

**The conflict between social identity and religious identity  
in the work of Jack Kerouac**

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or any other person, for the purpose of obtaining any other qualification.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1944, New York City became home to a small group of friends who collectively sought change as they felt that their nation was deteriorating around them. Intellectual figures such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs helped form the libertine circle, a group united in their concern for post-war America. According to Bill Morgan:

This group in particular, came to represent a whole generation of frustrated, disaffiliated, and discontented young people... They said that they were exhausted and beaten down by the war, beaten down by the conservative morality of the past, and beaten down by the need to conform to the standards of an outdated society. (Morgan, in Parker 2007, pp.17-18)

This ‘Beat Generation’<sup>1</sup> as the group later became known felt that the second world war had stripped them of a personal and national identity, an idea best captured by Barry Miles when he claimed:

The world was a very confusing place: all the old values appeared to have been swept away by the war but no new ones had yet been proposed to replace them. (Miles 1998, p. 91)

The members of the Beat Generation believed that post-war American society had become blinded by material greed as the surge of new employment during the war had eased the financial burden that had affected the people of America since the depression years of the late twenties. These Beat figures acknowledged the importance of the economic boom, however, they were not so naive as to have faith in economic stability. They saw that the newly adopted American value system focused on monetary gain and therefore they denounced it as being superficial and provisional. Beat poet Allen Ginsberg recorded this idea when in a letter to his father he wrote, ‘people who have accepted standard American values as

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<sup>1</sup>The term “Beat” was originally used in the jive talk of African Americans to describe a state of poverty or feeling of exhaustion and was later adopted by Jack Kerouac as a label for his group who claimed to be tired of all the forms and all the conventions of the world.

permanent, what we are saying is that these values are not really standard nor permanent and we are in a sense I think ahead of the times...' (Campbell 1999, pp.233-234).

The members of the Beat Generation had already witnessed the turbulence of the Depression years, an economic decline that appeared to first ambush the people of America at a time when the country relished financial comfort, and therefore, the Beats believed that the people of America should search for new values that were indelible, and moreover, truly meaningful to the individual. The group was united in the conviction that such values were obtainable as they believed that 'there was another America out there that remained unsung: a rawer, more primitive America where the spirit had not been tamed and moulded by the relentless machine of modern materialism' (Turner 1996, p.55).

This desire for change motivated the Beats and they soon began to voice their anger, reflect on their pain and share their journey with any willing reader who was not afraid to venture beyond the prudent fences of a conservative post-war society. They studied global social affairs and paid close attention to the portrayal of American society offered by writers of past decades such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. They witnessed the new found liberation of other countries but felt their own was shackled and outdated, their nation claimed to be the land of opportunity yet the high level of racism indicated that this opportunity only applied to a select minority. The Beats were still optimistic however, but 'they believed that a new vision of life would only emerge once the veneer of civilized values were stripped away... In Beat thinking, humans were essentially holy beings who had been corrupted by civilization and could be saved by rediscovering their original natures' (Turner 1996, p.76). Adventure was central to this rediscovery and the members of the Beat Generation felt that real values were to be found outside their post-war American society. These men wanted to experience the American freedom that was promoted in the work of

writers such as Walt Whitman and Jack London. This can be seen in *The Dharma Bums* when Kerouac wrote, ‘the only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights, and doing what I wanted... would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse, where we could be supervised’ (Kerouac 2000(A), p.103).

As a founding member of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac was the first to capture this desire for change when in January 1944 he wrote in a journal:

We are all too sensitive to go on: it is too cold, and our bodies are too exhausted. There is too much life around. The multitude is feverish and ill. There is war where men sleep on snow, and when we waken from our sleep we do not desire to go on... This is an age that has created sick men, all weaklings like me. What we need is a journey to new lands. I shall embark soon on one of these... perhaps when I return, I shall be well again. (Kerouac 2000(B), p.155)

Like the other members of the group, Kerouac felt a sense of emptiness and loss in the land he once cherished as a boy and therefore he adopted the role of ‘a great rememberer redeeming life from darkness’ (McNally 1980, p.141).

Kerouac is widely regarded as the King of the Beats, for not only was he the first to identify the group as being a Beat Generation, but was the first to propel the Beat literary movement with the publication of his novel *The Town and the City* in 1950. During an interview in 1958, Kerouac spoke about this term “Beat Generation”, claiming:

The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the forties, of a generation of crazy illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way – a vision gleamed from the way we had heard the word “beat” spoken on the street corners on Times Square and in the village, in other cities in the downtown city night of post-war America – beat meaning down and out but full of intense conviction – we’d even heard old 1910 Daddy Hipsters of the streets speak the word that way, with a melancholy sneer – it never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn’t gang up but were solitary bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization – the subterranean, heroes who’d finally turned from the freedom machine of the west and were taking drugs, digging bop, having flashes of insight, experiencing the derangement of the senses, talking strange, being poor and glad, prophesying a new style of American culture... but the beat characters after 1950 vanished into jails and madhouses, or were shamed into silent conformity, the generation itself was short-lived and small in number. (Kerouac 1958, *The Philosophy of the Beat Generation*, Esquire)

The Beats found it difficult to introduce their work to the public, as according to Campbell, ‘The beat generation writers [were] unusual among literary gangs in never having had a little magazine of their own, through which to distribute their early work’ (Campbell 1999, p.93). The publication of Kerouac’s debut novel therefore generated an optimistic energy within the group and although the novel received a number of bad reviews, it nevertheless created a platform upon which the Beat writers would attempt to develop, what they saw, as a more authentic vision for the future of America.

*The Town and the City* was largely autobiographical and bore stylistic resemblance to the writing of Thomas Wolfe. Like Wolfe, Kerouac incorporated much of his own life into the central character and managed to do so with a great deal of attention to accuracy and detail, ‘Kerouac was memory’s servant’ (Campbell 1999, p.51). Kerouac’s debut novel captured his sense of nostalgia and youthful passion, ‘His talent as a writer was not his inventiveness with new characters and plots, but rather his power to dramatize the spirit of his own life into romantic fantasy’ (Charters 1974, p.55). Kerouac portrayed the problems encountered by all of humanity in the journey through life, the struggle to overcome the fall from innocence, but more importantly, he captured the feeling of emptiness and alienation that haunted the majority of people in post-war America. He therefore allowed the reader to identify with his own pain and share the comfort of knowing that they were not alone in this time of social unease.

After *The Town and the City*, Kerouac discarded the Wolfean style of writing and adopted a style of writing that allowed him to populate the pages with the same energy and vigour that he experienced in everyday life. According to Theado, ‘Kerouac takes himself to the edge of experience, whether that experience is sexuality, drugs, fast cars, bop jazz,



religious and spiritual epiphanies, or madness, and he records the sensations that he feels...’ (Theado 2000, p.170). Kerouac was never content unless he was testing the boundaries of society, relentlessly rushing between the pure and perverse and this ‘tension between angelic and diabolic nature would animate much of his best writing; indeed it would be one of the chief sources of energy for the Beat Generation’ (Nicosia 1983, p.255). His ceaseless inquisition in both his work and his life was fundamental in the Beat movement and it is because of this contribution that this thesis will focus on the work of Jack Kerouac.

The thesis will explore the conflict between social identity and religious identity in his life and work. The examination of his texts will catalogue the thoughts and movements of the Beat writer throughout his life, showing the reader an almost Kierkegaardian transition from the youthful recognition of social flaw, to the hedonistic search for self and meaning, and finally, a ‘leap’ to the religious stage of spiritual inquiry. This thesis will place and acknowledge the work of Kerouac within the context of the Beat Generation, however, the primary objective is to honour Kerouac’s own wish by focusing on his work as an individual writer. Kerouac wished to distance his work from group association and he made these feelings clear in a letter to his Italian Translator Fernanda Pivano in 1964:

I’ve just turned down \$3,000 because I didn’t want to be in the same film with Ginsberg, please do not identify my biography with his, or with Corso’s. They’ve both become political fanatics, both have begun to revile me because I don’t join them in their political opinions, and I am sick of them and all their beatnik friends... what these bozos and their friends are up to now is simply the last act in their original adoption and betrayal of any truly “beat” credo. They have used “beat” for their own ends... Now that we’re all getting to be middle-aged I can see that they’re just frustrated hysterical provocateurs and attention-seekers with nothing on their mind but rancor towards “America” and the life of ordinary people. They have never written about ordinary people with any love, you may have noticed. I still admire them of course, for their technical excellence as poets, as I admire Genet and Burroughs for their technical excellence as prose writers, but all four of them belong to the “keep-me-out-of-the picture” department and that’s the way I want it from now on. (Kerouac 2000(E), pp.429-430)

This plea to be distanced from other members of the Beat Generation came at a time when the Beat Movement was at the pinnacle of fame and its writers were collectively worshipped

like Gods, therefore, when Kerouac wrote, ‘I hope you can make arrangements to publish me by *myself*. Otherwise, you will be doing me a disservice as an individual voice in America, and I do mean *individual*, i.e. ALONE’ (Kerouac 2000(E), p.430), he was certainly letting it be known that he felt his Beat association was clouding the true message of his work:

Most people seemed to know of him more as a pop-culture icon that represents youth movements, quests of the spirit, and satiation of the senses with fast cars, jazz, drugs, and the pursuit of kicks. *Time magazine’s* obituary refers to Kerouac’s status as “shaman” of the Beat Generation who sounded his “barbaric yawp,” yet the article never directly mentions that he was a writer. (Theado 2000, p.1)

Central to the study of this individual voice will be an understanding of the role of religion in the life and work of Kerouac. By examining the role of religion in the life and work of Kerouac, this thesis will expose the conflict between religious identity and social identity in his life and work and will argue that it was this conflict that caused his personal and literary decline. Kerouac was viewed as a saintly figure by his family and community and the tension that grew out of the social expectation placed on him by his bohemian literary circle certainly caused him a great deal of pain and confusion and this thesis will attempt to highlight this in his writing. According to Ann Charters, Kerouac was ‘... convinced that his religious devotions would lead him down a true path of spiritual wisdom and personal salvation’ (Charters 1974, p.190). Jack Kerouac was concerned with the emotional and spiritual dimension of his literary world and he saw the Beat Movement as a ‘second religiousness’ (Kerouac 2000(E), p.68). One need only consider his public readings to acknowledge the emotional dimension of his work, where unlike traditional readings of the time, Kerouac created a ritualistic environment where his recitations most resembled the act of prayer. This is significant as Kerouac’s work was largely based on personal experience, and therefore, the emotional, psychological, and spiritual nature encountered by the reader is that which provides a true understanding of Kerouac as both man and writer.

Chapter One of the thesis will therefore focus on Kerouac's childhood, as it was in his early years that he was most tested: emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Such texts as *The Town and the City*, *Visions of Gerard*, and *Vanity of Duluo*z will be examined as these texts record the events of Kerouac's childhood and therefore allow insight into the developing mental state of his youth. Kerouac's dependence on a spiritual saviour can be witnessed from his youngest years when he struggled to cope with the loss of a sibling, 'It must have been a harrowing experience for the entire family to see a child dying in agony, but particularly so for four-year-old Jack, who learnt about suffering and death before he could even read' (Miles 1998, p.12). According to Jim Christy:

His earliest memories were Gerard and the haunting iconography of the catholic church... His brother took him through the Stations of the Cross at the side of the nearby church. There were crucifixes, palm-frond crosses, and replicas of bleeding hearts throughout the Kerouac household. (Christy 1998, p.13)

This connection between Catholicism and suffering is a recurring theme in Kerouac's work and it is recorded effectively in *Lonesome Traveler* when he remembers the '... great tormented statue of Christ on the cross' (Kerouac 2000(C), p.36). Kerouac was beset with fears of death and consequently became preoccupied with the idea of resurrection and immortality. The death of his brother Gerard in 1926 had a profound effect on him, and like the other members of his family, his only comfort came in the form of prayer, 'Jack liked the reassurance given by Catholicism, and reinforced by his mother's stories of Gerard, that people died and went to heaven' (Nicosia 1983, p.551).

In addition to the examination of the theme of death, Chapter One will also focus on the theories of Freud to gain a better understanding of the social and psychological layers of Kerouac's youth. Freud's theories will be used to examine the unorthodox relationship Kerouac appeared to develop with his mother following the death of Gerard and therefore will explore such topics as the Oedipus and Madonna/whore complex. In this chapter,

consideration will also be given to the repressive economic order of Kerouac's society. This can be witnessed in the work of Kerouac, who was 'brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression [and] weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war' (Campbell 1999, p.132). Kerouac described this period in *Maggie Cassidy* as he recorded a memory of his mother at work:

She herself worked part time in the shoe factory with her grave sense of life sitting grim and tireless at the skiving machine holding stubborn shoe leathers to a blade, her fingertips blackened, years on end of it from fourteen on, other girls like her up and down the machines – the whole family working, 1939 was a tail-end depression year about to be overshadowed by events in Poland. (Kerouac 2000(D), p.48)

Kerouac certainly witnessed class hierarchy during childhood as he saw his family lose their home and business due to the economic downturn of pre-war America.

The second chapter of the thesis will focus on the period of Kerouac's life when he began to travel through America in search of meaning and salvation. This chapter will concentrate on such texts as *On the Road* and *Lonesome Traveler* in order to map Kerouac's 'search for a soul in an America that appeared to be losing its essence to materialism' (Turner 1996, p.23). These texts focus on the period of Kerouac's life when hope still soothed his heart and faith still occupied his mind. He felt that 'the road must eventually lead to the whole world' (Kerouac 1972, p.216), and therefore felt that his journey would deliver him from the spiritual emptiness of post-war America to a land of wisdom and truth. Far from being handed the pearl of wisdom, Kerouac became unsure of his identity and he felt a greater sense of alienation as a result. Kerouac was haunted by this sense of alienation as 'everywhere across the country he looked for a vision of America, helplessly rushing toward its promise, and then repelled by its emptiness' (Charters 1974, p.135), however, this only served to strengthen his bond with God at the end of his journey as he concluded that 'religion [was] the only kick left' (Turner 1996, p.179).

In this chapter particular attention will be paid to the Christian morality that was firmly embedded in the social value system that Kerouac so adamantly raged against. By utilizing Friedrich Nietzsche's work, this chapter will explore the view that Christian morality promotes the suppression of natural instincts and I intend to highlight this in the work of Kerouac. Kerouac was influenced by the work of Nietzsche but claimed that he did not agree with his views on religion. Many of Kerouac's friends in his later years claimed that he denounced Nietzsche's religious views because he secretly agreed with these views but felt guilty for betraying his religious upbringing. A study of the work of Nietzsche is therefore significant as it will address many of the issues that Kerouac struggled with and will allow a better understanding of Kerouac's own religious belief system.

The final chapter will focus on the last years of Kerouac's life and literary career, where, according to Steve Turner, 'Instead of facing God he faced himself, and didn't like what he saw' (Turner 1996, p.161). A study of *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* will be conducted in an attempt to focus on this period of his life when he appears to have been unsuccessful in his spiritual pursuit and had tired of waiting for God. These texts are significant in that they record the period when Kerouac himself seems to have seriously questioned his faith in God. These texts provide insight into a world of diminishing hope, a period when Kerouac 'hung suspended between the ethical boundaries, fascinated by the perverse as well as the holy, unable to wholly commit himself to either, and ultimately tolerant of both' (McNally 1980, p.11). Here, Kerouac no longer held the conviction that the future would bear the fruits of salvation, he no longer held the belief that 'somewhere along the line the pearl of wisdom would be handed to [him]' (Kerouac 1972, p.14), but rather, he felt the walls of his sad existence closing in on him. According to Turner, 'Jack had begun his personal and literary decline. He had been almost everywhere he was ever going to go,

had said all he was ever going to say, and life had lost its capacity to thrill him' (Turner 1996, p.165). However, unable to divorce himself from religion and God, Kerouac felt that he could make 'a religion out of whatever he was doing' (McNally, 1980: 22) and his devotion became motivated by convenience rather than faith. Consequently, he attempted to marry values from different religious orders in a bid to reclaim the hope that once comforted his soul.

Overall, this thesis will undertake a philosophical and theological approach to the work of Jack Kerouac. Central to this will be the connection between society and religion and therefore the hermeneutical perspective that will be utilized will be the application of psychoanalytical theory to his texts. Kerouac's novels were largely autobiographical and therefore the application of psychoanalytical theory to his work will sanction a better understanding of Kerouac's mental state. This theory will allow an examination of the childhood conflict that evidently played a major role in the alienation suffered by Kerouac in his adult life. By focusing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, an examination will be conducted into such topics as the Oedipus complex, Madonna/whore complex, social phobia, and homoerotic replacement, which can all be identified in the work of Kerouac, and which are significant in relation to the understanding of his mental state in his later life. Indeed, one could not possibly attempt to comprehend Kerouac's adult belief system without first gaining insight into his corrupted childhood, where, according to McNally:

The nuns reinforced [Kerouac's] morbid self-accusations of sinfulness with grim lectures on purgatory and an infinity of sins. In so doing, they initiated him into the ancient cult of the virgin-whore, the notion that women were either good – like his mother, like the sisters – or evil. (McNally 1980, pp.8-9)

A psychoanalytical reading of Kerouac's work will therefore allow a better understanding of the true message of his work. The application of psychoanalytical theory will address many

of the issues that had an obvious effect on his writing and will therefore allow the reader to gain a better understanding of the conflict that existed between the spiritual identity he developed in his youth and the social identity that he had to live up to as an experimental writer in the bohemian environment of New York during the 1950s.

# CHAPTER 1

This chapter will explore the religious values that Kerouac developed during his early years. An examination of these values is significant as it will permit a greater understanding of the true message of Kerouac's writing. As aforementioned, the connection between Catholicism and suffering is a recurring theme in Kerouac's work and it is certainly something that he struggled with when he gained fame for his writing in later years. Kerouac's fans wanted a man that was driven by energy and impulse, not a man who saw himself as a tortured saint. This chapter will therefore focus on Kerouac's early years when he first began to associate Catholicism with suffering. An examination of this development of his spiritual identity is significant as it appears that these early beliefs helped him pursue his literary career, however, upon gaining fame for his writing, it was also these beliefs that caused him confusion when he attempted to balance the religion of his youth with the decadent ways that his new literary life demanded.

Jack Kerouac was born in the small industrial town of Lowell, Massachusetts on March 12, 1922. His parents, Leo and Gabrielle, like many other French-Canadians of the time, had come to this textile town in search of occupational stability and financial reward. Both Leo and Gabrielle were class conscious and therefore the move to Lowell proved to be a good opportunity for them to improve their social status as Leo was beginning to make his mark in the print business. Occupationally, Lowell appeared to be the town of prosperity; however, the Kerouacs soon realized that prosperity could not secure true identity or happiness. According to McNally:

Francis Cabot Lowell understood the river's power, and cut its curve with a canal and a dam, creating the first industrial town in America, home to dozens of grimy red-brick shoe and textile mills. Long rows of cheap wooden boarding houses surrounded the red-brick core, sheltering the thousands of workers who fled the



boredom of their Vermont and New Hampshire farms for the opportunities of industry. But the tenements were houses, not homes, and that was one of the things that marked Lowell as different; from the beginning, it was a place for the alienated, those disjuncted from a rooted past. (McNally 1980, p.3)

This sense of alienation and lack of identity troubled Jack and therefore 'he was always bothered by the question of who he was and where he belonged' (Turner, 1996: 33). Growing up in Lowell was a major contributor to these feelings as the cultural diversity of his environment appeared to have a damaging effect on Jack. The comfortable surroundings of the French-Canadian culture of his neighbourhood fused with the American culture he experienced at school left him confused and unsure and his inability to grasp the English language increased his feelings of isolation from a young age, he 'was aware at an early age of being a foreigner in his own country, and the theme of alienation, of searching for his true home, would pervade his writing' (Turner 1996, p.31). Indeed, while this cultural conflict in Lowell did not help cement a true sense of identity in Jack as a boy, it appears that the greatest obstruction to Jack's formation of a sense of self came in fact from his own family.

