“A Nakedness of Mind”: Gender, Individualism and Collectivism in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*

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Bachelor Degree Essay  
Literature  
Autumn, 2013  
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Abstract

This essay focuses on gender roles, individualism and collectivism in Jack Kerouac’s classic road-trip novel *On the Road*. In order to put the discussion into a meaningful context, I look at the novel from a historical perspective and examine how it relates to post-war American society. I argue that the novel is, in many ways, representative of a society existing in a field of tension between individualism and collectivism, and that its notion of individual freedom, at the time revolutionary, can be seen as retrogressive with regard to the book’s portrayal and treatment of women. The essay features a discussion of what kind of individual freedom is presented in *On the Road* and how this freedom relates to typical American individualism as well as American post-war societal norms, the norm of the nuclear family in particular. This is followed by a brief analysis of how the novel influenced future generations, specifically in terms of sexual liberation. This analysis introduces a discussion of the way in which women are portrayed in the book and how this portrayal both represents collective progress in post-war America—women are often described as financially independent—and a phallocentric type of individualism. I then show that this individualism is connected to an unthinking optimism which, I argue, is one of the key causes of the retrogressive view of women exemplified by the book. My study ultimately demonstrates that the novel’s notion of individualism—an individualism which was highly influential for future generations and is usually viewed as progressive—can arguably be seen as retrogressive in terms of Kerouac’s representation of gender roles.

**Keywords:** Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, gender roles, individualism, collectivism
When reading through Jack Kerouac’s magnificent road-trip tale *On the Road* for the first time, one may get caught up in Sal Paradise’s and Dean Moriarty’s unfastidious relish for life, in their ecstatic appreciation of jazz music and in the frantic energy and power of Kerouac’s stream-of-consciousness prose. One then runs the risk, however, of failing to slow down and consider the characters in the novel who are, indeed, part of the story, but who are left, mostly, in the periphery and not necessarily part of Sal’s and Dean’s journey. I am referring to the women in the novel. It is easily observed how *On the Road* is, essentially, a novel completely doused in masculinity; the story is told from a masculine perspective—Sal Paradise being the narrator—and the one iconic character whom the novel primarily revolves around—Dean Moriarty—is, in many ways, extremely masculine. The novel’s phallocentricity has been noted and analysed by numerous critics, from different angles. Scholars have written about the importance Dean plays in the book as he “comes to represent […] a peculiarly intense and charismatic masculinity, a vital relation to the body, cultural and spiritual authenticity, the promise of America itself” (Richardson 218). The importance of male friendships as being one of the central themes of the book has been written about, perhaps most notably by George Dardess who claims that *On the Road* is “a love story” grounded in the friendship between Sal and Dean (201). The subject of homosexuality in Beat writing in general (Kerouac being one of the pioneers of the Beat Generation) has been discussed by Catherine R. Stimpson in her article “The Beat Generation and the Trials of Homosexual Liberation”. Tim Cresswell has pointed out that the novel’s notion of masculinity is connected to mobility and a public way to live life while the novel’s female characters lead private lives; this, Cresswell argues, widens the social gap
between men and women. This view has, in turn, been criticised for being too simplistic by critics such as Linda McDowell. I will, in this essay, build on this ongoing discussion of gender and sexuality by looking at the novel from a historical perspective and by relating central terms of this discussion to what I perceive as a tension, in Kerouac’s narrative, between individualism and collectivism.

