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# **Male view of women in the Beat Generation**

**– A study of gender in Jack Kerouac's  
*On the Road***

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## Introduction

Some writers seem to appeal predominantly to male readers. Beat author Jack Kerouac is arguably one of those. Female readers may judge his literature as hopelessly masculine, or assert that he displays a horrible view of women. In fact, a quick survey of the topics of the secondary literature about the Beat Generation shows that the omission of women and the lack of female authors are some of the issues for recent criticism. Convinced that the situation is not quite as simple as pure misogyny, I have decided to dedicate this essay to a gender study of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, probably the single most important work of Beat art.

Kerouac is one of the key figures of the Beat Generation. At Columbia University in New York he made friends with poet Allen Ginsberg, novelist William S. Burroughs and future hippie icon Neal Cassady. These young semi-intellectuals shared an interest in art, literature and jazz, as well as a fascination for the criminal underground scene, Matt Theado tells in *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (p. 15). Together they formed the artistic core of the Beat Generation and their experiences as Beats were the starting point for Kerouac's work with *On the Road*. It took Kerouac six years to find a publisher, but once on the market in 1957 *On the Road* was an immediate success, it is told in *Queer Beats*, edited by Regina Marler (p. 119). Unfortunately, the sudden fame obtained with *On the Road* was hard to handle for Kerouac, whose alcoholism was the reason for his early death in 1969 (p. 121).

*On the Road* is the story about the protagonist and first person narrator Sal (Salvatore) Paradise, his eccentric friend Dean Moriarty and their extensive travelling during the late forties and early fifties. Sal is a newly divorced college student who lives with his aunt in Paterson, New York, and tries to become an author. After having been inspired by rootless Dean, Sal's life on the road begins and he finds himself in the middle of the emerging Beat Generation. Totally, Sal and his Beat friends make three long and adventurous road trips to the West and one to Mexico, thus exploring America and the limits of personal freedom. They also strive to obtain new and increasingly intense experiences with help of women, alcohol, drugs and jazz music.

It is generally acknowledged that *On the Road* is a partly autobiographical novel and that most of its characters are based on real people by the use of pseudonyms. In fact, the vast majority of the prominent Beats appear in the novel. For example, Sal Paradise is a pseudonym of the author himself, Dean Moriarty of Cassady, Carlo Marx of Ginsberg and Old Bull Lee of Burroughs. Thus, *On the Road* is indeed a key work to the Beat Generation,

being a work of narrative fiction but still containing a supposedly true-to-the-fact picture of the legendary Beat Generation.

My aim for this essay is to analyse the role women play for the male Beats in *On the Road* and how women, love and marriage are viewed in this novel. The hypothesis that I will argue for is that the male Beats' relationship to women is built upon an opposition. Their restless vagabond life with its characteristic search for "kicks" is contrasted with traditional and romantic ideas about men and women understanding each other and striving for happy marriage. This opposition is essential to the Beat culture in *On the Road*, I argue, because it draws parallels with the deeper antagonism between the Beats and American mainstream culture. The point of departure for the analysis will be a description of the Beat Generation and its values, thus placing the novel in its socio-historical background. Then I will analyse the gender roles that are presented in *On the Road* and how women are continuously "marginalized" and "objectified" by the male characters. In this essay I use the term "marginalization" in the sense of making women unimportant and powerless in an unfair way, and "objectification" in the sense of viewing women as dehumanized objects instead of subjects (*Longman*). Finally I will deal with the protagonists' transition from Beat vagabonds to family fathers.

Apart from narratological analysis, I base this essay upon feminist, gender and queer criticism. With "feminism" I mean the political point of view which consists of "a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women [...] and a resolve to do something about it" (Goodman x). A third wave feminism separates "sex" from "gender", the first term denoting the biological difference between males and females and the second term the cultural difference. According to this theory, it is culture that determines which genders are "normal" or "natural". Our belief in masculinity and femininity is based on culturally conditioned traits and behaviour (Griffith 191). Queer theorist Judith Butler argues that sexuality is "performative". According to her, this means that sexuality is based on behaviour that we learn from our culture and that by performing this behaviour sexual identity is constructed. Moreover it is stated that "[t]he main goals of queer theory seem to be to describe such 'performances' and to challenge the validity of all 'normal' identities, not just sexual but racial, ethnic, and national" (Griffith 193). Consequently, a gender study of Beat literature should consider the complex matters of sex, gender, sexuality and identity.

## 1. The Beat Generation

In the recent *Reconstructing the Beats*, Jennie Skerl states that the Beats were “an avant-garde arts movement and bohemian subculture” that appeared in the 1940s and received public attention in the 1950s (p. 1). This loosely affiliated arts community wanted to create a new bohemian alternative to the dominant American culture, thus criticising mainstream values and social structures and urging for social change. Centred in bohemian neighbourhoods in urban areas, especially in New York and San Francisco, the Beats sought a “spiritual alternative to the relentless materialist drive of industrial capitalism”, which was non-Marxist and opposed to the modernity of the time and its social and political conformity (Skerl 2). Kostas Myrsiades, editor of *The Beat Generation*, claims that the Beats emerged in opposition to the dominant, middle-class, suburban culture of the 1950s America, the so-called “square” culture. He argues that the major Beat works show frequent attacks on “square” values like an all-consuming work ethic, sexual repression, cultural xenophobia, militaristic patriotism and suburban materialism. In fact, the Beats were the first to protest against the supposed conformity and lack of social concern among middle-class Americans (p. 1).