Following the birth of Jack, the Kerouacs were largely preoccupied with the well-being of their eldest son Gerard. Gerard, who was six years Jack's senior, suffered from rheumatic fever and his illness resulted in Jack spending the first four years of his life in the shadow of his older brother. Jack believed that he was not wanted and despite secretly blaming Gerard for the lack of attention he received from his parents, he nevertheless 'attached himself with fierce devotion to his older brother' (Nicosia 1983, p.25). In *Visions of Gerard*, Jack recalls a memory of this time, claiming, 'For me the first four years of my life are permeant and gray with the memory of a kindly serious face bending over me and being me and blessing me' (Kerouac 1991, p.2). Gerard's illness forced him to spend much of his time in the house and as his only playmate and companion; Jack was heavily influenced by the words and actions of his older brother. Gerard led a devout childhood and

showed a great deal of compassion to all the living creatures around him. He would show kindness to the children of his neighbourhood and help injured animals that he found near his home:

Gerard was an extraordinary child... [He] had a great love for animals. In the back yard he kept a pet rabbit; on the porch roof just below his bedroom window, he sprinkled crumbs for the birds; he even took a hurt mouse from a trap and nursed it back to health. When their cat ate the mouse, he gently lectured the cat on the immorality of eating one's neighbours! (Nicosia 1983, p.25)

This level of sensitivity and tenderness was not characteristic of many of the figures in Jack's life and therefore he came to see this boy who was only six years his senior as a fallen angel rather than a misfortunate child. He refused to submit to the feelings of pity held by his family and friends and instead held the belief that Gerard was a saintly figure, like Christ, who was born to suffer, but, who would be greatly rewarded in heaven. He felt that Gerard would guide him so that he too could live a life of purity, an idea recorded in *Visions of Gerard* when Kerouac wrote, 'like the abandoned howl of a dog and no one to open the door – for me: - Gerard to open it to the love of God, whereby, now, 30 years later, my heart, healed, is still warm, saved – without Gerard what would have happened to Ti Jean<sup>2</sup>?' (Kerouac 1991, p.5). This fascination with Gerard's behaviour quickly developed into imitation as Jack battled relentlessly to receive the same attention that was being received older brother.

Much of Jack's work can be traced to his early years, particularly, the influence and effect the life and death of Gerard had on him, and therefore, while it is not the intention of this thesis to attack the many critics who attribute Kerouac's writing to the 'restless uncertainty' (Campbell 1999, p.123) inflicted by global war, it will be argued that the war was merely a contributor rather than the cause. According to Sigmund Freud, 'before the

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<sup>2</sup> Ti Jean was the name used by Jack's family to address him in his childhood.

child reaches the age of 5, there have been traumatic experiences, conflicts and repressions, which, though totally forgotten themselves, have left a residue behind which forms the content of the boy's compulsive fear' (Freud 2002, p.132-133). This can certainly be identified in Jack, as according to Miles, 'Gerard's death had a profound effect on four-year-old Jack, who was beset with fears' (Miles 1998, p.75). Jack had to contemplate such issues as the meaning of life and reason for death at a very young age, issues that were to haunt him for the rest of his life. Many of these issues are effectively raised in *Visions of Gerard* in statements such as: 'why should such hearts be made to wince and cringe and grown out life's breath? – Why does God kill us?' (Kerouac 1991, pp.67-68), and, 'it happens to all of us one way or the other, we can pray if we want but it won't help – go on, God, don't call yourself God in my face – Doin [sic] business under conditions like that, we'll never win' (Kerouac 1991, p.80). Kerouac could not comprehend how a child as graceful and devout as Gerard could be punished and made to suffer and the only conclusion that offered comfort was that Gerard was not in fact being punished by God, but rewarded. This was perhaps the first time Jack began to equate Catholicism with suffering, the beginning of what eventually resulted in his attempts to marry the values of Catholicism and Buddhism in his later life:

The experience of Gerard's death merged with the pictures of death Jack saw all around him in the Catholic church. The image of the bleeding, life-size Christ that hung on a wooden cross at the grotto joined with that of the suffering boy whose white casket lay in the front room of his home before the funeral. Jack became frightened of darkness and shadows and wanted to know how he could get to heaven and be reunited with his brother. For a short time after his brother's death, Jack wondered whether Gerard, like Christ, would return in some resurrected form. (Turner 1996, pp.34-35)

These religious views adopted by Jack may have helped to comfort his youthful sensitivity; however, these values left Jack helplessly confused, and consequently, ignited the fires of alienation that he would spend the remainder of his life trying to quench. This

confusion is evident in *Visions of Gerard* when Kerouac records his vague memory of Gerard's death:

I don't remember how Gerard died, but (In my memory, which is limited and mundane) here I am running pell-mell out of the house about 4 o' clock in the afternoon and down the sidewalk of Beaulieu street yelling to my father whom I've seen coming around the corner woeful and slow with straw hat back and coat over arms in the summer heat, gleefully I'm yelling "Gerard est Mort!" (Gerard is dead!) as tho it was some great event that would make everything better... But I thought it had something to do with some holy transformation that would make him greater and more Gerard like – He would reappear, following his "death," so huge and all powerful and renewed. (Kerouac 1991, p.109)

This appears to show not only the close connection Jack saw between death and Catholicism, but also, perhaps most effectively captures the unnatural emotional and psychological mentality that developed in the Kerouac household around this time.

The treatment of Gerard's illness by the Kerouac family deprived Jack of any sense of individuality or identity, he pined for the love and attention that Gerard was receiving and felt that he was living his life in Gerard's shadow, 'there's no doubt in my heart that my mother loves Gerard more than she loves me' (Kerouac 1991, p.72). This sibling rivalry also contributed to Jack's confused and melancholic state, and according to a psychologist he saw many years later, was indeed a major cause of the unhappiness that pervaded his adult life. In a letter to his sister in 1945, Jack wrote:

The reason I have this subconscious will to failure, a sort of death-wish, stems from something I did before I was five years old and which stamped upon me a neurotic and horrible feeling of guilt... The psychoanalyst figured that I hated Gerard and he hated me – as little brothers are very likely to do, since children that age are primitive and aggressive – and that I wished he were dead, and he died – so I felt that I had killed him, and ever since, mortified beyond repair, warped in my personality and will, I have been subconsciously punishing myself and failing at everything. (Kerouac 1996, p.87)

Despite Jack's true feelings however, be it guilt or love, following the death of Gerard, he found himself trapped in the faith of his brother and inevitably spent the remainder of life trying to mould a life that would be approved by him.

Jack truly believed that Gerard was of saintly stature and said of his funeral: 'It's a vast ethereal movie, I'm an extra and Gerard is the hero and God is directing it from Heaven' (Kerouac 1991, p.127). He claimed that 'the whole reason why [he] ever wrote at all and drew breath to bite in vain with pen of ink, great gad with indefensible usable pencil, because of Gerard, the idealism, Gerard the religious hero' (Kerouac 1991, p.112). Jack wanted to follow in his brother's footsteps and he adopted the same idealistic values that he hoped might one day earn him the same role as Gerard. What he failed to consider however, was that these values he had inherited from his brother and which his brother had learned from his parents and community may have been fundamentally flawed. The most effective example of this is perhaps best identified in the theme of shame that enslaved both Gerard and Jack to a narrow perspective of life. As aforementioned, Jack was highly influenced by his older brother, and therefore, like Gerard, he allowed shame to dominate much of his life. Jack had spent his first five years listening to Gerard speak about shame, such as the occasion when he told the cat he should feel shame for killing the mouse, and more importantly, the time when Jack himself felt shame for watching a school friend in the urinal. This second event is particularly significant in that Jack was to associate sexuality with shame for the rest of his life, 'Confession every Friday afternoon was a rite that picked at the unhealed scabs of his conscience, reminding him anew of his "corruptness"... Sexuality above all could not stand comparison with Gerard, and masturbation became another bar in [Jack's] prison of conscience' (McNally 1980, pp.10-11). Like Gerard, Jack came to see shame in the most natural developments of childhood and this was supported by the religious pillars in his life, the church and his mother. Following the death of Gerard, 'Jack was thrust into his brother's role as spiritual centre of the family' (Nicosia 1983, p.27), and 'for the rest of [his] childhood, tales of Gerard's goodness would be the staple of [his mother's] lessons in behaviour, lessons that reminded him endlessly of his inferiority' (McNally 1980, p.6). Both the nuns and

Gabrielle believed that their teaching had led Gerard 'into martyred sainthood' (Nicosia 1983, p.25) and therefore they were extremely strict with Jack. In *The Town and the City* Jack wrote about this time of his life through the character of Mickey Martin:

For a moment he imagined that he himself lay in the crib, that he himself was the Christ child and that the Virgin Mary was his own mother... Then the boy looked up again at the altar manger and saw that he too must suffer and be crucified like the child Jesus there, who was crucified for his sake, who pointed out his guiltiness that way, but who also pointed out what was going to happen to him, for he too, Michael Martin, was a child with a holy mother. (Kerouac 1970, p.178)

Jack had an unusual relationship with his mother by this stage. In his teenage years she lectured him on the sinfulness of sexuality, and even at thirteen welcomed him into her bed while her husband slept in Jack's room. According to Nicosia, 'her attention embarrassed him. For the rest of his life he was troubled by the fact that she had bathed him until he was already capable of an erection' (Nicosia 1983, p.27). He had also been lectured on the sinfulness of women from an early age and therefore he held the belief that women were either pure like his mother, or sordid temptresses who were attempting to obstruct his path to heaven. This heightened Jack's sense of guilt and shame and he began punishing himself for instinctual feelings that were not uncommon for a child of his age. These childhood lessons certainly influenced Kerouac's view of relationships in later life:

Jack's relations with women were hampered by Catholic guilt and anguish... Jack frequently talked against both women and sex, and what was even more classically Catholic; he seemed to enjoy the repentance after sex as much as he revelled in the wickedness of the act itself. (Nicosia 1983, p.493)

According to Leland, 'it's reasonable to read Kerouac's portraits of women as simple misogyny... Kerouac was never easy with the pleasure principle, vacillating between kick-seeking and a puritan distaste for the body' (Leland 2007, p.96). Kerouac viewed women as evil temptresses who through their lustful acts, brought new life into a world of suffering, an idea he would later encapsulate in the phrase "pretty girls make graves". According to

Christy, 'he thought of women as either whores or madonnas, and when he did have sex with women, he felt guilty for participating in the tragic cycle of birth and death' (Christy 1998, p.21). He believed that 'children might sicken and die, and death or the prospect of it was something he never took easily. He reasoned that if you don't have children, you can't lose them' (Nicosia 1983, p.542). This view was raised by Kerouac later in his novel *The Dharma Bums* when he wrote:

I'd gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel. "Pretty girls make graves," was my saying, whenever I'd had to turn my head around involuntarily to stare at the incomparable pretties of Indian Mexico... the absence of active lust in me had given me a new peaceful life that I was enjoying a great deal. (Kerouac 2000(A), p.27)

Consequently, as Jack grew older he began to see his mother as his partner rather than a parent. An incestuous desire can be seen in much of Kerouac's work and one need only look to the poem *Lucien Midnight*, 'I'm/ my mother's son and my mother/ is the universe' (Kerouac 1971, p.13) or yet more controversial, a dream recorded by Kerouac, in which he wrote, 'Night... my mother and I are arm in arm on the floor, I'm crying afraid to die, she's blissful and has one leg in pink sexually out between me and I'm thinking "Even on the verge of death women think of love and snaky affection"' (Kerouac 1960, p.123) to fully comprehend the abnormal bond between mother and son. Kerouac's novel *Subterraneans* is perhaps the most insightful text with regards to this oedipal tie between Jack (Leo Percipied) and his mother:

When Leo is away from his mother, he involves himself fully in the nightlife of the city- drugs, drink, sex – with the realization that he can return home for emotional and moral cleansing. He never refers to a healthy love relationship in his past, or in anyone else's for that matter. Once he refers to being in love when he was sixteen years old, an oblique reference to Maggie Cassidy, but the experience only served to make him jaded. The only woman with whom he has a social relationship is his mother. Gerald Nicosia points out that the name Leo Percepied has symbolic significance. Leo was Kerouac's father's name, and percepied "is French for pierced foot. Oedipus of Greek legend had his feet pierced as a child and derived his name indirectly from that fact, "Oedipus" being Greek for "swollen foot," the

condition caused by his injury” (Nicosia, 449)... Leo reveres his mother and has taken his dead father’s place in her affections. (Theado 2000, p.119)

Speaking on this topic of incestuous desire, and more importantly, its connection to neurosis in adulthood, Sigmund Freud once wrote:

Psycho-analysis has taught us that a boy’s earliest choice of objects for his love is incestuous and that those objects are forbidden ones - his mother and his sister. We have learnt, too, the manner in which, as he grows up, he liberates himself from this incestuous attraction. A neurotic, on the other hand, invariably exhibits some degree of psychical infantilism. He has either failed to get free from the psycho-sexual conditions that prevailed in his childhood or he has returned to them – two possibilities which may be summed up as developmental inhibitions and regression. (Freud 1960, p.17)

Many of Jack’s closest friends acknowledged this unorthodox relationship he had with his mother as even in his adulthood she would read his mail, interfere in his relationships and participate in his wild drinking sessions:

Astute observers have testified to the oedipal tie between them. Having lost every other man in her life, Memere was determined to hang onto Jack even if she had to strangle him with kid gloves or “unknowingly” drive him crazy. She succeeded in keeping him a child who had to look up to giants like his brother and father, and for whom the rites of passage to manhood consisted of “marriage” to her. (Nicosia 1983, p.575)

In later years, as this relationship came under close scrutiny, Jack became defensive and publicly explained, ‘I’ve always been ‘settled with my mother’ who supported me by working in the shoe factories while I wrote most of my books years ago. She’s my friend as well as my mother. When I go on the road I always have a quiet clean home to come back to and to work in’<sup>3</sup>, however, what Jack neglected to share here with the public was the confession he had made to his friend, the Japanese American painter Matsumi, ‘about an occasion when his mother had tried to have sex with him’ (Miles 1998, p.280). As aforementioned, the treatment of Jack by his mother in his teenage years exacerbated his fear

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<sup>3</sup> *Newsday*, 18 July 1964.



of leaving childhood and contributed to his belief in 'pre-birth perfection', a theory that became central to both his life and work and which was certainly the philosophical platform from which his debut novel developed.

*The Town and the City* portrayed a contrasting parallel between the romantic innocence of youth and the destructive corruption of adulthood, a philosophical preoccupation that weighed heavily on the mind of its author. Jack's belief in 'pre-birth perfection' was the premise on which he built his philosophical theory, he held the view that the closest humanity could come to perfection was in the early stages of youth:

He came to believe that the only perfection humans ever experience is before birth, and that we spend our lives hankering after that bliss. Unable to return to the womb, the closest we can come to it is in the warm memories of childhood.  
(Turner 1996, p.31)

This nostalgic loneliness saturated the pages of his debut text, creating a literary foundation on which he would construct a social movement.

The novel was largely autobiographical and encapsulated the true feelings of its author, and the effective use of omniscient narration and multiple central characters allowed Kerouac the freedom to explore many themes that would be developed in later works.

According to Theado:

One cannot truly appreciate Kerouac and the complexity of the themes he would evolve throughout his career without reading his first book... *The Town and the City* digs into the moods and motivations of an American family before and after World War II, using the Martin family as a microcosm for Kerouac's vision of the American condition. (Theado 2000, p.39)

Kerouac's introduction of the Martin family presented him with a literary vehicle that allowed him to record the journey of a regular American family from the simplicity of childhood into the darkness of adolescence, 'It's a beautiful dream you have when you're young, before you learn how some men can be, how things can break' (Kerouac 1970, p.202).

The Martin family were used to represent Kerouac in the novel and each character contributed a different element of his personality, 'what I did there was separate myself into three personalities: Joe, Peter and Francis, with their younger counterparts Charley and Mickey' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.340). Although Kerouac confessed to this fragmentation of character, it appears that Peter is the central character of the novel, moving from the safe sanctuary of youth in a small town, to the nauseating complexity of life in a large city and the remaining characters are simply used to enhance the dichotomy of innocence and experience throughout the novel.

Charley and Mickey are presented as characters that are cradled in the happiness of youth. They are untainted by the responsibilities and anxieties that trouble their older brothers and therefore live free in the wonders of adventure, 'goaded on by all the fantastic and fabulous triumphs [they see] possible in the world' (Kerouac 1970, p.14). Both characters represent Kerouac's ideal, a life void of social judgement, where the individual's concern does not lie in occupational or financial issues but rather simplistic worries such as which day of the weekend holds the greatest potential for adventure, 'like every other kid in Galloway, Tommy could not make up his mind whether Friday night was more exciting than Saturday morning' (Kerouac 1970, pp.26-27).

Older brothers, Francis and Joe inhabit the opposite end of the social scale; they do not venture happily under the skies of youth but rather lay crippled in the trenches of adolescence. Both characters are aware of the troubles associated with the coming of age and as a result these characters begin to emotionally deteriorate, 'each one of them burned and raged with a particular loneliness, a special desolate anger and longing that was written in each pair of eyes' (Kerouac 1970, p.69). This emotional deterioration can be first seen in the character of Francis upon being spurned and alienated by a love interest, 'Francis hurried

away, pushing his bicycle along the path with a feeling of dry rotten horror in his heart' (Kerouac 1970, p.52). This event propels the feeling of hurt and hatred in Francis and as a result he takes refuge in the solitude of his own thoughts and feelings, 'Francis was learning to weave himself into his own cocoon of tormented adolescence' (Kerouac 1970, p.53). Joe differs from Francis in personality, he is popular, wild and confident yet he also feels like a stranger in his surroundings:

Joe was indefatigable in his pleasures, wonderfully liked by everyone, coveted by women of all kinds, strong and responsible at his work, spendthrift with his time and money and laughter. Yet in his inmost soul, like every other man, he brooded and was restless and always looked to the future as a challenge and a sad enigma. (Kerouac 1970, p.67)

The character of Peter Martin was designed by Kerouac to offer insight into the movement between these two contrasting states, by introducing a character who has experienced both the harmony of youth and the horrors of adolescence, Kerouac could juxtapose the predominant themes of innocence and experience, thus allowing the reader to understand how Kerouac felt about his own turbulent childhood. Peter first enters the novel as a young boy who enjoys the beauty of life; he is a socially balanced character who possesses the intelligence and sensitivity of his older brothers, but who also burns with the same energy and vigour that can be seen in his younger siblings. His early teenage years are conventional and consist of the same dreams and activities that enchant other young boys throughout America; he is popular, energetic and longs to be a hero on the football field. As the novel progresses and Peter grows older he achieves his childhood dream, at sixteen he is adored by his peers, acknowledged by his tutors and deemed an athletic star by his community, 'managers threw hooded jackets over him and patted him on the back, and the crowds roared' (Kerouac 1970, p.72). Although Peter has attained the fame and glory that he

sought in his younger years, he is alert to the ironic truth that his early days of dream and simplicity were days that should have been cherished:

Now they knew his name, they knew of him... He wished suddenly that no one would ever notice him again and that he would walk through the rest of his life like this, wrapped in his own secret mysteries and glories, a prince disguised as a pauper. (Kerouac 1970, p.82)

This social unease and yearning for a lost youth is exacerbated upon Peter's departure from his home town and he begins to accept the futility of his academic and athletic pursuits, 'suddenly it seemed to him that college and football were no longer important... and all the wry mannerisms of college life were ridiculous as he thought of them' (Kerouac 1970, p.238). Peter rejects the society he idolized in his early years and decides to abandon college and football and go in search of a more authentic America, an America he believes he can find as a servant in the war. The war however does not offer meaning, but rather, increases his state of despair, 'what a simple good little guy I used to be. What happened? Is it the war? Where am I going, the way I do things, why is everything so strange and far away now?' (Kerouac 1970, 336).

