



The Role of Psychedelics In Kesey's Life

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Introduction

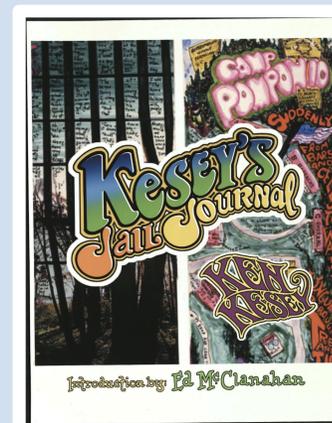
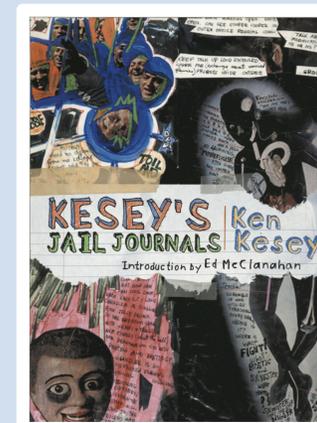


Kesey, 8

Ken Kesey has left his impact on the literary community as one of the best authors, not only in Oregon, but of all time. He wrote many renown novels, some of which include *Demon Box*, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, and his most notable novel to date, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This novel forever changed the way mental hospitals were looked at in the United States and proved to be such a literary mark of accomplishment that it is still a part of many high school English classes reading curriculum. In his personal life he also is said to have helped pioneer the liberating movement of the psychedelic sixties. He was interested in the mind-opening capabilities of psychedelic drug use, which was significant to his writing. It is evident that the role of psychedelic drugs affected both the inspiration and creativity that took place in writing one of the greatest novels of our time, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Findings

When looking at Kesey's jail journals, something that stood out as notable was the way he seemed to split the page and convey two different, but somehow complementary messages. This can be seen with two of the three pages of cover art that was preserved (one of the pages seems to be unfinished; it is decorated with nothing but lettering, which is only partially filled in)¹. There is a clear contrast between a lighter, more colorful half of the page and a darker, more monochromatic side. His jail journals are reminiscent of childhood projects with the collage style of artwork, although the content is decidedly adult. Acting as the base of his artwork are letters, covering the page and weaving in and out of the images like literary brushstrokes, reminding the viewer that his medium is, first and foremost, words. The contrast continues, not only in color but also in content, suggesting that Kesey is perhaps illustrating things he's seen and talks about in his books. One of the more poignant images from the jail journals cover is a dark humanoid silhouette, filled with organs and what looks like bits of machinery¹. This immediately brought to mind the Combine and their (according to Kesey) desire to mechanize and equalize the human experience. For this reason, Kesey was someone who struggled more with being in jail; he hated the feeling that some external authority had the power to control and influence his future⁶. Conversely, the extent to which he valued freedom of thought and expression is unerringly detailed in his 11th letter to his friend Ken Babbs. Kesey discusses the effects of drug IT-290 in a level of detail that makes it possible for the reader to feel like they perhaps know how one's brain works on psychedelics. This allowed us to support the idea that his cover journals were inspired by the shifts in perception that occur while on drugs; the letter is a slightly frenzied outpouring of everything he sees/thinks of during the trip. He suggests that psychedelics can open the mind¹. He calls IT-290 a key, able to unlock the recesses of the mind¹. Given the weight Kesey places on drugs, we thought it reasonable to view the jail journals through a psychedelic frame of analysis.



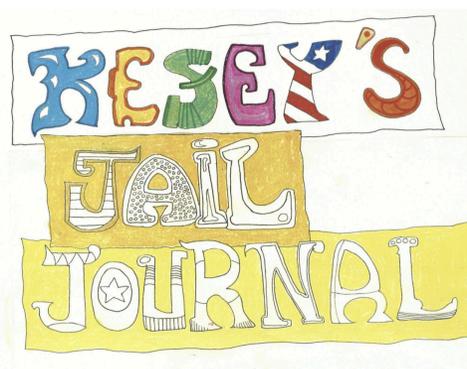
Kesey's Jail Journal Cover, 1

Research Question

How did Kesey's use of psychedelics affect his literary perspective?

