Chapter II

Life as Matrix of Suffering
Visions of Gerard (1963) and Tristessa (1960) are the two novels which are manifestation of the first of the Four Noble Truths realized by the Buddha through intuitive wisdom called Prajna. It says "All life is suffering" and the Buddha elaborates this by bringing in all the situations that lead to suffering, coming under the Law of Conditionality and Dependent Origination (Paticca Samuppada). Explaining the First Noble Truth the Buddha says:

Birth is suffering; Decay is suffering;
Death is suffering; Sorrow, Lamentation,
Pain, Grief and Despair are suffering;
Not to get what one desires is suffering;
in short: The Five Aggregates of Existence are suffering.

The Buddha then defines birth:

The birth of beings belonging to this or that order of beings, their being born, their conception and springing into existence, the manifestation of the aggregates of existence, the arising of sense activity; this is called birth.

Explaining death He says:

The parting and vanishing of beings out of this or that order of beings, their destruction, disappearance, death, the completion of their life-period, dissolution of the aggregates of existence,
the discarding of the body; this is called death.

Visions of Gerard subscribes to the Law of Dependent Origination as put forth by the Buddha while enumerating the causes of suffering, making it clear to the congregation that the very birth is the cause of suffering. A body is subject to change; it decays and suffers death which becomes the cause for sorrow, lamentation and despair. A body decays, it gets old, frail and wrinkled. It loses its vital force and its senses wear out.

II

The Kerouac family was not unfamiliar with suffering and Jack often said that the motto of his family was "Love, work and suffer."4

Jack's mother, Gabrielle, was rendered orphan when her mother had died in 1909, and Gabrielle was just fourteen years old at the time and was working in a shoe shop. Tom Clark writes, "In Kerouac's adult work, dream and half-waking images frequently evoke the "sad lost redness" of his nativity, associating birth with violence and the pain or "damnation" of consciousness."5
When Jack was two years old the Kerouac family moved from 9 Lupin Road to a rented cottage at 35 Burberry Street. What Jack recalls about the street is a hungry urchin Gerard had brought home one day to share Gabrielle's bread-and-butter sandwiches because it contained for him "all the despair, raw gricky hopelessness, cold and chapped sorrow of Lowell, like the abandoned howl of a dog, no one to open the door."  

They moved to another house in Centralville at 34, Beaulieu Street, a dirt-thoroughfare that became important in the legend Kerouac wove of his life. It became "the little street that bears the great weight of Gerard's dying."  

The Beaulieu Street house, in Jack's adult memory of it, was "sadly brown, associated with earth, time and graves. "The house," he said, "had been abuilt over an ancient cemetery."  

Jack frequently visited his uncle Joe an ailing brother of Leo who was living in a dreadful "drear brown house" where he had been "dying these past five, ten, fifteen years, worse."  

Next door was a large barnlike garage for rehearsals leased by one of the undertakers around the corner on funeral, Pawtucket Street, which had a storage room for confins "that often featured in Jacky's subsequent "dreams rickety and strange"
Joe suffered from asthma and lectured to Jack in Joual about the horrors of having been born to Kerouac. "You are destined to be a man of big sadness and talent", uncle Joe told Ti Jean, "it'll never help to live or die, you'll suffer like the others, more."  

It was July 1939 and Jack and his mother escorted his cousin that evening, back to Uncle Joe's and then, while returning home, across the Moody Street Bridge, they saw a man collapse in a heap on the bridge planks. The man was carrying a watermelon. Gabrielle saw that the man had stained his pants and told Jacky, that he was dying.

After years of brooding on death, it was the first time Jack had ever witnessed the event that was the source of so much mystery for him. Back home his hair stood on end, "...his soulawash with gloomy music. He remembered the sinister turning head of the Ste. Therese Statue. He feared that his parents too might die. That night he developed a fever. Gabrielle took into her bed."  

These incidents are important for understanding the greatness of impact on Jack's mind but the greatest event of all, is his brother's death for whom he had a great reverence that bordered on adoration. Endowed with supernatural intuition, Gerard understood mysteries of life and was so looked upon by the people who knew him.
Tom Clark writes that Jack

believed implicitly in the remarkable sanctity of Gerard which was attested to not only by their parents but also by neighbours and other relatives who swore that, like St. Francis, Gerard had birds that "did know him personally" and "came to his windowsill in the time of his long illness"; and by the nuns of St. Louis de France, who had "heard his astonishing revelations of heaven delivered in his catechism class on no more encouragement than that it was his turn to speak."

By the end of 1925, Gerard's malady, a rheumatic condition affecting his heart became grave. Leo would sit reading the funnies in his shirtsleeves "in the corner by the potted plant of time and bone - patting his poor sickly little Gerard on the head, my poor bil Wolf, you were born to suffer."

