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"On the Road & Into the Wild; The Need to Escape from Life"

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Abstract: The need to escape from life, or to avoid facing problems and responsibilities, is sometimes connected to travel. Throughout history, many have embarked in different journeys in order to reflect on themselves, to search for answers, to leave behind duties or their past or to move forward with their lives. Thus, this paper tries to explore and analyze the existential issues that might trigger a need to escape from one's own reality.

I have compared two grand novels: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996). *On the Road*, a highly autobiographical novel, narrates a period of intense travel across the United States, laced with drugs, music, and sex. *Into the Wild* focuses on the fatal experience of the young and courageous Christopher McCandless, who tragically ended his journey upon meeting death due to starvation in his beloved Alaska. This paper also explores the main differences of these great men's generations: Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation, and Christopher McCandless' Generation X.

To sum up, the main difference between both male heroes is that Kerouac was more of a consumer of experiences, an extrovert and a hedonist man, while McCandless was a highly spiritual man, an introvert who sought his own truth.

Keywords: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, Hedonism, Experiences, Christopher McCandless, Transcendentalism, Fatal Endings.

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On the Road & Into the Wild; The Need to Escape from Life

0. Introduction

It is the aim of this paper to explore and analyze the existential issues that might trigger a need or an emotional reaction to avoid and literally, escape from one's own reality. This paper focuses on two novels, *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, and *Into the Wild* (1996), by Jon Krakauer. It explores the motivations to pursue such distinct journeys. In consequence, it addresses the underlying existential needs that might propel one to avoid the "present moment", or life itself as it is experienced, or one's reality; considering the specific historical and social contexts in both cases. Our two main characters take on different journeys driven by somewhat parallel motivations. Yet, there are essential differences in personality, social and historical contexts to explain their own journeys. In both, we find that they use geographical distance, or travel, as a way to escape or avoid life. For different reasons, the goal is to leave behind worries and torments to paradoxically, get lost in an unfulfilled dream. For Kerouac the motivation appears to be an epicurean need to escape or run away from commitments or constraints and hopefully pursue complete freedom. Christopher McCandless decides to go on his own and finally reach his dreamed destination: Alaska, living simply on natural resources being Thoreau's transcendentalism what definitely inspires his bold experiment.

Thus, in this paper, I express my informed opinions and try to extrapolate some conclusions and areas of further investigation. Why is it that throughout many different stages in history, some have felt the necessity to escape, to step out of the comfort zone, to forget about duties and responsibilities and simply concentrate on the self? Curiously enough, nowadays many feel a need of searching for the self in order to sort out things and make changes in life. A very common way to try to attain such goal is precisely by travelling solo, that is, with no companion.

In order to explore this further, this paper will work hand in hand with the primary sources of the novels above mentioned, as well as with the biographical information about their authors.

Before turning to *On the Road* proper plot, it is important to mention some biographical notes on Jack Kerouac, especially the period of his life that inspired his masterpiece. Thus, I will focus on what happened from 1922, the year he was born, until 1951, when he finished writing the manuscript of *On the Road*. The historical and social background will also be vital to best understand the major themes of his novel.

Then I will focus on *Into the Wild* and the story of its protagonist, Christopher McCandless. His brave personality and often characterized immature journey to Alaska would play a definite important role in his life. After this discussion, I will address the hypothetical reasons behind their escapes. Both men traveled away and far, yet the reasons why they tried to make a fresh start are indeed different. A brief introduction to the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau is also provided since this was a powerful source of inspiration for the young Christopher McCandless.

Before reaching a final conclusion, it is also important to compare the two generations portrayed in the novels – Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation during the 1950's and Christopher McCandless' Generation X. This will be a brief introduction, which will mark the most salient features of these two generations. History, culture and society have an immense powerful influence in all, and this is expressed in the authors and writings selected for this paper.

1. Methodology

Regarding the methodology used for this paper, I have followed a comparative approach between the careers of Jack Kerouac and Christopher McCandless in order to draw conclusions on the specificity of the experience they went through in their various travels. We can say that both of them gained knowledge and maturity in their contact with very different life situations and experiences that definitely changed their lives.

Thus, I have engaged in a comparative research that encompasses a wide range of features, from mere biographical aspects to literary ones. In critical theory I should say I moved from considerations on biography to a further reflection on life-writing (with its complex multiplicity of aspects such as genre, voice, influences and innovation). Both Kerouac and McCandless appear as "modern" heroes that, due to their common drive to "travel" and their exposure to worldliness and wilderness respectively, come to be utterly and profoundly changed.

