

History Lab #5: How to Read a Novel**Due Thurs 11/3**

Yes, I know you know how to read and analyze a novel. You've done it in English classes for years. But this is an interdisciplinary history class, and what is a novel doing in a history class? Novels are a special category of primary sources. They can be subjected to the same kind of "cross-examination" we did for primary sources, but they also have some special considerations because they are self-consciously fictional, addressed to an audience of readers, and written from a particular perspective (or set of perspectives). Fiction can make history "come alive" in ways that textbooks cannot, but since a work of fiction creates a stand-alone universe, it may also distort the past in ways that are sometimes useful, sometimes dangerous. Fiction and History are often presumed to be opposing fields, with fiction concerned with the imaginative world of language, characterization and representation, while history is dedicated to exploring the "real" world of the past.¹ But using fiction AS history can help illuminate the ways that history blurs the line with fiction by crafting story and using a well-informed imagination to narrate a meaningful representation of the past. When using a novel as historical evidence, you need to think about the following (in addition to the questions we asked in How to Read a Primary Source):

- Who is the author? Who is the novel's narrator(s)? Are the author and narrator(s) linked/related?
- When was the novel written? What's the historical context of this novel?
- Notice the "non-textual" material, such as front matter, epigraphs, supporting documentation or essays, even illustrations and cover art.
- Is there a significant gap between the period the novel was written, and the period it is written *about*? In general, a novel is most useful to historians of the period **IN** which (not **ABOUT** which) it was written. For example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* tells us much more about what people in the 1930s thought about the Old South than it does about the actual Civil War period.
- What aspects of a historical period are the focus of this novel?
- How are those aspects portrayed? Are they presented as "accurate," or are they magnified, exaggerated, or deliberately contorted? If the latter, why? How might you verify or corroborate those aspects?
- What specific literary techniques or devices does the author employ?
- How do content and form interact in this novel?

¹ Jane Pederson, "History in Fiction; Fiction in History," University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire

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Grading: Worth 10% of your grade

Using the semi-autobiographical novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, write a 4-5 page paper that does the following:

DESCRIBES the novel and sets it in historical context;

ANALYZES some aspect of the novel from a historical point of view (see below for ideas);

CONSIDERS the benefits and limitations of using fiction as historical evidence

And **PROPOSES** some unanswered questions that this assignment has left you with.

- Consider the plot (or lack thereof) in *On the Road*. In what way does the novel replicate a road trip?
- Why has this novel become a “classic” in American literature, and what does that mean? For example, the Amazon.com blurb for the 50th anniversary edition of the novel reads:

“Few novels have had as profound an impact on American culture as *On the Road*. Pulsating with the rhythms of 1950s underground America, jazz, sex, illicit drugs, and the mystery and promise of the open road, Kerouac's classic novel of freedom and longing defined what it meant to be "beat" and has inspired generations of writers, musicians, artists, poets, and seekers who cite their discovery of the book as the event that "set them free." Based on Kerouac's adventures with Neal Cassady, *On the Road* tells the story of two friends whose four cross-country road trips are a quest for meaning and true experience. Written with a mixture of sad-eyed naïveté and wild abandon, and imbued with Kerouac's love of America, his compassion for humanity, and his sense of language as jazz, *On the Road* is the quintessential American vision of freedom and hope, a book that changed American literature and changed anyone who has ever picked it up. This hardcover edition commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the first publication of the novel in 1957 and will be a must-have for any literature lover.”

- Write a review of the novel, and then compare your review with one of its reviews when it was first published in 1957. Some can be found at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/books/review/Sante2-t-1.html> (Attach the review to your paper)

- How are the mechanics of this novel's unusual production or the myth/mystique surrounding its author part of the way this novel is read and received in American culture? The novel was written in 3 weeks in a Manhattan apartment in spring 1951, on a single, 120-foot scroll of paper - you can see it online at <http://www.ontheroad.org/>. For the mystique of the man see, for example, "Jack Kerouac's Roads" http://www.univie.ac.at/Anglistik/easyrider/data/picks_on_kerouac.htm or NPR's "Present at the Creation" story on Kerouac's *On the Road*, <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/ontheroad/>