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REL 101

**Short Essay #2**

The Dharma Bums tell the story of Ray Smith and his hitch hiking, and mountaineering adventures and his aspiration to become a Buddha. Ray is modeled off of the author Jack Kerouac, and finds friendship and meaning through meditation and revelry in the uncontrollable world around him. The novel opens with main character meeting an old bum while traveling on a train in California. Inspired, he calls the man a Dharma Bum and then begins to recount a series of adventures that he has undergone with other such free-spirited people. The book illustrates multiple parallels between the main character and the author’s life.

The book begins with the main character attending a poetry event at Gallery Six. A number of his friend performed there, and he is especially impressed by the poetry of Japhy Ryder. Ray and his friend Alvah Goldbook share a small cottage in Berkely, and Japhy lives down the street. It’s funny that his character is so contrasting as he is Buddhist scholar that is heavy into meditation, and is a party animal that drinks heavily with women. This contrast in character stands out in the book because Buddhist scholars are supposed to be disciplined.

Ray, Japhy, and their other friend Henry Morley depart to climb Matterhorn Peak in California. This peak is located in Sawtooth Ridge, and there Ray enjoys the simple pleasures of creating poetry and hiking to new locations with his friends, where he feels confident and alive at times. Upon getting back down, Ray experiences the suicide of one of his friends, and based of this, he decides to leave his house and hike across the country to North Carolina. Ray meets many people long the way, and he experiences many enlightening mediation sessions.

Rays relatives in North Carolina grow irritated with his idleness and how little work he does to participate within the family, leaving him to feel highly misunderstood. Because they haven’t gone through the same mediation and experiences that Ray has, his family cannot see that the world from the point of view that it is neutrally meaningless. Ray grows restless and leaves his family to return to live with Japhy, who is living with one of his friends Sean Monahan in a shack.

Multiple parties are thrown at the shack, and both Ray and Japhy participate in them but don’t find them so fun after a while. Together, they sneak away from a party held in preparation for Japhy's upcoming departure to a Japan monastery and hike to the coastline before sadly parting from each other. Japhy advises Ray to work as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Ranges. Ray takes this advice, and has an very positive and enlightening experience while working the job. He feels like for the first time in multiple years that he truly understand things, and he descend the mountain to take on the world again in a new light.

Overall, I thought this book was very good in describing the views that humanity has on freelivers, and how against American norms freeliving is. This is heavily exemplified in the contrast between the American partier Japhy and the Budddhist Japhy. The author also uses Rays families misunderstanding of enlightment to show the conflicts between the American and Buddhist way of thinking.