

Big Sur Study Guide

Big Sur by Jack Kerouac

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Plot Summary

First published in 1962, just seven years before Jack Kerouac died of an abdominal hemorrhage brought on by his excessive consumption of alcohol, "Big Sur" chronicles the summer of 1960, a summer Kerouac spends in California around Big Sur. The novel is another of his many autobiographical works, this time chronicling the daily reality of his extreme alcoholism and his first resulting meltdown with intensely vulnerable honesty and personal insight. The story moves from his accepting the invitation from a friend for him to spend three months alone at the Big Sur cabin to sober up and rest, through his short time there alone with nature and his thoughts, to his returning to the life of wild times with friends, both in San Francisco and Big Sur until he winds up in a complete mental breakdown brought on by the length and character of the bender that ensues.

At the opening of his story, Kerouac describes the constancy of the visits and parties that have followed him around since he established himself as an authority on the Beat Generation. He has retreated to his mother's house, and the kids still come and find him for inspiration and parties that go on for days, until Monsanto, a bookstore owner living in Big Sur, invites Kerouac to tuck himself secretly away at Big Sur. And so he does, becoming saturated with the natural world and its wildlife, the scale and distinctive look of the cliffs, the rhythms of the tides, and telling himself that to live simply and without wild bouts of parties and alcohol would be the ideal consummation of his life and learning.

Having sat by the sea writing down its sounds for several weeks, Kerouac's thoughts turn to friends, the idea that campfires and women are what he really wants, and so he obeys what he hears the sea telling him, to go to his desire. He hitchhikes to San Francisco and reconnects with several of the city's poets and artists, characters from "On the Road," and catches up with all of their stories in a long bout of more drinking and adventuring. Their conversations are heady and philosophical, intermingled with play and nonsensical ruminations, purely for the sake of imagination and intellectual dance.

Hints at his madness soon begin to appear, centered on a preoccupation with death triggered by the death of his beloved cat, Tyke. Kerouac begins to suspect that the people around him are conspiring to make him crazy, and links the suspicion to dreams of his youth. The days of drinking connect in long progression, and he describes the torment in his body and mind that result from the long days of drinking and more drinking, expressing his compassion for the drunks in the gutters and their inescapable misery.

Connecting in the end of the story with a woman bent on suicide and killing her small child if Jack does not marry her, Kerouac returns to Big Sur for the culmination of his madness, overcome with the reality of death all around him and the hopelessness of the cycle he is in, disgusted by his mistake in bringing them back to the place that had once been a sacred haven for him. The story's final lines record his waking from a nap with

his torment only a memory and the confidence that everyone would live in the end and everything would be right again. The book closes with the inclusion of the poem he wrote during those first weeks he spent sitting and listening to the sea.



Chapter 1 & 2

Chapter 1 & 2 Summary

Big Sur is the story of the adventures and misadventures of Jack Kerouac over a summer he was invited to spend secluded in a California cabin to recuperate from a life overtaken by drinking and parties. He spends three restorative weeks there before becoming despondent and thinking he needs people again and then sets in motion a whole string of weeks of drinking and traveling back and forth from San Francisco to the cabin at Big Sur, culminating in his first experience of alcohol-induced madness.

The story opens with Kerouac's description of his state when he set out on his journey to the cabin. He was to have departed in secret to a hotel and used an alias when he called his friend Lorenzo Monsanto to come and pick him up. Instead, he arrives drunk and boisterous to Monsanto's bookstore, is recognized by everyone despite his disguise, and ends up in the morning passed out with his friends Ben Fagan and Robert Browning, the beatnik painter on the floor. Monsanto figures on seeing his state that he must want to wait another week to go to the cabin, and that he would leave him to his drinking.

That is, in fact, the last thing Kerouac wants or needs, explaining at this point the hounding of fans despite all of his efforts at privacy and the resulting binges that have stolen his ability to write or rest ever since the publication of his last round of books. He is, as a result of his botched departure, sick and disgusted with himself, and the chapter closes with his description of the condemnation from the Salvation Army people on the corner and the sound of suffering drunks in the rooms surrounding his.

The second chapter is dedicated to a description of the drunken fog from which Kerouac must wrench himself before he'll be able to move. He describes the hopeful rucksack packed for his escape sitting among the bottles that resulted from his first snag, and says, "one fast move, or I'm gone." He also talks about the hopelessness that can only be produced by this kind of drinking, and the way his body feels, now familiar, after long nights of heavy drinking. He feels hot and bogged down and doesn't recognize the face in the mirror.

To get himself going, he stands on his head to get the blood back to it, showers, gathers up his things, and makes his way through the drunks and "the goopy city" to the bus station to get a bus to Monterey.

Chapter 1 & 2 Analysis

These first two chapters establish both the desperation of Kerouac's need and his inability to break free of the pattern himself. His habits are deeply ingrained, and his only hope comes from the people around him, only a small number of those being influences for his good. He obviously admires and respects Monsanto and appreciates



and understands the necessity of the escape; at this point, he is just too engrossed in his habits to be embracing the purpose of the time away quite yet.

He is observably frustrated in the second chapter with his repetition of the very practices he is traveling away from in order to break. The self-loathing that becomes a familiar theme later in the book just begins to show itself here, as he is deeply engrossed in the pain and cloudiness of his own body and mind. His familiarity with the feeling, its torment, and his means of making himself functional in it, are characteristics that remain consistent throughout, as he remains apparently lucid throughout most of the book, and drunk the overwhelming majority of the time. He is a practiced alcoholic and well-versed in its darkness.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Kerouac opens his third chapter telling himself that if he doesn't move fast, he'll never move again, and so grabs a cab to get to the coast and away from the temptations of the city. The driver warns him that he must use his lamp with the danger of the dark, and Kerouac describes the sound of the violently crashing water as he walks along, unable to see where the cliffs stop and the decline to water begins. He follows his lamp one footstep at a time, and inner voices of fear and calm battle for his attention.

He describes the ferns and plants as horrifying things and believes that the incredible noise of the water and darkness of the foliage mean that the place doesn't want him there, like there is an ancient war being waged that he isn't welcome to witness. He feels judged as a skid row bum by the majestic, natural place until at last he comes to a barbed wire fence and a field of heather and feels as if he's crossed instantly from hell into moonlit heaven.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The chapter is a telling revelation of how haunted and dark his mind has become, and how his own judgment of himself and his worthiness translates into his assumption of what the world thinks of him, too. Majesty becomes fearsomeness and the sound of crashing waves becomes a menacing threat that he must leave or be punished. The internal dialogue in which Kerouac struggles to maintain calm and focus is a perfect foreshadowing of the dialogue he has with himself when he begins edging toward madness later in the book. The arrival at last in a peaceful place, as if he had passed from hell into heaven, is also a very nice parallel to his transition from madness to peace at the book's close, and equally random. Like a switch had been flipped, his mind was instantly changed from tortured and dark to merry and light.



Chapter 4 & 5

Chapter 4 & 5 Summary

The fourth chapter is a record of Kerouac's first morning and his exploration of the area surrounding his summer retreat. He describes the incredible height of the cliffs and the narrowness and height of the bridge he had walked the night before. Having slept on the sand, he was just below the bridge, and now can see a car that had come off that bridge a decade ago and wondered at the idea that people could consider Big Sur beautiful instead of just terrifying.

Exploring further in the fifth chapter, Kerouac finds reasons for fearfulness in several more details. He describes the goat he would later name Alf the Sacred Burro standing still in the water, far from the place he had seen him earlier, and says he looks like an ancient character of myth. He likens the landscape to one from his drunken nightmares and recounts that the first time he had the dream was when he saw the beautiful green jungle peaks and pyramids in Mexico. He thought those places were evil, too, and wouldn't explore them. He envisions vampires and says it is no small wonder that, reading "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" in this place, he would go through just that sort of mad transition just six weeks from now.

But Monsanto comes and takes Kerouac to Monterey for groceries and on returning, he begins to enjoy the time, saying that those first days after leaving and coming back with Monsanto, he is even able to overcome his fear. He allows for ghosts and things living and flying around him with happy tolerance and settles in peacefully to the quiet life in and around the cabin.

