

Big Sur: Kerouac's Spiritual Drop Scene

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Abstract

Big Sur is an important novel in Kerouac's late period. The origin, content and purpose of this novel are significantly different from his previous works. Through analyzing the symbolic images in the novel, we can understand Kerouac's painful reflection on his resistance against the American mainstream culture, his deep understanding of the failure to convey his spiritual appeals and his inability to compromise with the society. The study of *Big Sur* not only shows Kerouac's spiritual collapse, but also reveals the spiritual trajectory of the Beats from fanaticism to decay.

Big Sur, on the coast of California, is a 99-mile-long rugged and beautiful waterfront. "Big Sur is fabulously romantic, ... with its rugged terrain, its treacherous sea, and its challenging climate" (Wallraff, 2002). Kerouac, the soul of the Beat Generation, finishes his novel *Big Sur* there. The agony and desperation shown in the novel helps to understand the ideological doom of the Beats. While *On the Road*, Kerouac's best-known work, records the height of Beat Generation, *Big Sur*, which was published in 1962, written 7 years before Kerouac's death, accurately summarizes the spiritual end of the Beat Generation. After *Big Sur*, Kerouac has never written works shown his spiritual pursuit and agony, which makes this novel the one that reveals his deep frustration and desperation over his spiritual struggle. In *Big Sur*, though the "spontaneous prose method" Kerouac has developed is applied, the symbols in *Big Sur* can still impress the readers by their concise and direct relation with Kerouac's crushed feelings (Kostas, 2002). He never tries to escape from his true feelings for his definite failure, so the symbols pave the way for a thorough understanding of Kerouac's spiritual journey and the ineluctable collapse of his dream. As Aram Saroyan said in the preface to *Big Sur*: "In *Big Sur*, we have the plaintive but magnificent aftermath" (Aram, 1992).

Keywords: Big Sur, Kerouac, the Beat Generation Spirit

1. Big Sur—Kerouac's retreat

In *On the Road*, Kerouac's main purpose of writing is to set up the new flag for a novel lifestyle. He has chosen to take the road, hoping to find a new life experience and new living value that is different from what is prevailing among the American middle class in the culture with the "shallowness and acquisitiveness" (David, 2013). The Beats are "nonconformists" who "critiqued...mainstream values and social structures" (Robert, 2005). They seem to renounce all social regulations and ethical restrictions on their personal freedom. "Those who wish to live well must break the charm of social conventions so that they can live according to their truest impulses and innermost desire" (Reno, 2008). Kerouac exerts himself in setting up a model of being unique and different, in search of "more artistically and spiritually attuned ways of thinking, living, and creating" (David, 2013). He proposed "an alternative to such soulless American phenomena as conspicuous consumerism, giant automobiles, split-level houses, and suburban conformism" (Barry, 2007). However, "since the publication of 'Road' the book that 'made me famous'" (p. 4) ...Kerouac, as the soul of the Beats, who revolts against the conformity has been blindly admired by the public and ironically become the key figure of the rigid and mediocre value system. The lifestyle he pursuits has greatly influenced the young people and he was madly chased after. "In fact so much so I've been driven mad for three years by endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, reporters, snoopers" (Jack, 1992). Facing this unexpected and ironic outcome, Kerouac is bewildered and frightened. His instinct response is to escape. "Escape was essential", and escape itself has a deep connotation of compromise and a reluctant admission of his failure (Reno, 2008). "Kerouac retreated to the

Big Sur wilderness in July 1960 in the hopes of controlling his alcoholism and getting in tune with a more natural mode of existence than the life of celebrity he had suffered since the publication of *On the Road* (1957)” (Terence, 2018).

