Abstract

Jack Kerouac attempted to reinvent his life experiences in his literature, and the myth he created about himself ultimately brought on his demise. He was born with humble roots and won a scholarship to Columbia, where he studied with Allen Ginsberg and read Thomas Wolfe. Kerouac decided to model himself after Wolfe by writing directly from his life's experiences. Kerouac experienced years of failures in finding a publisher; however, once he established his unique, spontaneous style, he became an overnight success with *On the Road* in 1957. This book, along with Ginsberg’s “Howl” and William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, built the foundation for the Beat Generation in the early 1960s. Unfortunately, Kerouac’s success undermined his true intent and his true self: The Beat Generation quickly evolved into a political movement that he wanted no part of, and the legend he created produced guilt and insecurity in his later life. Kerouac sought peace through religion, such as Christianity and Buddhism, and through alcohol, which led to his death. By incorporating his life into his literature, Kerouac created a fabrication so grand that he could not escape it. The life he depicted throughout his many novels, which he referred to as Duluoz Legend, and his inability to be satisfied with it, brought on his demise. Because this is an extraordinary story of an author, whose character was lost in the beauty of his own fiction, it is one that must be learned and understood by every modern-day reader.

Introduction

Jack Kerouac, a main member of the Beat Generation, was an author most popular in the twelve-year span from 1957 to 1969. Before dying of a tumor caused by chronic alcoholism in 1969, he successfully published fourteen novels, several letters, and poetry. Because he wrote directly from his life experiences, Kerouac’s most famous works, *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Big Sur*, chronicle his adventures as a Beat writer, his success, and his breakdown in the life he dubbed the Duluoz Legend. Like the other Beatniks, Kerouac indulged in myths and fabrications about himself, which is why much information about him is contradictory and fascinating. His semi-autobiographical novels were not published in the same order in which the events occurred, causing issues of continuity. Kerouac often showed up to televised interviews intoxicated, and he exaggerated the historical events of his books to impress and agree with the reporters’ suggestions. Kerouac’s linguistic embellishments and raw, loosely
edited, spontaneous prose posed a challenge to readers more than half a century ago, and yet, enabled his success as a writer through his innovations and originality.

The content of his work promotes the Beats’ underground lifestyle of sex and drugs, their political beliefs in changing an economically restrained America, and religious beliefs such as Buddhism and Catholicism. Kerouac was fascinated with the idea of creating a character for himself, and this alter ego, Jack Duluoz, ultimately brought on Kerouac’s demise. Initially, the Beat Generation was strictly meant to be a literary movement; however, with Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” (dramatized in The Dharma Bums) and Bohemians’ popularization, their gatherings became political. Kerouac had vocally expressed his disdain for this evolution, yet he could not deny his own involvement—specifically, the American themes within his own breakthrough novel, On the Road, and his support for 1960s youth counterculture groups such as the hippie movements.

Kerouac’s role in the Beat Generation, through his work and friendship with Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady, provided a foundation in the early 1960s for the counterculture to American society and a new vision of writing taken for granted in today’s literature. More than fifty years after the publication of On the Road, there has been a renewed interest in Kerouac’s poetic prose; for the anniversary, Viking Press promised to publish an uncensored version of the novel (Cummings), and another unreleased work, And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks, coauthored by Burroughs, has recently been published. Kerouac’s influence on the literary world has been profound, and as this generation of readers, over half a century later from his debut, is reintroduced to his Beat writing, it is important that Kerouac is approached in his own terms and in full context. This guide to an author, whose reinvention of himself brought his success and death, is a true cautionary tale for any reader, as well as for any aspiring writer. Because Kerouac’s writings still hold relevance for today’s readers, they should understand the influences and history behind his literature.

What to Expect
In this guide, three of Kerouac’s novels, On the Road, The Dharma Bums, and Big Sur, will be reviewed for style components and history, and they will be examined for influence by his peers, religion, and alcoholism. This aid to reading Kerouac’s literature will present much information on a biographical scale, including his self-fabrications and the truth behind the myths. Because his literature is semi-autobiographical, his history is pertinent to the study of his works. His family, Thomas Wolfe, and the formation of the Beat Generation were direct influences on his literature; Kerouac rewrote these events and people in his life, and the unknown consequences of the creation of the Duluoz Legend were too grave for him to bear.

History
Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, on March 12, 1922, Kerouac was raised by French-Canadian parents of working-class roots, which subsequently influenced his early work. He was nicknamed “Memory Babe” because of his tremendous ability to remember specific details. This later served him well as an author with his unique, spontaneous style. The early death of his
brother, Gerard, served as the basis of the character-study novel *Visions of Gerard*. Gerard’s illness and death left Kerouac with guilt, believing that he should have taken his brother’s place. Kerouac found refuge from his obsession with suffering and death in alcohol abuse, and later, Buddhism (Theado 12). On a football scholarship, Kerouac attended Columbia University in New York, where he met Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Cassady, who all became iconic members of the Beat Generation. Ginsberg and Cassady were like brothers to Kerouac; they shared the same passion for writing and a romanticized America. Together with Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder, they worked for a “New Vision” for literature (Theado 16–17).