Gerard died on July 8, 1926, when the nuns of St. Louis de France took down his last words about heaven. Jack was too small to understand the meaning of all this:

The relatives waited in the kitchen, but Ti Jean was too young to understand. After dutifully sitting through an unintelligible funeral service among glum adults in over-shoes at the damp basement church of St. Louis de France he rode in the rain with his parents to Nashua- and while his Ma and Ti Nin sobbed in the back of the black car, watched with "questioning eyes" as the saintly Gerard was planted in the wet, cold-sod of the family plot."
Gerard's death left him sad and agog. "At home there was a poetry in the brown gloom, but in Leo's greater world of downtown Lowell, there was a rugged, alluring prose of real life." 16

Gerard's death threw Jack into the world of imagination, He was told that his brother was now with Jesus. He started thinking over this and the whole thing was mystery which grew with each passing day that Gerard failed to return from the cemetery in Nashua. The change that came over Jack is very well brought out by Tom Clark:

In Jean's inner life, the powerful presence of his brother, who had been his faithful companion and kindly teacher, was replaced in two ways. First as death always shocks the child into self awareness, Jean began to explore his own physical individuality." 17

In the days after Gerard's death, he would sit motionless in the parlour, pale and thin. After a few weeks of sorrow he began to play old Victrola and set out movies to music.

Nineteen thirty two was not particularly a good year for it had hit the mills and the workers were laid off and many suffered untold hardships. Leo had to borrow several thousand dollars to recolate his shop.
As a young boy Jack found himself in a state of disappointment when Mary Carney, the girl he loved, broke date with him to wander off with another boy in the sexy stand. This created a sick sense in him, Mary Carney roaring in his head like "a tumultuous sorrow." He was relieved from this situation when he visited his coach Lou Little at Columbia, with his mother, to train himself as a football player.

During the final illness of his father, a doctor came repeatedly to drain fluid from his father's swollen abdomen. It was the fateful day on which Jack and his father had argument about how to brew coffee. A little later Leo hunched forward in his chair and died. Jack held his father in his arms for the last time and as he did it, he noticed the printer's ink still staining his fingers. His father's death plunged him into gloom for many weeks. But while Gabrielle kept herself busy in household chores, Jack slowly settled down to write in solitude, in pain, writing hymns and prayers at dawn.

Tom Clark says that "A disposition to bewail their harsh fate was ingrained in the Kerouac." Clark points out:

Jack's preoccupation with suffering placed him solidly in the family lines. In middle life he plunged into prolonged studies of Eastern religions, spurred by his sidetwary of Buddhism's First Noble
Truth: existence is suffering. It might be argued that not some putative "family malady" but real misfortune drove Kerouac to seek consolation in that tenet of Buddhist philosophy.

III

Visions of Gerard centre round the Character

Gerard Duluoz, an elder brother of Jack who had been an immense source of inspiration for him, possessing precociously saintly wisdom, with abundance of compassion for sentient beings, occupying even lower plane of life. Gerard Duluoz was born in 1917 and from his birth was a sickly child with rheumatic heart and with many other complications. Jack was greatly attached to him and when he died in July 1926, at the age of nine, Jack thought that the world was lost to him and he was rendered companionless out to find happiness in the reminiscences of his brother. He recalls,

For the first four years of my life, while he lived, I was not Ti Jean Duluoz, I was Gerard, the world was his face, the flower of his face, the pale, stooped disposition, the heart-breakingness and the holiness and his teachings of tenderness to me, and my mother constantly reminding me to pay attention to his goodness and advice.

Ti Jean remembers him to have been compassionate to him and in fact, there had been total identification between the two brothers. The first four years were very
vital in the life of Ti Jean, which left indelible impression on his child mind which lasted for the rest of his life.

He writes:

For me the first four years of my life are permeated and grey with the memory of a kindly serious face bending over me and being me and blessing me. The world a hatch of Dulouz Saintliness, and him the big chicken, Gerard, who warned me to be kind to little animals and took me by the hand on forgotten little walks.

In the Vinaya Pitaka the Buddha is compared to the first chick to emerge from a clutch of eggs. This first born chick starts to tap on the shells of the other eggs with his little beak helping the other chicks to emerge. The Buddha is like that first chick, and Gerard in his small way is like Buddha, making Ti Jean come out of the shell of worldly existence. Probably he is the first to emerge from the shell of nescience in the family, the shell of spiritual darkness and blindness.

Gerard who had often been ill, tried to forget his suffering in the company of Ti Jean and there was a perfect rapport between the two brothers, the one ready to impart his wisdom and the other ready to receive it. There was a cat in the house which was a friend to Gerard and he would call it in its cat-voice and it would respond by sitting on his lap.
Allo Zig Lain-ziglain-zigluu ----
he'd say to our cat, in a little high
crazy catvoice and the cat'd look plain
and blank back at him as though the
cat language was the true one but also
they understood the words to portend
kindness and their eyes followed him
as he moved around our gray house and
suddenly they'd bless him unexpectedly
by jumping on his lap at dusk, in the
quiet hour when water's burbling on
the stove, the starchy Irish potatoes
and hush silence fills ears in houses
announcing Avalokitesvara's blessed
everlasting presence grinning in the
swarming shadows behind the stuffed
chairs and tasselled lamps, a womb of
Emuberant Fertility, the world and
the sad things in it laughable, Gerard
the least and the last to disacknowledge
it. I'd bet if he were here to bless
my pencil as I undertake and draw
breath to tell his pain-tale for the
world that needs his soft and loving life. 22.