2. On the Road

As a preamble and introduction, it is worth mentioning that Kerouac's most prominent character, Sal Paradise, is a reflection of the author's own life and experiences and the many travels he undertook. Thus, Sal actually represents Jack Kerouac's alter ego. It is then indispensable to explore the author's life within the context of the Beat Generation in order to better understand his literary masterpiece *On the Road*.

The interesting and charismatic writer, Jack Kerouac was born in 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts. His parents had migrated from the Province of Quebec, Canada. Due to the vital and fast adaptation that migration required, Kerouac first learned to speak French. Only later, he also learned to write and speak English language properly and fluently. His intellectual gifts were evident so early on. It is most important to note that Kerouac's mother was a devoted Catholic, and that she raised her children within the strict rules of the Orthodox Roman Catholic Church. As we will see later, these early influences in his world view marked Kerouac's thinking throughout his life and also, his death.

Kerouac experienced significant traumatic losses, and death, at an early age. He was only four years old when his older brother died of rheumatic fever. Years later, his father died of stomach cancer. At this point in his life, Kerouac became obsessed about death and its dark mysteries. The subject of death became a pivotal theme in all of his writings.

During Kerouac's adolescence, he excelled in sports; particularly, football. He was awarded a football scholarship. Kerouac could choose, for the first time in his life, where to go to college. Kerouac's choices were Boston College or Columbia University. He opted for the latter and moved away from his family. More adverse circumstances faced him on this path, as he was injured only a few months into his junior year. It was again, time to decide, to choose, at such a young age. As the Second World War was taking place, he thought it wise or practical to join the army as a sailor in the Merchant Marine.

It was the time when life somehow, started to imbue or maybe infuse, our young Kerouac with the experience of literature. Only in his twenties, he met the original authors that later created the Beat Generation. He first met William Burroughs, a charismatic intellectual that made a deep impression on Kerouac, instantly. Burroughs later became his literary mentor and his trusted and experienced advisor. Through this connection, Kerouac also became a close friend of Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg became another notable character in Kerouac's novels, only found under various pseudonyms.

It seems as though a dark shadow followed Kerouac throughout his life. At the age of twenty two years old, he was put in prison as a witness to the murder of one of his acquaintances, David Kammerer. The story goes to say that Kerouac's friend, Lucien Carr, stabbed David to death during an altercation. Kerouac was placed in jail on bail. The Parkers, also acquaintances of Kerouac, offered him bail out from prison and freedom if he agreed to marry their daughter, Eddie Parker. Kerouac agreed to the conditions of his bail and married Eddie. His marriage only lasted scarcely two months. It became obvious to Kerouac that he

and she belonged to very different socio-economic worlds. While Eddie came from a well-established family financially speaking, he had nothing to offer. He was penniless. It was at this time when Kerouac resorted to narcotics and alcohol, in massive doses, to escape from his existential reality.

Soon after his divorce and within his circle of inspiring and literary friends, Kerouac met Neal Cassady in 1947. Once again, he became enchanted by Cassady's passion for life, his wild excitement and his sense of freedom. It was at this time when Kerouac felt confused about his own sexuality. His religious upbringing influenced deeply how he felt about these matters. The most important woman of his life was his mother, whom he deeply loved. Kerouac's conscious or unconscious compromise was to use prostitution and masturbation rather than getting married to a woman. Coincidentally at the same time, Ginsberg and Cassady became lovers, and Kerouac felt uncomfortable to some degree with his friends' relationship.

It is likely that his existential confusion propelled Kerouac to travel this same year (i.e., 1947) to the West and on his own. He had no money and was entirely dependent on his mother. Although his first novel *The Town and the City* was already written, he couldn't find a publisher for the manuscript. Kerouac was at this time very creative and prolific in his mind, all the while very confused and tortured emotionally. He wrote his second novel, *On the Road*, at a time he felt completely immersed in doubts. His first novel, *The Town and the City* dealt with Kerouac's own struggle to balance the expectations of his family with his unconventional life of a writer, an Artist. It was finally published in 1950 with Ginsberg's help. Let's make a historical note: these were the times of McCarthy's prosecution to anyone "marginal" (i.e., politically, intellectually, and even more, those with different sexual orientations).

Thus, in the early 1950's, Kerouac embarked on several trips with Cassady across the United States. These trips were to become the basis of Jack's masterpiece *On the Road*. In the summer of 1950, Kerouac was using drugs to such extent, that some of his friends feared for Kerouac's health. Neal Cassady appeared to have lost his sanity. As Kerouac's biographer Ann Charters admits, when both men were together, Cassady undercut Jack's reasoning.

