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Countercultural Escapism in the (Post)Modern Age: *On the Road* and *Trainspotting*

Bachelor thesis

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8 May 2018

5996 words

Table of Contents

Cover Sheet……………………………………………………………………………………1

Table of Contents………………………………………………………………………………2

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………...3

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………………4

Chapter 1: The Road and the Skag…………………………………………………………..6

Chapter 2: The (Post)Modern Other…………………………………………………………..12

Chapter 3: Escapism as Bildung………………………………………………………………19

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………………………23

Works Cited…………………………………………………………………………………...25

Abstract

This research investigates countercultural escapism in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, and connects it to the construction of Otherness and the emergence of postmodernism. The texts are approached through comparative thematic close-reading. This research argues that analysis of the different escapes can be used to gain understanding of the motivations that drive both countercultural movements, and that postmodern developments can be traced out through investigation of the construction of Otherness. Finally, the fluctuation inherent in both escapes and the endings of both novels indicate that *On the Road* and *Trainspotting* are countercultural Bildungsromans.

Key concepts: escapism, Otherness, the (post)modern, Bildung.

Introduction

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) are novels that have come to be seen as countercultural icons. *On the Road* chronicles the journeys of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, thinly veiled representations of Neil Cassady and Kerouac himself, who came to be figureheads of the Beat Generation of 1950s America. *Trainspotting* revolves around the lives of Mark Renton and his "associates," who inhabit the underside of Scottish society in Leith, Edinburgh. Surrounded by addiction and criminal activity, most notably involving the opioid heroin, these social outcasts mostly adhere to the values laid out by the punk movement that started in the 1970s, namely the rejection of capitalism, a focus on individual freedom and the harbouring of anti-establishment views (McGuire 20-22). The Beats also pushed against societal norms: they celebrated the individual, art, lived experience and spontaneity whilst rejecting materialism and the conventions surrounding romantic and sexual relationships (McDowell 412-13). The stable domestic family life—so central to the dominant American ideology—was put aside in search of living in the moment. Kerouac and Welsh also use language in a countercultural way. The traditional discourse of standard English is challenged by Welsh's use of Edinburgh dialect and Kerouac's unusual literary style, which has been criticised as being "typing, not writing" (Capote qtd. in Winn 27).

Though these novels are markedly different with regards to time, setting, and style, common themes can be found when looking at counterculture and the notion of escapism. Escapism can be characterised as a movement away from an undesirable situation by creating one that, at least initially, appears to be better (Young 377). In both works the protagonists are attempting to escape from the conventions of society: *Trainspotting* offers punk-infused drug culture and its associated lifestyle as an alternative to the mainstream way of life and *On the Road* centres on spatial escape in the tradition of the Beatnik lifestyle. Furthermore, Otherness is a central concept in both counterculture in general and escapism as put forward in these

novels. As countercultural icons, *Trainspotting* and *On the Road* are emblematic and thus representative of their respective countercultures; therefore, broader conclusions about countercultural escapism and societal developments may be drawn by critically analysing these novels. This research, through comparative thematic close-reading, explores the forms escapism takes, what the construction of Otherness can tell us about the countercultural communities in relation to mainstream society, and what the eventual result of the escape is for the protagonists. Chapter one consists of a thematic analysis of the countercultural escape in both novels: both modes of escape are compared and examined in their socio-political context. Chapter two approaches the use and construction of the Other, arguing that the tentative beginning and culmination of postmodernism can be traced out in both *On the Road* and *Trainspotting*. Chapter three aims to challenge the notion of failure often attributed to both novels, especially with regards to their respective endings, by examining the fluctuation in the roles their main characters assume, with a focus on the conclusions to both narratives. The different approaches the novels take to escapism and Otherness signify their (post)modern sensibilities and ultimately provide an aspect of Bildung for both protagonists.