Another approach to the Beat Generation is given by literary critic Gregory Stephenson in *The Daybreak Boys*. According to him, Jack Kerouac coined the term “beat” in 1948 (p. 2) and mentioned it several times in *On the Road*. Kerouac has two denotations of this word. Firstly, it is a synonym of “beatific”, a personal state of peace and happiness (p. 4): “He [Dean Moriarty] was BEAT – the root, the soul of Beatific” (*On the Road* 184, henceforth referred to as *Road*). Secondly, it is used as an overall term for the young men and women who are “rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I [Sal Paradise] was slowly joining” (*Road* 53). The “hipster movement” was an underground culture in New York that appeared in the 1920s and consisted of young working-class men listening to jazz, taking drugs and dressing sharp (Stephenson 4).

Among the influences behind the Beats we find not only hipsterism, but also bohemianism and the literature of the Lost Generation with authors like Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound and Henry Miller (Stephenson 4). All in all, the Beat culture was a blend of many different phenomena: drugs, sexual experimentation, the search for extreme experiences, jazz music, social revolt, radical literary experimentation, romantic egoism and anti-materialism. The goal was a cultural, aesthetic and philosophical revolution (Stephenson 5, 7).

It has often been questioned whether the Beats changed the values of the society. How did the young men in the subculture actually view women, relationships and sexuality? The

rebellion of the Beat movement can be said to be only partial. While Stephenson argues that the gender roles were durably changed (p. 14), Kostas Myrsiades claims in *The Beat Generation* that Kerouac and others still kept many of the narrow-minded conventions of “square” America. Like most Beats, Kerouac rejected the repressed sexuality of the time, but maintained the sexism (Myrsiades 12). According to Myrsiades, the critic should not praise the element of sexual experimentation in Beat literature without a discussion of the sexist construction of masculine identity (p. 6).

Since the Beat culture was dominated by men, it would be absurd to suppose that females were viewed as their equals. Admittedly, there were women writers and even a proto-feminist evolution within the Beat movement, but because the literary scene was competitive and sexism was largely unchallenged, female Beats gained little recognition. However, in the western states, especially in San Francisco, women were more likely to find acceptance in the Beat communities (Skerl 3, 4). Moreover, the huge media attention around *On the Road* made the debate focus on “the Beats’ lifestyle and ‘sexy chicks’ while downplaying the homosexual and androgynous components of the Beat culture”, as it is stated in *Beat Culture* (p. 4). Kerouac is even said to have tried to convert himself into a “new sexy literary figure” (p. 7). Obviously, Kerouac’s own ambition was more to appear as a sexy, masculine and heterosexual ladies’ man than a subversive advocate for the rights of women and sexual deviants. In short, it seems as if the Beats managed to remove the taboo around the subject of sexuality, but somehow they forgot, or actively omitted, the liberation of women. We have to remember, though, that the Beat movement of the 1940s and 1950s happened before the female liberation and the Civil Rights movement. Inarguably, mainstream society was still highly segregated and patriarchal.

## **2. Male bonding and marginalized women**

Today people are probably not very shocked by the sexual content of *On the Road*, but more likely provoked by the inequality between the sexes. The feminist reader possibly notices the masculine ambience in *On the Road* immediately. The question is what roles men and women are supposed to “perform” in the Beat culture depicted in the novel.

It is evident that Sal and his friends form a masculine “homosocial” group, that is a group based on male friendship, “male bonding”, without the influence of women. Traditionally masculine activities like drinking, driving cars and listening to jazz are intertwined with intellectual talk about philosophy and literature. Throughout the novel, female characters are mostly left outside the intellectual and decision-making sphere of the

males. Even though the Beats in the novel are open-minded about class and race, the women's place is peripheral. They are marginalized, often reduced to "unimportant" housewives, like in the passage where Sal, the protagonist, has just arrived in Denver and stays at a friend's place: "My first afternoon in Denver I slept in Chad King's room while his mother went on with her housework downstairs and Chad worked at the library" (*Road* 40).

It can be argued that female voices and perspectives are silenced as the narrator's focalization seldom encompasses any female character. In fact, all active main characters are men. As a result, the reader receives very little information about the women's thoughts and feelings and for many people the female characters may appear as blurred and opaque throughout the story. When a woman is introduced in the text the narrator tends to give her a short external description and possibly adds a few adjectives about her inner features. To exemplify, in the following presentation of Babe, a friend of Sal's in Denver, the narrator hardly reveals more information about her than her relation to men: "One of Ray's sisters was a beautiful blonde called Babe – a tennis-playing, surf-riding doll of the west. She was Tim Gray's girl" (*Road* 42).

It must be remembered, though, that there are a few characters that stand out from the female mass. Relatively active characters like Frankie (Sal's female friend in Denver), Galatea (Ed Dunkel's wife), Marylou (Dean's first wife), and Sal's aunt are allowed to carry some importance in the narration. However, these women exist mainly in terms of girlfriends, lovers or relatives. Nevertheless, they form an important unifying unit of the novel, because in order to construct masculinity, femininity is needed as an opposite. Besides, the chance to meet new women is in fact an important ingredient of the protagonists' trips, thus making the narration more captivating, at least for male readers.

One reason for the marginalization of women in *On the Road* may be Kerouac's personal problem with women. In the article "Kerouac Among the Fellahin" Robert Holton believes that the author left the gender issue untreated because it was too difficult and too threatening for him. To explore the female experience would remind him of his own difficult relationship with women. Gender and sexuality was a source of fear for the author, who often escaped the dilemma by reducing the characters to ethnical stereotypes, and thus expressing a kind of male cultural fantasy (p. 275). Kerouac wanted to remain subversive without being political, and to go beneath the surface of the values of the postmodern white male would have forced him to employ a political dimension (p. 276).