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac’s way of escape has undergone a qualitative change compared with what he had when he took the road. Kerouac has no more enthusiasm than what he had when “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off” (Jack, 1999). In *On the Road*, he took free-riding to experience the excitement of an unknown life, because “you have no idea know whether you can get on the bus, where the next ride will take you, where to stay the next day. You can only have an unknown expectation” (Chen, 2010). Kerouac explores the meaning of life with excitement and enthusiasm and fighting against social regulations and restrictions. This kind of courage and pride that confronts the unknown is an important manifestation of the Beat spirit and is also the main theme revealed in the novel. By contrast, in *Big Sur*, instead of hitchhiking to experience surprises, he chooses a comfortable way to travel—sitting in the private compartment of the train. It is not Kerouac’s random choice. For him, the theme of his active resistance expressed *On the Road* is substituted by a passive escape in *Big Sur*. Kerouac’s spirit of resistance and exploration has faded away because he now has doubts on his pursuit. *Big Sur* is a thorough thought after his madness in *On the Road*, and “the scene of such transformative experiences” (Terence, 2018).

In *On the Road*, the Beats are high-spirited, enthusiastic and idealistic. While going out on an unclear journey—as seen in *On the Road*—demonstrates the collective action of the Beat, going to Big Sur is no longer a collective one. In his early works, such as *On the Road* and *Tristessa*, Kerouac focuses on depicting on others rather than himself. In novels after 1960, such as *Desolation Angel*, and *Big Sur*, “the authority of others has failed, the only person’s wake in which he now finds himself is his own, and the rage and pain of these books reveal the depths of the disorientation this entailed” (Ann, 2000). In *Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Beats: New Directions in Beat Studies*, Clinton R. Starr defines the Beat Generation as a “vibrant counterculture that facilitated individual resistance and collective political activism” (Bennett, 2005). The Beats’ collective actions have clearly undergone some changes in *Big Sur*. “Even when Duluo is in the company of others, his isolation persists because none of his peers is likewise experiencing a dark night of the soul” (Mary-Beth, 2011). The period of writing *On the Road* is the prime time of the Beats, during which they hold a strong belief in the spirit of rebellion, so they work together to pursue and spread their ideology. In the later period, because of the loss of beliefs and difference in thinking, this collective action of the Beats gradually disperses. Some core figures of the Beats neither simply give up the ideological roots of the Beats, nor work together to fight against the culture. To them, their revolt is just an expression of the passion of their youth, so they can easily adjust themselves to new lives. But for Kerouac, who puts his life at a stake in the cause of resistance, has to suffer from the pains and seek for healing all by himself. He no longer holds his fierce boycott attitude on the machine civilization, and has no more enthusiasm for scorning social values and fighting secular stereotypes. “I am almost 40 years old, bored and jaded in a roomette bunk crashin across the Salt Flat” (p. 5). Kerouac himself is now trying to be a follower of social values and social order rather than an opponent of the established order of society. With frustration, he intends to go to Big Sur to reaffirm his original pursuit in light of his new perception.

Kerouac’s original intention is to seek peace in Big Sur, to avoid societal shackles and to escape being “surrounded and outnumbered” (p. 4). However, when he finally arrives at Big Sur, he finds that Big Sur is not a paradise.

And you look up at that unbelievably high bridge and feel death and for a good reason: because underneath the bridge, in the sand right beside the sea cliff, *hump*, your heart sinks to see it: the automobile that crashed thru the bridge rail a decade ago and fell 1000 feet straight down and landed upsidedown, is still there now, and upsidedown chassis of rust in a strewn skitter of sea-eaten tires, old spokes, old car seats sprung with straw, one sad fuel pump and no more people (p. 15).

Big Sur, where Kerouac intends to find inner peace from the so-called secluded place, is impacted by industrialization. The crashed car in this passage not only shows that American industrial production and material supremacy prevail across the country, but also indicates the sorrowful breakdown of the Beat Generation. There is nowhere to escape. Since the day of its birth, the Beat Generation has been dedicated at the creation of their spiritual kingdom, showing indifference to the imminent war, politics and other aspects of society. They are identified with various “marginalized groups whose exclusion seemed to guarantee their immunity from the privileges and perils of mainstream modernity” (Loni, 2015). They have chosen to withdraw from society, and consciously accept their identity as outsiders. “The life of the outsider was for them the last place where authenticity survived in the manufactured world of America” (Steve, 1999). While, Big Sur, a

marginalized place and the spiritual destination of Kerouac, does not escape from the invasion of the machine civilization, and therefore can't bring the spiritual comfort that Kerouac has been seeking. This is a denial of his years of pursuit and a ridicule of his escape. To Kerouac, Big Sur is the false destination of his spiritual pilgrimage.