In addition to being centred around male characters, the novel is clearly governed by a strong sense of individualism—that every man in it (not necessarily every person) has the right to pursue his own freedom and, essentially, do whatever he feels like, in the spur of the moment. This goes hand in hand with the book’s inherent rejection—or rather, I will argue, complete ignorance—of any form of politics, as well as its denunciation of typical American, middle class life. This rebellious attitude is common in Beat writing in general and especially prominent in works such as Howl and Other Poems by Allen Ginsberg (who is represented by the character Carlo Marx in On the Road). The book’s strong sense of individualism is shown to be interesting when looking at the novel in its historical context; the America of the 1940s and 1950s was in a state of change after World War II. While American individualism was still prominent, the collective efforts demanded by the war had changed domestic life in America in a dramatic way: more women had entered the work force and thus been given the financial independence necessary to be freer individuals in that they no longer needed to rely on bread-winning husbands. This essay will discuss questions regarding gender in On the Road and, in particular, how the novel’s portrayal of men and women is connected to individualism and collectivism in America—questions such as the following: what kind of individual freedom does the book promote? Are women invited along to pursue this freedom or is it solely for the male characters in the book to experience? Regardless of Kerouac’s own intentions, the novel had a huge impact on the American counter-culture of the 1960s; this essay will discuss possible reasons as to why that is, focusing on the rebellious sexual liberation described in the book. Do the novel’s male and female characters benefit from this liberation equally and in the same way? I will argue that On the Road is, in many ways, representative of an America existing in a field of tension between individualism and collectivism, and the novel’s ideas of individual freedom, at the time revolutionary, can actually be read as retrogressive, especially in terms of how gender roles are portrayed and the way in which women are treated in the book.
This essay will discuss the topics mentioned above according to the following structure: a discussion of the novel’s notion of individualism and individual freedom as seen in contrast to the historically prominent ideals of the nuclear family and consumer culture will be followed by a description of how the book influenced future generations and counter-culture movements, specifically in terms of sexual liberation. This will serve as a starting point for a discussion of the novel’s phallocentric portrayal of its female characters. Next, I will connect what Tim Cresswell has described as a dualism of private contra public with individualism and collectivism, examining how the novel’s “private” characters (many women in the novel) have jobs and are part of collectives, and thus financially independent, while male characters’ “public” lives are incompatible with most jobs and related to an inherent rejection of any form of governing power. This is followed by a discussion of how the characters in the novel appear oblivious of any political issues and resentful of any political collective. Initially, however, I provide a brief historical background to the novel in order to put the rest of the discussion into a meaningful context.

*On the Road* is in many ways closely connected to its historical context and, in order to understand the book, it is necessary to take a brief look at the American political and cultural developments of the early post-war period of the latter half of the 1940s and the 1950s. One significant development particularly worth noticing is the collective efforts demanded of the American people by World War II. Individualism is, and has always been, one of the key value orientations of American culture; as Currin V. Shields puts it: “[The United States] has come to be regarded as the stronghold of individualism. That the ideal of the free individual has long pervaded American thought cannot […] be denied” (104). However, while an individual may be able to achieve goals on a personal level, winning a world-expanding war on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and across the Pacific Ocean required more than individual effort. With many men being drafted in the army, and with the rising need to supply the armed forces with weaponry, ammunition and rations, it came to women to start work in factories and on plantations. This collective effort thus led to a significant upswing in women’s financial position which maintained its stronghold even after the war ended in 1945.¹ American individualism did not suffer because of this, however, and remains ever prominent to

¹ Additional information about female labour during and after World War II can be found in Michael L. Smirlock’s article “Working Women in America: Factors Which Influence Their Participation and Attachment to the Labor Force”. 
this day. There are many different ways in which this individualism can be described; specifically, post-war American individualism can be said to be strongly connected to capitalism and consumerism. Having emerged from World War II relatively unscathed and a superpower, the American post-war economy experienced a boom which would last up until, arguably, the late 1960s. American companies made business across the globe and American culture was spread worldwide through Hollywood, Coca Cola and American car companies. The rise of the American consumer culture and capitalism strengthened the norm that is the traditional nuclear family: the typical example being a married couple, living with their children in an American suburb, the father being the bread-winner, putting food on the table paid with his office-job salary. This view of individualism was strongly criticised by Jack Kerouac in On the Road, in which he chooses to promote a different, opposing kind of individualism.

