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THE ROAD NOT TAKEN : THE SPIRIT OF COUNTERCULTURE IN *ON THE ROAD* AND
FIGHT CLUB

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ABSTRACT

The concept of self directed, independent American man have undergone a drastic reevaluation following the Second World War .The corporate other directed man came into replace the previous notion of self directed American man. The irrational chaos and emotional turbulence caused by the Second World War made Americans reevaluate the scope of Individual freedom. By the end of the 1960s U.S economy had become a market oriented consumer economy whereas in the past it was a productive economy centered on meeting basic human needs. However soon voices of protest began to emerge .Allen Ginsberg's famous poem *Howl* made it's debut at a poetry reading in 1955. Jack Kerouac published his semi-autobiographical novel *On The Road* in the year 1957.Thus was born the Beat Generation .They effected a cultural revolution through their lifestyle which was an eclectic mixture of free love, drugs, sex, love of freedom and Zen Buddhism .The spirit of counter culture inaugurated by Beat writers can be said to have found it's last expression in the novel *Fight Club* written by Chuck Palahniuk .This novel was made into a successful film of the same name in the year 1999.

Key Words : Antiestablishment, Counterculture, Road Trip, Beat, Corporates, Fight Club

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After dropping out from Columbia University, Jack Kerouac met and mixed with a number of Beat Generation writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady. His road adventures with them during the years 1947-50 forms the subject of the novel *On The Road* .The real life person of Neal Cassady is fictionalized in this novel as Dean Moriarty whereas Kerouac himself is fictionalized as Sal Paradise.The very first draft of this novel was an innovation in literary writing as this novel was first typed in a 120 foot scroll of tracing paper sheets that Kerouac cut to size and taped together. The roll was typed single spaced without margins or paragraph breaks. Kerouac carried out this literary experiment in order to reflect the improvisational fluidity of Jazz as well as to depict the spontaneousness of prose.

On The Road is the tale of those people who care about the journey more than the destination. The vast expanse of road which stretches before one is a symbol of expectations, hopes, despair and above everything else the endlessness of time. Just as one can be dropped off at the sides of an endless road, one can be left at the margins of history. In one of his later novels titled *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac and his friends are

depicted as seekers of enlightenment, whereas in this novel they are more like seekers of sensation and excitement, aiming to drink life to the lees as Tennyson puts it in his poem *Ulysses*. In many ways this work can be read as the literary successor of *Walden* written by the famous Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau. Whereas Thoreau retired into the woods for two years to rediscover himself, Dean and Sal in *On The Road* travels across the American landscape in rundown cars and trucks to escape an American society which was at its dawn of "conformism". As Dean and Sal travels through the renowned Route 66, their vision of America also undergoes a metamorphosis. Sal's observations of America dwindle from a grand and euphoric world of wonder to a much more contemplative and philosophical turn of thought.

One most important feature of *On The Road* is the relationship between its two chief characters, that is Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise. In this novel a character's appearance as well as the values he upholds are very much related to the region he hails from. Dean came from West Coast and to Sal he was a representation of that culture because of his passionate, young, exuberant and wild mindset. Sal however believed that he was a "saint like figure from the west who lived his life with no regrets". The cultural revolution effected by the Beat Generation held up a new kind of figure as an antidote to the rigidly conformist American society: 'the American existentialist-the hipster' who exists in the enormous present, a present without past or future, memory or planned intention. In this new world there are only two options available: rebellion or conformity. One is either an adventure seeker in the American wild west or a square cell trapped in the totalitarian conformist American society.

There is a feverish intensity and a sense of urgency in *On The Road*, this is because the characters, especially Dean is aware of the value of time. "We know time", Dean Moriarty chants throughout the book both as an invocation and as a prayer. The hunger for new experiences which drives the two protagonists of this novel derives from their realization of the value of time. Along with his Mexican lover Terry, Sal almost began a domestic life in her hometown Sabinal, while working in the fields. However, he soon heeds the call of his heart for new experiences and bids goodbye to his lover. Beyond everything else the protagonists of this novel fear rootedness as it will quench their thirst for life.

Chuck Palahniuk published his diabolically sharp novel *Fight Club* in the year 1996. Whereas in the 1950's and 60's American society was at the dawn of "conformism", by the 1990's America had become a Capitalist world power rooted in conformist ethos. This novel was made into a successful film bearing the same name in the year 1999. The narrator and protagonist of this novel is a white collar Corporate professional (nicknamed Jack) who is disgusted with his routine life. He works in a car company which is corrupt and one which pays more attention to mere technical details of a car accident than lost human lives. The following scene in the movie illustrates the callous attitude of the corporates towards lost human lives.

JACK (V.O.)

I'm a recall coordinator. My job is to apply the formula. It's a story problem.

TECHNICIAN #1

Here's where the infant went through the windshield. Three points.

JACK (V.O.)

A new car built by my company leaves somewhere traveling at 60 miles per hour. The rear differential locks up.

TECHNICIAN #2

The teenager's braces around the

backseat ashtray would make a good "anti-smoking" ad.

JACK (V.O.)

The car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside. Now: do we initiate a recall?

TECHNICIAN #1

The father must've been huge. See how the fat burnt into the driver's seat with his polyester shirt? Very "modern art."

JACK (V.O.)

Take the number of vehicles in the field, (A), and multiply it by the probable rate of failure, (B), then multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement, (C). A times B times C equals X...

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE CABIN - MOVING DOWN RUNWAY

Jack is speaking to the BUSINESSWOMAN next to him.

