

# The Attitude towards Women in Kerouac's Novel On the Road

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Štefić, Andrea

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2020

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:892396>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-09-12**



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Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
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**Odnos prema ženama u Kerouacovom romanu “Na putu”**

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Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

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Osijek, 2020

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor Jasna Poljak Rehlicki for guiding me through the process of writing this paper. Thanks for all the ideas, comments and words of encouragement. This experience has sure been different and unique due to the circumstances with the global pandemics. Thanks to good communication and patience, we managed to overcome potential challenges and successfully finish the paper in time.

I would also like to thank my parents who provided me with the opportunity to study what I dreamed of since I was a child. Thanks for the constant support and waits at the railway station. Many thanks to my sister who was always there for me, through thick and thin. Thank you for all the wise words and caring for me.

Many thanks to my roommate and best friend Elena Rodi with whom I shared the best and worst times in Osijek. Thank you for all the long talks and for understanding and accepting me at all times.

Thanks to all my colleagues and friends who went through this process of finishing college with me. Thanks for all the fun moments that made studying less difficult.

## IZJAVA

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U Osijeku, datum

21.7.2020.

JMBAG: 0122221477

Stefic Andree ime i prezime studenta

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## **Abstract**

The paper will discuss the Beat Generation, its historical background, aesthetics of writing, key figures of the movement, and their most prominent works, with special emphasis on features and publication of the novel *On the Road*. The thesis will also discuss the position of women throughout history and then explicitly analyze the attitudes of men towards women in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. It will debate the perspective, behavior, and language used to describe and talk about women by characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty in order to highlight the misogynic tendencies of the Beat Generation. It will also deal with the attitudes and behaviors towards men particularly by Marylou, Camille, Galatea, and Sal's aunt to point to the differences between them.

Keywords: The Beat Generation, rebellion, gender issues, sexist language, misogyny

## Introduction

After World War II, the United States emerged as an immense geo-political force with a lot of potential. Economic situation in country was blooming; people were employed, they were buying houses, and affording various commodities. There was a certain safety and stability in the average family life and people conformed to this kind of “nine to five” lifestyle.

However, not everyone found peace in such monotony. Young people started feeling caged and wanted something different and new for themselves in their future. From that urge to explore, rose the Beat movement that expressed their dissatisfaction and alienation from the mainstream society. They were seeking personal and sexual freedom and illumination through a cleansed state of mind brought about using sex, drugs, and practicing Eastern religions. Founders and representatives of the Beat movement are a group of post-World War II poets and novelists who all had one thing in common – they saw the world differently and were seeking change. The fundamental circle of the movement comprised of Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, and William Burroughs together with Neal Cassady, who was not a writer himself but had a great influence on the Beats. They all yearned for a fresh experience and were thus travelling a lot. The Beats sought better life in their adventures which they later described in their works.

This lifestyle was also reflected in their poetics. They wrote using a free, undisturbed, writing style which captured their flow of thought. The novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac was also written in a similar style. Kerouac used spontaneous prose method of writing which best captured the speed and spontaneity of their lifestyle. Sal Paradise, the main protagonist of the novel, goes on a spiritual awakening across the United States with his friend Dean Moriarty. Together, they do everything opposite than normally expected from men in the 1950s. They challenged the concept of male friendship and the idea of the man as a breadwinner. They travelled around without any regard for nuclear family or a steady job. Although they had rebelled against the expected roles of men in the society, they did not seem to have any issues with the roles of women as obedient housewives. In the novel, virtually all female characters are stripped off their identity, reduced to the concept of sexual objects, easily to be discarded, or presented as nagging housewives who drain men’s creative potential and freedom. However, this attitude can somehow be understood if one takes into account the context of the period. The Beats did not hate women; they just seemed to

enjoy each other's company more, especially since many of the Beats were homosexuals. This attitude towards women in the novel *On the Road* will further be analyzed throughout this paper.

The first chapter of the paper deals with the historical background and society of the 1950s in the United States. It also focuses on the emergence of the Beat movement, their poetics, key figures and works, and the way in which Beats treated women in general.

The second chapter of the paper gives an overview of the position of women and their fight for women's rights the U.S. history in order to highlight slow and gradual shift from women being entirely dependent on the man to being almost completely emancipated.

The third chapter covers the way in which men treat women in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. It particularly puts an emphasis on the characters of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise and their attitude and behavior towards women. The second part of the chapter deals with the way in which women treat men and how they see their position in relationships and marriages.

The paper concludes with the idea that men in the novel and the Beats generally treated women in a way that reflects the historical circumstances and the position of women in the 1950s U.S.

# 1. The Beat Generation

## 1.1. Historical Background

Firstly, in order to better understand the Beats, their worldview, and their actions, the paper will explain the historical background in the United States in the 1950s. *Encyclopedia Britannica* writes that after the end of World War II a great deal of the U.S. military was demolished and taken apart. There have been severe casualties among people as well. However, their navy, army, and air force remained the most powerful in the world, and the ownership over the atomic weapons granted them great security. So, despite the severe losses, Americans finished the war as one of the leading world powers. At the same time, the U.S. government had new concerns about the great savings accumulated during the war. They feared it could lead to inflation or even next depression. Cohen in her article “A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America,” writes that the citizens were extremely cautious about the money they saved during the war and did not spend as much as the government wanted. Therefore, the U.S. started encouraging a mass consumer economy telling its people that the mass consumption was not a personal choice, but rather their responsibility as citizens to contribute to the improvement of living standards of all American citizens (236). *Encyclopedia Britannica* further explains that the U.S. cancelled the war contracts and laid off defense workers. As a result, there was a lot of work force available that was employed by the manufacturers and the production of consumer goods began. There were millions of job opportunities available, people were working and earning money. This entire situation led to an economic growth which provided a more stable living situation for many Americans.

The economic stability greatly reshaped American society. Baughman et al. suggest in their article “The 1950s: Lifestyles and Social Trends: Overview” that one of the social trends that emerged at that period was the baby boom. It started immediately after the war and continued throughout the decade. People had a safe living situation and well-paying jobs, so they started forming families. In the period between 1948 to 1953, more children were born than in the preceding thirty years (262-263). Moreover, in 1954 the U.S. experienced the biggest population increase ever. Some feared the ability of the society to handle so many new Americans, but each new American meant a new consumer which provided people with hope in an even more growing economy. In addition to the baby boom, there were many immigrants coming to the U.S. as well.

Many came from Europe, over 275,000 Mexicans became U.S. citizens, and thousands Koreans immigrated as well (335).