Few would argue against the notion that one of the major themes of On the Road is a particular kind of individual freedom and that it is closely related to the values of the Beats. It has been claimed about the Beat Generation that “[it] challenged the values of society, rejected American materialism, and loathed conformity” (Petrus 9). Stephen Petrus points to an article in Life magazine written in 1959 about the then called “beatniks”—people living a lifestyle influenced by Beat Generation writing—which stated that “beatniks oppose ‘virtually every aspect of current American society’ such as the traditional nuclear family, politics, organized religion, law, the Ivy League suit, higher education, and the hydrogen bomb. And they especially abhorred working” (Petrus 8-9). Kerouac’s book is in many ways a perfect representation of this. It is clear that the novel’s notion of individualism is not representative—it is even resentful—of American middle-class life during the 1940s and 1950s. One example of this would be when Sal describes his southern relatives—who appear as standard, middle-class Americans—as having “whining voices” and as talking about the “general weary recapitulation of who had a baby, who got a new house, and so on” (Kerouac 105). Rather than being based on capitalist consumer culture or the wish to settle down in a secure family environment, the novel’s notion of individualism appears to stem from elements such as mobility, spontaneity and sexual liberation.

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2 For further readings on American post-war history as well as American collectivism, see Andrew D. Grossman’s article “The Early Cold War and American Political Development: Reflections on Recent Research”, and Currin V. Shield’s “The American Tradition of Empirical Collectivism”.
Despite the novel’s rejection of the ideal of the American nuclear family, its view of individual freedom is in many ways closely related to typical American individualism, as described here by Claude S. Fischer: “in American culture [...] the ultimate source of action, meaning, and responsibility is the individual rather than the group” (364). This can be said to be true about the main characters in On the Road, except that they appear to overlook individual responsibility. There are many cases in the book when the male characters, especially Dean, appear ignorant of the negative consequences of their actions. One example of this would be when Dean, just after having become a father of a baby girl, “saw a ’49 Hudson for sale and rushed to the bank for his entire roll” and “bought the car on the spot” (Kerouac 106), leaving his family behind in order to drive to New York and save Sal from his boring, southern relatives. This is not only telling of the book’s attitude towards the concept of the nuclear family, but also of what it appears to mean to be a free individual. Spontaneous, instant mobility seems central to this kind of freedom; the possibility to move and make blink-of-an-eye decisions based on nothing but a thought or a sudden inclination is central to the book’s notion of individualism.

Kerouac’s book and its spontaneous, life-relishing individualism had great influence on numerous artists, including iconic songwriters and performers such as Bob Dylan. “I read On the Road in maybe 1959. It changed my life as it changed everyone else’s”, Dylan is quoted as saying on The Official Bob Dylan Site. With regards to Dylan, On the Road is described by Timothy Hampton as “[...] ‘generational’ text that rose to canonical status as a meditation on American life just as Dylan was coming of age—a text that defined, as would Dylan's own work, not merely a cultural/historical category [...] but a new form of social identity” (705). This social identity was the “beatnik” way of life. According to Petrus, media in the United States, during the years following On the Road’s publication, 1957-1960, was peppered with references to the Beat Generation and analyses of how Kerouac and his fellow Beats influenced American society; it was during this period that Dylan and his contemporaries were starting their careers, many of whom were hugely influential for the counter-culture movements, and the hippie movement in particular, of the 1960s. The hippie movement of the late 1960s shared values which were, in many ways, very similar to those of the Beat Generation; Petrus writes that “the term ‘Beat Generation’ refers to a group of post-World War II novelists and poets disenchanted with what they viewed to be an excessively repressive, materialistic, and conformist society, who sought spiritual
regeneration through sensual experiences” (3). The phrase “a group of post-World War II novelists and poets” in this quote could easily be substituted with “the hippie movement” without making the quote less accurate.\(^3\)

