

# Jack Kerouac's fear of women and lust



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In Jack Kerouac's novels and poetry he is always searching for something to believe in, be it himself, God, or something else. Surprisingly, he manages to also simultaneously be constantly running away. Fear of responsibility and conformity is present in the majority of his works; this is the reason for his elusiveness, and the constant desire and search for a path far removed from the traditional ho-hum home-life leads him to Buddhism, which was then a novel concept in America. Kerouac's newfound beliefs lead him to be zealously against lust, because it leads to the formation of karma: lust leads to birth, which leads to suffering, which leads to death, which leads to the continuation of the cycle. In *Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith (Kerouac's pseudonym for himself) had "gone through an entire year of celibacy based on [his] feeling that lust was the direct cause of . . . suffering and death." He even claimed to have "come to a point where [he] regarded lust as offensive and even cruel." Due to the "absence of active lust," Smith had a "new peaceful life that [he] was enjoying a great deal" (Kerouac *Dharma Bums*, 29). Robert A. Hipkiss addresses this when he states Kerouac's belief that "women fill an unholy and very earthly office. Women continue the cycle of karma" (Hipkiss 271). Smith does, however, eventually give in to his sexual desire and "all the peaceful celibacy of [his] Buddhism [goes] down the drain" (Kerouac *Dharma Bums*, 30). Alvah (Allen Ginsberg) and Japhy (Gary Snyder) had convinced him to join in with their game of "yabyum," which is essentially a "Zen Free Love Lunacy [orgy]," where a young girl named Princess was the main attraction (Kerouac *Dharma Bums*, 30). Before Smith retires that night, however, he meditates and eventually "wasn't taken in by no Princess or no desire for no Princess and nobody's disapproval and [he] felt glad and slept well" (Kerouac *Dharma Bums*, 35). Kingsley Widmer

blames this indecisiveness and paradoxical living on Kerouac's " guilty sexual fears" (Widmer 305), as he is " crudely malely sexual and cannot help [himself] and [has] lecherous and so on propensities . . ." (Kerouac *The Subterraneans*, 3). In *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac temporarily gives into " the sweet return to the protective sanctuary and succor of the womb" (Tytell 272); however, he treats Mardou, a timid, small black girl that he loves temporarily, poorly due to a lack of trust, and he also " wanted another drink with a rowdy fiend . . ." (Kerouac *The Subterraneans*, 105), which was what finally puts her over the edge. She did, however, stay with Kerouac for quite a while, despite the recurring theme of " poor Mardou going home alone, again, and drunken maniac [Kerouac]" rushing off (Kerouac 101, *The Subterraneans*), which shows why Kerouac was attracted to her; " the women least likely to make demands upon him are the most desirable" (Hipkiss 271). Eventually, Mardou rids herself of her " drunken maniac," which leaves him " weeping for [his] lost Mardou and so stupidly because [he]'d decided to throw her away [himself]" (Kerouac 103, *The Subterraneans*). Kerouac concludes that " there's a lover on every corner - they're all the same, boy, don't get hung-up on one" (Kerouac *The Subterraneans*, 110), which is preliminary to Buddhism as an excuse for his avoidance of attachment. Mardou becomes one of the " hundreds of lover-girls everyone of em betrayed or screwed in some way by [him]" (Kerouac *Desolation Angels*, 124). Some of the Dharma contains numerous rantings about female sexuality and its dangers. Kerouac's fears about lusting after women is summarized when he states his belief that: " Men are ' taken in' by women, since beginningless time, —this is how birth and ignorance continue —Men don't realize that women are their own Rib of Lust, Self-Lust, and are

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actually nothing but (like men) skin & bones with shit inside—Watch women closely & see if I'm not right—The True Man eschews women, has no children, and seeks No-Return to the dreary wheel of life & death—He is constantly on his guard against lust & concupiscence & cupidity—” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 170). Kerouac illustrates clearly here his belief about humans being nothing constant, and he knows that “ everything [he] had ever known and would ever know was One” (Kerouac *On the Road*, 147). Since everything is impermanent, Kerouac instructs his readers to “ instead of seducing women, control yourself / and treat them like sisters; instead of / seducing men, control yourself / and treat them like brothers. / For life is pitiful” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 175). He wants humanity to “ put an end to human rebirth, by abstaining from sexual intercourse” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 338). Kerouac also says to “ ... give up... all lusting after sex...” because there are “ two things to do: eat and teach” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 77). He goes from sad and quiet with conversations along the lines of: “...then suddenly he sees chickens in crates in the inside dark Chinese store, ‘ look, look, they’re all gonna die!’ He stops in the street. ‘ How can God make a world like that?’ I don’t want a world like that from God.” I don’t blame you.” (Kerouac *Desolation Angels*, 189) Then, however, he grows increasingly poignant with statements such as “ PRETTY GIRLS MAKE GRAVES Fuck you all” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 151) and his assertion that “ if Jazz was profound women couldn’t play it” (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 139). His anger with and fear of women, and the sexual desire they arise in him, is mixed with Buddhism and beliefs in non-duality, meaning all things being One, a central theme in Buddhism, and is concisely expressed in his *A B C's of Truth: A Creamy thighs of beautiful young girl*