2. The Metaphor of Collapsed Chair—the Last Straw

Flee to Big Sur is a vital decision for Kerouac, where he can alienate himself from the mainstream American society geographically and culturally; where he hopes to find solutions for his desperate pursuit "One fast move or I'm gone" (p. 7). Here, he tries to find comfort, which might in the end become his salvation. He wishes that he would get some consolation for his painful soul here. "Allow me to stay here, I only want peace" (p. 24). The bohemian lifestyle which he sees as a new life paradigm exhausts him and leads him nowhere.

However, Big Sur doesn't fulfill its duty. Instead of finding peace there, his spirit collapses in a gradual but inevitable way. Experiencing desperation and hopelessness, he has even thought of making a compromise with mainstream society. "[No] more dissipation, it's time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in 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" (p. 24). Big Sur will be his "old Heaven on Earth" (p. 13). The frustration he experiences in Big Sur becomes the last straw. When Kerouac first arrives at Big Sur, at the moment he got out of the car, he "sense[s] something wrong somehow" (p. 9). This feeling of wrongness continues to control him, until it ultimately drives him insane. The creatures he sees in Big Sur, like the mule, goldfish, and even mice, accelerate his collapse to a certain extent.

At the edge of his disillusion and disintegration, he finishes *Big Sur* in ten days. His spontaneous writing style records his confused thoughts and his mental breakdown in Big Sur without any decoration or modification. "Words...flowed so freely from Kerouac's typewriter" (Robert, 2013). His mature writing skills and creative ideas make *Big Sur* more profound than *On the Road*. Metaphorical images that run through it are the vivid manifestations of his spiritual pursuit and implication of the spiritual end of the Beat Generation.

The first thing Kerouac sees in Big Sur is "the black things in the white sand" (p. 13). The filthy atmosphere sets a dark background for the Kerouac's trip to Big Sur. The first creature he meets in Big Sur is the mule, which he uses "the Garden of Eden eyes" (p. 26) and "locks of hair like Ruth's" (p. 129) to describe, and he names him Alf the Sacred, endowing the mule with the sacredness. However, in the subsequent encounters with Alf the Sacred, the mule presents completely different images. Alf the Sacred is first treated like "an ancient sacred myth character", while at the same time, its feces have been emphasized since Alf the Sacred has its first appearance as "black dung" (p. 26). He then feeds Alf the last of his apples, and Alf "chomp[s] away sadly, turning to scratch his behind against a tree with a big erotic motion that gets worse and worse till he's standing there with erectile doing that would scare the Whore of Babylon let alone me" (p. 26). The queer combination of the mule embodies Kerouac's conflict and entanglement. His initial aim of finding peace is going astray. Under the influence of the mule, what Kerouac has experienced in Big Sur has become horrible. "And such things—A whole mess of little joys like that amazing me when I came back in the horror of later to see how they'd all changed and become sinister" (p. 29).

This kind of dilemma pushes Kerouac to sink deeper into the dark abyss. On the fourth day, he felt "bored" (p. 30), he feels like being "a madman...sitting in the dark writing in the dark" (p. 32). Though he tries to convince himself that Big Sur can ease his soul, he now experiences a strong feeling of leaving Big Sur, where once he feels crazy about, and going back to the city. However, the first thing he hears when he returns to the city is the death of his cat, which he sees as his little brother. In the novel, Kerouac shows in capital letters that the cat died on the night he fled to Big Sur. The death of his little brother has deprived Kerouac of his second effort to find comfort in the city and his effort to return to mainstream society. He has completely lost his expectation of living in the cities. "It sank in fact with the same strange idiotic helplessness when I took the unfortunate deep breath on the seashore" (p. 51). His desperation grows with one incident after another.