Chapter 1

The Road and the Skag

The novels differ regarding the context of and reasons for their escape. *On the Road* centres around members of the Beat generation, which flourished in the 1940s and 50s and displayed a growing weariness towards the conventions of society. The Beats inherited a world in transition: their faith in the dominant societal structures had been eroded by the succession of events such as the depression of the 1930s, the Second World War, the dawning of the nuclear age and the start of the Cold War (Cresswell 253-54). For a generation that had experienced all these world-changing phenomena, the "romanticism and escapism of travelling exerted a powerful . . . lure" (McDowell 413). For Sal Paradise, life before meeting Dean and starting his travels consisted of "feeling that everything was dead" (Kerouac 3); the Beatnik spatial escape offers a refuge for those "staring out the dead wall window of our civilization" (Kerouac qtd. in Portable 559).

The escape as constructed by Kerouac is therefore predominantly a movement away from the traditional values upheld by society, with the conviction that there is more to be found elsewhere. It seems the journey is not purely escapist, for Sal is convinced that "somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (Kerouac 10). As John Holmes notes, Kerouac insists that "their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side" (qtd. in Feied 57). This preoccupation with finding the spiritual essence of life (Cresswell 260) is metaphorically embodied in the narrative by the description of the next destination. The motion is always determinedly towards a better place: throughout the narrative, the place ahead, whichever it is at that point in time, is described in phrases such as "the Promised land" (Kerouac 15), "the golden land ahead" (122), and "an oyster for us to open" (124).

Sal attempts to find his pearl at the edges of society; by emulating the underprivileged Other in the form of the hobo and the marginalised racial Other or "fellahin," he seeks to escape "disappointment and 'white sorrows' and all that" (Kerouac 165). However, it is precisely his privilege as a middle-class white male that gives him the opportunity to attempt this escape. Moreover, his socioeconomic position enables him to shed his assumed identity with ease, an option the people he mirrors do not have. Chapter two takes a closer look at the construction of the Other, but for now it suffices to say that Sal looks to those at the margins of society for giving meaning to life; they, to him, have not been spoilt by the dominant ideology the Beats rebel against.

The Beats are in a complicated relationship with American culture. As Tim Cresswell observes, their resistance is ambiguous, for it idealises and rejects at the same time: it abandons the ideals of home and family, whilst celebrating another part of American mythology, namely that of independent, mobile males with little regard for the law (294). Furthermore, mobility and freedom are central themes in American culture; the westward movement especially is a key aspect of both the pioneer spirit and the American Dream. In *On the Road* this part of American heritage is, paradoxically, both celebrated and transformed into a way to rebel against the establishment, including its American Dream (249).

Set approximately 30 years later than Kerouac's novel, *Trainspotting* is further removed from the wars that influenced the mind-set of the Beats. In Thatcherite Britain, here seen from the Scottish margins, a change in social values took place as society was reformed according to conservative liberal standards, resulting in "the disappearance of more traditional notions of class and community" (McGuire 20). Life became increasingly individualistic, and especially the working class was faced with an economic survival of the fittest, a situation where the weak are inevitably capitalised on by the strong (20). In *Trainspotting*, these developments translate into a deep-rooted nihilistic worldview. Alienation from society is

paired with the belief that it is impossible to change it or oneself for the better: "Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor lives wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless" (Welsh 116). Though Renton is fully aware of the fact that a heroin habit ultimately takes more than it gives, it matters little when compared to the drudgery of life, since "[J]unk'll dae the business whin everything else seems boring and irrelevant," at least offering "a fucking good kick" (116) to compensate for its drawbacks. Welsh's escape is disillusioned; a life of extremes, destructive yet alluring, is chosen over a stable mild misery. The nihilistic vacuum left by the abovementioned change in values is partly filled, partly obscured by Renton's addiction.