3DB Baby crying because it doesn't want to be born 3DC Corpse decaying in grave (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 159). The internal struggle he expresses in many of his writings is because his "last obstacle is an unmatured sexual karma" (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 162). He elaborates on and justifies his imperfection in this area by claiming that "sexuality [is] the most powerful force in / all nature because of its sometimes / fabulous delight, is the very in- / carnation of Ignorance . . ." (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 198). Kerouac's belief in Buddhism includes the belief that one should "love everyone equally / Everyone equally empty / Each one a coming Buddha" (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 239). He also teaches that "lust is no different than / killing:- the squeal of the murdered / pig, the hoarse panting of the / sexers, it's all vicious, fleshy / and blind, and subject of the devouring worm" (Kerouac *Some of the Dharma*, 198). When Tristessa offers herself to Kerouac, he turns her down and thinks later, "But what I've missed when I don't get that friend lunge of the lover's body, coming right at me, all mine, but it was a slaughterhouse for meat" (Kerouac *Tristessa*, 55). Kerouac sees sex as causing "the crying horror of birth and the impossible lostness of the promise of death" (Kerouac *Desolation Angels*, 316), so it has the same end result as murder does; sexual reproduction creates life, which eventually has to end, thus both bring about death, while one just takes longer and involves more pain. Kerouac was always searching for an excuse to avoid responsibility and to see everything, and he found Buddhism to fit perfectly with his needs. Kerouac is said to have only "sometimes thought himself to be" a "Zen devotee" (Duffey 166). His novels feature "child-men" which "will never have a growing-up" (Duffey 166), each of whom symbolize Kerouac. His novels all show a "revolt against the 'square' world . . . the

world of rational and responsible living" (Kazin 165). His "frantic flights across country, [his] rootless and disaffected behavior" are always an "attempt to escape from an intolerable personal or social situation . . . [a] search for values or for inner light and understanding . . . a search for God" (Feied 166). Kerouac finally finds this inner light and a god with Buddhism, and this also conveniently gives him an excuse for shunning relationships, commitment, and responsibility. Before he found Buddhism, he explained it by claiming "women love [him] and then they realize [he is] drunk for all the world and this makes them realize [he] can't concentrate on them alone, for long, makes them jealous . . ." (Kerouac Satori in Paris, 21). Kerouac's belief of lust resulting in birth, and the suffering that's unavoidable in life, and then death, which is equally inevitable, and their interrelations cause him to shun lust, and therefore always be on the run from it and the women that cause him to feel desire. Hipkiss addresses Kerouac's difficulties with attachment and his constant need to escape by asserting that "the call of the road . . . is as often as not a call away from entanglements with women" (Hipkiss 270). Buddhism provided Kerouac with an excuse for what was already part of his innate personality, the desire to recoil from attachment. Women are seen as the method that life, as well as death, since the two come together, uses to reproduce itself. Women produce sexual desire in the loins and minds, and occasionally even attachment in their minds - which is perhaps Kerouac's ultimate fear - and thus they are the carriers and causes of continued pain and death for so many. Because of this, Kerouac attempts to keep from being caught up in their karma cycle trap in which numerous men become entangled. His motives certainly include self-centered issues, such as avoiding settling down to a responsible family life with a woman, but they

also include a noble aspect; he believes, either from self-delusion or sincerely, that sex directly causes death, as "all of us [are] trembling in our mortality boots, born to die, BORN TO DIE," which would be a valid reason for avoiding having active lust in one's life (Kerouac *Tristessa*, 32). Works Cited Duffey, Bernard. "The Three Worlds of Jack Kerouac." *Recent American Fiction* (1963): 175-84. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1973. 166. Feied, Frederick. *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Culture Hero* (1964): 57-61. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1973. 166. Hipkiss, Robert. *Jack Kerouac: Prophet of the New Romanticism* (1976): 26-282E Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 29. Ed. Jean Stine. Detroit: Gale, 1984: 269-272. Kazin, Alfred. "The Alone Generation." *Harper's* (October 1959): 127-31. Rpt2E in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 1. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1973. 165-166. Kerouac, Jack. *Desolation Angels*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.—. *Dharma Bums, The*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.—. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.—. *Satori in Paris*. London, England: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.—. *Some of the Dharma*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.—. *Subterraneans, The*. New York: Grove Press, 1958.—. *Tristessa*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992. Tylell, John. "The Joy of 'On the Road'." *Naked Angels* (1976): 430. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 29. Ed. Jean Stine. Detroit: Gale, 1984: 272-273. Widmer, Kingsley. "The Beat in the Rise of the Populist Culture." *The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (1970): 155-73. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 14. Ed. Dedria Bryfonski. Detroit: Gale, 1980. 305-306.