Indeed, America's entry into the Second World War in 1941 heightened the feelings of loneliness and alienation that plagued Jack since his childhood days and certainly destroyed the remaining elements of innocence that were so important to the nineteen-year-old boy. Jack saw the war, at first, as a means to gain life experience and did not consider the lives that would be lost or the social change it would cause. In *The Town and the City* Kerouac confessed to such feelings through the character of Peter when he wrote:

Peter was a year too young to be eligible for the selective service draft, but he had heard about the merchant marine and he pondered this as the first great step of his new life. Curiously, however, he never thought of this in terms of war, but in terms of the great gray sea that was going to become the stage of his soul... Mighty world events meant virtually nothing to him, they were not real enough, and he was certain that his wonderful joyous visions of super-spiritual existence and great poetry were realer than all. (Kerouac 1970, p.274)

This flippant attitude however can be largely attributed yet again to Jack's parents who appear to have held many racist views regarding America's involvement in the war. Jack's father in particular felt that America was concerning itself with the troubles of other nations and he held the belief that brave American soldiers were being sacrificed foolishly in another nations war, once telling Jack 'this is a war for the Marxist communist Jews and you are a victim of the whole plot' (Kerouac 1994, p.59). This cynical attitude helped shape Jack's attitude towards the war:

Now that Jack was completely receptive to the lessons his father had to teach, Leo chose to bequeath him the belief that all the efforts of a lifetime come to absolutely nothing- an utterly black pessimism, studded with the warnings of hysterical bigotry. One of the last things his father said to him was, "Beware of the niggers and the Jews". (Nicosia 1983, p.163)

Jack's bleak outlook developed further when he realized that his service in the merchant marines would not offer him the adventures he had expected, but rather, would return him to a world of fear he had known since birth, a place of suffering and death, 'Jack was empty and nervous as he felt his roots being ripped out of the ground, something like the way he felt as a boy seeing Lowell threatened by the flood. But now it was he who would endure the changes, and without Lowell, he didn't know who he was anymore' (McNally 1980, p.46).

*Vanity of Duluo* records this stage of Kerouac's life as he witnessed the ramifications of global war:

The sweet blond German Billy Budd is suffocated chokingly by water in a sunken capsule. His eyes look wildly toward me in my life jacket at the black cooking range of the SS Dorchester. I can't stand it. From that moment on I'm the only real pacifist in the world. I don't see it, I don't get it, I don't want it. Why couldn't our two ships just meet in a cove and exchange pleasantries and phony prisoners? (Kerouac 1994, pp.131-132)

Kerouac was certainly affected by the violence and death he witnessed during his service with the merchant marines, however, what appears to have troubled Jack most was the realisation that he had lost a sense of personal and national identity that would never be

restored. This sense of loss is recorded in *Vanity of Duluo* when Kerouac recalls his days on the football field as a boy, 'as we binged and banged in dusty bloody fields, we didn't even dream we'd all end up in World War II, some of us killed, some of us wounded, the rest of us eviscerated of 1930s innocent ambition' (Kerouac 1994, p.16). Kerouac felt that the war had somehow extinguished the essence of the America he had grown to know and love, and therefore, once again, found himself in a position where his already fragile sense of identity was in grave danger:

The sight of New York now, the way it had unfolded itself in a horror of endless streets and uncomprehensible sprawl and distance, was as full of dark mystery and ghostly sorrow as the world itself- the world as it had become to him since the beginning of the war... Everything that he had ever done in his life, everything there was- was now haunted by a deep sense of loss, confusion, and strange near grief. (Kerouac 1970, pp.358-359)

Kerouac, however, discovered that he was not alone in his feelings of anxiety and alienation and took comfort in Times Square characters such as Herbert Huncke and William Burroughs whom he could identify with at a time when little else made sense to him:

After the war the country seemed to have grown suddenly mean, cruel, dominated by an overgrown military filled with warmongers who immediately wanted to encounter Russia. A figure like Herbert Huncke, the Times Square junkie, was attractive because he affirmed human needs and feelings in the face of an inhuman establishment... As the country beat wearily, with brute indifference, toward the Cold War of the 1950s, these young people groped hopelessly in a world in which they simply did not know how to live. (Nicosia 1983, p.149)

This group felt uncomfortable in a post-war environment that placed great emphasis on institution and structure, an idea perhaps best raised by McNally when he wrote:

A man who could not submit to discipline was not a normal American by the middle of the twentieth century. World War II was the most powerful collective experience in American history, completing a realignment of American culture: it very nearly seemed that those who did not accept large-scale organized life patterns like big business or suburbia were misfits. (McNally 1980, p.56)

It was during the spring of 1944 that Kerouac was first introduced to this group he described in *Vanity of Duluo* as 'the new characters of my future life' (Kerouac 1994, p.194). According to Kerouac, this was a time of 'low, evil decadence. Not only the drugs,

the morphine, the marijuana, the horrible Benzedrine... but the characters we got to know' (Kerouac 1994, p.259). Kerouac had been dating a Columbia university student named Edie Parker and 'between 1943 and 1945, Edie Parker's sixth-floor apartment off Amsterdam Avenue became the birthplace of the Beat Generation. Here, the nascent Beats would have their first encounters – fall in love, read books, discuss ideas, evade the police, experiment with drugs' (Turner 1996, p.65).

Lucien Carr was the first of this new group to enter Kerouac's life and at a time when 'the war had left the federal government tripled in size and corporate assets doubled, with an accompanying increase in "efficiency" and a decrease in the visionary and human qualities that Jack prized' (McNally 1980, p.81), his intellectual energy and rebellious inquisition was certainly welcomed. Like Kerouac, he had fled from a troubled past and he too found it impossible to adapt to their post-war society. Lucien Carr was a student at Columbia University and met Kerouac through Edie Parker who was enrolled in the same art class as him. He was two years Kerouac's junior and like Jack, found himself in New York on the run from his past. According to Turner:

Carr had sense of abandon about him... They never knew what he would do or say next. He dressed in brightly coloured shirts and wore a red bandana and enjoyed getting drunk. He also had an impressive knowledge of literature and talked to Jack about Shakespeare, Flaubert and Rimbaud. (Turner 1996, p.67)

Kerouac found that he could identify with Carr and more importantly realized that he was now not alone on his quest for change. As aforementioned, this was an age of authority and structure and Carr raged against this new rule bound society, always aiming to shock as a means of protest. Kerouac believed that Carr not only looked like the poet Arthur Rimbaud, but moreover, felt that he burned with the same enigmatic energy. Like Rimbaud, Carr behaved in a scandalous manner and often outraged those around him with incidents such as

the time he grabbed an uncooked steak from Burroughs' pan and chewed while speechless onlookers watched the blood flow down his chin:

Lucien danced on the tightrope of his sensibilities not as an entertaining pose but because he-and Jack-sought more from life than the present rules implied was available; they were serious if obstreperous pilgrims in search of what they called the "New Vision". (McNally 1980, p.63)

Both Kerouac and Carr devoted themselves to this spiritual and intellectual pursuit and in the weeks that followed two more characters arrived who would come to share the Beat spotlight with Jack.

Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs first met Kerouac in 1944 and both were immediately attracted to his boyish good looks and revolutionary views. Allen Ginsberg was five years younger than Jack and was first introduced by Lucien Carr, whom he had met earlier that year in the residential halls of Columbia University. Ginsberg had come to Columbia from Paterson, New Jersey to gain the relevant qualifications that would allow him to practice law. Like most of the other members of the Beat Generation; he had grown up in a chaotic environment and was exposed to his mother's mental illness from a young age. Ginsberg was considered to be Jack's physical opposite; however, what they lacked in physical resemblance was certainly compensated in their intellectual likeness:

The men discovered that they were kindred spirits. They both felt that they had seen ghosts, and had both stared into the night sky and sensed the meaningless of human life in the face of the universe. These feelings had prompted both to ask spiritual questions. (Turner 1996, p.67)

Ginsberg's sensitivity appealed to Kerouac and reminded him of the two people he had loved and lost, his brother Gerard and childhood friend Sammy Sampas.

Unlike Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs was much different than any of the characters Kerouac had encountered in his past. Burroughs was eight years older than Kerouac and had certainly led a very unusual, yet, interesting life. He had spent his time living against the grain and this appealed to the young bohemians of Columbia who too wished to react against the conventions of their post-war society:



Burroughs had a sharp intellect, a dry, iconoclastic wit and a small private income which had allowed him to move to New York with no particular goal in life other than to pursue his love for reading and satisfy his fascination for guns, knives, drugs, criminals and low-life in general. For a teenager like Ginsberg, who was just poking his head out into the world, Burroughs was a stimulating discovery. Here was a man who had studied literature and anthropology at Harvard, psychology at Columbia and medicine in Vienna, and who had opted to work as a bartender in the Village in order to be closer to the rough edges of city life. (Turner 1996, p.69)

Burroughs had a hypnotic quality about him and these young rebels clung to every word he spoke. He shared his worldly knowledge with them and offered them access to the many books that would in time inspire the birth of the Beat Movement. He assured them that social change was near, however, for Kerouac, this change came at great cost.

Since the death of his brother, Kerouac had spent his days trying to emulate Gerard's behaviour and for the most part succeeded in living a pious life. At home, he was very polite and well behaved, and in school, he studied hard and excelled at sport. Overall, he managed to live in a manner that he believed would be approved by God and Gerard, while at the same time respected by his society. Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs certainly contributed to a social change, but in doing so, Kerouac gave birth to a personal conflict that would prove destructive in his life. In the company of his new friends, Kerouac delved into the work of writers such as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Blake, Nietzsche, and Spengler. Rimbaud believed that one could become a true visionary upon making the soul monstrous and Blake spoke of a similar path to truth in his poetry, 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' (Blake 1975, p.7). This new road appealed to Kerouac as it allowed him to experience a sense of freedom and create his own environment that would reflect the perfection of the 'pre-birth' stage.

This new way of life was alien to Kerouac however, and conflicted with all the values that he felt were meaningful in earlier years. Kerouac could certainly relate to the liberating views held by writers such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire yet felt a great sense of guilt and

shame in doing so as he felt that he was disrespecting the memory of his dead brother. This was a very difficult and confusing period for Kerouac who found himself torn between a loyalty to his religious upbringing and a curiosity to pursue a truth that he felt, like Baudelaire, would only be discovered by experiencing life in all its forms, the good and the bad.

This mental struggle is recorded in *The Town and the City* in the conversation between Peter and his father George. When George questions Peter about his change of lifestyle and choice of friends, Peter replies:

I don't care what people do, as long as it's something different. I get curious... I'm going to live in this world, I'm going to find out all about it, I'm not going to hide my eyes like a maiden in distress, or like an old puritan either, or like a scared rabbit! I'm interested in life, any kind of life, all of it! (Kerouac 1970, pp.420-421)

Kerouac began to question his religious identity during this period and felt that he was missing out on valuable life experiences because of his devotion to God:

Jack was getting deeply involved in his own private theological debate... [He] felt that in many ways Catholicism enslaved people, for instance, by telling the poor to accept suffering because they would have their reward in heaven. (Nicosia 1983, p.86)

The effect of the Global war appears to have been a contributor to the destabilization of Kerouac's religious identity and he himself:

Later blamed the war for claiming a sizable stock of his own childhood faith. Part of his "emotional bankruptcy" was due simply to the large number of close friends he had lost in the war... Moreover, the survivors who replaced these "great guys" seemed to be living by an entirely different code. In the cold glare of post-war selfishness, Jack scarcely recognized the characters of his youth, those staunch optimists of the thirties, men like his own father, pursuing a communal prosperity just around the corner. (Nicosia 1983, p.137)

Kerouac had focused on heaven from a young age, however, after the war he came to believe that perhaps one could find true meaning on earth and was inspired by the writing of Tom Wolfe. Speaking about the influence of Wolfe, Kerouac later wrote:

He just woke me up to America as a poem instead of America as a place to struggle around and sweat in. Mainly this dark-eyed American poet made me want to prowl, and roam, and see the real America that was there and that "had never been uttered". (Kerouac 1994, p.75)

Wolfe certainly helped ignite a desire in Kerouac to pursue 'the essential and everlasting America, not the V- for – victory America' (Kerouac 1996, p.37), however, it appears that his journey was ultimately fuelled by a desire to escape the memories of his past: 'Jack had no desire to moon poetically over the tragedy of life. Rather, his instinct was to outrun it, to lose it in the oblivion of spent energy, while searching for new and possibly more hopeful experiences' (Nicosia 1983, p.94).

This was a period that transformed Kerouac as he yet again struggled to establish a sense of identity that he felt was true to him. He had spent his teenage years devoted to God and therefore felt secure in his role as God's servant, however, in the company of his new revolutionary friends, Jack began to question these beliefs that he felt were life denying. Kerouac came to believe that the sole purpose of religion was to control the individual, a view raised by Sigmund Freud when he wrote:

The doctrines of religion are not a subject one can quibble about like any other. Our civilization is built upon them, and the maintenance of human society is based on the majority of men's believing in the truth of those doctrines. If men are taught that there is no almighty and all-just God, no divine world-order and no future life, they will feel exempt from all obligation to obey the precepts of civilization. (Freud 1961, p.45)

This conflict between the religious identity of Kerouac's youth and the social identity of his time spent in New York is captured in *The Town and the City* where Kerouac's transformation of character is portrayed through the protagonist Peter who drifts from the

innocence and purity of Galloway to the chaos and darkness of Times Square. Kerouac came to accept the Marxist view that religion was the opiate of the people and although he came to believe that there was an obstruction that religious belief presented in the pursuit of ultimate human freedom, he simply could not abandon the God of his youth:

To go on living, it was essential to believe that one could-as Jack would later put it- "see God's face." Such was the ultimate goal of their "new vision." Where they went looking for it was not the churches or monasteries but places like Times Square and the Angler bar. (Nicosia 1983, p.157)

Essentially, this new vision allowed Kerouac to experience all of the decadent adventures that New York had to offer without having to sacrifice his religious beliefs. According to Nicosia, "[this] tension between angelic and diabolic nature would animate much of his best writing; indeed it would be one of the chief sources of energy for the Beat Generation" (Nicosia 1983, p.255), however, it appears that far from enhancing Kerouac's work, the tension between angelic and diabolic nature highlighted the warring dichotomies and religious contradictions that saturated his texts and exposed his naive and chaotic perception of life.

The Beats were united in their pursuit of this new vision, however, Kerouac felt that Lucien Carr in particular, did not fully comprehend its objective and in a letter to Allen Ginsberg in 1944 he explained this view:

Lucien is different, or at least, his egocentricity is different; he hates himself intensely, whereas we do not. Hating himself, as he does, hating his "human kindness," he seeks new vision, a post-human post-intelligence. He wishes more than Nietzsche prescribed. He wants more than the next mutation-he wants a post-soul. I prefer the new vision in terms of art-I believe, I smugly cling to the belief that art is the potential ultimate. Out of the humankind materials of art, I tell myself, the new vision springs. Look at "Finnegan's [sic] Wake" and "Ulysses" and "The Magic Mountain." (Kerouac 1996, pp.81-82)

Like many of his literary heroes, Kerouac was determined he would write his way into history, ‘dedicating my actions to experience in order to write about them, sacrificing myself on the altar of Art’ (Kerouac 1996, p.63). According to McNally, Kerouac believed that ‘if he could combine his sense of land, time, and space, and his awareness of temporality and death in some deep form fusion, he would be redeemed’ (McNally 1980, p.137). Indeed, ‘intending to pour all his sins and sufferings into the book he hoped that when it was finished he would be redeemed. By redemption he might have meant some sort of spiritual cleansing. He certainly wished to be understood, if not commended’ (Nicosia 1983, p.164).

Kerouac’s passion for writing appears to have stemmed from his childhood years when he then also attempted to rectify the mistakes of life through the vehicle of literary creativity. Kerouac was adamant that he would write his way to the solution like a mathematician who would arrive at the answer only after careful calculation. For the purpose of this task, Kerouac wanted to experience everything in life and therefore began to spend his days participating in adventures that he believed would assist in his understanding of life. These adventures consisted of drug-fuelled gatherings, wild drinking sessions, and sexual encounters with both male and female characters. Like many of the great writers of past generations, the Beats held the belief that drugs would enhance their intellectual capacity, therefore, allowing them to experience some new vision, ‘there was never any doubt that they were exploring states of consciousness – Jack said that drugs would help him understand people and, most importantly, himself’ (Nicosia 1983, p.148). Kerouac felt that one could not truly understand something without experiencing it first-hand and therefore the drugs, in addition to many other potentially dangerous experiments, were justified by the views he had adopted from the French Symbolist poets such as Rimbaud, who claimed that one should call the monster to their door, and Baudelaire, who once wrote: ‘to plunge the depth of the abyss

– Hell or Heaven, who cares?’ (Baudelaire 2006, p.182). Kerouac was evidently now living for creativity rather than the God of his youth as he claimed that ‘his indulgence in bisexuality was like his experience with drugs, something he would later use in his writing’ (Nicosia 1983, p.150), however, one should not assume that with a change in lifestyle, came a change in attitude, for, in truth, Kerouac was now more depressed and guilt stricken than ever before.

According to McNally, ‘Jack was driven half frantic by the split in his life between two worlds, the clean Lowell-Ozone Park axis of jobs and family and security, and the drug-hustler-homosexual scene of Allen, Bill, and Times Square’ (McNally 1980, p.79). Consequently, Kerouac was now more determined than ever to write, however, although confident in his ability, he nevertheless found it extremely difficult to translate his complex philosophical thoughts into his written work, ‘at the age of twenty-three, Jack was quite positive that he had the vision necessary to write, but he needed to discover the method that could translate ethereal clouds of thought into written words’ (McNally 1980, p.81). Kerouac was certainly aware of the direction he intended to take with his work and explained this in a letter to his friend Hal Chase during this time:

My subject as a writer is of course America, and simply, I must know everything about it... my purpose is Balzacian in scope – to conquer knowledge of the U.S.A. (the center of the world for me just as Paris was the center for Balzac) – my purpose is to know it as I know the palm of my hand. (Kerouac 1996, p.107)

Fortunately for Kerouac, method soon followed direction when he discovered that the key to his literary pursuit lay in what he referred to as “scene sketching.” Scene sketching involved the recording of events exactly as they were experienced and this certainly appealed to Kerouac who had a desire ‘to write with total honesty and shamelessness, capturing in words the segment of time and space that he envisioned’ (McNally 1980, p.140). Equipped with pen and paper, Kerouac prowled the streets of New York recording detailed descriptions of

everything from movie theatres to Times Square characters, ‘detail after detail coalescing into a portrait so real that a later reader could dream that he’d been there’ (McNally 1980, p.140). It was perhaps during this time that Kerouac discovered the hobos that would occupy his writing for the remainder of his life. Kerouac could identify with these people as they too were social outcasts, however, what interested him most was the honesty and purity of these people who had nothing to lose, and therefore, nothing to hide, ‘more deeply than ever before, the term “beat” made sense to Jack, signified “beatific,” holy, compassionate, the ungrasping affection of the downtrodden’ (McNally 1980, p.190).

Another contribution to Kerouac’s literary development at this time was the influence of Bop music. Bop music was born out of World War II and was essentially a replacement for the big bands that had been destroyed by the entertainment taxes and recording restrictions implemented during the war. Black musicians had tired of lining the white man’s pocket and sought to create a new sound that would reflect their post-war environment:

Bop reflected the technical changes of World War II-greater speed and magnified complication-with perfect precision, but the music’s social aspects were equally important. For the first time, black musicians saw themselves as artists to be respected, as artists in revolt. (McNally 1980, p.82)

This appealed to Kerouac who wished to start a similar revolution through his writing. Kerouac believed that if he could somehow incorporate the energy of Bop music into his own writing he would generate a cultural revolution that would replace the defeatist, dogmatic ideology of his “kill joy” society. Speaking on this influence of Bop, Ginsberg said:

Bop musicians were adapting their music to the cadence of actual black street talk, talking to each other with their instruments, using street talk. Kerouac returned it to speech using rhythms more interesting than existing printed poetry and prose to get the emotions of spoken language into the written language.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Literary History of the Beat Generation*, Lecture 1, Naropa Institute. Unpublished.

It was indeed for this transition that Kerouac later became famous with his creation of “spontaneous bop prosody”, a literary style that permitted him to record experiences in a fluid manner.