However, it seemed as if Kerouac wanted, needed, to somehow settle down, and find some sort of stability. He got married for a second time. Her second wife Joan Haverty, was the initial addressee of *On the Road*. Jack wanted to tell her all about the various trips Neal Cassady and he took together, and writing this novel was the best way to express that to her. Their marriage only lasted six months, and his only child, a daughter, was born from this marriage. She was named Janet Michelle, "Jan." Kerouac however, refused to acknowledge Jan as his daughter. Interestingly, father and daughter only met twice; yet this little girl inherited his wanderlust and also became a writer.

Going back to his novel *On the Road*, it is worth mentioning that Kerouac wrote it in three weeks, after having spent seven years on the road. The manuscript – presented to his editor on a single, unbroken roll of paper– was rejected and six years would pass before it was published in 1957. In the years in between, Kerouac followed Ginsberg and Cassady to San Francisco and the term "Beat Generation," which Kerouac coined, gained popularity. Kerouac originally described "beat" as "sympathetic" and remarked that it had absolutely nothing to do with violence.

Prior to meeting Cassady, Thomas Wolfe had been Kerouac's literary inspiration. Kerouac replaced him and sought inspiration in Cassady soon after meeting him. In fact, Kerouac's spontaneous prose technique seen in *On the Road* was actually inspired by a rambling letter that Cassady wrote to Kerouac at one time.

Jack Kerouac spent much time of his life writing. Her daughter Jan assured that this was the only way he was able to express his feelings freely. Everything was secondary in his life to writing. Some of his most beloved friends certainly praised Kerouac not only his work and his essential role in his literary generation, but also for his powerful and magnetic

personality. As can be found in the documentary film *What happened to Kerouac?* (1986), John Clellon Holmes, often known as the "Quiet Beat" and one of Kerouac's closest friends, believed that each of Jack's novels is radically different, sort of like acts of desperation. He viewed Kerouac as a visionary and highly creative artist, an experimenter of consequence very much like James Joyce was. John Clellon Holmes also believed that Kerouac was not famous, but just notorious, mainly because he was never taken seriously in all his life.

Kerouac's first wife, Edie Parker, described him as a sweet, unpretentious, gentle and intelligent man. She firmly believed that Neal Cassady was Kerouac's alter ego. Also, the Beat poet Gregory Corso thought that Cassady embodied an ideal about America and its freedom, and that the idealization of Cassady alone, was what fascinated Kerouac.

In 1969, at age 47, Kerouac died from internal bleeding due to long-standing abuse of alcohol. At one time he expressed that due to his religious beliefs, he would never commit the act of suicide. Instead, and unknowingly, he self-medicated his emotional pain with drugs and alcohol, which led to his death or what could be construed as slow suicide.

There are prominent psychological and existential issues in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Thus, the dissatisfaction, fear and frustration are clearly identifiable, triggering an emotional reaction to leave, to go away. Sadness is a prominent tone in Sal's eyes. Sadness is perceived everywhere in America and linked to solitude: in people's lives, in places and even in his own dreams. The feeling of insanity, or losing one's mind, becomes the main source of Sal's idolatry of Dean. That is, Sal becomes infatuated with Dean as Dean represents madness, holiness, and a false sense of vitality based on excess and lust, expressed in the abuse of drugs, alcohol and sex. The background music is jazz, an intensely American music form in its sound and culture. All combined create a false sense of friendship or life stance, a motto, even a sort of spirituality... "Holiness" was indeed part of the Beat Generation, where "Beat" may come to mean "beatific" among other things.

Kerouac's initial ideas about the novel *On the Road* originated in the early 1940's, but these took a more definite form after he started traveling through the United States and Mexico in 1947. Kerouac wrote it in 1951, and it was published by Viking Press in 1957. The frantic and new experiences he encountered during those years of travel became the basis for *On the Road*, making this novel highly autobiographic. He traveled most of the times with close friends, who were well-known authors from the Beat Generation. Some of them were Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*), Allen Ginsberg (Carlo Marx), William Burroughs (Old Bull Lee), Henri Cru (Remi Boncoeur), and Luanne Henderson (Mary Lou), just to name some of the main characters.

On the Road is considered probably as one of the best-known and representative works from the Beat Generation, with its protagonists living life against a backdrop of jazz, poetry, and drug abuse.