Baughman et al. further write that America in the 1950s was not just a fast-growing society, but also a society on the move. Cars became affordable and since forty-one-thousand miles of interstate roads were constructed, Americans felt the urge to travel. Efficient routes that connected major cities were made and people were able to travel from one side of the country to another. Families were able to visit national parks and they became popular as vacation destinations. With that, the Holiday Inn chain of motels prospered since the travelers needed a place to stay and drive-in business was also on the rise, which allowed for people to get a meal or even watch a movie from the comfort of their car. When parking in the cities became cluttered and more difficult to find, shopping malls started to emerge and people got into habit of spending their time strolling along the malls, buying often unnecessary commodities (335).

Carlisle in his book *Postwar America* writes that automobiles along with the television and radio made the biggest change to American family life. Radio and television created a habit of sitting together in the evenings and watching TV shows as a family. Together with popular music, radio and television brought cultural conformity. Families in the suburbs considered leisure time as family time, enjoying their time in the family room with board games, toys, stereos, and sport equipment (26). Rose in her article “The Two-Income Family” writes that in that period women stayed home, while men were the main breadwinners. The decision for women to work was often economically based. They had limited employment opportunities and would only work to provide extra items for the children or a bigger house. They were taught to be happy by being housewives (343). Baughman et al. add that the feminine ideal of the 1950s was to be a mother and a perfect wife. Those who would be unmarried at the age of thirty were considered odd and were viewed with suspicion. American girls received this type of domestic training from the early childhood. They were not taught to seek personal fulfillment through a career, but rather by supporting their husbands (262).

Carlisle further writes that it was a period of conformity and high schools promoted uniformity by imposing dress codes and teaching children to comply to social rules. Even though majority of teenagers never rebelled against parental authority directly, they still did so through music and fads. Around 27 000 young people enrolled to colleges studying for a better future.

Although it may seem that, on the surface, everything functioned perfectly and the families were happy, it was not like that for young people. Young generations of the 1950s felt suffocated and caged in by this kind of lifestyle. They watched their parents' daily routine and yearned for something new and fresh. In addition, they blamed older generations for destruction, wars, and the use of the atomic bomb to end World War II (60).

The members of the counterculture on the rise were resolved to break down all social barriers that prevented them from living the lives they wanted. The birth of that counterculture is often associated with the publication of *The Town and the City* (1951) by Jack Kerouac, who six years later coined the term Beat Generation. The Beats were known for their love of everything bohemian and many of them used various drugs in order to give freedom to their "inner spirits" (Carlisle 60). *Encyclopedia Britannica* further adds that they expressed their alienation and dissatisfaction from conventional society through a particular style of dress, manners (using various swear words), and generally using the so-called "hip" vocabulary that they adopted from jazz musicians of the period. They advocated personal freedom and release, sexual freedom, purification, and illumination that would be achieved through cleansed state of mind brought about by jazz, sex, drugs, or by practicing eastern religions (Zen Buddhism). The Beats often traveled, which could symbolically represent their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs at home and the need to seek change and better, freer life. While traveling, they gathered experiences and new worldviews that they put down on paper and later published. Russel in his book *The Beat Generation* writes that as the Beats and their lifestyle became internationally recognized, other groups of people like artists, musicians, and writers reflected in their worldview and hoped they would change general mindset of the people of that time from materialistic, "square," and uniformed to free-spirited, self-aware, and spiritual (58).

## 1.2. Key Figures and Works

As mentioned earlier, Petrus in his article “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and its Response to the Beat Generation” writes that the term “Beat Generation” refers to a group of post-World War II poets and novelists who had different worldviews than their contemporary fellow writers. They did not want to live the life in tune with the materialistic, conformist, and repressive society and instead sought higher forms of spiritual regeneration that was achieved through sensual experiences. This group of writers includes Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, who first met in 1944 in New York City and formed the heart of this literary movement. Some of the less known, but also important Beats include John Clellon Holmes and Gregory Corso. In addition to this circle of writers, there were also Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, Carl Solomon, and Peter Orlovsky, who were of great influence to the prominent works of the Beats, despite not being the authors themselves. Although Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs had difficulties with persuading publishers to publish their work until 1956, the first decade of the Beats was not an uneventful one (3-4).

Russell writes about another important Beat writer, Allen Ginsberg. He noticed from an early age that he differed from his peers by his homosexual tendencies. However, he never acted upon them until he got into college. In Colombia, he met and fell in love with Lucien Carr, who never returned his love in a sexual way. However, they did have a great time visiting gay clubs and various jazz clubs. Carr’s intellect and sophistication made a huge impact on Ginsberg. It was Carr who introduced Ginsberg to Kerouac and Burroughs. Being much older, Burroughs was a major influence on Ginsberg. He taught him about history, literature, and anthropology. Another great influence on Ginsberg was Cassady, who provided Ginsberg with the homosexual experience. However, it was a turbulent and unhappy relationship since Ginsberg had to compete with other men and women to get the attention of the bisexual Cassady. After he was discovered in bed with Kerouac, he got suspended from college. Soon after, he got arrested for being involved in a theft. As a result, Ginsberg got sent to a psychiatric clinic for a treatment. There, he met Carl Solomon who later helped him and Kerouac with publishing their works. The turning point of his career was the 1955 public reading of *Howl* which helped Ginsberg gain public recognition for his work. Later, he traveled across the world, meeting various poets and artists and indulging in the counter-cultural

way of life with sexual freedom, drugs and poetry. He published various poetry collections, including *Reality Sandwiches* and *Airplane Dreams* (34-37).

Another important Beat writer is William Burroughs. Russel points out that Burroughs did very good at school. He graduated from Harvard, majoring in English Literature. He tried to join the military when the war began, but got rejected due to his psychiatric file. He was aware of his homosexual tendencies and got into relationships with other men. However, when one of them rejected him, he chopped off his little finger which led to having a psychiatric report. Through Lucien Carr he became friends with Ginsberg and Kerouac whom he impressed with his knowledge of history and literature. He also met Herbert Huncke who provided him with his first experience with drugs and bohemian lifestyle. Eventually, he settled in Tangiers and began writing seriously. First, he published a novel *Junkie* in 1953. Soon after, he finished a sequel *Queer*, and also published his most important book *Naked Lunch* (45-48).