He begins doing chores and comes to enjoy the solitude, having made the cabin home just with the act of doing its daily maintenance and interacting with it. He starts really enjoying the natural world, too, and even makes his first sojourn to the beach in the evening to contemplate the surf and the cabin just built overlooking a cliff. He imagines the romantic dinners happening there and that the cliff it sits on looks like the profile of a resting dog. He sleeps peacefully and wakes up to greet the next day nameless and whole and at peace with the universe.

Kerouac records more basking in his sixth chapter, talking about the nearly flawless escape that Monsanto's cabin provides. He daydreams and asks the gods if he can stay in this place, since he only wants peace from it and nothing else, and he hears the gods and God reply yes. He pledges to make this peaceful observation and contemplation his new practice, replacing dissipation and drinking, and just living and talking with people, traveling and enjoying the world, but remaining solitary.

He recounts a story here of Hollywood to communicate its worthlessness in comparison with contemplation and purity of living. In the story, he was expected to rehearse the reading of his own prose, and in the end refused and did the show drunk. He so pleased



the executives that they gave him a starlet to take to dinner, and she bored him all evening with her own poetry. But he is somewhere else entirely now and happy to revel in the small, participatory tasks of living there. He arranges his bed so that it suits the uneven boards, walks inland to see Alf about his daily business in his beautiful field of heather and carries huge redwood trees for firewood. He settles so deeply into the Zen and the environment that he forgets who and where he is.

It is the damp season, so the tourists haven't inundated the place yet, and he can just wander Big Sur alone. He builds a mill race, so deeply engrossed in the task that he works at it from noon to sundown, and feels like an Indian fashioning a canoe by hand, so purely his own was the work.

Chapter 4 & 5 Analysis

Kerouac describes the place from the perspective of someone who has been long away from nature and has never seen anything of this scale. For that reason he sees its majesty, and probably its purity, as reason for fear, as he sees himself in comparison with it. Back home, his only mirrors to see himself in were the kids and publishers who admired him as an icon and a god; whereas here, there is something truly magnificent and holy in its perfection and age, and he feels it is rejecting him in the beginning. It isn't until he makes himself a part of it, and a servant to it, that the place finally becomes a nurturing and welcoming place.

As Kerouac finally starts seeing this, and settling in to learning the wisdom offered him by a place like Big Sur, quieting his fearful mind, finally healthy and clear, he settles into the hope of restoration and peace. He is still thinking with his own mind in the fifth chapter, imagining fearful things, but he no longer gets all wrapped up in them. Now they can just be musings, but nothing to disrupt the calming, cleansing influence of the natural world.

Chapter six is a deepening of Kerouac's experience of his own mind in the context of the quiet, nurturing world of the cabin, and he finds the ability for the first time to live completely in it with none of the fearful voices or images that came with him entering into his mental dialogue. He discusses the features of the place that would later contribute to his madness, telling this story as he is after the experience and reflecting on its lessons, but in these moments, he is completely happy and at peace.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The fourth chapter is record of Kerouac's first morning's exploration of the area surrounding his summer retreat. He describes the incredible height of the cliffs and the narrowness and height of the bridge he had walked the night before. Having slept on the sand, he was just below it, and now could see a car that had come off of that bridge a decade ago and wondered at the fact that people could consider this place beautiful.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Kerouac describes the place from the perspective of someone who has been long away from nature, and has never seen anything of this scale. So for that reason, he sees its majesty as reason for fear. His fear must also be a projection of the state of his mind on the place, since the longer he stays there, the more nurturing the place becomes.



Chapter 7 & 8

Chapter 7 & 8 Summary

Chapter seven finds Kerouac in only his fourth day at Big Sur, and beginning to get bored. Remembering the words of Emerson that "infancy conforms to nobody" and that "life is not an apology," he returns his thinking to the beauty of the simple things around him. He gives himself to being a student of the tiny tasks using the most inexpensive and simple of his tools. He also wonders, upon reflection, whether he should not have let his boredom take him to the sea to write down every sound the ocean made, that perhaps that is some of what drove him mad.

But that is the way he spends his three weeks, engrossed in the simplicity of his daily tasks and making the sojourn to the sea every evening with his secretarial notepad. He contemplates the fact that this unchanged place is the same as it was when women smashed acorns and men fished to feed their native families, and that the rocks and the leaves and the sand all recognize the same patterns of people and of themselves to be the natural, right, and proper cycle of things, and all of them - the people, the plants, the tides and the rocks, are elements of paradise. He wonders at the fact that he can be so engrossed in these beautiful thoughts at one point, and so shortly after, be mad in the very same place.

Chapter eight describes all the living things that have become a part of his daily comings and goings at the cabin. He sets cheese and chocolate out for the mouse, speaking French to the raccoon, and reflecting that in any fine restaurant, one could never find anyone else eating olives slowly at midnight as he was doing at the end of each of his happy days. His reflection continues swinging from birds to himself, to Mein Mo Mountain to bugs, to owls to bacon, each of them sources of amusement and interest, and contributing to his absentminded living and the activity of doing nothing (the Buddhist concept of Wu Wei).

He appreciates that the things he contemplates, fires in this case, are different every time, and so are to be enjoyed at the moment they are happening, as is even his search for socks. He wonders that as happy as he was, he was only three weeks from madness.

Chapter 7 & 8 Analysis

His daily reverie has now broadened to include contemplation of literary thinkers and how their insights can guide and inform him here, and his meditations are positive and productive. He recognizes the value of simplicity and purity, living close to nature, quiet with one's thoughts, and aware of one's place in and out of time. While he points forward to his coming madness, it is no doubt these weeks of happy, solitary rejuvenation that allow him to recover from that madness so completely in the end.

In the eighth chapter, his attention incorporates the life all around him and his relationship to them. It is these karmic gestures of caretaking that attaches him to this place and these living things, and so breaks his heart when he returns on the verge of his madness. That is no doubt why they are included so tenderly here in this moment.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In Chapter nine, as if a switch has been flipped, there comes what Kerouac calls the first signpost of his coming insanity. He is sitting by the sea and breathes a deep sigh, and as if some poison breath of iodine has entered him, he becomes instantly sure that the sea doesn't want him here, and all his time sitting and listening to it has been wasted. He hears it telling him to go to his desire and not to hang around there. The conviction that he is unwanted by the sea remains in him for every return visit.

He resolves to go back to San Francisco and so spreads out all of the food he has left for his animal friends. He makes a decision before he goes that will affect him more deeply than he ever imagines at the time, to set the rat poison back out, as his friend Monsanto would prefer.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This is the first moment of turning for Kerouac, as he has given heed to the nonsensical idea that he is not welcome there, just as he was feeling judged by it and unworthy of the place on his arrival. He follows that feeling to its necessary action in preparing to leave. He foreshadows the defining characteristic of his madness in his pointing out at the close of this chapter that he decides to set out the poison Monsanto has put there for the purpose of doing away with the cabin's smaller living creatures.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter ten finds Jack back out on the road trying to hitch a ride back to Monterey and then on the bus to San Francisco. He opens the chapter quoting Thomas a Kempis: "You go out in joy and in sadness you return," and thinks of the young boys who get all duded up to hit the town and crawl back home again sick. He says he is like those boys as he reflects on this day. Standing thumb-up on the road, he starts to realize that a lot has changed in 20 years, and the well-dressed, well-pressed tourists of today are not as likely to pick up a dirty-looking hitchhiker as in the days of "On the Road."

He decides to walk the 14 miles and ends up blistered and hobbling before someone finally stops and takes mercy, retracing his route to take Kerouac all the way to the station.

Chapter 10 Analysis

He closes the chapter confessing that the fact that he couldn't get a ride was a sign. He does nothing in his writing to communicate anything but the anticipation he felt in the moment and the feeling that, on reflection, it was foolhardy from the outset. The reader can't help agreeing and reading on with sympathetic trepidation.



Chapter 11 & 12

Chapter 11 & 12 Summary

The first place Kerouac goes in San Francisco is to City Lights bookshop to see Monsanto. The merry old writer smiles with welcome, but tells him he should have stayed, since he had planned to go see him at the cabin the following weekend. Stepping into a private room, Monsanto reveals the news that he had received a letter from Jack's mother containing the news that Jack's cat Tyke had died the night after Jack left.