JACK

If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.

BUSINESS WOMAN

Are there a lot of these kinds of accidents?

JACK

Oh, you wouldn't believe.

BUSINESS WOMAN

... Which... car company do you work for?

JACK

A major one.

The interaction between Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty forms an important part of *On The Road*, similarly the interaction between Tyler Durden (narrator/Jack) and his alter ego is the crucial feature of *Fight Club*(In

the movie played by Edward Norton and Brad Pitt respectively) . The following excerpt from *On The Road* demonstrates why Sal decided to join Dean in his road trips.

But then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars...

This famous excerpt from the novel perfectly exemplifies the character of Dean Moriarty, and it is exactly his uniqueness and craziness which made Sal take interest in Dean. At the beginning of the novel Dean was portrayed as a former prisoner who had just been released from the prison. He made an immediate decision to transition from the West Coast along with his loving wife Marylou to Sal's location in East Coast. Just as Sal Paradise met his role model in Dean Moriarty, the corporate slave Tyler Durden (Jack) creates an alter ego of Free living, indomitable Tyler Durden in order to escape from his oppressive life. Another important feature that both *On The Road* and *Fight Club* share is their similar portrayal of women. Kerouac never gave woman a conflict except that revolved around their significant other. The chief woman characters in *On The Road* such as Marylou and Terry are only defined by their relationship with Dean and Sal respectively . The chief woman character in *Fight Club* is Marla Singer who is described by the narrator as a "fake". Similar to the narrator Marla is trying to escape from the world around her. However unlike the narrator who creates an alter ego to deal with the crisis in his life, Marla resorts to sleeping pills.

Both *On The Road* and *Fight Club* share a similar discourse on the question of Masculinity. The chief male characters in both of these seminal cultural texts are attracted to as well as repelled by women. "We are a generation of men raised by women", quips Tyler Durden at an important moment in the movie. The chief objective in *Fight Club* is the creation of a masculine cult centred on brutal fighting and creating mayhem in society. Women are both in and out of the world of *Fight Club* as the following dialogue illustrates .

TYLER

You've gotta understand something about me. I have a little rule, okay? Don't ever talk to her about me. Ever. I can't stand that kind of shit.

Tyler fixes Jack with a friendly, but firm stare.

TYLER

If you ever say anything about me or about what happens here in this house, to her or anyone -- I will find out. And you'll never see me again. Promise me.

JACK

Okay.

TYLER

Promise you won't.

JACK

Yes, I promise.

TYLER

Promise?

JACK

I said I promise!

TYLER

That was three times you promised.

In *On The Road*, Sal Paradise the first person narrator is daunted by his middle class life after his divorce. When he met Dean Moriarty an entirely new world opened up before him, a world of excitement, adventure and new possibilities. Women like Marylou and Terry are part of this world, but they are never an integral part of the adventures of Dean and Sal. Like land, women are also for Dean and Sal something to explore and then move on.

The crucial question is, in what respect does *On The Road* and *Fight Club* differ?, they differ not on what they oppose but on the manner of their opposition. The leaders of the counterculture movement of the 1960s opposed the complacent middleclass society around them not by militant action or political protests (however some like Chester Anderson, editor of the Beat magazine *Beatitude* indeed organized a rally against police maltreatment in North Beach 1960). These are however more the exception than the norm. In 1952, Beat poet John Clellon Holmes wrote of the hipster, 'there is no desire to shatter the 'square' society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or write a manifesto would seem to him absurd'. Beat writers and hipsters rebelled by their songs, books and most importantly the choice of their lifestyle.

Unlike the rebels of *On The Road* who travelled openly under the sun, the firebrands of *Fight Club* led underground lives in a dilapidated building. Their purpose was to form a tightly regimented militant organization for the purpose of planning and executing Project Mayhem

JACK (V.O.)

We have front row seats for this
Theater of Mass Destruction. The
Demolitions Committee of Project
Mayhem wrapped the foundation columns
of ten buildings with blasting
gelatin. In two minutes, primary
charges will blow base charges, and
those buildings will be reduced to
smoldering rubble. I know this
because Tyler knows this.

TYLER

Look what we've accomplished.
(checks watch)
Thirty seconds.

In a crucial scene in the movie, Tyler Durden forces a young man who runs a small store (at gunpoint) to renounce his job and pursue his ambition of becoming a veterinary doctor. The million dollar question is, whether Tyler Durden is a liberator or a tyrant?. The following scene (after the death of Bob, a member of Project Mayhem) tries to provide an answer.

JACK

What he wanted? Look... look at him.
Look at him! What does he want?
(wipes tears,
points at Bob)
This is a person. This is not a cog
in your machine...

RICKY

But, this is Project Mayhem.

JACK

No, no. This is a man -- this man
has a name...

RICKY

But, in Project Mayhem, we have no
names.

JACK

No! Wrong! This man's name is
Robert Paulson.

RICKY

Robert Paulson?

JACK

Robert Paulson is dead. He's dead,
because of you...

MECHANIC

I understand.

Everyone just stares at Jack.

MECHANIC

In death, a member of Project Mayhem
has a name.

At the end of the movie, narrator gets sickened by his alter ego and his destructive tendencies. Narrator shoots himself at the throat to eliminate his alter ego. The movie ends when narrator and Marla stands hand in hand while watching Project Mayhem in action. The movie raises a number of pertinent questions, but in the end leaves them unresolved. If the present societal structure is corrupt, how should the future society be envisaged?. The disease is recognized, but what is the cure ?.The answers to these questions are never easy.

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