Neal Cassady was also important for the Beat circle. Russell points out that his life was greatly dominated by speed (both the drug and the way of living). As a teenager he used to steal cars, drive them until he got bored of them, and then steal new ones. He came to New York in 1947, where he met Ginsberg and Kerouac. He had a rebellious nature and a free spirit which was essentially what the Beat Generation was about. He loved to travel and enjoyed many travels with Kerouac, inspiring him with his wit and stream-of-consciousness conversations. He published his autobiography and a collection of letters, although he did not publish anything while the Beat movement was on its peak (Russel 60-61).

Finally, there is Jack Kerouac whose aptitude for sports got him got him accepted into Columbia University in New York. There, he met the new members of the university; Lucien Carr, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and the rest of the circle who would become the core of the Beat Generation. Kerouac's first literary effort began in 1946 when he started working on *The Town and the City*, published in 1950. During that period, he met Neal Cassady, whose energy and enthusiasm impressed Kerouac. Cassady introduced him to the life on the road and the two started traveling across the United States without much purpose. These travels inspired Kerouac to start working on *On the Road* and capture the immediacy and speed of their traveling, using spontaneous prose as his writing method. In 1953 he took amphetamine to enhance his creativity, and in three nights he wrote the novel *The Subterraneans*. With the absence of his close friends, he became depressed,



which was also the side effect of the heavy drinking and drug abuse. His solitude led him to write *Desolation Angles* (20-23).

Elmwood in her article “The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” writes that the book *On the Road* could best be described as Kerouac’s existential travelogue in which the first person narrator Sal Paradise takes several trips through the United States in search of spiritual awakening and finding the “it.” This search for “it” could probably be described as finding the meaning of life and purpose of one’s existence. The author explores that by going on a spiritual quest and by looking for an alternative lifestyle and set of values which would define him as an individual who decided not to comply to the *status quo* in the society’s values (Elmwood 340).

Šedrlová, in her thesis *Representation of Female Characters in Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and Its Film Adaptations* contends that the novel *On the Road* is one of the most prominent “road” narratives in the English language. It follows the adventures primarily of the author’s alter ego Sal Paradise, and his best friend and leader in their escapades Dean Moriarty, who is an embodiment of author’s big influence and a friend in real life, Neal Cassady (19). It can, thus, be said that *On the Road* is partly an autobiography since many of the characters are based on the real people (Old Bull Lee is based on Burroughs and Carlo Marx is a personification of Ginsberg). Elmwood further explains that the book focuses on the blossoming, tender, and one could even say homoerotic friendship between the narrator and his mad, boisterous, and rebellious friend Dean (340). Altogether, they make three long and wild trips to the West coast and one to Mexico, therefore gaining many new experiences and moving the limits of personal freedom.

Shea in her article “Jack Kerouac's Famous Scroll, 'On the Road' Again” states that according to the legend, it only took Kerouac three weeks to write *On the Road*, allegedly typing it without many breaks on 120-foot paper roll. Kerouac wrote exceptionally fast, typing approximately one hundred words per minute. He believed that the process of replacing the sheets of paper in the typewriter would heavily slow him down and get in the way of his flow, so he devised a scroll of paper method of writing. However, in reality it took Kerouac much more time to complete the process from the first letter on the scroll to its publication. Along the way, he went through more rewrites of the story and several rejections from various publishers. It took him six years to find a

publisher, Sterling Lord, who was captivated by the novel and who recognized Kerouac as an important new voice in American literature.

### 1.3. Poetics

Jessmer in her thesis *Containing the Beat: An Analysis of the Press Coverage of the Beat Generation During the 1950s* contends that the Beats were aware that in order to produce something new and progressive that would differentiate them from their predecessors, they had to inhabit a fundamentally different style of writing. That included different forms of narrative, different methods of writing, and a distinctive technique of writing (24). Carmona in his dissertation *Keeping the Beat: The Practice of a Beat Movement* adds that the Beats were profoundly devoted to finding new forms of writing which would serve as means of freeing what they felt inside themselves. The freedom that jazz musicians expressed through improvisations without looking at notes, the Beats manifested through the complete freedom in writing (89-90). Donahue mentions that Kerouac explained in his *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose* that the beauty of writing is in sketching language as undistributed flow from the mind, which he later connected to the blowing of jazz musicians. Many of the Beats' poems were written in a rhythmic way that had a natural flow. For example, Kerouac's novel *Visions of Gerard* have concentrated phrases similar to repeated riffs of musicians. Those phrases often repeat the same idea and when read aloud, they are very rhythmic, and have a sort of musicality which emphasizes particular phrases (5). Shortly, many aspects of the Beats' writing style can be compared to compositional and performative models of jazz in the 1950s.

Thaisz in his thesis *Poetry of the Beat Generation* mentions that the Beats wrote using a free verse, meaning they did not take into regard limitations of meters and rhymes. Their style of writing reflected their general attitude towards poetry. They were rebelling against restrictions of form, meters, and rhymes. This free verse of their poems reminds of the haiku, which was popular among the Beats due to their fascination with Eastern religions and Zen Buddhism. The traditional haiku has a strictly defined structure in which each line has a specific number of syllables. However, the Beats had little regard for strict forms and traditional rules of poetry. For that reason, Jack Kerouac broke the rule about the number of syllables in each line. In his *Book of Haikus*, he wrote nameless haikus obeying just the basic rule of having three lines. For example:

Little pieces of ice  
in the moonlight  
Snow, thousands of em (53)

As Kerouac was fascinated by jazz musicians of the time, this adjustment of the form in his haiku could symbolically represent the dash between two breathes of a jazz musician (39).

Furthermore, Thaisz mentions that the Beats followed their flow of thoughts, run-on lines, and slang language. Their vocabulary full of slang words has its roots in the underground world of New York. Words like *hip*, *dig*, or *square* are in connection with 1940s New York jazz scene. In order to enhance their flow of mind while writing, the Beats looked up to the jazz musicians who often used drugs like Benzedrine or heroine. For example, Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* on Benzedrine, William Burroughs used heroine, and Allen Ginsberg was on various drugs like marijuana or LSD. Ginsberg used amphetamine injections and morphine to write his long poem *Kaddish*. With the help of drugs, the social restraints faded out and the Beats started using vulgar language more and more often. Allen Ginsberg was the first to break the language taboo in his poem *Howl* which, in a way, revolutionized American poetry. He shocked readers with his use of sexually explicit language, which included many homosexual references. The authorities declared the poem obscene and arrested Ferlinghetti who was its publisher. In the end, Ginsberg won the trial with the support of several well-known poets who testified in favor of Ferlinghetti. This event popularized the poem and the book and it changed the way people viewed poetry. Poets were no longer expected to beautify the reality and use proper vocabulary (37-45).

