

# The Adventurous Education of Duluoz: Jack Kerouac's *Vanity of Duluoz* in the Light of Michael Foucault's Theories

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## Abstract

*Vanity of Duluoz* (1968) is a semi-autobiographical novel by Jack Kerouac that follows the life of Jack Duluoz, a persona representing Kerouac himself. The novel explores various aspects of Kerouac's life, particularly his experiences during World War II while serving in the naval forces. This study examines the novel through the lens of Foucault's political philosophy, analyzing themes of power, power relations, institutions, and surveillance. The novel portrays a sense of abnormality, difference, and resistance during a period when the American government sought to enforce homogeneity in both domestic and foreign policy. Kerouac illustrates how individuals contribute to governmental control, leading to a form of "open-air imprisonment" within society. He also critiques institutions such as sports teams and academic organizations, likening them to familial structures that overlap with other regulatory systems, including prisons. As Kerouac's final published novel, *Vanity of Duluoz* serves as a culmination of his literary work, reflecting on the societal forces that impose norms and shape individual identity.

**Keywords:** Michel Foucault, Jack Kerouac, Institution, Surveillance, Unfreedom, Disillusionment, Normalization

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to investigate and analyze the real state of America and its citizens and their freedom based on Michael Foucault's theories and concepts like surveillance, institutions, and normalization. When this war ended in 1945, the United States appeared to become one of the strongest nations globally. Not only this country wanted to exert its power and ideology domestically, but it also was looking for a way to spread and propagate its values all around the world. Therefore, it could manage to control, restrict, and homogenize the lives of people everywhere and in every aspect.

Morris Dickstein (2015) argues in *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, "For too many of them America became America: a hopeless racist, repressive, and imperialist power" (xi); moreover, "The dominance of a kind of ideology that sought to constrict the freedom of individuals forged a conformist society that left no space for individuals to be free and themselves" (Soleymanjahan et al, 2020).

The novels of Jack Kerouac depict the lives of protagonists, as well as the lives of many other people from all walks of life. They take on journeys to challenge many traditional beliefs and ideas, and question the true nature of the state. Moreover, they stop acting abnormally and in contrast to the rules of the government as they are constricted by the power of the state which is exercised by the semiautonomous but overlapping institutions that seem to be making individuals normal and ordinary. Despite

these facts, they become conformists and act according to the regulations of the government that constrict the normal people all the more and creates matrices of institutions through circuits of institutions that undertake the task of fragmenting the personality and identity of abnormal individuals through all these prisonlike institutions and their satellite institutions.

Another significant aspect of institutions originates from their disciplinary nature. For Foucault, disciplines refer to the strategies, mechanisms, stratagems that intend to make people act as the state wants them to act; this, however, is possible only through certain institutions that disseminate their rules of behavior in workplaces, academic sites, and specifically the army. Foucault likens the characteristics of prison to those of all other institutions and their structures; he argues that the date that he chooses for the completion of the carceral system would be 22 January 1840 as it is the official date that prison of Mettray was opened. He chooses this date and this place due to the fact that Mettray was the exemplar of the carceral system which characterizes the modern world; not surprisingly, Foucault believes that since all institutions assist maintaining the carceral system as their primary goal, they have, one way or another, the same structure and thereby believes all other institutions to share the characteristics of prison.

Jack Kerouac's fiction is autobiographical. Thomas Wolfe was Kerouac's literary model and exactly like him, Kerouac wanted to metamorphose his life into art. He wrote his novels directly from the experiences of his life, writing the details in his own unique language.

*Vanity of Duluoz* (1968) is a semiautobiographical novel by Kerouac which speaks of the Jack Duluoz, who is the persona of Jack Kerouac himself, spanning about 11 years from 1935 to 1946. The novel deals with different aspects of Kerouac's life ranging from his Lowell, Massachusetts where he did his high school to Columbia University where he continued his education and finally to World War II where he served for the naval forces. The novel ends with the time Kerouac and some of his friends start to form a movement which they called the Beat Movement.

The purpose of this study is to represent the real workings of power and power relations in the real context of the United States at the time when Kerouac writes his masterpieces and the researcher hopes to provide a genuine and firsthand representation of the political, social, cultural, and historical context.