Jack is heartbroken, and determines that he will start drinking straight away. He finds momentary reasons to smile when he does, but even his smile reminds him of the one on his face when Monsanto gave him the news. Returning to the story of the store, he remembers his old dream of being a literary figure just like Monsanto, with the roll top desk—his distance from that dream only increases his sadness. He tries to exchange news with Monsanto but is too distracted by the thought of the coming death of all of the animals and the people, too, someday, so he heads out with Ben Fagan and his friend to a bar, where he renews his resolve not to get drunk, but just to enjoy the beautiful night.

Ben and he sit in a park and watch people, and he reflects on the Ben he knew from the Dharma Bum days, and their mutual experiences of the woods alone for long stretches. Ben is a poet and a student of Hindu scripture. Kerouac comments that while Ben retains his peace soberly, Ben openly acknowledges that when he leaves town, all his friends go back on the sauce, just as Kerouac was even then about to do.

His friend Dave Wain, a faithful fellow drinker, was also back in town, who is a connection to George Baso, the Japanese Zen master of the last year's adventure, whom he learns has been hospitalized for tuberculosis. As Kerouac introduces Dave's new friend Ron Blake, he characterizes Dave as a great talker and the type younger boys would want to imitate. Kerouac recounts the whole detailed story of Dave's and George's realization that everyone in America should actually be washing themselves after the restroom with soap and water. They spread it like a movement among all of their friends, even to Monsanto himself simply by the power of their personalities.

He concludes the chapter with a description of the house a number of these friends share in San Francisco and how simultaneously maddening and marvelous it is. There is a lot of activity and music all the time, which could be maddening. There are also experts in every room on subjects such as Hindu spirituality, art and culinary art making the house a completely unique and wonderful place. Cultures black and white combined beautifully, and there was always an extra bed.

The twelfth chapter opens with the group's contacting Cody to make plans to go and see him work, and stopping by the liquor store. The dialogue takes place in Willie the



Jeep, Dave driving expertly while the friends sit inside and talk like old men on porch swings. Dave hypothesizes that the world's population will only continue exploding until we are living in high rises all over the globe, turning it to a natureless prickly ball with no chance of producing a writer who could touch them all enough to effect a change.

Kerouac reflects on the number of places that are no longer solitary and once were, with people pissing in all the great rivers like they are not sacred anymore at all. All the great writers of generations past are too numerous to take in completely and so fall by the wayside. The scope and magnitude of it all becomes so overwhelming to the group as they drive around that they conclude that all there is to do is to drink.

Chapter 11 & 12 Analysis

His respect and admiration for his friends is the overriding theme in the eleventh chapter, while the subtext still hints at coming trouble and the inevitability of his hurtling toward drunkenness with no end in sight. The death of Tyke is the clearest foreshadowing and first real trigger in his mind of his meltdown.

While there are elements of cosmic awareness and awe at the greatness of the world, the group's conclusion in the twelfth chapter that it is too much, so all there is to do is to get drunk effectively sets the tone for the rest of the book. The group is wildly intelligent and well-read, surrounded by world-class minds and places, but while their conversations are full of literary and historical knowledge, the conversations all take place in the context of complete abandon to the available temptations.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The group finally connects with Cody in his living room as he sits over a game of chess, although no one has time to join him for a complete game. Kerouac describes his and Cody's mutual dismay that they haven't been able to connect and catch up since the days of *On the Road*. Kerouac tells the story of how Cody was arrested by undercover cops when he was trying to trade two joints for a ride to work and spent two years in San Quentin Penitentiary with a murderer, and how Cody hasn't been hardened by it at all, but seems still more childlike. In fact, both Dave Wain and Stanley Popovich take to him right away.

Kerouac recounts the story of how he was scheduled to go to San Quentin and talk to the religious class, but got drunk the night before and couldn't get there in time. Cody is observably disappointed to hear that he is drinking again, and Kerouac's description shifts to his admiration of Cody's dedication to his work and family. Cody doesn't complain about anything, even as hard as he works, and when the group goes with him to see him recapping tires, they stand astonished at his sheer power and tirelessness as he goes about the task. When Kerouac wakes up the following morning, having drunk himself to passing out the previous night, he notes that there are no birds to wake him in the city as there were in the days at the cabin.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Kerouac's observation of Cody's dismay at his drinking and his description of the contrast between their two approaches to life in the years that have elapsed since their days traveling together is conspicuously accurate, but still has no effect on his actions at the time. His conscience seems untouched at the moment of recognizing Cody's sadness to see him drinking. He is seeming much more affected by his removal from nature at the close of the chapter. Here Kerouac is heading full-force into the very world he was whole-heartedly devoting the summer to escape.



Chapter 14 & 15

Chapter 14 & 15 Summary

Instead of the birds of the wilderness, it is the sound of clinking bottles on the floor that greets Kerouac upon waking, with the yelling of Lex Pascal reminding him of a wild time a year ago by which he characterizes Lex as a man too wild to live anywhere civilized, so voracious is his appetite for women and booze.

Making their plans to go and visit George Baso at the tuberculosis hospital, the group meets Dave Wain's friend, Joey Rosenberg, an athlete turned beatnik Jesus on a pilgrimage to go wherever the group is inclined to go, acquainting the world with a style of dressing in a combination of dressy and tattered clothes. The group goes first to Mike's Place Bar to have food, drink, and pool, and Kerouac explains the process of extended drunkenness as a continuum from fun to cockiness to saturation to sickness and delirium, unless there is a reprieve.

Next he introduces Romana Swartz, the Rumanian Jewess nudist who has captured Dave's heart, and who is as intelligent and well-read as a group of friends like this one would require. On their way to the hospital to see George, Kerouac reflects on the time George told him about the Buddha's intimate knowledge of every kind of sexual act, and while he had only one true love, he had experience with every single kind of sex. The two had stayed up all night one night so George could exhaust his knowledge on the subject, Jack was captivated throughout the entire time. They went from that conversation to St. Louis for dancing girls; Dave Wain never gets any deeper into the conversation than to inject the occasional "Yum, yum."

Arriving at the hospital, Jack is surprised to see George the Zen master looking weakened by the illness and a little put out to see friends there to see him, receiving them with a look of suicidal depression.

Chapter 14 & 15 Analysis

Chapter fifteen encapsulates the friends' visit to the hospital and a sad visit trying to rouse the old George back to familiar conversation followed by the sad departure of the group of friends, all save Kerouac, who is determined for something more. He starts a game with George as the two say goodbye of turning back over and over again for more and more exaggerated gyrations and gesticulations of goodbye. Jack finally arouses the little Japanese man to play in return, until the moment when, finally up in his room, Jack at the car, a toss of water out the window is George's final goodbye.

Kerouac is now completely engrossed in the lives of his friends in San Francisco and re-acquainting himself with each one's lives as they have changed. He remembers the best aspects of each of their pasts, and describes the new additions with welcoming admiration. His description of the effect of days of drinking is still just matter-of-fact, and



as yet only the foreshadowing of and preparation for what is to come. The sweetness of the fifteenth chapter reveals Kerouac's selfless dedication to his friends, and his determination to honor and keep healthy the friendships began in their grandest days. He drinks for celebration and has much in these days to celebrate, basking again in the company of his inspirations and peers.



Chapter 16, 17 & 18

Chapter 16, 17 & 18 Summary

Three o'clock in the morning of that day finds Kerouac in the neighbor's car at the rooming house, since the others are asleep and he had been talking with the young man about how Cody and Dave were the greatest drivers in the world. The neighbor tells him he used to drive a getaway car and takes the still drinking Kerouac through the streets of San Francisco at 100 miles per hour and back again to demonstrate his skill. This chapter is another example of the openness with which Kerouac welcomes every person and every adventure. It is an equally admirable and risky practice.

In the seventeenth chapter, Kerouac learns that Cody has lost his job and agrees to give him the money he needs for rent. Upon meeting up, they make plans to go with Monsanto, Arthur Ma, Dave, Romana and Evelyn, Cody's wife, to the cabin for the weekend. They pick up booze and stop for pizza before heading out. On their arrival back at his former haven, Kerouac feels both marvel and sadness for having so effectively disarmed its peace.

Chapter eighteen recounts the group's arrival coupled with Kerouac's reaction to the introduction of people to his sacred place. He describes Cody's reaction of amazement and describes the change that Cody has undergone as a result of his time in San Quentin writing his philosophical musings in correspondence with his mistress Billie. He has become childlike and playful in a way that makes him embrace the place and reflect on his own old times in Colorado.