Whereas Sal attempts to find enlightenment at the margins of society, Renton and his associates actually inhabit said margins: they reside in the housing developments in the slums of Edinburgh and depend on welfare. Welsh's narrative is pervaded by a sense of being stuck in a less than ideal situation. Though the protagonists technically have the possibility to improve their lives with regards to their socioeconomic status, they have lost all hope for positive change, both on a personal and a societal scale. They believe they do not have the power to change society, nor can they change to fit it better. As Renton puts it, "Ah wish ah could find [Ma] a replacement [son]. Ah wish that because ah don't think change is an option fir us" (73). Renton escapes into hard drugs. He does not characterise his escape as a quest of sorts, it is purely escapist, that is, an end in itself. A heroin habit subsumes everything else: "Whin yir oan junk, aw ye worry aboot is scorin. Oaf the gear, ye worry aboot loads ay things . . . Ye worry aboot bills, food, bailiffs, these Jambo Nazi scum beatin us, aw the things that ye couldnae gie a fuck aboot whin yuv goat a real junk habit" (169). Whereas in Kerouac's novel a feeling of stagnancy is counteracted by the road and its inherent promises, for Renton and his associates it is a feature of both life and their chosen escape, emphasizing the theme of

feeling trapped; both their socioeconomic situation and their drug addiction are keeping them metaphorically immobile, while their pessimistic worldview keeps them paralyzed.

Sal and Renton have markedly different attitudes towards their respective countries and societies. Kerouac's writing seems greatly empathetic towards America; as Cresswell notes, the word America(n) features on nearly every page, and Sal and Dean are described as American angels and American saints (259). The beauty of American landscapes, cities and people are poetically described; for example, fields are "the color of love" (Kerouac 72). Scotland is not treated as graciously by Welsh: it is "a country ay failures," home to "the scum of the earth" (100). The contrast between the protagonists' outlooks on both their countries and lives can partly be explained by their socioeconomic statuses; Sal has a relatively comfortable existence to return to after his journey, as emphasized in the narrative by his aunt, whom is always able and willing to transfer him money to aid his quest, whereas returning to reality for the likes of Renton means facing a rather bleak situation, especially when paired with drug withdrawal. As mentioned above, *On the Road* uses a part of American heritage, namely mobility, as a way to rebel. *Trainspotting*, on the other hand, describes drug culture, arguably the form of escapism most frowned upon. Furthermore, the illegality of drugs means using them is in itself a rebellious act, a stance against the rule of government by rejecting legislative power. Kerouac's hero intends to return to American society after his journeys; the object of his quest is personal spiritual development, after which he is ready to settle down. It seems Sal is rebelling against a culture he still has one foot firmly planted in, whereas Welsh's protagonists are more separated from the society they turn their backs towards.

Two of the things *Trainspotting* and *On the Road* have in common have to do with circularity and the importance of style. The narratives mirror each other with respect to the circularity inherent in the escape; *Trainspotting* follows the familiar junkie's pattern of abuse-

abstain-relapse, *On the Road* features "a repeated pattern of excitement with the prospect of a new city, a period of exploration then dejection and sadness followed by continued travel" (Cresswell 255). The similarity is unmistakable when the words "city" and "travel" are replaced with "high" and "drug use." Furthermore, both novels utilize style to emphasize key aspects of the text: *Trainspotting* is written largely in Edinburgh dialect, a choice that underscores Otherness as well as the postcolonial discourse running through the novel, which will be looked at in a later chapter. Additionally, the narrative consists of separate, only loosely related stories from different points of view. This fragmented nature underscores the individuality that pervades life in these circles and mirrors the chaos and unpredictability of the lives of its characters. *On the Road* uses its style, rhythm, and structure to emphasize the frantic and often directionless movement inherent in Sal's escape: the novel utilises musical and poetic sounds and rhythms to "convey the underlying sense of rapid and spontaneous movement" and its structure resembles the erratic, ever-changing energy of Jazz (Cresswell 256-7). Moreover, Kerouac originally wrote on an enormous scroll that unwinds in front of the reader as the road stretches out in front of a car, again emphasizing the continuous movement in plot and narrative.