**Thomas Wolfe**

Kerouac’s earliest literary model, Wolfe, inspired him to “make his life into art” (Theado 9). Kerouac’s first published work, *The Town and the City*, is much different than his later writings that made him popular, primarily because of the style. *The Town and the City* is grammatically correct and follows the typical sentence structure. It took him six years, beginning in 1942, after he attended Columbia University, to write the final manuscript with several revisions; this is greatly different compared with the rushed and leniently edited, *On the Road*, which followed (Weinreich 18). *The Town and the City* is often looked on as an imitation of Wolfe, and the novel was not well received critically.

Regina Weinreich expresses support for *The Town and the City* in her book, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*, stating that Kerouac did not imitate Wolfe’s style and approach, yet perfected it:

> Wolfe opens Kerouac’s eyes to America as a subject and theme in itself. Like the best of Wolfe’s work, *The Town and the City* is a romanticization of social realism, a reworking of autobiographical material. But if the America of both Wolfe and Kerouac has a similar resonance of desolation, America also represents quite a different fatherland for each of them, and herein lies the critical point which neutralizes the notion of “imitation” as a condemnation of Kerouac. If anything, the new work must be seen as a perfection of the precursor. (19–20)

Although both Wolfe and Kerouac wrote on a similar topic of America, they had vastly different experiences with the country in background because Kerouac’s parents were French Canadian. Kerouac may have imitated the style, but the content of the work is inherently original because Kerouac had a completely different upbringing, lived within a different community—of aspiring Beat writers—and had an outsider’s outlook toward life. He had not yet developed a style of his own at this point; however, Kerouac adopted Wolfe’s technique to convey his own unique dissent toward the American way of life. Weinreich suggests that Kerouac merely perfected the style in such a way.

**The Beat Generation**

Considering the nature of their antiestablishment content, it is no surprise that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs had difficulty getting their early work published. Between 1942
and 1956, these men exchanged literary ideas, discussed American ideals, and traveled across the country together. Cassady was the vehicle for much of the action and story in the cornerstone Beat writings of the late 1950s; his character was mentioned as an inspiration in Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” and was the hero of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, published in 1957, which was the turning point for the authors. With Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, two years later, these literary works each became part of the gospel for this new generation, nicknamed by Kerouac as the *Beat Generation*, and influenced the following decade’s hippie movements and countercultures.

The word *Beat* was coined by Kerouac to describe the type of literature he and Ginsberg discussed and created. In a French-Canadian interview, Kerouac claimed he derived the term from the word *Beatitude*; however, this was denied in an interview with William F. Buckley, Jr. During the latter, Kerouac defined the term as “crushed, beaten” or “poor” (Kerouac interview). In the *Paris Review*, Kerouac continued to play down the significance of the word, stating:

Oh the Beat generation was just a phrase I used in the 1951 written manuscript of *On the Road* to describe guys like Moriarty [Cassady] who run around the country in cars looking for odd jobs, girlfriends, kicks. It was thereafter picked up by West Coast Leftist groups and turned into a meaning like “Beat mutiny” and “Beat insurrection” and all that nonsense; they just wanted some youth movement to grab on to for their own political and social purposes. I had nothing to do with any of that. I was a football player, a scholarship college student, a merchant seaman, a railroad brakeman on road freights, a script synopizer, a secretary . . . what kind of Beatnik is that? (Berrigan 45–46)

Kerouac often expressed dislike for the phrase, *the Beat Generation*, especially years later when the term “spun out of his control” (Theado 24). He found the variation of the word, *Beatnik*, as rather “pejorative” (Kerouac interview). Although he felt it was degrading and offensive to be called a Beatnik, other members, like Ginsberg and Burroughs, promoted the use of the term. Perhaps it was the evolution of the term, from poetic to political, and the philosophical change in the Beat movement that made Kerouac resent the word.

**Beatnik Evolution**

As the movement grew further and wider, new members began to push for political undertones and ideals, shifting the meaning behind the Beat philosophy away from a completely literary and poetic stance. These authors and poets began writing about postwar political and economic perspectives of American society. For better or worse, Ginsberg and others became interested in the future of America and how to incorporate it into literature in a new way. Kerouac remained as distant as he could from any political involvement that went beyond literary means. Burroughs reflected on Kerouac’s political indifference years later in Richard Lerner’s documentary, *What Happened to Kerouac?*, saying that Kerouac did not have any desire for political movements, and he stayed “completely apolitical.” Burroughs said, “I don’t think he ever took part in a demonstration or signed a petition.” During an
interview within the same documentary, Kerouac was asked about the Vietnam War, and he replied, “It’s a plot between the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese, who were cousins, to get Jeeps in their country.” Although he was intoxicated, Kerouac expressed his apathy towards politics, disregarding any care or passion from anybody watching on television or in the crowd. Whether Kerouac was ignorant or distressed by Beat’s new political fad, his novel, On the Road, was still interpreted as political discourse, and the supposed solidarity found in poverty between Beat members, glorified in this novel, was a model for the hippie movements to come.