Kerouac had finally reached a stage of artistic confidence and believed that he was now capable of capturing in text the fusion of thoughts that he had for so long wished to record. However, Kerouac’s rare happiness was yet again short-lived when in the early months of 1946 he witnessed the death of his father. Kerouac had always viewed his father as a true American hero and therefore to see him deteriorate before his eyes certainly stripped Jack of any remaining happiness or hope for the future of America:

There is something especially cruel about watching your father die. How can the big strong man who once threw you around with such power wither and waste before your very eyes? It was his seed that helped make you. It is the flesh that helped create your flesh that is being consumed. Jack now had the true disillusionment forced upon him. His father’s death taught him that nothing ultimately mattered but the angel of death perched on his shoulder...Jack returned to Ozone Park, slipped a blank piece of paper into his typewriter, and set out to write his tale in pain and glory, to redeem his life from death. (McNally 1980, pp.86-87)

Kerouac was devastated by the loss of yet another loved one; however, it appears that even Leo’s death could not put the brakes on Jack’s creative spirit. On the contrary, Jack worked ferociously on what was to become his debut novel. Many of Jack’s family and friends struggled to understand how he could demonstrate such conviction and devotion to his writing so soon after the loss of his father, however, this soon became clear upon the publication of *The Town and the City*. As aforementioned, *The Town and the City* was not popular with the majority of its readers, however, it did offer an insightful portrayal of its author and certainly contained the sense of nostalgia and demoralised sadness that you would expect to find from any man who had lost his father, brother, childhood friend and experiences a global war, all before reaching the age of twenty five. Kerouac’s debut novel



was a source of release and although he relished the achievement of publication, he, more than any of his critics, acknowledged that he leaned too heavily on the crutch of a Wolfean literary style. *The Town and the City* bore resemblance to Wolfe's novel *Look Homeward Angel*, however, in Kerouac's defence it appears most likely that the novice writer did not intend to surpass his literary hero, but rather, simply pay tribute to him. Nonetheless, Kerouac felt that his words were not managing to capture the essence of everyday life and was aware that a different form of writing would be necessary in order to allow him to communicate with his audience in a manner that would permit a deep and true understanding of the message he was trying to share. In addition to a different literary form, Kerouac also believed that the topic of his writing should be fresh and meaningful, and for this he reverted to his old belief that the true meaning of life could be found on the open road. This idea is captured in a letter to his friend Hal Chase in 1947, where Kerouac wrote:

My own development in the directions above hinted center around a new interest in things rather than ideas. For instance, all my reading in the past few months has been of a very practical nature... I have begun a huge study of the face of America itself, acquiring maps of every state in the USA, and before long not a river or mountain peak or bay or town or city will escape my attention.  
(Kerouac 1996, p.107)

Kerouac felt that somewhere on the road in America he would discover the true meaning of life and was extremely fortunate to encounter Neal Cassady during this time, a man who not only shared Jack's enthusiasm for life on the road, but, who also inspired the style of writing that Kerouac had sought. Kerouac saw Neal as a kindred spirit and immediately both men formed a close bond, 'Cassady was a hero in search of a context, while Kerouac was a scene-painter, a memory-sifter, in search of a hero' (Campbell 1999, p.59). In 1949 both men embarked on a road trip that gave birth to a new literary generation.

This chapter has examined many of the issues that troubled Kerouac during his childhood and explored many of the unhealthy religious views that he adopted from his

family. It appears evident that Kerouac developed a belief system from an early age that was not only impossible to sustain, but was also, a destructive force in his life. Kerouac associated sexuality with shame and religion with suffering from childhood and this, it will be argued in the next chapter, caused a great deal of conflict when he reached adulthood and had to adopt his place in the social scheme of post war America.

## CHAPTER 2

This chapter will focus on the period of Kerouac's life when he travelled through America in search for the God of his youth. An examination of *On the Road* will expose the struggle that Kerouac encountered when he first acknowledged that his religious upbringing was being jeopardized by his social persona as a Beat Generation writer. The previous chapter addressed the issues that troubled Kerouac during his childhood and mapped the development of his religious beliefs. This chapter will focus on Kerouac's social identity during the period when he gained fame as a writer and felt that he needed to experience all things, good and bad, for the sake of his work.

*On the Road* was first published in 1957 and unlike Kerouac's previous novel *The Town and the City*; its general audience deemed it a success:

The book hit America just at the right time: coinciding with America's great love affair with the automobile and with the birth of rock 'n' roll... *On the Road* had it all: teenagers, nightclubs, fast cars, sex. It was the first rock 'n' roll book and it sold like hot cakes. (Miles 1998, 229)

Like Kerouac's debut novel, *On the Road* is largely autobiographical. The reader is introduced to two central characters, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Sal can be identified as Kerouac, while Dean's character is based on Kerouac's friend Neal Cassady, a man who was just as interesting and unstable as Kerouac, a man who 'spent a third of his time in the pool hall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library' (Kerouac 1972, p.10). According to Turner, 'in Neal there was a reconciliation of the streetwise and physical with the philosophical and literary. Neal would shoot pool, steal a car and go home to read Shakespeare, all in the same day' (Turner 1996, p.86). Cassady's arrival in New York during autumn of 1946 provided Kerouac with a fitting subject to write about:

From the age of six, Neal accompanied his father across the country each summer, visiting relatives or following the fruit harvests, hitchhiking or hopping freight

trains and travelling in covered boxcars in the proper hobo tradition. No doubt Neal's stories of hopping freights helped foster in Kerouac the romantic notion of the endless movement of people across America. (Miles 1998, p .105)

Neal Cassady first encountered Jack Kerouac when he arrived in New York in 1946:

Twenty-year-old Neal swept into his life like a west wind siren singing freedom, excitement, kicks, a wild yea-saying over-burst of American joy, as Jack characterized him enthusiastically flying after food and sex like a holy primate, a natural man; he was the embodiment of Jack's American dream. (McNally 1980, p.89)

Neal, in many ways, represented what Kerouac saw as a real American hero, 'Poet and friend Gary Snyder once remarked that Kerouac saw Cassady as "the last cowboy crashing"' (Theado 2000, p.73). This romanticized view of Cassady as an American hero who lived an exciting and free life was naive and thus essentially caused Kerouac much confusion in later years. Kerouac, unlike the many readers of *On the Road*, was however aware of the pain and loneliness that was concealed beneath this Dionysian lifestyle and although it appears that he did not wish to portray Cassady as anything less than perfect, he addressed the issue of suffering in his text:

Critics of *On the Road* objected that its characters were indifferent to their fallen conditions... Kerouac's characters live with the consequences of their decisions, a fact his critics rarely acknowledged. Amid Sal's salute to the mad ones, he flashes an image of Jane Lee, Bull's wife, "wandering on Times Square in a Benzedrine hallucination, with her baby girl in her arms and ending up in Bellevue" – a breakdown of family protections and of nightmare exposure of the innocent. This is the other side of their madness, the dust cloud toward which the friends are heading. (Leland 2007, p.52)

Cassady had lived a horrendous life from a young age. He lived on the streets with his alcoholic father throughout his childhood and was forced to provide for himself as a result. In his autobiography, *The First Third*, Neal describes a period of his life before his teenage years when his daily routine involved collecting his intoxicated father from a bar in the early hours of the morning. He would then help his father back to a room that was often occupied by the homeless community, and then he would get a few hours sleep before getting up to prepare himself for school. It appears evident from this description alone that Neal

would not experience a normal, healthy development from childhood to his adult years, as according to Freud, 'the Individual reacts to the injuries which civilization and other men inflict on him: he develops a corresponding degree of resistance to the regulations of civilization and of hostility to it' (Freud 1961, p. 20). Neal began to rebel against the authority figures that he felt should have protected him as a child, and as he entered his teenage years, he found himself in a decadent life of crime. When Neal stole his first car however, it wasn't for excitement as Kerouac might have you believe, but rather, to feel a sense of escape; an escape that Kerouac himself desired but never truly admitted. Leland claimed that '*On the Road* can seem without direction because its narrator is not trying to develop an identity but to escape identity' (Leland 2007, p.83). Neal's criminal behaviour began in his early teens and from his own description of this period it appears evident that he stole cars to feel a sense of freedom and security, a sense of knowing that he could bolt if life became too complicated:

I stole my first automobile at 14 in 1940... it has no further, sharper, stronger, more meaningful remembrance than the one of its get-away moments, which included wading thru a three-phase traffic signal in the first block.  
(Cassady 1971, pp.170-171)

Cassady spent the remainder of his life living in this frantic and reckless manner and Neal's arrival in New York was as wild and impulsive as his earlier experience in 1940:

Neal was twenty when he arrived in New York City in the late autumn of 1946 with his sixteen-year-old child bride, Lu Anne, and a holdall containing copies of Shakespeare, Proust and a handful of clothes. They came from Sidney, Nebraska, where he and Lu Anne had been staying with one of her aunts. Neal pumped gas and Lu Anne worked as a maid but, within a few days, Neal remembered he had arranged to meet Hal Chase in New York. Neal stole her uncle's car while Lu Anne broke open her aunt's safe and took \$300. (Miles 1998, p.106)

Kerouac was aware of Neal's cunning tendencies from their first encounter, however, Kerouac admired Neal's character and 'told Carroll Brown, God loves Neal because there is so much to forgive him; more sins would only mean more opportunities to forgive' (Leland 2007, p.35). Kerouac referred to Neal as a holy con-man and he described Dean Moriarty, the

character based on Neal in *On the Road*, as ‘a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man, he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him’ (Kerouac 1972, p.10). Neal always had a hidden agenda and his interest in Kerouac at first was related to Kerouac’s intellectual and literary abilities. Neal had come to New York with a dream of attending Columbia University and therefore he believed that Kerouac could tutor him and help him achieve this goal. In addition to Kerouac, Neal was also receiving tuition from Allen Ginsberg, who would share his knowledge with Neal in return for sexual favours. This further highlights the deceitful nature of Neal, as he took advantage of a vulnerable man, who was confused about his sexuality. Kerouac, unlike Ginsberg, acknowledged Neal’s scheming ways, however, he was always prepared to forgive as he believed that ‘a man who can sweat fantastically for the flesh is also capable of sweating fantastically for the spirit’ (Kerouac 2000(E), p.329). Kerouac was obsessed with Neal from the moment they first met and this has led to much debate regarding the relationship between the two men in the past. Many critics including Barry Miles believe that Kerouac developed a homosexual desire for Neal Cassady, as Miles wrote:

Jack was not yet done with his obsession with Cassady. He gave every impression of being as hopelessly in love with him as Allen had been. In a – presumably real – letter to Neal reprinted in *Visions of Cody*, he says, “I’m completely your friend, your “lover”, he who loves you and digs your greatness completely – haunted in mind by you.” (Miles 1998, p.160)

This theory of homosexual desire may very well be true as it is known that both men engaged in sexual relations with men prior to meeting each other, however, it appears more likely that Kerouac saw Neal as a substitute for his brother Gerard, and his obsession was therefore a brotherly love, rather than, a sexual desire. Kerouac saw Cassady ‘as a brother-sufferer – as the brother, Gerard. Neal, whom Jack thought was born at about the same time as his elder brother’s death, seemed to fill the empty spot in Jack’s heart; as Gerard echoed in

his misty Lowell dreams, Neal focused the excitement of a wider world' (McNally 1980, p.90). Kerouac was still troubled by the memories of his youth, when he was told by his mother that he should have died instead of his brother and therefore it appears that in Neal, Jack believed that he could somehow have a second chance. This feeling of guilt and loss was recorded in a letter to Neal in 1951 when Kerouac wrote:

Judas is me, Jesus is Gerard. What have I gone and done; and what hath God wrought? I never asked to be Judas and I'm sure that Judas never did; and in fact, our friend Harrington once put forth the crazy idea that Judas was a political pawn in the plot to make Jesus a martyr (a superficial modern pragmatic idea). But if I hadn't been born then how could I have betrayed Gerard; for I betrayed him merely by living when he died. He was an angel, I was a mortal; what he could have brought to the world, I destroyed by my mere presence; because if I had not lived, Gerard would have lived. (Kerouac 1996, p.282)

Kerouac and Neal certainly resembled brothers, not only in appearance, but also, in certain views they had adopted in childhood. Both Kerouac and Neal carried a sense of loss from an early age, as Neal was abandoned by his family and Kerouac had to deal with the death of his brother. Consequently, both men distrusted society and each felt that only the other could truly understand how they were feeling. Both men remained immature throughout life and their lack of responsibility and their self-destructive nature showed their unwillingness to conform to a life that caused them so much pain. Kerouac and Neal also felt that their friendship could offer insight into their individual identities and many of the experiences they sought out in *On the Road* appear to be solely for this purpose. According to Nicosia:

Bev Burford found Jack's drinking just another aspect of his childishness. She thought he tipped up a bottle as if he were looking for something inside it, a key to himself perhaps, and his failure to discover anything pushed him on to the next. In a similar way he sought Neal, as if their identities might be tied together. (Nicosia 1983, p.192)

Kerouac and Neal believed that the key to discovering their true identity could be found in their friendship, however, according to Nicosia, their friendship was yet another aspect of life that both men failed to understand clearly, 'each of them felt inferior in the others presence;

and, sadly, neither realized how much the other really liked him' (Nicosia 1983, p.176). This confusion was caused by a mutual desire to exchange identities, as both men refused to embrace their own qualities and strived to be like the other:

The naturally reserved Jack could admire Neal's fierce energy, while Neal could admire Jack's dedication as a writer. Neal imagined himself as a student and author, but knew he would never have the self-discipline to do either. Jack would have liked to have been one of the mad ones (as he would refer to them in *On the Road*) who never said a commonplace thing, but he was by nature an observer, rather than an initiator, of action. (Turner 1996, p.86)

Kerouac and Neal certainly admired the qualities in each other that they felt they lacked personally; however, they both acknowledged a common factor that they believed separated them from the majority of others. Unlike the majority of Americans who enjoyed the social structure and stability of their post-war environment, Kerouac and Neal were horrified by the loss, of what they believed, was the true American Identity. Both men felt cheated by their country, and moreover, felt cheated by their fellow countrymen for conforming to this destruction of the true America, an America that they saw as the land of their fathers. One cannot therefore overstate the significance of *On the Road*, as it allowed 'Kerouac [to] recreate himself in Leo's America, a blue-collar world of patriarchs and their families, with little incursion from the suburban strivers, organization men and idle intellectuals that Leo would have kept at bay' (Leland 2007, p.78). Kerouac longed to find this aboriginal presence that he believed could still be found somewhere in America and Cassady wasted no time in volunteering to be the driver. Kerouac wrote to his friend Hal Chase in 1947 and expressed this desire to study America, as he claimed, 'my subject as a writer is of course America, and simply, I must know everything about it' (Kerouac 1996, p.107).

The novel that ensued recorded the journey of characters that were not content with being cogs in the social machine, characters that witnessed the clockwork American life and felt betrayed, 'On the Road was a search for a soul in an America that appeared to be losing



its essence to materialism' (Turner 1996, p.23), a search that Kerouac himself believed would resolve the crisis of life, 'somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me' (Kerouac 1972, p.14). *On the Road* captures the adventures and exhilaration of a vagabond lifestyle, however, it would be a grave misconception to judge that the characters of the book were truly enjoying the experience, and therefore, it is important for the reader to acknowledge that 'Kerouac's most famous novel comes with many associations that work to inform and mislead the reader before the cover is opened. The book is both a story and a cultural event' (Theado 2000, pp.53-54). As aforementioned, it appears that these members of the Beat Generation were not racing through life in search of adventure; they were restlessly searching for a means of escape:

At a time when millions of Americans were entering the middle class, Kerouac and his friends paid a price for opting out... The small core of friends who formed the Beat generation was shaped by suicide, depression, psychosis, institutionalization, addiction, alcoholism, jail, and early death... As Carolyn Cassady said of her late husband's admirers, "whatever it is that Neal represented for them, like freedom and fearlessness, Neal was fearless but he wasn't free. Neal wanted to die... I kept thinking that the imitators never knew and don't know how miserable these men were, they think they were having marvellous times – joy, joy, joy – and they weren't at all. (Leland 2007, pp.47-48)

*On the Road*, if read in isolation, may be understood as a simple adventure novel that records the jovial nature of life and friendship. However, a previous knowledge of Kerouac's earlier novel will paint a very different picture for the reader. *The Town and the City* deals with the crisis of life that haunted Kerouac in his early years and this crisis is exacerbated in *On the Road*. One need only look at such statements as, 'I gaped into the bleakness of my own days' (Kerouac 1972, p.240) and 'I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion' (Kerouac 1972, p.120) to see that Kerouac was not attempting to embrace life, but rather trying to outrun it. Kerouac felt a stranger not only to his land, but to himself, he claimed, 'I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the east of my youth and

the west of my future' (Kerouac 1972, p.20). He had finally tasted the harshness of 'nightmare life' (Kerouac 1972, p.101) and realised that the road was coming to an end.

Kerouac may not have found what he was looking for on the road, however, the experience that he gained on his journey was not wasted. His time on the road gave him a new chapter in his life to write about. Kerouac acknowledged however that the Wolfen style used in *The Town and the City* would not allow him to accurately portray the complexity and vitality of his journey and therefore he set about finding a style that would allow the reader to feel that they were actually experiencing the journey first-hand, as a back-seat passenger in the adventure of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. According to Turner, 'Kerouac was trying to find a way to express himself which had the scope and insight of classic literature combined with the immediacy and popular surface of a comic book or a jazz record' (Turner 1996, p.93). The literary style that Kerouac finally adopted and modified became known as "spontaneous prose". According to Theado:

His spontaneous prose style seems to insist that readers believe they are experiencing the text as it is being written, so Kerouac relies on a modified use of the suspension of disbelief; he welcomes readers to join him in the present moment. The Romantics, also masters of this technique, wished to create the sense of immediacy in writing as well...Kerouac relates the written word tightly with the spoken word, and both are yoked by the world of his mind as he sifts through dreams, memories, and other various thought associations to build up the sentences. In "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1957) Kerouac explains that instead of periods, he uses the long dash to separate phrases based on breathing patterns, as a jazz musician might phrase a solo. (Theado 2000, pp.32-33)

It was important for Kerouac to find a writing style that allowed him to connect with his reader as he felt that the relation between writer and reader was of significant importance:

Kerouac sought an immediate relation between the object and the writer. The prose that results from this relation is an unmediated representation in language that Kerouac suggests will be recognized by readers via a "telepathic shock"... Kerouac naturally believed that a "telepathic shock" would be possible between the writer and the reader, an idea that goes against much postmodern American existential theory that holds that two people cannot possibly share the same wave-length of understanding. (Theado 2000, p.35)

This interest in the connection formed between reader and writer was shared by many great writers, however, it was perhaps first raised by Walt Whitman in his poem ‘Who learns my lesson complete?’, when he wrote, ‘my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each other without ever seeing each other’ (Whitman 2006, p.295).

There were many factors that inspired Kerouac’s writing style. The first contribution to the development of his spontaneous prose came before his journey on the road from his friend Ed White who ‘suggested that he try sketching like a painter, but with words’ (McNally 1980, p.139). Kerouac began to carry a pen and notebook with him at all times and started a process of recording the images he saw and conversations he heard. He referred to this process as “scene sketching” and he immediately saw the merits of this practice. Within a short period of time, Kerouac had a large number of notebooks filled with vivid descriptions of various locations ranging from libraries to jazz clubs and had recorded the conversations of his friends verbatim. Kerouac believed that this would enable the reader to feel a closer connection to the events of the story as they unfolded, and also, would allow future readers to experience events in their historical context. The music and art scene that Kerouac was exposed to during this period in New York also inspired him to adopt a writing style that was governed by the heart rather than the mind. Kerouac was a Jazz enthusiast since his school days at Horace Mann; however, it was the rise of the bop scene during the mid forties that contributed to the development of his writing style.