Jack tries to feed the birds like he always had, but notices that the people have scared them away, as each one steps in to some activity, either for the good of the group or for his/her own enjoyment of the inspiring place. Monsanto points out in this chapter that the cabin is the kind of place that is sullied a little by the introduction of people, and Kerouac sadly agrees.

Chapter 16, 17 & 18 Analysis

Kerouac's reaction to returning to the cabin reveals a significant change in him since his first arrival at that place. He is not only no longer afraid of its majesty, that having been replaced with admiration and awe, but he has come to see the value of it as a solitary place, and has already begun to regret having brought his wild world to the place of his peaceful one.

In chapter eighteen, he continues the major theme of the adjustment it is for Kerouac to have people in his sacred place, feeling as if he has betrayed it in bringing them there. The closing of the chapter with the group's examining the car that had gone off the bridge is a nice foreshadowing of the derailment of Kerouac's vision or intention for his

summer, and the casual examination of his friends is very much the same as their observation of his self-destruction.



Chapter 19 & 20

Chapter 19 & 20 Summary

Chapter nineteen describes the conversation during the group's first night at the cabin, all of them drinking and smoking and eating steaks. While the other members of the group are engaged in other conversations and activities, Kerouac and Arthur Ma dive into a nonsensical conversation about old men's driving habits. After a while the group adjourns to the beach for a bonfire. Arthur and he continue their nonsensical conversation even after the group has returned to the cabin to pass out and continue until dawn, getting to know each other's rhythms and conversational tendencies better and better and enjoying each other more as the night wears on.

The twentieth chapter describes the progression of Kerouac's relationship with Monsanto's closest friend, Arthur Ma, and what he learns about Ma's background. He is the son of a traditional Chinese family in Chinatown, and his father is the best friend and advisor to Chiang Kai-Shek, even though Arthur is a communist. Kerouac explains that his family rejected his bohemianism, so he lives in a grand hotel, and that he is recently separated from his wife, a beautiful black girl. He is wildly successful with women of every type, and Kerouac feels such a kinship with him that he wonders whether they were connected in another life. The chapter concludes with an approximation of one of their conversations.

Chapter 19 & 20 Analysis

Kerouac's and Ma's conversation in Chapter Nineteen is artfully recorded and playful from first to last, full of imagination and becoming their own explanation as to why these nights of getting lost in people and alcohol are such a pleasure for Kerouac, as well as why people gravitate to him when he embarks. The more imagination and the less sense there was in them, the better. The main purpose of their conversations being to stimulate the other to more fantastic shouts the next time he speaks.

The fact that Kerouac doesn't remember exactly what the conversations in Chapter Twenty were about, makes what he approximated them to be even more interesting as insights into his own mind. Even in their fanciful conversations, torment and death are themes in his contributions.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

The twenty-first chapter follows Kerouac through the end of the big weekend of friends and into the beginning of his decline. He describes the incredible wind that has cleared the clouds from the place that hid the stars from him during his solitary time there and suggests that the constancy and force of the wind could have been part of what frayed him to the end of his calm. The morning following his all-night talking with Arthur Ma, the group has a wood chopping contest, and Kerouac surmises that a lot can be learned about a person based on how he chops. Monsanto is methodical and precise, while Cody is all force and spectacle, making Kerouac think he is more like Cody.

After the morning fire, the group sets out for the hot springs, and sees floating in the water the body of the otter Jack had watched during his three weeks. Kerouac is agitated further by the group of homosexual men so pleased at the sight of his undressed friends that the evidence of the fact was floating on the water. That discomfort, combined with his frustrated effort to inquire after his friend Kevin Cudahy (the fellow he asks refuses to acknowledge his question) starts Kerouac down the path toward paranoid insanity. The group goes to a restaurant from there and Jack has a conversation with two generals who know the group to be San Francisco's Beat Poets. They and the generals talk about the value of letting groups of friends like them fight together in guerrilla warfare, since they would be so faithful to one another.

When the group finally departs for the city again, the kid, Ron Blake, asks if he can stay, and Kerouac is too tenderhearted to refuse and insist on the chance to recover. Instead, he grabs more port and lets the kid take him to the beach. On their way, they find both the mouse and the snake who had previously been peaceful characters in Jack's solitary world now dead on the ground. As Ron's enthusiasm increases, Kerouac's physical condition worsens until he is groaning about his sickness unaware of the youth's startled observation of the whole pitiful display. He is now well on his way to the coming delirium.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Perhaps the most tender and insightful revelation about the inner world of an alcoholic comes in this chapter when Kerouac describes his mental and physical anguish having gotten to this point. He describes the belief that even God and mercy have become non-realities, and he feels as if he's betrayed his very birth having gotten to where he is at this point. His body feels disgusting and painful, and there is nothing to do but writhe in pain and mental and spiritual anguish. He has that in combination with the humiliation of Ron's having witnessed him at his most vulnerable and raw to deal with at the close of the chapter. The only thing that stops him from telling Ron off is his recognition that the young man had stayed with him out of innocent admiration.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Chapter twenty-two describes the bliss and happy meditations that followed the hitch-hiking departure of Ron Blake when Kerouac finally spoke aloud his need to rest and be alone. Rehydrated and alone in his natural haven, he remembers a childhood suspicion he once had in daydreams and wonders if it is the case now. He had dreamed that everyone around him is in on the scheme of trying to drive him mad. He wondered as a child whether everyone might all be devils waiting for him to discover that he is the last Jesus. He confesses the ease of growing his childhood suspicion into that adult, alcohol-soaked episode, all completely behind him now that he is alone and feeling healthy.

Now, he basks again in his natural world, feeding the animals and watching their comedies, gathering wood, reading and dreaming about soldiers turned lovers that don't quite fit the world, but are still so sweet, their friends can't help appreciating them. Having napped, he is exhilarated, and hears the mountains say "You don't have to torture your consciousness with endless thinking," so sets his attention only on the beauty of his environment. He is determined to heed the wisdom of Milarepa and not be distracted by the amusements of town as long as he is alone with nature. He is content to be quiet without thinking, without wanting, or letting himself be swept up in anything but the blissful peace of the moment with all of its joys and fears, and so he ends this chapter.

Chapter 22 Analysis

This is as quenching a chapter to read as it must have been for Kerouac to have experienced. He lingers over the moments, telling the stories of the animals that serve as salve to him now, of the literary and spiritual thinkers whose ideas are now righting and quieting his mind, and the beauty of the place that so soothes him when his nerves have been at their most raw. He speaks to himself just the kind of wisdom the reader aches for Kerouac to hear, and it has the needed effect of soothing and calming him proportionate to his suffering, and allowing him to come back completely into the beauty and peace that has been gifted him for his healing.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Kerouac's solitary bliss is short-lived, however, as the very next morning, Ron Blake arrives with Pat McLearn and his wife and child. After only a short bit of long-awaited conversation with Pat, he barges Cody with Evelyn and their two children. Cody is overflowing with good news, having bought a Jeep and gotten a new job, and wants to stay and drink and celebrate, sharing pot and news with Kerouac, and whisking him away to town to pick up more booze for the night. Ron Blake, meanwhile, stays behind with Cody's blessing to have some time alone with Evelyn on the beach, and Kerouac closes the chapter with a bit of insight into his relationship with Evelyn.

The back story he tells is of how Cody and Jack had once all lived together, sharing Evelyn as a joint sort of wife while they worked alternating shifts until, after so much of that being the pattern, one or both of them eventually got jealous, and Cody married Evelyn. Evelyn had comforted Jack with the assurance that while it was her Karma to serve Cody, she was destined to be with Kerouac in another life. He confesses his desire to chase her and be chased through eternity, he loves her so much.

