

## The Grail and Kicks: Gothic Roads, Beat Roads

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### Introduction

George Rosen, in his article *The Revolt of Youth: Some Historical Comparisons*, wrote,

“The disaffection of groups of young people with their society is ... not a specific phenomenon of the twentieth century. Other times and places have produced rebellious youth, social dropouts and alienated generations (86).”

When we look at such disaffected groups in history, we find that *wanderlust*, the restless desire and pleasure of travel, has figured significantly in the characterization of each. From the Middle Ages we have records of wandering students and church clerics moving from town to town, university to university, and of course, from tavern to tavern. The German *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) groups of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which included Goethe as a member, were a restless, radical and noisy bunch of students protesting against the predominant “rule of reason” rationalism of the day, and enthusiastically sought out other believers in other towns.

What do you suppose happens when youth combines with wanderlust and the *sturm und drang* of their own times? Rosen also remarked that in the US, “each generation has produced distinctive young rebels—the bohemians before and after World War I, the radicals of the thirties and forties, the beatniks and hipsters of the fifties, and the hippies and romantic anarcho-marxists of the sixties (86).” Moving away from something, toward something ‘better,’ most of those disaffected groups have taken to the road, to connect with like-minded others, or just to see where and what the road might bring them. ... Or, to satisfy that age-old overtone of youth: restlessness.

Do goals, or what Aristotle termed the *telos*, concern such travelers “on the road”? In many cultures throughout history there have been countless reasons why such people embark on a journey—perhaps as many reasons as there are travelers. If the travel leads toward a quest, we are encouraged to regard such a journey with at least a modicum of myth and hero reference, given the long and rich history of quests in literature, ballad and legend.

### The Grail Quest

The quest of the Holy Grail (a chalice or dish supposedly used by Jesus Christ at The Last Supper (NewAdvent.org)), pervades much of Arthurian literature, and the first Grail romance, called *The Story of the Grail*, was written by the French poet Chrétien de Troyes (1135?—91?). According to Maleuvre, in his book *The Horizon—a history of our infinite longing*, the subsequent Grail tales, of King Arthur sending forth Percival and the rest of his Knights to embark on quests in search, ostensibly, for the whereabouts of the universal prize, the Holy Grail, we realize that their courageous journeys seem actually to have been undertaken for the sake of the journey itself, and it is the open road that is the purpose of their questing, an end in itself (122). Maleuvre points out further that in the stories, the Knight chooses to chase after a Grail—something he has never before seen, some mythological, imagined, unattainable relic—rather than settle for real boxes of gold or living damsels in distress that present themselves to him. The imagination of what the quest, or the road or journey, can offer is much more appealing to him (124). We only need this line from the American poet Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” to grasp this sentiment in its timelessness:

I think heroic deeds were all conceiv’d in the open air,  
and all great poems also

Tennyson further chronicles this Arthurian quest for the Grail, based on his study of Mallory’s *Morte d’Arthur*. Underlying the story of battles, wounds, mortal deaths and agony, the theme seems to be to travel, to journey from *this* place to *that*. Arthur and the Knights may find glory through ‘knightly deeds,’ but much of the narrative is taken up by going to

meet the enemy, traveling to the next dawn wherein their fate may (or may not) be sealed forever in that place they come to, and reminiscing about those places they will never see again, "Walking about the gardens of Camelot (Tennyson)".

### The Beats

Some sojourners and runaways have become famous, and a few, legendary. In the 1950s of the U.S., small groups of young people, mostly well-educated and disillusioned by the times of post-war U.S. society, and poor, gathered together in urban regions such as New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago, to write poetry, listen to the new free-form bebop jazz, or to paint, and they became the penultimate, disillusioned yet energized mid-20th century underground culture. Together, they would travel from city to city, hub to hub, joining, scattering, reforming, to create a living transitory culture in constant flux across the nation, and even into Mexico. One journalist called them *the Beats*, and the rest of the press of the day chimed in with the quasi-Russian phrase *beatniks*. (See the Note at the end of this paper for a description of this historical period in US history).

Although *the Beats* was considered a new movement at the time, James Gurley suggests it belongs "to an old and well established tradition in American literature." He goes on to say that "American literature has been obsessed with the search for an ultimate meaning to the individual human life (67)".

What was the impetus, then, of all these young people devoting all of their considerable energy and passion to travel, music and poetry? It may have been wanderlust; it may have been triggered by disenfranchisement. It may have started as all things begin — a turn of the wheel when what had been, with its associated reasons, comes around "once again" and we see take place, put into action, what had actually already been. The era's young people, male mostly, men, boys, boy-men like Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy, would hop into any old car (rarely their own), start up the engine, and hold the foot to the floor until they got to *anywhere*, god knew where, just to go. Just to go: that was the trigger, the arrow released from the bowstring, tightened by the constrictions of society, and sent flying as US Route 66 cutting through the very heart of

the country. Historically, it was nothing new. They might have been knights of the Middle Ages setting off on a great quest. But for them, it had never been done before.