Bop differed from the regular jazz compositions of the swing era in that it was characterised by the extremely fast tempo. The speedy and often fragmented sound differed from the organised melodies of the swing era. Bop was a musical revolution in the Jazz scene and it alerted Kerouac to the importance of creating in a manner that reflected their society. Musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker acknowledged the turbulence

surrounding World War II and therefore believed that the compositions of old would not offer an accurate representation of the events of the times they lived in. This interested Kerouac not only as a music lover, but also, an aspiring writer. Kerouac could relate to this music, but more importantly, he believed that he could incorporate the energy of the music into his own writing:

Jack's link with Charles "Bird" Parker was obvious, since he consciously modelled his writing after Parker's magnificent music. As technically sophisticated as his tunes like "Ornithology" or "Groovin High" were, Bird played with the raw energy of a high power line, and it was that stabbing electricity that Jack had attempted to put into *On the Road*, that mortal sense that the candle must burn furiously, else the times will surely snuff it out... The tunes themselves were spontaneous improvisations on old pop tunes, worn fragments plucked from the commercial popular culture and reenergised. Parker's art had affinity for Jack's not only in their transmutation of the old culture, but in their concern for the human voice and breath. (McNally 1980, pp.147-148)

In addition to jazz, the New York art scene was also breaking free from conventional approaches around this time. Jackson Pollock introduced a new style of art known as "drip" painting which involved placing the canvas on the floor and using a hardened brush to splatter paint; a technique which earned him the nickname Jack the dripper. This technique allowed Pollock the freedom to express his wild emotion through a spontaneous approach, and like bop musicians such as Parker, enabled him to perform with 'a savage physical intensity. Pollock spoke of being "in the painting," and Jack and Bird sometimes lost ten pounds after a spectacular night of creation' (McNally 1980, p.149). Kerouac acknowledged the resemblance between the artistic approach of Pollock and that of the bop musicians and decided that he would bring to literature what they had brought to art and music respectively:

Though the visual arts were never one of Jack's major preoccupations, he recognized Pollock as an "artist of genius"... Pollock was another artist who wanted to stand in his work totally naked and confessional, romantically expressing his self and, as the painter put it in a later note, the "Experience of our age in terms of painting-not an illustration of-(but the equivalent.)" Like Jack, he sought not outward form but a way to explore his emotional and sensual universe; "deep form," as Jack once put it. His wife, the painter Lee Krassner, wrote that "He sensed rhythm rather than order." (McNally 1980, p.149)

Both Parker and Pollock refused to allow reason to overrule emotion and according to Nicosia, 'with bop musicians and abstract-expressionist painters, Kerouac shared a great distrust of conscious design' (Nicosia 1983, p.454).

Another factor that contributed to Kerouac's literary development was the speech of the characters that he interacted with around Times Square, 'hustlers, criminals, and junkies had to say what they wanted in as few words as possible and none dared reveal more than was necessary. Yet by their laconic speech and cagey silences they revealed what they most wished to hide' (Nicosia 1983, p.308). Kerouac enjoyed this lack of redundancy in their speech and came to believe that a similar use of language in his writing would allow him to create a work that was not only contemporary, but also, true to his environment. It is also important to note that this type of speech not only inspired Kerouac's writing style, but moreover, inspired the philosophy of the Beat Generation. The members of the Beat Generation were heavily influenced by Jack Black's novel *You Can't Win*. Jack Black's autobiographical tale recounted his years as a petty crook and railroad drifter and while perhaps 'it was from the mouth of Huncke that Burroughs first heard beat and other bits of jive talk close up' (Campbell 1999, p.40), Black must be credited for being the original source for this terminology amongst the Beat writers, and indeed, the true pioneer of "Beat" literature.

For Kerouac, it was important that the dialogue of his characters was a true representation of their everyday conversations and therefore 'it made Jack listen to actual American speech and realise that it was possible to write it down as it was spoken, like the transcription of an oral story teller' (Miles 1998, p.110). Characters such as Herbert Huncke and Jack Black alerted Kerouac to the significance of everyday speech; however, Neal Cassady was the greatest contributor to Kerouac's development of spontaneous prose. As

aforementioned, Neal Cassady admired Kerouac's literary ability and on many occasions asked Kerouac to teach him how to write. It is therefore ironic that Neal's letters proved to be the main contribution to the writing style that brought fame to Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation:

Kerouac was especially impressed that Cassady held nothing back in the letter, that he incorporated the "painfully necessary" details of his thoughts as well as of specific locations, measurements, and chronology. Kerouac saw the importance of reliance on direct experience, and he was suddenly changed as a writer. He would no longer fictionalize his experiences into novels like the Wolfe – inspired *The Town and the City*. Instead, he would write from his life directly, infusing the scenes with his own artistic vision, tempered by Burroughs's matter-of-fact Dashiell Hammett approach to narrative. Thus Cassady is both hero and a stylistic influence for *On the Road*. (Theado 2000, pp.19-20)

Cassady not only ignited the flame of adventure in Kerouac, but more importantly, inspired him to write with truth and conviction. It was during the spring of 1947 that Kerouac received his first letter from Neal Cassady:

On March 7, sitting in a bar on Market Street, Kansas City, he scrawled an 800-word letter describing two seductions (one successful) that he'd attempted on the journey so far. The letter came as a revelation to Jack. Not only was it frank in its subject matter, but it also perfectly captured Neal's unstructured way of rapping, and suggested to Jack a literary style that could help him break the bonds of the formalism he had inherited from the influences of London and Wolfe. (Turner 1996, p.87)

The letter incorporated all the elements that Kerouac believed was necessary to offer a true representation of his characters in a textual medium. Cassady's letter was fast-paced and 'it was the use of everyday American speech, his unselfconscious use of swear words and total disregard for normal conventions of English letter writing' (Miles 1998, p.106) that motivated Kerouac to discard the formal writing style he had used in *The Town and the City*. Neal's letter promoted a literary style that was natural, as he believed 'that all rules, self-conscious styles, long words and "lordly clauses" should be ditched in order to allow a pure communication of feeling' (Turner 1996, p.93). According to Neal's wife:

He enjoyed the challenge of finding words or expressions that described his observations, feelings and impressions in as minute detail as possible. He revelled in the game of continuing a sentence as long as he could before resorting to a period. (Rather like his favourite feat of driving a car as far as possible before applying the brakes). (Cassady 1971, p.140)

This appealed to Kerouac as he had been struggling to develop a writing style that was confessional and swift for his new book. Upon reading Neal's letter he 'decided to ignore everything but completeness of detail, telling the truth in all its delicate and hideous glory' (McNally 1980, p.139). According to Nicosia:

Writing by free association had been done extensively by Proust, as well as many of the Romantic poets, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, and its roots went back to the lyrical poets of Greece and Rome. Despite such precedents, Jack thought he detected something new and natively American in Neal's "scribbling". (Nicosia 1983, p.186)

Kerouac felt that Neal's writing offered insight into something that no other writer of any time could possibly share, the energy and turbulent mentality of the 'last cowboy crashing' (Theado 2000, p.73).

This writing style adopted by Kerouac was not unique, Yeats had utilised a similar 'trance writing style' (McNally 1980, p.139) in his poetry and one can even see such a stylistic process being promoted in biblical times, 'take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate; but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speaks ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the holy Ghost' (Mark 13: 11). However, although Kerouac did not create a unique writing style, the context in which he wrote was certainly original. Kerouac's "spontaneous prose" allowed him to sketch the American landscape at a ferocious speed, recording every sound, sight and smell he encountered along the way. He acknowledged that his role as "memory servant" was no longer of use, believing that his answer lay waiting in the future, not buried in the past, 'the road [was] life' (Kerouac 1972, p.199). Indeed, 'Kerouac wrote from the materials of his life – as any writer must – his boon

to world literature is the freedom of language that he invented and developed for exploring personal, spiritual, and generational stories' (Theado 2000, p.8). Kerouac's spontaneous prose embodied a true representation of the Beat Generation, 'the sentences were short and tight, clickety-pop word bursts that caught the rhythm of the high-speed road life as no author before him ever had' (McNally 1980, p.133). Kerouac's writing style in *On the Road* certainly allows the reader to gain a greater insight into the world of the Beat Generation. The free-flowing, highly descriptive text permits the reader to experience the events and thoughts of the characters first-hand, and therefore, although the reader can enjoy the adventures of the journey, they must also be willing to share the pain and anxiety that haunted these Beat writers, 'the essential flaw in spontaneous prose, as well as its great virtue, is that it gives a rather accurate picture of the state of mind of the writer' (Miles 1998, p.299). Kerouac's writing style was closely connected to his desire to have an individual voice and he felt that spontaneous prose would allow him to capture his complex ideas and feelings and share them with his readers in the same impassioned and chaotic manner that he was experiencing them. It is therefore important to note that for Kerouac the writing style was just as important as the topics that he was writing about. Here, it is also important to remember that *On the Road* is an autobiographical text and 'one cannot analyze Kerouac's lifework without simultaneously considering his life, as the two are deeply intertwined. Kerouac lived to write, and he looked into his own life for what he considered the most indispensable material' (Theado 2000, p.25). The pain and anxiety suffered by Kerouac in life is therefore openly displayed in his work and although it might not be considered an uplifting read, it certainly offers a true representation of its author, and indeed, to many, a true representation of life.

This anxiety that persecuted Kerouac also haunted many of the great inquisitive minds of past generations. In 1932 Jean-Paul Sartre recorded a similar feeling of despair,



‘something has happened to me: I can’t doubt that any more. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything obvious. It installed itself cunningly, little by little; I felt a little strange, a little awkward’ (Sartre 1965, p.13). Even more noteworthy however was the ‘arrest of life’ (Tolstoy 1981, p.9) experienced by Leo Tolstoy. Like Kerouac, the meaning of life troubled Tolstoy; he struggled with the question, ‘why should I live?’ (Tolstoy 1981, p.15) and found himself in a state of paralysis without the answer, ‘so long as I did not know why, I could not do anything. I could not live’ (Tolstoy 1981, p.10). Kerouac’s anxiety was similar to this ‘arrest of life’, in that he too felt, ‘It was too much, nobody could tell. Nobody would ever tell. It was all over’ (Kerouac 1972, p.229). Both writers felt suffocated by their obscure existence and both arrived at a similar belief, the belief that death was salvation. Kerouac believed that death would restore ‘pre-birth perfection’ and thus emancipate the soul from the cold grasp of life:

The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kind, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death. (Kerouac 1972, pp.118-119)

Tolstoy also viewed death as a sweet escape and even contemplated suicide, ‘I arrived at the conclusion that I could not live, and, fearing death, I had to use cunning against myself, in order that I might not take my life’ (Tolstoy 1981, p.11). However, this did not ease the burden for Tolstoy or Kerouac, on the contrary, their anxiety intensified, they now had to consider the marriage of life and death and therefore delve deeper into the original question of meaning, they now needed to find a solution to the problem of how one could live a meaningful life in the face of death.

However, all was not lost; an element of enlightenment was gifted to the writers by members of what they perceived to be the lower class. Tolstoy was inspired by the ‘simple

men' whom he saw embracing life. These men were not ignorant of the question, they had found their meaning of life, a meaning founded on religious faith. Kerouac also appeared to have been woken from his melancholic slumbers by the holy souls of the lower class, he was drawn towards the simplistic 'hobos' of the American road and the saintly 'fellahin' of Mexico City, however, unlike Tolstoy, his religious naivety obstructed his road to understanding and recovery.

Examples of this religious naivety can be found throughout *On the Road*, however, it is perhaps best captured in the representation of the father figure throughout the novel, 'fathers, in their absence, represent an important theme in *On the Road*. *The Town and the City* ends with the father's funeral and his son Peter heading out on the road' (Theado 2000, p.64). Both men held a sentimental love for their father; Neal's father was an alcoholic bum, yet nevertheless, Neal clung to the childhood memories of their adventures, likewise, 'Jack related how he'd gotten the spirit of adventure from his father, how much he wanted to emulate him, and how he often wondered if he were living up to his example' (Nicosia 1983, p.421). Both Jack and Neal felt a deep sense of loss and therefore it appears that their search for God in *On the Road* was closely connected to their desire to find a father figure.

According to Freud:

The terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine providence allays our fear of the dangers of life. (Freud 1961, p.38)

This Freudian concept is significant when we consider the religious upbringing of both men. Kerouac and Neal attended church regularly as children and therefore shared first-hand knowledge of the significance of the term "father" in the Catholic Church.

In addition to Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche also wrote about many issues that stem from religious worship, issues that can certainly be identified in the work of Jack Kerouac. Like Kerouac, Nietzsche was a radical thinker who sought to question all values which had previously been taken to be true and permanent. However, unlike Kerouac, he believed that the modern world of man had become diseased by an Apollonian desire for structure and order and everywhere around him he witnessed men who cowered in the safe-haven of comfort and ignorance, weak men who denied life in the name of God. Nietzsche was horrified by this fallen world and believed that a rebirth of the Dionysian would be salvific in restoring the aristocratic values that had originally been replaced by the 'slave morality'. As aforementioned, Kerouac, and the other members of the Beat Generation, read the work of Nietzsche and they agreed with many of his theories. However, Kerouac claimed that he did not agree with Nietzsche's religious views, a claim his friends disputed in Kerouac's later life. In this chapter, Nietzsche's theories will be examined and will be applied to Kerouac's work in a bid to determine the extent to which Kerouac actually agreed with Nietzsche's views on religion. Nietzsche felt the necessity to inquire into all values that had previously been regarded as true and in a letter to his sister in 1865 he wrote about his devotion to this quest, 'here the ways of men part: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe; if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire' (Kaufmann 1974, p.21). It is precisely this inquisition that can be found throughout the works of Nietzsche, and the *Genealogy of Morals* is by no means an exception. Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* offers an examination of the historical development of moral values and according to Nietzsche:

The project is to traverse with quite novel questions, and as though with new eyes, the enormous, distant, and so well hidden land of morality – of morality that has actually existed, actually been lived; and does this not mean virtually to discover this land for the first time? (Nietzsche 1969, p.21)

Nietzsche was very much an evolutionary thinker and therefore his genealogical approach offered a means of exploring the change of moral concepts as they occurred throughout history. His genealogy of morals called for an examination into the growth and change of moral concepts over time and the intention was to expose the unhealthy nature of the contemporary moral concepts that had come to suffocate his society. He believed that this ‘unmasking of morality’ (Nietzsche 1992, p.101) would sanction the restoration of aristocratic values and believed that it was this ability to see morality as a complication that separated him from the utilitarian philosophers of his time, ‘he considered himself to differ from them in taking morality to be a “problem” to be critically investigated, rather than something to be embraced and vindicated more or less as it is received’ (Schacht 1983, p.420).

Nietzsche was opposed to this English school of utilitarianism and from the outset of the *Genealogy of Morals* the reader is presented with an attack on ‘these English psychologists’ (Nietzsche 1969, p.24). In his first essay ‘Good and Evil,’ ‘Good and Bad’, Nietzsche wrote:

That in this theory (utilitarianism) the source of the concept “good” [had] been sought and established in the wrong place: the judgment “good” did not originate with those to whom “goodness” was shown! Rather it was “the good” themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian.  
(Nietzsche 1969, pp.25-26)

Nietzsche believed that the concept of “good” had been perverted over time and that which was originally associated with power and truth had become associated with weakness:

The man who is in truth weak, ill, and botched, who ought to be wiped out, is declared to be the good man, and is offered as a perverted ideal for the true ideal of the “proud, well-constituted man”, who says yea to life. The latter type of man is declared by the moralists to be evil. (Copleston, 1975: 101)

This view is significant when examining the conflict between social identity and religious identity in the work of Kerouac. As aforementioned, Kerouac adopted a religious belief system in his early years that placed a great deal of attention on guilt and suffering. He witnessed the weakness and suffering of his brother Gerard yet saw this as a virtue and he was haunted by feelings of guilt in his attempt to emulate the saintly life that was promoted by his family and teachers. This became problematic for Kerouac in later life as he struggled to find a balance between the social persona that was expected of any bohemian writer in post-war America and the religious persona that was ultimately the roots of his upbringing. Kerouac concluded that society was a corrupt force that attempted to undo the work of God by tempting the individual from his religious path and it was this belief that would later inspire Kerouac to ‘turn his back on the stresses of civilization’ (Charters 1974, p.223) and run to the solitude of the mountains to seek sanctuary and God:

I decided someday to become a Thoreau of the Mountains. To live like Jesus and Thoreau... I'll wander the wild, wild mountains and wait for Judgement Day. I believe there will be a Judgement Day, but not for men... for society. Society is a mistake. Tell Van Doren [sic] I don't believe at all in this society. It is evil. It will fall. (Kerouac 1996, p.193)

Nietzsche claimed that this type of perversion originally took place when the priestly caste obtained power and began to associate the concepts “pure and impure” with “good and bad”. This priestly castle promoted such things as abstinence as being that which was good and pure and condemned any act of impulse as being impure or bad. Thus, Nietzsche claimed:

There is from the first something unhealthy in such priestly aristocracies and in the habits ruling in them which turn them away from action and alternate between brooding and emotional explosions, habits which seem to have as their almost invariable consequence that intestinal morbidity and neurasthenia which has afflicted priests at all times: but as to that which they themselves devised as a remedy for this morbidity. (Nietzsche 1969, p.32)

Nietzsche believed that this ‘priestly mode of valuation’ (Nietzsche 1969, p.33) originally stemmed from the knightly-aristocratic mode, however, became its opposite when tension grew between the two, ‘when the priestly caste and the warrior caste [were] in jealous opposition to one another and [were] unwilling to come to terms’ (Nietzsche 1969, p.33). He progressed to develop this argument by claiming that the priestly caste grew resentful of the aristocratic class who promoted such values as bravery and power and therefore began a revolt in an attempt to smother the instinctual values which they themselves were unable to practice:

The priests are the most evil enemies – but why? Because they are the most impotent. It is because of their impotence that in them hatred grows to monstrous and uncanny proportions, the most spiritual and poisonous kind of hatred. The truly great haters in world history have always been priests. (Nietzsche 1969, p.33)

Consequently, this priestly caste, according to Nietzsche:

Brought about that tour de force of a reversal of values that enabled life on earth to acquire a new and dangerous fascination for one or two thousand years. Their prophets fused ‘rich’, ‘godless’, ‘evil’, ‘violent’, ‘sensuous’ into one entity, and were the first to mint the word ‘world’ as a curse word. In the reversal of values (part of which is to treat the word ‘poor’ as a synonym for ‘saint’ and ‘friend’) lies the significance of the Jewish people: the slave revolt in morals begins with them. (Nietzsche 1998, p.83)

For Nietzsche, this slave revolt that was born out of hatred and revenge ‘had been victorious’ (Nietzsche, 1969: 34), and consequently, the reversal of moral values was implemented by the priestly caste, the good were now seen as evil and that which was originally deemed to be bad was now celebrated as good:

The wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone – and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned! (Nietzsche 1969, p.34)

As a result of this reversal, Nietzsche believed that the masters had become poisoned by ‘the morality of the common man’ (Nietzsche 1969, p.36), an idea explained by Copleston when he wrote:

Christian morality in particular is the crime against life: it teaches – according to Nietzsche – the contempt of all the principle instincts of life. Christian morality is a morality of self-renunciation, and self-renunciation betrays the will to nonentity, denying life to its very roots. (Copleston 1975, p.100)

This idea of self-renunciation can be witnessed in the life and work of Kerouac. Kerouac spent much of his life either fighting instinctual urges or troubled by a sense of guilt for doing something that he felt would disappoint his brother and therefore ‘a sense of impending remorse is prevalent in much of Kerouac’s writing’ (Theado 2000, p.30). It has been argued by many critics that homosexuality was the predominant issue that persecuted Jack throughout his life, ‘Ellis Amburn, Kerouac’s last editor and later his biographer, has proposed that Kerouac was tormented by his attraction to men, and that his alcoholism and other problems stemmed from denying his desires’ (Leland 2007, p.55). Kerouac often submitted to these homosexual desires and it is known that he engaged in sexual relations with Allen Ginsberg shortly after the pair met, however, Kerouac always dismissed these events as sacrifices for his writing, a view that he would later share with the Beat poet Gregory Corso, ‘Jack pleased Corso with his shyness and Catholic reserve about such matters. He and Jack were both uncomfortable being sex objects to other men, and they commiserated with each other over having to barter their sexuality for artistic recognition’ (Nicosia 1983, 415-416). Kerouac attempted to defend his sexuality throughout his life; however, friends such as Ginsberg and Burroughs believed that Kerouac was simply trying to evade his true feelings. This argument appears to be true upon the examination of the treatment of homosexuality in Kerouac’s novels. According to Theado:

