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# "He Who is Conscious of the Bright but Keeps to the Dark": The Fame and Legacy of Jack Kerouac

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“HE WHO IS CONSCIOUS OF THE BRIGHT BUT KEEPS TO  
THE DARK”: THE FAME AND LEGACY OF JACK KEROUAC

by

REGINA CROTSEY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
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## ABSTRACT

“He who is conscious of the bright but keeps to the dark”: The Fame and

Legacy of Jack Kerouac

by

Regina Crotser

Advisor: George Fragopoulos

This thesis traces the legacy and fame of Jack Kerouac from his lifetime up until current day. Since his death, pop-culture has glorified and stereotyped Kerouac to the point where he is an easily digestible concept of counterculture and coolness. This speaks to what our society craves—celebrities boiled down into clickbait titles and single-faceted understandings. Amidst chaos, who can blame us? But when we look at the real Kerouac, who the biographies and archival research say he is, we see someone much more complex than that. And, through writing autobiographical fiction, he introduced that complexity and messiness to his own generation. His generation manufactured a utopia of white picket fences while coping with the chaotic aftermath of two world wars. They craved uniformity; but Kerouac’s prescience told him to show them his messiness—break the stigma so they, too, could feel comfortable acknowledging their own flaws. Kerouac and the Beat Movement is what that era needed.

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## Introduction

The first time I saw Jack Kerouac and heard his voice, I was fifteen. Earlier that year, over the summer, I found a copy of *On the Road* in a bookstore. I liked the cover, the title rang a bell, and I read anything I could get my hands on. Instantly, the way he wrote — long sentences, lily-padding from thought to thought — spoke to something inside me. I read *On the Road* and then spent weeks carrying the book around with me. It took me months, until that winter, before I thought to search the internet for him.

I found a video of a man playing piano and Kerouac talking about, then reading from, *On the Road*. I was a flower being inhaled. Every one of my petals rustled in his wind as his voice articulated those long stumbling lines of verse. I was gone then, completely.

He unlocked something in me. He made me look to the sky and want to roar. I would sit in bed for hours reading his journals and then responding in my own. A conversation across the decades. The fact that Kerouac had died in 1969 did not deter me in the least. He was as real and as present as I was. He was my king and I kissed his ring. He unlocked me and released my caged doves to the sky.

An insect would be drawn to any light, they don't have the capacity to choose. Any light will do. But as humans we're attracted to specific people, drawn to specific lights. *Why Kerouac's light?* I asked myself after making him my thesis's subject. *Why am I a moth to his light? Why have I bumped against the glass of his kitchen window for the last ten years? Why does it seem like every particle inside me is drawn to his story, his persona, his tragic legacy?*

I am not the only one. Even in his own lifetime he sparked this type of obsession in people—in friends first, then in fans and followers. The writer who launched a thousand beatniks. Almost immediately, though, his own identity became commandeered to match whatever it needed

to be. To those who idolized him he was a pure jazz writer-prophet speaking for a generation; and to those who vilified him he was a drunk sex fiend with no regard for proper grammar. These misconceptions troubled Kerouac, as being stereotyped often does to people.

Since his death, pop-culture has glorified and stereotyped Kerouac to the point where he's an easily digestible concept of counterculture and coolness. This speaks to what our society craves—celebrities boiled down into clickbait titles and single-faceted understandings. Amidst chaos, who can blame us? But when we look at the real Kerouac, who the biographies and archival research say he is, we see someone much more complex than that. And, through writing autobiographical fiction, he introduced that complexity and messiness to his own generation. His generation manufactured a utopia of white picket fences while coping with the chaotic aftermath of two world wars. They craved uniformity; but Kerouac's prescience told him to show them his messiness—break the stigma so they, too, could feel comfortable acknowledging their own flaws. Kerouac and the Beat Movement is what that era needed.

In this thesis, I trace the legacy and fame of Jack Kerouac from his lifetime up until current day. As I see it, Kerouac is a legend—albeit a niche one. Within the last decade alone, several films have been made that tell some aspect of Kerouac's story. Even the existence of these films speaks to the legacy and ongoing fame of Kerouac as a writer. I attempt to answer: Why so many? Why are we obsessed with Kerouac? And why does his name have an asterisk after it in literary canon, as if his work is not meant to be taken seriously?

I look at two recent films—*Howl* (2010) and *Big Sur* (2013)—to see how they promote or deconstruct the stereotyped identities we have created for Kerouac. The first identity I explore is his one as a Beatnik Buddhist, spiritual sage. The second identity is his most well-known one as a



super-cool writer rock star. The third identity is his one as a washed up drunk. Each of my three chapters focus on one of these identities.

The first and third chapters are broken into three parts. The first part of each chapter analyzes how we perceive Kerouac in the present day. I look at his most popular books, at how he is portrayed in current popular culture, and identify the specifics of his stereotype. The second part of those chapters transition into how that specific identity of Kerouac was portrayed in his own time. This section's evidence is rich in *New York Times* book reviews, author profiles, and interviews from the 1950s and 60s. The last section of these chapters is where I reveal biographical and archival research that paints the most accurate, and complicated, picture of Kerouac in regards to that identity. This is all because, when people see “bio-pics”, they assume what they are shown is fact. My purpose is to ask: do these “facts” from present day match what actually happened?

The second chapter of my thesis deals with his most stereotyped identity—that of the writer rock star. This chapter deconstructs that identity and argues it is, and has always been, the falsest. I do a film analysis deconstructing this stereotyped identity and discuss why society has always put Kerouac on this particular pedestal, which led to his downfall.

In terms of research material, I utilize several of the existing biographies about Kerouac. Many of the earlier ones—*Kerouac: A Biography* and *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac*—were written by friends or acquaintances of Kerouac, which adds validity to their content. The recent biographies—*Subterranean Kerouac* and *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*—touch on the more scandalous aspects of Kerouac's life. Of course, Kerouac's own work will be a huge basis of my thesis. I examine *The Dharma Bums*, *On the Road*, and *Pic* in depth as they relate to each of Kerouac's three identities. Additionally, I share

what I have found in Kerouac's published and unpublished journals and correspondence to friends from the New York Public Library archives.

## Chapter One: As Pure Zen Angel

### Introduction

After World War II, America settled into a period of unsurpassed economic growth. Along with this economic revival came a renewed sense of the American Dream and American values, which were emphasized from television to pulpit. American patriotism was at an all-time high because of the looming threat of Communism and nuclear warfare. However, the ideal American identity that so many people were trying to perfect did not appeal to everyone. A small subset of people emerged to form a counterculture, eventually called the Beatnik Movement. The impetus for the movement was the crouch-and-cover forced forgetfulness of the country after World War II. In response to the trauma of World War II, the atomic bombs and concentration camps, the country turned inward towards material comforts and superficiality. The early Beats sought solace—spiritual solace—in the world religions of the East while the rest of the country wanted to secularize and nationalize.

Jason C. Bivins, a doctor of philosophy and religious studies, discusses how this post-war idealistic society created an oppositional counter-culture:

“As children of America’s postwar economic boom, this generation enjoyed a level of material comfort and social (particularly educational) opportunity that had hitherto been unknown in the United States. Yet throughout the 1950s, increasing numbers of young people came to feel, perhaps as a result of the time afforded them for reflection and study, that life options made available to them by mainstream American society were neither exciting nor existentially fulfilling” (65).

This “increasing number of young people” that Bivins mentions who became dissatisfied with the purported American way of life soon started calling themselves the Beat Generation.

Spirituality, but not religious dogmatism, was important to the Beats. Jack Kerouac and the Beatnik Movement, largely upper-middle class youths living in the economic boom of post-war America, became untethered and unfettered from organized religions. However, in the 1950s, when being atheist was too taboo to even consider, the Beatniks decided to adopt Buddhism as an alternative to Abrahamic religions. They eschewed the expected way of life: many were writers or musicians; they often lived communally; they listened to jazz and blues music; they hitchhiked across the country living off the generosity of others; they earned money doing odd-jobs instead of having a career; and they drank, did drugs, and dressed in second-hand clothing. The Beats largely congregated in New York City or San Francisco. And in their “quest for release from the working world of American life” (Bivins 67) they adopted Zen Buddhism as a philosophical justification for their desire to live life on their own terms.

Beats like Gary Snyder, Alan Watts, and Diane di Prima, to name a few, were drawn to Buddhism because it further separated them from mainstream culture. It fit easily into their ambition to be free and creative and peaceful. Buddhism told them that they were expected to live a simple life of “nothingness”, and verified their inner suspicion that “all life is suffering”—especially if one is being made to live a life one does not want. Zen Buddhism gave people an excuse to live outside of strict societal expectations. Additionally, it emphasized *ahimsa*, which translated into pacifism. This was a relief in a society welcoming back soldiers from a World War and entering into a battle against Communism. Gary Snyder spoke about *ahimsa* recently, in an interview with the Buddhist magazine Inquiring Mind, contrasting it with similar beliefs in Western religions: “...the injunction not to do any harm can’t be seen as an absolute as in the Ten Commandments, those black-and-white ethical laws of the Abrahamic religions. In old Sanskrit, *ahimsa* means ‘do no harm’ or ‘cause the *least* harm’... don’t beat yourself up because you didn’t do so well... This is an important difference between the East Asian approach to ethics and the

more absolutist, dualistic rules of the Occidental religions” (“Interview”). This ethical flexibility, along with Buddhism’s lack of regulation regarding marriage and procreation, was a welcome alternative to societal pressures—for instance, the ones about settling down to a life within a white picket fence.