Another reason why women are marginalized in the novel might be due to ideology. By "ideology" I mean the world-view that is represented in the work in forms of values, beliefs

and ideas (Griffith 180). It is important to remember that in the American society of the 1940s or 1950s, women had significantly less power than today. It is possible that the novel reflects values that Beat writers like Kerouac simply took for granted because these beliefs were so deeply rooted in contemporary society.

### 3. Women and society – gender problems

In the same way as the values of contemporary American society affected Kerouac's writing about the female sex, the fictional society in the novel itself also embodies a certain view of the woman. In fact, any work of narrative fiction contains an ideology in which the real author's "voice" is heard through the "implied author", that is the idealized author expressed by the text. It is this implied author who decides what to tell, how to tell it and in what order (Griffith 34). Apart from the implied author, other elements in the novel may also express values (conflicting or not), for example the narrator and the characters.

It is easy enough to see that the society presented in the novel embodies values and conventions that make the fictional characters unhappy with their relationships with others. Many characters seem to be unsatisfied with their love life and their frustration often leads to violent acts, which is demonstrated in the stories that Sal is told along the road (*Road* 138 and passim). It can be argued that Sal's middle-class America is patriarchal and that women are in an inferior position. For instance, there is a division of labour according to sex which implies that the home is the place for female duty and male spare time. One example of this is when Sal visits a ranching family and the husband is free to relax and enjoy himself while his housewife prepares plenty of excellent dishes. Sal praises the abundance of food, but he also notes that the wife complains about the rural solitude (*Road* 215). The narrator indicates a certain degree of feminist awareness as he knows that the woman is not content with a life at home and that she would like some of the freedom that he enjoys himself.

It is obvious that the female characters in the novel are frustrated in their daily lives and that the negative feelings often lead to tensions between the spouses, which in turn may burst into verbal or physical assault. One of the worst-functioning relationships described in the novel is the one between Sal's French friend Remi Boncœur and his wife Lee Ann. This is how Sal describes Lee Ann and her marriage to Remi:

She was a fetching hunk, a honey-coloured creature, but there was hate in her eyes for both of us. Her ambition was to marry a rich man. She came from a small town in Oregon. She rued the day she ever took up with Remi. On one of his big showoff week-ends he spent a hundred dollars on her and she thought she'd found an heir. Instead she was hung up in this shack, and for the lack of anything else she had to stay there. (*Road* 61)



In this quote the narrator presents Lee Ann as a match between a beautiful exterior and an evil interior and the fact that she is beautiful does not automatically make her a suitable wife for Remi. Instead, she is described as a she-devil who uses men in order to obtain money. When her initial and morally questionable intention of marrying rich does not come true, she reacts by showing her discontent for her husband. Consequently, their relationship, which is built upon traditional gender roles, becomes a frustrating restriction of their lives. Lee Ann seems to believe that the only way to become rich is through marriage and Remi obviously thinks that in order to please a woman he has to spoil her with gifts. A society with more diversified gender roles would of course open up new possibilities for a woman to have a reliable economy so that she would not have to depend on a wealthy husband.

There is no doubt that in the society of the novel also young unmarried women seem discontent about the way gender roles are assessed. While travelling across the continent, Sal becomes a keen observer of people from different groups of society. One interesting meeting is when the protagonist on his first trip to the West spends the night with Rita Bettencourt, “a nice little girl, simple and true, and tremendously frightened of sex” (*Road* 55). Sal tries to convince her that sex is “beautiful”, but he fails to live up to his own idea about a potent lover. Instead, they continue the night with some small talk. She proves to be disillusioned about the meaning of life; in fact she is satisfied with her existence as long as she has decent work. Sal tries to share his excitement about life but she is not interested in his philosophies, and he shows his frustration of their love problems: “We lay on our backs, looking at the ceiling and wondering what God had wrought when He made life so sad” (*Road* 56). The following day Sal is absorbed in thoughts about the lack of communication between girls and boys and the problems with the American way of dating:

I wanted to go and get Rita again and tell her a lot more things, and really make love to her this time, and calm her fears about men. Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting talk – real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every minute is precious. (*Road* 56)

In the two examples above there is a clear streak of religiousness noted in the expressions “God” and “life is holy”, but there are also conservative ideas. Before going to bed with each other, men and women ought to know each other better, Sal tries to say, and he criticizes the social codes of American dating. He pities Rita for fearing sex, but it is not stated whether there are traumatic events behind her anxiety. Sexual abuse could be a plausible reason.

It has now been suggested that young women are discontent with the way they are supposed to behave in the American society pictured in *On the Road*. A further example of this is a girl that Sal chats with on the bus home from his third trip to the West. Here he performs the role of the experienced vagabond, and she the inhibited “square”. This woman is indeed part of “square” society, and the everyday routines assigned to the female sex seem to dampen her joy. When Sal realizes that she is bored, he proposes that she should try activities that are crucial in his Beat life –dating and sex—but she does not approve of his advice:

I took up a conversation with a country girl wearing a low-cut cotton blouse that displayed the beautiful sun-tan on her breast tops. She was dull. She spoke of evenings in the country making popcorn on the porch. Once this would have gladdened my heart but because her heart was not glad when she said it I knew there was nothing in it but the idea of what one should do. ‘And what else do you do for fun?’ I tried to bring up boy friends and sex. Her great dark eyes surveyed me with emptiness and a kind of chagrin that reached back generations and generations in her blood from not having done what was crying to be done – whatever it was, and everybody knew what it was. ‘What do you want out of life?’ I wanted to take her and wring it out of her. She didn’t have the slightest idea what she wanted. She mumbled of jobs, movies, going to her grandmother’s for the summer [...] She was eighteen and most lovely, and lost. (*Road* 228-229)