#### 1.4. The Beats and the Women

As mentioned, in the 1950s, men performed their role of a breadwinner, while women stayed home being housewives. Tan in her article “Being the Beats: How Did the Beat Generation Shape Ideas of Gender in 1950s America?” further suggests that the nuclear family became the ideal of that period that everyone wanted to achieve. However, the Beats had a different vision. They opposed the *status quo* of men in society by challenging the idea of the man as a breadwinner and completely changing the concept of male friendship. This rebellion against the accepted norm in the society is mostly visible in Kerouac’s *On the Road* where the main, male character Sal does everything opposite of what would normally be expected of a man. Sal and his newly met friend Dean travel across the United States with no regard for providing for the nuclear family and having a steady job (Tan 60-61).

The Beats also redefined masculinity in the 1950s by putting great emphasis on the male friendships over any other relationship. At that time, men who would not live up to the expected breadwinner role of providing for their family, were, in a sense, regarded as not fully masculine. However, the Beats had little regard for this and defined what masculinity meant to them through the friendships and relationships they had with one another. It is obvious that their disobeying of marital roles did not mean losing human attachments or loneliness, but, on the contrary, they, as close male friends, connected very deeply with each other. Such way of life they chose is clearly visible in *On the Road*, but also in Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Both the novel and the poem emphasize the importance of male friendships and their search for unique experience through traveling and indulging in various substances. As some of them had homosexual or bisexual tendencies (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady), they also had sexual relationships with each other, for example Ginsberg, who had sexual relations with both Cassady and Kerouac. Ginsberg explicitly wrote about sexuality and homosexuality in *Howl* and the poem clearly reflects his fearless rebellion against social norms and expectations of masculinity (Tan 62-63).

While the Beats rebelled against the expected roles of men in the society, they did not seem to have an issue with the roles of women as housewives. On the contrary, they entirely diminished the role of women in society. For instance, William Burroughs was well known for being a misogynist and for comparing women to junk. On one occasion, he shot a gin glass off the head of his wife, killing her in the process (Tan 64).

A typical representation of misogynistic behavior towards women are the novel *On the Road* and the poem *Howl*. In *On the Road*, women characters presented as objects that men use when they feel like it and are almost always connected to either a home or a man. This is visible at the very beginning of the novel that opens with Sal splitting up with his wife. However, this event is not presented as something significant or something that should be discussed in more detail. On the contrary, it is interrupted by Sal thoughts about Dean Moriarty, suggesting that Kerouac valued male friendships over wives and family life. Similarly, in *Howl* the readers can notice a disparaging approach towards women as well, particularly in the use of explicit, even vulgar language. In the poem, women are stripped of their identity and presented as expandable commodities. This lack of respect in the Beats' works reflects the way they viewed women in the real life (Tan 64-65).

Another thing that proves the Beats' disregard of lies in the fact that the Beat circle lacked female writers. Although there were a few excellent female Beat writers of the time, like Diane di Prima, Joyce Johnson, and Anne Waldman, the spotlight had always been on male writers. When asked why there are no women writers in their circle, Ginsberg replied that it was not their fault that there were no women of genius in the group further, and this further strengthening their disrespect for women (Tan 66).

After analyzing the Beats and their behavior and attitudes towards women, one could conclude that the Beats despised and disrespected women on purpose. However, this thesis will argue that they did not have any intentions to discard them from their circle because they wholeheartedly detested them, but rather suggest that the Beats started socializing spontaneously without the need to include women. What is more, many of them were homosexuals, therefore they did not desire the company of women. Moreover, it has to be taken into consideration that visiting clubs and traveling were fundamentally regarded masculine in the 1950s U.S. Hence, despite the fact that they were progressive in their pursuit of freedom and exploration of sexuality, they were extremely regressive in their attitude towards women, which will be further explored in the thesis by the analysis of male/female relationships in Kerouac's novel *On the Road* treated.

## 2. The Position of Women Throughout the U.S. History

Mauk and Oakland write in their book *American Civilization* that women and some minority groups of the United States today have a special status in the society because of the discrimination in the past. Throughout the many years of American history, society that was dominated by men, has forced women, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and people belonging to LGBT community into an oppressed position. As a consequence, all of these groups have their own histories which people often view with different kinds of opinion and whose government policies are repeatedly changed even though they make constitutive component of the history of the nation. They have shaped the history of America with their fights for equality and standing up to discrimination. All of those inequalities have led to group differences among attitudes, earnings, employment opportunities, health, crime, and housing. The discrepancy between ideals of the nation and the oppressive reality has bothered the nations' moral sense and fostered a very demanding but relentless progress towards more equal society (84).

Mauk and Oakland further mention that, historically looking, English common law regulated women's legal status in the United States. Until the mid-1800s, women experienced "civil death" after getting married, meaning they existed legally only through their husbands. They did not have the right to possess an estate, control their salaries, or ratify any contracts. Official separation from their spouses, procured only in extreme instances, was much easier to attain for men than for women. Unmarried women were expected to devote to their father's or brother's volition until they got married. Asserting that women were physically fragile and less intelligent, men maintained women's dependency on them. However, some examples that contradicted such uniform and conventional attitude towards women existed. On the East coast there was a scarcity of male work force, which meant that unmarried women and widows had to fill in the traditionally men's jobs. In addition, on the western frontier, women's competence and skill was just as essential and necessary as men's. From the first colonial days, a lot of women in America have worked. Before the period of industrial revolution, a lot of work on handicrafts was done at home and women were mostly the ones to do that job. When the industrial revolution occurred, women were in a majority among workers in New England textile mills. Up until the Civil War period, women worked in more than one hundred occupations that required less responsibility and skill than men, and earned approximately one fourth of men's salary. Women were the first workers who protested

for higher salaries and demanded improved working conditions. While men showed little concern about such questions, women joined labor movements and established their own unions (73).

Mauk and Oakland further write about the situation for women in the United States during the nineteenth century. During 1848, two women's rights activists, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, led the first convention for women's rights in New York. The convention's Declaration of Sentiments demanded divorce and property rights, the right to vote and educational and employment opportunities. Thenceforth, women's rights movement worked on achieving set goals by holding regular conventions. Susan B. Anthony advocated women's status in marriage and divorce cases, and their economic rights in New York state law. However, a few years later, her efforts were annulled. Despite that, women started getting jobs as teachers, and during the First World War worked as nurses and secretaries in government offices. Through the Thirteenth Amendment, feminists joined the prospering campaign for the abolition of slavery in constitution, but the movement split in two when it became apparent that only African American men were given the right to vote in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. One group decided to seek woman's rights through federal suffrage amendment, while the other focused on winning the vote state by state (85-86).