Kerouac was raised a devout Catholic and still considered himself a Catholic even during the height of his Buddhist study. As a result, he interpreted Buddhism through the lens of Catholicism. In a poem from *Mexico City Blues* he writes: “I believe in the sweetness of Jesus/And Buddha—I believe/In St. Francis, Avaloki/Tesvara, the Saints...” (14). He often referred to Buddha, God, and Christ interchangeably or in conversation with one another. Praying and meditating happened simultaneously. There is one particular example of this in *The Dharma Bums*, when the Kerouac character composes a prayer that goes, “I sleep tight and long and pray under the stars for the Lord to bring me to Buddhahood after my Buddhawork is done, amen” (93). Like other recent enthusiasts at the time, he saw many parallels between the two religions. It is not only contemporary scholars who note the contradiction that Kerouac, a central Beat figure, was also still, in many respects, a Catholic. The most logical explanation is that Buddhism, for him, was a hobby, an obsession, instead of a religious replacement. This fact conflicts with the myth of Kerouac as a Buddhist mystic, and undercuts the stereotype of him as pure Zen angel. He was only a Buddhist scholar in the mind, for his soul still belonged to Jesus.

Kerouac discovered Buddhism in the stacks of a New York City library and instantly became obsessed (Charters 201). It makes sense that he would be searching for something new to occupy his brain, since continuing to write manuscripts that could not get published was discouraging. He published his first novel, *Town and the City*, in 1950. The first draft of *On the Road* was finished in April 1951. And in the next two years he wrote four other “true story novels”: *Visions of Cody*, *Doctor Sax*, *Maggie Cassidy*, and *The Subterraneans*. While he initially

tried to shop these manuscripts around himself, he quickly enlisted the help of Sterling Lord as a literary agent. Even with a professional advocate, the manuscripts could not entice any publishing houses. By late 1953, Kerouac was frustrated and discouraged. While in the library in January of 1954, Kerouac stumbled across some Buddhist texts that immediately grabbed his attention. According to a ‘to do’ list in his diary for January 17<sup>th</sup>, Kerouac needed to return a copy of *A Buddhist Bible* by Dwight Goddard to the New York Public Library (Item 3.39, Jack Kerouac Papers). On January 18<sup>th</sup> he has written “Dhyana & Samadhi” and the next day those same words appear with the addition of the word “Samapatti”. It seems these key terms of Buddhist practice—translated as meditation, concentration, and spiritual absorption—had already become part of his vernacular (Tigunait).

Kerouac’s education in Buddhism was initially self-directed, obsessive, manic and he was initially unaware that Buddhism was interesting to other Beats. That year, 1954, independent of any other influence, he began compiling all his studies and ruminations about Buddhism in a file called *Some of the Dharma*. These notes and writings were meant only for his friend Allen Ginsberg—who is addressed specifically, as if in a letter, several times throughout the beginning of the text—and not for widespread circulation. As Kerouac studied D.T. Suzuki’s writings and became obsessed with religious texts like *The Diamond Sutra*, references from such works bled into his poems and narratives. Kerouac, and other Beatnik Buddhist writers at this time, considered themselves *Bodhisattvas*—saviors of the world who will not enter nirvana until all other sentient beings attained enlightenment. As a result, their aim was to introduce the masses to Buddhism in the hopes that it would impact their worldview and perhaps even change mainstream society for the better.

Kerouac, for example, wrote *The Dharma Bums*, which was a book about how he and his friends lived the Buddhist life. He not only mentions Suzuki specifically, but he liberally quotes

from various Mahayana texts and the sutras—whose origins stem from the oral teachings of the Buddha himself. When introducing the character Japhy Ryder—pseudonym for his friend Gary Snyder—he provides his readers with a sort of suggested bibliography: “[Japhy] had a slew of orange crates all filled with beautiful scholarly books, some of them in Oriental languages, all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D. T. Suzuki and a fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus” (12). The novel progresses at an exciting speed through conversations between Ray Smith—pseudonym for Kerouac—a newcomer to Buddhism, and his more informed friends. As characters like Ryder teach Smith about the religion, the reader is also learning, oftentimes from the source material itself, such as in this scene when Ryder quotes from the Diamond Sutra: “That’s why frontiersmen are always heroes...They’re constantly on the alert in the realness which might as well be real as unreal, what difference does it make, Diamond Sutra says, ‘Make no formed conceptions about the realness of existence nor about the unrealness of existence,’ or words like that” (73). Intriguing conversations such as these were likely manufactured to pique the interest of his readers, as a way to spread Buddhism to the masses.

His interest in Buddhism became a tool to help him justify his ideal life. He used Buddhism as an escape from publishing woes. It was an excuse, a reason, something he could point at to justify his lifestyle, undercutting the myth that Kerouac was deeply invested in Buddhism. In one sense, it was a way to channel his energy from obsessively writing novels toward compiling research notes on Buddhism—as he did when creating *Some of the Dharma*. But in another way, he was escaping from expectations. He could live the life he wanted to—partying with friends, hitchhiking back and forth across the country, talking to strangers, drinking in excess, sitting under a tree every day for months meditating—if he became a “dharma bum.” Buddhism helped him bridge the gap between the aesthetic and the lived. It was not simply something that he used in his writing, but something which allowed him to live the life he wanted to.

## How We Perceive Him Present Day

Recently, many books published about Kerouac—like Robert Inchausti’s *Hard to Be a Saint in the City: The Spiritual Vision of the Beats*—or on behalf of Kerouac—like his *Some of the Dharma*—have related to his Buddhist practice. While interesting in their own way, these books provide only a one-sided portrayal of Kerouac. By taking a deep-dive into this one aspect of his life, or publishing new volumes of his writings about this one particular subject, they are helping to create a stereotype of him as a “pure Zen angel”. The books on the subject sell (and, thus, pile up) in a way that books solely about his alcoholism, mental illness, or fame do not. Furthermore, since many others practiced this brand of “Beatnik Buddhism” anthologies or compilations are the medium of choice.

One such volume is 1995’s *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* by Carole Tonkinson. This collection brings together pieces by major Beat writers and the Buddhist thinkers of the 1950s who inspired them. Kerouac is, predictably, at the forefront of the book and its marketing—along with Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. Tonkinson spent time carefully curating this collection so it spoke to specifically what version of Buddhism the Beats were practicing. She wanted her anthology to bring “together in one volume what amounts to an unrelenting testimony to the Beats’ deep, persistent interest in Buddhism, challenging negative judgments of the Beats’ religious interests” (9). A noble pursuit, however, the book’s focus remains on Kerouac, instead of on the many Beats who took Buddhism more seriously. In her introduction she says, “Kerouac translated his intellectual curiosity about Buddhism into actual practice. In the mid-1950s he chanted *The Diamond Sutra* (his favorite Buddhist scripture), meditated daily, and attempted for months at a time to live the ascetic and celibate life of a Buddhist monk” (17). She seems blinded by Kerouac’s fame and succumbed to the myth of Kerouac, thus perpetuating it instead of revealing the true nature of his character. This hagiographic tone might be as a result of the sources



available to her at the time—all of which she lists in the book’s “Selected Bibliography”: biographies published right after Kerouac’s death by his acquaintances, his writings about Buddhism intended to convert the general public, and his letters to other Buddhist Beats (373). Primary sources, such as the Jack Kerouac Archive, purchased by the New York Public Library in 2001, were not yet available to her (“New York”). Regardless, Tonkinson’s book was one of the first to stereotype Kerouac as a pure Zen angel.

*Hard to Be a Saint in the City: The Spiritual Vision of the Beats* by Robert Inchausti is the 2017 version of *Big Sky Mind*. It puts decades of Beat voices—not just those from the 1950s—in one room to talk about the “spiritual vision of the Beats.” Inchausti’s purpose was to bring “the old works together in a new way so that readers can discern on their own the deeper connections and the value of their *ideas*” (5). It seems with this book he hoped to inspire and enlighten the reader, more than teach them. So, while his editor’s note gives us a lengthy overview of the movement, his role was primarily curatorial. The issue here in dedicating several chapters to Kerouac is that it frames every aspect of his career in the light of Buddhism. To the uninformed reader, it could seem as if Kerouac had always been a Buddhist and even owed his bop spontaneous prose writing style to his study of Buddhism. In reality, Kerouac developed that technique over a year before he discovered Buddhism; the two were not related in any direct way. His essay about bop spontaneous prose, which begins Inchausti’s sixth chapter, starts with, “I got the idea for the spontaneous style of *On the Road* from seeing how good old Neal Cassady wrote his letters to me, all first person, fast, mad, confessional...” (81). Clearly, Cassady was his muse more than Buddhism. Since his writing style shifted before *On the Road*, he was writing almost exclusively in that style when he began writing about Buddhism. The stream of consciousness writing helped him more authentically capture his spiritual epiphanies, was a catalyst for his reflection and learning, but this distinction would be lost on a casual reader of Inchausti’s book.

As previously mentioned, Kerouac spent at least three solid years immersed in Buddhist study. His primary composition was the aforementioned *Some of the Dharma*, which started out as a letter to Ginsberg but turned into a massive tome of notes, research, and reflections. This book in its currently published state—unchanged since it was released in 1999—is massive, both in size and length, and lacks such things as pagination or an index. While it is marketed as an exact replica of Kerouac’s own copy, this implies it is more of a novelty than an actual research tool. Decisions like this in the publishing of such a work inhibit a reader’s ability to see it for what it was—a amateur’s tome of research.

Two other books by Kerouac have been published recently for the first time, *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha* in 2009 and *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* in 2016. Letters between Kerouac and his agent, Sterling Lord, during the peak of Kerouac’s Buddhist study in the mid-1950s, reveal that they were shopping these manuscripts around to various publishing houses with no success (Item 69.1, Jack Kerouac Papers). The main issue, it seemed, was that Kerouac was not enough of a Buddhist scholar to make these works marketable. For instance, Kerouac’s biography of the Buddha, *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*, reads more like one of his spontaneous prose novels than a biography. While it is clear to us now that years of extensive research went into the writing of it, readers then would have only noticed the page-long sentences and lack of citations. As a result, publishers at the time realized he was a hobbyist, albeit one with an exceptional talent for writing. Additionally, consumers at that time would not have turned to Kerouac—wild *On the Road* beatnik—for their Buddhist scholarship.