Kerouac denied the existence of a “Beat crowd” in the Paris Review interview. He stated that the community feeling was “inspired by Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg; they are very socialistically minded and want everybody to live in some kind of frenetic kibbutz, solidarity and all that. I was a loner . . . There’s no ‘Beat crowd’ like you say . . .” (Berrigan 46). This was seen as a contradictory statement because the plot of On the Road moved along through the characters of this Beat crowd. Kerouac’s novels were about this community, and despite being shelved as fiction, he claimed these experiences were real. We now know that Jack Kerouac was a shy outsider in a society of antiestablishment poets; in his literature, however, he depicted himself as an “extroverted madman” (Theado 22). Explanations and misconceptions were created merely by Kerouac’s current mood during interviews. Perhaps the blame could be placed on his indifference to reality or his abuse of alcohol. Ann Charters, a biographer of Kerouac, expressed the difficulty of his friendships within any Beat crowd because of his family background:

There was an enormous fellowship between Kerouac and friends like, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Corso. That, however, was a tricky kind of relationship, because they were all relating to each other as writers, or people who were involved in the adventure of drugs, or a whole kind of feelings of alienation from mainstream American society. But on the other hand, Kerouac’s feelings about his own sexuality, or about his own religion, or about his own origins, remained back in Lowell with his mother in the working class background, that he was into emotionally. That’s where he lived. (What Happened to Kerouac?)

Although Kerouac was an outsider among a community of antiestablishment writers, his literature portrayed him as the man in the center of the action. Sal Paradise, Jack Duluoz, and the other characters supposedly portraying Kerouac within his works were not the catalysts for his adventures, but they were the enthusiastic followers Kerouac had always wanted to be. As Charters suggests, his mentality, in reality, was always rooted in his blue-collar upbringing in Lowell, Massachusetts, yet the character he created for himself fulfilled the desire for acceptance within this community. Although he rejected the notion, his literature reveals he desired this underground society. And because he could recreate the world with his typewriter, Kerouac reanimated the past events of his life to fit a narrative he found more exciting, accepting, and approving.

The concept of this community built a foundation for the hippie counterculture, using the Beat literature as gospel in the 1960s (Johnston 103). The Beatniks glorified the lifestyle created
by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground, which they found tantalizing, and they lived and wrote of such an existence outside of mainstream society (Berrigan 7). They were not shy about their enthusiasm for poetry and language, all the while allowing stories to reach legendary or mythical status. Kerouac joined the Beatniks in their indulgence of drugs, sex, and alcohol, as illustrated in On the Road, The Dharma Bums, and Big Sur. Ginsberg wrote of the economical restraints put on by American society and his fear for the future of the country.

Bohemians flocked to hear the Beats read their poetry and writings. According to Kerouac, to be Bohemian is to be lazy, to be a “parasite” to the cultural movement that occurred within the Beat revolution and Greenwich Village, New York. He states that Bohemians did not work, but wore “beards and sandals” and “just sat around watching us” (Kerouac interview). Kerouac was offended by the Bohemians, blaming them for turning the Beat movement from a literary into political one, creating a Beat fad, and ruining his friendship with Ginsberg. It became increasingly obvious that Kerouac was mostly indifferent to political parties, whereas Ginsberg leaned far left of the spectrum. When the Beat Generation adopted a liberal standing, Kerouac’s relationship with Ginsberg began to deteriorate.

Although Beat writings became increasingly political and against the mainstream of American society, critics now do not see the Beat lifestyle justified by any restraints formulated by American idealism. Allan Johnston writes in his scholarly article, “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation,” of the irony of the Beatnik lifestyle:

Consequently, Beat culture by its very nature lacked the theoretical and social underpinnings to develop the clarified economic or political oppositional stances that appeared in the 1960s counterculture. Only in retrospect, if at all, did the Beats see their lifestyle (including the alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and petty thievery that it often involved) as a reaction against a seemingly aggressive and stifling social ethos. (104)

The founding literature of the Beat Generation, Kerouac’s On the Road, Ginsberg’s “Howl,” and Burrough’s Naked Lunch, were rather ambiguous for direct political interpretation. General issues were proposed within hyperbolic statements regarding suppression of idealists and fears of American fascism. Critics such as Johnston found it difficult to decipher, within the poetry and prose, what the Beatniks stood for politically and what was exactly restraining them from achieving the American Dream. Perhaps this was an issue for Kerouac as well, continually trying to avoid a political formation and overall message that would move the Beat Generation away from its original literary purpose.