In this quote the pressure from mainstream society is once again blamed for restricting people’s lives in a negative way and thus making them distressed and disenchanting. This critique clearly harks back to the opposition between the Beats and the “squares”. There are plenty of traditional obligations in mainstream society, Sal seems to argue, but fulfilling the “square” duties does not necessarily lead towards greater happiness. Love and sex do, however, but apart from those joys Sal seems as lost in life as his disillusioned female friend on the bus. Even though Sal is a Beat, he can not escape the “square” conventions totally and, more importantly, he does not suggest any other alternative than a more hedonistic lifestyle. It is doubtful whether boyfriends and sex would make any radical change for the country girl, or if Sal is only trying to seduce her.

It is not difficult to believe that if the middle-class women presented in the novel have troubled lives, it is even worse for those who belong to the lower classes. Their problems are of course of a more serious kind than boredom. Not living in a welfare-state, unmarried or divorced women have to be strong and manage to support themselves and their families despite the male domination of the labour market. One of these lone mothers is Frankie, Sal’s woman friend in Denver. She is poor and lives in a trailer, which implies that she is not part of “square” middle-class society. Moreover, she is one of the very few females who are characterized in a language surprisingly full of respect and praise. The male Beats seem to approve of her tough masculine style and portrait her like a heroine:

The mother was a wonderful woman in jeans who drove coal trucks in winter mountains to support her kids, four in all, her husband having left her years before when they were travelling around the country in a trailer. [...] After many a good time and a big Sunday-afternoon drunk in crossroads bars and laughter and guitar-playing in the night, the big lout had suddenly walked off across the dark field and never returned. Her children were wonderful. (*Road* 201-202)

It is evident that Frankie's status as an underdog makes her popular with the male Beats. In the quote above the negatively sounding noun "lout" for describing the husband can be noticed, while Frankie herself is lauded for her hard work. Besides, she likes drinking, parties and music, and her way of living apparently impresses Sal and his friends. Even though she is at the bottom of society, she has the will to enjoy life as much as possible while supporting her children. That attitude is well in line with the male Beats' spirit.

It has now been shown that American women of all social classes seem to be in a difficult situation in *On the Road*. If they have husbands, the "square" marriage serves as a restriction of their freedom and often leads to quarrels and violence within the family. If they live on their own, their work as breadwinners seems problematic in a society where only men are supposed to be employed outside the home. Yet, the outsider status of the powerful lone mother Frankie is described in positive terms. Even though the male Beats take women's subordination for granted, they seem to find masculine and independent women fascinating. In this pre-feminist society the only way for women to achieve equality is obviously to adopt a male manner.

#### **4. Objectification of women**

In *On the Road* there is an ever-present objectification of the woman. As a result, she loses her human qualities and can be compared to an inanimate object. There are several ways in which this objectification works. It can be visual through the act of gazing at a woman, as suggested in the chapter of "the male gaze" below. The woman can also be used as a means to achieve something else – in this case sensual pleasure. Since the Beat culture described in the novel is highly hedonistic, pleasure in terms of sex is crucial to Sal and his friends. Treating women as objects also implies that they are "replaceable" in the same way as commodities are procured, used, disposed of and replaced. It is not the woman herself that matters for the characters, but any female who is able to give them enjoyment. Men, on the other hand, are throughout the whole story treated as inviolable individuals with important inner lives.

## ***The male gaze***

“The male gaze” is a term derived from media theory, in which it is usually applied on gender studies of advertisements, especially those from the first half of the nineteenth century. According to feminists the term suggests that the pleasure in looking is given to the active male subject while the woman is the passive object. Women are depicted as men want them to be, instead of displaying their real characteristics. This gives an overly simplistic concept of femininity which divides women into “good girls” and “bad girls” implying that women are defined from this masculine point of view, rather than taking into account their own actions and varied personalities (“Male Gaze”).

The concept of the male gaze can be applied on literature as well. In *On the Road*, Sal’s and Dean’s visual objectification of women can be argued to be a clear example of this sexist gaze. Symptomatically, the narrator normally begins every characterization of a woman with a stereotype description of her physical appearance. It is obvious that when Marylou, Dean’s first wife, is introduced as “his beautiful little chick” (*Road* 7), she is given a typically objectifying label which implies that she is immediately reduced to a visual object of desire “owned” by her husband. The way in which Marylou is objectified in the quotation above could be compared with a man displaying his new and fancy car for his neighbours. Later on it is added that “Marylou was a pretty blonde [...] But, outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things” (*Road* 8). As a result, she is incorporated into the category of “bad girls”; she is judged beforehand, no matter her actual personality.

It must be remembered that the objectification of Sal’s women friends occurs again and again. When Dean’s second wife Camille is first introduced to the reader, Sal sees a “brunette on the bed, one beautiful creamy thigh covered with black lace, look up with mild wonder” (*Road* 44). With a little imagination, this pose may be something that we recognize from the sexist advertisements of the 1950s; in other words, it is a typical example of the male gaze, obviously originating from the simplistic media view of the woman. In a similar passage Sal describes Dean’s third wife Inez only on the basis of her body: “a big sexy brunette [...] and generally like a Parisian coquette” (*Road* 232). Here we have an example of a woman being diminished to a body whose main features are colour and ethnical origin. The simple description is charged with connotations of vanity and easy virtue and it can be argued that there is a touch of exoticism about her. Further on in the text when her habits are mentioned it is made obvious that she is a “good girl” (*Road* 235 and *passim*). Consequently she is

opposed to Marylou, the “bad girl”, but the male gaze is nevertheless present in all three characterizations.