These “sensual experiences” mentioned by Petrus are commonplace in Kerouac’s narrative; sex is being had constantly throughout the book. The 1960s was a decade of sexual liberation and featured steps taken towards a more sexually egalitarian society; the arrival of the birth control pill, for instance, gave women some control over their reproductive systems and with whom they would start a family. The birth control pill also made it easier for unmarried couples to have sex.\(^4\) Considering the influence Kerouac’s narrative had on the sexually liberated hippie movement, the kind of sexual liberation found in *On the Road* is surprising as it, rather than being equal for both sexes and progressive, is completely focused on the male sex. Looking closely at what exactly is implied in the book’s sexual scenes, it is obvious that women and men in the novel are treated completely differently. The novel’s portrayal of its male characters shows that the male identity is often based on his sexual drive and his ability to seduce women. Dean is the unchallenged champion of this; we learn, very early on in the novel, that Dean considers sex as being “the one and only holy and important thing in life” (Kerouac 8) and are, throughout the novel, given examples of his talent at seduction and love making. Despite Sal perhaps not sharing exactly the same ambitions as Dean in terms of women, he still looks up to him and chooses to follow him wherever he goes throughout the book. Comparing the novel’s description of a sexually liberated man to the female equivalent, one soon notices that women are not at all liberated in the same way. Not having to look further than the very beginning of the novel, we learn that Marylou, Dean’s first wife, “[had] apparently whored a few dollars together and gone back to Denver—‘the whore!’” (Kerouac 9). What this implies is that women who are described as sexually attractive, and who have sex with men other than the main characters, are looked down upon rather than treated with the same adoration and respect as men in the book who behave in similar ways. Another example of this would be when Marylou and Sal are stuck in San Francisco without any money or a place to stay. Sal has throughout the book been sexually attracted to Marylou and when she

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\(^3\) The very term “hippie” is, according to John Robert Howard, derived from the term “hipster” which, in turn, meant “beatnik” and “those familiar with the beat scene” (44).

\(^4\) Further readings on the impact of the birth control pill during the 1960s can be found in Martha J. Bailey’s article “‘Momma’s Got the Pill’: How Anthony Comstock and Griswold v. Connecticut Shaped US Childbearing”.

leaves Sal for a nightclub owner who is able to provide lodgings for her. Sal, again, claims that he “saw what a whore she was” (Kerouac 163). While Marylou’s behaviour is looked down upon, there are examples of women in the book whose behaviour regarding sex is more appreciated—even encouraged. Having just spent a night of drinking and laughing in the kitchen of a man Sal and Dean have just met at a bar, Dean has this to say about the new friend’s wife who, throughout the evening, simply lies in bed smiling, not uttering a word of complaint about the racket the men make:

Now you see, man, there’s a 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. (Kerouac 192)

This passage can be read as a representation of how, in the American ideal of the nuclear family, women are expected to behave in a docile and completely submissive manner, waiting for her husband in bed, and for him to have sex with her whenever it would suit him. Despite the novel’s reputation as revolutionary and progressive, Sal’s and Dean’s view of women appears just as retrogressive as that of any bread-winning husband at the time. A “real” woman, according to Dean, is supposed to never complain and let her husband do whatever he feels like. In other words, the sexual liberation in On the Road is completely centred on male desires without paying any attention to female sexuality. Women are not supposed to have sex whenever they feel like it—they are supposed to have sex whenever their male partners feel like it.

This retrogressive view of women’s sexuality does not come across as extremely surprising when considering the way women are portrayed and treated in the book, generally. The opening sentence is telling of the book’s phallocentricity: “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up” (Kerouac 7)—the departure of a woman and the arrival of a male friend. This is representative of the novel’s general standpoint in that friendships between men are more important—more substantial—than romantic relationships between men and women. This is one way in which the book is denouncing one type of institutionalised collectivism connected to the norm of the nuclear family—marriage—while, at the same time, promoting a more individualistic lifestyle governed by something less binding—friendship. This, again, goes hand in hand with Petrus’ description of the beatniks’ resentful view of the nuclear family. Sal’s general attitude to women is expressed most succinctly in the following passage in which he is picked up by a woman while hitchhiking along Route 6 in Illinois:
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. I was all for it. (Kerouac 17)

This passage tells us that the very first impression Sal gets from seeing a woman is one concerning sex; “a twinge of hard joy”, meaning an erection. This is true even when he meets Terry—the woman with whom he has, arguably, the only truly romantic relationship in the novel—for the first time; Sal introduces her to the reader with the following objectifying line: “Her breasts stuck out straight and true; her little flanks looked delicious” (Kerouac 78). This, again, is telling of how the novel represents the Beats’ type of individualism which goes against the politically correct norm of the time; the reaction one supposedly should have when seeing a woman, according to the nuclear family model, is not necessarily one of sexual desire (even though heterosexual desire is a precondition for patriarchal family structures; however, it goes against conformist agenda to bring up this raunchy aspect of the otherwise so decent nuclear family-concept), but rather one of consideration as to whether or not the woman in question would become a suitable wife—something which Sal seems to ignore completely.

