

Comparative Essay Sample: Two Books

Literature, just like any other form of art, is a good historical mirror – books work as an informative reflection of social life and historical events of certain era. It is obvious that works of every period in the world history have something in common, demonstrating a cultural movement or context. Thus, it is fair to suppose that books published at the same decade might be quite similar in structure, themes, language, imagery, and style. To definite extent this thesis is fair, however sometimes it requires an in-depth analysis to find similarities. Let's compare two well-known English-language novels, "On the road" by Jack Kerouac and "The third policeman" by Flann O'Brien, and find out if the ten years gap between publishing affected these authors, or the decade was not enough for significant differences in books' messages?

Jack Kerouac, one of the most prominent American authors of twentieth century, is considered a father of "beat generation". This culture appeared in United States after the Second World War as an underground movement and was embodied first of all in literature. Focusing on jazz music, drug and sex experiments, eastern religion, and denial of materiality, books of beat period remain bestsellers until now. Kerouac was the pioneer of beat generation, and his novels served as brilliant examples for other writers of the period. His novel "On the road" is among Top 100 American books of last century for unique style and language. The author wrote this masterpiece between 1949 and 1951, however, the book was published only in 1957. "On the road" is by right considered one of the most notable English-language novels.

The second writer we research today, Brian O'Nolan, is also rather well-known English-language author of twentieth century. Just like Jack Kerouac, this Irish author wrote most of his works between 1940s and 1960s. Besides writing novels, O'Nolan was a journalist, columnist, and satirist, hence many of his works were first published in magazines. Interestingly, the writer liked using pseudonyms, both as a columnist and as a novelist, and his best work was written under the name Flann O'Brien. "The third policeman" written in 1940 is the author's most noticeable novel, however it was published only in 1967, after O'Nolan's death. In this book, just like in all his works, the author uses his original style, combining surreal style and unusual sense of humour with a bizarre irrational mixture of fantasy, philosophy, comedy, and grotesque.

There are certain similarities in personal and professional life of both Jack Kerouac and Brian O'Nolan. Being talented English-language writers of first half of twentieth century, both authors were born in the beginning of 1900-s in strict Catholic families with traditional rules. They both moved a lot, and met various people of different background, which gave them much material for future characters. Also, both writers wrote a lot, and not only fictional prose. Works of both Kerouac and O'Nolan are unique in style and are rather distinctive. Their most productive period was between 1940 and 1960, when their best works were written, however both gained popularity post mortem. Finally, both novelists

abused alcohol, and it eventually caused their early death in 1960-s. Despite a great number of analogies, most well-known works of these writers are not that similar.

“On the road” by Jack Kerouac was published in 1957, six years after the novel was completed. This autobiographical novel tells a story about friends travelling across USA for 3 years. It is written in Kerouac’s original style – spontaneous unedited texts, covering acute themes of beat generation. Brian O’Nolan’s novel “The third policeman” was also printed with quite a delay, in 16 years after its completion. This book demonstrates the author’s unique style of mixing fantasy, comedy, and grotesque, telling about a farmer’s murder and building the entire plot around it between dream and reality.

Just like any other beat generation book, “On the road” contains distinguishing themes of this period – jazz, bebop, drug experiment, promiscuity, travel, spirituality, and a seek of a great American dream. This novel may be by right called the prima of beat movement, covering distinctive topics of this underground post-war subculture.

On the contrast, “The third policeman” looks nothing like a relaxing autobiographical road story. Although the author covers spiritual themes as well, it looks more like soul travelling and ghosts. Moreover, the themes of this novel include mystery, crime, murder, surrealism and philosophy, dreams and death.

The overall imagery of two books we analyze has not much in common to my mind. When Kerouac’s book is realistic and believable depiction of a young Americans, seeking something more for them, trying and mistaking, chasing a great dream, just like everybody did in a post-war United States, O’Nolan’s text is dark and mystical portrayal of deep fears and damages of human personality, focusing on many levels of our life and showing surreal sides of existence. Even the depiction of spiritual questions of these writers is different. Jack Kerouac’s protagonist, Sal Paradise, said: “Isn’t it true that you start your life a sweet child, believing in everything under your father’s roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome, grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life” (Kerouac 2002, 158). Brian O’Nolan’s best quote about spirituality, to my mind, is a phrase said to the narrator, the protagonist: “The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at best) only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard” (O’Brien 2002, 69).

The tone and language of discussed novels is also different. While “On the road” is autobiographical story describing real events of author’s life, “The third policeman” is a combination of multi-level fictional mysteries presented as an unusual fantastic satire. American author tried to make his narrative much like an unprompted diary – this was his original approach to writing. It looks to great extent like a documentary, hence it is very easy to read and empathize with its characters. That is why this novel creates an atmosphere of relaxing and free journey, and it remains a favorite book for multiple readers all over the world. On the other hand, Irish writer uses metaphors and deep philosophical ideas to create a mystery the reader might be willing to solve. His narrative

toggles from reality to dream and then to purgatory in a surreal sequence to keep a reader interested. This is the reason why this novel is considered a great example of mystic fantasy, and some receptions from it are still relevant in books and movies.

“On the road” and “The third policeman” are great examples of post-World War II period novels. And although both writers lived in same time and had very much in common, their books are quite different in style, themes, imagery, and language. While Jack Kerouac’s novel can be described as a documentary diary, depicting real life and events and focusing on beat generation topics, Brian O’Nolan created an artistic book of surreal mystery with many levels of reality. When “On the road” is recommended for rather wide audience, “The third policeman” is a favourite book for true surreal mystery lovers. However, both texts have definite similarities. They concentrate on characters, portraying people in dramatic situations.

Persons described in both novels try their best to remain humane in various circumstances, looking for something more beyond material world. Due to such masterful depiction these novels are considered masterpieces of twentieth century.

Bibliography

Kerouac, Jack. 2002. On the road. Penguin Classics.
O’Brien, Flann. 2002. The third policeman. Dalkey Archive Pr.