The cat looking plain and blank bears allusion to
the incident of the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana. There are
very beautiful representations in Buddhist art of this
very solemn, final scene. They are mainly Chinese in
origin. Buddha died in the grove of sal-trees, lying
on a stone couch at the foot of a cluster of these
trees. Sangharakshita, a famous English Buddhist monk
notes:

----these representations show the
disciples - monk disciples, Kings,
princes, merchants, wandering mendicants, Brahmins, traders, flower-sellers - in attitudes of grief,
grouped around him; and a little
further away, the different animals
of the forest, and domesticated
animals - all of them weeping, as if
to say that the whole shared a common
grief in the loss of the Buddha. And
there's a folklore incident here which
says that among all the animals there
was only one animal which did not weep.
That was the cat. That's why the cat
in Buddhism ------ has a rather bad repon-
tation. There was a rule which said
that Bodhisattvas are not supposed to
keep cats, as cats are supposed to be
devoid of feeling, because even on the
occasion of the Buddha's passing away
the cat just went on presumably licking
her paws, and didn't take very much
notice.

While Gerard is fomd of the cat Ti Jean looks at
it with an acute critical sense.

The cat is up on the sink ...with his
paws under him and his tail curling
down and his rumminative quickglancing
face bending and ear pricking to the
phenomena, as though he was trying to
figure out or pass the time, or make
fun of us.

IV

The pervading atmosphere in the novel is that of
gloom, resulting from the unprecedented suffering of
Gerard, a lovely boy, angel-like, possessing supra-
wisdom, surprising even the teacher-sisters who believe
that he possessed divine wisdom. The suffering comes
from a variety of seasons but the very cause of suffering
is birth which cannot be prevented, for nobody can stop
being born. The excruciating pain Gerard suffers from
is intolerable and "somehow from somewhere out, or
in the Centre, Counsel coming to him saying, "Dont do
it - Don't be born' but he was born, he wanted to do
it and be born and ignored the counsel, the Ancient
counsel." 25

And once he is born he is subject to life-
conditioning where society, individual ability and
natural forces are at work. For Gerard life is a long
disease. From birth his condition is rheumatic and
after getting better temporarily he relapses into it.
"The long night of life is terribly long and deceptively
short." 26

There are many factors contributing to suffering
in the family of Emil who is Leo, father of Gerard and
Ti Jean (Jack). Emil moves from place to place, over-
working himself to maintain his family. The Merrimack
river suddenly gets swollen and is in spate, destroying
his business as his printing press is badly damaged.
Emil himself afterwards suffers from cancer and succumbs
to it. Jack gets involved in a murder case and Leo
refuses to pay bail money, causing pain to Jack and to
himself, shocked by the calamitous behaviour of his
son. The mouse suffers an agony when trapped in a cage
and is ultimately finished off by the cat. There are
a number of situations where life comes to face to
face with unsavoury moments of trouble, pain and death. Hobo comes to Lowell famished; Jack's mother Gabrielle suffers from pain which is momentarily relieved by aspirin; which Gerard brings from a drug store. The suffering has just got to be borne.

The lamp on the corner only serves to accentuate by contrast the lightlessness in the general air - The stars above are no help, they twinkle in a vain freeze.

Jack observes with a tinge of irony:

Not a soul in sight, a few cruds of old snow stuck in the gutters - A fine world for icebergs and stones - A World not made for men - A World, if made for anything, made for something dead to sympathy - Since sympathising there'll not be in it ever.

Gerard realizes in what hopeless condition he has been, the humanity has been and comes heavily down on God, the creator of this universe:

God does not look like he made the world for people', he guesses all by himself as it occurs in his chilled bones the hopeless sensation - No help is sight, the utter helplessness up, down, around.

The wind blows heavily and Gerard realizes how nature has conspired against man making this world virtually an unsuitable place to live in, flashing in
our memory the figure of King Lear, walking alone on
the moor exposed to elements. Gerard notes:

So for winds to swail across, a man
oughta lie down on his back on a cold
night and miss those winds —— No thought,
no hope of the mind can dispel, nay no
millions in the bank, can break, the truth
of the Winter night and that we are not
made for this world — Stones yes, grass
and trees for all their green return I'd
say no, to judge from their dead brownness
tonight —— A Million may buy a hearth, but
a hearth wont buy rich safety——'

While returning from a drug store Gerard comes
across a junkman who is going homeward, delayed because
of overextended work somewhere in windswept junkslopes,
Gerard notices his pitiable condition:

...he smiles that tooth-smile of the
cold between embittered lips, you see
the suffering of his mitts and the
weeping in his beard, the woe —— Going
home to some leaky rafter — To die on
his heap of mistakes, —— and what was
gained in emptiness you'll never find
debited or credited in any account.

Gerard does not fail to realize that in suffering
there are two parties, the one who suffers and the one
who makes others suffer, thus fixing the role of a
third party as an onlooker. He divines that all this
is pure division, a grief or separation, the cold is
cold because there are two to know it", the cold and
and he who is encâlled."

He also understands that in the tragic drama of human life supernatural powers remain indifferent, underlining the fact that only the sufferer experiences real suffering. Gerard approaches his house and pauses on the cold porch for one last look up and tells himself: "The stars have nothing to do with anything." Ti Jean sees Gerard as a 'seed' who merges into a whole humanity He observes: 'Seeds, seeds, the seed sown everywhere blossoming the fruit of our loom, living—but—to die."

Gerard's illness at Christmas spreads the pall of gloom over the family. "Aunt Louise sits at the kitchen table shaking her head, --- pain, pain, always pain for the Duluzes --- I knew it when he was born --- his father, his aunt, all his uncles, all invalids -- all in pain -- Suffering and pain -- I tell you Emil, we haven't been blessed by Chance." and then she laments to Emil, 'Emil, Emil, what's going to happen, what's going to happen to all of us."