Both novels opt for an individualistic escape rather than a communal effort to implement change; individualism also thematically pervades both narratives. The heroin use in *Trainspotting* is inherently an individual activity; though the ingestion is usually social, with one person cooking up for the rest and everyone taking the drug in the same room, once the trip starts it is every man for himself. The battle with addiction is a private one, and Renton emphasizes that in the drug industry, there are "[n]ae friends . . . [j]ust associates" (7). As in society, it is the survival of the fittest. At first glance, *On the Road* seems to pivot around the friendship between Sal and Dean, but the former is left behind multiple times,

most notably in Mexico while he is ill. The narratives imply that, in the end, the only constant companion you have is you yourself.

As this chapter has shown, *Trainspotting* and *On the Road* construct countercultural escapism in different ways. Sal seeks to escape dominant American societal structures to move towards a spiritual goal. He seeks this spiritual essence in the marginalised Other, and his ideology is in a complex relationship with the American Dream. Renton's escape is a reaction to Scottish ideology and society in the wake of Thatcherism, disillusioned and nihilistic; in essence, he chooses what seems to him the best of two undesirable options. *On the Road* is characterised by movement, *Trainspotting* by stagnancy. What they have in common are an inherent circularity in their escape; a highly metaphorical use of style; a focus on individualism as both a value to be realised and a characterising element of the escape itself; and a focus on the construction of and relationship to the Other, which the following chapter will explore.

Chapter 2

The (Post)Modern Other

As stated before, in both novels escapism is intimately connected to Otherness, which revolves around a comparison to the self. The Other can be an individual as opposed to the singular self, as well as a community or category that oppositionally defines one's own. The Other and the self are in a defining relationship: as Emmanuel Levinas argues, the self cannot exist without the Other, for it cannot conceptualise itself as a self without opposition to a not-self in the form of the Other (Kearney 62). Therefore, the Other is crucial in understanding identity, for it is by constant comparison to everything Other that an idea of self is formed. Otherness is marked by difference, often an outward one such as gender or complexion; although in essence it encompasses everything that is not-self, it has been predominantly associated with marginalised people who have been disempowered on grounds of their difference to the dominant social group (Senekal 27; Gunn 177). Identity and Otherness are closely linked to countercultural movements, since they construct their identity in opposition to the mainstream; therefore, countercultural movements usually characterise themselves as the oppositional Other.

As Otherness traditionally defines communities, this chapter will use Bernard Cova's (1997) and Ángela Izquierdo's (2017) definitions of modern and postmodern communities to argue that, through an analysis of the construction of Otherness, the development from late modern to postmodern ideology can be traced out in *On the Road*, whilst the culmination of postmodernism can be identified in the communal structures in *Trainspotting*. Furthermore, the novel embodies postmodern thought by questioning the usefulness of traditional notions of Otherness in the postmodern age.

According to Cova, the late modern and early postmodern era are characterised by a transition of one form of community to another (300). The late modern period mostly features

organic or operative communities, which are based on nation, class, and race; they are "characterized by closure, and tend to protect themselves from alterity [through] exclusion of and protection from otherness" (Izquierdo 92). In the transition to postmodernism, they make way for tribes; these are smaller communities, which are inherently unstable and held together by less deterministic attributes such as a common (moral) philosophy, subculture, lifestyle and/or consumption practice (Cova 300-301).

As stated before, Sal escapes from mainstream society by manoeuvring himself towards the hobo and the fellahin, the marginalised racial Other that is not bound by the prevailing culture in America, not determined by "white ambitions" (Kerouac 164). Dissatisfied with his own identity as "a 'white man' disillusioned" (163), Sal longs for change. Otherness offers him that possibility: he wishes he "were a Negro . . . , a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily" (163). His search for a different self culminates in his emulation of the racial Other. After spending a day picking cotton—a stereotypically fellahin occupation—Sal seems to identify as Other: "sighing like an old Negro cotton-picker, I reclined on the bed and smoked a cigarette" (88). Half a page later, he says "they thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am," and after a few days of this life, Sal declares he "was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be" (88). Sal's first trip across the continent brings him into contact with Mississippi Gene, who embodies the lifestyle of hoboism. The hobo is presented as the culmination of personal freedom and his life is further characterised by being on the road; Sal in his escape emulates hoboism, and idealizes and romanticizes it like he does the fellahin life.