Sal appears to be interested in, first and foremost, attractive women, but values other qualities as well: kindness, like in the middle-aged woman who offered him a lift, and an ability to cook, for example. Many women in the book are described—with affection although at the same time degradingly—as “marvellous cook[s]” (Kerouac 14) and women are often the ones who make the actual meals while male cooking usually involves nothing more than making a couple of ham sandwiches, or similar, for the road. This is an example of how, as Tim Cresswell puts it, On the Road “reinforces the dualism of private/public as a gendered distinction” (257). As Cresswell shows, it is solely the male characters who lead public lives while women are supposed to stay in the private sphere of the home (preferably in the kitchen). While this arguably is true about the novel’s general stance on gender roles, Linda McDowell, in her response to Cresswell’s article, claims otherwise; McDowell argues that Cresswell’s analysis can be seen as based on “too simple a dualism between masculinity and femininity, and their respective associations with the road and the home” (413).

McDowell mentions “a central theme of On the road which Kerouac had always argued was consistently misunderstood—that the quest was a spiritual one, that [Sal’s and Dean’s] journey really was an inward one” (415). Keeping the novel’s portrayal of
gender roles and sexuality and Cresswell’s dualism of public versus private in mind, the following passage in the book proves interesting:

My moments in Denver were coming to an end, I could feel it when I walked her home, on the way back I stretched out on the grass of an old church with a bunch of hobos, and their talk made me want to get back on that road. Every now and then one would get up and hit a passer-by for a dime. They talked of harvests moving north. It was warm and soft. 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. I heard the Denver and Rio Grande locomotive howling off to the mountains. I wanted to pursue my star further. (Kerouac 56)

The book’s stance on individual freedom is showcased here in Sal’s romantic description of the “bunch of hobos” and their talk of “harvests moving north” which made him “want to get back on that road”; in short, Sal views hobos as free men and is fascinated with the spontaneous nature of being able to simply pick up and leave at any time. Keeping in mind the novel’s spiritual theme mentioned by McDowell (which in this passage is hinted at in the mentioning of the pursuit of a star and a church), this freedom and spontaneity—and their relation a public life and individualism—appear to be key for this spiritual journey. Sal then wanting to discuss “souls” and how “life is holy” with Rita can be seen as one example of how Cresswell’s claim—that *On the Road* reinforced the dualism which dictates that men lead public lives and women private ones—is not entirely true; at least since Sal does not exclude women from this spiritual, public, and individualistic journey. This spiritual search is one of the aspects of the book which the counter-culture and hippie movement later picked up, showing, again, that the Beat Generation’s writing and *On the Road* were hugely influential. However, this passage appears as merely an exception to the book’s general stance on women and how they should be treated.

Despite the novel’s and its male characters’ objectifying treatment of women, Kerouac does provide numerous examples of how American society and women’s situation at the time were improving. An example of this would be the fact that the male characters in the book are often times relying on women financially. The following quote features Terry offering to take care of Sal, turning the norm of the bread-winning husband on its head:
She said she’d work picking grapes and make enough money for both of us; meanwhile I could live in Farmer Heffelfinger’s barn down the road from her family. I’d have nothing to do but sit in the grass all day and eat grapes. (Kerouac 95)

This particular example does not completely reverse the roles of the nuclear family—as Sal does not take up the role of a house-wife—but it does, in a sense, represent the fact that more women had entered the work-force after the war, which made it less surprising to find couples in this type of economic relationship. While this specific example of female financial superiority is connected to Terry’s kindness and her love for Sal, there are other examples where men simply trick and abuse women financially, sometimes in the most pathetic and cruel ways possible, as exemplified in the following quote:

Ed had met a girl called Galatea who was living in San Francisco on her savings. These two mindless cads [, Dean and Ed,] decided to bring the girl along to the East and have her foot the bill. Ed cajoled and pleaded; she wouldn’t go unless he married her. In a whirlwind few days Ed Dunkel married Galatea, with Dean rushing around to get the necessary papers, and a few days before Christmas they rolled out of San Francisco […] All along the way Galatea Dunkel, Ed’s new wife, kept complaining that she was tired and wanted to sleep in a motel. If this kept up they’d spend all her money long before Virginia. […] By the time they got to Tucson she was broke. Dean and Ed gave her the slip in a hotel lobby and resumed the voyage alone […] without a qualm. (Kerouac 106-7)

This passage is an obvious example of one of the arguable low-points in terms of morals in the novel. It relates to individualism and collectivism in two ways: firstly, as an example of yet another financially independent woman, Galatea, who, this time, is exploited by the two destitute and morally disgraceful males, Dean and Ed. Secondly, it features a case where the norm of a married couple making up the nuclear family is mocked; instead of adhering to the norms, marrying with the ambition to start a family and settle down, Ed agrees to marry Galatea for money in order to make his and Dean’s plans to do the opposite—to move and to leave—possible. The woman wanting a private, secure way of life is tricked into a public, mobile life by the men—Cresswell’s dualism is here being represented in all its glory.

This dualism between private versus public is shown to be highly interesting when connected to the terms individualism and collectivism. Leading a public life, at least the type of public life described in On the Road—a life of constant travel, is not just connected to, but closely and essentially tied to the individual’s experience. The
travels of Sal and Dean would not be the same if they were not two distinct, spontaneous individuals. At the same time, leading a private life can similarly be seen as connected to collectivism in that the private, stationary life is inherently dependent on some form of collective—a job, for instance. The main reason Sal is able to keep on driving back and forth across America is that he is continuously being sent money by his aunt—his aunt then being yet another example of how women had become more financially independent after World War II. Without this constant source of income, he would not have been able to live his public life; in this sense, a public way of living is also dependent on collectivism—Sal’s aunt having earned her money from some sort of collective institution. While the leading male characters in the book do, occasionally, have jobs, they are rarely committed to them for very long, or at least not committed in the sense that they allow themselves to be changed by them. Dean, for instance, works for some time as a parking-lot attendant in New York, here described by Sal:

The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into tight spot, hump, snap the car with the emergency so that you see it bounce as he flies out; then clear to the ticket shack, sprinting like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arrived car before the owner’s half out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping, and roar off to the next available spot, arc, pop in, brake, out, run […]. (Kerouac 12)

This job, which Dean has very early on in the novel, represents Dean as he is otherwise described throughout the book—frantic, energetic, dangerous, half mad and terribly impressive—and becomes part of the introduction to his personality. He does not have to change or adapt for this job; it is almost as if he merely behaves in his usual manner and simply happens to get payed for it. Thus, this job should not be seen as Dean falling into domesticity or taking a step towards becoming the bread-winning husband of any nuclear family, but rather as Dean simply managing to exploit the capitalist system for his personal, individual benefit without having to submit to any social structure, something which the Beats strongly opposed.

The male characters’ inability to keep a job and their resentment of governing forces represent a certain kind of unthinking optimism which, I argue, is observable throughout the book. One aspect of Sal’s and Dean’s shared notion of individual freedom appears to be connected to an oblivious—or rather a deliberately shunning—attitude to any train of thought which they consider negative or depressing. One of the
earliest and most succinct examples of this can be found in the first chapter of the book when Sal compares Dean with his intellectual friends:

Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. [...] Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but 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 […]’ (Kerouac 13-14)