Fifty years removed, consumers today do have that same intuition. When they see these two books, unearthed as “lost” Kerouac manuscripts, containing such vast knowledge, the assumption is that Kerouac was a serious Buddhist scholar—perhaps one who was misunderstood and underappreciated in his own time. These assumptions are the root of the pure Zen angel

stereotype. In not realizing that Kerouac's Buddhist manuscripts finally being published was more about capitalism than about revealing a new aspect of Kerouac, the myth gained a new false dimension.

### How His Public Perceived Him

Most consumers of Beat literature relied heavily upon these writers to teach them about Buddhism. Kerouac was seen as the person who introduced the Beatnik movement, and eventually mainstream America, to Buddhism. Jason C. Bivins writes that "...though they may have been dilettantes in a certain sense, [Kerouac and Ginsberg] were influential in making Zen 'sexy' and transgressive. The Beats associated Zen with an attitude of 'hip' disdain for what they saw as mainstream society. Zen was coupled—and sometimes even identified—with a mannered detachment from the materialism and conformity of postwar America" (64). Those who needed something more concrete than hitchhiking and jazz welcomed a belief system that accommodated their "disdain" for the way things were going. Buddhism on its own would not have sufficed for this purpose—it needed to be filtered through a Kerouacian sieve.

While there were a few mentions of Buddhism with 1957's *On the Road*, Kerouac's next book *The Dharma Bums* centered around it. Even though he had at least five completed manuscripts of different novels at the ready, he and his agent Sterling Lord decided that Kerouac's next book needed to be one that was equal parts Beat and Buddhism. In a small, brown, flip-up diary that Kerouac kept in the autumn of 1957, he reflected on this decision and tracked his daily progress (Jack Kerouac Papers, item 55.7). It took only a few weeks to write as it was based on his notes from his trip to Desolation Peak in the summer of 1955. Not only did the novel aim to convert Americans toward the Buddhist mentality, but also to fine-tune the beatnik public image. The public perception of the Beat movement was that they were drug and sex addicted youths, but *The Dharma Bums* demonstrated the counter-culture's deeper purpose. Reviews and

editorials about the book reflect a public grappling with this new “kind” of beatnik. Interestingly, even though Kerouac’s books were marketed as fiction, the public understanding was always that they represented the lives of real people—a finger on the pulse of the counterculture.

In a review of the book published in October of 1958 by Nancy Wilson Ross titled “Beat — and Buddhist” in *The New York Times*, this shift in perception is made clear. Ross’s review begins with, “The novel by Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, was a chronicle of the hitch-hikers, hipsters, jazz fans, jalopy owners, drug addicts, poets and perverts of the Beat Generation” (“Beat”). This is Ross aiming to engage her readers by acknowledging their likely presuppositions of the Beats. She goes on to contrast this assumption, complicate the stereotype, by explaining their spirituality: “In the present book, however, not only are his ‘bums’ considerably more respectable and articulate, but they are no longer merely moving for movement’s sake. ‘Sitting’ has even been discovered to possess possible virtue, for Kerouac and his restive pals—now in search of Dharma, or ‘Truth’—are trying to learn to meditate in Buddhist style, their new goal nothing less than total self-enlightenment, the *satori* of the Zen masters of Japan and China” (“Beat”). While the tone seems to acknowledge public skepticism, as evidenced by words she puts quotes around, there is an earnest desire to give these particular Beats a fair chance. This is probably due to her own interest in the subject.

The editor of this review included a brief biographical note about Ross at the bottom of the first column, no doubt to reveal potential bias to readers: “Miss Ross, whose novels include *The Left Hand is the Dreamer*, is now engaged in writing a *Primer on Buddhism for the Western World*” (“Beat”). It is unclear whether Ross fell in the middle of the Venn diagram of Beats and Buddhists; however, her objective tone implies she was a Buddhist scholar and not a dharma bum—making her a perfect choice to review this book. She was able to point out some of the incorrect or awkward sounding passages about Buddhist poetry, but avoid the previous

generation's clichéd, blanket statements of condemnation. Her review ends with more addressing of stereotypes: "In the general, the new activities of Ray Smith-Kerouac and his fellow bums are rather more on the positive side than heretofore. Digging 'cool' Zen is clearly more adult than digging hot jazz, drinking tea is certainly healthier than smoking it" ("Beat"). By painting these "bums" as more mature, or evolving, Ross was able to help Kerouac sway the public toward taking he and his generation more seriously.

Around the same time, in other sections of *The New York Times* that discussed Kerouac, The Beats, and Buddhism there was clear evidence of an older generation grappling with the presence of Eastern thought in their Western world. A journalist named J. Donald Adams discussed this topic several times in his monthly column "Speaking of Books". This column functioned as a dialogue between Adam and his readers in regards to the most popular books of the day. In one column from November 16, 1958 he addressed criticism he received after painting *The Dharma Bums* and Zen Buddhism in an unfavorable light. In an attempt to clarify his position, he wrote: "I think that Eastern thought of that kind demands a capacity for contemplation that, for the most part, is beyond the reach of Western man. We are incapacitated by two things: by the urge toward action, as against contemplation, and also by the persistent presence of the Hebraic-Christian conscience which makes it difficult for us of the West to accept, as the Chinese do, the good and evil which are counterbalanced, more or less, in every human nature" ("Speaking"). Ethnocentrism aside, it is clear that Adams did not believe the Beatnik practice of Buddhism to be sincere and attempted to justify this skepticism with supposition. Opinions of this nature abounded during the late 1950s as Buddhism was on the rise with more than just the counter-culture. Perhaps it was the informal, jazzy language Kerouac and the Beats used to discuss Buddhism that drew some people in and made others wary.

However, as previously mentioned, there was also a far-ranging skepticism of religion at this time. In *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, Mark Greif addresses the loss of faith in the post-war period. He claims the worry was “about both religion and ideology.” He says, “Thinkers wondered whether it was possible or wise to believe in anything abstract, lest it lead to the further abuse of concrete human life, after dogmatic belief—in Germany, Italy, and Russia—had led to the worst disasters.” The question remained, though, of how the country could “go on without a faith in progress, in God, or simply in a natural supremacy of good rather than evil in the world?” (10). The Beats as a generation were a symptom of this radical skepticism. Looking toward Buddhism could have been people seeking a new moral compass. It could also have been a conscious or unconscious guilt over the interment and atomic bombing of Japanese people. Either way, Buddhism seemed to be for those seeking sense in a chaotic world—and Kerouac was no different.

#### How He Actually Was

In the same month as he discovered Buddhism, Kerouac got antsy to travel again. Carolyn and Neal Cassady were asking him relentlessly in every letter to come visit them in California (Item 64.6, Jack Kerouac Papers). He wouldn’t even need to find a place to stay—he could live with them. And so, like he’d done many times before, he made plans to pack up and trek across country. It took him a few weeks. He needed to acquire things. For an extended stay, he knew from experience, he needed supplies. He made these ‘to do’ and ‘to pack’ lists in his pocket notebook on a daily basis. Items included “call on so and so”, “reply to so and so’s letter”, “buy rope and an all-weather jacket.” As each were done, they got crossed off with a single line. He made packing lists on scrap paper, too, as he sat at his writing desk. Any scrap of paper he could get his hands on: a memo paper from his old scrip summarizing job at Fox Searchlight, an ink-smudged piece of whisper thin typewriter paper he couldn’t use, anything. And each day in his diary included a note about which book on Buddhism to return to the library and which new one to

check out. It seems Kerouac spent these first three weeks of 1954 devouring classic Buddhist texts, jumping from one to another, like a ravenous wildfire (Item 3.39, Jack Kerouac Papers).

By late January he was in California, working at a rail yard by day and debating with Neal at night. These debates started almost as soon as he arrived because he couldn't stop himself from telling Neal everything he'd learned about this fascinating new way of thinking. Neal, wanting to contribute, talked about the only bit of Buddhism he knew about: the writer Edgar Cayce. Kerouac argued that Cayce wasn't a true Buddhist scholar and Neal just stuck to his opinion in true egotistical fashion. Wanting to win these arguments, Kerouac sought out the San Jose Public Library's world religion section (Charters 201).

This research for friendly competition's sake turned into an obsessive distraction. Kerouac sent his manuscript for *On the Road* to Little, Brown on his own—without the knowledge of Lord—but the publishing house was letting it gather dust and refusing to respond to his inquiries beyond the sporadic “not yet”. The nail-biting agony of waiting was only abated, for Kerouac, by doing research on the fascinating world of Buddhism. He took notes in a notebook specifically dedicated to this research, separate from his daily diary. It started as facts and inspiring quotes, but soon morphed into a reflection on what he was reading and what it meant for him. He allowed himself to be swept up in this learning; allowed himself to make believe he was improving himself for the better by doing this work.

In the summer, Kerouac moved back home and in with his mother in Ozone Park, Queens. He went into the city, met up with friends, but continued to obsessively study Buddhism. The publishers kept stringing him along and he used this study of Buddhism to keep himself and his mind occupied. The main tenet of Buddhism, that all life is suffering, truly resonated with Kerouac during this time of publisher's limbo.

In the fall of 1954, in October, Kerouac decided to take a trip to the place where he'd grown up. He wasn't working, he wasn't getting published, so hopping on a bus to Lowell, Massachusetts was a possibility. As down as he felt at this time, it makes sense he would seek solace in his childhood memories. During this trip Kerouac made a now-famous realization about the connection between Buddhism and his identity as a beat. As the story goes, while Kerouac was visiting the church, he attended in his childhood he realized a connection could be made between the term 'beat' as he had been using it and the Catholic concept of 'beatitude' (Charters 209).

The stories in interviews he gave later and, subsequently, in biographies make this moment seem almost miraculous or divine. Whether it actually happened this way is anyone's guess. However, it is indicative of some major themes running through Kerouac's life at this time. First, we see a return to a place of comfort and security—a place where Kerouac last felt successful. This place of comfort and familiarity was not only his hometown, Lowell, but also the Catholic church. Kerouac's foray into Buddhism must have felt like a movement away from Catholicism, causing feelings of guilt. The pilgrimage to this church, while not the objective of the trip, must have felt meaningful and redemptive. In this homecoming, it seems Kerouac could also have been seeking the comfort of the memory of publishing his first book, *Town and the City*, which used a fictionalized Lowell as its setting. As the writing subject and style was more conventional, it was published with much less hassle. A fact which made the rejections of *On the Road* that much more painful. *On the Road* and the other manuscripts he was peddling were in his new experimental writing style; one which Kerouac defended passionately, but the rejections must have made him rethink his change.