Approaching and rethinking the margins of society is typically postmodern (Hutcheon 58). The move toward and emulation of the Other signifies a change in communal boundaries; the deterministic nature of organic communities is negated as Sal constructs the Other as an

ideal self that offers him the possibility of escape. His white community does not offer him "enough ecstasy, . . . enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, . . . enough night" (163), signifying that the ideal community to Sal is based more on the postmodern conceptions of tribes, which form over similarities in factors like philosophy and lifestyle (Cova 300-01) rather than, in this case, race and class. However, this permeability of communal boundaries is always temporary, as Sal soon feels "the pull of my own life calling me back" (89); his position in his own community allows him this mobility. Furthermore, Kerouac's construction of the Other is romanticised, ignorant with regards to the actual living conditions of those people Sal manoeuvres towards. He seems to suggest that "African-Americans are insulated from disappointment because they are lacking in aspiration" (Holton 269), and that it is possible to appropriate their life and culture by adopting a typically fellahin lifestyle of manual labour. His glorification of hoboism "deflects needed attention from serious social and economic problems of which transience is a symptom" (Adamo 44). Clearly, the Beats strove towards a valorisation of difference, which is a key aspect of postmodernist thought (Hutcheon 6). This ties in with the abandonment of the homogenous communal identity associated with the organic community; however, Kerouac's problematic construction of the fellahin and the hobo belies his groundedness in late modern sensibilities. The organic communal structures are not broken down, but appear cracked nonetheless, allowing for a glimpse into the postmodern world.

The men in *On the Road* are in a complex relationship with the female Other as well. The narrative is laced with many different love interests for both Sal and Dean. Often, the same woman is romanced and abandoned multiple times, and Dean regularly dates several women at a time without their knowledge or consent. As Cresswell points out, "[t]he two men constantly meet and leave women without 'getting involved' – even when they are married to them" (257). This behaviour has led many critics to condemn Kerouac for his portrayal and

treatment of women in the novel (Lawlor 2005; McDowell 1996; Cresswell 1993). Although Kerouac has been criticized extensively, his protagonists seem to express genuine interest in their targets and finding love in general; Sal especially longs to settle down, stating "I want to marry a girl . . . So I can rest my soul with her till we both get old" (116). To Sal, women are explicitly associated with the concept of home (Cresswell 258), while the abrupt exits are justified by appealing to the spiritual power the road holds over Sal and Dean. This constant fluctuation between wanting to settle down and needing to keep moving can be metaphorically connected to Kerouac's precarious position in between late modernism and early postmodernism: on the one hand, Sal longs for a redefinition of life according to the governing principles of personal freedom, on the other hand he recognises the safety and comfort inherent in the nuclear family ideal that governed 1950's America. Especially the end of the novel, where Sal is settled down with Laura, signifies that he is ultimately not ready to abandon modernism. As with the fellahin, the Other is a nexus of possibility, but also an anchor to late modern times.

In *Trainspotting*, Otherness is transformed according to postmodern thought. Firstly, the novel critically examines Otherness using postcolonial discourse, particularly focused on Scottishness, its connotations, implications, and complications. Renton voices a strong opinion on identifying with one's nationality, after stating he neither identifies as British nor Scottish: "Ah've never felt a fucking thing aboot countries, other than total disgust. They should abolish the fuckin lot ay them. Kill every fucking parasite politician that ever stood up and mouthed lies and fascist platitudes" (Welsh 285). Renton here implies that nationality is not an effective category through which to construct one's identity, and that fascism is closely connected to the polarisation between nationalities, both of which should be condemned. This is a clear statement against organic communities, which mirrors the establishment of postmodern tribes. Additionally, postmodernism is characterised by the critical questioning of