It is through that Kerouac's greatest gift lies in the way he depicted America and American life for his generation, just as F.S. Fitzgerald had done. *On the Road* offers a first-hand testimony of the frantic, wild beat life. Yet implicitly, it is a criticism of that way of living. Kerouac reflects his deep disillusionment with America, which for him represents a land of corruption, greed and hypocrisy; a country that promises everything but appears to deliver nothing. In the novel, Kerouac makes it clear through Sal Paradise, the main character, that Sal goes on the road to escape from life rather than to find it, that he runs from the intimacy and responsibility of more demanding human relationships, and from a more demanding human relationship with himself. (Vopat 1)

"We all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved!" (Kerouac 121) As Vopat admits (2), Sal Paradise prefers living on impulses, not to be driven by any kind of destiny. He and

Dean Moriarty constantly refuse responsibility, and also self-analysis, self-awareness, and in general, thinking.

"I was having a wonderful time and the whole world opened up before me because I had no dreams." (Kerouac 235) This quote from the novel implies that none of the characters have a self-definition or a sense of life continuity. There is only the eternal now, which demands absolutely nothing: No limits, liabilities or obligations. A life based on reactive spontaneity and impulse. All of this, of course, seems to indicate a quality of an existential angst, a running away from the fear of emptiness, fear of life and death. As Vopat noted, "In their cars they are suspended from life and living, as if in a capsule." (2)

Another main character in the novel, Dean, feels utterly free although he appears insane. Dean defies maturity, logic, time and its demands for constraint and responsibility. Parallel to Nietzsche's superman, Dean feels as though he is beyond good and evil, blame and expectations, or the need to justify his existence through work and duty. A stance in life that Sal sorely admires: bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness – everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being. (Vopat 2)

"Yes! You and I Sal, we'd dig the whole world with a car like this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world." (Kerouac 209). Sal appears to want to find some direction, a goal, some meaning to his life. He looks for them both in America and in his fellow friend Dean. However he fails, and he finds himself just back on the road, which is all for him.

Once he realizes this, he becomes disgusted and hopeless. "Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life." (Kerouac 192) Although he is completely aware of the futility and craziness of his journeys, he keeps on planning even more.

As I mentioned before, Sal idolizes Dean and seeks in him not only the figure of a lost brother, but even for a father whom he could follow and trust. Sal deeply needs to be protected, loved and directed. But at the end of Part Two he is finally disenchanting with Dean, who has proved to be a poor friend and also another bad father figure. "It was remarkable how Dean could go mad and then suddenly continue with his soul - which I think is wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach, and a woman at the end of the road - calmly and sanely as though nothing had happened." (Kerouac 209) Sal seems to both understand and pity Dean, being aware of the fact that Dean is probably the least free of all the characters. Dean's life is not as romantic and adventurous as it appears initially. Rather, he lives driven by joyless anxieties.

Eventually Sal finally decides to leave the road, to settle down and face change and responsibility. As Vopat believes, "Sal's growth as an adult can be measured through his responses to Dean, and in the changing aspects of their relationship." (6)

On the Road ends with an elegy for a lost America, for the country which once might have been the father of us all, but now is only the land where they let children cry. Dean Moriarty is himself America, or rather the dream of America, once innocent, young, full of promise and holiness, bursting with potential and vitality, now driven mad, crippled, impotent, ragged, dirty, lost, searching for a past of security and love that never existed. (Vopat 6)

3. *Into the Wild*

Hardly anyone has known about Chris McCandless' life and about his tragic ending. It is most likely that those who know about Mr. McCandless owe it to Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild*, published in 1996. Krakauer has always been an expert and a legendary mountaineer. When he graduated from college in 1977, he traveled solo to spend

three weeks in the wilderness of the Stikine Icecap region of Alaska. Once there, he opened a new path to climb the Devils Thumb. This experience he described in *Into the Wild*. Krakauer's experience and journey was very similar to Chris McCandless' own, as we will later see.

Much of Krakauer's popularity as a writer developed overtime as he was a journalist in mountain climbing. He contributed as free-lance writer in magazines such as *Outside*, *National Geographic* and the *Smithsonian*. The time came when he could eventually devote his time in full to writing books. One of these is *Into the Wild*. This book relates the fatal and passionate story of the young and adventurous Chris McCandless. Krakauer felt too deeply moved by McCandless' death that he decided to investigate in as full detail as possible, McCandless' travels, the people he met along the road, and eventually, how he died.

Just a decade later, the American actor Sean Penn directed in 2007 a film based on this story, which he titled *Into The Wild*. At the same time, Ron Lamothe wrote, produced and directed a documentary film on the same subject matter, the life of Christopher McCandless. He titled his documentary *The Call of the Wild*.