Another theme we see running through this church story is Kerouac trying to make sense of his identity and place in the world. With his *On the Road* antics in the past but still very much on his mind he sought a way to define himself and his friends within the context of what was going on



in American society. “Beat” was a word they used to define themselves, but was it enough for Kerouac? Did that word work for him once he was off the road? Did he feel differently as he became more spiritual? It could be that this story, about discovering the true meaning of “beat” as “beatitude” or “beatific”, was a merging of identities for Kerouac. And perhaps he saw his friends shift in this direction, as well. He was not the only one getting into Buddhism—and by the end of the decade all of them would have some connection to it. Perhaps merging his scoundrel, deadbeat identity with one of more sophistication and spirituality was what he needed to soothe him during this time of rejections and waiting.

Coming off this trip to Lowell, Kerouac sought new solace in his Buddhist studies. The letter he had been composing to Ginsberg was now being retyped and reformatted into a book that Kerouac called *Some of the Dharma*. He began moving away from the belief that all life was suffering and started realizing that, through Buddhism, he might be able to find a way to alleviate that suffering. In *Some of the Dharma*, he started writing about an alternative life that might not involve being a famous writer. Some of this took on a more bitter tone: “If I can start to earn my living as a writer all will be well on earth for me— But it is historically impossible for my work to be accepted, there I’ll have to do what I should do anyway, live in a shack in the woods alone” (46). And some was more redemptive: “I don’t want to be a drunken hero of the generation suffering everywhere with everyone— I want to be a quiet saint living in a shack in solitary meditation of universal mind” (63). He would get his wish of living in a shack in few years, when he was a fire watcher on Desolation Peak—the centerpiece experience in *The Dharma Bums*.

All the while, as he recorded his notes, he began to practice stream of consciousness writing which involved writing with no inner judgment. He often blended reflection on his career predicament with what he was learning from Buddhism, as seen here in *Some of the Dharma*: “Since everything is surface ripples of manifestation, they neither abide in the past or in the future,

but in some timeless present beyond the time of the body and the brain that dreams—so I have only ONE BOOK to write, in which everything, past, present, and future—everything that I know and everything that I did know and will know, and never knew and will never know, is caught like dust in the sunlight in the bedroom, immemorially shining in the mind essence sea which is its base origin” (277). This long, jazzy sentence represented the kind of writing he used in *On the Road* and would soon become the way he spoke, as well.

Throughout this whole Buddhist epiphany, Kerouac could not shake most of his old habits. Despite trying to abstain from drinking, he still went on binges when he took the train from his mom’s house in Queens to hang out with friends in Manhattan. What truly debilitated him, though, at this time in his life was Benzedrine. He picked up this habit when he was living in Harlem with Ginsberg in 1945 (Rasmussen). His use was recreational until 1954. While he was known to have written *On the Road* with only the help of black coffee, he eventually needed something stronger to fuel his creativity (Lord, ch. 1). In January 1955 a symptom of his Benzedrine addiction began flaring up to the point where it impeded his day to day life. Phlebitis, or vein inflammation, of the legs is a painful ailment that caused his legs to swell and made limping inevitable. On days when the pain became too severe Kerouac stayed home and wrote—and took more Benzedrine.

That same January, Kerouac received a summons from NY City Family Court. His second ex-wife, Joan Haverty, was suing him for child support. They had divorced in 1951 when Haverty was pregnant. Kerouac had convinced himself that he left her because he caught her cheating on him, but he knew deep down that was not the truth. Haverty had been trying to leave the marriage for months before she became pregnant, but Kerouac found her in whatever new apartment she was renting and insisted on moving in. At that time in his life he was finishing *On the Road*, had no job, and needed Haverty to survive (Haverty Kerouac 194). But when she became pregnant and

refused to terminate the pregnancy, and he divorced her on illusory grounds (Haverty Kerouac 207-8).

Now, in January 1955, Kerouac realized that simply denying he had a daughter was not going to make it so. He was unsure what would happen when he went into the courthouse on that winter day. His legs were throbbing from the phlebitis; he needed to have his mother wrap them tightly in elastic bandages to help him walk. He brought a pile of Buddhist books with him in case he was thrown in jail immediately and needed something to do. So, there was Kerouac, hobbling into the courthouse with bandages, shorts, and a plaid hunter's jacket (Charters 211). He sat through the case, denied feebly that he was the father, but acknowledged when he saw the child that she definitely had his eyes and coloring. The judge ruled that Kerouac probably did not have the means to pay child support and Haverty, seeing how pathetic he looked, eventually agreed.

The great irony of this scene was the stack of books Kerouac brought with him. Those Buddhist texts—that Kerouac used to occupy his mind, to give him comfort, to help explain his suffering—did nothing to make him a better person. No study of Jesus or Buddha would help him become less self-absorbed, more caring. It may have made him a better writer, but not a better friend or husband or father. It did not stop his addiction to speed or alcohol. It only distracted him so he would not have to admit that his suffering came from his unacknowledged flaws. He was “conscious of the bright,” as he wrote in a poem from *Some of the Dharma*, but “keeps to the dark” (15).

## Chapter Two: As Writer Rock Star

### Introduction

After dropping out of Columbia in 1941, Kerouac was untethered. He spent his 20s flying back and forth across the country chasing adventure. As was his habit, he wrote everything down in pocket notebooks. Everything was happening so fast but he was able to write down what he saw, heard, and felt. Near the end of the decade, he settled down in New York City and started writing his first novel, equally influenced by his childhood town of Lowell and his favorite author, Thomas Wolfe. After *The Town and the City* was published in 1950, he wrote a variety of short stories and started many novels—but nothing felt quite right. His best friends Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady, who were right there with him on his cross-country adventures, suggested he turn those notebooks of stories and experiences into a book. So, excited by the idea, he wrote furiously to capture the whirlwind of those years in order to finish the book by the end of 1951. The excitement of writing, though, soon made way for the agony of publishing—which would not happen for him until 1957.

Kerouac's friends advocated for him in those years before *On the Road* was published. While they did not care as much as he did about him getting published again, they did care enough to talk him up to the press. One of Kerouac's friends, John Clellon Holmes, from the San Francisco writers' scene mentioned in an interview how he considered Kerouac the originator of the label "Beat." Then, in 1955, Ginsberg dedicated his poem "Howl" to Kerouac by putting a sort of author's biography in the front of the book. It said, in part, "Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years... creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature. Several phrases and the title of Howl are taken from him" (Ginsberg 5). It is clear that his friends questioned why such a brilliant,

prolific writer could languish, drowning in unpublished manuscripts. This created a literary buzz about him in the underground scene even before *On the Road* got published.

Mainstream culture, however, likely did not even know he existed. Studious readers of *The New York Times* book review section might remember him from a review about his first book *The Town and the City*. While not quite a rave, the review—titled “Of Growth and Decay”—did have an optimistic tone. The reviewer, John Brooks, threw around phrases like “a rough diamond of a book” and “a series of pathetic encounters”. And acknowledged the fresh-faced, eager atmosphere Kerouac created by saying, “One gets the feeling that the author grew spiritually and improved technically while writing *The Town and the City*.” A comment about how the depiction of New York City life was “powerful and disturbing” (Brooks) seemed to foreshadow Kerouac’s later work. Ultimately, though, the 500-page book barely merited as many words in this review, one of the only ones written about the debut.

Kerouac’s writing completely changed after *The Town and the City*, much to the dismay of publishers. Commenting on Kerouac’s mimicry of Thomas Wolfe in his first novel, Brooks took a jab at the two authors: “Like Wolfe, to whom he seems to owe much, Mr. Kerouac tends to overwrite” (“Of Growth”). While this comparison did not bother Kerouac, it was one of the things that motivated him to create the spontaneous bop prose style that later became his trademark. He changed his style, created this new innovative way of writing, of experiencing life, but it was too experimental to match the taste of publishers in his day. While he finished writing *On the Road* in 1952, it took until the Fall of 1957 to be published. Sterling Lord, his agent, in his memoir *Lord of Publishing*, remembers how much he resented the publishing houses’ suggestions to revise and edit when he felt the book was written perfectly the first time (ch.1).

Once *On the Road* was published, the critics who had gotten wind of him from Cllelon, Ginsberg and others were ready to sensationalize him into “The King of the Beats”. They hoped

they could bill him as the James Dean of books, a void created by the actor's death in 1955. *The New York Times* review of the book announcing Kerouac's arrival on the scene was serendipitously enthusiastic. Sterling Lord remembers this in his memoir, mentioning that Gilbert Millstein was filling in when the usual book reviewer was on vacation. He reflects that Millstein was "an extremely perceptive and talented writer himself...well connected with the current culture" (Lord, ch. 1). It was as if the Millstein review immediately catapulted Kerouac into the spotlight.

Millstein was the first to place Kerouac's work in the context of the post-war generation. The review took time to teach the general public about the "San Francisco Renaissance" and about the transient nature of the movement and its members. He defined the term "beat generation," mentioning that an interest in Zen Buddhism was a prerequisite (Millstein). One comes away from the review with the feeling that the "generation" was a tornado or a wild animal that had been let loose on the country. The truth was, though, that the movement had already happened and by this time it was almost over. Kerouac was not that same person he was in his 20s. All the moving, all the "beat"-ing, left him beat up, fed up, and drained.

In 1957 when people read *On the Road* they pictured a young, wild, fast youth who thought deeply and lived dangerously. What they got in interviews and in person, though, was a deeply spiritual middle-aged man living with his mother. This contradiction troubled Kerouac in a way that being so deeply misunderstood would impact anyone. The public misconception—that he was still the man he was ten years before—was what created the "writer rock star" stereotype with which Kerouac was saddled. For while Kerouac suffered waiting to get *On the Road* published, he suffered more after as a result of not being able to live up to what society expected from him.