## 2. Discussion

Drawing on the conceptions of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), specifically his notions of normality, institutions, and surveillance, this study tries to represent the real America depicted in the novels of Jack Kerouac:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker' -judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 304)

In *Antihero in American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, David Simmons argues that:

The postwar hegemonic conviction (exemplified by McCarthyism) that certain ideologies were detrimental to the very fabric of American society undoubtedly contributed to the decline of a traditional American pluralist ideal. For the 'original' belief in "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" no longer sat well in a climate in which an institution such as the House Un-American Activities Committee asserted that there was only one true and proper way to be an American. (14)

One of the greatest endeavors that Foucault has embarked on has been an attempt in arguing that power is not simply a kind of repression of the powerless by those who hold power in their hands; in fact, he does not even see power as something that one can possess but rather as a set of relations. For Foucault, even when power seems to be the most limiting, controlling, and coercing, it is rather productive and leads to new kinds of behavior in place of suppressing and censoring some certain behaviors.

### 2.1. Creative Contributions to Society

The first thing that Jack Duluoz does after his addressing his wife is comparing and contrasting the ways things were back in 1935 and their present situation. For Jack Duluoz, people used to have much more freedom of action back then while they are under the constant gaze of each other; in the same vein that Foucault compares pre-modern man and modern man, arguing that the pre-modern man was only monitored sporadically when it was necessary for the authorities, the modern man is unstopably under the gaze of authorities who seek to police them as well as all other individuals in the society have taken the task of being judges of normality themselves:

Look, furthermore, my anguish as I call it arises from the fact that people have changed so much, not only in the past five years, for God's sake, or past ten years as McLuhan says, but in the past thirty years to such an extent that I don't recognize them as people any more or recognize myself as a real member of something called the human race. I can remember in 1935 when full-grown men, hands deep in jacket pockets, used to go whistling down the street unnoticed by anybody and noticing no one themselves. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 9)

Duluoz furthers his argument by clarifying the way individuals today, compared to past, deem each other as subjects that must be exposed. All individuals in the wider society have undertaken roles that police officers take which is unearthing the guilt other people have committed and ready to give them penalties. He also mentions "creative contributions to society" as

evidence to the way all individuals in the society are pressured to help the government; their assisting the society, however, is fulfilled by the institutions they are supposed to join and serve:

You no longer see this in America, not only because everybody drives a car and goes with stupid erect head guiding the idiot machine through the pitfalls and penalties of traffic, but because nowadays no one walks with unconcern, head down, whistling; everybody looks at everybody else on the sidewalk with guilt and worse than that, curiosity and faked concern, in some cases 'hip' regard based on 'Don't miss a thing', while in those days there even used to be movies of Wallace Beery turning over in bed on a rainy morning and saying: 'Aw gee, I'm going back to sleep, I aint gonna miss anything anyway.' And he never missed a thing. Today we hear of 'creative contributions to society' and nobody dares sleep out a whole rainy day or dares think they'll really miss anything. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 10)

Kerouac's novels reflect the spirit of the age of a nation that wanted difference and disobedience to be its benchmark. All the examined novels depict characters who share some of the traits of people who are antiheroes to the prisonlike system of the United States. The spirit of the age, in contrast, was pinpointed by the government that takes advantage of the power of numerous institutions in the society to do exactly the opposite of what individuals want.

### 2.2. *The Prison of the Team: Sport Institutions and Family*

Duluoz continues to talk about the topic of football throughout the entire first book of the novel; one of the most formative institutions in his life has been the institution of football. Duluoz points out to all the problems and complications that have faced his life as an athlete and the way things are in the team are utterly similar to what happens in many other institutions that are ongoing in the wider society. On the one hand, the team is exactly like a family whose coach or father is the tyrant who pinpoints what should be done and by whom; on the other hand, there are a couple of techniques that must be internalized by the coach, captain, and other authorities that must be followed and if one does not follow them, they must be punished and set to a normalized manual that constitutes the sum and substance of all good athletes. The institution of football, like so many other institutions, also keeps monitoring the deeds of the individuals to guarantee the same behavior they want them to exhibit.