Yet Kerouac identified himself with the hippie movement of 1960s, contradicting his pronounced political reluctance and idealism in the Buckley interview. Kerouac agreed that the hippie movement was part of an evolution of the Beat movement, saying, “We’re just the older ones. You see I’m 46 years old and these kids are eighteen . . .” He goes on to say, “The Hippies are good kids, they are better than the Beats . . .” (What Happened to Kerouac?). Kerouac was clearly proud of inspiring the youth, yet he never discussed any direct political involvement in that same interview. He kept himself completely apolitical and almost non-
sensical when it came to such topics. His resentment toward Bohemians and acceptance of
the hippie counterculture is a contradiction yet to be fully explained by any Kerouac scholar.
Perhaps he saw Bohemians as the reason for the Beat Generation’s political movement, and
the hippies as the product. Burroughs and Ginsberg were at the forefront of this Beatnik
evolution, despite any reluctance either had, and they had encouraged the Beat Generation’s
political involvement since its conception. Burroughs stated in the documentary What Happened to Kerouac? that the hippies were just following the Beatniks to a “logical conclusion.”

Perhaps it was only inevitable that the Beat Generation would become responsible for
inspiring the youth, ultimately creating the hippie counterculture of the coming decade.
Although Kerouac claimed publicly that he did not want to be involved, he created a character
of himself within his novels that encouraged this kind of behavior. His lifestyle, as expressed
through his writing, made him appear as a notorious character, which he later rejected in
regret. There is no doubt Kerouac left a lasting impression, one that many could idolize, despite
the truth that he was an older, less reckless man. Jack Kerouac’s “overnight” success in the late
1950s took years in the making, as he struggled to find a publisher. Most of his popular and
most influential writings were composed a decade before they were publicly released. Therefore, a large generation gap developed and led to misconceptions about his literature’s origins.

The Duluoz Legend

Kerouac wanted to rewrite the experiences of his life in his literature; however, publishers
requested pseudonyms for his characters, out of fear of any lawsuits, and shelved his work as
fiction. The most common name for his protagonist is Jack Duluoz. This protagonist was
everything Kerouac wanted to be. All Kerouac’s flaws and insecurities and his introverted
nature in reality were replaced in his literature by the cross-country adventurous Duluoz.
Although the events were inspired by Kerouac’s real life, the overall excitement and revelry
that the Beat Generation engaged in was exaggerated to the limits of belief. He referred to
his life, as it is depicted in his literature, as the Duluoz Legend. Indeed, it was a legend, a life
he wanted to have. This creation of the Duluoz Legend is like the creation of the monster in
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, where Kerouac’s alter ego, developed
through art, ultimately brings on his own madness.

Publishers released his work for commercial appeal and profit, so there were continuity
issues with his fabricated life story. Kerouac claimed to have wanted to bring all of his works
together, in an epic manner, so that one could read the entire story of Duluoz. Weinreich
emphasizes his late desire for his own heroic history, and his influence from Buddhist teach-
ings (which will be covered in this guide later):

Legend can be an unauthenticated story from early times, preserved by tradition
and popularity, and thought to be historical; a chronicle of the life of a saint; the
fame of a person or place . . . Even the most superficial reading of Kerouac’s indi-
vidual novels suggest an attempt on Kerouac’s part to make a fiction out of histori-
cal events, recounted in an ironically “oral” tradition, to canonize a “hero” through
extensive retellings of his adventures . . . Kerouac’s further wish for a single design to all his fiction appears in a handwritten note at the bottom of the manuscript page of a poem entitled “Daydreams for Ginsberg,” dated 10 February 1955, prior to the publication of On the Road: “But now I am beginning to see a vast Divine Comedy of my own based on Buddha . . .” (7)

Yet, he could not find any literary technique that allowed these separate books to be brought together in a chronologically coherent whole, packaged together as the Duluoz Legend. Kerouac’s death in late 1969 kept him from pursuing this goal, and unforeseen errors in his storytelling made the project impossible for any editor to accomplish.

**Literary Chart of the Duluoz Legend**

For an example of these continuity issues, the following is a chart of Kerouac’s main novels of the Duluoz Legend, when they were composed, and when they were published:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Composed</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date Published</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946–1948</td>
<td>The Town and the City</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948–1951</td>
<td>On the Road</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951–1952</td>
<td>Visions of Cody</td>
<td>1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>The Subterraneans</td>
<td>1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956–1961</td>
<td>Desolation Angels</td>
<td>1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>The Dharma Bums</td>
<td>1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Big Sur</td>
<td>1963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Theado, xiii)

What constitutes a main novel, or chapter, in the Duluoz Legend is subject to debate. Some works are included, while others are not, according to different scholars of Kerouac. The Town and the City is much different in terms of style and intent, so it is included in this chart as merely a reference point, being his first published work. On the Road took as long as nine years to be published. It was the first novel in the legend to be accepted, causing The Dharma Bums to be considered the sequel because it was published the following year. In reality, the events that take place in both novels are six years apart. Although written in 1953, The Subterraneans was published after The Dharma Bums. Big Sur was the next novel released, with its events occurring toward the end of his life; however, there were several more novels published after Big Sur, such as Desolation Angels, Visions of Cody, and others not included in this literary chart.