Regarding the position of women during the twentieth century, Mauk and Oakland mention that the two groups then came together for ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote in all elections in 1920. After the suffrage was achieved, many women's organizations separated, and the economic position for women slowly improved, partly because of the conflict inside the movement. The following decades, social reformers for women's rights demanded such measures that would treat women as a special category, and managed to pass the laws that limited women's occupational choices and working hours in order to protect their health and safety. This kind of protectionist attitude, prevented women from working in higher paying jobs and basically implied that women are the weaker sex thus further increasing the gender inequality. In order to remove them, activists proposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Though many feared that ERA would jeopardize the protective legislation for women, such accusations and generally conservative view led to inactivity of the women's movement. After World War II, many married women were employed and continued to work during the following decades. For example, in 1940 only fifteen percent of married women had jobs, and by 1970 nearly



fifty percent were employed. Therefore, when the next women's rights movement arose in the 60s and 70s, protesting against the idea that women should be housewives, many Americans were supportive. Motivated by African Americans' demands for civil rights, the women's movement successfully proposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which was the first such legislation that prevented sexual and racial discrimination. By the middle of the decade, women's movement activism and persistence led to passing the laws that provided equality in the job market, acceptance into the higher education, equal pay for the equal amount of work, and equal availability of credits and loans (86-87). Despite all this, women in the U.S. still deal with inequality because of the still omnipresent traditional and old-fashioned attitude (Mauk and Oakland 77).

### 3. The Attitude towards Women in *On the Road*

Šedrllová, in her thesis *Representation of Female Characters in Jack Kerouac's On the Road and Its Film Adaptations* contends that *On the Road* belongs to the road-narratives which all have a common approach towards women. Female characters, if there are any at all, are represented as some sort of amusement devices that can be abandoned when men feel like hitting the road. And if they do go on a trip, they continually take a back seat to men's adventures. Women are assigned only a marginal role to the story, mostly remaining in the background of the main events and never being the center of significant moments in the heroes pursue (27). Tan in her article "Being the Beats: How Did the Beat Generation Shape Ideas of Gender in 1950s America?" writes that in *On the Road* women are presented as irrelevant and unessential in comparison to the friendships that men form. To exemplify that, we can see in the beginning of the story that Sal starts talking about splitting up with his wife and the sentence after interrupts it by the story about Dean. He makes it quite clear from the opening of the story that his male friendships are much more important than any of the women in his life (65).

Partoens in her thesis *From Beat to Bad Connections: Joyce Johnson's (Feminist) Response to Kerouac's On the Road* claims that Kerouac does not go into exploration of female mind and character, but rather presents them as sexual property. Because of that, women stay in the marginal positions in the story and their personality and identity are mostly defined by their physical appearance. Another unusual thing is that many female characters in the novel do not even have names, but are rather described through their looks and their narrow mental capabilities (19). This is visible in the following quote when Sal describes his meeting of a nameless girl: "Her beautiful body was matched only by her idiot mind" (Kerouac 93).

Ghosh in his paper "The De-humanization of Women in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*" writes that the phenomenon of objectifying women through their physical appearance repeats as a pattern throughout the whole novel. Almost all the women that appear in the novel, are first described by Sal on the basis of their looks. For example, the first time Sal describes Dean's first wife, Marylou, he says: "beautiful little sharp chick Marylou" (Kerouac 5). Afterwards, Sal goes into a little more detail in depicting her as a: "pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair" and "smoky blue country eyes" (Kerouac 4). Later on, he adds: "outside of being a sweet little girl, she

was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things” (Kerouac 4). After being left by Dean one more time, Sal harshly criticizes her, telling that he “saw what a whore she was” (Kerouac 100) even though he was the one who would almost always leave her. Enevold in her article “Men and Women on the Move: Dramas on the Road” adds that Kerouac’s representation of women as whores is once again represented when Dean, Sal, and their friend Stan go to Mexico and socialize with prostitutes. Here, women remain to be bought and consumed for male pleasure only (Enevold 409).

Birkin in her article “Marylou and the Portrayal of Women in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” claims that men in the novel only approve of women who perform domestic duties and criticize those who do not comply to that type of lifestyle. For example, Dean often demands that Marylou should do household chores: “the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor” (Kerouac 4). According to Sal and Dean, a perfect woman should be obedient, passive, and dutiful housewife. This attitude is visible from the quote where Sal and Dean describe “the sweetest woman in the world” saying that “she never asked Walter where he’d been, what time it was, nothing. She never said a word,” also adding that” she never said a harsh word and never [made] a complaint (Kerouac 118). This concept of keeping women domesticated and submissive is presented in the book as the perfect behavior for women. They should always be at home, waiting to serve their men, while men can go on the road whenever they want (Birkin 20).

Ghosh emphasizes that the novel never places women and men on their “territory”; it rather seems as if women do not have personal lives of their own and just sit back and wait for their men. In addition, there is only one example of female relationship that male characters actually address. Namely, when Sal visits Galatea Dunkel in San Francisco, he realizes that she is frequently socializing with Dean’s wife Camille. Surprized, he comments: “I suddenly realized that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of the men” (Kerouac 109). This clearly shows that male characters view women as incapable of having personal opinion or sharing a conversation together outside of their oversight (Ghosh 3).

Furthermore, Ghosh continues that Marylou is probably the only female character in the novel that accompanies men on their road adventures. Although she goes on a few trips with Dean and Sal, it is obvious that she does not do it for some sort of personal fulfillment, but rather because she loves Dean. Sal clearly points that out: “when she looked at his hangjawed bony face with its

male self-containment... she knew he was too mad” (Kerouac 96). This absence of women on the road among men’s adventures is partly because road is considered as male space. Men are allowed to go on trips with their companions to rest and have a good time, while women are expected to stay home (Ghosh 2).

Furthermore, Birkin asserts that many female characters, for example Marylou, are victims of objectification and the male gaze. If they are not regarded as submissive housewives who will stay domesticated, they are viewed and labeled as “whores” (20). Olsson in his thesis *Male View of the Women in Beat Generation – A Study of Gender in Jack Kerouac’s On the Road* writes that the term “male gaze” has origins in media theory, where it was used during gender studies in advertisements during the early nineteenth century. As feminists claim, the term refers to “the pleasure of looking given to the active male subject while the woman remains the passive object” (Olsson 10). Instead of being their true self with their own identity, women are portrayed as men wish them to be. This type of approach toward women separates them into good and bad girls, which is a simplified version of femininity and implies that women are defined according to the men’s attitude towards them, rather than their own character and personality (10).