established and dominant ideologies (Hutcheon 159); with regards to Otherness, "[t]he modernist concept of single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other)" (61). Grant Farred states that Renton ridicules the Scottish people's desire to preserve their difference (217), an urge that causes behaviour resulting in "a national self-delusion powerful enough to obscure the "white trash" from itself because it is clothed in and historicized into a heroic oppositionality" (220). In this light, Welsh seems to suggest that Otherness can obscure parts of one's own identity as much as it helps to construct it. *Trainspotting*'s reflection on Scotland's postcolonial status exemplifies postmodernism's systematic scepticism as the viability of the construction and role of the Other in contemporary society is questioned.

Secondly, the static nature of Otherness is challenged. As Christine Harold argues, the addicts in Welsh's novel have the role of abject Others, whose misery and illness may cause the self, here the mainstream working class, to feel sympathy or fear, but also enable it to feel healthy and (morally) superior (869). Traditionally, the Other has little to no chance to assimilate into the mainstream; this aligns with the conventional picture of heroin as painted by government adverts, as it suggests that the first use unavoidably leads to lifelong addiction and ultimately death (884). In this light, it can be argued that Renton and his fellow addicts not only are seen *as* abject Other, but also see *themselves* as such, as demonstrated by their belief in their inability to change as well as the feeling of stagnancy and entrapment that pervades the novel. However, *Trainspotting* destabilises the assumed immobility of Otherness by putting the abject Other in constant conversation with the mainstream working class. Although clearly condemning mainstream society in the famous "choose life" speech (Welsh 237), Renton constantly fluctuates between periods of indulgence and abstinence, between escaping through heroin and attempting to escape from his heroin addiction by adopting a working-class lifestyle. Like Renton's constantly changing way of life, postmodernism "is

contradictory and works within the very systems it tries to subvert" (Hutcheon 4). The continuous movement between abject Other and mainstream self subverts the traditional pre-postmodern notion of static Otherness and its automatic exclusion from the dominant way of life.

Lastly, the binary opposition between self and Other is called into question through the novel's construction of the male-female relationship. Binaries conceal hierarchies (Sarup 57; Hutcheon 61), as one term (here self and male) represents the dominant centre and the other (here Other and female) the subordinate margin (Sarup 57). In the postmodern age, the legitimacy of binary oppositions is questioned; differences and boundaries between male and female become blurred as the hierarchy inherent in the division starts to disintegrate. *Trainspotting*'s Diane exemplifies this development: although she is Renton's junior by eleven years, she has the upper hand in their interactions. As Izquierdo notes, "female empowerment is normally represented in 'masculine' terms, through the exercise of violence and domination over the male body" (96). Diane's forward, dominant role makes Renton feel "nervous, awkward and virginal" (Welsh 177); his self-consciousness contrasts sharply with her confidence, and it is Diane who dictates the duration and scope of the foreplay. She also insists to be on top, riding "herself into a climax, Renton lying there like a dildo on a large skateboard" (179). The female Other takes on masculine qualities, effectively undoing the binary opposition and its hierarchal structure.

To conclude, the relationships between the self and the Other in *On the Road* can be read as a manifestation of the transition from modern to postmodern thought, because instead of solely constructing the (racial) Other to define oneself and one's group, as happened in organic/operative communities, the Other now also becomes a could-be-self or ideal self. This signifies the fracturing of the communal spirit, an effort to define oneself outside of one's community, which characterises the transition to the postmodern age. However, the

problematic nature of the idealisation of marginalised groups shows a rootedness in modern ideology as manifested in organic communities. The "world in transition," as mentioned in the introduction, can therefore be characterised as the world in transition from the modern to the postmodern era. Kerouac writes in between the two times, partaking in both modes of thought. *Trainspotting*'s treatment of Otherness is a manifestation of the culmination of postmodernity. Otherness is critically examined and rejected as a viable construct in the postmodern age; through the novel's postcolonial discourse, Renton's fluctuation between abject Other and mainstream self, and the disintegration of the binary opposition between male and female, Welsh presents his readers with a distinctly postmodern critique of the outdated nature of Otherness.

