

Spring 2005

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### Recommended Citation

Williams, Roberta (2005) "Book Review: The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," *ESSAI*: Vol. 3, Article 34.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol3/iss1/34>

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Book Review: The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

by Roberta Williams

(History 257)

The Assignment: Write a book review of The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe. Who is Ken Kesey? What are the Merry Pranksters trying to do? Why? What does this novel tell you about American society at this time? Explain.

“The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. Great changes are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of the mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power” (Wright 3).

History is something we all experience directly and indirectly. We live through it; it touches and shapes our lives. Sometimes it is not obvious, but more often it is like a breeze that can't be seen, and unless the breeze is strong, cold or the day is hot and one is in need of a wind we pay it little mind. This is the history we experience like air. We live in it, breathe it, move through it, yet pay it little mind. (It is the history of today.) We feel the touch of it so much that we are not aware of it until jolted out of it. Ken Kesey was one such jolt.

Freedom is synonymous with the United States' definition of itself. It is a concept that has permeated the American consciousness since the country's creation and, although freedom is enmeshed in the American psyche, it has not remained unchanged, and throughout our history has been reformulated to fit the needs of the times it passes through. The 1950's saw freedom change from FDR's four freedoms and World War II's fight against fascism to something quite different, the freedom to consume and freedom to conform.

The 1950's were an idealized time. The United States found itself as the leader of the “Free World,” rebuilding Europe, with a strong industrial economy and prosperous population. The standard of living was high, and it was a time of affluence. The threat that faced the United States was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, and US was embroiled with the USSR in the Cold War. Communism and authoritarianism had taken the place of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito as the main danger faced by the West. The United States and the USSR were at odds in a battle of ideology and arms. Both possessed nuclear weapons, and both danced around the threat of using them on each other.

The United States government and citizens dealt with these problems schizophrenically. Everything was fine, but the country was in danger. The government instructed people on how to deal with a nuclear attack, from duck and cover, educational films at school, to building bomb shelters, while telling them to maintain a normal life and everything was fine. The government and media reported communists were everywhere, and thus to beware and to be vigilant. Consumerism was linked with capitalism, and capitalism was linked to democracy, which was

then linked to freedom. Because one was able to buy and choose from a great number of goods and number of goods and services, one was free. Consumerism became the concept of freedom opposed to being economically independent and participating in the give-and-take of democracy. Not only were Americans free to consume, but also their freedom was brought to them by big business, and big business was the engine behind the rise of affluence, and the rational of our superiority over the communists. Profits were not the motive; the freedom of the world hinged upon consumption. Where once big business was mistrusted and feared, it was now to be embraced because it was what made us better than the Soviet Union. Big business was sold as the means to defeat the Soviets and to questions these values of consumption was labeled un-American and pro-communist.

Despite the government's and big business's endorsement and promotion to consume and conform, not everyone agreed with the new ideology of America. There was a body of debate, and blind acceptance of our superiority based on the number of consumer goods we made, had access to, and used, was considered inhuman, undemocratic and suffocating. These mostly educated elite did not "buy" into the new mythology of free enterprise and its benefits. Allen Ginsberg, a poet from the 1950s, wrote of the American society and started his infamous poem Howl with: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked... who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism, who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed then down,... Moloch! Moloch! Robots apartments! Invisible suburbs! Skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! Invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!" (Ginsberg 9-19). These intellectuals felt far from liberated by American compulsion to consume and build arms, but were strangled by the over-powering expectations of the system. Into this intellectual stew came Ken Kesey who was one of the dissatisfied residents of the later half of the twentieth century. He was an all-American, white, middle-class boy, a high school wrestler champion, college student, and published author of the critically acclaimed book, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. He was on top of his world, a respected dissenting voice of his generation, and yet rejected the expectations of the path before him. He abandoned the 1950s lifestyle, and the unspoken assumptions of its being the apex of creation. He questioned its rigidness of thinking and goals, from how one lived, to what one was expected to believe. Men go to school, get a job, get married, and have children. Citizens supported their government and their leaders unquestioningly, or else they were not worthy of the country they lived in and were branded a communist. What one was supposed to do was clear and black and white (you were either on the bus or off the bus). Why was mass production, mass consumption, the altar upon which one sacrificed one's being?