**On the Road**

Over a three-year span, Kerouac took a series of trips across the country from New York to the West Coast with Cassady, meeting with Ginsberg and other members of the Beat
Generation along the way. Kerouac was inspired by these trips, and the road started a transition of style, away from the formulated sentence structure of his first published work, *The Town and the City*.

Kerouac had met Cassady through a friend at Columbia. Matt Theado explains the personality and myth of Cassady in *Understanding Jack Kerouac*:

According to legend, Cassady had stolen five hundred cars and been to bed with five hundred women by the time he was eighteen. The son of an alcoholic, he had been in and out of reform school several times. Although he had little formal education, he had a keen natural intelligence and an energetic curiosity. More important to Kerouac, though, was his addictive enthusiasm for life. (19)

Cassady was certainly an inspiration to Kerouac because Cassady was the very person Kerouac wanted his alter ego to be. Cassady was familiar with taking on adventures with his friends; because he had such energy about him, he fit in well with those who would make up the Beat Generation. He may have been responsible for much of the Beat Generation’s involvement in criminal acts, drugs, and pleasure seeking. After all, he became a sort of muse for many writers such as Ginsberg and Kerouac. Cassady is seen as the true hero of *On the Road*. As the character, Dean Moriarty, Cassady puts into action the entire plot, removing Kerouac from the depressing house of his mother in New York and out into the world. Kerouac’s character, Sal Paradise, is the same as every protagonist in the Duluoz Legend—an observer, not the agent of the action (Theado 29), and in the development of Kerouac’s fictional self—in progression from *On the Road*, to *The Dharma Bums*, to *Big Sur*—the reader can see the transformation of Kerouac himself. He learns from Cassady, and through the expanding legend, Cassady/Moriarty’s influence on Paradise/Duluoz is the catalyst for all his adventures.

Kerouac wrote this story of his adventures with Cassady during the trip in journals and letters, and several unsuccessful drafts followed in pursuit of the meaning within the story. Kerouac was constantly unsatisfied with these attempts. Because he could type 100 words per minute, Kerouac was continually interrupted by changing the pages on his typewriter and felt restrained by the traditional standards of the English sentence (Shea). He wrote to Ginsberg and Cassady often, complaining about this inability to articulate what he exactly wanted, and his failure at finding a publisher for the past drafts he created. It was not until he made an innovation on his typewriter, allowing him to write continuously, that he produced, in three weeks, the novel he had been trying to write for three years (Shea). *On the Road* was an overnight success, and Kerouac brought a new style and popularity to the Beat Generation.

**Style Development**

Kerouac taped pieces of Teletype paper together and modified his typewriter to allow (what became) a 120-foot long roll of seamless, spontaneous poetic prose to be typed within three weeks. The scroll was said to be his final manuscript that was accepted for publication.
(Cummings). It has reached legendary status, among scholars and Beatnik readers, and *On the Road* became the first major novel of the Beat Generation. Kerouac continued this approach for *The Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur*. In the documentary *What Happened to Kerouac?*, it is acknowledged that Kerouac prepared for such marathon writing by sleeping all day or running; Allen Ginsberg stated, “He would sit down and write continuously for several days and sleep then write again, maybe for twenty-four hours or eighteen hours, using Benzedrine and coffee.” Ann Charters, a biographer of Kerouac, also commented on his untraditional writing process in the same documentary, saying “He chose to do the hardest, most difficult thing, which is fly in the face of convention and write the way he pleased to write…” (*What Happened to Kerouac?*).

**The Legendary Scroll**

Not only is the content of *On the Road* often the subject of Kerouac’s myths, so is the manner in which it was written. There were rumors that in reality, Viking Press, who published *On the Road*, had Kerouac revise the scroll several times before it would accept the manuscript; proponents of this rumor claim that if the actual scroll were unveiled, then, perhaps, this truth would be revealed. However, for its fiftieth anniversary, the legendary scroll was on display, and it was clear that the only changes made to this manuscript were pseudonyms, some censoring, and slight grammatical corrections (Cummings). Kerouac’s method of composing *On the Road* should be questioned because of his willingness to fabricate and agree to anything. As Thadao explains, “Mythical stories are often more absorbing than the truth. In Kerouac’s case, the facts may never entirely be known” (55).