They called it ‘kicks’ — doing something, often irreverent or anti-social, for the kicks, for the joy of it. There was even a pop song that came out of the times, with the lyrics “Get your kicks on Route 66 (Troupe)”, that legendary road that all such people traveled from the Midwest across the southwestern US, the journey-road going from Chicago through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before ending at Los Angeles, California, covering a total of 2,448 miles (3,940 km) as catalogued in the *Route 66 Web & Atlas*, and written about in such colorful, energetic detail by Kerouac in his seminal book of the times, *On the Road*. It was the epic of the age, describing how and why he and his pal Neal Cassidy traveled to *somewhere* by going *anywhere*. It is summed up in this bit of dialog between Kerouac’s own character in the book, and his friend Neal Cassidy:

“ ‘...We gotta go and never stop going 'till we get there.' 'Where we going, man?' 'I don't know but we gotta go' (238)”.

Thus, the journey itself was the goal, the Grail.

### More Historical Precedents

*The Goliards* is the name given to scattered groups of travelers and revelers who, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, roamed the European countryside satirizing the Church through bold and ribald songs and delighting in wine, licentious love and the open road. At that time, all government authority was held in the name of the Catholic Church, and as such, its dominant, inflexible and overbearing authority was often ridiculed. The Goliards were comprised mostly of disgruntled (or perhaps fun-seeking) Church clerics and university students, and also included lay people, male and female. Their patron saint was the mythical Goliath, whom they praised as ‘the lord of the vagabonds.’ (Fordham.edu)

The most famous author of Goliardic verses was an anonymous, heretical, anti-establishment Latin poet who called himself The Archpoet

(circa 1130-1165) aka *Archipoeta* (Latin), and his most famous piece was called *His Confession*. Below is a stanza from this work that illustrates the integral part 'the road' (*the broad way*) and hedonism (vices and greed) play in the life and times of the Goliards.

Down the broad way do I go,  
 Young and unregretting,  
 Wrap me in my vices up,  
 Virtue all forgetting,  
 Greedier for all delight  
 Than heaven to enter in:  
 Since the soul is in me dead,  
 Better save the skin.

([The Hypertexts.com](http://TheHypertexts.com))

The joy of being on the open road has often been celebrated as a spiritual, liberating part of human existence, and to take it can be an ecstatic experience in itself, regardless of the final destination. Seven centuries after the Goliardic Archpoet sang rapturously of his lust for the profligate, decadent life, Whitman offered this look at the journey *as journey*, in his poem "Song of the Open Road," as part of his *Leaves of Grass* epic:

AFOOT and light-hearted, I take to the open road,  
 Healthy, free, the world before me,  
 The long brown path before me, leading wherever I  
 choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune—I myself am good  
 fortune;  
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need  
 nothing,  
 Strong and content, I travel the open road.

The earth—that is sufficient;  
 I do not want the constellations any nearer;  
 I know they are very well where they are;  
 I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

## Conclusion

What was the Grail at each of these steps? What were the similarities of the times—social upheaval, protest against the powers that be, a delight in hedonistic pleasures, camaraderie, and the joys of the open road? Chroniclers Chrétien de Troyes and Jack Kerouac offered that each and all of these served to set in motion, literally, the on-the-road quests for the road itself, the journey as objective.

Observe the alienation of the hero from society in those times: disquiet is inherent in Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, among the Goliards, and for Kerouac, Cassidy, and all those others—troubadours, hippies, punks, etc.—to whom the road beckoned, and still does, as a spiritual salvation.

“...The youthful rebels are romantics and enthusiasts spreading the message of the New Jerusalem,” Rosen declared, “and in so doing they point out needed social change (96).” This sentiment, coupled with Maleuvre's characterization of the Gothic aesthetic as that which “hearkens to space, movement, distance (124),” give us a way to see the imperatives affecting youthful disaffection, disenfranchisement, and wanderlust.

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## Note

This era in American history, roughly 1948 to 1962, was marked by the end of WW-II and the Korean War, which had seen a marked increase in the size and power, economically as well as militarily, of the U.S. “military industrial complex” (a phrase coined by President Eisenhower in 1961 ([coursesa.matrix.msu.edu](http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu))). These two wars were immediately followed by the heightening of the arms race and development of atomic weapons by the Soviet Union and the US, along with the perceived, concomitant threat of nuclear attack, coupled with the U.S. Senate investigations into supposed covert operations and spying against the US by agents allegedly working for the Soviet Union. All of this helped to create the Cold War, and an atmosphere of distrust and threat and lock-

step obedience to law and order in US society, against which young people (and others) protested by so-called antisocial activity, refusing to yield to the strict social conformity (fueled by paranoia) by which the more conservative citizens structured their lives. Many people felt that society and the government had gained too much power over the liberties of the individual, and they sought a more free, liberating way of life.

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