Not only does this passage feature another typical example of the book’s male characters’ views of women—that they are good for little other than having sex with—it also exemplifies a deliberate avoidance of more serious and heavy subjects in order to instead pursue more fleeting pleasures through sex, for instance. Kerouac is quoted as saying that being “Beat” “involves a sort of nakedness of mind” which comes from “having been used, of being raw” (qtd. in Petrus 4). Petrus chooses to connect this quote to post-war American society with its heightened levels of government supervision and influence; Kerouac has been “used” and made Beat by this society. Andrew D. Grossman writes about the level of security during this time: “there were little or no difference between external security policy and domestic security policy […] [and] much of the national security legislation of this era endorsed a narrow, constrained view of liberalism that ultimately undermined civil liberties” (472). The Beats’ suspicion of state surveillance is represented by the fact that American police officers are, throughout On the Road, treated with contempt. Kerouac’s notion of individualism was a response to this collective oppression. The “nakedness of mind” and choice of not seeing those negative aspects of life emerging from extreme forms of collectivism in favour of short-lived satisfaction and the fulfilling of temporary desire can be connected to the following, famous passage in On the Road in which Sal describes his feelings about people in general:

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centralight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’ (Kerouac 11)

This quote reveals the essence of the novel’s notion of individual freedom; freedom is to live in the moment, to experience everything without exhaustion, to explode and burn with desire, to talk madly and to yearn to be saved. What Kerouac refers to when he
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says that being Beat involves a “nakedness of mind” (qtd. in Petrus 4) appears to be this type of perceptibility and impressionability—that being Beat is a state of mind in which sustained intellectual thought does not have a foothold, but where every impression is savoured in the present moment and for its own sake. This attitude, or way of thinking, does not lend itself very well to pondering the negative and problematic aspects of life or society. With the exception of only a handful of occasions, Sal never leaves Dean’s side—he is simply too captivated by Dean’s fascinating personality, the very embodiment of a “mad one” and of freedom itself. Sal’s relentless adoration and following of Dean is another example of how the book represents an unthinking optimism; as Mark Richardson points out, “Sal’s faith at times seems a deliberately naïve refusal to face the truth” (220). This claim is most accurately exemplified in the fight about Dean’s behaviour towards his wife, Camille, between Galatea Dunkel and Sal. Galatea, rightfully, accuses Dean of having “absolutely no regard for anybody but [him]self and [his] damned kicks” (Kerouac 182). Sal admits that Dean is “responsible, perhaps, for everything that [is] wrong”, but chooses to ignore it and instead tries to end the discussion in order to “get going and hear the great jazz of Frisco” (Kerouac 182). Even though Sal suspects that Galatea might be right about Dean, he still chooses to follow him.

This unthinking optimism is also apparent in how the characters in the novel appear oblivious of political matters; matters concerning gender equality or the rights of women are never mentioned by any character in the book, which is not surprising, though, considering the novel’s general phallocentricity. One would think, however, that Sal and Dean would perhaps at least be somewhat interested in the political events of the times in which they were living, especially considering the historical and political significance of the American post-war era with its collective developments and its heightened security policy, for instance. Despite this, the American political scene of the time is only mentioned on a small number of occasions in the book, and always in an ignorant or mocking manner. An example of this would be when Sal and his friends, on numerous occasions, ironically quote President Truman when stealing groceries: “we must cut down on the cost of living” (Kerouac 69). It appears as if Sal is oblivious of the times in which he is living, or, rather, that he chooses not to pay any attention to politics or social problems. This way of thinking—or way of avoiding certain thoughts—is, I argue, problematic from a social point of view in that it stifles progress.
Sal’s unthinking optimism, I argue, is one of the key reasons why the kind of individualism presented in *On the Road* is retrogressive in terms of how women are treated. The male characters—who live public lives devoid of collective elements such as work and domestic commitment but also of certain, typically American individual traits such as personal responsibility (Fischer)—are uninterested in seeing the issues facing their society, one of which is the problematic situation of gender inequality. I am of the opinion that an educated population which is unafraid to analyse and discuss societal problems is essential in order for said society to function properly and for injustice and inequality to be properly opposed. This goes against the type of individualism advocated in *On the Road*, which involves choosing not to see any negative aspects of society and focusing, instead, on personal and momentary satisfaction. Rather than being progressive and spurring on those positive changes connected to collectivism that were taking place in post-war America—the improving situation of women, for instance—*On the Road* and its individualistic nakedness of mind can therefore be seen as retrogressive, especially in terms of gender roles.
Works Cited


