

A Literary Review of The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

by Layla Souers

Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is a cleverly written biography about the young novelist Ken Kesey. In 1966, Wolfe comes across two letters that Kesey wrote while hiding out from the law in Mexico. Wolfe decides to do an expose on the young novelist that has somehow turned into a fugitive. Kesey is eventually caught and ends up in jail. Wolfe decides to go meet with him.

After meeting Kesey in jail, Wolfe learns more about Kesey and his gang of followers called the Merry Pranksters. Wolfe changes his focus from doing a short expose to a deeper story. He decides to look further into the life of Kesey. Wolfe decides to write about Kesey's transformation from young novelist to somewhat of a "cult" leader.

Wolfe observes Kesey, the Pranksters, and their way of life. He goes to the Warehouse where they live without electricity and running water. Wolfe spends about a month observing and interviewing them.

Wolfe learns of the tapes from their trip of '64. Almost two years earlier, Kesey had documented this excursion. He and his Merry Pranksters traveled across country by bus to the World's Fair in New York City. Wolfe re-creates this wild ride across country. Along the way, Kesey and The Pranksters have run-ins with the law, meet up with the Hell's Angels as well as perform the "Acid Tests." These "tests" simply involved taking LSD and increasing audio and visual stimuli. According to Kesey, the purpose of these tests was to be able to function on acid. The Pranksters perform a test on some unknowing youths at a public forum. They decided to "share" their acid with The Youths by putting it in their Kool-Aid without their knowledge. As one victim put it, "I looked around and people's faces were distorted...lights were flashing everywhere...I was afraid, because I honestly thought that it was all in my mind, and that I had finally flipped out" (*EK-AAT*, p. 274).

In the end, it is conveyed that the entire trip was basically meaningless; but the book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, documents and tells a vivid story about a very interesting time period in America.

Tom Wolfe

Born on March 2, 1931, Tom Wolfe had what some would call a refined childhood (Ragen, p.5). Because he was held to a higher standard, Wolfe's creativity flourished at an early age (McKeen, p.4). His mother instilled in him the appreciation for the arts (Ragen, p. 5). Wolfe's father was an author himself. He had a PhD, taught agronomy, and wrote and published articles (Ragen, p. 5). By writing a biography on Napoleon at age nine, Wolfe showed an aptitude for writing at an early age (Ragen, p. 6). For a young boy, Wolfe had a few interests that were a bit out of the ordinary. He took an interest in tap dancing and ballet (McKeen, p.4). Eventually, he moved on to a more traditional pass-time; baseball (McKeen, p. 5). He later was crushed when his dream of playing baseball for the New York Giants was ended when he was cut from the tryouts after three days (Ragen, p. 7).

Although accepted to Princeton, he turned it down to attend Washington and Lee University. Wolfe stated the people there just to be seemed nicer (McKeen, p. 5). His fairly controversial undergraduate thesis, entitled *A Zoo Full of Zebras: Anti-Intellectualism in America*, was a precursor to his later writing style (Ragen, p. 7). He continued his education at Yale, where he received his PhD in American Studies in 1957 (Ragen, p8).

Having a PhD wasn't the norm for journalists but he went to work in the newspaper industry in New York City. This rather successful career that spanned about ten years, helped shape him as a writer. "His career in the newspaper and magazine businesses not only revolutionized journalism but was necessary to his development as a writer" (McKeen, p. 14).

The release of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* earned him a spot with noted authors; Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, as one of the founders of this "higher journalism" (Howell, p. 58). "Favorable reviewers of Wolfe's two collections and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* no longer considered his work *mere* journalism" (Howell, p. 58).

More notably, Wolfe's subject matter and writing style caught the attention of the younger generation as well as college professors (Ragen, p. 19).

Literary Heritage of Tom Wolfe

Tom Wolfe had several authors that influenced his writing. Wolfe's first inspiration was his father Thomas Kennerly Wolfe, Sr. Wolfe admitted to finding more works under his father's name than his (Ragen, p. 5).

He also was inspired by other authors. "Wolfe idolized the figures of the twenties and thirties--- Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, James T. Farrell---who had parlayed literary talent into fame and financial success" (Hollowell, p. 128).