All this results in distrust of God and Ti Jean remarks 'God made us for His glory not our own' which reminds us of King Lear who says:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods

Gods: They kill us for their sport.

King Lear, Act IV, Scene I
Gerard's suffering is too great for his age. In fact it is an unequal battle between him and the ailment that is so malignant. But he suffers silently with great forbearance. "He has suffered so much he's suffering enough for twenty four old sick men and he hasn't said a word." He knows that suffering is caused to all living beings and in the final reckoning duality between living and nonliving objects ceases to be. There is no higher nor lower being when it comes to suffering and death. Ti Jean says:

Like a load of rocks dumped from a truck onto a little Kitty, the pitiful inescapability of death and the pain of death, and it will happen to the best and all and most beloved of us. O —— why should such hearts be made to wince and cringe and groan out life's breath? — why does God kill us?

Gerard was the dearest son of Emil, who greatly worried about Gerard's health and whenever Gerard's illness aggravated it tore his heart out. He had two other children in good health but he cares more for Gerard because he needs it.

In any case I got two of em in good health —— but in my heart I can't be happy about anything. Gerard, there are no others like Gerard. I shall never be able to understand where a little boy like that got so much goodness — so much — enough to make me cry.
Though the novel is constructed on the First Noble Truth it is not without overtones of further Buddhist tenets like void, impermanence, Bodhisattva ideal, Taoism, emptiness etc.

Summers he'd lain a afternoons on his back, in yard, hand to eyes, gazing at the white clouds passing on by, those perfect Tao phantoms that materialize and then travel and then go, de-materialized, in one vast planet emptiness. —— 41

Moreover, the sorrow for others results from their attachment to Gerard, arousing sympathy in others for his suffering and endearing himself to others by possessing saintly wisdom, unmindful of what would happen to his dream of becoming a painter of beautiful pictures:

Ms when I'm big I'm gonnie be a painter of beautiful pictures and I'm gonna build beautiful bridges. He never lived to come and face the humble problem, but he would have done it with that "nobleesse tendresse I never in my bones and dead-man heart could ever show. —— 42

From his birth to death for Gerard it is all suffering.

The novel embodies other Buddhist doctrines such as emptiness of things looked at from phenomenal and noumenal aspects and Gerard intuitively has the
knowledge that life is bound to be there. He also sees its transitoriness. He looks at life with wishful thinking giving expression to archetypal emotion but also holds an idealistic view of life. But both are far from reality: the truth is suffering; decay. The following passages point to these facts:

The sun wasn't shown, its cold cloudy day, the windows are gray and portentous with the news of the excitement of life and the healthy and the living. 43

Then

Comes the cankerous rush of spring, when earth will fecundate and get soft and produce forms that are but to die, multiply... 44

This ebb and flow of life is described as follows -

...snow melts, running for cover under the bloody light, to join the river's big body so that ocean will again receive his swollen rent, as ever April, yet, Landlord without end, be none the richer... 45

This is the universal law based on cause and effect, illustrating empirically the fact that there is death because there is birth. What we call life is not really life. It's admixture of elements of life and death or it is always death in life. Everybody is subject to this law for the elements, viz., earth, water, fire, air, space and consciousness which constitute our life return to nature from where we have borrowed them. But
suffering squeezes the heart of the sufferer in utter agony.

Duluozes cannot escape this: "The Snake of Inevitability was rising up and eating the Duluozes." 46

The trauma of life in all its gruesome aspects is familiar to the Duluozes: "And as heartbreaking April blossomed—burst into May and the mornings and the nights were music, the death in the house grew browner. 47

Human relationship, inadequate understanding of a person due to ignorance, is another cause of suffering. Manuel, who has no harmonious relationship with his wife, tells her, "Being in the same house with a pest like you it's enough to make a man drink poison!" 48

The conversation with surrealistic overtones throws light on the kind of life Manuel and his life are living:

Emil to Manuel "How is it at home?"

"Well, there we don't fight, we—" he was about to say 'we die' but checked himself. 49

This is illustrated by the incident in which a hobo and the bar lady are involved. The hobo named Slats comes to Lady Nicotima at the bar and slaps on her rump congratulating her for her good showing that afternoon
whereupon she turns around and says "Dont you believe in God?" and aims a delicate little pistol and fires, hitting him dead...

Emil ponders over the realities of life marked by sorrow and suffering:

Brothers that were saints that died on me, that too's happened a million times in a million repetitions and reincarnations in Samsara's sorrow parade...

Gerard's suffering has forged him into an angel-like boy, instead of man of the world, sweating and swearing and whispering to be 'a weightable'... man.

But birth and tender years which we take to be actual happeningsness in the phenomenon of this self belief that something seems to happen, called existence, hath made of Emil's son Gerard instead of weightable debatable man, "a tender-born and angel of tender years."

Trauma of death is a final suffering and it comes as a dhamma-cloud not pouring rain but a shower, soothing, agreeable.

Bless my soul, death is the only decent subject, since it marks the end of illusion and delusion - Death is the other side of the same coin we call now, 'Life - The appearance of sweet Gerard's flower face, followed by its disappear-
ance, alas, only a contour-maker
and shadow-selector could prove it,
that in all the perfect snow any such
person or thing ever did arrive, say,
Yea, and go away - The whole world
has no reality, it's only imaginary,
and what are we to do? - Nothing-
nothing - nothing. Pray to be kind,
wait to be patient, try to be fine,
No use screamin. The Devil was a
charming fool.