Chapter 23 Analysis

And so, back in the thick of it again, Kerouac rolls without resistance with every change that comes to his circumstances, even the ones he has to know will lead him right back into the state from which he had only just begun to recover. His affection for his friends overrides his need for recovery, and he is happy to see them. He sees them all with unclouded clarity, recognizing them to be flawed in whatever ways make Ron lust after Evelyn, and make Cody encourage their mutual infidelity, and loves and welcomes everything they bring, even when they have barged into his haven uninvited. The insight he offers into his relationship with Evelyn and Cody reveals a good deal about what has allowed him to remain suspended in the world of partying, and for what he might be pining.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

The twenty-fourth chapter goes deeper into the description of Jack and Cody's relationship, and thereby, his relationship with Evelyn. Kerouac opens with a description of McLearn's pet hawk riding around on his shoulder, and how it fits in with his whole Rimbaud persona. From there, he moves to a conversation he has with Cody about Cody's plans for them, describing it in an aside as a crisis about to get worse. Cody has the idea of sharing Jack with yet another of his lovers: something Kerouac explains is a strange extension of their brotherly relationship, each one reminding the other of his own father. Her name is Willamine, and she has been Cody's confidante and lover since his time in San Quentin. Giving her to Jack for a while is Cody's way of taking care of her, and allowing Jack in some strange way to learn about him.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Here Jack is completely blown by the wind of the powerful personality of Cody Pomeroy. The fact that Jack communicates the story of Cody's proposition and his and Jack's past relationship so matter-of-factly, without coloring it with any of his own opinion, leaves the question unanswered about whether this is what Jack really wants. Instead, it remains completely possible that he doesn't know at this point what he wants, but is paying homage to this long-held and sacred friendship by going where it leads. He is also at this point fresh from a bout of pining for Evelyn and, since Billie is another of Cody's lovers, she may promise in Jack's mind to serve as a parallel to Evelyn that might fill the same void.



Chapter 25 & 26

Chapter 25 & 26 Summary

Chapter Twenty-five finds Cody driving Jack away from the play they watched because Evelyn was the set designer as Kerouac reflects on their mass of experience both together and apart, and how exhausting it would be for either of them to try to catch the other one up. And so they sit in silence, Cody driving expertly and finally talking about the letters he wrote to Willamine from San Quentin in lieu of memoirs, since anything he kept would have been taken from him anyway.

In chapter twenty-six, the pair of friends finally arrives at Willamine's tidy apartment and Jack and Billie are instantly attracted to one another, and Kerouac believes that staying with her in a sea of love for a while will be just what his frayed mind needs. He concedes that Cody at first reacts badly, but that this is what he does every time, and that he and Billie both explain to him that it's just an irresistible, spontaneous explosion of love and nothing personal. He talks about his listening to her talk, and how, compared with the things Evelyn says about Cody, Billie's conversation bores him terribly, but he loves the sound of her voice. The two fall into bed blissful and eager for a long time together - a month had been Cody's idea - and later in the night, Jack meets her strange, question-asking son, Elliot.

Chapter 25 & 26 Analysis

Kerouac comments memorably at the end of the twenty-fifth chapter, "...I can see from glancing at him that becoming a writer holds no interest for him because life is so holy for him there's no need to do anything but live it, writing's just an afterthought or a scratch anyway at the surface..." He closes the chapter at once congratulating himself on loving the world on its own terms and shamefully confessing that he is getting ready for the silliest hate he ever experienced.

At the point of their meeting, Jack's relationship with Billie is a good thing. She is charming and big-hearted, open and nurturing, and Jack is fully aware that her ultimate aspiration is to edge Evelyn out of Cody's world and to have him to herself forever instead of to have any genuine and lasting relationship with Jack.



Chapter 27, 28 & 29

Chapter 27, 28 & 29 Summary

Now Jack and Billie have spent the whole night talking about books and Cody, laughing about it being slightly boring. When Billie has gotten up to go to work, she leaves Jack to sleep in and bathe while all his friends call her apartment looking for him. He meets her young friend Perry, the young criminal, and he is the first character yet who does not receive Jack's unconditional acceptance, although Kerouac still recognizes and acknowledges his poetic soul. He also meets a bunch of Billie's other friends when they ring the doorbell, all turning out to be tough Negroes and ex-cons.

He reflects on a dream in which he had walked the streets of a silent city where the beatniks walk the streets and the professionals and authorities watch silently from the windows above. This is the point at which he begins to lose the ability to distinguish between perception and reality.

Chapter twenty-eight is a short chapter dedicated to the first full day of madness for Kerouac, left alone all day with Perry, who takes him to meet the reportedly beautiful daughters of a man he calls a general. Jack is more than a little disturbed to find that the girls are no more than ten years old. Compounding his unease with the day is his realization as it goes on that Elliot, Billie's son, doesn't like him at all. Later, he is made to pay for dinner at a Filipino restaurant when the man who is not actually a general insists, and Kerouac is too cloudy to argue. He closes the chapter thoroughly upset and confused, and longing for the comfort of Evelyn's arms.

The next in the list of disturbing facets of his time with Billie comes in Chapter Twenty-nine. Billie encourages, despite Jack's discomfort, her son Elliot to watch the two of them having sex. Jack tries to accommodate, but feels himself slipping away from sanity. He recounts how Monsanto, Fagan and McLearn come during the days to visit for long, drunken conversations while he sits in the same chair by the fishbowl, drinking for hours on end. He is made uneasy by Perry and the pedophilia that is so present in his conversation and tells of how badly Billie wants her and Jack to marry, and how, strangely, but not surprisingly, Cody wants it, too.

Chapter 27, 28 & 29 Analysis

By Chapter Twenty-seven, Kerouac has already begun to blend the dream about the silent city with reality, and is wishing for someone to explain reality to him, since he recognizes already that he is going insane. His telling the story on reflection gives the benefit of his having done the work of sorting it all out, so the reader can see what elements from reality and from his dreams were confusing him, and what his perception was in comparison with reality.



When Jack calls Cody to see when he is going to come and get him, Cody says to stay for a few more days, as if, Jack theorizes, he wants him to have an ordeal like his own in order to help him identify better with Cody's life. While Kerouac's other friends visit him where he is, out of apparent respect for his freedom to be where he pleases, Cody, by contrast, seems more intent on keeping Jack where he wants him to be for as long as he wants him to be there.



Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Ben Fagan visits in this chapter, and insists on getting Kerouac out of the chair he has been in for so many days on end. The two go to a park where Ben watches Kerouac sleep in the grass. He awakens for nonsensical conversations in which Ben plays with happy images in Kerouac's imagination, and reassures Kerouac that he is welcome to rest and recover.

Chapter 30 Analysis

The value of this dedicatedly sober friend is clear in this chapter, as well as the fact that Kerouac's friends have been discussing his state, and that they are concerned. The fact that Kerouac devotes a whole chapter to Ben's merciful and selfless act of watching over him as he sleeps confirms that he recognizes Ben Fagan's value as a friend and as a dedicated teetotaler.



Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

At the beginning of Chapter Thirty-one, back in the apartment, Jack is waiting for Billie to come home late from work. Their first topic of conversation is about whether Jack might have killed her goldfish by giving him cornflakes, and his asking like a confused child why fish have to die. Their conversation from there is a jumbled back and forth about how badly Billie wants to get married, with Kerouac pointing out that she really loves Cody. He suggests instead that at least they wouldn't have to have sex all the time, but rather, just live in a place they defined by truth and live there as parallel and whole people.

As a solution to the mess of the city and the fog he has fallen into, he suggests they go with Dave and Romana back to the cabin for the weekend. The two friends are, of course, game, and their plans are made.

Chapter 31 Analysis

This is an excellent summation of the unhealthiness of this relationship, and of Kerouac's inability to reason with Billie in any way that would extricate him from it. He has a nice vision for a healthy relationship, allowing both of them to remain whole and independent, but it is nothing she wants. Her friends are unhealthy, and she is not balanced or as focused on Kerouac as she is on his connection to Cody and his availability as a permanent connection to Cody's world.



Chapter 32 & 33

Chapter 32 & 33 Summary

This chapter is dedicated to the conversation Jack and Billie have while they are preparing to leave for the weekend. Billie is trying to shake Jack out of not being willing or ready to marry her, and Jack is desperate to convince her that marriage is not the way their relationship should go.

Before the band of friends goes to the cabin in Chapter Thirty-three, they stop by Cody's house at Jack's request under the guise of picking up some clothes he left. He really wants the two women in Cody's life to see each other face to face. When he accomplishes his goal, the women ignore one another, and he blabbers drunk for a while, realizing how out of place he is in this domestic scene, and how uncomfortable everyone is. After a bit of failed conversation, they all head back out.

Chapter 32 & 33 Analysis

Kerouac is touched in chapter Thirty-two by the gesture from Life, as a benevolent force, to reach out and offer itself to people who misunderstand it as much as he and Billie do. His confession of gratitude is a glimmer of transcendental perspective before the tumble into insanity that lies before him.