When Sal observes even his own girlfriends with his male gaze, it is easy enough to believe that his tendency to objectify is deeply rooted in a superficial, simplistic and sexist worldview. Terry, his poor Mexican girlfriend, is at first a victim of his objectification. When he notices her on the bus station, he describes her as “the cutest little Mexican girl in slacks. [...] Her breasts stuck out straight and true; her little flanks looked delicious; her hair was long and lustrous black; and her eyes were great big blue things with timidities inside” (*Road* 78). What we find here is an outer description from a strictly male point of view, with focus on certain distinguishing parts of the female body (breasts, flanks, hair and eyes). Moreover, when he describes her breasts as “straight and true” it is implied that she looks the way a beautiful woman should. Likewise, his second girlfriend Lucille is introduced in the text as “a beautiful Italian honey-haired darling” (*Road* 111), which might suggest a picture of her as if she were taken directly from an old advertisement. In the two quotations above, neither Terry nor Lucille receives a detailed description of their inner features; their beauty and sexual charisma seem enough. Undoubtedly, there is a recurring pattern in the narrator’s characterization of women.

The male gaze in *On the Road* is not only a matter of characterization and introduction of the character in the text, but it is also a highly characteristic feature of the story itself as a pattern of action for the male Beats. As a matter of fact, in quite a number of central events Dean and Sal are actively gazing at women in a highly objectifying way. Dean is on a constant look-out for new acquaintances, and for Sal every city brings the possibility to see women that are exotic to him. When visiting Chicago the two friends hardly do any usual sight-seeing, but instead they search for beautiful girls all over the city. The first night Dean exclaims as he is about to enter a bar: “What a weird town – wow, and that woman in that window up there, just looking down with her big breasts hanging from her nightgown, big wide eyes. Whee” (*Road* 224-225). Here Dean expresses an almost childish joy of exploring the local women and their supposedly promiscuous manners. Thus, gazing at women is almost like a lifestyle for the two friends. Another example is when the borrowed car with which Sal and Dean have made their Chicago-trip has to be returned it is in a bad condition. Dean is not at all interested in the legal matters though; he only stares at the owner’s wife. “The upshot of it was an exchange of addresses and some talk, and Dean not taking his eyes off the man’s wife whose beautiful brown breasts were barely concealed inside a floppy cotton blouse”

(*Road* 221). Again, a fixation on a certain protruding part of the female body can be noted, and the great pleasure Dean finds in gazing.

It can be argued that also the two quotations above remind the reader of ads, posters or movies. The male subjects gaze at the female objects and define them according to their male point of view, assigning to them whatever feature they find suitable. The women that the two men long for in vain become objects of sexual desire as they project their male fantasies on them. The girls' inner features are of no importance as long as their bodies are a pleasure to look. For Sal and Dean, travelling therefore means the exploration not only of new places and new cultures, but also of the women who live there.

### ***Getting the kicks***

The women in *On the Road* are also explored and objectified for “kicks” when they are pursued by the male Beats on their trips across the United States. In fact it can be argued that one of the main forces behind the constant travelling of Sal and Dean is their search for the intense, “authentic” experience of pleasure. When females are mainly used as a means of sexual stimulation, they become replaceable objects, or tools, for the male desire. We see that although the male characters strive for a liberal view of sexuality, they do nothing to reject the sexist ideology of mainstream society.

Tim Cresswell argues in “Mobility as Resistance” that the search for “kicks” is related to Sal's and Dean's travelling. He states that in *On the Road* the leaving of a woman is always connected with the arrival of a male friend and that almost every place and town is connected with the meeting and leaving of a woman (p. 258). Therefore, the women here appear as replaceable objects for the male Beats. Tim Hunt displays a similar point of view in *Kerouac's Crooked Road* when he argues that the trips can be seen as escapist adventures, in which “Sal and Dean are running from the banalities of modern America” (p. 30). For Sal, every trip begins with breaking the routines, a series with road experiences and ends with a return to the established order (p. 23). Thus, travelling becomes synonymous with leaving one woman in order to seduce another woman.

It goes without saying that Dean Moriarty is a most extreme ladies' man. In fact, his attitude towards women and relationships can be seen as the essence of the Beat vagabond life, a life without responsibility for others. For him, life is a matter of fulfilling two truly basic instincts: hunger and sexuality. Consequently, his existence is an endless race of collecting as many experiences as possible. He lives in the moment and is always on the hunt for erotic adventures (Myrsiades 61-62).

Dean has been searching for “kicks” all his young life. There are several passages in the text telling how young Dean used to pursue girls for fun. For example, it is mentioned that as a teenager “[h]is speciality was stealing cars, gunning them for girls coming out of high school in the afternoon, driving them out to the mountains, making them, and coming back to any available hotel bathtub in town” (*Road* 40). It is obvious that seducing girls just to obtain a thrill of pleasure has always been part of Dean’s everyday occupations. Sal describes his friend’s behaviour and adds some of Dean’s own words: “Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn’t care one way or the other, ‘so long’s I can get that lil ole gal with that lil sumpin down there tween her legs, boy’” (*Road* 14). This shows that his needs are indeed very basic – food and sex– and that he is on the constant lookout for an “easy prey”.