Ken Kesey's response to the hypocrisy and emptiness he found in the lifestyle and philosophy of the 1950s sparked a unique response. He did not protest, he did not cry for change and self-awareness; he did something that spoke of his origins. White, male, middle-class, educated, and entitled, he refused to participate in it, but he opted out and did his own thing. He knew that to protest was to be "trapped in the old 'political games,' unwittingly supporting the oppressors by playing their kind of game and using their kind of tactics" (Wolfe 356). Kesey rejected the Cold War consensus and expectations either way, and instead went on a trip.

He tripped on acid, he tripped onto the Intrepid, he tripped to visit Timothy Leary, he tripped to Mexico, he tripped into the moment, he tripped into a group state of mind, he tripped into jail, he tripped into now, he tripped into the counter culture of the later 1950s and the 1960s.

“They’re off on their own freak, and it may not look like much, but they’re starting to transcend the bullshit. There’s this old trinity, Power, Position, Authority, and why should they worship these old gods and these old forms of authority” (Wolfe 22).

Judging by Tom Wolfe’s book, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Ken Kesey rejected the mores of the 1950s intensely and in every way possible, he was the anti. “If you label it this, then it can’t be that... Kesey took great pains not to make his role explicit. He wasn’t the authority, somebody else was... He wasn’t the leader, he was the ‘non-navigator’” (Wolfe 126). He did buy into the consensus, and was not going to participate in it. First he moved to La Honda and lived with a core group of people, which expanded and contracted naturally as events occurred. The residents of La Honda experimented with drugs, which led them to experiment with lights, sounds, and perceptions. They followed their inclinations, and they lived for now, but what was now? Kesey and Wolfe never really said, but the closest Wolfe came to saying was: “To put it into so many words, to define it, was to limit it. If it’s this, then it can’t be *that*... Everyone had his own thing he was working out, but it all fit into the group thing, which was – “the Unspoken Thing” (126).

If the Cold War and consumer consensus were the engine of the conventional society, the LSD experience was the catalyst of this new anti-philosophy. It alters the Pranksters, as Kesey and his followers called themselves and their view of meaning and life. Acid electrified them, illuminated the world, everything was connected; everything was now, the experience. “The whole thing was...*the experience*... this certain indescribable *feeling*... Indescribable, because words can only jog the memory, and if there is no memory of... The *experience* of the barrier between the subjective and the objective, the personal and the impersonal, the *I* and the *not-I* disappearing... that feeling!” (Wolfe 45). The unity they saw encompassed everything even time and causality, and they came to understand that “A didn’t cause B just because it came before B, but was part of a greater pattern” that could be truly understood only by opening the doors of perception and experiencing it” (Wolfe 142).

It was not just the LSD that produced this awareness. The world was divided into people who understood and those who did not. You were either on the bus or off the bus and that was the test, and one did not have to be physically on the bus to be “on the bus”; one did not have to trip to have these understandings. In Kesey’s living room was a book by Hermann Hesse, The Journey East, written in 1932, which Wolfe states was a book about the Pranksters and their bus trip. In the book Hesse describes the experiences of oneness and transformation; Hesse was on the bus! If Kesey has a legacy it is that this experience is available to everyone. It’s not about who has the most power, money, or stuff, but about this, this transcendent experience that leads where it leads: Go, follow it, don’t conform to anything but this experience; that is where your freedom lies.

Conformity is something humans have done for ages. Humanity’s survival has and will depend upon it. Conformity also has its downside; automatic pilot is only good as long as the conditions for which the automatic pilot is set are healthy and relevant. In the 1950s, the anti-communist sentiment reached such heights that the concept of freedom was changed. And, based as it was on the conformity of mind and body, the consumer society needed to justify its existence. Not everyone was swept away in the anti-communists consumer life style. In fact there was a strong counter movement that also redefined freedom, and this redefinition was, “do your own thing.” Ken Kesey and the Pranksters were free not to participate! The Pranksters were free to follow their own vision. “What they all saw in... a flash was the solution to the basic predicament of being human, the personal *I, Me*, trapped, mortal and helpless, in a vast

impersonal *It*, the world around me. Suddenly! –All-in-one! – flowing together, *I* into *It*, and *It* into *Me*, and in that flow I perceive a power, so near and so clear, that the whole world is blind to” (Wolfe 127-128).

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