According to some sources, publishers refused to edit the scroll, even after it was retyped onto regular sheets with paragraphs and page breaks, because it reached 450 pages of typescript. It took six years, with Malcolm Crowley for help, to get this story published by Viking Press in 1957. Until his death, Kerouac blamed Crowley for that work, of adding “needless commas and revisions,” because Kerouac believed that, “By not revising what you’ve already written you simply give the reader the actual workings of your mind during the writing itself: you confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way…” (Berrigan 4).

On the *Steve Allen Show*, Kerouac misled the audience to believe that the *On the Road* scroll was the first and only draft, claiming that it took him three weeks to write about his seven years of cross country travel with Cassady. This myth is still accepted by some today. John Sampas, Jack’s executor and brother-in-law, expresses his concern on the *Steve Allen Show* matter, stating, “This gave the impression that Jack just spontaneously wrote this book in three weeks… I think what Jack should’ve said was, ‘I typed it up in three weeks’” (Shea). Paul Marion, a Kerouac scholar, does not believe in his spontaneous writing and acknowledged Kerouac as a traditional writer, telling National Public Radio (NPR), “Kerouac cultivated this myth that he was this spontaneous prose man, and that everything that he ever put down was never changed, and that’s not true… He was really a supreme craftsman, and devoted to writing and the writing process” (Shea). There is a consensus among scholars that Kerouac had developed his own sort of hybrid spontaneity within work, and that it truly took him years to create the structure of the story, yet only three weeks to type it.
Poetic Prose

The poetic prose of Kerouac’s *On the Road* was another reason it became a bestseller, boosting the Beat Generation’s popularity. This free-flowing thought, stream-of-consciousness writing became the core of later Beat literature, which gave fans of *On the Road* an interest in the developing Beat genre. In *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, Michael Meyer defines stream-of-consciousness writing as a “technique suggest[ing] the flow of thought as well as its content; hence, complete sentences may give way to fragments as the character’s mind makes rapid associations free of conventional logic or transitions” (1640). Kerouac uses a variation of this technique in his writing, with a free flow of thought and intent to “give the reader the actual workings of [his] mind during the writing itself” (Berrigan). This is also seen in Allen Ginsberg’s most famous poem, “Howl,” published a year before *On the Road*; it applies the same long draw of each line, using an entire breath as the measurement in the stanzas, instead of any kind of beat.

With Kerouac’s typewriter innovation, his writing was given more freedom for a natural rhythm, and he stretched his prose to fit a total breathing capacity for certain sentences and phrases. Kerouac was indeed a proponent for writing like one speaks, and this was relevant in all of his writings, especially *On the Road*. By applying stream-of-consciousness writing in an extended narrative of prose, such as this novel, Kerouac surpassed his colleague Ginsberg, who could only sustain the style successfully for several short poems. The popularity of *On the Road* stood as a testament to Kerouac’s talent and was a textbook example for other Beatnik authors to follow. Stream-of-consciousness became a technique that helped define Beat writing, and it should be rightly attributed to Kerouac’s success.

This popular passage from *On the Road* expresses this technique:

> But then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes “Awww!” (5–6)

This stretch of offbeat measure can also be referred to as Kerouac’s jazz; he was greatly influenced by music, evident in his most popular works. He describes his own method in this musical fashion. Similar to jazz composition, the flow of text in Kerouac’s style appears improvised and varied, with a flexible structure to adhere to. Perhaps the phrase *Beat Generation* was coined for its style, the musical repetition, and jazzy beat of a drum. Weinreich explains this jazz influence and how the music relates to his method, stating, “He describes his philosophy of composition, ‘blow as deep as you want to blow,’ as if he were thinking of a writer as a horn-player” (42). Kerouac’s intent was to redefine the structure of a sentence to rhythm open to variation, like jazz. This gives the text that sort of spontaneous feel, as words fell from key to key on Kerouac’s continuous roll of Teletype paper.
The Dharma Bums

Once On the Road became a bestseller in 1957, Crowley and Viking Press wanted Jack Kerouac to write a sequel, hoping to continue their success. Despite having other works composed that he wished to release, Kerouac agreed to produce what his publisher demanded. He continued his unconventional writing style for this next work, entitled The Dharma Bums, written on a 100-foot roll of paper, single-spaced. In essence, this novel describes events that occurred six years after his trip with Cassady, yet qualifies as a spiritual sequel because of its style and loose basis on Kerouac’s life experience. The same characters appear in The Dharma Bums as appeared in On the Road, but with new pseudonyms, and the hero is another friend of Kerouac, Gary Snyder, who is given the name Japhy Ryder. Like Dean Moriarty of On the Road, Ryder is an outgoing “frontiersman, and thus an American hero” (Theado 155), setting up another common characteristic of the two heroes. Kerouac is clearly drawn to these personalities; both stories feature a protagonist who endures a transformation of some kind by following the example of the true hero.