Evelyn remains gracious to Jack even when he barges in on such an ill-conceived quest, but the atmosphere is still defined by awkwardness, as he characterizes himself as blathering and drunk. His understanding of the situation in retrospect paints it vividly. He hints in the final line of the chapter that even at that awful moment, he is still only getting warmed up.



Chapter 34 & 35

Chapter 34 & 35 Summary

In the thirty-fourth chapter, the circumstances Kerouac has perpetuated have begun to send him toward insanity in earnest. While Dave and Romana are away in town getting supplies, he and Billie are on the beach as Billie talks about killing herself and Elliot if she and Jack do not marry. This is the setting for his St. Carolyn by the sea vision, and his realizing that he has missed his opportunity to meet author Henry Miller because of his drinking. Billie's insanity has now revealed itself to the point that she has openly beaten Elliott and insists on openly making love to Kerouac even while the little boy begs her to stop.

The thirty-fifth chapter brings Dave back from his fishing trip proudly showing off his recently caught fish to find Kerouac weakened and discouraged by his latest sexual experience with Billie. Kerouac regrets that he is not able to accomplish these simple, practical human feats, nor maintain his cheer as Dave so invincibly can. He also confesses to Dave that he would like to cut their weeks short, fearing that he may die if they continue.

Chapter 34 & 35 Analysis

The tragedy of this episode is that Kerouac is apparently helpless to remove himself from the woman who is so poisoning his moods and thoughts. He is exhausted by the days on end of drinking, and has realized that he has made a mistake in bringing more people, and these in particular, back to the cabin instead of just escaping to it alone.

By now, Kerouac is at the end of his strength, paranoid about everything and convinced that death is an instant away. He is also feeling guilty about dragging everyone up to the cabin and then wanting to send them away, just adding to his reasons for self-loathing.



Chapter 36

Chapter 36 Summary

In the thirty-sixth chapter, Kerouac is more silently watching the goings on of the rest of the group, now approaching the climax of his madness. Dave is cooking the fish he caught. The otter, mouse, and snake Jack had seen and loved when they were living, stay in Jack's mind as Dave lovingly cooks the fish, even asking Kerouac to pray over it before they partake.

After dinner, Jack walks restlessly back and forth from the beach to the cabin, unable to be with the group, but feeling guilty about being away. He describes the misery of his insanity, and goes back to the theory that everyone is conspiring to make him so, or to poison him by some elaborate scheming until the whole world fills with hallucinations of antagonistic forces. Then, all at once, he hallucinates a cross, and so ends the chapter.

Chapter 36 Analysis

He recounts the story as if he can still see and believe all the false fears that fill his head, making it evident that by this point in the story, he remembers the insanity as the only reality. He has begun to allow the insanity coming from Billie to be as constant and inescapable a voice in the story as it was in his head at the time. His imagery and search for reassurance and wisdom are alternately based in the Catholicism of his childhood and the Zen Buddhist and Hindu studies of his adulthood, making it clear that he is grasping for anything that will bring him peace and perspective.



Chapter 37

Chapter 37 Summary

Having seen the cross, Kerouac begins praying and swears his fidelity to the God of his youth until he is finally assured in his mind that he and his friends will all be saved, and he thereby believes he can sleep. His dreams, however, fill with dark images of copulating vultures with faces that turn to mottled, pasty human faces, all conspiring to fool the young people who come to the work camp that is the setting for his dream, and make them into vultures just like themselves. The darkness of the camp morphs into a long greasy kitchen when, just when his dreams turn darkest, Elliott, who is awake and watching him, thumps his foot on the floor and wakes him up.

He likens the images and confusion that comes to him in his next bout of sleep to the images and explosions he saw on Peotl and Mescaline, only without being wonderful for him as those images had seemed at the time. Over and over, just when he edges closer to the peace of sleep, Elliott thumps the floor again, never letting him escape into sleep.

Chapter 37 Analysis

In a chapter dominated by dreams, it is obvious that Kerouac's mind has slipped well into the territory of darkness, conspiracy, evil, and ugliness. The fact that Elliott never lets him escape it both suggests that the little boy isn't willing to be miserable by himself and furthers the boy's characterization as a major contributing factor to Kerouac's idea that the world is evil, and everyone in it is conspiring to make him insane.



Chapter 38

Chapter 38 Summary

At the beginning of the final chapter, Kerouac has left the porch in search of a quiet place, but finds reasons to believe that every place he finds is evil or dangerous in some way. He returns to the porch and is convinced that they are all actually dead, and that everything is dead and brings death. When they all finally wake up, they have their slow breakfast, and then decide that rather than burn or pack out all their garbage, they should bury it. Billie digs a hole that looks exactly like a grave, not only to Kerouac but to everyone in the group, including Elliott for whose dimensions it is perfectly suited. Jack finally goes over the deep end, screaming about why it has to look like a grave, and why Elliott is screaming.

Finally, he goes to a chair to rest for a moment on the front porch and takes a nap. Miraculously, when he wakes up, his whole sense of well-being is restored. He is calm and realizes that everything will be fine in the end. These people will go back to their lives, and he will go home again. A sense of golden wonderfulness fills his whole being, and he fills the final page with its assurances.

Chapter 38 Analysis

In the end, when the alcohol has worn off and he has had a chance to rest and recover, Kerouac is finally able to put into perspective which thoughts had been his, and which thoughts had been the eschewed worry and distraction fed to him by Billie and perpetuated by the darkness of exhaustion and an intoxicated mind. He is able to return completely to the frame of mind in which he lives the rest of his life. As deeply as he had plunged into the darkness, he shoots up out of it as far from sanity as he ever was.



Characters

Jack (Duluoz) Kerouac, also Ti Jean

Jack Kerouac is the narrator and protagonist of the story, famed by the beginning of the story as the voice of the Beat Generation. It has been about 15 years since the publication of the books he had written when he was out on the road with Neal Cassidy, Allen Ginsburg and William Burroughs, and his world has devolved into drinking with the kids who love his books and still come around and expect him to be the Kerouac of 20 years ago. His state of mind is frayed from the beginning, and while the escape to Big Sur is intended to be a respite and rejuvenation for him, it is only that for a short while before he succumbs to the temptation to return to what is familiar and resume the weeks-long parties with friends from San Francisco. He describes them all with affection and tenderness, but they are all vulnerable to or permissive of the very alcohol-saturated habits from which Jack set out to recover. As a result, he commences drinking as soon as he gets back to the city and continues for long stretches with no nourishment but alcohol, until his mind turns paranoid and panicked at the hopelessness and horror of life as it appears to his worn and bedraggled mind. Throughout, he is intensely vulnerable and forthright, as tenderly describing himself as he describes everyone else in the work, his insight reaching even beyond his own experience to encompass the reality from which his mind was slipping. He writes with wisdom and a tone of candid confession.

Cody Pomeray

Cody Pomeray (Neal Cassady) is the hero of *On the Road* (then called *Dean Moriarty*), and a long-time friend of Jack's. The two of them have not seen each other for several years when they meet in this story, so Kerouac has reason to tell a good deal of Cody's back story. He tells about Cody's wife Evelyn and their former lives as a trio when Jack and Cody worked opposite schedules while Evelyn was at home. During their time when Cody was working, Jack fell in love with Evelyn. When Cody proposed to her, she said it was her karma to serve Cody and to love Jack in eternity. Cody still remains an inspirational character to watch as he lives his life as a hard-working family man, still unquenchably adventurous and philosophical even having spent two years in San Quentin for possessing marijuana, sharing a cell with a murderous madman. He is also, however, an incredibly powerful influence on Kerouac, inspiring him not only to drink, but also encouraging Jack to have affairs with the women Cody keeps on the side.

Lorenzo Monsanto (Lawrence Ferlinghetti)

Lorenzo Monsanto (in life, Lawrence Ferlinghetti) is the bookstore owner whose cabin is at Big Sur and provided the setting for so much of the story. Monsanto, as he is called throughout the book, identifies Jack's intense need for solitude and recovery, and offers



up his cabin as a place where Kerouac can get away for an entire summer without being bothered or tempted to party.

Dave Wain

Dave Wain is an old taxi driving red-headed Welchman and a lover of long binges, poetry and fishing. He was also Kerouac's companion with his lover Romana while Jack was at the cabin with Wilhelmina and her son during Jack's meltdown. He is a jokester and has an ability Kerouac appreciates to keep tense moments light by cracking jokes and staying available to the task at hand.