Chris McCandless died only a year after I was born in Spain. Undoubtedly, I could have not been aware of this event... I also doubt whether the story of this young man ever reached Spain or other countries. Even in Lamothe's documentary film, most Americans portrayed and interviewed in this film, had not heard anything about him. I however, became very interested in this man's story, and my interest in the subject and research is drawn to the sources already mentioned.

Christopher Johnson McCandless was born in 1968 in El Segundo, California, to Walter "Walt" McCandless and Wilhelmina "Billie" Johnson. They raised him with his younger sister, Carine. The family later moved and settled in Annandale, Virginia due to Walt's work with the NASA.

I will discuss in the next section of this paper McCandless' early findings about himself and his family (see section 4 of this article: "What might trigger a need to escape from life"). In brief, McCandless found at an early age that his sister Carine and himself, had six half-siblings from Walt and his first wife, a woman called Marcia. Walt lived a secret double life, between his two homes and his two families. Chris could never forgive this and regarded his father as a sanctimonious hypocrite.

Chris McCandless lived a full, intense and short life; he was only twenty four years old when he died in Alaska. Those who knew him characterized him as a very quiet and shy young man, and always polite. He was also remembered as a very artistic person, sensitive and thoughtful, at times seemed to be too shy or fearful of people. In his short life, there were time when he needed the companionship of his friends, while more often, when he preferred the absolute solitude and silence.

Chris graduated in 1990 from Emory University with a Bachelor's degree and doubled majored in History and Anthropology. He was undoubtedly, a very talented man with an exquisite bright mind. In June and right after his graduation, he told his family in his own gentle ways, "I think I'm going to disappear for a while." then embarked on his journey under the name of "Alexander Supertramp." He first donated a gift of \$24,000 for his graduation, to Oxfam International. He left and traveled, only carrying with him his favorite books, a backpack with basic tools, his identification card, and \$ 300 that he kept in his wallet. As Jon Krakauer believes (181), McCandless needed to test himself in many different, challenging and often turbulent ways.

McCandless' final goal was to reach Alaska. As Jon Krakauer remarked, "Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing." (4)

Chris wanted to explore the world, needed to test himself, and also leave the ordinary life. While he was an extraordinary athlete, a cross-country runner during high school

with incredible stamina, he was not as well prepared for his final expedition as he thought he was.

Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul. Chris soon discovered what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds. (Krakauer 182)

Chris was last seen alive in April 28 by a local man who gave him a ride to the Stampede Trail. He stayed in Alaska for nearly four months. He died in August, 1992. Some said he starved to death. He ate what he could find: squirrels, plants and birds. At one time, he was able to kill a large moose but didn't know how to preserve the meat, which quickly rotted out. Krakauer believes that Chris was poisoned by the seeds of a plant he picked up by mistake. Be as that it may, he was terribly weak and had lost too many weight that when he was found dead he weighed an estimated 67 pounds.

During his stay in Alaska, he shared with us his experience:

"Two years he walks the Earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best". And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the great white North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become *lost in the wild*. Alexander Supertramp. May 1992." (Krakauer 162; my emphasis)

I am quite sure that most would be critical, and judgmental of the idea that living merely off the land in such hostile territory as Alaska, is completely irresponsible and immature. Perhaps, Chris McCandless was a fool. Yet, he was driven by a pure desire and intuition. What he chose to pursue, was nonetheless brave, uncommon, a quite daring stance on life.

4. What Might Trigger a Need to Escape from Life

Before delving in the discussion of what might trigger a need to escape from life, I would like to comment on some of the advantages of traveling solo; that is, no companionship. With regards to our two male characters, it was Chris McCandless who traveled alone for nearly four months until he reached eventually his beloved Alaska. However, Sal Paradise, Jack Kerouac's alter ego in *On the Road*, not always traveled alone. Apart from that simple difference, our brave and independent characters would have hypothetically thought of the advantages of traveling solo; maybe before, during or after their trips. These might have been their thoughts...

One basic factor is that only one would have the complete and absolute control of the itinerary to explore. For example, Sal Paradise traveled all across The United States and Mexico with no other goal than visiting his friends. He stopped in places like Denver, Mexico City, New Orleans and San Francisco. Chris McCandless traveled solo through California, Arizona and South Dakota, to finally end his journey in his beloved Alaska.

Another – not less important factor- is the delicate issue of the financial expense one might incur in this endeavor. Traveling solo has the advantage of spending exactly what one decides to spend. It is very interesting that at one point in his journey to Alaska, Chris McCandless decided to burn all the money he had, with the exception of \$300, which was

found in his wallet when he was found, dead. On the contrary, Sal Paradise and his buddies faced economic difficulties at different points in their journey; so much so that at times, they had hardly anything to eat or anywhere to sleep.