In the second book of the novel, Duluoz starts wrestling with his student days. Incorporated into the school environments, he admits that he used to get As and Bs as he was a good student. His infatuation with the academic institutions made him go to the library and read books that were of scholarly thought, something that made him look brilliant in the eyes of his teachers and classmates. He admits that his interest in books and reading was merely a competition with other schoolboys, a technique the institution employs to make students endorse the dominant ideology without their being fully aware of it:

Just reading to show off to myself that I was reading. Led to a careful reading of H. G. Wells' Outline of History, stupid examinations of the Harvard Classics, and deep awe in the tiny print on onion-skinned pages white as snow as found in the Eleventh Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Ency Brit XI Ed.) with its detailed record of all that ever happened until 1910 as compiled for the last time in copious happy terms by Oxford and Cambridge scholars — loving books and the smell of the old library and always reading in the rotunda part of the back where was a bust of Caesar in the bright morning sun and the entire range of cyclopedias in semicircle shelves. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 22)

There is no outside to the institutions that are constricting the lives of Duluoz and his family; Duluoz is imprisoned by the institution of school, out of which there is no escape and beyond which he cannot see anything. His father's only wish after he gets fired is that Duluoz gets good marks and will be successful, all of which imply the unconscious endorsement and appreciation of the same institution that is shattering the identity of their son. On the other hand, Duluoz's father's job is contingent on Duluoz choosing the university which is determined by the masters and authorities at work; instead of dealing with work-related things and subjects, the people that Duluoz's father work for are allowed to even comment on where his son must attend and what he should do. Neither for Duluoz nor for his father is there any site from which they can escape and be safe.

### 2.3. *Academic Institutions*

Arriving at the University of Columbia, Duluoz is required to take some preliminary courses which he does and when he starts recounting the ways his days were, Duluoz is exposed as an institutionalized young man serving the academic institutions that are going to take his individuality away from him. The first evening before the school starts, Duluoz finds himself at a table with numerous school books posited by bronze bookends. After jotting down some notes, he notes that his great-stepmother, Aunt Ti Ma, and her husband, Nick the Greek, have made ready a room for him so that he can concentrate on his studies, stressing the role of the institution of family once again in New York. The family in New York plays the same strategic role when they command him when to go to sleep, when to wake up, what to eat, and what things he needs to do:

They say 'Go to bed early now, Jacky, school and practice tomorrow. You know what your Mama said, gotta make good.' But before I go to bed, full of cake and ice cream, I make my lunch for the next day: always the same: I butter one sandwich plain and the other peanut butter and jam, and throw in a fruit, either apple or banana, and wrap it up nice and put it in bag. Then Nick, Uncle Nick, takes me by the arm and says: 'When you have more time I tell you some more about Father Coughlin. If you want some more books, there are many more in the cellar. Look this one.' He hands me a dusty old Jules Romain novel called Ecstasy.... I set up my neatly pressed pants, sports jacket, schoolbooks, shoes in place together neatly, socks over that, wash and go to bed. I set the alarm clock for, listen to this, 6 A.M. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 25)

When he gets up in the morning, exactly like all other good American citizens, he gets up at six and takes the subway to Times Square; in the subway, he sees thousands of people like himself going to work, university, or other places to serve their respective institutions. While on the subway, he gets enough time to do his math workbook and this saves him some time. At Times Squares and the stations near them, most workers leave and some later stations other workers get on to get uptown Manhattan and Bronx. The subway becomes a site that serve the different institutions by making individuals ready for their works and tasks; while workers are transported by that to different places in town, Duluoz is doing all of his homework there to be ready for his classes. As Duluoz is a native French speaker, he will be having no difficulty in his French classes but when he envisages what the class will be like, he sees his teacher laughing at him for his Canadian French accent; laughing at, making fun of each other, and seeing each other as cows are what Duluoz and his classmates are going to learn at school:

I turn to the French book and read all those funny French words we never speak in Canadian French, I have to consult and look them up in the glossary in back, I think with anticipation how Professor Carton of French class will laugh at my accent this morning as he asks me to get up and read a spate of prose. The other kids however read French like Spanish cows and he actually uses me to teach them the true accent. Now you'd think I'm close to school but from 96th Street we go past Columbia College, we go into Harlem, past Harlem, way up, another hour, till the subway emerges from the tunnel (as tho by nature it was impossible for it to go underground so long) and goes soaring to the very end of the line in Yonkers practically. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 26)

The first day of school ends with Duluoz recounting his life story there with describing all the friends he had made; he has more Jewish friends than his fellow athletes as they are rich and he can gain more profit by being their friends. School becomes the site where Duluoz start internalizing a very strict discipline; on the evening of the first school day, he needs to sleep at eight thirty as he must be energetic for the next day. Furthermore, he must set the clock, make his clothes ready, study his lessons, examine and reexamine himself almost every week to ensure that he is following the norms and standards that Horace Mann wants his students to respect; Duluoz contends that he wants to be "perfect", not knowing that his perfection in the institution of school is equivalent to being a "perfect institutionalized man":