Willamine Dabney

Billie (Willamine) Dabney is Cody's lover, and determined to steal him permanently away from Evelyn, his wife. Presented with Jack, she shifts her attentions to him with dramatic declarations of her desire to marry him or, if she cannot, to kill herself and her son.

Ben Fagan

Ben Fagan is a character featured in the book, "Dharma Bums", and is among the first people with whom Kerouac reconnects in San Francisco. He is a poet and a true friend, fully aware of Jack's tendency to drink for days on end, and so the faithful friend who sits with Kerouac in the park and watches over him while he sleeps it off.

George Baso

George Baso is "the little Japanese Zen master" who has been hospitalized with tuberculosis, and whom the band of friends visits on the day when Kerouac and he spend the last several minutes saying goodbye with gesticulations as they get further apart.

Joey Rosenberg

Joey Rosenberg is the young athlete turned beat Jesus who mixes very dressy items with old beaten ones, and who trades shoes with Jack before they go back to the cabin. He is distinguished by his willingness to follow the adventure wherever it may lead, and the purity and clarity of his countenance during his pilgrimage.



Romana Swartz

Romana Swartz is Dave Wain's large and beautiful, brown girlfriend and his date for the final trip to the cabin at the close of the story.

Elliott Dabney

Elliot Dabney is Billie Dabney's son, permitted to ask questions incessantly and to watch Jack and Billie having sex, but who she beats severely when she reaches the end of her patience. He is charged with the ability to drive anyone crazy to Dave's observation toward the end of the book.

Tyke

Tyke the Cat is only a part of the story twice, once when Kerouac sends instructions to his mother to kiss him for him, and once when he learns from Monsanto that he died just shortly after Jack left. He is heartbroken, as Tyke was like a brother to him, his affection for cats instilled in him by his own dear brother who died when Jack was young, and he supposes that the news of Tyke's death contributes in some measure to his later breakdown.

Alf the Sacred Burro

Alf is a pet mule of other residents at Big Sur that Kerouac feeds regularly, and becomes an iconic member of the natural community of the cabin. The rest of the community consists of the mouse Kerouac feeds until he leaves the rat poison opened and the mouse finds it and dies, the birds he fed right from the front porch, the fish of the sea he supposes speak Breton, and the otter he watched with such great interest until he returns with friends to see him dead and floating in the water.

Kerouac's Mother

Kerouac's mother is a character in the background, since Jack lived at his mother's house when he wasn't traveling, and because she writes the letter to Kerouac about the death of his cat, but never appears herself in the story.

Perry Yturbide

The black-haired young criminal friend of Billie's who lusts after young girls much to Jack's discomfort.



Objects/Places

The Cabin at Big Sur

The cabin begins as a haven and sanctuary for Kerouac from the life of drinking and crowding fans that has defined his hometown. The first three weeks he spends there he describes as the happiest three weeks of his life. Later, it is the setting for parties and Kerouac's recognition of the contrast between his solitude and what he has invited to the place.

The Pacific Ocean

The setting for much listening and thinking for Kerouac, and the voice to which he is listening when he writes the poem at the end of the book entitled simply "Sea".

Alcohol

The drug with such a powerful hold over Kerouac that even while he is trying to recover from it, and even after he recognizes that it is destroying his sanity, he cannot free himself from it.

Kerouac's Earlier Books

Now having become the definition of Jack to an abundance of young idealists and aspiring beatniks, they are both the reason his life is full of invitations to self-destruction by way of celebration and his salvation and redemption.

City Lights Bookstore

The place in which Monsanto is master, able to apprehend and find just what everyone is seeking, and which he defines with his inimitable and characteristic smile. It is also the place at which Kerouac first arrives drunk and boisterous to begin his secluded vacation to Big Sur.

Billie's Apartment

The setting of a full week of drinking and sex, all under the observation of Elliott, Billie's young son, and while Jack anxiously waits for Cody's return.



Willie the Jeep

Dave Wain's Jeep, and the vehicle by which several runs back and forth from the cabin are made.

Cody's Garage

The setting for Jack and friends' astonished observation of Neal's (Cody's) powerful handling of the large and heavy tires, the first time he has seen him in several years, following Cody's time in jail.

The Neighboring Cabin

Kerouac writes that he supposes it is night after night of romantic dinners in the warmly lit windows of the cabin he can see from the beach when he is walking there late at night.

Big Sur

The home of the cabin and others, filled later in the summer with innocent vacationers, shocked to see the debauchery and wildness introduced to their quiet place by the guests at Monsanto's cabin.



Themes

The Value of Solitude

Description

Circumstances as a Distraction from Friendships

Jack's relationship with the group of old friends in San Francisco are ones he recognizes as having been valuable once when their world was different, and they all had different responsibilities and commitments. Now the relationships are ties to revisit the way one visits a museum. His friendship with Cody is a good example of something that was valuable when they were traveling together, but now is even more destructive in its new context. Their worlds had diverged so dramatically; Kerouac emerged into the world of writing and publishing books, and Cody making a life and family as a working man. When Cody tried to revive their friendship by partying, sharing girls, and drinking for days on end, it proved more a complication than a restoration. There were also his friendships with Ben Fagan and George Baso that he wanted to revisit by and their individual responsibilities prevented it. Evelyn is another bittersweet example, and perhaps the most unsatisfying of his reunions. Their time together is so limited and the fact that she is now married to Cody prevent the two to be as close as they once were. With his old friendships, there is fondness in memory, and wishes for happiness in the future, but no chance for them ever to be the close friends they had been before.

The Nurturing Capacity of Nature

In much the same way that separation from people and social demands was healing for Kerouac, his immersion in nature was a substantial contribution to his recovery. The night he arrived at Big Sur, his search through the darkness brought him to the clearing filled with tall grass and convinced him that he had passed from hell into heaven, and set him on his path of restoration. The silence of the cabin allowed him to observe and train his own thoughts, helping to shift them from the destructive path they had been on to one of seeking and practicing wisdom instead. The presence of the ocean and the scale of the place allowed him to fix his attention on something stronger and more lasting and substantial than the things people convince themselves are important in their daily lives, and helped Jack to right his perspective as to his place in the world, and the rhythms of living in nature. Finally, the animals that surrounded him gave him something outside himself on which he could focus and exercise his compassion. It seemed to him a clean, pure and unsullied place, unlike the filthy, crowded cities, and a place in which he could be both vulnerable and nurtured, allowed to seek and experience all the healing he is able to absorb.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person, as a reflection on the state of the author's mind as he moves through a summer full of both solitude and intense interaction with friends and alcohol. He is speaking from a place of reflection on these things, and so alludes throughout to the fact that he will be going insane before the close of the story. For that reason, he is able to point out the elements of the story that contribute to that madness, or will later play a role in it. He is also able to speak with a degree of insight into the other characters in the story that would only come from reflection on their significance to the story after the fact. His perspective on them as characters from his past, and whom he has admired as thinkers, strategists on life and other writers also lends depth and color to his descriptions of them as they move in and out of the story. When one understands that his intention throughout his writing career is to compile all of his stories into an autobiographical anthology, his perspective also takes on more of the patience of the teller of long and interwoven stories.

Setting

The story takes place in and around Big Sur, California in the summer of 1960, as well as in San Francisco and Monterey. The cabin Kerouac lives in alone for the first three weeks, and on and off again with friends throughout the rest of the summer, belongs to author Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Lorenzo Monsanto in the book) and is his gift to Jack to use as a haven and an escape from the flurry of enthusiastic followers of the beat literature by which Jack has become famous. It is intended to be a place where he can be sober for an entire summer and rest and recover from what has been a long and destructive string of days-long parties instigated by fans and perpetuated by Jack's drinking habits. It ends up being a beautiful and awe-inspiring place that nurtures and inspires him in the beginning and whose majesty and purity intimidate and seem to reject him when he allows his paranoia to take hold.

There is also the beach and the ocean as settings there, where the high bridge was so narrow that a car went over it and landed on the beach upside down, making it a place of fear. The ocean was a soothing thing to which Jack had listened and recorded its words until he was sure it was telling him to go away and follow his desire to be with people.

San Francisco is a place filled with poets, writers, thinkers, artists and friends both inspirational and destructive, and so becomes the great distraction from the place of restoration. It is also from San Francisco that all of the friends come who eventually taint and take away the haven that Big Sur was intended to be and had been in the beginning.



