes and prose experiments, that jumps around in time and place. It is much more so than the comparatively linear in the novel *On the Road*. It is unique among Kerouac's novels for its lack of a controlling plot. Rethinking his first examination of Cassady in *On the Road*, Kerouac wanted to pay homage to his friend in a way that, the former book had not. The novel *Visions of Cody* became a way to get to the heart of the matter, to push Kerouac's attempts at an authentic language past the exterior body of events into the subconscious spirit of the story.

Kerouac vehemently disparaged the idea of revision, tells the same story twice. Particularly towards its final section, *Visions of Cody* recycles the exact same source material from the conclusion of *On the Road*. As Weinreich puts it, “Significantly, the insistence upon further clarification to get to the truth about things, forced Kerouac’s mind over the material again and forces the reader to recognize that by such repetition a stage of revision is already built into the supposedly “Spontaneous Prose.” Repetition in fact becomes Kerouac’s control (5). Much like the jazz Kerouac modeled his style after, each of his works is a variation on the same theme. Kerouac filtered each text through a distinct state of consciousness in the result of amphetamine and marijuana’s divergent effects to produce unique visions of the same subject.

This is not to say that, drugs were the deciding factor in shaping each work’s style. The amphetamine was in some measure responsible for *On the Road*’s unswerving interest in temporality and motion. The novel *Visions of Cody*’s inimitable aesthetic partially urged on by Kerouac’s marijuana use, colored and molded by the drug’s unique pharmacology. However, the novel *Visions of Cody*’s style was also natural result of Kerouac’s continual growth as a writer and his fascination with experimentation. In any case, perhaps the best evidence of the differing roles played by amphetamine and marijuana in shaping Kerouac’s aesthetic is the remarkable contrast in style between the two texts, especially since they were written roughly within a year of each other. Such a rapid progression in Kerouac’s aesthetics, from the relative linearity of *On the Road* to the almost complete collapse of order in *Visions of Cody*. It is not given the well-documented power of drugs to induce quick behavioral transformations. The novel *On the Road* speeds along at an abrupt pace fueled by amphetamine, skimming the surface of events while the narrative progresses in a straight fashion. Kerouac considered it a “horizontal” version of the story. The novel *Visions of Cody*, by contrast, moves vertically. It abandons narrative coherence in favor of poetic expansion, jumping around in time and space, expounding on the infinitesimal, and truncating traditional storytelling, which causes it to read like a hallucinated, inner road-trip into the realms of the unconscious mind.

Rather than it abandon in the novel *On the Road*'s "Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac was continuing to refine it, utilizing a new "sketching" technique suggested by his friend Ed White, who asked Kerouac, "Why don't you just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words (*Selected Letters* 356). Sketching can be seen as the next step of "Spontaneous Prose," its creative evolution. While, Kerouac's continual stylistic development would doubtless have occurred without marijuana, there are enough similarities between its proven effects and the textual features produced with the sketching technique. It is fitting that, Kerouac used a term from the visual arts, "sketching," to describe his evolved spontaneous method, because his sketching process bears some resemblance to art forms like cubism, that drastically alter conventional perceptions of reality. Kerouac found that, his perception could be further modified by marijuana.

Stylistically, this engorgement of perception occurs both through the wealth of associated ideas and images as well as in the multiplication of words and subsequent lack of punctuation both lead to a feeling of overflowing abundance. While this level of detail may be seen as overindulgence, Kerouac saw it as verbal richness, a way to capture life in its entirety. Certainly, it goes beyond the bounds of narrative necessity, but that's exactly the point for Kerouac. It is a textual representation of excess, favored by the Beats.

Marijuana's ability to turn the ordinary into the extraordinary made cannabis central to the Beat aesthetic, which was a turning away from the "high" (no pun intended) literary tradition in favor of the low-down: drug users, criminals, and vagrants. Marijuana helped to develop the Beat vision, that the overlooked was worthy of attention, that someone like Cassady was as deserving a subject as any hero or king. Not surprisingly, *Visions of Cody* tends to focus on the more mundane aspects of life; however, far from glorifying the prosaic, Kerouac is celebrating the commonplace for its universally relatable aspects. One good example Kerouac's ability to gleam the eternal out of the everyday is the description of Cassady called Cody Pomeray in the novel playing football (67-70). On the surface, this section is about Cassady throwing a football with his friend Earl Johnson. At a deeper level, however, it depicts a contest for authority. Kerouac turns the match into an archetypal battle of dominance, a masculine rite of leadership. Cody "wins" at football and is accepted as head of his gang of friends. The another part of *Visions of Cody*, that highlights the pedestrian is

the tape transcription. Roughly a third of the book is a series of real recorded conversations between Kerouac and Cassady. Kerouac selected lengthy passages from these sessions for inclusion in the text. Naturally, the two smoked marijuana throughout the entire recording. Through this method, Kerouac is able to capture language in its most organic form. Cassady's voice especially becomes "the model of the common urge to communicate ordinary experience in a natural, unpretentious voice" (Weinreich 81). The colloquial becomes the epitome of authenticity.

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