He eliminated the homosexual relationships from *On the Road* that had occurred between some of the men on whom he based characters. Cody speaks of his relationship with Irwin (based on Allen Ginsberg) in *Visions of Cody*, but Jack rarely confronts the implications. After witnessing Cody having homosexual sex (“Olympian perversities”), Jack is disgusted. (Theado 2000, p.118)

Kerouac was certainly reluctant to address the issue of homosexuality in his work and when he was pressed on the topic he ranted about the immoral nature of same-sex relationships:

I consider queerness a hostility, not a love...These are my views and I'm not saying them for your benefit (don't have to) so much as for "posterity" which might someday read this letter, all my letters (as Kerouac). Posterity will laugh at me if thinks I was queer... little students will be disillusioned. By that time science & feelings intuitive will have shown it is VICE, VICIOUS, not love, gentle... and Kerouac will be a goat, pitied. I fight that. I am not a fool! A queer! I am not! (Kerouac 1996, p.167)

This letter to Neal Cassady exposes Kerouac's fear of homosexuality, however, what is most interesting about this is not the fact that it appears to support the views that Jack was in fact homosexual, for his sexuality is insignificant for the purpose of this argument, but rather, it shows the shame and negativity Kerouac associated with homosexuality. It is important here however to examine Kerouac's treatment of homosexuality in the correct historical and cultural context. Homosexuality is largely welcomed in contemporary times and in many parts of the world it is not now unusual to engage in same-sex marriage, however, in 1940s America, the treatment of homosexuality was much different. During this period homosexuality was viewed by many as a mental illness that corrupted the individual. Kerouac grew up in a religious community and therefore would have been aware of the strict views on homosexuality held by the church from a young age. As he neared adulthood, Kerouac acknowledged that these views were firmly embedded in his societal structure. Kerouac most likely first experienced this hostile treatment of homosexuality when he served in the



merchant marines; however, it appears that the most significant exposure to homosexuality came through his friend Allen Ginsberg:

Allen had developed the concept of “bringing the monster to your door.” He would act out whatever character was most frightening or repugnant to the person he was with. Since one of Jack’s bugbears was homosexuality, Allen would inform him of all the supposedly straight men he had gone to bed with... Jack also feared madness, and it was Allen who forced him to see that what seemed unreal was “the only thing, the inevitable – the one.” (Nicosia 1983, pp.211-212)

Although Allen Ginsberg became comfortable with his sexuality in later years, when he first met Kerouac in New York, he too was deeply troubled by his feelings for other men. Ginsberg had spent some time with a psychiatrist to help him overcome the trauma that he suffered from the years he spent with his schizophrenic mother throughout his childhood and during these visits ‘the psychiatrist had convinced Allen that he would never be mentally healthy until he went straight’ (Nicosia 1983, p.328). This link between madness and homosexuality can be traced back to the seventeenth century where, according to Foucault:

The venereal, the debauched, the dissolute, blasphemers, homosexuals, alchemists and libertines found themselves on the wrong side of a dividing line, and were thrown together as recluses in asylums destined, in a century or two, to become the exclusive preserve of madness. (Foucault 2006, p.101)

The idea that insanity and homosexuality could in some way be connected preoccupied many members of the Beat Generation and caused Ginsberg to embark on, what he referred to as, the road to perfection, a road that did not lead Ginsberg to mental happiness, but rather, delivered him to the gates of the Columbia Psychiatric institute. Ginsberg’s road to perfection consisted of a denial of instincts, he was attempting to be somebody that he was not and therefore he constantly struggled to keep his true identity buried. This suppression of the natural instinct troubled every member of the Beat Generation and Nietzsche believed that this was a product of Christian faith:

From the beginning, Christian faith has meant a sacrifice: the sacrifice of freedom, pride, spiritual self-confidence; it has meant subjugation and self-derision, self mutilation...wherever the religious neurosis has appeared on earth until now, we find it combined with three dangerous dietetic prescriptions: solitude, fasting, and sexual abstinence. (Nietzsche 1998, pp.44-45)

Allen Ginsberg personally acknowledged the ramifications of this sacrifice in the Beat Circle and recorded them in what was to become one of the most controversial poems of the twentieth century. *Howl*, in addition to *On the Road*, is widely regarded as the most significant contribution to Beat literature. Published in 1956, *Howl* captured the intensity of a generation struggling to find spiritual light in post-war America:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked... angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz. (Ginsberg 2009, p.1)

These opening lines afford the reader a deep insight into the world of the Beat writers. Firstly, considering that suppression of the natural instinct was commonly associated with the members of the Beat Generation, it is important to note that the word starving immediately follows the word madness in the opening line. Furthermore, ‘in the dedication to *Howl* Ginsberg identifies Kerouac as one of the “best minds” of his generation being destroyed by the mechanistic, unsympathetic American culture’ (Theado 2000, p.124). This is significant as it suggests that Ginsberg believed that the madness that haunted his generation was not a medical issue, but rather, a societal issue. Indeed, here Ginsberg appears to indicate that the madness attributed to many members of the Beat Generation was a product of a corrupt society, designed to keep inquisitive minds in their place. This is important as it highlights the conflict between social identity and religious identity in the lives of the Beat members. Their post-war American environment was driven by such religious values that associated homosexuality with madness and these men constantly struggled to find a way to make their spiritual and social identity exist in harmony and as a result suppressed many of their true

feelings. Kerouac was certainly sceptical of the label madness after spending time in the psychiatric ward of a naval hospital, 'as he watched frustrated guards beat patients, he was troubled with the age old question, who is really insane around here?' (McNally 1980, p.55). The juxtaposition of the religious identity 'burning for the ancient heavenly connection...' and social identity 'smoking and contemplating jazz' is also effective in highlighting the dual nature of these men who spent their days racing between the solitude and abstinence which they dedicated to their God and the pleasure which they dedicated to their Beat Generation. Finally, the poem captures the defeatist attitude of the Beat writers with the inclusion of words such as; 'starving', 'dragging', 'poverty', 'darkness', and 'covered'.

For Nietzsche, men of the priestly caste suppressed their natural instincts in the name of God, they felt anger yet they did not respond with action, and furthermore, were celebrated for this 'unwillingness to revenge' (Nietzsche 1969, p.47), their ability to turn the other cheek. Nietzsche was horrified by this reversal of values that saw men of the earth converted into slaves of the heaven and noble virtues turned into sinful vices, 'they are miserable, no doubt of it, all these mutterers and nook counterfeiters, although they crouch warmly together – but they tell me their misery is a sign of being chosen by God.' (Nietzsche 1969, p.47). He felt that man should not have to smother his instinctual urges and as he believed that man was ultimately the creator of his own destiny he felt that life without action was futile, he believed that 'a man's value, accordingly, lies in his readiness to undertake whatever are to him the most strenuous and least comforting moral and existential tasks, regardless of their accepted moral value' (Stern 1978, p.89). Nietzsche believed that the focus of man should be on this world and not on a celestial world of ideals and 'therefore, Nietzsche argues, man cannot reach the highest enhancement of his powers until he has destroyed in himself his belief in the divine. Only then will life have a meaning for him and the earth yield up her treasures to

him' (Stern 1978, pp.96-97). Ludwig Feuerbach also argued that the focus of man should be on life rather than death and he stated that his predominant goal was:

To turn friends of God into friends of man, believers into thinkers, prayers into workers, candidates for the next world into students of this world, Christians, who on their own admission claim to be "half animal, half angel", into human beings, full human beings'. (Feuerbach 1957, p.197)

Ludwig Feuerbach was a radical thinker who exhibited not only a profound awareness of his own age, but also, what appears to be an insight into the issues that would concern future generations. Nietzsche remained loyal to many of the Feuerbachian views, however, it appears that he was not as naive as Feuerbach in the belief of the possibility of human salvation, 'Nietzsche brings out more powerfully than Feuerbach the implications of the "death of God" in modern culture, because he shows that God's demise evacuates humanity of its traditional meaning, which Feuerbach thought could still be saved' (Henry 1997, p.209). For Nietzsche, salvation lay beyond the good and evil value system of the priestly caste and consequently he identified the "death of God" 'with the virtual end of the morality of good and evil, and of all forms of idealism. It is for him the cardinal event of modern history and of the contemporary world, the ghost that looms behind his every important thought' (Stern 1978, p.92). The death of God, according to Nietzsche, created a void that could only be filled by a superior kind of man; the *Urbmensch* would rise above the 'herd' that had for so long stifled the will to power of the master caste and therefore would once again find a way to affirm life:

Our ships can at last put out to sea in face of every danger; every hazard is again permitted to the discerners; the sea, our sea, again lies open before us; perhaps never before did such an 'open sea' exist. (Nietzsche 1974, S343)

This open sea was perhaps what Kerouac originally hoped to find on the open road, however, it appears evident that his decadent days on the road were futile. Kerouac's inability

to escape the naive Catholic views he had developed as a child caused great disappointment and pain as he had failed to find the spiritual wisdom he had sought. He had travelled through the country, only to find that he 'was at the end of America- no more land- and now there was nowhere to go but back' (Kerouac 1972, p.75). He had spent his days searching America for an element of light only to return to the 'tremendous darkness' (Kerouac 1972, p.32), 'everywhere across the country as he looked for a vision of America, helplessly rushing toward its promise, and then repelled by its emptiness' (Charters 1974, p.135). The neon-light imagery throughout *On the Road* supports this view by Charters as the neon sign on the red brick wall appears to represent 'a neon promise of Saturday night excitement [that] runs abruptly into the redbrick harshness of reality' (Theado 2000, p.50). Kerouac had experienced adventures on the American road but still found that he was enslaved to the fruitless life. However, he still clung to the religious devotion of his youth and despite his failure in finding spiritual fulfilment, he still agreed with his friend Cassady that 'religion [was] the only kick left' (Turner 1996, p.179), a kick however that was not now born out of faith, but, convenience. Kerouac had finally tired of life on the road and was ready to trade his frenzied, hedonistic lifestyle for tranquillity and meditation, 'I'm tired of all that jazz and smoke and want to go the way of the dharma bums' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.138).

## CHAPTER 3

This chapter will examine the period of Kerouac's life following the publication of *On the Road*. During this time Kerouac appears to have openly agreed with many of Nietzsche's religious views that he had denounced in his earlier life. This chapter will examine the period of his life when he attempted to marry values from different religious orders in a bid to find a balanced lifestyle that would allow him to be a religious worshipper and a bohemian, experimental writer simultaneously. An examination of *The Dharma Bums* will be conducted to expose the extent of the conflict between religious identity and social identity in the life and work of Kerouac.

Following his departure from the American road, Kerouac was preoccupied with the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. He had failed to obtain the pearl of wisdom on the road; however, he did manage to obtain global success for the novel that recorded the events of his journey. Kerouac soon discovered however, that this literary fame he had sought throughout his life was a destructive influence and consequently the sadness and anxiety that he had experienced throughout his life intensified and plagued him endlessly:

In September of 1957 Viking Press finally published *On the Road*, and Kerouac, by now an underground legend in New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach, became an overnight nationwide celebrity. Ironically his success initiated his failure. Kerouac was not suited for mass media fame. An extroverted "madman" in his writing, he was actually shy in public and often became ill at the thought of appearing on a television show or even at a book-signing party. His already heavy drinking increased. (Theado 2000, p.22)

Kerouac believed that a new journey, with new values, might finally deliver him to God and *The Dharma Bums* recounts this search for God, truth and religious awakening which Kerouac believed would cure his tainted soul. Kerouac promoted this novel as:

A surprising story of two young Americans who make a good-hearted effort to know the truth with full packs on their backs, rucksack wanderers of the west coast hiking and climbing mountains to go and meditate and pray and cook their simple food. (Kerouac 2000(E), p.157)

Like much of Kerouac's earlier work, *The Dharma Bums* is largely autobiographical and focuses on the personal relationships and adventures of its author. This novel records the friendship and journey of two men who embarked on a search for spiritual enlightenment and truth, a search for divine salvation in a degenerate land. The characters Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder were used by Kerouac to represent the factual friendship between himself and his Buddhist companion Gary Snyder. Ray Smith is the voice of Kerouac and narrates the tale of his time spent with Japhy. Like his previous novel *On the Road*, and indeed most of his other work, *The Dharma Bums* is a novel that focuses on the American hero. Through the character Ray Smith, Kerouac again 'presents himself as a passenger, an observer, not the driver and agent of the action' (Theado 2000, pp.29-30), while the character Japhy Ryder is given a heroic status similar to Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. Kerouac first met Gary Snyder at a poetry reading in 1955 and he immediately felt a connection similar to that which he experienced upon meeting Neal Cassady for the first time in 1946:

Snyder invited Jack to join him and his librarian friend John Montgomery as they climbed the 12,000-foot Matterhorn Mountain in the Sierra Nevada – a trip that Jack was to immortalize in *The Dharma Bums*. For Snyder, who had spent a lot of his life outdoors, it was an unexceptional autumn ramble, but for Jack, who hadn't done anything so vigorous since breaking his leg at Columbia, it was a great achievement, made all the more pleasurable because he was drinking in Snyder's wisdom of wildlife, backpacking, survival, astronomy, Buddhism and radical politics. Just as Neal represented the garrulous, energetic person that Jack would never be, so Snyder represented the politically active, spiritually consistent person that he would never be. (Turner 1996, p.157)

Like Cassady, Snyder was a charismatic character and Kerouac admired the fact that he was true to himself and didn't care what other people thought about his values or actions. Kerouac saw Snyder as a frontiersman and 'in Gary's life-style Jack foresaw the rucksack revolution that would lead to millions of hippies abandoning industrial America a decade

later' (Nicosia 1983, p.496). This prophecy is recorded in *The Dharma Bums*, 'through Japhy Ryder, Kerouac again seemed to be speaking for a social minority, not a black subculture of kicks as in *On the Road*, but a more radical social movement that developed into America's counter-culture ten years later' (Charters 1974, p.267). Jack believed that Snyder was the personification of the true American hero:

His voice was deep and resonant and somehow brave, like the voice of old-time American heroes and orators. Something earnest and strong and humanly hopeful I liked about him, while the other poets were either too dainty in their aestheticism, or too hysterically cynical to hope for anything, or too abstract and indoorsy, or too political. (Kerouac 2000(A), p.16)

Snyder was a major influence on the life and work of Kerouac. After his fruitless journey on the road, Kerouac was looking for something that would reignite his faith, 'Catholicism appeared to have failed him and he was looking for a replacement, something to shield him from the bleak Nothingness [sic]' (Christy 1998, p.29). Kerouac took solace in Snyder's Buddhist practices as he felt that they provided ample opportunities for adventure and discovery:

The whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars... all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray. (Kerouac 2000(A), p.83)

According to Turner, 'Jack's interest in Buddhism developed during 1953. It could have been influenced by Ginsberg's immersion in oriental art, literature, and religion, but the direct impetus was the break-up with Adele Lee and his desire to retreat from the city' (Turner 1996, p.145). It appears that Buddhism, like Catholicism, was simply viewed by Kerouac as a means to hide from the responsibilities of life. Carolyn Cassady explained this in an interview with *Time Out* magazine when she said:



Jack's basic thing was escape. Buddhism, the trips, the drink, the drugs, everything was an escape. All that bumming around; if he wasn't high on something, he was miserable. He had talked about solitude and when he tried it he almost lost his mind. He went on talking about solitude and meditating in the woods but he set it up so he could come back in the evening and watch television. (*Time Out*, 14 October 1987)

Kerouac felt that he could relate to many of the Buddhist values, however, from the opening chapter the reader is alerted to the fact that his spiritual journey was not a life affirming conversion, but rather, another source to fuel his only true devotion in life, that of writing novels, 'I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical... now I am grown so old and neutral' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.8). These religious devotions that Kerouac spoke of could in no way be associated with perfection as he attempted to combine certain values of Buddhism and Catholicism in order to satisfy and support his own hedonistic lifestyle, the remaining values that served no purpose for him in his daily life were simply discarded, 'I didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavours of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni's four noble truths, all life is suffering' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.14). According to McNally:

Jack differed from Gary in his practice of Buddhism, for he thought of himself as a "dreamy" Mahayana Buddhist, concerned only with mitigating the first truth of suffering with compassion, and felt that Gary's Zen studies were rather intellectual. A few years later he would say that "Zen ideas are only technical explanations without tears and truth," and in a bitter moment still later, that Zen was "the invention of [the Hindu God] Mara the Temper... the Devil's personal war against the essential teaching of Buddha." (McNally 1980, p.208)

Biographer Matt Theado on the other hand, held a more positive view regarding Kerouac's Buddhist devotions:

One cannot overstate the significance of Kerouac's Buddhist studies on his life and writing. At its core, Kerouac's Buddhism was not a radical departure from his worldview, for he had been exploring key Buddhist issues since *The Town and the City* without the background of Buddhism's rich traditions. He found affirmation in

Buddhist teachings that made sense in the universe as he knew it. Kerouac augmented rather than replaced his childhood religious beliefs. (Theado 2000, p.123)

What Theado appears to have failed to consider prior to making this statement however was that Kerouac lacked devotion and consistency in every aspect of his life and his ever-changing religious values appear to be no exception to this. Kerouac identified himself as a 'Buddhist- Catholic' (Miles 1998, p.243) who 'felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, east from west' (Kerouac 2000(A), p97), claiming, 'What's wrong with Jesus? Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's nirvana?' (Kerouac, 2000(A): 97). He felt that he could make 'a religion out of whatever he was doing' (McNally 1980, p.22) and therefore attempted to evade any loyalty to a particular religious order. This naïve and chaotic belief system allowed Kerouac to pervert and transform sacred rituals into lustful orgies and drug fuelled gatherings:

She was sex mad and man mad, so there wasn't much of a problem in persuading her to play *yabyum*... I realised she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way, which had its traditional roots in the *yabyum* ceremony of Tibetan Buddhism, so everything was fine. (Kerouac 2000(A), pp.26-28)

Kerouac might have believed that "everything was fine" as he set about manipulating Buddhist doctrines, just as he had done earlier in his life with Catholic values, however, the people closest to Jack thought otherwise. Many of Jack's close relations acknowledged his absurd belief system, his sister accused him of 'playing God' (Nicosia 1983, p.476), while his Buddhist friend Gary Snyder (Japhy Ryder) ridiculed his fickle religious views, 'oh, don't start preaching Christianity to me, I can just see you on your deathbed kissing the cross like some old Karamazov or like our old friend Dwight Goddard who spent his life as a Buddhist and suddenly returned to Christianity in his last days' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.169). Kerouac's attempt to marry the values of two religions pushed him deeper into a melancholic state, as

‘his discipline cracked rapidly under the stress of a spiritual crisis. Deeply torn by the war between his philosophical preference for Buddhism and his heartfelt need for a personal God, he attempted a variety of sophistries to reconcile the two’ (Nicosia 1983, p.550). Steve Turner believes that Kerouac’s failure in this religious endeavour was largely due to his child-like conception of Catholicism that he carried from his youth into his adult years:

The link remained weak because his Catholicism was undeveloped. There were references to it in his novels, but he didn’t possess the certainty of faith that results in a burning vision that demands to be communicated. By contrast, the friends of his who were Buddhists had the zeal and commitment of converts, partly because they had first encountered the religion with adult minds and made adult applications, and partly because they believed they had found what they were looking for. Jack was a cradle Catholic and his understanding of Catholicism remained child-like and unsuited to the volatile world of ideas into which he entered as a writer. His preoccupation was with the suffering of Christ, rather than the forgiveness and new life offered by God, and because of this he never had the assurance of salvation that would have brought relief to his sensitive soul. (Turner 1996, p.215-216)

Kerouac’s religious and world views were certainly inconsistent, however, what remained unchanged in his life was the depression that followed him since his childhood years, the hypocritical ideals regarding life and religion portrayed a lost, unenlightened writer who was ‘suspended between the ethical boundaries, fascinated by the perverse as well as the holy, unable to wholly commit himself to either, and ultimately tolerant of both’ (McNally 1980, p.11). Kerouac ‘was torn between the simple life, in the woods with bare necessities, and the roaring all- night drunken excitement of the city’ (Miles 1998, p.209). Kerouac claimed that he wanted to be like *Han Shan*, ‘a man of solitude who could take off by himself and live purely and true to himself’ (Kerouac 2000(A), p.22), however, his capricious nature prevented this, as ‘one minute, he’d say his big dream was to go live in the woods with Gary, and the next moment he was going to head to Hollywood and pal around with his idol Frank Sinatra’ (Christy 1998, p.45). Nevertheless, it was not simply his lifestyle that spoiled his spiritual quest, but his inability to distinguish between the rational question of the meaning of life, and faith. Chapter two of this project briefly explored some of the similarities between

Kerouac and Tolstoy with regard to their 'arrest of life', however; it appears to be in the solution to this arrest that Kerouac marked his point of departure from Tolstoy. Tolstoy acknowledged that his pragmatic treatment of the question of meaning was wrong. Tolstoy arrived at the conclusion that 'faith [gave] the meaning of life and the possibility of living' (Tolstoy 1981, p.17), he defined this faith as the 'power of life' and declared that 'faith has to be defined and then God, and not first God, and faith through him' (Tolstoy 1981, p.17).