On the death of Gerard Emil tells Ti Jean:

'I know Ti Pousse, I know', I had that
same feeling that I have today when I
would rush and tell people the good
news that Nirvana, Heaven, our Salvation
is Here and Now, that gloomy reaction of
theirs, which I can only attribute to
pitiful and so-to-be-loved Ignorance of
mortal brains.

Ti Jean acknowledges his indebtedness to Gerard
in the words where desirability and reality are fused
"He left me his heart but not his tender countenance
and sorrowful patience and kindly lights."

The novel is not ingrained in pessimism. Death
is not a subject to rue about, or to be horrified by.
Nirvana is perfection. It is a state where all craving
comes to an end. It is to be attained here and now. In
his wisdom and compassion he is a Bodhisattva:

....I see there in the eyes of Gerard
the very diamond kindness and patient
humility of the Brotherhood Ideal
propounded from afar down the eternal
corridors of Buddhahood and compassionate
Sanctity in Nirmana (appearance) Kaya
( fgm ) .... My own brother, a spot of
sainthood in the endless globular
Universes and Chillicosm. His heart under
the little shirt as big as the sacred
heart of thorns and blood depicted in
all the humble homes of French – Canadian
Lowell.

I have discussed in detail the Trikaya doctrine
in Chapter IV.

Identification of Gerard with Avalokiteswara is
made to underline compassion which Gerard possesses
which is active, following its own kinetics.

Edward Conze writes about Avalokiteswara:

Among the creations of mythological
imagination of the Buddhism of Faith,
Avalokitesvara is easily the most out-
standing. By the power of his magic,
and by his infinite care and skill he
affords safety to those who are anxious.
The word Avalokitesvara is a compound
of the word Ishvara (Lord, Sovereign),
and of avalokita, which means he who
looks down with compassion. i.e. on
beings suffering in this world, Avaloki-
teshwara personifies compassion.

According to Buddhism the root causes of suffering
are craving, hatred and ignorance. Ti Jean is of the
view that it is due to ignorance man calls reality by
different names. Ignorant mind perceives things in
their dichotomy, polarity and therefore do not attain
Truth. To have the knowledge of External Truth man must shed his ignorance and go beyond thinking that discriminates. Buddha says —

They address me by different names and not realizing that they are all names of the one Tathagata. Some recognise me as Tathagata, some as The Self existent one, some as Gautama the Ascetic, some as Buddha. Then there are others who recognize me as Brahma, as Vishnu, as Ishvara; some see me as sun, as Moon; some as a reincarnation of the ancient sages; some as one of "the ten powers", some as Rama, some as Indra, and some as Varuna. Still there are others who speak of me as The Un-born, as Emptiness, as "Suchness", as Truth as Reality, as Ultimate Principle; still there are others who see me as Dharmakaya, as Nirvana, as the Eternal; some speak of me as sameness, as non-duality, as un-dying, as formless; some think of me as the doctrine of Buddha-causation, or of Emancipation or of the Noble Path; and some think of me as Divine Mind and Noble wisdom. Thus in this world and in other worlds am I known by these uncounted names, but they all see me as the moon as seen in Water.

Ti Jean is aware that sins are caused by ignorance which cannot be averted if ignorance persists. He says "sin is sin and there's no erasing it... We are spiders. We sting one another."59

In fact, in Buddhism there is no sin in Christian sense. What we have is a skilful or unskilful action emanating from wholesome or unwholesome thinking on which depends our happiness or unhappiness. Buddha
believes in co-relation between cause and effect and only by dispelling ignorance can we sow seeds of skilful thoughts and actions.

PART II

Tristessa is another novel that deals with suffering but the cause of this suffering is not the same as we have it in Visions of Gerard, in which suffering, is attributed to disease. In case of Tristessa it is craving or 'tanha' for a drug which she neurotically takes to, unfindful of dissipation of her energies caused by it. In Tibetan wheel of life, craving, hatred and ignorance are symbolised by a cock, a snake and a pig; snake holding the tail of the cock and the pig holding the tail of the snake. These tendencies form the basis of the wheel.

Kerouac himself had told Allen Ginsberg that he was very happy with the book partly because it exemplified more than any of his novels, the first Law of Buddhism that all life is suffering and partly because it was written at a time when he had premonition of a literary success.

Ann Charters, in her book "Kerouac" gives genesis of the book. She writes:
One hot night in August 1955, Kerouac left his friend Garver and went upstairs to get some sleep. The kids from a Mexican family downstairs were having a great time on his roof burning a bed to get rid of the bugs. Jack entered into the fun, fanning the fire with his own mattress. They finally went back downstairs but he couldn't sleep, so he sat up in his room and in the candle light began a long short story about the Mexican girl who was Garver's connection for morphine in the slums, a story he finished a year later in Mexico City and published as Tristessa.

Jack first met Tristessa a year before in Mexico City. She had been in love with her connection Dave Tercereo, nearly forty years her senior. Tristessa kept a picture of Tercereo beside the icon of the Virgin Mary, idolizing his memory as the man who had taken her off the street shortly after her addiction at sixteen and showed her how to live. Tristessa is not her real name. She had been born Esperanza Villanueva in Jaurez. Jack changed her name when he wrote about her, from Esperanza which means 'hope' in Spanish, to Tristessa, which means 'sadness'.