The fact that Dean is married and a father of two does not prevent him from getting his “kicks” elsewhere. He promises each of his women true love and a stable family life, but because of his restless and insatiable appetite for girls he fails to live up to his sweet lies over and over again (*Road* 44 and *passum*). Instead of concentrating on one relationship, he is constantly unfaithful to his wives and tries to seduce every single woman that he meets. Besides, he involves himself with at least two women at a time and literally runs back and forth between them. At the time when Sal is on his first visit to Denver, Dean is dating both Marylou and Camille without them knowing of each other and he runs frantically between the two hotel rooms where they are waiting for him (*Road* 42-44). Since what matters for him in his relationship to women is only the lovemaking, every woman is an equally replaceable tool.

If we view the search for “kicks” as a theme in the novel, it can also be related to Sal’s development as a character and the introduction of Dean in the story. In the beginning Sal is a slightly timid and innocent middle-class “college boy” living with his aunt in a house outside New York and trying to become an author. He is in his middle twenties and has just gone through a divorce from his first wife. It is only when he meets the somewhat crazy and hysterical Dean his life on the road begins and he gradually becomes a Beat. Hunt argues that Sal admires Dean’s freedom and his success with women (p. 22) and when he turns into Dean’s spiritual disciple he ceases to be the innocent “college boy” (p. 24). After the final break with Dean at the end of the novel, Sal settles down in New York with a new girlfriend and with no intent of further adventurous trips or affairs.

It is during Sal’s first trip westwards that his search for “kicks” really begins. Initially he shows a great excitement of dating new girls, but he is not overwhelmingly successful. Once he tries to persuade a girl of having sex with him (“fooling around with this sullen girl and spending my money” (*Road* 37)). Mostly, his behaviour lacks a great deal of seriousness,

as if he were a teenager who has just had his eyes opened to the opposite sex. To exemplify, he mentions that “[t]he girls were terrific. They went out in the backyard and necked with us” (*Road* 53). In San Francisco his hope seems to ebb out and his desperation is clearly shown: “I tried everything in the books to make a girl. I even spent a whole night with a girl on a park bench, till dawn, without success” (*Road* 71). It is only after the break-up with his Mexican girlfriend Terry that Sal’s personality displays a greater lack of seriousness. He seems almost too untouched by the farewell to her and hurries on to the next willing woman, who happens to be a complete stranger on board the bus (*Road* 99).

On Sal’s third trip to the West his search for “kicks” is intensified. When in San Francisco to visit Dean, Sal wants his newly settled-down friend to join him on a trip to Europe. In one sentence he captures the essence of the ultimate Beat experience: “We’ll go dig all the crazy women in Rome, Paris, all those places; we’ll sit at sidewalk cafés, we’ll live in whorehouses” (*Road* 178). For the two friends, this trip would embody their ideas of living in the present and the importance of hedonism in life. However, they never carry their overseas vacation into effect and instead Sal, Dean and their friend Stan leave for Mexico, which marks the end of their time together on the road. Their trip reaches its climax when Sal and his company, high on marihuana, visit a Mexican brothel in order to live out their male fantasies and get their “kicks” (*Road* 269-274).

For the three friends the scene at the brothel is an experience full of intense thrills as they break their former limits of behaviour, but at a high cost for the women. In the brothel Sal breaks totally with the white middle-class values of moderation. Prostitutes and drugs are supposed to give the three boys a “non-square” experience. For them, this behaviour signifies freedom from mainstream restrictions, but they do not understand that their search for “kicks” corresponds to the prostitutes’ lack of personal freedom when selling their bodies (Holton 273). That is, when Sal, Dean and Stan buy sex from the “exotic” Latin-American prostitutes they experience a new and exiting feeling of freedom because what they do is not allowed in “square” society. However, for the young girls it is the opposite because they lose control of their own bodies when they are exposed to the foreign tourists.

### ***The female backlash***

It is important to note that the male irresponsibility in the novel is actually opposed by the women. In fact, a few female characters are allowed to express their critique of male behaviour. This clearly proves that the male character’s objectification affects the women negatively and that they would prefer being treated differently. The scarce female voices that



do express themselves in the novel give another point of view in which the search for “kicks” and the idea of the exchangeable woman are seen from a female perspective.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that there is in fact one passage in the novel where women get together and revolt against the male Beats, a scene that could be called “the female backlash”. When Sal is staying with Dean in Camille’s house in San Francisco a few of their female friends get enough of the men’s escapist adventures. Galatea, Ed Dunkel’s wife, stands up for her opinions and frankly tells Dean how irresponsible he is who does not take care of his wife and children (*Road* 182-185). This initiative to reproach Dean for his irresponsible behaviour is definitely an important moment for the female characters in *On the Road*.

There are several important aspects of this feminist outburst. Firstly the female characters take the initiative to act on their own. Secondly it makes Sal understand that women actually have a social life together and that they discuss their husbands. “I suddenly realized that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of men” (*Road* 176). In fact, this is the only example of an existence of female bonding along with male bonding – women who come together for different activities and for discussing shared experiences and problems while their men are at work or seeing other men. Thirdly, we are told about the women’s true opinion. They frankly state that Dean is irresponsible because he left his family and that he only thinks about himself and his search for “kicks”. Funnily enough, Sal notes that Dean, who used to be generally admired by the girls when he was a teenager, is now accused by the wives of his old friends (*Road* 182-185). Time has apparently come for Dean to grow up, and for the Beats to marry and go back to mainstream society.

## 5. From Beats to family

In *On the Road* the view of women changes as the male Beats grow older. It can be suggested that for Sal and his friends, gazing at girls and searching for “kicks” are not the final answers of how to live. In fact, their lives undergo a slow but radical change. From a restless existence on the road they move towards a more settled-down everyday life, as shown in the following quotation where the narrator states that a friend of Dean’s “was midway between the challenge of his new wife and the challenge of his old Denver poolhall gang leader” (*Road* 180). So while the story unfolds, the Beats’ attitude towards women and marriage is gradually altered.