With no context, a reader today would come away from *On the Road* with the same assumptions about the author as someone in 1957 would have; it explains why, sixty years later, this stereotype of Kerouac is still the most prevalent. And this stereotype is no more clearly seen

than in the movies about Kerouac's life and the beat generation. These movies can be lauded for their fidelity to the facts of the major moments in the beat generation. If one were to watch all of them, say, in a particular order, they would come away from that viewing with a clear understanding of how it all played out. The issue, though, is how the figures within the Beat movement are portrayed. Kerouac, specifically, is often simplified to the point where he functions as the "cool guy" in the film. It seems the importance is placed more on making an entertaining movie than on creating realistic portrayals.

One such contemporary film is *Howl* from 2010. This film is indicative of how movies like it perpetuate the stereotype that Kerouac was this aloof cool-guy. The film relies primarily on imagery to fit Kerouac into this literary and cinematic archetype. It uses cool-guy tropes such as smoking, staring off in thought, squinting, scowling, and smirking to convey this characterization. The film *On the Road* from 2012 uses the same imagery to show Kerouac as the same archetype. The actor, Sam Riley, looks much more like James Dean than he does like Kerouac. Interestingly, his hair—longer than Kerouac ever kept his—becomes another cliché of masculine coolness and desirability. When he is still in New York City, before going on the road, his hair is neatly coiffed and off his face. Once he starts his adventure, he suddenly looks tanner, more rugged, and his hair falls in his face constantly. Both films use the same shot of the Kerouac character, smoking, staring into the sunset in apparent contemplation. While a movie like *Howl*, in which Kerouac is only a minor character, could be granted leeway in terms of its portrayal, there remains the question of why any of these films would rely so heavily on clichés. What do they gain from portraying a major literary figure in such a one-dimensional way?

### Howl Movie Analysis

*Howl* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2010. The movie's premise is the obscenity trial following the City Lights Publishing release of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl"

in small pocket folio form. It came out in 1955, two years before Kerouac's *On the Road* was published. The poem itself, well-known by its first few lines— "I've seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by/madness, starving hysterical naked, /dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn/looking for an angry fix" (Ginsberg 9)—was shocking to some at the time and faced as much harsh criticism as it received praise. The film *Howl* flashes back and forth in time to show Ginsberg reflecting on his journey as a poet up to when he is interviewed for his comment on the trial. The courtroom scenes and the interview scenes in 1957 are shot in color, while the scenes establishing Ginsberg's writing story are shot in black and white.

The first time we see the Jack Kerouac character, played by Todd Rotundi, is in the very beginning when someone, during Ginsberg's first reading of "Howl", calls out, "Hey Jack, pass that here"— 'that' being a gallon jug of dark liquor (*Howl*). Later that same scene, when the camera cuts to the crowd again, Jack whoops and takes a swig from the same gallon jug; his face is out of focus. It is interesting that the film gives us our first image of Kerouac as the hard-drinking writer that he is also oft stereotyped as. The next, and only other, time he comes up is when the character of Ginsberg narrates over a flashback of how Kerouac was his earliest love interest and muse. This second segment takes up around ten minutes of the film.

The film starts with James Franco as Allen Ginsberg in his living room with the interviewer continuing to tell the story of how "Howl" came to be. He starts to talk and after the first sentence— "Then I went to Columbia University and I fell in love with Jack Kerouac..."— the scene changes to black and white flashback while his narration continues as voice over. The flashback scene begins with the two men dancing sensuously with beautiful women in a small living room. Kerouac is with a blonde who looks like Marilyn Monroe. The two couples are so close together that the men can pass a joint back and forth while dancing. Ginsberg narrates: "Jack gave me permission to open up. He's a romantic poet. And he taught me that writing is personal,



that it comes from a writer's own person. His body, his breathing rhythm, his actual talk" (*Howl*). The scene is coded as being strictly heteronormative, even while Ginsberg himself points out that this is actually a moment of homoerotic love and flirtation. While they dance, Ginsberg looks at Kerouac and Kerouac looks at his own dance partner. Then Kerouac begins kissing his girl and Ginsberg watches out of the corner of his eye. Kerouac rests his hands on the girl's chest, smiling flirty with her. They begin kissing again, arms wrapped around each other. The voice over says, "Eventually I developed a much deeper sense of confession. I needed to express my feelings to him, but he didn't want to hear them." The camera cuts to the four characters passed out on the couch with Ginsberg leaning on Kerouac's shoulder. As this scene transitions to the next, Ginsberg says, "So I had to find a new way of expressing them in a way that would entrance him" (*Howl*).

This scene portrays Kerouac as cool, desirable, and a "ladies' man". First, the black and white nature of the scene creates a sense of retro coolness that the technicolor scenes, depicting events from just two years in the future, do not. The filmmakers make Kerouac seem cool and desirable by having both his dance partner and Ginsberg look at him throughout the scene. This scene is clearly about the relationship between the two men, and about Ginsberg being in love with Kerouac. But Kerouac is being portrayed as a ladies' man, as someone who is seemingly very straight. This film does not acknowledge Kerouac's own bisexuality or imply that, in real life, the two men had a homoerotic relationship at times. A friend of the two, Ellis Amburn, in his biography *Subterranean Kerouac*, quotes Ginsberg as saying, "Kerouac enjoyed 'beautiful boys'... he was 'very mixed sexually'... but felt it was morally improper for him to 'participate in the erotic' [with men]... Ginsberg blamed such negativity on... society itself, which opposed homoeroticism with laws, social stigma, and dire religious proscriptions" (44). When the film contrasts Ginsberg's sexuality with Kerouac's, instead of aligning them, it almost others Ginsberg in his own story. How hard it was to be gay in the 1950s is a key aspect of Ginsberg's story. If the

filmmakers had provided a queerer reading of Kerouac, they could have created the same empathy for him that they did for Ginsberg.

The next section of this flashback in the film shows the two men on a park bench while Ginsberg reads out loud from typewritten pages. Kerouac smokes a cigarette by pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. Ginsberg narrates: “And then I realized that if I actually admitted and confessed the secret tenderness of my soul in my writing, he would understand nakedly who I was. And so that sincere talk replaced the earlier imitative rhyming that I was doing for my father. Jack was the first person I really opened up to and said, ‘I’m a homosexual.’” The voice of the Ginsberg on the park bench fades in as he reads to Kerouac from a poem he has written. The writing mentions “meat” and “asshole” which he intends to be suggestive. Jack does not look him in the eye; instead he stares off and looks at the cigarette he is smoking. Then he says, “Allen, alright” to get him to stop reading (*Howl*).

In this scene we see a few different cool-guy tropes: smoking and emotional distance. Again, the film continues to place Kerouac as the object of Ginsberg’s affection, this time making Kerouac disgusted by his flirtation. They emphasize this emotional distance by having him smoke in a distinctly masculine way. Since cigarettes first started being advertised, they have been marketed as something that will make a person cool. These tropes together are heavy handed clichés that weaken the film. What does it gain from making Kerouac the foil to Ginsberg? Why use Kerouac as a means to emphasize Ginsberg’s alienation as a gay man when Kerouac’s whole life was spent denying his own bisexuality?

After the scene in the park, the film cuts to a brief shot of Kerouac sitting on a fire escape squinting into the sun and smoking. As this plays, the voice of Ginsberg from the future says, “I very soon realized that nobody was really shocked by anything” (*Howl*). This tiny moment, in particular, is the epitome of the cool-guy archetype—and an example of a shot that does nothing

for the plot but everything for the characterization. This imagery is exactly how Kerouac is thought of in present day society. Putting him in this cliché stance on that fire escape perpetuates the assumptions made about Kerouac as a writer rock star. And, in fact, as an icon and a celebrity, this is what people in his time expected and what he was not able to provide them.

The final section of this scene shows Kerouac and Ginsberg on either side of a living room, both using typewriters. The camera cuts back and forth between them, and they make eye contact just once. Kerouac's legs are spread on either side of the small desk that holds his typewriter, basically straddling it. He scowls down and types with complete focus. When the two men make eye contact it is through a haze of cigarette smoke around Kerouac's face. Ginsberg smiles genuinely and Kerouac smirks. The last line of voice over reads, "Really I wrote 'Howl' for Jack" (*Howl*). Here Kerouac functions as muse, mirroring the way he is seen as the muse of the beat generation.

This final appearance of Kerouac brings together the complete stereotype. He is smoking again. His posture is sexualized and aloof, referencing the lust Ginsberg—and now the viewer—feels for Kerouac. This film does exactly what the media in the 1950s did to Kerouac: market him as the literary version of a James Dean. As a celebrity he functioned as little more than a replacement or an icon. His face, his identity was used to sell books, to market and profit off of a movement. As a result, Kerouac was catapulted into a depressive, alcoholic spiral feeling like he was shouting into the void, trapped behind the mask society had created for him. *Howl* is just another reproduction of that mask.

### Conclusion

The film *Howl* makes Kerouac out as this aloof writer rock star—from the way he presses his forehead against his woman's face, to the way he smokes his cigarette aggressively like a blunt; from the way he sits on a fire escape and squints into the sun, to the way he straddles his typewriter

and smirks across the room at Ginsberg. And because Kerouac was only seen in that one scene and spoken of with such longing, the viewers are meant to feel the same way. This portrayal of Kerouac is of a handsome, unattainable barreled chest. He is a smirk, a frown, pursed lips and a cigarette, held between pointer and thumb fingertips. This image is what hipsters of present day are imitating. They have *On the Road* in the back pocket of their vintage Levi's and cigarettes rolled in the sleeve cuffs of their white t-shirts. While not every person who dresses this way does so because they want to be like Jack Kerouac—obviously, they might not even have ever heard of the him—the idea of Kerouac is perpetuated through them.