In her work, Šedrlová focuses on the visual representation of female characters in film adaptations of the novel. There, she stresses the notion of visual pleasure, in which female characters only represent sexual objects for the male characters in the movie and for the viewers. Men have a role of an active observer, while women are in the passive role of an object, having a sole purpose of being gazed into by men. The female figure is thus created according to the fantasy of the man that is projected onto all women, which too happened in the novel (38-39). For example, when Sal describes one of (many) Dean’s girls, he says: “She was a big, sexy brunette - as Garcia said, “Something straight out of Degas, and generally like a beautiful Parisian coquette” (Kerouac 143). In another instance, Sal comments: “I took up a conversation with a gorgeous country girl wearing a low-cut cotton blouse that displayed the beautiful sun-tan on her breast tops” (Kerouac 141).

Partoens writes that the male gaze is type of sexual harassment of women since it is a way of evaluating women’s physical appearance which is not in women’s control. Kerouac makes no effort at all to portray female characters as active participants in the novel, but rather emphasizes the inequality between the genders by the notion of the “male gaze” (45). Therefore, the novel is

full of verbs visually describing men's staring at women: "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" (Kerouac 49). The reader can notice that Sal's description of the Mexican girl is narrated strictly from the male's perspective; by describing her breasts as "true" he points out that they should be as such to appeal to men. However, according to the theory of objectification, "reducing women to the passive object of the male gaze can result in them internalizing this outsider view and beginning to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance" (Partoens 45). This happens in the novel when Dean's friends appear while Camille is naked. Rather than being embarrassed, she keeps on lying in the bed, not changing the position and it is clear that she is not bothered by being sexually objectified (Partoens 45).

Šedrlová, points out that this kind of objectifying procedure in describing male characters in the novel is much less frequent than with female characters. For instance, we find out Dean's physical appearance after we learn what his origins are and his preoccupations in life. Furthermore, the only physical description for Sal's friend Carlo Marx is given on the page six (that he wears glasses), even though he is mentioned already on the first page. Moreover, the only description given for Terry's brother is that he was "a wild buck Mexican hotcat with a hunger for booze, and a great good kid" (qtd. in Šedrlová 67). By focusing on the physical appearance of women characters and by empathizing internal attributes of male characters, Kerouac adds to the gender inequality in his novel. Finally, as Ghosh concludes, there is a paradox in the Beats' revolt. While they were striving to outgrow the repressive, uniform, close-minded society, they forgot to include the treatment of women into their revolutionist way of life (6).

### 3.1. Sal and Women

Ghosh writes that the situation with Sal and his women is quite arguable. It is quite clear that his attitude towards life and therefore, women, is greatly influenced by Dean's way of life. Even though Sal sometimes does not approve or agree with particular actions of Dean, he never questions or opposes them. Deep down, Sal has very traditional values towards women and marriage and would like to eventually get married and settle down (5). The novel opens with the line: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up" (Kerouac 4) meaning that Sal was a family man. Dean becomes an antidote for Sal's writer's block caused by the tranquilizing married existence: "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road" (Kerouac 4).

Birkin asserts that Sal, as the first-person narrator, puts great emphasis on the physical appearance of the women he meets. For instance, he described Marylou as a "beautiful sharp little chick" (Kerouac 7) and "a golden beauty" (Kerouac 94). These types of descriptions are very similar to all the others that Sal gives of women throughout the novel. For example, it is again visible when he describes his girlfriend in the West, Terry: her "breasts stuck out straight and true" and also of Dean's third wife, Inez, to whom Sal refers to as "a big, sexy brunette" (qtd. in Birkin 18).

In addition to this shallow way of assessing a woman, Šedrllová, also writes about Sal's preference for teenage and underage girls. According to data from 2007 available on *Children and Youth in History* website, the age of consent differs from sixteen to eighteen in different states. *On the Road* involves frequent instances of male characters lusting after young girls and even sexually engaging with them (as in the Mexican brothel). Nevertheless, at the time when Dean marries Marylou, she is only fifteen years old which makes her only three years older than Lolita in Nabokov's novel which was published in 1958 in New York. However, *On the Road* was not as controversial as *Lolita*, which was repeatedly forbidden in various countries for many years. Although Sal is heavily drawn to teenage girls, he is generally less likely to act on his appetite, which might be because of Kerouac's own upbringing in a Catholic spirit. One time, he even tells Dean not to touch Frankie's thirteen-year-old daughter, Janet. Moreover, when they visit the Mexican brothel he goes for a thirteen-year-old instead of the sixteen-year-old girl who first attracted him (Šedrllová, 66-67). Dean does not act on his urges for young girls out of shame: "At

one point the mother of the little colored girl - not colored, but dark - came in to hold a brief and mournful convocation with her daughter. When I saw that, I was too ashamed to try for the one I really wanted” (Kerouac 166). Birkin further writes that this type of degrading approach and tendency to infantilize women is also present in Sal’s calling women “girls.” He describes Marylou as “a sweet little girl” (Kerouac 4) and says for Babe that “she looked exactly like the little girl she had been” (Kerouac 154). In this way, Sal patronizes women and alludes that they do not intellectually seem they age, which is quite insulting towards them (Birkin 18).

Furthermore, Birkin mentions that Sal turns out to be quite a hypocrite when comparing how he behaves towards women and what he seeks in a woman to marry. While he can sleep around with countless women without hesitation, he expects for his perfect woman to marry “pure,” alluding that he would like her to be virgin, untouched, and saving herself just for him. At the end of the novel when he finds the woman he was dreaming about, he describes her as having “pure and innocent dear eyes” (Kerouac 176). This type of reasoning greatly resembles the so called Madonna-whore complex which posits that it is allowed for men to have sexual relations with as many women or “whores” as they want, but would only marry a “pure” women that has not yet been touched by other men (Birkin 19). One of the most shocking instances in the novel is the scene when Sal and Dean consider pimping out Marylou: “It was cold outside. A college boy was sweating at the sight of luscious Marylou and trying to look unconcerned. Dean and I consulted but decided we weren’t pimps” (Kerouac 95). Though they did not act on the idea, it clearly reflects the utter disregard for Marylou and women in general.