One effect of the male Beats’ maturation process is that they start thinking about forming families. However, in order to do so they first need to find a way to deal with their

problems with women. We have seen that women in the novel are not happy in their relationships with men and that they are generally marginalized and objectified. The male characters also seem to be aware of this fact and as the story develops they express their opinions about the love and marriage. A solution to Dean's and Sal's problems with women is suggested in a discussion between the two characters when travelling to New York for New Year's Eve. Sal mentions that his aunt once told him that men are to blame for the problems between the sexes. Dean says that he already knows that this is the case, but he adds that in his marriage with Marylou it is the woman who does not want to forgive him and make peace with him:

My aunt once said the world would never find peace until men fell at their women's feet and asked for forgiveness. But Dean knew this; he'd mentioned it many times. 'I've pleaded and pleaded with Marylou for a peaceful sweet understanding of pure love between us forever with all hassles thrown out – she understands; her mind is bent on something else – she's after me; she won't understand how much I love her, she's knitting my doom.'

'The truth of the matter is we don't understand our women; we blame on them and it's all our fault,' I said.

'But it isn't as simple as that,' warned Dean. 'Peace will come suddenly, we won't understand when it does – see man?' (*Road* 116-117)

Here we see that in the fictional society of the novel people do not know how to communicate, which leads to tensions between the sexes. However, Sal and Dean do not agree on whose fault it is. According to Sal and his aunt, it seems to be implied that there is a long history of female subordination. Dean, on the other hand, mystifies the woman and indicates that she has evil intentions. Interestingly enough, it is suggested that both Sal and Dean dream of a society where there is peace and understanding between the sexes. How this is to be achieved is wrapped in mystery for the reader, though, but it looks as if the utopian state will appear by itself. The vision of understanding between the sexes may seem romantic, but it remains to be seen under what circumstances men and women are supposed to make peace.

Dean seems to believe that there will be no more fights if the woman simply accepts her subordinated position and stays quiet no matter what her husband does, which is suggested in the quote below. When in San Francisco, Sal and Dean make friends with a coloured man called Walter, who late one night invites them to his home for a drink. Afterwards Dean explains for Sal how much he likes Walter's black wife and that he thinks of her as a model for how a good woman should behave:

'No you see, man, there's *real* woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night with anybody and have talks in the

kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, and that's his castle.' He pointed up at the tenement. (*Road* 192)

According to Dean a wife is obviously supposed be understanding and tolerant. Men should be able to gather at home without any comments from the lady of the house. A “real” woman does not complain about her husband, he tries to say, which of course leads to domestic peace. Still, his words show that there is a patriarchal subordination of the woman because she is not allowed to oppose her man. If Dean’s opinions are representative of other Beats, traditional “square” values still exist among the Beats in *On the Road*. This is then an example of the opposition mentioned in the thesis statement.

Holton emphasises the connections between gender and race and notices the sharp contrast between the characterization of the white women who produce the female backlash and Walter’s black submissive wife described above. Galatea (Ed Dunkel’s wife) and her white middle-class friends openly criticize the male Beats, but the black woman remains quiet, and is therefore more comfortable. As in the brothel scene, the narrator does not question the validity of the multiple layers of dominance and submission that are produced by gender and race (Holton 274).

If we read *On the Road* as a novel about the personal development of Sal Paradise, not only do we find that his objectification of women begins with his life on the road, but also that he is searching for a new girlfriend to fill out the emptiness after the separation with his first wife. Consequently, it can be argued that even though Sal enjoys the search for “kicks”, he is not satisfied with his life on the road and consequently he wants to settle down and form a family instead. When he leaves home for the first time he clearly shows that he has high expectations of his “new” life on the road: “Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me” (*Road* 14). What “the pearl” consists of is not stated, though, but it might very well be the woman of his life. Furthermore, when he is about to leave New York for the second time his purpose becomes even more evident as he unburdens his mind to Dean and Marylou:

All these years I was looking for the woman I wanted to marry. I couldn’t meet a girl without saying to myself, What kind of wife would she make? [...] ‘I want to marry a girl,’ I told them, ‘so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time – all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something.’” (*Road* 111)

No matter how exiting bohemian life may be, even the truest Beat tends to believe in the nuclear family after all. Obviously, the values of mainstream society are not totally rejected

by the Beats and an uttering like the one above is definitely more conservative than subversive.

If Sal's life on the road is connected with the bohemian Beat culture, then the wish for a future family life is its "square" antithesis. Sal expresses the idea of traditional American suburban life towards the end of the story: "All I hope, Dean, is someday we'll be able to live on the same street with our families and get to be couple of oldtimers together" (*Road* 239). From having been travel companions, Sal is now ready for another kind of friendship, that is neighbourliness.

Surprisingly enough, even rootless Dean aims to change his life in order to become domesticated and live quietly with one woman. Rebellion belongs to the youth, he seems to argue, and life on the road must come to an end:

'We know life, Sal, we're growing older, each of us, little by little, and are coming to know things. What you tell me about your life I understand well, I've always dug your feelings, and now in fact you're ready to hook up with a real great girl if you can only find her and cultivate her and make her mind your soul as I have tried so hard with these damned women of mine. Shit! shit! shit!' he yelled. (*Road* 175-176)

Here it is suggested that Dean wants to live a "normal" family life, but the reader knows that he is unable to take this step, thus giving his statements an ironic rendering. Dean would like to be mature, but as far as can be judged, his words are empty.