Monsanto sees through Kerouac's hopelessness and is aware that he will fall into a more serious state of desperation, and then advises him to go to the cabin in Big Sur again to get healed. However, Kerouac becomes weirder and weirder. "But on the way to Cody's my madness already began to manifest itself in a stranger way" (p. 66). Different from the first time, this is a crazier "getaway" (p. 85) from the "grooky" city where he feels "trapped" (p. 70).

While his friends are having "a big ball" (p. 94), Kerouac "[sees] the cabin so sad and almost human waiting there for me" (p. 92), which "seemed ill omened to me somewhere" (p. 103). The desperation that he can't shake off and the redemption that he has nowhere to find make him "use wine to mask the unpleasant thoughts and

emotions generated by his spiritual explorations, drinking until his chair collapses beneath him” (Mary-Beth, 2011). “During the following week I keep sitting in that same chair by the goldfish bowl drinking bottle after bottle of port like an automaton, worrying about something” (p. 157). The goldfishes die for no reason. “Dead animals...are ubiquitous reminders of Duluoz’s own mortality” (Harry, 1979). The death of his cat and the fish are the ominous sign that indicates the doomed fate of Kerouac. And then is the sudden collapse of the chair he usually sits in. “And when Billie comes home with Elliott I smile and sit down in the chair and it utterly collapses under me, blang, I’s sprawled on the floor with surprise, the chair has gone” (p. 167). “Everything is going crazy” (p. 158). Now, he has lost the last spiritual dependence he can rely on. He is thrown into a state of loneliness and helplessness. “Never the less the fish are dead and the chair is broken” (p. 169). The death of goldfish and the collapse of the chair give him the fatal blow. He breaks down. The destruction of his self-confidence and self-expectation causes him a spiritual collapse. He is “almost going mad from the sadness of it all” (p. 168). He has completely lost the hope of getting healed.

Big Sur doesn’t give him the spiritual peace he wants, let alone the repair of his mental pain. If the image of the mule is the beginning of Kerouac’s desperation about his spiritual pursuit, he still holds hope even in the shadow of despair. The death of the cat renders him deeper despair and madness, but he struggles to have a slight hope to find a way to redeem. However, his trip to Big Sur where he wishes to find comforts completely destroys his spiritual pursuit. The death of the goldfish and the collapse of the chair put an end to this desperate hope of salvation.

3. Grave—Destiny of His Pursuit

If “*On the Road* gave them ... hope, albeit sheltered hope”, *Big Sur* is completely shrouded in despair (Timothy, 2010). The life in Big Sur does not bury the pain, but makes the pain clearer. “And even worse than dawn is morning, the bright sun only GLARING in on my pain, making it all brighter, hotter, more maddening, more nervewracking...” (p. 212). With the death images haunting around him, Kerouac finds no way out, and his distress and pain grow greater and deeper. His extreme pain and despair cause Kerouac to think about mortality.

Thus, the symbols in Big Sur are no longer the signs of his desperation, but the demise. Kerouac repeatedly mentions death in *Big Sur*, and the word “grave” appears seven times. The “grave” image indicates that his painful experience has turned into fatal outcome. His years of pursuit and effort lead to meaninglessness.

The most direct mention of the tomb is that Kerouac feels that he can’t control his own behavior after drinking too much alcohol, and thus begins to hate himself. “The hairs on his fingers stare at him like tomb hairs” (p. 112). When he sees the tomb everywhere, he subconsciously seeks death as the final release from his desperation.

This cruel self-negation means that Kerouac is aware of the bleak ending. The last mention of the grave is that Billie has dug a pit to dispose of the garbage. “Billie offers to dig the garbage pit but does so by digging a neat tiny coffin shaped grove instead of just a garbage hole” (p. 213), the pit is “the perfect 4 foot by 3 foot neatly sided grave like you’re ready to sink a little box in it” (p. 214). Everyone is shocked because they understand the psychological implications of excavating the grave. The more significant episode is that the final “grave” is specifically connected with “garbage”, which implies the essence of Kerouac’s pursuit—it is nothing but useless; a repulsive thing is doomed to be discarded and abandoned. This is the most candid and cruel revelation of the spiritual end of the Beat Generation. At this point, Kerouac’s pursuit has come to an end.