Wolfe also claimed to have been influenced by Charles Dickens. Dickens is known for his use of obtained his great use of dialogue, satire, biographic skill, and talent for telling stories from them. The first is an English writer Charles Dickens. Wolfe obtain his talent from Dickens now most for his use of dialogue and characterization

Wolfe Although his works remained controversial, Tom Wolfe has found his place in the contemporary literary world (Ragen, p. 37). His first book, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* published in 1965, became a bestseller. According to Ragen (2002), "The response to the book was largely positive, though some reviewers had not stomach for either his experiments in style or his insistence that popular culture, especially teenage culture, was the engine driving American society" (p. 12). After the success of this book, Wolfe was considered "a literary celebrity" (Ragen, p. 12).

Tom Wolfe and his literature are still in high demand today. He is quoted by newspapers, put on magazine covers, and people are still reading his books (Ragen, p. 57).

The 1960's

The 1960's are synonymous with Hippies. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* which was written in 1966 is considered to be the book on hippies by *The New York Times*. The book concentrates on the hippie scene that was going on in California at the time. There was an entire group of teens and young adults, called hippies that formed their own counterculture. Within this culture, the hippies had their own ideas, language, morals, arts, and fashion.

It is well known that the majority of hippies used marijuana as well as other drugs. "If grass is the staple of hippiedom, then Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) is its caviar" (Brown, p.11). Certain hippies claimed that smoking marijuana helped to make situations like sex better (Miller, p. 66). Often using drugs as a way to expand their minds and connect with each other, hippies incorporated drug use into their daily lives (Yablonski, p.30).

Americans were divided because of the Vietnam War that started in 1959 and lasted throughout the '60's. Often outspoken with their protests against the Vietnam War, hippies were criticized for being Anti-American. Some people believed that the hippie movement helped to blemish the '60's because of their own culture that involved sex, drugs, music, and lawlessness. "They seemed to deliberately flout every convention of law, morality, manners, and even hygiene" (Ragen, p. 76). Others believed that Hippies have in fact helped Americans to understand their own culture. *Hippie* author, Barry Miles believes that they actually served a purpose for society "because it was only by stepping outside society that people were able to look at it objectively—to see what was wrong with it, to see how they would like to change it" (p.10).

During the 1960's music was a very significant presence in America. "Rock and roll was as integral to the counterculture as were dope and sex" (Miller, p. 73). Woodstock, still the most talked about music festival to this day, helped to bring the '60's to a close in the summer of 1969. The '60 seemed to take its toll; as several prominent artists of the time (Hendrix, Joplin, and Morrison) died about a year later.

I Hope You Saved Your Glow Stick

Upon reading the title of Tom Wolfe's book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, it is not really clear what the story will entail. However, if you are somewhat familiar with what a glow stick is, you may already have an idea about what the article, "Hope You Saved Your Glow Stick," is going to be about. Unlike the complex structure of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the writer of this article uses the inverted pyramid structure to tell the story. Sam Knight, author of the article, explains that the "raves" that went out of style, have recently made a comeback in London. The most important information is at the beginning of the story.

As far as literary devices, the author does provide context and setting for the story matter. There is also some use of metaphors along with imagery that is somewhat similar to *TEK-AAT*.

"Still, there were glow sticks—a kind of waving coral reef of neon pink, yellow, and greens---and between acts, young men in leather jackets nudged their way around the dance floor, offering Ecstasy" (Knight).

Although short, Knight weaves some exposition into the story. For example, he writes about how Parliament passed the Criminal Justice Act of 1994 that allowed police to shut raves down.

Like Wolfe, Knight also makes ample use of the narrative by creating a plot, short scenes, and involving action. Knight's point-of-view is third person; which Wolfe predominately also uses.

"Teenage fans wore reflective jackets, neon paint, sunglasses, beads and whistles as they hurled themselves back and forth, up and down, suggesting this if this wasn't rave, then it was certainly a somehow-related cousin" (Knight).

Knight does interview several people for the story as well as introducing an interesting character at the end; Saint Acid. Knight also incorporates some quotes like Wolfe does. However, the quotes are just plain quotes, not like the dialogue like Wolfe creates from them.

TE K-A AT and A A I W

Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* can be compared to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in several ways. Although Carroll's book is a fairy-tale, it has some similarities to Tom Wolfe's book. Although Wolfe starts his book *in media res* and continues to tell the story with flashbacks, the narrative still unfolds like a story.