In uncertain times like these, or in the midst of a Cold War, society craves the predictable. It wants celebrities boiled down into clickbait titles and literary archetypes. In order to make them more digestible, pop-culture glorifies and stereotypes them to the point where they are not real anymore. When faced with a world in chaos, who can fault us for trying to regain control. Unfortunately, it is the people behind the media-made masks who suffer. Kerouac suffered. Alcoholism consumed him as a result of the fame. He was lauded as the “King of the Beats”, as the spokesperson of a generation; but really, he just wanted to share his own complexity and messiness—break the stigma, so society, too, could be flawed.

Films portraying Kerouac as a writer rock star, or hipsters dressing up as that hyper-masculine archetype, are ways society idealizes a bygone era. It knows deep down the flaws of the 1950s—the racism, the sexism, the homophobia—but it is easier not to think about it and pretend those were the good old days. Taking the mask off of complicated figures like Kerouac, though, could help us face those flaws that continue to plague our society. Acknowledging and examining the struggles our icons had with such things as sexuality and mental health could open up a dialogue and normalize difference.

## Chapter Three: As Washed Up Drunk

### Introduction

Even as early as 1958 Kerouac's work garnered harsh criticism. When bad reviews started pouring in, Kerouac's literary posse stepped in to defend him—just as they did in the time before *On the Road* was published. His biggest defender was always Ginsberg, who first came to his defense in a book review of *The Dharma Bums* published in the *Village Voice* in 1958. The editor's note in Ginsberg's *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952 -1995* claims that this review was in response to "several subsequent attacks on Kerouac's books [that] had taken place" (342). In this review, Ginsberg discussed the horror of Kerouac being forced to edit his original scroll of *On the Road* and attempted to explain Kerouac's bop spontaneous prose style. To do this he cited a few examples of page-long sentences in Kerouac's published works, analyzing them to enumerate their technical brilliance. In short, by explaining what makes Kerouac's writing good, Ginsberg was attempting to school the "hacks" (348) and "academics" (349) who had been blindly criticizing Kerouac because they did not understand his style.

Whether this review accomplished its intended mission is unlikely—poor reviews continued to pour in throughout the 1960s while Kerouac put out more and more of his previously unpublished works. It started with a review of his book *Dr. Sax* which came out in 1959. The review by David Dempsey in *The New York Times* was called "Beatnik Bogeyman on the Prowl". Dempsey starts his review with: "...this is one of the author's earlier novels, which publishers heretofore have had the good sense not to publish. [This book] is not only bad Kerouac; it is a bad book." Even though Dempsey did not favor the book, he was still respectful of the author, calling it "bad Kerouac" which implies Kerouac is typically good. He even went so far as to concede that "his peculiar genius infects every page" ("Beatnik Bogeyman"). This was still when Kerouac's image was one of a rock star writer who was "peculiar" but still a "genius." While today the myth

of Kerouac as writer rock star is solidified in our minds, back then it was just how publishing houses were trying to market him. In reality, depending on who you asked, Kerouac was equal parts mysterious and puzzling.

His mystique soon waned, though, likely as a result of an oversaturation of the literary market; he had put out two books in 1959 and three books in 1960 (Nicosia 699). What came tumbling in were bored sounding reviews, for each new book just offered more of the same—same writing style, same topics, same core group of characters. Two such reviews in 1960 were about the novel *Tristessa* and a collection of short stories called *Lonesome Traveler*. The *Tristessa* review, by Daniel Talbot of *The New York Times*, called “Beat and Screaming”, begins by acknowledging Kerouac’s talent: “...it is always a pleasure to read a Jack Kerouac novel, even if it is not among the author’s best work... he is a born writer... He loves language, and he obviously has a profound feeling for the human race” (“Beat and Screaming”). These read like a script of platitudes required to uphold this ‘peculiar genius’ public narrative about Kerouac. Talbot, also responsible for a review of *The Lonesome Traveler* called “On the Road Again,” continues to acknowledge Kerouac’s unique talent for writing: “...it is again a collection of Kerouac’s nerve-ends vs. the universe.” However, speaking as a fan, he conveyed his disappointment and boredom: “Not much different from Jack Kerouac’s other books in style, content, or philosophy...” (“On the Road Again”). This attitude marked a shift from being him seen as a visionary to being seen as a sell-out.

One of his only works to receive critical acclaim in this era was 1962’s *Big Sur*. In one *New York Times* article, titled “A Turn in the Road for the King of the Beats”, reviewer William Wiegand lauded Kerouac for being open about his alcoholism and subsequent mental health issues. In his opinion, *Big Sur* was “certainly Kerouac’s grittiest novel to date and the one which will be read with most respect by those skeptical of all the Beat business in the first place” (“A Turn”). All

of Kerouac's novels were assumed to be thinly veiled autobiography, but the "grittiness" in *Big Sur* stems from its admission of weakness and an attempt to convey how broken he had become as a result of fame.

The story describes the years right after *On the Road* was published when Kerouac was trying to ride the wave of his reputation by writing more and publishing everything he could. However, he was having a hard time controlling his drinking because he needed alcohol to perform in social situations. Being an icon did not come easily to him, and the press junket for *On the Road* alone caused him great anguish. His agent, Sterling Lord, remembers this in his memoir: "Jack did not respond well to the sudden fame, and the long-term effects were devastating. I felt he was basically shy, and any time he came to New York, which he considered not to be part of the real world, he had to fortify himself with alcohol" (Lord, ch. 1). Kerouac hoped taking a retreat to his friend Lou Ferlinghetti's cabin on the mountain Big Sur would act as both rehab and spiritual re-centering. Throughout the novel, though, three such voyages out to the cabin did nothing but reinforce to Kerouac that he might be too far gone to ever recover.

What *Big Sur* brought him in critical acclaim, it lost him in public opinion. It was the curse of honesty: for after the stark confessional tone of *Big Sur*, he was nothing more than a washed up drunk to them. And this portrayal of Kerouac remains to this day. Sadly, though, of all the modern iterations of Kerouac, it is this one that rings the truest. Kerouac's battle with alcoholism places him in the company of many other famous writers—Ernest Hemingway, being perhaps the most notable example. But what is lacking in our stereotyping of him, as such, is an understanding that fame is what caused his downfall.

#### How We Perceive Him Present Day

*Big Sur* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013. It is an adaptation of Kerouac's 1962 novel of the same name. Michael Polish, the director and writer of the film, lifted a lot of the

voice-over narration directly from Kerouac's novel. One of the only major changes the filmmaker made was to use the real names of the people involved in the story—instead of using the pseudonyms from the novel. This particular choice brings the film closer to the realm of biopic, which is in stark contrast to the film version of *On the Road* which distances itself from reality by relying on archetypes. While *Big Sur* did make changes to the source material, its fidelity to the motifs of the novel make it the truest of any modern cinematic portrayal of Kerouac.

The portrayal of Kerouac in both versions of *Big Sur* is not a flattering one. The overall sense the viewer gets in the film is of a manly character who is getting too old for the partying and debauchery of his youth. The actor playing Kerouac, Jean-Marc Barr, looks remarkably like Kerouac. He is handsome but in a way that shows his age and wear, and they make him look fifty when the character is only forty (*Big Sur*). The motifs in the film—such as perpetually carrying a bottle of alcohol, waking up on the floor fully clothed, and staring off in a drunken stupor—also emphasize how much Kerouac was spiraling out. But combined, instead of forwarding the malicious stereotype of the pathetic drunk, the film somehow inspires an empathy and an understanding that this is what fame has done to him.

The film portrays this message with an ending that is ten minutes of psychotic break and two minutes of an attempt at ending on a happy note, with a score of swelling strings. While it is important to acknowledge Kerouac's optimism, it is still only a thin veil over his battle with alcoholism. Just as in the novel, the film ends with Kerouac waking up on the floor after five days of heavy drinking, beginning to lose his sense of reality. He leaves his friends at the cabin to find a place to rest in the woods. Though it can be assumed that he wanted to get away to sober up, he is still carrying a bottle of alcohol—an image often repeated throughout the film. Barr voices over lines directly from the novel: "As soon as I find a spot of grass by the path I realize I cant lie down there because the tourists might walk by and see me..." (*Big Sur* 114). Kerouac, always wary of



the public eye, worries he will be seen, recognized, and judged for being a drunk. The film enhances this moment by mimicking intoxicated blurry, swinging vision and showing laughing passers-by to get us to understand that Kerouac is being paranoid about the possibility of being seen. In the book he signals to the reader how drastically his life is affected by his fame; the movie reinforces how this reality has affected his mental health.

When he wanders back to the cabin, the film continues to be blurry and the voices of his friends are muffled. He watches his girlfriend dig a garbage pit and the blank look on his face helps the audience understand that he is not in touch with what is going on around him. Suddenly, the garbage pit triggers in him thoughts of a grave and the psychotic break happens—all disorienting music and hand-held camera shakiness. Instead of Kerouac seeming crazy or pathetic here, the scene reads as an inevitable conclusion to what he has been through. One feels empathy because the filmmakers made him human and relatable instead of one-dimensional.

*Big Sur*, the novel, ends with a forced hope that settles on melancholy. Inexplicably, Kerouac comes down from his psychotic break feeling optimistic about what is to come. He explains, “I’ll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day and leave all San Francisco behind and go back home across autumn America and it’ll all be like it was in the beginning—Simple golden eternity blessing all—Nothing ever happened...” (*Big Sur* 116). This feeling of hope, present in quite a few of his later works, shows us that Kerouac was not ready to give up on himself. Even after over a hundred pages of depression and alcoholism and delusions, he still wanted readers to see that he believed in his ability to get better—and so should we.

Toward the end of his life, he took this notion one step further by attempting to retell his whole life story using a new, manufactured identity. This last book Kerouac was working on before he died was *Pic*—a novella cobbled together from snippets of stories he had written over the course of the last twenty years. Most were autobiographical pieces that he reworked so they all

flowed together through the voice of a young African-American boy from the South named Pic. Clearly, this desperate attempt to publish something new—and something, arguably, controversial—was Kerouac’s way of trying to rebrand himself, trying to hold on to fame. While he always shied away from fan attention, he did desire to gain control of how he was being perceived by the public and critics. It was his last attempt to articulate his legacy before his death. But the choice to write a story from this perspective could lead one to question if it was merely the delusion of an alcoholic too far gone.