From the discussion above it is clear that the gradual change from a life on the road to an ordered family life proves to be difficult for the male Beats. The reader may notice that Sal's romantic dreams do not easily come true, but every relationship makes him a little more mature. The love affair with his first girl, Terry from Mexico, is an illustration of the inner tensions of the protagonist and also of the tensions within the Beat Generation itself. The Beats want to distinguish themselves from "square" America but nevertheless they are inevitably caught in mainstream conventions. When being with Terry, Sal reaches the personal state he has desired for so long: "I was a man on the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be, in Paterson" (*Road* 94). However, in the end he opts for leaving her and returns to his aunt. According to Hunt, Sal realizes that he is more interested in the experience of living as an outsider than being a father for Terry's son, and he knows that she deserves better (p. 15). It is his white middle-class background that makes him give up the idea of marrying Terry, despite his positive attitude towards other cultures and people: "All my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley" (*Road* 170). In this quotation we see that Sal is maybe not so subversive after

all, because he is not able to break with tradition and marry outside the limits of “square” conventions.

Towards the end of the novel it is obvious that the transition from vagabond Beats to family fathers produces varied results. For instance, Dean’s destiny seems dark as he is left alone when the other Beats more successfully adjust themselves to “square” society. Sal’s attempt is more fruitful. In New York he meets Laura, and it is love from first sight: “[T]here she was, the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long. We agreed to love each other madly” (*Road* 288). We see that he achieves his goal of finding a new partner, but the notion of “mad love” does not make the relationship seem especially stable and long-lasting.

It has now been suggested that the bohemian Beat life is a transitory stage between adolescence and the family concerns of adult life. When Dean shows Sal a few photographs of their friends’ families, Sal realizes that they are all entering a new phase in life. One day their children will look at the pictures and they will believe that their parents lived well-ordered “square” lives. Never will they be able to imagine that these parents used to be hard-drinking vagabond Beats pursuing girls all over the American continent (*Road* 239). For Sal, the road has finally come to an end. The initial search of girls and “kicks” has faded away and what will remain are only the quiet memories of a rebellious youth.

## Conclusion

My aim for this essay was to analyse the role women play for the male Beats in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and how women, love and marriage are viewed in this novel. The hypothesis that I argued for is that the male characters’ relationship to women is built upon an opposition between on one hand the restless Beat life and its search for “kicks”, and on the other hand the more traditional family life.

First I examined the American Beat Generation, thus placing the novel in its historical and social context. I found that it was an urban post-war subculture that consisted of young intellectuals that opposed “square” society and rejected values like the nuclear family and the oppressed sexuality. However, the Beats retained the sexist and negative view of women that was present in mainstream society, and Kerouac himself preferred to be viewed as a sexy ladies’ man rather than involving himself in political discussions.

From the analysis of “real” society I went on to look at the situation of the women in the text. I found that since the female characters are seldom focused on they are both marginalized and stereotyped. The male characters are active subjects and form a homosocial

culture in which male bonding is central. Moreover, I examined how the American society is viewed in the novel. I found that gender problems are a recurring issue and that the female characters are generally unhappy with their love life. The women in the novel either live in restricting relationships, or have to oppose the inequalities of society when they attempt to support their children alone.

Throughout the text the woman is objectified in two different ways, I argued. First there is the ever present male gaze, both in terms of the narrator's characterization of women and in terms of actions that the characters perform. Consequently, women become passive objects, reduced to stereotypes like "good girls" or "bad girls", whereas men are active subjects who enjoy the pleasure in gazing. Secondly, the male Beats' constant search for "kicks" automatically reduces the woman to an object of male desire. Dean's behaviour is a typical example of this, and he introduces Sal to the dehumanizing way of using the female body in order to obtain pleasure.

In addition I found that the objectification implies that women are "replaceable". Dean involves himself in a complicated pattern of marriages, children and extramarital relations. Also Sal goes through a number of casual acquaintances, but for him it is a transitory part of youth between his first and his second marriage. Dean, on the other hand, is trapped in a problematic life on the road with an increasing amount of paternal obligations. As a result, Galatea and a few other female friends get together and revolt against Dean and his irresponsible behaviour, which suggests a certain degree of feminist awareness.

The objectification of women was finally put in relation to the male characters' development from Beats to family fathers. I found that both Sal and Dean are concerned about the poor communication between men and women and that they dream of a future society with peace and understanding between the sexes. While sexist Dean wants a submissive woman, Sal prefers "true love" and someone to care about. Slowly the Beats adjust themselves to "square" society and form traditional nuclear families, but the transition proves to be hard. Sal finds a new and promising girlfriend, but their love is maybe a little too fierce to last long. Dean, however, is left alone because he is unable to make himself fit into "square" society.

It seems as if a solution to the discrepancy between life on the road and happy family life is actually suggested towards the end of the novel. Sal finally realizes that travelling can enrich and enlighten a person's life, but only for a limited time. With the help of the new experiences and the maturity obtained the urbane man can deal with "normal" life in a more creative way. The hedonistic search for "kicks" and the constant use and objectification of

women is a destructive path that leads to a future as a miserable and hated outcast. True love, marriage, children and the safety of a home is a better alternative, if not quite as exciting.

In conclusion, *On the Road* contains a rather traditional Western view of the woman in contrast to its subversive reputation as a Beat classic. Sal Paradise and his friends reject contemporary “square” values such as oppressed sexuality, but apply a strictly male perspective and therefore never transcend the old and sexist gender roles. Yet, can Kerouac really be blamed for being a child of his time? Seen as an exciting and inspiring travel account, it is easy to understand why *On the Road* still attracts new generations of readers.

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