The differences between Moriarty and Ryder lie in the outcome of the characters. Moriarty is never truly satisfied, still chasing his own version of the American dream, but Ryder finds peace within himself, still searching for nirvana. The protagonist, despite his transformation due to the secondary characters, still returns home to write the story.

It was sold to Viking as a “real American book [having] an optimistic American ring of the woods in it.” Kerouac’s physical and emotional state was a paradox in itself with his oncoming success; he was confident as a novelist, yet he drank profusely because of “his inability to cope with the pressures of fame and notoriety in the aftermath of On the Road’s publication . . .” (Theado 152). Despite his continued alcohol abuse, he was able to finish The Dharma Bums manuscript, which was accepted by Viking immediately. This book followed On the Road perfectly, without Kerouac experimenting further with the English sentence structure, and it was another successful novel, elaborating more on the infamous life of Kerouac, as part of the unfinished library of the Duluoz Legend.

This success, however, brought on more anxiety. Kerouac described himself as a loner and an outsider, and this was his true character by nature; in his novels, he paints a different picture of who he is, which caused further distress, because of the differences between his fiction and reality. He was suddenly in demand, and his struggle to create himself anew through his writing became emotionally self-destructing. Kerouac’s confidence in his writing was poised against his inability to be satisfied with The Dharma Bums. There were many more works he finished but could not release; his publishers wanted more works similar to On the Road. Perhaps Kerouac feared his unconventional style would become conventional, and he was not able to evolve his abilities and talents. Theado explains this contrast between his success and satisfaction:

Kerouac had at least five completed but unpublished novels that he would rather have seen in print—and more than sixty notebooks filled to the margins with his scrawled prose—when he put himself to the toil of producing The Dharma Bums. Undeniably—and understandably—he was cashing in on his overdue
renown. The Dharma Bums represents the kind of success Kerouac might have enjoyed had he not sacrificed commercial prosperity for artistic integrity. (153)

The Six Gallery Reading
Kerouac's novels give light to what was the Beat lifestyle, and many events and occurrences were unknown to the public until his literature. One event in particular, the Six Gallery Reading, was dramatized in The Dharma Bums, making the significance of this gathering of poets public. This reading featured Ginsberg, Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ferlinghetti was a writer, though only associated in the Beatnik circle socially rather than literarily because his works did not fit the true definition of Beat writing (stream-of-consciousness, myth creations, or similar anti-conformity themes). Although he did not read, Kerouac was in attendance at the Six Gallery Reading, where Allen Ginsberg read his infamous poem, “Howl,” for the first time. Perhaps the Six Gallery Reading was important to the foundation of the Beat Generation, because Kerouac wrote about it. In many ways, he was the eye of many outsiders to this underground society of poets. Though a modest gathering, The Dharma Bums made this event the most significant in Beat history.

Buddhism
The Dharma Bums is famous for Kerouac's first incorporation of Buddhism into a published work. He was Catholic by birth, but was introduced later to Buddhism by Snyder. Kerouac often combined these two religious practices and beliefs in his work and subsequently his life. The integration of these two religions is a common theme in much of his later writings as well. In this part of the Duluoz Legend particularly, Kerouac asserts himself as a wandering “Dharma Bum,” attempting to solve the difficulty of communication between people and religion. In amalgamation with his religious revelations, Kerouac focuses on self-reliance—by way of hitchhiking throughout the novel across America—once more. In the beginning of The Dharma Bums, Kerouac sets up the theme of the novel (hence the title) with the introduction of Buddhism in his life:

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. Because now I am grown so old and neutral... But then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world... in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) ... The little bum in the gondola solidified all my beliefs by warming up to the wine and talking and finally whipping out a tiny slip of paper which contained a prayer by Saint Teresa announcing that after her death she will return to the earth by showering it with roses from heaven, forever, for all living creatures. (6–7)

Throughout this novel, the involvement of Buddhism is referenced in respect to Catholicism, and his understanding of religion in general. He tried to blend these two in his real life
to find some inner peace to balance his success. However, this was in vain, and his developing alcoholism took control.

**Big Sur**

Published after *The Dharma Bums, The Subterraneans* received a lackluster response from critics and fans alike. Kerouac’s publishers wanted another novel like *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. They turned down his other completed manuscripts, which were later published as *Desolation Angels* and *Visions of Cody*. The failure of *The Subterraneans* and the pressure by his publishers contributed to his stress and breakdown that was to come. It was speculated that Kerouac also felt guilt about using his friends’ lives in his works (Theado 159). His fans contributed to his constant drinking; they were often of a much younger generation, and he was old enough to be their father. This led to his insecurity and fear of disappointment. These kids wanted to impress him, and all of this is dramatized in his novel, *Big Sur*. During this period, Kerouac was interviewed several times, and the topic of discussion always focused on his involvement in the Beat Generation, the speculative nature of the *On the Road* composition, and other difficult times in his life. Kerouac made it a habit to appear at every interview intoxicated and was uncooperative with the interviewer, perhaps because he was uncomfortable with his fabrications and myths. He was not the man in his literature, and yet the interviewers, his fans, and his critics expected him to be that character in real life. This pressure, coupled with his publisher’s desires, led him to write *Big Sur*, which describes his breakdown in 1960.