A third advantage is meeting people along the way, lending oneself the opportunity to become more psychologically open-minded. Sal Paradise, for example, seemed to always enjoy the companionship of the different people he met on his travels. Together, they shared moments of dancing to jazz, or taking drugs, or spending all night talking until dawn. On the other hand, Chris was a quieter, more introverted, young man. He was more of an observer than a participant. Nonetheless, he made some great friends that left a mark on his heart.

Another result of traveling solo is that one might become more introspective, reflective and observational. Thus, both of our characters kept a journal with them. The only difference is that while Jack Kerouac mostly wrote about what he did during his travels, Chris McCandless wrote about what he felt and learnt, and how his body and his mind progressed.

Opening oneself to experimentation, in a healthy or unhealthy manner, is another advantage, or an intrinsic part of traveling solo. One can experiment with anything, and this is what Sal Paradise did without any constraints in regards to drugs, love affairs and jazz.

Lastly, one will be definitely challenged in ways that would have never been predicted every day. Uncertainty about obstacles or treasures will pervade. It reminds me of how Chris survived a flash flood, then paddled a canoe down to remote stretches of the Colorado River to the Gulf of California. He also crossed the border to Mexico and got lost in many dead-end canals.

Let's now move on to the existential need to escape from life, as there are also some differences between our main characters.

Jack Kerouac found himself trapped when he was a young man, having lost some of his dreams. He was twenty-five years old when he embarked on his first trip alone to the West. It is quite possible that this took place in 1947, when he became infatuated with the wild and adventurous Neal Cassady. It was upon his discovery of how carelessly and freely Neal lived his life, and his realizations that he had no money, was dependent on his mother, and had not been successful in publishing his first novel. It was then when Jack decided to try and break through. His aim was to make a clean start, and this he found it on the road.

I have specifically chosen three quotes from Jack Kerouac in which we can find his feeling of internal emptiness. An empty space he tried to fill in with relentless activities but failed to achieve. It is as if something always impeded him from reaching his dreams,

I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion." In fact, all the drug and alcohol consumption was another way to escape from his nightmares and anxieties since he believed at one point that: "I saw that my life was a vast glowing empty page and I could do anything I wanted." Kerouac lives a short but intense life, and found out that "Happiness consists in realizing it is all a great strange dream.

However, Christopher McCandless seemed to have everything one could wish for. He was born to an upper class family in Washington D.C. His father, Walt, worked for the NASA. Chris was a strong-willed student since childhood, and eventually graduated from Emory University with a Bachelor's degree. His relationship with his dear sister Carine, was very close. One of the main reasons why Chris McCandless felt he needed to run away into the wilderness of Alaska was precisely, to escape from his father, a "sanctimonious hypocrite" according to Chris.

Walt's split with his first wife, Marcia, was not clean or amicable parting. Long after falling in love with Billie, long after she gave birth to Chris, Walt continued his

relationship with Marcia in secret, dividing his time between two households, two families. Lies were told and then exposed, begetting more lies to explain away the initial deceptions. Two years after Chris was born, Walt fathered another son –Quinn McCandless- with Marcia. When Walt's double life came to light, revelations inflicted deep wounds. All parties suffered terribly. (Krakauer 121)

The results of these family dynamics, is that Chris and Carine eventually had another six half-siblings living in California, all fathered by Walt and Marcia. Chris did not learn about these facts until the summer of 1986, when he travelled to South California. These findings were extremely shocking and confusing to Chris. After that experience, he harbored strong feelings of bitterness and resentment towards his father. It is quite possible that these events could have played a factor in his views about society and his need to escape all the false he had witnessed.

More even than most teens, he tended to see things in black and white. He measured himself and those around him by an impossibly rigorous moral code...The boy could not pardon the mistakes his father had made as a young man, and he was even less willing to pardon the attempt at concealment. He later declared to Carine and others that the deception committed by Walt and Billie made his "entire childhood seem like a fiction". But he did not confront his parents with what he knew, then or ever. He chose instead to make a secret of his dark knowledge and express his rage obliquely, in silence and sullen withdrawal. (Krakauer 122-123)

From a young age, Chris appeared to be a highly spiritual man. Another impetus to break through and lose himself in Alaska, was likely his inspiration from the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau; more specifically, Thoreau's well-known experiment in Walden Pond. This man implemented into practice the theories of his predecessor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Both transcendentalists are considered icons in the American society, really inspiring men that have certainly changed the minds of many throughout these two centuries.