Very often, when Sal saw a woman he would think of sex: “Along about three in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hard joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted somebody to help her drive to Iowa” (Kerouac 11). Sal would think that every woman who approached him wanted to be sexually involved with him. However, deep down he was searching for a woman to love, for someone to settle down with, as is clear from the quote: “I spun around till I was dizzy; I thought I’d fall down as in a dream, clear off the precipice. Oh where is the girl I love? I thought, and looked everywhere, as I had looked everywhere in the little world below” (Kerouac 48).

Sal had a childlike naiveté and honesty when it came to the women he met. He would see something good in every woman and thus believe that every woman was perfect for him:

I went into a chili joint and the waitress was Mexican and beautiful. I ate, and then I wrote her a little love note on the back of the bill. The chili joint was deserted; everybody was somewhere else, drinking. I told her to turn the bill over. She read it and laughed. It was a little poem about how I wanted her to come and see the night with me. (Kerouac 23)

Despite his reckless behavior greatly influenced by Dean, he was a hopeless romantic who searched for his true love. He cherished a deep and meaningful conversation before engaging into a sexual relationship with a woman:

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 moment is precious. (Kerouac 36)

Sal proves that he cares about traditional ways of treating women, but is most of the time distracted by Dean's ways with women which he then subconsciously inherits. Although he meets many different women on his journeys, it is only those who love to engage into a more meaningful conversation that really capture his interest. Deep down, he seeks a deeper emotional connection with women than it might appear at the first glance:

I took up a conversation with a gorgeous 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. (Kerouac 141)

Sal yearned for women with a soul, who knew what they wanted from life and were sure about it. The country girl from the quote spoke of things that society indoctrinated her to want and Sal noticed it: "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 (Kerouac 141). Sal believed that there is something that she truly wanted and desired and he tried to get it out of her, but with little result.

Olsson writes that as the novel progresses and characters grow older, their attitude towards women changes. It can be concluded that at the end of the book, Sal and his road buddies realize that searching for "kicks" and living for the road adventures are ultimately not the chosen ways to spend their lives. As a matter of fact, they go through a slow, but quite radical change and development of character. They go from enjoyment of the uncertainty of the road life to searching for a slower, settled-down kind of life. That is visible when Sal mentions that Dean's friend "was midway between the challenge of his new wife and the challenge of his old Denver poolhall gang leader" (qtd. in Olsson 15). When Sal separates with Dean at the end of the book, he and his new girlfriend settle down in New York and he has no desire for wild road life or multiple sexual partners anymore. He is finally ready for a committed relationship.

### 3.2. Dean and Women

Olsson writes that Dean Moriarty is undeniably the biggest womanizer of all male characters in the book. What is more, his way with women and relationships is a great representation of the Beat vagabond life, a lifestyle that does not care for others. For him, the meaning of life is to satisfy his two primary instincts: sexual drive and hunger. Therefore, his life consists of chasing as many such life experiences as possible. He lives in the present moment, never looks back and is always on the lookout for an opportunity to engage in a sexual intercourse (12). Ghosh asserts that Dean is depicted as a portrayal of a classic patriarchal man, gigolo and someone who lacks feelings of responsibility towards other people. As Galatea Dunkel put it: "You haven't had any sense of responsibility for anyone" (Kerouac 113). Throughout the novel, he would frequently abandon his wives and children without any moral sense. However, Sal as a narrator completely overlooks his flaws and sees his western, rugged masculinity as some sort of an idealistic picture of a man (Ghosh 3). He is so confident with himself and his sexuality that he will greet the person at the door naked, without knowing who is behind the door "I stood in the door. Dean opened it stark naked" (Kerouac 28). For what he knew, it could be anyone, but that is something that did not bother him.

Olsson stresses that Dean has been looking for "kicks" from when he was a young boy. Kerouac explains his chasing the girls for enjoyment in a couple of passages. For instance, in his teenage years "His specialty was stealing cars, gunning for girls coming out of high school in the afternoon, driving them out to the mountains, making them, and coming back to sleep in any available hotel bathtub in town" (Kerouac 25). The seduction of girls has always been on Dean's mind and a part of his everyday life as describe in the following quote: "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,' and 'so long's we can eat, son, y'ear me?'" (Kerouac 7). This can mean that his needs truly consisted of eating and making love to girls wherever possible (Olsson 13).

Olsson further mentions that for Dean being married and having children does not stop him from enjoying the company of other women. He repeatedly tells the women he sleeps with that they will have a happy family life and love for each other, but each time fails to fulfill his promises because of the constant internal urge that sends him back for more experiences. Instead of

committing to one relationship, he repeatedly cheats on his wives and tries to sleep with almost every woman he meets. Moreover, he engages with two women and juggles between them by running from one to another (13). Birkin explains that when men have multiple partners in the novel they are never assigned derogatory terms or being judged on the basis on their behavior, but when women do the same, they are referred to as “whores.” When Dean is unfaithful to his wife and has a girlfriend on the side, Sal refers to it by saying that “Dean was making love to two girls at the same time” (Kerouac 28) and does not pass any kind of judgment to his behavior (18). Furthermore, when there was a rare period of Dean’s monogamy, he just could not believe it was happening, saying “all the time I’ve been here I haven’t had any girl but Inez – this only happens to me in New York! Damn!” (Kerouac 145).

Ghosh mentions that Dean hangs around Marylou for a long time, but thinks of her as “awfully dumb” (Kerouac 4), which makes it quite clear that what is important to him in a woman is not her personality, but sexual appeal over everything else (Ghosh 4). Birkin further writes that Dean, later on in the novel starts obsessing over Marylou’s sexual life, even though he left her before that and was married to and living with Camille. He wanted to find a proof that she was a whore and that she was seeing other people:

He had gone crazy over Marylou again and spent months haunting her apartment on Divisadero, where every night she had a different sailor in and he peeked down through her mail-slot and could see her bed. There he saw Marylou sprawled in the mornings with a boy. He trailed her around town. He wanted absolute proof that she was a whore. He loved her, he sweated over her. (Kerouac 107)

What is interesting to note is the fact that he starts calling her “whore” only after he feels that he had lost control over her and her sexual life. However, he did not have a problem trying to get Sal to sleep with her earlier in the novel: “Dean...wanted me to work Marylou” (Kerouac 77). Dean’s double standards are quite noticeable in his actions and reflect his insecurities with women (Birkin 18).