The novel begins with Jack riding along with Tristessa in the cab, drunk with a big bottle of Jaurez Bourbon. Tristessa is high, beautiful, going home gaily to go to bed and enjoy her morphine. She has long sad eyelids, resignation of Virgin Mary, has coffee complexion, "expressionless half disdain and half mournful
lamentation of pain.  

Tristessa is a junkie, a dope addict and a prostitute. Jack's romantic fantasy is frustrated by the fact that she is removed from the possibility of any close relationship with him by her being an Azteca, an Indian girl with her hair "black and cool and sick hanging in two pigtails behind with the rollsod hairdo behind - Her shoes she keeps looking at are brand new not scuffed, but she lets her nylons keep falling and keeps pulling on them and convulsively twisting her feet.  

This makes her more exotic and desirable. She is high all the time, always sick, shooting ten grams of morphine a month. Jack's fascination for her has a dreamlike character because it has a tantalizing air about it. She is too far removed from him in her absorption with her own sickness and death to ever love him. This enhances her appeal for him but remains a distant dream. Jack suffers from frustration just as Tristessa suffers from craving, but craving is at the root of suffering in both. 

By the time Jack has set off in cab with Tristessa he has had many long sessions with marijuana, morphine and opium in Garver's room. 

Entering Tristessa's bedroom, Kerouac is startled at the bizarre surrounding: Tristessa is living with
her sister Cruz and the rooms are filled with animals; a rooster under her bed; a dove cooing and flapping its wings on a mantel; a hen, a chihuahua howling in heat, a kitten; and El Indio, allegedly a vendor of curios but actually a thief and morphine dealer—all of them chattering, screaming, disputing in "the littered disarray of the cluttered rooms". Cruz vomiting, Tristessa's huge icon of Virgin Mary in a corner near her bed, a silent witness to the addict's ritual tying the arm, boiling the morphine in a spoon, and plunging the needle into the flesh.

Sitting in the bedroom drinking his bourbon and Canada Dry, Jack feels an outsider among the three Mexican junkies. Even after accepting a shot from Tristessa which he does quite reluctantly, he still sees Tristessa, Cruz and El Indio as a wild group of people. He cannot fully overcome the feeling that prompts him to regard El Indio a thief or Tristessa a pickpocket. He still feels uneasy, is afraid that he may be robbed or attacked suddenly. He is not even sure whether Tristessa understands the sincerity of his religious belief. All this has frustrating affect on him.

He is really robbed by the thieves during the rainy night in Mexico City and he narrates the incident with horror.
...that side street where the gang of Mexicans stop me and rifle through my duffel bag and take what they want and take me along for a drink — It's gloom as unpredictable on this earth, I realize all the uncountable manifestations the thinking mind invents to place a wall of horror, before its pure perfect realization that there is no wall and no horror, just Transcendental Empty Kissable Milk. Light of Everlasting Eternity's true and perfectly empty nature — I know everything's all right but I want proof, and the Buddhas and the Virgin Marys are there reminding me of the solemn pledge of faith in this harsh and stupid earth where we rage our so-called lives in a sea of worry meat for Chicago's of Graves—right this minute my very father and my very brother lie side by side in mud in the North and I'm supposed to be smarter than they are — being quick I am dead.

Jack finds this world a veritable vale of tears. It is suffering everywhere, El Indio, Cruz and Tristessa represent underground world where grinding poverty characterizes life with all its concomitants. Jack's sympathy for the poor people is evidenced in this novel. He describes the lives of these characters:

Cruz is a little Indian Woman with no chin and bright eyes and wears high-heel pumps without stockings and battered dresses, what a wild crew of people, in America a cop would have to do a doubletake seeing them pass all be-wrongled and arguing and staggering on the sidewalk, like apparitions of poverty — Cruz takes a highball and throws it up too. Nobody notices, El Indio is holding eyedropper in one hand and little piece of paper in the
other arguing, tense-necked, red, full-blast at a screaming Tristessa whose bright eyes dance to fight it out—The old lady Cruz groans from the riot of it and buries back in her bed, the only bed, under her blanket, her face bandaged and greasy, the little black dog curling against her, and the cat, and she is lamenting something, her drink sickness, and El Indio's constant harrassing for more of Tristessa's supply of morphine.

The surfeit of pain creates nausea for it in Jack for he finds the life around him surcharged with pain and misery:

My head fells and wearies to think of it. Tristessa says 'How is Jack?' .. She always asks: 'Why are you so sad? Muy dolorosa,' and as though to mean 'you are very full of pain; for pain means dolor — 'I am sad because all La Vida es doloroso', I keep replying, hoping to teach her Number One of the Four Great Truths —

II

Tristessa believes in Karmic operation and has an instinctive wisdom to grasp it, characteristic of an Aztecan. To Jack's admittance to her that he loves her but has to leave her, she answers in the wisdom of one who knows "I know it, a man and woman iss dead, when they want to dead".