The “grave” images play a very crucial role and reveal an important theme throughout Big Sur. Kerouac leaves the city to go to Big Sur, seeking spiritual asylum and finally ends up with an unavoidable “grave” there. The extreme manifestation of the Beats can be attributed to the venting of desperately and frantically pursuing feelings, the extreme neuroticism, and the constant destruction of their bodies. In the face of the misunderstanding and coldness from their revolt against social norms, Kerouac, the core figure of the Beats, suffers great mental pains and starts to question their beliefs and behavior. The more mature Kerouac becomes, the more desperate he is in facing boundless despair. “As his spiritual quest falters, his mind begins to ‘tear’ at itself” (Brophy, n.d.).

That feeling when you wake up with the delirium tremens, with the fear of eerie death dripping from your ears like those special heavy cobwebs spiders weave in the hot counties, the feeling of being a bentback mudman monster groaning underground in hot steaming mud pulling a long hot burden nowhere, the feeling of standing ankledeep in hot boiled pork blood, ugh, of being up to your waist in a giant pan of greasy brown dishwater not a trace of suds left in it (p. 8).

As desperation that comes from the self-negation and self-reflection of his crazy behavior is growing, the “grave” or death is the inevitable answer. “We’re all being swept away to sea no matter what we know or say or

do” (p. 36). The Beats’ failure attributes to their attempt to impose an aesthetic model on real life to make everything in reality go extreme, free and emotional. “They operate in varying degrees as challenges to the cultural status quo”, eager to create an alternative world through their own maverick behavioral system (Loni, 2015). In this alternative construction, the Beat Generation discards reality. Their too-pure, too far from reality belief system over-emphasizes individual and spiritual freedom. This extreme destruction of the social system and norms gives the Beats a taste of fascism. The result of this is that the Beats become unorthodox destroyers, which is inevitably criticized and rejected by the real world. “Ginsberg quietly slipped away to Europe and allowed Kerouac to bear the full force of the popular media. The media portrayed him as advocating illegal and immoral activities, but Kerouac was too drunk most of the time to intelligently deal with the criticisms and confrontations. He felt like ‘a kid dragged in by a cop’” (Tom & Jack, 1997). In the end, he attempts to escape reality and flees to the isolated places like Big Sur. However, Big Sur does not offer Kerouac a shelter where he can heal his pain and desperation, but instead breaks his fantasy for recovery cruelly. In the face of the inevitable fatal outcome, Kerouac gives up all his hopes and efforts. He is never willing to exchange for reconciliation with society at the expense of distorting his soul, therefore, he chooses to express his final respect to all his youth and ideals of life with demise. His morality is his insistence to his pure and sincere spiritual pursuit.

In the preface of *Big Sur*, Kerouac said, *On the Road, the Subterraneans, the Dharma Bums, Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassidy, Tristessa, Desolation Angels, Visions of Cody* and the others including this book *Big Sur* are just chapters in the whole work which I call the Duluo Legend (p. 3). It can be seen that to him, the themes of his works are organically coherent, showing the evolution of his thoughts and the inevitable result of his spiritual defeat. “In *Big Sur*, the stringing together of disparate events of Kerouac’s life gives the work an anguished tone like no other in the Kerouac canon” (Shelley, 2011). Therefore, *Big Sur* is not only an inseparable part of Kerouac’s works, but more importantly, it presents the destination of Kerouac’s pursuit, and the vanishment of the Beat Generation spirit. The analysis of the mental collapse of Kerouac can provide deeper understanding on his life. “So, Kerouac, for some of us, becomes almost synonymous without private lives, the secret culture of our inmost thoughts and affections, the legend as well as the history of our existence” (Ann, 2000). As Alan Ginsberg said: “Every book of Kerouac is unique, a diamond that is crystallized from his heart. He has a thousand words in his heart, and after a wonderful combination of syntax. The self-explanation is revealed, and the sleek and empty emptiness contained in some of the paranoid chaos in the heart is also vivid. The writing of such a natural charm is unmatched in the second half of the twentieth century” (Allen, 1992).

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