

***On the Road vs. The Bell Jar: Comparison Essay***

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Course

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## **Outline**

- I. Introduction
- II. Comparison of Story Elements
  - A. Setting of the Stories
  - B. Feeling of Community
  - C. Gender Roles
- III. Conclusion

### ***On the Road vs. The Bell Jar: Comparison Essay***

The novels *On the Road* by J Kerouac and *The Bell Jar* by S. Plath represent the essence of the way people were living in the post-war period. *On the Road* is considered a classic example of the so-called Beat literature. The Beat Generation literary movement predominantly consisted of male authors and currently is associated singularly with such names as Kerouac, Ginsberg, Cohen, and Burroughs. They are considered to be the voices of the generation due to their realistic depiction of that time. However, this group was not the sole representative of American literary art. Writers like Plath created deeply personal art that expressed fears and feelings of being lost and useless in the unknown world. It resonated with the whole American nation in the 1960s, when the book was published for the first time. Both *On the Road* and *The Bell Jar* hide complex and, in some way, philosophical meaning between the lines. They also provide realistic historical background and depict special sense of American community. At the same time, they contain a range of profound differences, such as gender roles of the main characters, and similarities, among which are historical background and a sense of community.

#### **Comparison of Story Elements**

##### **Setting of the Stories**

Events in both Kerouac's and Plath's magnum opuses take place in the 1940-1950s and are primarily based on authors' personal experience. This fact explains why the background sometimes seems so similar in these books. In Kerouac's novel, the protagonists Sal and Dean move around the country, commit crimes, and encounter peculiar people, who do not always have the best lives. The majority leads the transient lifestyle imposed by poverty and injustice in the USA after the war. Behnam (2020) states that the way the author tells a story allows a reader

to “immerse himself in the intoxicating atmosphere of America in the fifties” (p. 9). People lead the nomad lifestyle and do not care about the future – these are the major features of both the novel and the real happenings in the 1940-1950s.

The hopeless atmosphere of post-war America pertains to Plath’s novel as well. The main character, Esther, pursues her dreams and tries to fulfill her hopes and aspirations. She contemplates her academic life, but it turns out to be wantonly: Esther is not accepted for the writing course. She feels lost and unsettled, like almost every other female character in this story. The protagonist’s failure at being happy in the position she is assigned demonstrates the general fear of adulthood and the future (Pascual-Garrido, 2017). Both novels translate the apprehension of the post-war American generation but employ different methods. Kerouac utilizes constant movement as a key note, while Plath concentrates on the feeling of being stuck.

### **Feeling of Community**

In Kerouac’s novel, everyone seems hospitable and friendly, always ready to help and provide shelter when needed. This provides, however, an opportunity for the exploitation of this kindness. Dean is selfish by nature, and Sal is too weak to say no to his friend’s ideas or his own temptations. Sal makes promises and accepts the help of others, only to ruin everything and again be on the road. The community does not help him fight his own chronic loneliness, and in the end, all relationships fall apart (Barndt, 2017). Sal tries to find vivid experiences in life and feels trapped when he does not travel.

In *The Bell Jar*, the community also does not manage to help the main character. Esther is always surrounded by other people, but this does not save her from depression and suicidal thoughts. Her gradually changing mental state goes unnoticed by society, and she ends up at a

mental institution. It sheds light upon public indifference towards its members and mocks delusions of the members themselves (Pascual-Garrido, 2017). When Kerouac's character actively chooses to run away, Plath makes her protagonist remain in place. Sal has all opportunities to change and to live in a normal society; different people offer him the better way of living. Esther's distinct personality is being rejected and hidden away, because she strives to be accepted by the others. This fact alone differentiates the two characters: Sal is active, and Esther typically tends to be passive. Both novels demonstrate many striking similarities in terms of showcasing the harmful solitude, which was common among young people in the 1940-1950s, but the protagonists' coping mechanisms differ.

### **Gender Roles**

The plot dynamics already demonstrate the biggest difference between the analyzed books – the already prescribed lifestyle of men and women. Kerouac's protagonist is free in a sense of mobility and choice of his path. Of course, the nomad lifestyle was looked down upon in American society, but it was quite common after World War II. Sal is an outcast of society, but he can return to normal work at any time. He does not do that, however, because he, like many others, rejects old American foundations and the image of the American dream (Bezhan, 2020). Sal actively tries to deny the traditionally American lifestyle, refusing to settle down.

Meanwhile, Esther does not have the same opportunities; she is not free to decide, whether she should run away or not. Female members of society in the mid-twentieth century are subjected to certain behavior and are to play by the rules; otherwise they will be stigmatized and deprived of the right to re-enter the community. Furthermore, the sense of conformity and desire to fit in are ingrained in women, which is apparent in Esther's case. But even when a woman

abides by the rules and behaves herself, it does not save her from being either objectified or sexually assaulted (Myka, 2018). It is apparent that the biggest difference between the two stories lies in the gender roles of the protagonists. The perspectives of the characters strangely mirror reality as well, because both books were based on the authors' lives and personal experiences of living in the brand-new USA. Sal and Esther, like their whole generation, feel lost, but Sal can move and does not see any obstacles, while Esther is stuck in one place and cannot change anything without public reprimand.

### **Conclusion**

Although both novels *On the Road* and *The Bell Jar* reflect the sentiment of the whole American nation and remain a cornerstone of post-war literature in the USA, the authors depict certain things not in the same way. Kerouac emphasizes the importance of constant mobility, a feeling of freedom, and the rejection of conventional ways. His characters constantly move and stumble upon different people from various social circles. Plath pays more attention to injustice towards women and their inability to improve anything. Nevertheless, the writers portray the process of society atomization, a lost sense of commonality, and a plausible picture of the post-war United States. Both Kerouac and Plath immortalized their own personal experiences and feelings. Therefore, the books create a room for discussion and comparison. Neither can be described as a better one because the protagonists' perspectives are yet similar but not completely the same. This fact makes both novels excellent literary samples of their time.

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