H.D. Thoreau (1817 - 1862) was truly a self-made man who shared with Christopher an intense love for nature. He decided to live his life reflecting his own methods. He became a kind of pilgrim and at the same time a non-conformist icon from today's point of view. Thoreau's way of life included some interesting and innovating ideas that Christopher McCandless stuck to and admired: a basic premise in Thoreau's method is "Do It Yourself;" for example building your own living space, a hut, is a symbol of Thoreau's own ideas. He was against the fragmentation of labor opposed to capitalism since for him individuals as a whole represented unity. He postulated the need to be economic and personally independent and above all self-reliant creatures. Another of Thoreau's premise deals with "Unity and Nature." When people are treated as machines, or as a mean to a goal, humankind becomes alienated. The Industrial Revolution intrinsically changed our connection to nature.

Thoreau also emphasized the "The value of simplicity." All individuals should be able to live wisely and simply. There is no real need to put forth strenuous efforts to survive. While life is hard at times, it is imperative that one keeps the faith in him or herself, and in so doing, one can achieve almost whatever is wanted. In fact, the philosopher achieved and lived out loud this principle in his life.

Furthermore, Thoreau spoke about the principle of "authenticity." He urges us to not imitate other people for, in order to find our own way in life, we need to think for ourselves. Thoreau did not want to be an example for others. According to him, everyone has the means to become who they want to be. People need to achieve a higher truth, to be true to ourselves. That is how we would preserve the true course, no matter how long it takes. Another of Thoreau's premise was the need to adhere to "Truth." Truth is the simple way of living. How did Thoreau articulate his defense of Truth? He did so by rejecting materialism

and luxury, as these tear us apart from the "Truth." As he stated, "rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."

Lastly, he also spoke about the need to keep in tune with the beauty and joyous spirit of Nature and to follow the "Higher Laws" it discloses. Thoreau continued to reveal that there are three main lies inherent to human life. First, the lie of Modern Civilization, that is in order to be rich or to reach the top one must degrade or use others. Secondly, a lie in the *Declaration of Independence*, for not everyone is born or becomes entitled to freedom and to the pursuit of happiness. People are not born or do become, equal in practice. Lastly, the 'Loss of Innocence' for he understood that the so called "American Dream" could not be attained, and that such dream was a utopia.

The difference between these great men is that whilst Thoreau decided to put an end to his experiment after two years in Walden Pond, Chris McCandless relentlessly pursued his ideals and in doing so, he lost his life upon reaching Alaska. This seems a deep paradox, deserving further exploration.

5. Generational Differences between the Male Heroes

This section will provide a brief comparison between the two generations reflected in the novels – Jack Kerouac's *Beat Generation* during the 1950's and Christopher McCandless' *Generation X*. Their most salient features will be addressed in an effort to understand the historic-social background of the two. Thus, the personal motivations of Jack Kerouac's alter ego Sal Paradise, and the young Christopher McCandless, will be better identified.

The American literary movement called The Beat Generation began in the early 1950's. It was integrated by a group of highly intellectual young writers who demonstrated a carefree and undoubtedly new and fresh approach to literature. Although New York was the original setting for these writers, they all finally moved to San Francisco, which was to be the cradle of the hippie counterculture.

The term "Beat" was actually coined by our author, Jack Kerouac in the late 1940's. Nevertheless, the term in question became more common when authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Jack Kerouac himself began to be notorious. It was after World War II that "beat" changed its meaning; it was then used as a synonym for "exhausted" or "beat down." It provided this generation with a definitive label for their personal and social positions and perspectives.

This movement was also known for positioning against "The Establishment" - the rigid rules of the American society at that time. This generation innovated with the writing style, like Kerouac's spontaneous and carefree style, also marked by the "stream of consciousness". These writers also experimented with all kinds of drugs, apart from alcohol. They defended alternative sexualities and gay rights, shared an interest in Eastern religion (above all Buddhism), they totally rejected materialism and their aim was to depict explicitly the human condition. These writers were pacifists, who championed anti-war movements, protesting the Vietnam War and coining the phrase "Flower Power," due to Allen Ginsberg. The *Beats* tended towards the left wing of politics, often related to Communism.

The authors of the Beat Generation were often considered as new bohemian hedonists, due to their manifested non-conformity and spontaneous creativity. Features of the expanding Beat movement were incorporated into the hippie counterculture in the 1960s, two decades after this literary generation was formed.

More than twenty writers took part in the Beat movement. Just to mention the most salient, prolific and prestigious ones: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Clellon Holmes, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley or Gary Snyder. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) are among the best known examples of Beat literature.