Chapter 3

Escapism as Bildung

Although mainstream and counterculture appear to be opposing forces, they are linked closer together than it initially seems. Like the self and the Other, they depend upon each other for identification processes, and though countercultures reject certain aspects of the dominant ideology, they are necessarily rooted in the mainstream and inevitably connected to it (Schoene 69). Both *Trainspotting* and *On the Road* illustrate the constant conversation between the two by placing their characters in ambiguous, fluctuating roles and relationships, particularly at the conclusion of the narrative. This chapter argues that the unstable escapism in both novels ultimately serves as a road to self-development, whether intentional or not.

As mentioned in chapter one, Sal and his form of countercultural escape paradoxically glorify America and certain aspects of its culture, such as the pioneer spirit and individual freedom, whilst denouncing other central parts, such as the nuclear family and the materialistic aspect of the American Dream. The ambiguous nature of Sal's relationship with the latter is illustrated by the fact that his journey is made possible by his wealthy aunt; paradoxically, his move away from traditional capitalist materialism is dependent on its very results. Sal attempts to find a more ideal way of life at the fellahin margins, but continuously abandons the societies he finds in favour of travelling on or settling back into his pre-travel lifestyle; there is a constant fluctuation between wanting to settle down and the need to keep moving. Eventually, Sal returns to American society and ends up in the traditional construct of a monogamous relationship, seemingly leaving his Beat days behind as he abandons Dean on the streets of New York under pressure of his new social circle. Sal's apparent reconformism has led many critics to conclude his goal has not been reached, describing his journey as "doomed resistance" (McDowell 417).

Like Sal, Renton is in an ambiguous relationship with consumer culture and capitalism: although the black market he operates in traditionally undermines conventional business, it is inseparable from the mainstream market and subjected to the same rules of supply and demand. Perhaps Renton himself expresses it best in *Porno*, the sequel to *Trainspotting*: "it's naive to expect drugs tae be exempt from the laws of modern consumer capitalism. Especially when, as a product, they best help define it" (Welsh 408). Renton repeatedly attempts to kick his habit and integrate into society, fluctuating between the roles of abject countercultural junky and mainstream working man, "each identity mirroring—that is, simultaneously bolstering and undermining—its counterpart" (Schoene 69). When dealing with a heroin withdrawal, he longs to rid himself of his drug habit; when sober, he longs for the "kicks" the junky lifestyle offers him. *Trainspotting* challenges the image of one-dimensional junkies by highlighting this fluctuation, thereby emphasizing their humanity over their abject Otherness. At the end of the novel, Renton steals the money he and his "associates" made selling drugs and flees to Amsterdam, the narcotics capital of the world, where "he could be what he wanted to be. He'd stand or fall alone" (Welsh 430). *Trainspotting*'s ambiguous ending does not imply a solution for Renton given his previous difficulties.

The novels have ambiguous or in a sense unexpected conclusions: it is unclear whether Renton manages to resolve his struggle of fluctuating between the two lifestyles, whereas Sal seems to adopt that which he once rejected. Though on the surface it may seem that their endeavours to escape dominant structures and unsatisfactory lifestyles have therefore failed, this research aims for a different, more nuanced understanding of both texts.