Methods

We investigated our research question by analyzing primary sources in the form of personal documents of Ken Kesey's from the UO special archives collection, provided by Linda Long. This involved a number of letters, sketches, rough drafts, and ramblings of Kesey's that we then synthesized a common theme from, in conjunction with the ideas brought up in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The documents we chose to examine in more detail were the cover art of his jail journals, from the brief stint of jail time he did one summer, and a letter he wrote to one of his longtime friends discussing his experiences on the psychedelic drug IT-290, which is also where he first references what will become his most famous novel. His letters give insight into the patients he worked with at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Menlo Park, California, and allow readers to see the inspiration for so much of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Secondary source research was done to further understand the effects of psychedelics in the brain and how that may have influenced both his perceptions of the world and the way that translated into his writing.



Kesey's Jail Journal Cover, 1



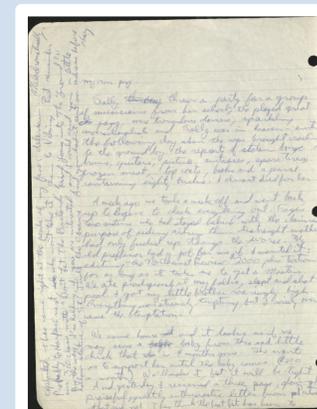
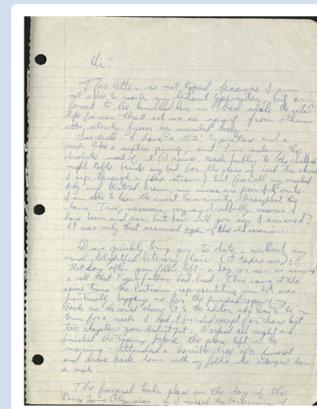
Personal Images of Kesey's, 8

Conclusions

Kesey's unique style of writing was influenced by his use of psychedelic drugs. The surreal imagery and the altered portrayal of color, sound, and time in his writing and artwork reflect the hallucinogenic effects of psychedelic drug use, confirmed by both scientific research and Kesey's first-hand accounts. Psychedelic drug use shaped Kesey's perspective by providing him an altered perspective of reality, one that is happier, more colorful, and more liberated than reality. This experience of artificial happiness assisted in the development of Kesey's dark world view. The contrasting dark and light portrayals splitting two of Kesey's journal covers represent two perspectives of the world; one of seeming freedom, joy, and color, and one of darkness and confinement. The colorful portrayal is clearly indicative of a psychedelic perspective, as compared to the dark sober one. Yet Kesey's message is not as simple as it first appears; in Kesey's cover draft featuring the words "Camp Pompolino," the colorful, drug-influenced side does not demonstrate a free state; it shows a state of false-liberation. The dark side, as clearly evident by the use of jail bars stemming from trees, represent the same repression and confinement of the colorful side parallel to it. The difference is not the reality, but the perspective. Kesey's symbolic use of the camp where he was incarcerated demonstrates the false comfort that is found when one conforms to the rules around them. When Kesey demonstrated good behavior at Camp Pompolino, he was allowed to walk unguarded through the forest, but he remained a prisoner. In consideration of his publicly negative views about the role of society on individuals, the symbolism and imagery in Kesey's artwork and writing, supported by scientific research onto the effects of drug use, demonstrates a surprising perspective on drug use; psychedelics afford their users a false sense of liberation from the rules of society. Similarly to choosing to follow the rules, by avoiding the consequences of repression, one can gain a false sense of freedom in a world outside of their control. Our analysis of Kesey's work concludes that he believed psychedelics' could not help one escape repression; psychedelics could help you forget.

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