Generation X, usually abbreviated to Gen X, is the generation born after the Western post-World War II baby boom. Its members, often called Gen Xers, are all the people whose

births took place from the early 1960's to the early 1980's. Hence, our hero Christopher McCandless (1968-1992) is part of Generation X.

The term "Generation X" was originally coined by the Magnum photographer Robert Capa in the early 1950's. However, the term was finally popularized by Canadian author Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), who depicted the lifestyles of young adults during the late 1980's.

In comparison with previous generations, Generation X is a more heterogeneous one, which acknowledges social diversity in terms of race, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, language, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Although their parents challenged leaders in order to try to replace them, Gen Xers value more favorably the use of economic, the media and consumers actions in a long-term process with the aim to pursue a change in the institutional spheres.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Generation X statistically holds the highest education levels when looking at current age groups. Also, it is believed that the people belonging to this idealist generation will defend and promote the individual effort and business risk-taking.

6. Conclusion

The novels chosen for this paper – *On the Road* and *Into the Wild* – both belong to the field of travel memoirs and have been analyzed from that perspective. It is important to remark the distinction between memoirs and autobiographies. As Linda Anderson affirms, "memoirs have traditionally occupied a category of their own within the field of 'life-writing,' and have been distinguished from autobiography as being more flexible and outward looking." (113) Related to this distinction, Cavarero notes that "we make our home in the unique story we can tell about ourselves." (35) That is, we are not the product of our story, but rather, we construct our story. "Memory has an 'uncontrollable narrative impulse.'" (Cavarero 35)

In this paper, key aspects of Jack Kerouac's and Christopher McCandless' biographies have been remarked, as their constant moving and travels are intimately connected to their real experiences in life. Indeed, this is what travel memoirs are all about. Prominent differences between both heroes have also been explored: Sal Paradise is actually Jack Kerouac's alter ego, a character built out of the Beat author's major experiences on the road. Yet, Christopher McCandless was a real young man who, years later after his death would become a character and an idol due to Jon Krakauer's report on his novel *Into the Wild*.

This paper attempts to investigate above all a need to escape from life. Both novels discussed deal with the theme of travel as a way of escapism. In my view, there is a vital difference in the connotations of the words "leaving" and "escaping." While "leaving" connotes a well-grounded and rational decision, "escaping" implies an automatic, emotional reaction to a life situation. In this sense, both novels reflect escapism or emotional reactivity. One could hypothesize that was the need to pursue hedonic and epicurean experiences what triggered the need to escape in *On the Road*. However, McCandless's motivations to escape might have been born out of sheer anger, frustration, inability to fit in anywhere along with his feelings of inadequacy. McCandless truly seemed to want to cut himself off from the world, and it is possible that this is why he escaped alone. Leaving everything behind, disposing of his money, entering a harsh environment without appropriate gear, might also be construed as a conscious or unconscious desire to end his life.

It is interesting that although more than five decades have passed since *On the Road* was written, human beings continue to demonstrate this need to escape, to reach an endless road in an attempt to try to find themselves. The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, born in 1925, believes that the concept of "liquid modernity" has deep roots in our society. For him, "liquidity" means that absolutely nothing is fixed or permanent, that we are constantly in an unstable and unpredictable state. It implies a sense of rootlessness to all forms of social construction. This can be applied to our two novels, even if they are visibly different in many

ways. Our male heroes found themselves in an uncertain and delicate internal state and believed that traveling on the road would be the solution for it.

Given the length constraints for this paper, my aim has been to compare *On the Road* and *Into the Wild*, exploring aspects such as their main characters, their real experiences and feelings, while taking into account the historical backgrounds of both generations and their motivations to escape from life.

Future research to further deepen our understanding of this interesting topic should focus on the different physical landscapes that our heroes travelled, in connection to their personalities. Thus, Kerouac appears to be more of a consumer, an explorer of experiences; perhaps a glutton for such metaphorically speaking. His personality appears extroverted. He immerses the reader into the vast America, known as the land of opportunity. America is known as a country that pursues the realization of the American dream, where citizens are self-made and hard-working people. A vast territory with wide ranges in natural landscapes and weather: high mountains, innumerable lakes, great rivers, deserts, big cities and remote towns, tornadoes, hurricanes, snowy and hard winters, suffocating hot summers. Jack Kerouac becomes a fabulous tour guide, taking us to the large and cosmopolitan cities in the USA and Mexico: New York, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and Mexico City. On the other hand, Christopher McCandless travelled to small and quiet places to finally reach his beloved Alaska: an undoubtedly remote, isolated and dangerous territory. In this light, McCandless appears to be an introverted individual, who seeks solitude and minimalism.

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