Jack thinks she is a wise woman "who would have graced the herds of Bhikshunis in very Yashodhara's
time and made a divine additional nun."67

She understands Karma as Buddha understood it, but this is in keeping with the individualistic interpretation of the law of Karma which throws each individual on his own resources, propounding that each one of us has our own series of Karma and that the punishment for misdeeds must be suffered by us, as our good deeds must be enjoyed by us. Tristessa tells Jack and the humanity why she suffers:

"What I do, I reap", she says in Spanish—Men and Women have errores—errors, faults, sins, faltas, human beings sow their own ground of trouble and stumble over the rocks of their own false erring imagination, and life is hard. 68

Tristessa loves death, so does El Indio whose sole concern is to procure junk and for this he relies on Tristessa. "—-he is busy, sometimes busy being sick"69

Tristessa in the throes of death likens herself to the Dove in her house which flies to death every moment of her life, feeling that only death can bring purity in her defiled life. The Dove — waits in her golden corner of the world waiting for perfect purity to death. 70

EL Indio's hitting the cat out of his way, his slapping of his kid's away at the supper table is not
out of the run of the common life but what characterizes Mexico life is the carefree attitude of the people even though in the thick of sorrow and suffering and poverty reigning supreme.

Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything they do is happy and carefree, no matter what is... Tristessa is a juncky and she goes about it skinny and carefree, when an American would be gloomy - But the coughs and complains all days, and by the same law, at intervals, the cat explodes into furious scratching that doesn't help.

Unable to respond to Tristessa's love for him, which he thinks, lacks ethereal quality of purity and sanctity, and promoted by the ulterior motive of buying seconals with his money, Jack recoils into his own world, - he wants to be a stream-entrant. He has given up his old ways of life and has created a new cosmos for himself where dross is eliminated from his heart and he sails safe to the other shore. He says:

I have sworn off lust with women - sworn off lust for lust's sake - sworn off sexuality and the inhibiting impulses - I want to enter the Holy Stream and be safe on my way to the other shore, but would as lief leave a kiss to Tristessa for her hark of my heart's sake.

Jack as Bodhisattva looks at these people and animals with his spiritual eye and would like to enlighten them about the reality of life.
I wish I could communicate to all these creatures and people, in the flush of my moonshine good times, the cloudy mystery of the magic milk to be seen in Mind’s Deep Imagery where we learn that everything is nothing — in which case they would worry any more, except after the instant they think to worry again — All of us trembling in our mortality boots, born to die, BORN TO DIE I could write it on the wall and on walls all over America.

But this should not be misconstrued as a philosophy of pessimism, propounding nihilism but is a positive attitude of a constructionist - a warning how far America should go in building material civilization.

In her confessional talk with Jack, Tristessa quite candidly tells him that she needs money to keep her alive. She tells him how she is weighed down by sickness and poverty and shows a sanguine gesture in her look, of accepting him as her lover-saviour. If she fails in this, then she would have God as her saviour. ‘If my friend dont pay me back, my Lord pay me back — more.’

Jack’s carnal desire for her ultimately is transformed into a holy feeling towards her. In her Jack sees an Angel belonging to some monastery. Although Jack desperately wants to sleep with her, he decides to leave her alone, thinking of her as a helpless kitten.
He fails to express his love for her that summer and the story drags on.

IV

Next summer before he returns to Mexico City, he writes her letters, expressing in them his love for her. In 1956 he wrote Part Two of the book, a sad account of how she has become even more sick than she was in previous year. She has been taking goofballs which has weakened her and has gone so far in it that she cannot control herself. She falls into the street and hurts herself seriously in head. She is going to pieces, her face bandaged, and her hands clutching her kimono to her side. Jack would love her if only he could become a junkie.

Even though the action in the book is limited "Tristessa is remarkably rich, the result of Kerouac's receptivity to the exoticism and strangeness of Mexico City. For Kerouac Mexico was a romantic place full of the danger and excitement of the old American West."75

The atmosphere of the novel is grave, portentous and heavy. John Tytell remarks:
The tone is sinister, hopeless, and resigned, style itself muted by the picture of Tristessa succumbed, virtually destroyed, more ill than ever because of an unregulated use of Seconals (goofballs).  

Tristessa, Terry and Mardou could well be compared, because they are all black-haired women belonging to another racial type with whom sex is a terror contraction of the womb. John Jytell aptly summarizes:

Tristessa explores the holiness of the ugly and disaffiliated, and is punctuated by references to Catholic ritual and Hindu myth. Yet the novel seems an expression of an even deeper, more personal meaning, especially if Tristessa is compared to Terry, the Mexican girl in On the Road or to Mardou Fox. All three are black-haired women of another racial type; with each, the narrator fantasizes an idyllic vision of escape into a more primitive existence where material possessions are meaningless and undesired, the kind of world Melville envisaged in his first novels of the South Pacific. With Terry, the narrator succeeds for a time when they live in a tent and pick cotton. With Mardou, he plans a trip to Mexico which never occurs. Tristessa's crowded living space with its animals represents another projected escape from Western notions of cleanliness and propriety. Then, with each woman, Kerouac imagines paranoid possibilities: they are seen as thieving whores who will betray him. It becomes necessary in each case to smash the romantic pedestal by mistreatment of the woman he has placed upon it.
Five Precepts and Eight-fold Path are the means to overcome unhappiness and surprisingly enough Jack who is on way to Bodhisattvahood does not try to wean away Tristessa from the kind of life she is leading. She is a dope-addict and is always in the company of dopes and gangsters who commit thefts and indulge in violence. Abstaining from killing and violence is the first precept the Buddha has taught which Tristessa does not practise. Sexual misconduct is another thing which has been warned against in the third precept. But this also has been set at nought as Tristessa follows profession of prostitution – the flagrant sale of flesh. She also breaks the fifth precept that says one should "abstain from intoxicants". Jack as Bodhisattva or on way to Bodhisattvahood does nothing to bring about a change in her by effecting a drastic breakthrough in her life. On the contrary he is afraid that Tristessa will deprive him of his money for he has carefully hidden traveller's cheques in his bag. Jack who talks about Buddhist philosophy with its emphasis on the existence of suffering and suppression of it, never even once tries to enlighten her on evil habits that lead to emaciation and final extinction. His compassion remains sterile, a distant thing, just a philosophic uninvolved musing in which he sees her as mother, wife and sister. Jack
is frustrated even as Tristessa is frustrated, for her
desire remains unfulfilled, and finds an easy refuge
in hatred for the object desired. Jack is conscious of
his failure to respond to her love for only a drug
addict can provide her needs and he is an ineffective
Bodhisattva. Maddened by unrequited love Tristessa
becomes paranoid and vent her violent feelings:

Ah Sacristi – the sad mutilated blue
Madonna, is Tristessa, and for me to
keep saying that I love her is a bleeding
lie – She hates me and I hate her, make
no bones about it — I hate her because
she hates me, no other reason — she hates
me because I don’t know, I guess I was too
pious last year — She keeps yelling "
I dunt care!" and hits us over the head
and goes out and sits on the curb in the
street and doodles and sways.

Probably Bull would save her who wants to marry
her but she is far gone in her addiction and is beyond
redemption. Bull wants to marry her to get citizenship
and tells Jack that she is his life and he is her life.
Very realistically he tells Jack "I never touch her—
it's just a marriage of convenience — I can't be
getting stuff on the black market myself. I don't know
how, I need her and she needs my money."79

This is the world of convenience and not of
compassion. Tristessa's suffering has crossed all the
bounds and has developed psychopathic traits. She breaks everything in Bull's room, hits him and falls on the floor right on her head. She calls Jack 'filthy teahead' and orders him to go out of Bull's room. She even tries to hit Jack on the head and he has to struggle with her before he escapes her fury.

Finally, defeated Jack tells Bull 'I'd have to be a junkey to love with Tristessa, and I can't be a junkey.'

Tristessa and old Bull make peace and Jack is alone. Jack who married twice and divorced was contemplating upon his marriage with Tristessa; "I wanted Tristessa to be my third wife." 87

Tristessa has misconstrued a situation which results in failure. Tristessa's suffering is real for she has gone through the agonies of life. Both Tristessa and Jack are conscious of the truth that they are nothing and will end as nothing.

Though suffering is the central emotion in the book, there are a number of Buddhist concepts that are brought to bear on the main theme. There is something sacrificial about Tristessa's love and she is seen as Tathegata --

She looks straight at me pools of neither this nor that, her combination of reluctance to break her personal
disgust covenant moreover lodged in the Virgin Mary, and her love of wish-for-me, makes her as mysterious as the Tathagata whose form is described as being non-existent rather as ineritable as the direction in which a put-out fire has gone.

Dwight Goddard writes, "The Tathagata is not a non-entity nor is he to be conceived as other things are as mother born nor disappearing, nor is the subject to causation, nor is he without significance; yet I refer to him as "The Un-born".

In his spiritual journey Jack attains compassion and has prajna or perfect wisdom. A Buddhist Bible describes:

Perfect knowledge (jnana) belongs to the Bodhisattvas who are entirely free from the dualisms of being and non-being, no birth and no - all annihilations, all assertions and negations and who, by reason of self-realisation, have gained an insight into the truths of egolessness and imagelessness.

Though Visions of Gerard and Tristess are in essence novels of suffering they have existential atmosphere. Whereas Visions of Gerard has tragic grandeur Tristessa is an embodiment of suffering due to inextricable attachment to the world of desire which caused her undoing. Suffering in Visions of Gerard is relieved
by saintly grace of Gerard and what we feel is not the loss in his death but a gain in the form of compassion and wisdom he has left behind us. Tristessa is a victim of social order which places her in dire poverty from which she hardly comes out, drowning her pain in narcotics which does her no good and she goes from bad to worse to find her own solution to the problem which is her doom. The solution to her problem would have been to stop craving. Death has put a sudden end to the life of Gerard who would have been a priest or a saint or a Bodhisattva, of which he showed precociously.

Addiction has atrophied the growth of Tristessa towards a bhikkuni and has undermined her very life with the result that she suffers excruciating pain and only seconals can serve her as palliative. The thrice repeated negative — Nothing, nothing, nothing (Visions of Gerard, p. 92) describes total annihilation, nihilism, and brings back to our memory King Lear's answer to his daughter Cordelia "Nothing will come of nothing" (King Lear, Act I, Scene I).

If the First Noble Truth is taken independent of the remaining three then it inevitably leads to pessimism and Buddhism is not a philosophy of pessimism. It shows
the way to happiness, here and now.

While Visions of Gerard is greatly sentimental, Tristessa is sternly realistic. Though Jack calls Tristessa a Tathagata she is hardly so, for there is nothing else in her character except suffering, that could elevate her to the position of Tathagata.