The story is told from Wolfe's perspective, as he describes the mental state of the characters and their whole experience that is almost dreamlike. *AAIW* begins with a bored little girl that decides to follow a white rabbit. He jumps down a hole and she follows. Once down the hole, Alice discovers a roomful of doors and a entirely different world. In *TEK-AAT*, the author is actually the one that is thrown into an entire new world. He follows his white rabbit, Kesey. The Queen of Hearts; the disciplinarian, represents the foil in the story. In *TEKA-AT*, the foil is the cops. The cops and their "shiny black shoes" are not as harsh as the Queen of Hearts with her "Off with her head!" tirades; but they still thwart the characters in *TEK-AAT*.

We know at the end of *AAIW* that everything Alice has experienced is a dream. Wolfe often refers to their experiences as fantasies. He writes: "He had his own fantasy, the League for Spi-ri-tu-al Dis-cov-ery, and yet he is the rear kind who might even be will to move with *their* fantasy, his and the Pranksters'" (Wolfe, p. 33). Wolfe's description of the characters and their actions make them seem utterly mad; which is similar to the unusual characters Carroll created in *AAIW*. As the Cheshire-Cat says, "...we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad" (Carroll, p. 73).

Like in *AAIW*, Wolfe's use characterization is very prominent. The people in *EK-AAT* are given personas that identify them. Alice is faced with all sorts of different characters. She encounters a talking caterpillar and Mock Turtle. Just as ridiculous in *TEK-AAT*; Cool Breeze, Mountain Girl, The Flag People, The Hermit, Zonk, Stark Naked, and Freeloading Freddie.

Literary Devices in The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Tom Wolfe uses several literary devices to re-create the total experience of Kesey and the Pranksters. In the beginning, Wolfe narrates the book in **first-person** but then transitions to **third-person** narrative. He also begins the book with a somewhat complex **structure**. He uses a scene-by-scene re-construction that starts out *in media res* and then tells the story through flashback. The **context** of these in people (i.e. under the influence of LSD and marijuana) and the **setting** (the time period of the 1960's) is essential. These literary devices help the reader to understand the **plot** (the wild drive across country to the World's Fair) and all of the other things that the characters do that make sense in their world.

Wolfe uses a lot of **imagery** to describe the surroundings and experiences the characters encounter. He also uses this **onomatopoeia** effectively to describe the sounds the characters make and hear. "Sandy the pink drum strokes there, and he would make a sound like *chee-oonh-chunh, chee-oonh-chunh*, and so forth, and Kesey the guitar arrows there *broinga broinga brang brang...*" (Wolfe, p.59). Wolfe's use of **dialogue** stays true to the language the characters use.

Wolfe makes use of several literary devices to describe the characters. He uses **metaphors** and **similes** to describe the characters as well as their drug induced experiences. Wolfe even compares the characters to actual comic-strip characters like Prince Valiant and The Spirit. **Characterization** is used to describe Kesey; the non-leader).

Exposition is also weaved into the story. The best example is the background on the **protagonist** and **tragic hero** Kesey. The police or "cops" serve as the **foil** and the **protagonist** in the story. They represent the opposition to the characters and provide **conflict**. The **motif** in the book is the "Acid Tests." The tests are a recurring idea of Kesey's. The **mood** of the story is up and down that mimics the characters wild ride as well as their "highs" and "lows" caused by the drugs. Overall, there is a puzzled **tone**. Wolfe also uses several passages of **blank verse**.

The whole story is used as an **allegory** for the characters life. Wolfe uses **repetition** several times in the story; most notably at the end to solidify the Pranksters' experience—"We Blew It!" (Wolfe, p. 411).

Works Cited

- Brown, David Joe, ed. The Hippies. Time Incorporated. New York: 1967.
- Carroll, Lewis. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Random House. New York: 1946.
- Hollowell, John. Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism And The Nonfiction Novel. The University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill: 1977.
- Knight, Sam. "Hope You Saved Your Glowstick." The New York Times 21 January 2007. 08 December 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/21/fashion/21Rave.html>>
- Labin, Susan. Hippies, Drugs, and Promiscuity. Arlington House. New York: 1972.
- McKeen, William. Tom Wolfe. Twayne Publishers. New York: 1995.
- Miles, Barry. Hippie. Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. New York: 2004.
- Miller, Timothy. The Hippies and American Values. The University Press of Tennessee Press. Knoxville: 1991.
- Ragen, Brian Abel. Tom Wolfe: A Critical Companion. Greenwood Press. Westport: 2002.
- Wolfe, Tom. The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. Picador. New York: 1969.
- Yablonsky, Lewis. The Hippie Trip. Pegasus. New York: 1968.