Kerouac, on the contrary, arrived at no such conclusion. He agreed that religion was the only means of redemption, however, unlike Tolstoy, he continued to prowl the land, 'waiting for God to show his face' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.73). Kerouac still equated religion with suffering and therefore it appears that his search for God was not about him finding happiness and serenity on earth, but rather, about him finding comfort 'safe in heaven dead' (Christy 1998, p.77). According to Kaufmann:

The kingdom of God is in the hearts of men – and Nietzsche accuses Christianity of having betrayed this fundamental insight from the beginning, whether by transferring the kingdom into another world and thus depreciating this life, or by becoming political and seeking salvation through organizations, churches, cults, sacraments, or priests. (Kaufmann 1974, p.165)

Kerouac's naïve notion of faith prevented him from embracing life and therefore his chaotic spiritual search amounted to no more than a delusional pursuit whereby Kerouac raced between the solitude of the tranquil mountains and the roaring festivities of the bohemian San Francisco streets in a frantic attempt to discover 'just what's the point, of this whole joint?' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.89). Kerouac's last attempt to find spiritual salvation is recorded in the last chapter of *The Dharma Bums* when Ray Smith once again leaves the Beat scene of civilization to spend the summer alone on Desolation Peak. Once again Kerouac attempted to escape the sadness and despair of life by hiding away from the world, however, what he still failed to consider was that the solution to his problems rested within himself and

consequently he embarked on another fruitless journey that consisted of the same childlike optimism that can be found in *On the Road*:

I wanted to get me a full pack complete with everything necessary to sleep, shelter, eat, cook, in fact a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back, and go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, as my only activity, pray for all living creatures; I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world... I didn't want to have anything to do, really, either with Japhy's ideas about society (I figured it would be better just to avoid it altogether, walk around it) or with any of Alvah's ideas about grasping after life as much as you can because of its sweet sadness and because you would be dead some day.  
(Kerouac 2000(A), p.90)

The final chapters map this summer Kerouac spent as a fire lookout, a summer he believed he would finally 'come face to face with God or *Tathagata* and find out once and for all what [was] the meaning of all his existence and suffering' (Campbell 1999, p.197). However:

Instead of visions and revelations he faced boredom and an aching loneliness in the face of the emptiness around him. His thoughts began to return to Lowell, to Mary Carney and the life he might have had if he had never hit the road. Instead of facing God he faced himself, and he didn't like what he saw. (Turner 1996, p.161)

*The Dharma Bums* portrays this summer of solitude as a period of enlightenment, where Kerouac's character basks in the 'Zen ideal of poverty and freedom' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.142) and completes his spiritual quest thus obtaining the answers he was looking for, 'I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.204). His time spent alone on Desolation Peak is described as a happy time where spiritual light finally pierces the armour of his darkened world, 'in my diary I wrote, "oh I'm happy!" in the late day peaks I saw the hope' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.197). However, according to Miles:

The picture Jack paints of himself as a hermit bikku, happily meditating, cut off from the world for sixty days is something of an exaggeration. According to his friends, the experience reduced him to a nervous wreck, desperate for human company. (Miles 1998, p.218)

Indeed, it appears likely that Kerouac's days without the distractions of people and parties forced him to introspect and confront the self that he attempted to avoid all his adult life. Kerouac's introspection did not present him with the carefree boy of his Lowell youth, but, an ageing writer who had lost his will to live. Thus, one must not imagine Kerouac returning from the mountains a satisfied and redeemed man, but, on the contrary, a despondent traveller who had acknowledged his place in 'all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.204). Kerouac's wanderlust days on the road and his spiritual pilgrimage to the mountains had amounted to nothing, however, he returned to the city still clinging to the hope that he might, one day, encounter his own personal saviour, 'wishing there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.198).

Kerouac's inability to have faith in that which he could not ostensibly define resulted in his spiritual demise, he had been unsuccessful in his spiritual pursuit and had tired of waiting for God. These circumstances appeared to increase Kerouac's obsession with death, a theme not only prevalent in *The Dharma Bums*, but also, many of the letters he wrote during that period of his life:

Jack could not follow his younger brother in [the] pattern of spiritual growth, for it was far too late for that; he was tired, more deeply disillusioned, without the faith in life and search that made a cosmic odyssey possible. As he told Carolyn [Cassady], his present task was to sweat life out, to pass through the world patiently waiting for death to enfold him. (McNally 1980, p.310)

Kerouac became increasingly morbid during these years and celebrated such ideas as 'Death is holy ecstasy. Life is holy suffering' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.299) and 'accept death as if it were a friend who was coming over for a drink' (Parker 2007, p.28). He had apparently overcome his earlier fear of death by simply extracting the want of life, he came to see death as a reward for his suffering in life and held such morose views until his early death in 1969 when the forty seven year old died due to an alcohol related illness.

Kerouac returned from two months of solitude on Desolation Peak to a nation gripped in a Beat frenzy. Both Ginsberg's *Howl* and Kerouac's *On the Road* were on the verge of being published and the Beat Movement had gained the attention of the American media in Kerouac's absence. The Beat figures were idolized by the public and Jack Kerouac was seen as the leader of this new literary generation:

Jack threw himself into the lifestyle of a celebrity – drinking hard to boost his confidence, trailing from party to party, and taking his pick of women. Broadway wanted him to write a play on the Beat Generation, men's magazines begged him for features on the new hip lifestyle, and Grove press offered to publish an unabridged version of *The Subterraneans*. (Turner 1996, p.173)

Kerouac certainly enjoyed the attention at first and took great satisfaction in knowing that he had achieved the literary success he had craved since his childhood in Lowell. However, it soon became evident to Kerouac that this achievement would come at a grave cost and following the publication of *On the Road* in 1957 Kerouac found himself in the darkest period of his life, disgusted by the person he had become; 'he was no longer the abstemious Buddhist, but was now the Catholic caught up on a treadmill of sin and repentance' (Turner 1996, p.165). According to Turner, 'the beatnik craze brought Jack much unwanted attention, and he found fame impossible to deal with. The criticisms undermined his confidence; he had to drink heavily to cope with meeting so many new people and he was blocked as a writer' (Turner 1996, p.179). Ironically, Kerouac had succeeded in becoming a famous writer, only to discover that fame prevented him from writing, and moreover, he was extremely disheartened by the nature of the fame that was bestowed on him. Kerouac had ambitions of becoming a credible writer like Marcel Proust or James Joyce, writers that were celebrated for their work rather than their lifestyle. He, on the other hand, acknowledged that his fame was the product of his rebellious, decadent ways, where his fans compared him to James Dean rather than James Joyce, 'Jack was aware that to many people his publicity value

was an unregenerate American male, but he didn't want to play that role. He saw himself as a suffering artist in search of sainthood, not a peddler of sleaze' (Turner 1996, p.173). On this point, Jim Christy holds the view that 'reviewers completely misunderstood – or maliciously distorted – Kerouac's books, putting him in a line-up of greasy delinquents that included James Dean and Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley, and accused him of promoting a switchblade attack on American values' (Christy 1998, p.81). In addition to Christy's view, Turner wrote:

Unfortunately, his status as a pop icon has made it difficult for critics to look clearly at his body of work. In that sense his role as "King of the Beats" and the image of him as an on-the-road thrill-seeker has worked against him. Jack realized early on that *On the Road* had typecast him, with the results that his poetry and his experimental prose was [sic] generally overlooked. Fame burdened him because he felt he was famous for all the wrong reasons, and he didn't have it in him to live up to the image of Dean Moriarty, who many supposed him to be.  
(Turner 1996, p.213)

Jack despised the view that his Generation promoted violent and degenerate values as he had originally claimed that the Beat Movement was a religious movement. The readers of *On the Road* however largely failed to recognise this and as the book gained an almost biblical status, Kerouac watched thousands of young Americans trying to replicate the decadent lifestyle of Dean Moriarty. *On the Road* had become much more than a simple novel that presented entertainment, it had become a guidebook for a new, younger generation who worshipped every word that came from its author. Speaking on this impact that the book had on its readers, Christy wrote, 'I've spoken to people who, upon reading *On the Road*, immediately quit their jobs, their schools, and set out for adventure. Often they put aside an entire way of thinking about the world' (Christy 1998, p.36). Kerouac detested the fact that these people were trying to associate themselves with the Beat Movement and this problem was further complicated following the publication of *The Dharma Bums* in 1958. Kerouac



had predicted a new movement during his time with Gary Snyder and *The Dharma Bums* recorded the idea of this “rucksack revolution”:

It was a prophecy which came true... when a large segment of the hippie movement moved to the land, establishing tens of thousands of country communes, sharing land, sometimes sharing children, living in old farms, in tepees or geodesic domes, their rejection of consumer society more complete than Gary Snyder or Jack Kerouac could ever have imagined. (Miles 1998, pp.236-237)

Kerouac’s forecast proved to be accurate and in 1958 he found himself under further attack from people who now accused him of encouraging a group that later became known as Beatniks. Kerouac fought these claims of Beatnik association and was more horrified than ever before that he could be seen to advocate this hippy lifestyle which he regarded as being fruitless and destructive. In an interview with the New York Herald Tribune during 1958, Kerouac voiced his anger regarding the association that was being made between himself and the Beatniks, stating:

Do you know what a Beatnik is? Usually some guy who says, ‘I hate my father. I hate my mother.’ So they leave home in Indiana and they come to New York. They write a line of poetry, type it up in a great big expensive five-dollar binding book, put it under their arm, put on sandals, grow a little goatee, walk down the street and say they’re poets. It’s just kind of a fad. It was invented by the press. Listen, I’m a railroad brakeman, merchant marine deckhand in wartime. Beatniks don’t work. They don’t get jobs. (*New York Herald Tribune*, 22 September 1958)

Kerouac had always sought comfort in his religious identity and focused on living life in a manner that he believed would have been approved by his dead brother, however, following the publication of *On the Road*, Kerouac found it extremely hard to sustain this religious persona. The followers of *On the Road* certainly did not want to imagine their hero as a shy, suffering, solitary figure who turned his back on adventure in the name of God:

For a quarter-century he had been an observer, a voyeur who could not always go through doors but who took pictures through his special keyhole. Now he was strapped to a chair with what seemed like all of New York City peering through the hole at him. The terms of fame were impossible...the fans wanted Jack to be Dean Moriarty, the free American cowboy, the limitless man who lived on life’s mental frontiers...the great God public had condemned Jack to the easy-to-catalogue

stereotype role of bohemian novelist; evermore, he would be the King of the Beats. (McNally 1980, pp.242-243)

This attention was too much for Kerouac to take as he felt that he was now not only defying his own values, but more importantly, disrespecting the memories of his childhood in Lowell with his brother Gerard. This was a difficult period for Kerouac as he watched his life-long ambition being swallowed up by superstar notoriety:

Jack's fame and success was not as a writer; it was as the self-proclaimed spokesman for the Beat Generation. The press were not much interested in writing and literature. They saw Jack not as the author of *On the Road* nor a proselytiser for spontaneous prose, but as an advocate of what seemed to them a nihilistic, rebellious, hedonistic lifestyle which included petty theft, the use of illegal drugs, and the seduction of underaged girls. Jack found himself in the front line as the establishment began its counterattack. (Miles 1998, p.233)

Kerouac was upset that the true message of his work had been misunderstood by the general public and he was horrified by the idea that his status within the Beats had been demoted from king to jester:

Jack had always longed for fame and acceptance but, now that it had arrived, it threw him over the top and he became insufferable. His drinking increased so that most of the time his talk was little more than incoherent babbling. People laughed at him behind his back and he became something of a standing joke as well as someone to avoid. (Miles 1998, p.232)

Kerouac's friends and family noticed a severe change in his personality during this period. Jack's arrogance and cruelty during this time was a distinct contrast from the kindness and compassion he had promoted in his novels and perhaps the clearest sign of his transformation was in the rejection of his daughter Jan:

At the various Kerouac conferences one hears how Jack was so sensitive, compassionate and tender. Ginsberg particularly talks of his 'great heart', but his rejection of his daughter negates all this, if his constant betrayal of his friends had not already done so. Jack was cold-hearted, obdurate and callous. He took no interest in Jan's welfare, even after it had been proven that she was his child. Each month he begrudgingly sent off the cheque, but did nothing to help her off drugs or to get her off the streets, though he was fully apprised by Allen Ginsberg of the life she was leading in the Lower East Side. The ill-health caused by this life killed her when she was still young, a tragic and unnecessary end to a talented young woman. Jan Kerouac herself showed more generosity of spirit than her father ever had when

she recognised that Jack was infantilised by his mother and unable to behave like an adult: he was trapped for ever as a guilt-ridden, carousing, Catholic college Jock. (Miles 1998, p.277)

Kerouac's treatment of Jan is particularly hard to understand when one considers the paternal nature of his feelings towards his brother Gerard. Kerouac spent his life lingering on memories of Gerard and was persecuted by a sense of guilt that resulted in him wondering if he could have somehow saved Gerard by dying in his place. It is therefore difficult to believe that this same person who was conscience-stricken over the uncontrollable death of his brother could watch his only daughter enter into a life that involved heroin addiction, homelessness and prostitution. Kerouac could not have done anything to prevent Gerard from dying yet he always blamed himself, while it appears that Jan could have been saved by simple acknowledgement and paternal love on Jack's part, but, true to his nature, he chose to hide in the past:

In November 1967, Jan Kerouac paid her father a brief visit. She was now fifteen years old, pregnant, and on her way to Mexico with a long-haired boyfriend. Uncontrollable at home, she had dropped acid at twelve and was on heroin by thirteen. To support her habit, she had turned to prostitution... If he saw any connection between his past behaviour and her present problems he didn't mention it. (Turner 1996, p.201)

This was certainly a different side to the man who claimed to be building a literary generation on compassion and religious values and during the sixties his daughter would not be the only person to encounter Jack Kerouac's newfound inconsiderate nature:

He was a manipulator, a controller of people's lives, as if they were his to play with but not his responsibility. His writing came first, all else was subjugated to it, but his friends did not realise just how expendable they were to him. They were used when it was convenient. They were there to stay with, to praise his genius, to listen to his drunken babble, to feed him, to drink with him, to keep him out of trouble and to have sex with, but he had little interest in their lives, their ideas, their writing or work, unless he could use it as raw material for his writing. (Miles 1998, p.232)

By 1960 many of Kerouac's friends experienced his transformation of character. Ginsberg and Cassady felt they could no longer identify with Kerouac, a man who once shared their

vision, and ‘Burroughs scorned him by saying that he hid behind his mother, never helped his friends and yet had made his livelihood out of recording their speeches and actions’ (Turner 1996, p.196). According to Miles:

It was the beginning of the end of the Beat Generation as a group of old friends with a common vision. From now on, Allen’s relationship with Jack was entirely one-sided, with Jack using Allen and giving nothing in return. He stayed with Allen in the city but Allen was forbidden to visit him at home. Neal had withdrawn from Jack after the publication of *On the Road*, confused and embarrassed by the fame it brought him, but also with a distinct sense that he had been used, his energy and stories wrung out of him, leaving him like a limp rag... Jack still wanted to be the King of the Beats; he just didn’t want the Beats anywhere near his home. [He] treaded heavily on his fame and recognition, asking complete strangers if they knew who he was, and lording it over his remaining friends. (Miles 1998, p.244)

Kerouac’s behaviour during this period contributed to the break-up of the group. He had alienated those closest to him since he had gained fame as a published writer. Kerouac’s anguish was so intense during this period that he once again began to harbour thoughts of death. He felt that he could no longer cope with the stresses of life and therefore believed that death would offer him sanctuary and reunite him with Gerard. However, Kerouac’s religious upbringing had taught him that suicide was sinful and therefore ‘to the end of his days he believed that suicide could not be justified before God, and so he never dared attempt it directly’ (Nicosia 1983, p.527). This was simply a minor obstacle for Kerouac however as it would not be the first time in his life that he manipulated religious doctrines, ‘Kerouac had told a few people that he wanted to die but couldn’t commit suicide because he was a Catholic. He intended, therefore, to drink himself to death’ (Christy 1998, p.76). Kerouac’s drinking was escalating at an enormous rate and in 1960 one of Jack’s few remaining friends intervened in an attempt to help Jack, however, by this stage, Kerouac was beyond salvation:

By 1960, Jack’s life seemed to be spiralling out of control, due mostly to his excessive drinking... Aware of Jack’s problems, Lawrence Ferlinghetti suggested that he come out to California to complete his *Book of Dreams*, which City Lights was interested in publishing. Ferlinghetti had a remote cabin close to the ocean down by Big Sur where Jack could write and retain his privacy... as with his experience on Desolation Peak, loneliness soon set in, and the dark emptiness

outside the cabin at night seemed to echo an emptiness he felt inside. It was the beginning of a minor mental breakdown. (Turner 1996, pp.182-183)

*Big Sur* was first published in 1962 and was said to be Kerouac's most honest book. It recounts the mental breakdown suffered by Kerouac during 1960 and unlike his previous novels such as *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac wrote with a complete openness that exposed his naked emotions enabling his readers to see the hurt and pain that was hidden behind the neon lights and jovial adventures of his earlier work. The central character of *Big Sur* acknowledges that he is trying to escape life and not pretending that the journey is another adventure. *Big Sur*, although largely overlooked by many of Kerouac's critics, is a text of monumental importance in that it appears to effectively wind up Jack's autobiographical legacy:

Kerouac's story as a writer who suffers from his own success wraps up in *Big Sur*. The novel, finished in 1961, completes a great cycle of going out (*On the Road*) and returning (*Big Sur*) that is matched by the stylistic developments that mark each book-or step-of the way...Kerouac comes full circle in *Big Sur* as he despairs of the purpose of writing in the first place and regrets the use he has made of his life and his friends as subjects. He closes the book with a writer's epitaph: "There's no need to say another word". (Theado 2000, p.7)

As aforementioned, *Big Sur*, unlike Kerouac's previous novels, is a frank and open text. Here, Kerouac did not try to mask his emotions or attempt to portray his life in an exaggerated light, but rather, he wrote with complete honesty and sadness about how fruitless his life had become:

It's the first trip I've taken away from home (my mother's house) since the publication of "Road" the book that "made me famous" and in fact so much so I've been driven mad for three years by endless telegrams, phone calls, requests, mail, visitors, reporters, snoopers... Me drunk practically all the time to put on a jovial cap to keep up with all this but finally realizing I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die. (Kerouac 2006, pp.7-8)

*Big Sur* certainly signals a more mature, introspective attitude in Jack Kerouac; however, while it is fair to say that Kerouac was now comfortable accepting the mistakes of his past, it

is apparent throughout the novel that his hopes for the future are not only unrealistic, but still extremely childlike:

Only in the woods you get that nostalgia for “cities” at last, you dream of long gray journeys to cities where soft evenings will unfold like Paris but never seeing how sickening it will be because of the primordial innocence of health and stillness in the wilds... no more dissipation, it’s time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in the woods like these, then just calmly walk and talk among people of the world, no booze, no drugs, no binges, no bouts with beatniks and drunks and junkies and everybody, no more I ask myself the question O why is God torturing me, that’s it, be a lover, travel... Go back to childhood, just eat apples and read your Catechism – sit on curbstones, the hell with the hot lights of Hollywood. (Kerouac 2006, pp.22-23)