As mentioned before, both escapes are of an individualistic nature, not aimed at implementing a revolutionary change in society. The last pages of *On the Road* nonetheless seem to imply a sort of betrayal to the revolutionary spirit the Beats seemed to embody.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Sal's goal was always spiritual: the journey is one of discovery and reflection, not necessarily observable personal progress or active engagement with societal issues. Sal may end up in the systems he once rejected, but that does not negate his experiences, nor does it undo the fact that his experimentation with a new, if temporary, way of life and mode of thought inspired a new generation: the Beats paved the way for a new mode of consciousness and set in motion the revolutionary developments of the 60s and 70s. *Trainspotting*'s ending is in line with the ambiguous nature of postmodern thought itself, and emphasises the idea that, above all, one is shaped and restrained by one's immediate surroundings. A fresh start outside of the United Kingdom is Renton's last hope to build a life for himself, to find a role he can assume more permanently. In both novels, the protagonist attempts to distance himself from mainstream society through escapism, and in both cases it is the process of said escapism paired with self-reflection that offers a personal solution: Sal's journeys have a markedly positive effect on his mental state (Coulton 23), enabling him to overcome the traumatic experiences that made him feel like "everything was dead" (Kerouac 3), whereas the problematic nature of Renton's fluctuating roles makes him realise his most feasible opportunity for a better life lies abroad, and that it is his responsibility to make it work. Although Renton's form of escapism is intended to be purely escapist, it nonetheless teaches him valuable lessons about himself and the world around him. The interpretation of individualism put forward in the first chapter is thus confirmed by the ending: escapism in these novels ultimately centres around personal salvation. Kerouac and Welsh write about inward revolution in a countercultural environment, enabling their novels to be classified as countercultural Bildungsromans, which describe cognitive maturance in the late modern and postmodern age.

The (post)modern escape in the novels is highly unstable. The inseparable nature of seemingly opposing concepts pervades both narratives, emphasizing the complicated

relationship between counterculture and mainstream. The countercultural escape can therefore never be complete. Though critics argue the escape has therefore failed, this chapter shows that this is not the case, for both Sal and Renton achieve personal development that (potentially) makes them better suited to live a life in which they can be content; to an extent, they have escaped their own demons.

Conclusion

In *On the Road*, Sal's Beatnik escapism is a movement away from traditional values and constructs in the wake of sobering events such as the Second World War. Sal is in a complex, fluctuating relationship with American culture. His escape is one characterized by movement, which can be metaphorically connected to the transition from the late modern to the postmodern age as exemplified by the construction of the Other as an ideal self. However, an adherence to modern sensibilities is apparent in the misguided idealisation of the lives of the fellahin and hobo. *Trainspotting* presents its countercultural escapism, modelled after the values laid out by the punk movement, as a nihilistic response from the Scottish margins to Thatcherism. Renton fluctuates between two less than ideal lifestyles, and a feeling of stagnancy pervades his life and escape. The novel critically examines and rejects organic communities and traditional notions of identity and exclusion through its construction of Otherness, a development that is typically postmodern. The (post)modern escape in both novels is unstable due to the protagonists' fluctuation between countercultural Other and mainstream self. Although neither Sal nor Renton permanently escape from those aspects of the mainstream they initially rejected, their respective journeys, whether spatial or in the mind, provide a Bildungs-aspect to both narratives which allows Sal to feel content in mainstream society and causes Renton to realise the actions necessary for a chance of survival.

Although this research was intended to be primarily a comparative close-reading, it could have benefited from a more extensive theoretical foundation, especially concerning the shift to postmodern thought. Starting off with postmodernism as a primary filter would have led to additional insights: the angle of postmodernism was now added at a later stage of my project. This research almost exclusively focused on the two main characters, but it would be interesting to extend the topic of this paper to the secondary characters: for example, to

analyse Dean's role as the inspiration for Sal's escape and the embodiment of postmodern sensibilities, or to examine the metaphorical significance of the way Welsh constructs Renton's brother Billy, as his role and death are closely connected to the thematic notions of postcolonialism and Otherness. Further research could also flesh out some aspects this paper merely touched upon, such as the significance of the homosocial relationship and weakening interpersonal bonds in both novels, and the masculinity narrative connected to it. Both protagonists come into contact with the homosexual Other, to whom they ultimately respond with anger; this, too, might be suitable to explore in connection to masculinity. Furthermore, music plays an important role in both novels as well as both of the respective countercultures; it would be interesting to see an extensive analysis on the symbolism and significance of music as connected to counterculture.

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