The title, *Big Sur*, is a reference to the location of Ferlinghetti’s cabin, under the Bixby Canyon Bridge in California (What Happened to Kerouac?). He wrote this novel with the same innovation that afforded him popularity for *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. The difference in this novel is the protagonist, Jack Duluoz, who is actually the true hero of this story. Kerouac left New York for a retreat at Big Sur, to come clean from alcohol, and to avoid his fame that followed his first two major novels. *Big Sur* tells the story of this relief that fails him, because Duluoz has a mental breakdown and returns to alcohol in the end, while returning to his home, his mother’s house. Theado’s summary of this novel gives an understanding of the vast differences this has from its predecessors:

> The task at hand presents a rhetorical dilemma for the writer, for he contends with the nearly impossible task of describing a mental and spiritual crisis—a breakdown in his orderly thinking—in a well structured book. Kerouac unifies the book one way by consistently undercutting the simple joys he finds in his first days at Big Sur with comments that hint at the dark future. (162)

Although he wrote this book on rolls of Teletype paper, there is much more structure, in the sense of content and flow; however, the protagonist is in disarray, struggling harder to find that peace otherwise resolved in *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. He is no longer the character that follows; Duluoz is left to forge his own way and fails. In this story, Kerouac attempts to come clean, not only from alcohol, but to his fans about who he truly is. He admits the absence of reality in his fiction and confronts the youth in this novel.
A recurring theme in *Big Sur* is death and madness. Weinreich argues that Kerouac’s mental health is reflected in his writing by the adjoining phrases and scattered thoughts throughout the work. She states, “Very few sentences form thoughts in this book. Instead the book is filled with dash-joined images providing a breathy, impressionistic effect…the writing is encumbered by excessive language” (151–152). Weinreich provides a perfect example from the novel:

> But there’s moonlit fognight, the blossoms of the fire flames in the stove—There’s giving an apple to the mule, the big lips taking hold—There’s the bluejay drinking my canned milk by throwing his head back with a miffle of milk on his beak—There’s the scratching of the raccoon or of the rat out there, at night—There’s the poor little mouse eating her nightly supper in the humble corner where I’ve put out a little delight-plate full of cheese and chocolate candy (for my days of killing mice are over)—There’s the raccoon in his fog, there the man to his fireside, and both are lonesome for God . . . (*Big Sur*, 37)

Kerouac’s style and ability to write was affected moderately to dramatically throughout this work, yet it was another financial success for him. Despite his breakdown, Kerouac recovered enough to finish, and it was a remarkable feat. Because of his chronic alcoholism and struggle with oncoming success, Kerouac’s religious beliefs, found in *The Dharma Bums*, waned. Most eerily, *Big Sur* foreshadows his own demise and the rushed, unfinished conclusion to his life as well as his works.

**Conclusion**

In retrospect, the Duluoz Legend is a story in the same fashion as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*; Kerouac created an alter ego that ultimately brought on his own madness and demise. Among all the speculations of his compositions, the contradictory nature of his character, and the flaws within his myths, Kerouac’s talent is mostly evident in his literature. Whether or not the Beat Generation was a tight group of writers, or Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in three weeks, or he was in reality the character he was in fiction, does not change the beautiful prose and the incredible history behind this author. The irony now seen throughout his career, and the paradox of Kerouac as an author and character, has justified his legend. He feared his fans’ disappointment in the man he truly was, and the interviews he granted only fueled his insecurities toward his writing and myths. Kerouac sought peace through religion, such as Christianity and Buddhism, and alcoholism, which led to his death. By incorporating his life into his literature, Kerouac created a fabrication so grand that he could not escape it. Theado explains that readers must accept Kerouac’s reality with his fiction:

> Kerouac lived to write, and he looked into his own life for what he considered the most indispensable material. Essentially, writing justified his life. And his life—for readers—justifies his writing in that it helps explain its stylistic eccentricities . . . Some observers may conclude that Kerouac failed in life—he never maintained a solid home life that he yearned for; he had a child he rarely saw; he was frequently
broke and often depended on his mother; he died an early alcoholic's death—yet his work stands as a testament to his genius. (25–26)

Kerouac created a style that brought together all of his abilities. His speed typing, incredible memory, and his creative mind brought together a generation of writers, inspired a coming counterculture, and absorbed his life experiences into legend. It is a cautionary tale for any aspiring author, a remarkable story for all who love to read. His novels alone have stood out as great American literature, yet together they tell a greater narrative: an author whose self became lost in the beauty of his own fiction. Therefore, the influences and history behind his literature must be learned and understood by today's generation of readers.

Works Cited


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