I went up to my room and looked sighing at that first entry I'd made the night before, the big 'opening night', which ended: 'I am now making elaborate preparations for tomorrow. I've set the clock, gotten my clothes ready, etc. Tonight I evolved a plan of self-tutoring which I commenced officially. The subjects are five in number and I shall take one per evening, with a subsequent self-examination for the week after. The subjects are Mythology, Latin, Spanish, Literature, and History. As if I didn't have enough studies coming up from the ivy halls of Horace Mann. However, my motto is "The more you study, the more you subsequently know; naturally, the more you know, the nearer you get to perfection as a journalist.'" So then. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 32)

After Duluoz and his teammates start playing and winning football games, their training becomes more serious and disciplined; apart from that, however, his attending Columbia University has been a very intense training in his becoming a disciplined person. In the same vein that Duluoz's training as an athlete is examined frequently by their games, his being disciplined by school and school authorities is also monitored by his father when he visits New York to check everything with Jack Duluoz, an undertaking that Jack himself called the "Adventurous Education of Duluoz." It is important to note that Jack's father, and his grandmother and her husband, school authorities, and all those who are formative in his being disciplined operate as judges who nudge Jack what should be done and what needs to be skipped. The judges of normality, ordinariness, and homogeneity are ubiquitous in the society and embark on what the society has distilled in them regarding instructing institutionalization.

The following September when Jack is taken to his New York dormitory by his father, he hears almost the same thing. For Duluoz, the family becomes a private sphere that disseminates the same ideology that other institutions do; the institution of family is, in essence, a satellite institution that inculcates the same mentality in children that the government has distilled in their parents. With the father place at the center of the institution, the family teaches children to study, try hard, and do their best so as to become what governments want them to be:

Pa and I then went out on the town, to the World's Fair too, restaurants, the usual, and when he left he said, as usual: 'Now study, play good ball, pay attention to what the coach and the pros tell you and see if you can't make your old man proud and maybe be an all-America.' Fat chance, with the war a year away and England already under blitz. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz* 49-50)

What Jack has not recognized so far is that it is not only the Jesuits that can instruct him how and what to think but all the institutions that are operating in the wider society are doing the same thing. Jack believes that he is free when goes for Columbia University over Boston College, not knowing that they are doing the same thing which normalizing and making people have the same kind of subjectivity. For Jack, there is no outside to these power relations working at the level of institutions without his coming to terms with that:

What do the Jesuits really say? That everybody's got to be a Catholic because there's no other way out of the impasse of medieval theology. But if like Pascal, Blaise Pascal, their 'enemy' in the seventeenth century, they simply should say that Christ is the Son of God because nobody can prove otherwise, I should have bought them. Yet I'm a Jesuit today, secret General of the Order, like Ulysses S. Grant the general that rocks in the rocking chair with a bottle . . . but more of this later when I get into the history of the vanity of what resulted from the football and the college studies that led to the writing and the thinking, wifey dear. (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz* 39)

What Jack says about the Jesuits is utterly true when he contends that they all want people to think like them; what he cannot fathom, on the contrary, is that all the institutions in the society are overlapping and individuals need to be captured by one or more. Therefore, thinking of being different must be dispensed with as there is no way one can get out of the interlocking structure of matrix that these institutions and their satellite institutions have brought about with the aim of normalizing the whole society.

That fall ended and Jack became a hero of some kind, and he spent the whole winter studying, enjoying with friends, and the like until he met Sabbas Savakis; a good friend, he used to teach Jack how to read and understand literature. When finally, Jack turns to the people who have been his friends at Columbia University, he also deals with the fate of most of them, a future that puts them front and center in the games that institutions play on individuals. The institution of war is one of the most formative and decisive institutions that has sent most of them to the other world; in other words, the academic institutions of school and college have gone through their paces to prepare individuals to enter another institution that takes advantage of their normality and ordinariness. In other words, just like all other people in American society, these students are caught in a matrix that really lends itself to being endorsed by all those individuals who find homogeneity as their identity:

It's not because he died in the war, on the beachhead at Anzio wounded, died in an Algiers North Africa hospital of gangrene, or probably broken heart, because a lot of other guys died in World War II including some I've already mentioned in this book (Kazarakis, Gold, Hampshire, others I don't even know what happened), but because the memorabilia of my knit just knits a knight in my night's mind. That's plain English poesy? Because, okay, he was a great kid, knightlike, i.e., noble, a poet, goodlooking, crazy, sweet, sad, everything a man should want as a friend.  
(48)

Jack becomes so much endorsed in the institutions that he is serving as a member that he is attended by most authorities; for instance, when Jack is invited to a formal dinner hosted by the dean of Columbia University, he becomes the most disciplined student ever the dean has known. By extension, when the dean writes a letter to Jack's mother telling her about her son, he calls him extremely following the strict rules table manner. Furthermore, Jack admits that his sister, an active member of the institution of family, has been so much helpful in teaching him the rules of table manners:

Here, all dressed up in Ma's best McQuade- Lowell-selected sports coat, with white shirt and tie and pressed slacks (the cleaner was on Amsterdam across the street), I sat and ate my soup by gently lifting the saucer away from me, spooning away from me, smiled politely, hair perfectly combed, showed suave interest in jokes and awe in the dean's serious moments. The entree was meat but I cut it delicately. I had the best table manners in those days because my sister Ti Nin had trained me back in Lowell for these past several years; she was a fan of Emily Post's.... He thereupon wrote a note to my mother saying: 'Your son, John L. Duluoz, may I say with pride, Mrs Duluoz, has absolutely the best and most charming table manners it has ever been my pleasure to enjoy at my dinner table.'  
(Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz* 53)

After a couple of months that Jack understands that his coach favors all players over him and becomes sure that he will not be given a chance to show himself like back in Lowell, he goes back home to his parents and tells them that he wants to find a job in a local rubber plant that makes tires. However, the job seems to be too hard for Jack and quits without asking for the morning's pay. While he is talking to his father about the job that he did not like, he tells his father that intends to become a writer; his father replies that no one in his family has ever been a writer and "there never was such a name in the writing game". Jack finds a new job as a mechanic and starts the job the next morning.

### 3. Conclusion

One of the most important aspects of the novel *Vanity of Duluoz* is the style of writing; while Kerouac had tried his hand at writing in the fashion of Thomas Wolfe and his journalism writing in which he used the technique of free writing without paying much attention to the conventions of writing, he goes back to the normal and standard writing that he had used solely in his first novel. One of the most important aspects of his individuality has been placed on his style of writing which, for many, constituted the essence of his idiosyncrasy has been changed into the most normal type of writing that belies his attempts to being different in terms of both form and content.

The novel opens with outlining a wide array of institutions that work in tandem so as to forge individuals who consent to what is imposed on them. Jack Duluoz, the alter ego of Jack Kerouac, is well-known to exhibit deeds that make him different from other members of the society. However, from the day one, he is under pressure to consent to what is told to him and this process starts by attending academic institution of school. At school, Jack, along with all other classmates, start what Jack himself calls the adventurous education; however, the education that Duluoz receives is fully instruction on how to be and act like his fellow Americans. The institution of school consists of training and examining; they are taught how to think, what to think, what to believe, and what not to believe and they are examined on different rounds to make sure they have internalized the discipline that is decisive to their ordinariness. The same processes are reiterated in colleges and universities where they are challenged by more serious and severe curriculums that guarantee their final submission to the wishes of their colleges and universities. By extension, the football teams with the structure of the family in which the coach acts as a father and tells what they should do by training and examining have the same task of taking the individuality of citizens away from them and leave them as unconscious subjects that are there to be led in any kind of direction.

When Jack becomes disgusted by the way he is treated by those at university and in the football team, he decides to work for himself, not realizing that there is no way to get out of these institutions. In going to work, he is trained, examined, shaped,

and catalogued to work for the same people whom he would regard as the people who curbed his freedom and individuality. Working in a factory and working as a mechanic make him ready to look for anomalies and uncontrolled voices that he must mute, the same thing that is done by the American government to people who do not express a normal, similar voice like all other people in America.

The final institution that turns out to be the most dominant and one that the institution of school works for as a satellite institution is institution of war. All the hitherto institutions have sought to create individuals who are powerful, energetic, but also pliant and submissive; so when Jack, his classmates, and other are drafted into the war, they are docile powerful bodies whose main task is to fight without realizing why they are fighting. When the novel reaches the ending, Jack and his classmates are seen fighting for no specific cause but believing they are saving their country from villain powers, which is the same thing that he and other are made to believe.

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