Even though this book had clear autobiographical connections to Kerouac, it really does read as his only fictional work. It tells the story of a young boy in North Carolina who lives with his grandfather after his mother and father pass away. When his grandfather gets sick and is unable to take care of him, Pic’s older brother Slim swoops in to take him back to live with him in New York City. The first third of the book describes their trip up North, where Pic sees the country for the first time—having only experienced a sheltered life up until that point. The middle of the book describes how Slim and his wife Sheila’s struggle to make ends meet. A huge scene in this section shows Slim playing trumpet in a jazz club in Harlem, truly happy and lauded, and wishing he could make that his career. The last third of the book shows the trio travelling across the country to California in the hopes of making a new start for themselves. While most might see this as a coming-of-age novel because it is told in the perspective of Pic, one could also argue that Pic’s older brother Slim is actually Kerouac and that the story is a “follow your dreams” type narrative.

Recent literary criticism would likely have a lot to say about this novella. Critical race theory, in particular, would be discerning of why a middle-aged white man would think he could tell a story from the perspective of a Black boy. It brings to mind Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, specifically in the way it uses Black Southern dialect. Though *Huckleberry Finn* is often put on banned book lists for its use of racial slurs, the literary canon deems it

important for the way that it humanizes the experiences of Jim. This makes one wonder, does Kerouac's *Pic* do the same thing for its Black characters? Did Kerouac do enough in this text to justify his use of Black Southern dialect throughout?

There are moments in the text where one could argue that he was making a point about racism and the plight of Black people in America. For instance, when Pic and Slim are travelling by bus toward Washington, DC they are able to move to a seat right behind the bus driver. Slim explains—for his role throughout is of wise teacher—that this was because they crossed the Mason-Dixon line and jokingly calls Pic “Jim Crow” (171). Pic naively says that his name is not Jim, and Slim is shocked at how little his little brother knows of the world. He jokingly asks Pic if he saw the line when they crossed it and Pic, taking it literally, asks if they drove through it or over it. Slim finally explains, “But there *is* such a line, only thing is, it ain't on the *ground*, and it ain't in the air neither, it's jess in the head of Mason and Dixie, jess like all the other lines, border lines... all jess 'maginary lines in people's heads and don't have nothin to do with the ground” (172). This insightful commentary on the arbitrary nature of segregation laws seems progressive coming from a blue-collar white man in 1969, even if the use of this “dialect” is not.

Do these moments of compassion, though, justify writing the entire novel in Black Southern dialect? It seems Kerouac's motive for this decision was that it aided in his characterization of Pic as wide-eyed and sheltered. As in the scene above, Pic truly knows nothing about the world outside of the rural town he grew up in—and the dialect he uses emphasizes that ignorance. It seems as if Kerouac were relying on the stereotype of Southern drawl as a signifier for low intelligence. Conversely, while all the characters in the novel speak the same way, Pic is the only character who is so naive. One could argue that this is simply because he is a child, seeing the world through a child's sense of wonder, and not because he is Black. Kerouac could even have

been utilizing that childlike perspective to symbolize his own eye-opening experience moving to New York City for college.

While very few contemporary critics of note have actually commented on *Pic* specifically, the adoption of Black culture by white writers in literature is a much-discussed topic of late. Recently, political and literary critic Michael Szalay published a book called *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*. In it, he breaks down how different writers throughout the twentieth century have aligned themselves with Black culture with the aims of appearing more “hip.” And while it primarily analyzes literature through the lens of politics, some of his insights still ring true for Kerouac. For instance, when talking about Kerouac’s generation he says, “...during the sixties, that liberalism in the North demanded little more than that you ‘smoke pot and dig the right kind of jazz’ in order to demonstrate ‘that you really love Negroes.’ Seen this way, literary hip provided yet one more cost-free means of expressing goodwill toward African-Americans, one more way of embracing... ‘everything but the burden’” (Szalay 3). Here he coins the term “literary hip” and continues by likening it to the minstrel shows and blackface of the previous generation. While the difference is that “the blackface, now removed from sight,” (Szalay 4) is on the page, it still allows for others to profit from that exploitation.

For this line of criticism, he relies on another cultural critic named Eric Lott and his work on blackface minstrelsy. In a section from Szalay’s book breaking down how white authors have commodified Black culture, he references Lott: “As Lott sees it the minstrel show ‘helped to produce the culture commodity ‘blackness’.’ We might, then, read the prosthetic skin applied literally in blackface and metaphorically in all subsequent performances of blackness as glittering with... the patina of capital itself” (Szalay 58). Unconsciously or consciously, Kerouac utilized literary blackface for profit. Through this contemporary lens, we see Kerouac’s last work for what it was: an attempt at reinvention using the ruse of minstrelsy. His main character was meant as a

new “face” for Kerouac to wear in order to distance himself from the reality of his alcoholism and Pic’s naivety functions as a purification of Kerouac’s past transgressions. Unfortunately, this was all done at the expense of Black people.

Though Kerouac’s oeuvre is not typically examined through a racial lens, there are some critics who have called Kerouac out on his exploitation of Black culture. One that stands out in particular is Robert A. Hipkiss who published a critical study of all Kerouac’s works in 1976. In the first chapter of his book, “Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism”, Hipkiss addresses how Kerouac tended to write Black characters: “Throughout his fiction, the Negro is put-upon, a bit of a clown in his ability to see the humor of his situation, and almost never angry. Anger would, of course, humanize the Negro and destroy his enviable... refusal to give this world credit for being as important as the white man makes it. Kerouac’ idealized picture of the Negro becomes downright silly in *Pic*... Nothing destroys the primitive joy in the characters” (7-8). While an insight like this is common today, as seen with Szalay and Lott, it was progressive opinion for someone forty years ago. It seems even some of Kerouac’s contemporaries saw through his attempts to reinvent himself as something other than a washed up drunk.

### How His Public Perceived Him

Kerouac’s admission in *Big Sur* that he was struggling with alcoholism was not the only thing that lost him favor with the public; it was also his habit of showing up to interviews noticeably inebriated. Sterling Lord and several of his friends have spoken about Kerouac’s use of alcohol as a crutch in social situations. For someone as naturally shy and introverted as Kerouac, “performing” in an interview was a wholly uncomfortable struggle. Whether he ever got more comfortable in them between bursting on the scene in 1957 and his death in 1969 is impossible to decipher—simply because it took more and more liquid courage each time.

An interesting trip down this particular memory lane comes in a book called “Conversations with Jack Kerouac” edited by Kevin J. Hayes. The book collects ten of Kerouac’s magazine and newspaper interviews from the years 1958 to 1968. One of the most disparaging appeared in the Boston Sunday Globe in August of 1968. The interviewer, Gregory McDonald, spent an afternoon with Kerouac at his home in Lowell just a few days before his big move down to Florida. In typical celebrity profile fashion, McDonald took a lot of time setting up the scene with vivid descriptions. In the beginning he describes Kerouac as such: “... [he] sits in a rocking chair... open plaid flannel shirt, T-shirt over a big belly, still bigger chest, not having shaved or eaten for four days, not since we had arranged to do this thing... averaging twelve to fifteen shots of whiskey and gulps of beer an hour...” (*Conversations* 82). Clearly, McDonald was aiming for a shocking ‘fall from grace’ type story. He included details about how Kerouac’s wife, Stella, brought him cookies and more alcohol implying childishness or debilitation. Then, McDonald includes a humiliating story Kerouac shares with him from his recent trip to Europe where he “paid a prostitute in Portugal named Linda ten dollars to stare into his eyes for a solid hour by the clock. Then he gave her another ten” (*Conversations* 83). This lack of journalistic integrity—interviewing someone who is intoxicated to the point of embarrassment—speaks to how pervasive the stereotype of Kerouac as washed up drunk must have been at that time. If the public still had any respect for him, this type of story would not have been marketable.

In the face of harsh and mocking interviews like this one, Kerouac likely retaliated in the only way he knew how—with a story. In the last months of his life, Kerouac knew he was dying and wished to write a novel about a young boy who was completely and totally not like him. While one could attempt to explain why he chose to make that young boy Black, the point is quite irrelevant. Nothing—not a bad experience with fame, not personal attacks in interviews, not alcoholism—excuses Kerouac of his racism. Somewhere in between saying *Pic* is a “fun” or

“carefree” departure for Kerouac (in author-is-dead fashion) and completely writing him off for his troubling depiction of African-Americans is a place where we can learn from his mistakes.

### How He Actually Was

In 1964 when Kerouac and his mother moved to Florida for the penultimate time, he complained loudly and frequently about how isolated and lonely he felt away from the action of New York City and Massachusetts. He understood that his mother did better in the warmer climate, but he kept them as long as he could in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts after her stroke in 1966 (Charters 364). Eventually, though, his mother wore him down and he agreed to return to the tip of the country—that place which meant certain loneliness.

Before the trip down to St. Petersburg from Lowell, Kerouac had asked his brother-in-law to make the drive for him. Sampas claimed it was because no one trusted Jack—including Jack himself—to stay sober long enough to safely make the trip (Charters 364). This vision of Kerouac in the passenger seat makes the trip seem like a kidnapping. And that might have been Kerouac’s feeling. The inebriation in this case might have been less about addiction and more about a way to steel himself against a sense of foreboding.

One might wonder why Kerouac let himself be talked into this move if he knew it would make him so miserable. Was it because his sister died, leaving him as the only one left to care for his mother? Did he feel guilty for his years “on the road” and was now trying to make up for lost time and past transgressions? Or was it his alcoholism that made him dependent and complacent, as if he instinctively knew he was actually the one who needed caring for?