Also in San Francisco is Billie's apartment, where Jack spent a week and where his insanity began really to take hold, as he was allowed to drink for days on end, and to have her in his ear as a voice of instability and destructive thoughts and friends.

Also

Language and Meaning

The language of Jack Kerouac is distinctive, full of onomatopoeia and adjectives made up to sound like the mood he is trying to create. Words like goopy, slaverous, ogresome, hump, affrayed, and turmoiled appear throughout, and are easily understandable by their context and the sound of the words. He also weaves in a great deal of beatnik language like dig, hepcat, man, tea, and sauce when he is recounting the conversations of friends. In his own conversation, there is a good deal of French, sometimes translated, and sometimes left to be expressions of the moment whose meanings can be surmised by their contexts. There is also the intellectual, well-read vocabulary of a group of friends who have made their lives of studying philosophy, literature and art, and so their language is peppered with the vocabulary that comes from such reading. The final most obvious distinction in his language is the phonetic way in which he includes the casual slang he and his friends use in conversation. Words like sumptin, 'bout, drinkin', ya, thar, and 's'matter appear throughout as very effective stylizations of the conversations of the friends.

Structure

The structure of Kerouac's writing is by far its most distinctive feature. Each chapter is its own episode, and so they are separated from each other logically and in reasonable lengths. But within them, his writing is entirely organized according to his stream of consciousness, so that sentences go on forever with very little punctuation. He pays very little heed, in fact, to any grammatical or structural rules, except to be sure, at least for the most part, that his thoughts can be understood. Particularly in cases where he is describing his muddled state of mind, his sentences abandon all form and rhythm, so that reading them out loud or silently, the reader cannot help but vividly feel the scattered, frantic, confused and paranoid mood of the writer. In conversations he has with friends while he is drinking, the best example being the one he has with Ben Fagan when he wakes up to see Ben watching over him in the park, he uses quotation marks, but no paragraphs, separating one person's speech from the other's with long dashes only.



Quotes

"...a reporter ran upstairs to my bedroom as I sat there in my pajamas trying to write down a dream — Teenagers jumping the six-foot fence I'd had built around my yard for privacy — Parties with bottles yelling at my study window 'Come on out and get drunk! All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!'" Chapter 1, page 4

"'One fast move or I'm gone,' I realize, gone the way of the last three years of drunken hopelessness... that feeling when you wake up with the delirium tremens with the fear of early death dripping from your ears like those special heavy cobwebs spiders weave in the hot countries, the feeling of being a bentback mudmad monster groaning underground in hot steaming mud pulling a long hot burden nowhere, the feeling of standing ankle deep in hot boiled pork blood, ugh, of being up to your waist in a giant pan of greasy dishwater not a trace of suds left in it..." Chapter 2, page 8

"And not only that, the blue sea behind the crashing high waves is full of huge black rocks rising like old ogresome castles dripping wet slime, a billion years of woe right there, the moogrus big clunk of it right there with its slaverous lips of foam at the base — So that you emerge from pleasant little wood paths with a stem of grass in your teeth and drop it to see doom." Chapter 4, page 14

"...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 the people of the world, no booze, no drugs, no binges... no more I ask myself the question O why is God torturing me, that's it, be a loner, travel... it's time to think and watch and keep concentrated on the fact that after all this whole surface of the world will be covered with the silt of a billion years in time..." Chapter 6, page 24

"So once again I'm Ti Jean the Child, playing, sewing patches, cooking suppers, washing dishes... Long nights simply thinking about the usefulness of that little wire scourer, those little yellow copper things you buy in supermarkets for 10 cents, all to me infinitely more interesting than the stupid and senseless 'Steppenwolf' novel in the shack which I read with a shrug..." Chapter 7, page 31

"GO TO YOUR DESIRE AND DON'T HANG AROUND HERE — For after all the sea must be like God, God isn't asking us to mope and suffer and sit by the sea in the cold at midnight for the sake of writing down useless sounds, he gave us the tools of self reliance after all to make it straight thru bad life mortality towards Paradise maybe I hope — But some miserables like me don't even know it, when it comes to us we're amazed..." Chapter 9, page 42

"The lights are twinkling on outside in that fantastic toy street, I can feel the joy rise in my soul — I now remember Big Sur with a clear piercing love and agony and even the death of Tyke fits in with everything but I don't realize the enormity of what's yet to come..." Chapter 11, page 55



"It's like real horrible when you come to think of it, even us with all our fancy talks, shit man it's all millions of people and events piling up almost unimaginable now, like raving baboons we'll all be piled on top of each other or one another or whatever you're supposed to say — Hundreds of millions of hungry mouths raving for more more more — And the sadness of it all is that the world hasn't any chance to produce say a writer whose life could really actually touch all this life in every detail like you always say..." Chapter 12, page 63

"He was on his way to work on the railroad one night and was short on time and his driving license had been already revoked for speeding so he saw two bearded bluejeaned beatniks parked, asked them to trade a quick ride to work at the railroad station for two sticks of tea, they complied and arrested him — They were disguised policemen — For this great crime he spent two years in San Quentin in the same cell with a murderous gunman..." Chapter 13, page 67

"What's keeping me is that I know George will get better and live and teach the joyful truth and George knows I know this, that's why he's playing the game with me, the magic game of glad freedom which is what Zen or for that matter the Japanese soul ultimately means..." Chapter 15, page 82

"Monsanto... says, 'This is the kind of place where a person should really be alone, you know? when you bring a big gang here it somehow desecrates it not that I'm referring to us or anybody in particular? there's such a sad sweetness to those trees as tho yells shouldn't insult them or conversation only'—Which is just the way I feel too." Chapter 18, page 94

"But there's no joy at all, people say. 'Oh, well he's drunk and happy let him sleep it off' — The poor drunkard is crying — He's crying for his mother and father and great brother and great friend, he's crying for help... He'll want to bury his face in his hands and moan for mercy and he knows there is none — Not only because he doesn't deserve it but there's no such thing anyway — Because he looks up at the blue sky and there's nothing there but empty space making a big face at him..." Chapter 21, page 112

"And you know a lot of this sneery stuff they've written against us, against San Francisco or beat poetry and writers is because a lot of us don't LOOK like writers or intellectuals or anything, you and Pomeray I must say look awful in a way, I'm sure I don't fill the bill either." Chapter 23, page 123

"Lying mouth to mouth, kiss to kiss in the pillow dark, loin to loin in unbelievable surrendering sweetness so distant from all our mental fearful abstractions it makes you wonder why men have termed God antisexual somehow... just listen to Tristan and Isolde by Wagner and think of him in a Bavarian field with his beloved naked beauty under the fall leaves." Chapter 26, page 148

"Always an ephemeral 'visitor' to the Coast never really involved with anyone's lives there because I'm always ready to fly back across the country but not to any life of my own on the other end either, just a traveling stranger like Old Bull Balloon, an exemplar



of the loneliness of Doren Coit actually waiting for the only real trip, to Venus, to the mountain of Mein Mo..." Chapter 33, page 178

"On soft Spring nights I'll stand in the yard under the stars — Something good will come out of all things yet — And it will be golden and eternal just like that — There's no need to say another word." Chapter 38, page 216



Topics for Discussion

What do you think was Kerouac's primary intention in describing the reality of addiction to alcohol the way he did so vividly? Explain your answer.

Does reading Kerouac's work change your view of alcoholism in any way? Do you have a personal experience you understand better or differently having read such a personal account?

What do you think was the appeal of the Beat Generation to the teenagers that came after them, as in cases like Joey Rosenburg who just wants to follow them everywhere they go? Do you see elements of the virtue of their world in this book?

In Jack's friendship with Cody (Neal Cassady), Jack points out that the two friends each remind the other one of his own father. In what ways do you see the friends manifesting father and son relationship in the interactions recorded here?

Billie and Jack connect to each other instantly, thrilling to the chance to spend long periods of time together. Discuss what you perceive were their expectations of the relationship from the beginning, and why those expectations might have had the effect they did on the way their relationship ended up.

Ron Blake is an eager student of Jack's and an ardent admirer. Do you think he could have learned anything from the time he spent with Jack alone at the cabin? Explain.

Which character(s) in the story did you identify with most? Did the way Jack related to that (those) character(s) endear him to you or not? Explain your answer.