

The objectification of women in "on the road" a feminist criticism essay sample

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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” (On the 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. The women that the two men long for 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 at. For Sal and Dean, traveling therefore means the exploration not only of new places and new cultures, but also of the women who live there.

The women in On the Road are also explored and objectified for “ kicks” or just for the hell of it , when they are pursued by the male characters on their trips across the United States. In fact, I strongly believe that one of the main forces behind the constant traveling 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. 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. Therefore, the women here appear as replaceable objects. It goes without saying that Dean Moriarty is a most extreme ladies' man.

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. Dean has been searching for "kicks" all his young life. There are several passages in the novel telling how young Dean used to pursue girls for fun. For example, it is mentioned that as a teenager "his 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" (On the 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'" (On the 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 (On the Road 44). Instead of concentrating on one relationship, he is constantly unfaithful to his wives and tries to seduce every single woman that he meets. 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 (On the Road 42-44). Since what matters for him in his relationship to women is only the sex, every woman is an equally replaceable tool.

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 emphasized that there is in fact one passage in the novel where women get together and revolt against Dean, 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 (On the Road 182-185). This initiative

to reproach Dean for his irresponsible behavior is definitely an important moment for the female characters in *On the Road*.

There are several important aspects of this feminist outburst. First, 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" (*On the Road* 176). Actually, 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". Time has apparently come for Dean to grow up, and for the male characters to marry and go back to mainstream society.

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 result, Galatea and a few other female friends get together and revolt against Dean and his irresponsible behavior, which suggests a certain degree of feminist awareness.

Works Cited:

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. 1957. London: Penguin Books, 1972.