The house Kerouac bought for his mother, wife, and himself was small and single storied. Sitting at 5169 10th Ave. N and veiled by palm trees on either side of the narrow property, this brick home looked like the physical embodiment of someone hiding. The trees cast the home in shadow at all times except high noon and the living room windows were set far in under the

porch roof (Montgomery). Gabriella had her own room, where she remained almost constantly due to her paralysis. The walls were decorated with a mixture of Catholic and Buddhist religious objects (McClintock).

Kerouac missed the bond of camaraderie he had in the North. He missed his friends and he missed talking to people. He needed more than a wife and a mother. So, Kerouac took to the phone. In interviews after his death, Kerouac's friends and acquaintances all talked about the hours-long phone conversations they were roped into. He would call at any hour of the day or night—not paying attention to societal, cordial rules about calling during the dinner hour or after nine o'clock at night. What was worse, there was barely a time when he would make these phone calls sober. At this point in Kerouac's life he was drinking heavily, keeping a stasis state of inebriation. The conversations were not about current events, philosophical epiphanies, or reminiscences. These telephonic correspondents reported that the content of these conversations was the minutia of Kerouac's day. His hour by hour, day by day recounting—slurring and misremembering, back tracking, repeating—would wear on anyone's nerves. His friends were no exception (Gifford and Lee 311).

To those Kerouac did not correspond with over the phone, he wrote long letters. This was typical of Kerouac, who used to write novella-length letters to Ginsberg and Burroughs and Cassidy in the 1950s. His most frequent correspondent was his agent, Sterling Lord. Lord had been Kerouac's agent for his entire career so their relationship was familiar and honest. During this time—late 1968, early 1969—the two traded letters about the translations being sold of his most famous books. *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* were being published in Spanish for fans in Argentina, *Satori in Paris* was being translated into Italian, and *On the Road* was being offered to Yugoslavians for the first time (Item 69.13, Jack Kerouac Papers).



It is unclear how Kerouac felt about the globalization of his canon. Did he worry if translators would be able to capture his unique stream of consciousness, run-on sentence style? Did he feel like he was worthy of acclaim, of having people around the world read his work in their own language? Each letter to Lord during this time period shows evidence of his obsession over how much money each new printing would advance (Item 69.13, Jack Kerouac Papers). The mortgage on the new house and his mother's medical expenses dealt a blow to Kerouac's already meager savings (Gifford and Lee 312). Did he feel like he was prostituting himself and his life's work out for a quick buck?

In April of 1969, Kerouac sent Lord a letter saying that he had finished a novel he called *Pic*. Lord was delighted. It seems he had not actually completed it, though, because in the next few letters Lord asked him to send off the *Pic* manuscript whenever he was ready. After it was finally sent, Lord mentioned in a letter from June 12th that Merrill Pollack of W.W. Norton was interested in *Pic* and they needed to "wrestle around with each other or whatever they do in these publishing houses to see if they can't come up with an offer." In the very next paragraph of the letter he writes, "Incidentally, Arabel Porter had turned it down saying that she didn't like it at all unfortunately." Every publisher whom Lord shopped the book around to either hated it or felt it needed a final chapter. He writes in a September 9th letter, "The most favorable reactions feel it is not finished, so I hope you will put on the conclusion." It seems the slew of recent, negative reviews on his last several releases was making publishers skittish (Item 69.13, Jack Kerouac Papers).

Kerouac had no idea how to end the story, even going so far as to stubbornly claim it was finished. After being rejected by many of the major publishing houses at the time, Kerouac relented and wrote a final chapter. Rumor has it that he carried his typewriter into Gabriella's room and she told him how to finish it (Gifford and Lee 313). If true, this belies a closeness

between mother and son that resonated throughout his life. It also hints at Kerouac's dependency on more than just alcohol.

On July 11th, Kerouac received a letter from Lord with an interesting offer. Peter Maiken, an editor at the Chicago Tribune, wanted Kerouac to write an article—2,500 words in length—for \$1000. Seeing as the advances for the translations were only around \$200, this was a tempting deal; and Lord knew it. Still, he did his best to sell the idea to the sometimes-elitist Kerouac. He wrote, "As you know, Sunday Rotogravure magazines are not quite as free swinging as magazines like *Esquire* and *The Realist*, but they are printing better material all the time" (Item 69.13, Jack Kerouac Papers).

At the bottom of the letter, Lord stapled a sliced-up excerpt from the original offer from Maiken. It read: "'After Me, the Deluge' By Jack Kerouac. The great white father of the beat movement looks back on the progeny he spawned. What does he think of the hippie, the dropout, the war protester, the alienated radical? Does he have anything in common? Does he disown them? Does he qualify as an intellectual forebear of any sort? What is Jack Kerouac thinking about these days?" This blurb appeared word for word as the article's caption when it went to print ("After Me").

As soon as Kerouac read the letter he began drafting. He must have turned the letter over right then, because there are penciled words all over the back of the letter in his blocky handwriting (Item 69.13, Jack Kerouac Papers). Kerouac's friend and biographer, Ann Charters, noted that he viewed this as an opportunity to clearly define his political views (365). Which makes sense given that the last America saw of him was that confused appearance on William F. Buckley's "Firing Line." In one paragraph in particular he clearly lays out his opinions about big central government, socialism, and people who depend too much on the government by using a metaphor about a

parasite and a whale, a similar point to one he made on “Firing Line”, but made more coherently (“After Me”).

If the writing of this article was meant to counteract the impression he made on the television show, it seemed to do a good job. Of course, anything would be better optics than a bloated, intoxicated, and irrelevant fifty-something arguing with a well-spoken representative, the poet Ed Sanders, of the current counterculture (“Firing Line”). It’s much easier to communicate your viewpoints while in the comfort of your home behind your own typewriter.

One night in September Kerouac was at his local watering hole, “The Cactus Bar”. It was within walking distance of his home and he went there regularly. He had made friends with a few of the patrons. On this particular night, one of Kerouac’s drinking buddies was having a dispute with the manager of the bar. While trying to verbally defend his friend, Kerouac got beat up by the manager of the bar. He was dealt a concussion and some cracked ribs. The police were called, he was taken down to the station, and his wife was called to pick him up (Hill).

Did this happen as a result of Kerouac’s extreme loneliness? Was he so desperate to have a friend that he would put himself in danger to show fealty? Or was he just too inebriated to understand the situation? There is no evidence that Kerouac threw a punch or did more than just try to mediate the argument. However, it left him in even worse physical condition than he was before. Especially considering that he refused to seek any medical attention for his injuries (Hill).

Here is where the peacenik Buddhist and the hopeless drunk image merge for Kerouac. On one hand we see a man trying to mediate a conflict through discussion instead of violence—both a Buddhist and Catholic teaching. However, we also can picture a hopeless drunk spouting off and facing the consequences.

Right after this event, a journalist from The St. Petersburg Times named Jack McClintock showed up at Kerouac’s door asking to come in. McClintock wanted to do an in-depth interview as

a companion piece to “After Me, the Deluge,” and as a way for the people of the city to get to know the reclusive celebrity in their midst. From September and into October, McClintock and Kerouac became almost friends. The relationship seemed something more than what one imagines a journalist and their subject develop—even during extensive interviews needed for celebrity profiles. Kerouac, who was reading *The Life of Samuel Johnson* at the time, referred to McClintock as his Boswell (“Jack Kerouac’s last interview”). It seems he falsely fancied McClintock an admirer or confidant, instead of a man doing his job.

At this point, it is obvious that Kerouac knew he did not have long to live. He was grasping at straws. He knew his drinking was corroding his inside. His injury from the bar fight was likely aggravating him, whether he talked about it or not. He had started compulsively organizing and labelling all of his belongings, arranging them into an archive (McClintock). And who does that unless they are obsessed with death or planning to die?

## Coda

When I first started writing about Kerouac I gravitated toward the end of his story. One of the first pieces I wrote about him was this one, from the perspective of his wife on the day of his death: *Stella had been trying to get Jack to eat all day. Finally, she bargains with him, saying she won't fill up his pill container with more Scotch until he eats something. He asks for a can of tuna so she takes the lid off and hands it to him with a fork. She goes in to Gabriella's room and shares that she finally got Jack to eat something, and they both sit in silence for a while deep in their own thoughts. Stella goes to check on Jack and he is not in his chair. She sees light peeking out under the bathroom door. She knocks three times, asking if he needs any help but gets no answer. What she sees when she opens the door is horrifying, but only her hands shake when she calls for an ambulance—she can keep her voice steady. All night long she sits in the St. Anthony's Hospital waiting room, twisting her handkerchief in her hands, while the surgeons attempt twenty-six blood transfusions to fix Jack's ruptured stomach. She knew when she saw him on the bathroom floor that it was all over, but in the morning when they bring her the news, she thanks them for trying and asks them to call her a taxi to take her home.*

While I want to say the free-wheeling Jack I first met on the road is the one who speaks to me the loudest, it sadly is this one. The one broken by his experiences, by those who claimed to love him—his fans, his friends: bad influences both—by a disease passed down from his father who died the same way. I feel for him so deeply, I think, because it all could have been prevented.

I see the three Jacks as auras hovering around him. The farthest from him, writer rock star, pulling energy from everyone around him but not him. On the other side, pure Zen angel, drawing energy from Jack's best ambitions for himself, shimmering artificial white. And then draped all around him, washed up drunk, like a heavy velvet stage curtain dropped on him too early before scene was meant to end.

What matters most is that we learn from his story. He was a nobody from Lowell, Massachusetts who wanted so badly to be somebody. He worked so hard to get our attention, waited for years to published *On the Road*, and when he finally did, we exploited him. And we do this to everyone who deigns to ask for our attention. How many more people have to die a premature death because of our insatiable thirst for blood?

If we mythologize our icons—the ones who had it worse—into easily digestible archetypes, like the film *Howl* does to Kerouac, we will never learn our lesson. When we attribute their early deaths to a “rock and roll lifestyle” or the “hard life of the road” we absolve ourselves of guilt. And when we put them on a pedestal, guild them in gold, and remember only their smile we eliminate the possibility of learning from our own mistakes in how we cannibalize celebrities.

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