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Comparisons between Neal Cassady and R.P. McMurphy

Former Beat writer turned Merry Prankster Neal Cassady and Ken Kesey's "supernatural comic book hero" R.P. McMurphy shared some startling similarities. What, you might ask, did a writer and another writer's fictional character have in common? For starters, Cassady was known as "the fastest man alive," and McMurphy's initials, RPM, is a reference to driving (revolutions per minute) and being on the road, which is where Cassady spent most of his time, whether it be with Jack Kerouac (documented in his 1957 novel *On the Road*) or Kesey's Merry Pranksters.

Cassady had several run-ins with the law – namely stealing cars – while still a minor, landing him in reform school and juvenile detention centers. In addition, he had con artist instincts, as Kerouac wrote in the first draft of *On the Road*, "He was conning me, so-called, and I knew it, and he knew I knew . . . but I didn't care and we got along just fine." RPM has an obvious disregard for authority and discipline and is marked by the hospital staff as being violent and dangerous.

Both Cassady and RPM possessed a casual attitude toward women and relationships. Cassady married several women, one of whom, Carolyn Cassady, he all but encouraged into an affair with Kerouac likely to beset his philandering ways. "You know what they say, 'my best pal and my best gal'. . . just don't do anything I wouldn't do . . ." He bounded up the stairs laughing, knowing just as we did, that there was nothing he wouldn't do in a similar situation," Carolyn Cassady recalled. RPM, whose previous involvements with "the twitch" Candy were at best mere

implications, arranged a date with her for Billy Bibbitt while he enjoyed a tryst with the other prostitute Sandy.

The one time when these two personalities completely meld was, ironically, during the film version of “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” when RPM drove the bus on the way to the fishing trip. The scene embodied “The Holy Goof” and erratic driving that Cassady was famous for and was likely the sole change to Kesey’s original work that is a positive one. RPM became Cassady in that scene; he became “the fastest man alive,” a super hero – Captain America, if you will. While the scene served as an homage to Cassady and the Pranksters, it also foreshadowed their [the patients’] path to destruction, should they continue following RPM. While he had “liberated” them in a sense, he was also self-destructive, and his glory as well as theirs would be short-lived.

Point of view is one of the strongest elements in this novel. And although RPM is the integral character in it, telling the story from any other point of view would have proved detrimental. As Tom Wolfe wrote, “If he [Kesey] had told the story through McMurphy’s eyes, he would have had to end up with the big bruiser delivering a lot of homilies about his down-home theory of mental therapy. . . . This way he could present a schizophrenic state the way the schizophrenic himself, Chief Broom, feels it and at the same time report the McMurphy Method more subtly.” This, obviously, is where the film version ultimately went wrong, telling the tale through RPM’s eyes, yet at the same time is an ironic example of how Cassady has been represented in art and literature. Since they were published posthumously, his autobiography *The First Third* and letters to Kerouac have always been linked to anecdotal essays, introductions and prologue from other Beat writers, Pranksters and academics attempting to offer their opinions about what traits embodied the real Cassady. In a sense, both Cassady and RPM have become

allegorical figures – through literature, art and in life (onto each other, and other counterculture and literary figures; comparisons between RPM and Kesey himself) – as well as literary allusions, such as one or both have been seen as a Christ figure or martyr.

Though *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was told through the eyes of the character Chief Bromden (Chief Broom), RPM was the focal point of the story and had the strongest influence on the rest of the characters. Hence, he taught his fellow inmates to fish, play cards and question authority. In essence, he passed the torch on to them (most prominently to Harding, who took over for RPM when he was sent for shock treatments), perhaps aware of his imminent demise.

Cassady, through his friendships with Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlingetti and other Beat writers and as the focal point of the Pranksters, was able to influence generations to come. With the arrival of the Pranksters in New York City in 1964, Ginsberg, Kerouac and the other Beat writers – thanks to association with Cassady (the enigmatic companion/inspiration for many Beats writers since the late 1940s to the “Eternal High” driver of the psychedelic “Furthur”)– were able to pass the torch to Kesey and the rest of the Pranksters (as Ken Babbs described in class), whose influences on the (primarily) west coast counterculture were documented in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Cassady remained a focal point of the counterculture until his untimely death in 1968.

His influences were often more subtle. Though Cassady convinced Kerouac to teach him how to write, he ultimately inspired Kerouac’s writing style for *On the Road* (based upon Cassady and Kerouac’s road trips, the first of which in 1947), which was written the way Cassady talked and wrote, as Kerouac called “kickwriting.” This style of writing is also present in William Burroughs’ first book *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*.

RPM, like Cassady, possessed a charismatic energetic trait that drew others to him, as Tom Wolfe noted, “. . . they can’t resist the guy. They suddenly wanted to do things. . . . By and by, many of the men resent him for forcing them to struggle to act like men again. . . .” Many of the men, by the time RPM showed up, have grown accustomed to their daily routines and Nurse Ratched’s control over them. While they may (or may not) have been aware of her control, RPM was the only one to challenge her and try to break through her facade. “Drunk, brawler, gambler, ladies’ man, hell-raiser extraordinary, McMurphy is the only true misfit, the only true affiliate ‘in the nest,’ and he brings into it an independence, a self-confidence, and a hatred of authority destined to upset the delicate balance of preposterousnesses and tip the scales toward of absurdity,” observed Joseph J. Waldmeir. At first, the other patients were pleased with RPM’s antics toward Nurse Ratched; however, most of them soon changed their tune when they realized that the behavior could prove to be detrimental to them as well. As Harding stated, “. . . he’s done everything for a reason.” This also played into RPM’s ulterior motives figuring into his demise when his plans backfired and Ratched had him lobotomized. “The hero,” as John A. Barnsness wrote, “though he may not survive, will triumph.”

Through their energy for life and erratic behaviors, Neal Cassady and the fictional R.P. McMurphy proved to be catalysts for a time of social change, one a graduate of the Beats and the other Kesey’s vision of imperfection thrust into the world of the insane, who – and will likely continue to – still influence academics and popular culture.

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