*Big Sur* was effective in showing Kerouac’s ability to be realistic in acknowledging his past mistakes and his emotional suffering, however, what remains unchanged in this novel is the sense of uncertainty and contradictions that permeate all of Kerouac’s writing; the constant fluctuation between hope and despair. To elucidate this point, one need only look at the difference between the above quotation and the statement made fifteen pages later when Kerouac wrote:

I see myself as just doomed, pitiful – An awful realization that I have been fooling myself all my life thinking there was a next thing to do to keep the show going and actually I’m just a sick clown and so is everybody else – All of it, pitiful as it is, not even really any kind of commonsense animate effort to ease the soul in this horrible sinister condition (of mortal hopelessness). (Kerouac 2006, pp.37-38)

There had always been an element of fluctuation in Kerouac’s actions and views, however, during this period Kerouac appeared to be in a severe state of depression, ‘throughout his life, Kerouac staggered between extremes of behaviour and, as he got closer to the end, the extremes became more violent. He was such a drunk’ (Christy 1998, p.53). Kerouac had come to the end of the road and had run out of ideas to distract him from life. Solitude no longer comforted him and he was now using large quantities of alcohol. During this period Kerouac’s alcoholism was so extreme that he was not able to get up in the morning without first having a drink and it was not an unusual occurrence for him to wake up in a field with no

recollection of how he had got there. It was evident that Jack was still hell-bent on the plan of drinking himself to death; a method he still felt was not a direct act of suicide and which therefore could be justified in the name of God. This bothered many of Jack's old friends as it hurt them to see the man they once respected and admired in such a deplorable state, but also, it angered them to see that he was still attempting to validate his ludicrous behaviour for the sake of his Catholic upbringing. Speaking on this topic during a lecture to the Beat Generation class in Brooklyn College, Herbert Huncke said:

He wasn't geared to withstand the pressures of the society in which we live any more than most of us are, without some kind of outlet, so he had started drinking and drinking was acceptable. That was the thing about Jack that always irritated me – that business of trying to stay within the bounds of good behaviour while indulging in a sort of dual role, of living with these people who were all either shooting up or taking Benzedrine or smoking pot regularly. He didn't even really like to smoke pot. But drinking, since it was legal ... you see he always catered just a little bit to the standards of the government, the establishment, the society in which we live. I suppose that's maybe to his credit. It was my one complaint with him for the simple reason that he was this gay, Bohemian, freedom-loving character in one breath, and then a very conservative person in the other. Somehow or other the two don't mesh together. You're either one or the other. One of the saddest things I can recall seeing, as far as people are concerned, is Jack blown up like a balloon, his face just huge and round and red and stubble-covered, with an old shirt half-hanging out of his pants like an old Turk... feeling extremely sorry for himself, swimming in alcohol and sort of gazing up with tears streaming down his face at the absurdity of everything... there was just something very pathetic about him, and I didn't like to be in his presence when he was like that towards the end. (Huncke, in Miles, 1998: 239/240)

This vivid description of Kerouac not only shows the extent of his decline during this later period of his life, but more importantly, it indirectly addresses the issue that was ultimately the cause of this decline. Kerouac's dual nature was evident from childhood when he struggled to commit himself to either the adventurous sense of freedom that burned in his heart or the control and constraint that his religious upbringing demanded. Consequently, he spent his entire life trying to balance a social identity that was life affirming with his conception of a religious identity that was life denying. This intensified following the publication of *On the Road* as Jack 'was sucked into a vortex of parties, and interviews,

openings, readings, and brawls' (Christy 1998, p.42). His devotion to God had become weakened and he had grown too weak and tired for adventure. Kerouac arrived at Ferlinghetti's cabin in this defeated state of mind and during the rare occasions of sobriety he was filled with a deep sense of regret regarding the path he had chosen to follow. He considered how different his life might have been if he had taken the advice of the many people who suggested that he should give up his literary dreams and focus on domesticity in his home town Lowell. Kerouac had always regarded domestic life as an imprisonment of the soul, an idea he recorded in *The Dharma Bums* in his description of a truck driver who offered him a ride, 'he had a nice home in Ohio with wife, daughter, Christmas tree, two cars, garage, lawn, lawnmower, but he couldn't enjoy any of it because he really wasn't free' (Kerouac 2000(A), p.110). According to Turner:

Growing up frightened him... Although he was almost forty, he had postponed the normal rites of passage associated with adulthood. He had so far been married twice, but the marriages were both brief and uncommitted. He was a father, but he had no experience of parenting. He had taken on jobs, but had never been a breadwinner.  
(Turner 1996, p.191)

This level of responsibility never appealed to Kerouac; however, in 1960 this appeared to be exactly what Kerouac wanted in his life. He cursed himself for leaving Lowell and giving up on Mary Carney; the one woman that many believe was his only real love. Kerouac believed that women were either pure like his mother or sordid temptresses that set out to obstruct his religious path and he certainly regarded Mary as a maternal figure:

Mary was a year older than he, more socially adept, and their romance would create an indelible image in Jack's mind of what a woman should be... More sophisticated than he, she took him by the hand and led the nervous opening conversation, maternally fussing with his tie and hair. (McNally 1980, p.28)

According to Theado, 'Mary always represented for Kerouac the simple, small-town life he might have had if he had settled down in Lowell and become a mill worker' (Theado 2000,



p.13). During this time at Big Sur, Kerouac persecuted himself with thoughts of how wonderful a life with Mary might have been and he deeply regretted running away from the relationship. Kerouac recorded this in *Maggie Cassidy*, a novel about his relationship with Mary:

Thing was – Maggie wanted me to be more firm and binding in my contractual marriages of mate and heart with her – She wanted me to stop acting like a schoolboy and get ready to be busy in the world, make headways for her and our brood, and breed. I pouted like a big baby over the thought of losing my home and going off into the unknown suicides of weddings and honeymoons.  
(Kerouac 2000(D), p.150)

Kerouac had always idolized Mary Carney and even once claimed that she ‘could have been the mother or the daughter of God’ (Kerouac 2000(D), p.34), however, his obsession with her, and the simple life she represented, escalated during his time at Big Sur. Kerouac could not escape the sense of guilt and regret that he felt for ultimately sacrificing his life for the sake of his literary career and consequently thoughts began to flood his mind regarding how great his life could have been. These thoughts mainly centred on his youth, a time when Jack enjoyed the innocence of life and did not have to consider the complication that Beat stardom brought into his life, ‘no idea in 1939 that the world would turn mad’ (Kerouac 2000(D), p.21). Kerouac felt that everything changed when he left Lowell for New York, a view which he addressed in *The Town and the City*, but perhaps, captured most concisely and effectively at the end of *Maggie Cassidy* when he wrote, ‘from sweet Lowell Maggie came to sour New York in a rosy gown’ (Kerouac 2000(D), p.178).

This sense of loss and regret persecuted Kerouac during his time at Big Sur and a breakdown of some sort appeared to be inevitable. Kerouac had spent his whole life attempting to conceal his pain and anxiety from those around him and in 1960 these pent up emotions finally resulted in Kerouac’s mental breakdown. This collapse that Kerouac suffered during 1960 was recorded in great detail by Kerouac in *Big Sur*, when he wrote:

I see the rocks wobble as it seems God is really getting mad for such a world and is about to destroy it: big cliffs wobbling in my dumb eyes: God says 'it's gone too far, you're all destroying everything one way or the other wobble boom the end is NOW'... Ma was right, it was all bound to drive me mad, now it's done... An argot of sudden screamed reports rattles through my head in a language I never heard but understand immediately – For a moment I see blue Heaven and the virgin's white veil but suddenly a great evil blue like ink spot spreads over it, 'the devil! – the devil's come after me tonight! Tonight is the night! That's what!' – But angels are laughing and having a big barn dance. In the rocks of the sea, nobody cares anymore – suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the cross. I see the cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness, I start to scream because I know I'm dying. (Kerouac 2006, p.141)

Despite Kerouac's optimistic view that 'something good will come out of all things yet – and it will be golden and eternal just like that' (Kerouac 2006, p.165), the reality was in fact much different. Following his return from Big Sur in 1960, Kerouac was in the worst mental and physical condition of his life. His alcoholism was now more extreme than ever before and by 1962 his actions and views were shocking to those who had once described him as a gentle, compassionate soul:

His view became openly anti-Semitic and he had taken on all his mother's racist opinions... He had always enjoyed Black jazz and counted among his friends the Black poets LeRoi Jones and Ted Jones. Now he sided with the most reactionary of all the southern racist organizations, the Ku-Klux Klan. (Miles 1998, p.278)

Kerouac's uncharacteristic views were not limited to race and 'for the first time his friends heard him attacking Christ as egomaniacal and excessively political. He went so far as to suggest that if Christ had studied a little Buddhism, Christianity wouldn't be "the dualistic greed-and-sorrow monster that it is"' (Nicosia, 1983: 464). Kerouac was regarded as a lost cause by this period of his life and even a final attempt to reconnect with the town of his birth was a complete failure. He had fostered the idea of returning to Lowell, and possibly even Mary, during his time at Big Sur, however, upon returning, he found that the idea was simply a dream that would never be fulfilled:

Most of his time in Lowell was spent talking to anyone who would listen, but there wasn't a lot of respect in his home town for an athlete who set off for Columbia

with so much promise and returned with nothing to show for himself but some books that people said bad things about. In their eyes, he'd done the worst thing a working-class boy of his generation could do: he'd been handed a golden opportunity and he'd failed to take advantage of it. (Turner 1996, p.193)

Kerouac had alienated most of the people in his life and he had by now resigned himself to see out the remainder of his years in the company of his mother.

Since his death in 1969, Kerouac has regained worldwide legendary status; however, it is important to remember that Jack Kerouac's story as a writer is ultimately a tragic tale of a man relentlessly trying to be somebody that he was not. Taking his childhood into consideration, it appears that Kerouac never really stood a chance in the world:

His view of life stemmed from his earliest feeling of alienation: that his brother Gerard was loved and he was not. At some point there must have been a sudden awareness of himself as a separate entity from the family, an individual, an 'other'. Jack always saw himself as different from other people, never part of the mass, out of reach of their feelings. (Miles 1998, p.297)

Kerouac's story as a writer is therefore one of irony. His dysfunctional childhood provided him with the tools to fulfil his literary dreams only for him to find that these literary dreams would destroy his life. Perhaps Kerouac himself captured this idea best in his final book *Vanity of Duluo* when he wrote:

I did it all, I wrote the book, I stalked the streets of life, of Manhattan, of Long Island, stalked thru 1,183 pages of my first novel, sold the book, got an advance, whooped, hallelujah'd, went on, did everything you're supposed to do in life. But nothing ever came of it. No 'generation' is 'new'. There's nothing new under the sun. All is vanity. (Kerouac 1994, p.268)

This chapter has examined the struggle encountered by Kerouac in the latter stages of his life when he himself began to question his religious devotion. A study of the novels *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* has helped to expose the conflict between religious identity and social identity that exists in the work of Kerouac. These novels portray a writer that was

persecuted by the divide between what was expected of him by his family and community, and what was expected of him as “King of the Beats”; the leader of a dissolute literary circle.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has focused on the examination of a number of novels that show the rise and fall of Jack Kerouac, novels that collectively map the life of the author, from his youthful recognition of the social strangulation in post-war America to his failed spiritual journey. Kerouac is widely regarded as having been a life affirming leader, a King of his Generation, however, the primary purpose of this thesis was to argue the case that Kerouac was not this hero who celebrated life, but, a reprobate that squandered it. The argument that this thesis attempted to raise was perhaps best summarised in the words of Wechsler, a newspaper editor who once denounced Kerouac, and indeed his Beat Generation, by claiming that he ‘saw no virtue in organised confusion’ (Miles 1998, p.248). Many of the people that read the work of Jack Kerouac usually tend to subscribe to one of the two popular views regarding the connection between his life and his work. The first of these is the view that Kerouac was some kind of religious wanderer. Jim Christy certainly shared this opinion when he wrote:

Kerouac’s life is so much a classic pilgrimage and his work a record of that pilgrimage, that it often seems as if he had carefully plotted his road or that it was preordained. And during that search, he encountered like-minded souls – a purpose of the classic pilgrimage – and often the views shared by these people conflicted with those people conflicted with those of the established church as well as the secular powers. But having encountered like-minded souls, the true pilgrim was, nevertheless, impelled to wander on alone. (Christy 1998, pp.89-90)

This romanticized statement appears to mirror Kerouac’s own view of himself ‘as a special solitary angel sent down as a messenger from Heaven to tell everybody or show everybody by example that their pecking society was actually the satanic society and they were all on the wrong track’ (Kerouac 2006, p.92). Christy refers to Kerouac as a pilgrim and describes his travel as a pilgrimage, somehow failing to consider that a ‘classic pilgrimage’ would most certainly not involve sex orgies, drunken binges and Benzedrine fuelled parties. Kerouac attempted to portray his journey as a pilgrimage in a bid to appear somewhat loyal to his

Catholic upbringing, however, it is important for the reader to form a clear distinction between what Kerouac was writing in his work, and what Kerouac was doing in his life. To elucidate this point, one need only consider *Big Sur*, a novel where Kerouac wrote, ‘God isn’t asking us to mope and suffer... he gave us the tools of self reliance after all to make it straight thru bad life mortality towards paradise maybe I hope’ (Kerouac 2006, p.38). This is significant when you consider that this was published during the same year that Kerouac took his fourteen-year-old nephew to a predominantly black neighbourhood to erect a large wooden cross which he then doused in kerosene and set alight.

The second view that many of Kerouac’s readers hold is that Kerouac’s true identity is encapsulated in the character of Dean Moriarty. Like the previous view, this is inaccurate and tends to result in a misconception of both Kerouac and his writing. Kerouac would certainly have liked to have been one of the mad ones; however, the truth is that he was always the passenger, never the instigator. Both of these views are flawed and will therefore steer the reader away from the true message of Kerouac’s work. These misconceptions regarding Kerouac’s work are significant as they not only resulted in his literary decline, but more importantly, his personal decline. Kerouac could not handle the pressures of living up to the public’s expectation of what they perceived him to be. In reality, he was not a saintly figure or a brash, enthusiastic trail-blazer; he was in fact everything the fans of *On the Road* did not want him to be. This pretence was too much of a burden for Kerouac to handle and certainly contributed to his literary and personal collapse:

Kerouac’s overdue literary success destroyed him. He was ill equipped for dealing with the strong responses that his work, especially *On the Road*, evoked from both fans and critics. One of the ironies of Kerouac’s life is that he initially had sought the fame of a conventional novelist... The King of the Beats [had] tired of being pressed upon by a younger generation who, in their notions of some kind of Beat idealism, wished to share their lives with their idol. (Theado 2000, p.159)

The two views that are addressed above are often formed by the reader largely due to the conflict between social identity and religious identity in the work of Jack Kerouac. Throughout this thesis, the examination of Kerouac's novels has shown a man torn between the demands of his religious upbringing and the expectations of a post-war bohemian society. Kerouac's novels show him relentlessly rushing between purity and decadence in an attempt to remain loyal to both his religious upbringing and his social persona as an experimental writer. Evidently, Kerouac failed at finding this balance and therefore it appears that while religious identity and social identity are extremely important aspects in his work, they are nevertheless, aspects that are part of a bigger scheme. Throughout his work, there is an evident conflict between religious identity and social identity with fluctuation between characters that are devout and characters that are decadent, however, the one thing that remains consistent throughout his work is the love and reverence he holds for the America of his youth. This is significant as it shows a time when Kerouac's religious identity and social identity were at one. As a child, Kerouac did not have to worry about the issues that would persecute him in his adulthood and therefore could focus his attention on the freedom that childhood innocence permits. It is likely therefore that the true purpose of Kerouac's work was not to discover something new, but rather, return to something familiar. Through his writing, Kerouac wanted to rediscover the land of his youth, an America that he associated with freedom:

He was, at heart, a traditionalist who bemoaned the passing of an America where individualism and adventure had been valued more than group conformity and personal security...Jack's wanderings across America, which became an essential part of his reputation, were a way of asserting his freedom at a time when most Americans were tied to corporations which in turn tied them to specific living areas. He identified with the early American pioneers and particularly with hobos, who he saw as preserving the true spirit of freedom. (Turner 1996, p.213)

Kerouac attempted to reignite this sense of freedom in post-war America; however, despite inspiring the rucksack revolution, Kerouac found that his writing was unsuccessful in reinstating the America of his youth:

In 1967 as I'm writing this what possible feeling can I have for an "America" that has become such a pot-boiler of broken convictions, messes of rioting and fighting in streets, hoodlumism, cynical administration of cities and states, suits and neckties the only feasible subject. (Kerouac 1994, p.103)

This thesis however, is by no means advocating the view that Kerouac's Beat writing was fruitless. On the contrary, it appears that all of Kerouac's texts provide a profound awareness of his social surroundings and an engaging narrative style that offers the reader temporary emancipation from the routine of their daily lives, allowing them to escape their occupational or domestic environment and delve into a literary world of jazz and life on the open road. Kerouac's writing exceeded his own time, as, in addition to inspiring the writers of his own literary scene, his work paved the way for a new generation of writers that utilized his spontaneous prose to create their own free-flowing writing, '[Kerouac's] idea of literature, as of friendship, meant sparing nothing, making the private public' (Leland 2007, pp.49-50). This idea of literature influenced the work of writers such as Hunter S. Thompson and Charles Bukowski, who themselves went on to gain a great deal of fame, and indeed, notoriety, for their raw, controversial themes and narratives.

Arthur Rimbaud once wrote, 'Ah! My life as a child, the open road in every weather; I was unnaturally abstinent, more detached than the best of beggars, proud to have no country, no friends - What stupidity that was!' (Rimbaud 2008, pp.238-239). Unlike Rimbaud, Kerouac did not awake to this stupidity; his inability to abandon the memories of his carefree youth prevented him from embracing life. Kerouac did not appear to recognise that the open road would eventually come to an end and therefore he simply wandered blindly through his days:



At the end of *The Town and the City*, Peter Martin, the child most like Jack Kerouac, turns up his collar and strides off into the rain, the voices in his head asking where he's going. There is no answer. There wasn't an answer for Kerouac. He was of no country ... a seeker on a permanent pilgrimage. (Christy 1998, pp.80-81)

According to Miles, this also prevented him from producing literature that truly represented his intellectual potential, 'Jack remained forever callow, a perpetual adolescent, and it is this immature view of the world that will always prevent his works from being truly world class: they do not address adult themes' (Miles 1998, pp.168-169). Kerouac may have reaped the rewards of a famed writer but this thesis has shown that his literary pursuit was ultimately unsuccessful. Kerouac's 'writing had developed from his boyhood quest to create orderly worlds in his room, born of his need to make life a game with fair rules' (Nicosia 1983, p.301). This point is important as it shows Kerouac undertaking an unrealistic literary endeavour. It appears that Kerouac was attempting to play the role of God in his writing as he set about creating his perception of what life should be like in his work. Kerouac's main problem became his inability to distinguish his writing from real life and he found the pressure of his task overwhelming. Kerouac would never become the character of his novels or live in the bygone America of his youth.

Overall, it appears evident from this thesis that Kerouac was a social outcast who spent his days wallowing in a world of utopian dreams; he was an outside observer who constantly criticized society, but never, a participant helping to make the change. Kerouac once defended the Beat Generation by claiming, 'I assure you that the Beat Generation is an honest movement, and if the criticism is "Where are you going?" the answer is "We will get there"' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.271). Kerouac did not succeed in guiding his generation to this final destination and he attempted to blame other Beat members for the failure, 'they have used "beat" for their own ends... they can't possibly feel the way I do about life because their

childhoods were distorted by madness and disorder, and mine was not' (Kerouac 2000(E), p.429). This hypocritical statement mirrors Kerouac's own demise, a writer whose work was indeed tainted by 'madness and disorder', but more importantly, a man who fell victim to a tragic life; who wrote about the joys of living, but longed for his salvific embrace with death, 'it's a great burden to be alive. A heavy burden, a great big heavy burden. I wish I were safe in heaven, dead' (Kerouac, New York Post, 21 January 1958).

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