When he would feel like it, he would grab Marylou and she would give herself to him. Sal as a narrator interprets it as “love dance,” proving that he is quite unreliable as a narrator since it is quite obvious that Dean was in a frenzy and Marylou was the first thing he could grab: “Dean was having his kicks; he put on a jazz record, grabbed Marylou, held her tight, and bounced against her with the beat of the music. She bounced right back. It was a real love dance” (Kerouac 74).

Šedrlová further writes that Dean on more occasions becomes violent with Marylou and that type of behavior is presented as an acceptable way to treat women since Sal as a narrator does not disapprove of it: “Marylou was black and blue from a fight with Dean about something; his face was scratched” (Kerouac 78). Another time Dean admits that he beat her: “I hit Marylou on the brow on February twenty-sixth at six o’clock in the morning” (Kerouac 108). Dean’s obsession and jealousy with Marylou escalates when he comes up with a plan to kill Marylou and himself afterwards. He admits to Sal:

Then I knew I loved her so much I wanted to kill her. ... I got the gun, I ran to Marylou, I looked down mail-slot ..., I barged in, ... – and gave her the gun and told her to kill me. She held the gun in her hand the longest time. I asked her for a sweet dead pact. She didn’t want. I said one of us had to die. She said no. I beat my head on the wall. Man, I was out of my mind. She’ll tell you, she talked me out of it. (Kerouac 108)

Ghosh mentions that the situation with Dean and his attitude towards women can actually be quite reasonably explained. Even though his sexist approach toward women never becomes true misogyny, his treatment of women is unforgivable. This could be influenced by his growing up in a dysfunctional family or the fact that he had an absent mother. Nevertheless, it is certain that he is deeply drawn to women and cannot imagine his life without them. Although it might appear that because of his ego he would not allow it, he is actually quite dependent on women. He would say: “...oh I love, love, love women! I think women are wonderful! I love women!” (Kerouac 83).

### 3.3 Women vs. Men

Olsson writes that there is actually one moment in the novel when female characters stand up to men in a scene that could best be described as “female backlash.” While Sal is staying over with Dean in Camille’s house in San Francisco, a few of the women join together in a mutual revolt against men’s road escapades (15). Galatea Dunkel, Ed’s wife, is the first one who stands up to Dean and calls him out for neglecting his wife and children:

You have absolutely no regard for anybody but yourself and your damned kicks. All you think about is what’s hanging between your legs and how much money or fun you can get out of people and then you just throw them aside. Not only that but you’re silly about it. It never occurs to you that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time. (Kerouac 113)

This is a crucial moment in the book because it is the first time that someone has actually voiced his opinion about Dean’s reckless behavior and spoke the truth about it. What makes it even more important is that it was a woman who stood up for herself and expressed her anger with selfish men. Although she realized the truth about men and their careless behavior, she was too often blaming her husband’s friends for the bad treatment from Ed’s side:

“He’ll come back,” said Galatea. “That guy can’t take care of himself without me.” She gave a furious look at Dean and Roy Johnson. “It was Tommy Snark who did it this time. All the time before he came Ed was perfectly happy and worked and we went out and had wonderful times. Dean, you know that. Then they’d sit in the bathroom for hours, Ed in the bathtub and Snarky on the seat, and talk and talk and talk - such silly things.” (Kerouac 112)

Although Galatea had a moment when she confronted Dean for his behavior, she was addressing the wrong person; it was actually her husband Ed whom she should have been confronting. However, she chooses to keep trying to save her marriage and keep her husband happy like it was expected of women in the 1950s and for this reason she does not differ from other women in the novel after all: “When Ed gets back I’m going to take him to Jamson’s Nook every night and let him get his fill of madness. Do you think that’ll work, Sal? I don’t know what to do.” She is quite desperate, but does not give up” (Kerouac 119).

Sal's aunt is the only female character who is actually respected by men and speaks probably the wisest words in the whole novel: "the world would never find peace until men fell at their women's feet and asked for forgiveness" (Kerouac 72). Ghosh explains that this is possibly an allusion to the long-lasting history of inequality between genders and unfair treatment of women. Regarding the men, this kind of voice of reason is found only in Carlo Marx who asks: "Dean, why did you leave Camille and pick up Marylou?" (Ghosh 5). Partoens further mentions that the character of Sal's aunt character is greatly determined by her role as a caregiver. Even though she does not support Sal's frequent escapes to the road and Dean's impulsive and uncontrollable behavior, she still takes care of Sal when he decides to come back home. She spends most of her time at home, doing household work that is traditionally assigned to be done by women: "Dean had come to my house, slept several nights there waiting for me; spent afternoons talking to my aunt as she worked on a great rag rug woven of all the clothes in my family for years, which was now finished and spread on my bedroom floor" (qtd. in Partoens 30-31). Although she performs all the traditional roles of a woman in the house, Dean and Sal have respect for her. For instance, when they borrow money from her to pay their ticket, they make sure to give it back to her after a while. This could be the case because she is Sal's aunt and is older than them so they do not perceive her as sexual object and thus respect her.

## Conclusion

Throughout the history of the United States, women have suffered constant oppression and marginalization in the society. During the 1950s the situation seemed to be better since more and more women got jobs. However, they were still regarded as housewives who had to comply to their husbands and perform domestic duties. This is the kind of patriarchal society that the Beat counterculture arose from. Therefore, the Beat circle was a male-centered literary and social movement which marginalized and sexually objectified women. Even though the Beats rebelled against the *status quo* in the society and were trying to escape from the narrow-minded conventions and conformist lifestyle, they still failed to change their views towards women. Kerouac, who belongs to the circle of the Beat writers, based his novels on the events and people from real life, so his works can be taken to assess the attitudes and beliefs of the Beat Generation as a whole. On the example of Kerouac's novel *On the Road* we can see that the way Sal and Dean treated women reflected the treatment of women by the Beat circle as a whole. We can notice that Kerouac does not make effort to explore the female personality and psyche, but rather builds her character on the basis of her ability to perform household chores and how well she can satisfy men's sexual desires. In case they do not behave the way men expect them to, they are labeled as "whores." Compared to male's friendships, women are completely irrelevant and unnecessary to the story. There were a few instances when women stood up to men, such as when Camille threw Dean and Sal out of the house, or when Galatea told Dean the truth about his selfish behavior. However, they were still oppressed and used most of the time throughout the novel by the men. We can say that the Beats had the best intention to liberate themselves from the mainstream society and explore different ways to live and managed to remove the taboo on the subject of the sexuality. However, they failed to free themselves from the deeply rooted sexism and the view of women as sexual objects.

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