

# Marylou and the Portrayal of Women in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

BY LAURA BIRKIN

Although Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* has earned a reputation as a seminal work which embodies the Beat generation mentality, its portrayal of women is not something that can be described as positive. In fact, the attitude towards women depicted in the novel will most likely shock the contemporary feminist reader. In this essay, I explore Kerouac's portrayal of women in *On the Road*, using the character of Marylou as a starting point. I will discuss several issues surrounding the portrayal of women in the novel, including the objectification and mistreatment of women by the male characters, and the assumption that females must assume a domestic role while males are free to travel.

Throughout *On the Road*, women are clearly subjected to the male gaze, through which the reader finds "a stereotypical sexualised objectification and infantilization of women" (Enevold 407). The majority of the female characters in the novel seem to exist solely for the male characters to have sex with and

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subsequently abandon; and are reduced from being strong, intelligent, well-rounded characters to "having only...sex functions, displayed by their bodies" (McNeil 189). Few of the female

characters are referred to by name, with various women being referred to as simply "a beautiful young black chick" (Kerouac 206) and "a gorgeous country girl" (Kerouac 228), highlighting the idea of women as mere sex objects. Furthermore, even when describing more significant female characters such as Marylou, Sal still appears to value her physical appearance over anything else, describing her as a "beautiful sharp little chick" (Kerouac 7) and "a golden beauty" (Kerouac 153). These descriptions of Marylou echo those of other women throughout the novel, including Terry, whose "breasts stuck out straight and true" (Kerouac 78), and Inez, who Sal calls "a big, sexy brunette" (Kerouac 232). On top of this, in the rare moments when something other than the physical aspects of female characters is described, it is usually their lack of intelligence that is highlighted. For example, Marylou is described as "awfully dumb" (Kerouac 8), while at another point Sal describes his encounter with a nameless "dumb girl... [whose] beautiful body was matched only by her idiot

mind" (Kerouac 150). The men's patronizing attitude towards and infantilization of women is also apparent in Sal's constant references to the women he meets as "girls." Among others, he describes Marylou as "a sweet little girl" (Kerouac 8) and praises Babe's beauty by saying "she looked exactly like the little girl she had been" (Kerouac 252).

Layering insult upon insult, female characters in *On the Road* are also often described disparagingly as whores, and Marylou in particular is described as a "whore" by Sal on several occasions, such as when he says, "I saw what a whore she was" (Kerouac 163). Dean later becomes obsessed with Marylou's sexual propensities, and Sal writes that "he wanted absolute proof that she was a whore" (Kerouac 173). However, it is interesting to note that Marylou only becomes a "whore" when Dean no longer has control over her sexual activities; whereas earlier in the novel, he has no problem offering Marylou to Sal in a warped sexual exchange, as Sal writes "Dean... wanted me to work Marylou" (Kerouac 124). The "old discourse of the 'bad' sexually independent single sexual woman" (McNeil 189) also manifests itself in the novel when Sal rents a hotel room with Terry but subsequently begins "getting the foolish paranoid visions that Teresa... was a common little hustler" (Kerouac 80). However, after leaving Terry, Sal feels no qualms about moving on to a new girl right away, saying: "I made the acquaintance of a girl and we necked all the way to Indianapolis" (Kerouac 99). The leitmotif of women as whores is epitomized when Sal, Dean and Stan drive down to Mexico and spend the day at a "whorehouse" (Kerouac 269), with the prostitutes clearly encapsulating the idea of women as public property, "circumscribed as 'goods'... and locked into a marginal object position" (Enevold 409), rather than existing as individuals. During this episode, Sal wilfully chooses to overlook the hardships and "awful grief" (Kerouac 271) of the prostitutes' lives, instead eroticizing the incident as "a long, spectral Arabian dream" (Kerouac 272).

Naming women such as Marylou "whores" is highly hypocritical of the male characters in *On the Road*, given that no matter how many women the men have sex with, they are never accused of being too promiscuous or called derogatory names. For example, when Dean cheats on his wife with his new girlfriend, Sal describes how "Dean was making love to two girls at the same time" (Kerouac 42) without making any kind of comment on his behavior. At another point Dean

exclaims: “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 236), clearly lamenting his current status of faithful monogamy. When Sal describes Dean as “BEAT – the root, the soul of Beatific” (Kerouac 184), it appears that he sees Dean’s beatitude as “the absence of guilt over sex, over treatment of women, [and] over property” (McNeil 191); when he finally says, “I realized what a rat he was,” it is because of Dean’s poor treatment of Sal, a fellow man, rather than of any woman (Kerouac 285). Sal’s hypocrisy is also shown by the fact that while he doesn’t hesitate to sleep with as many women as possible, he claims to be searching for a “pure” woman to marry; and at the end of the novel when Sal meets “the girl...that I had always searched for and for so long” (Kerouac 288), she is described as having “pure and innocent dear eyes” (Kerouac 288). From this description, it is clear that although it is permissible, even encouraged, for the men of Sal’s acquaintance to sleep with as many women as possible, for them a marriageable woman must be pure in order to be acceptable. Thus Sal offers the reader a perfect rendering of the Madonna-whore complex, according to which a man can sleep with as many “whores” as he wishes, but will only marry a “pure,” sexually uncompromised woman.

Throughout *On the Road*, female characters are overlooked and mistreated, as epitomized by actions of Dean. Marylou states: “Dean will leave you out in the cold anytime it’s in his interest” (Kerouac 161), and Dean shows little regard for the women in his life, even those he marries and has children with. He frequently cheats on his wives and is not greatly concerned about providing for his family; and Sal mentions at one point, “Dean then had four little ones and not a cent” (Kerouac 233). Instead, Dean cares only for himself, and he

always has “the same battered trunk stuck out from under the bed, ready to fly” back to the road (Kerouac 236). Galatea highlights Dean’s true nature when she tells him, “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” (Kerouac 183). Galatea herself is treated despicably by Dean and Ed, her husband, while Sal recounts how they “gave her the slip in a hotel lobby and resumed the voyage alone...without a qualm,” leaving her stranded and alone in an unknown place (Kerouac 107). Meanwhile, Sal also selfishly uses women for his own ends, as is the case with his “woman friend who gives me whisky and money and big suppers” (Kerouac 207). Although Sal acknowledges the pain and hardships of some women, for example, when he notices that Camille is a “haunted woman” with “the sad look of a harassed woman’s life”; in general, the men don’t preoccupy themselves with worrying about what the female characters are thinking or feeling (Kerouac 176).

During *On the Road* women are either praised for being domestic creatures or derided for not being domesticated. It is constantly assumed that women should perform domestic duties; and these duties are imposed upon them on occasions such as when Dean decides that “the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor” (Kerouac 8) and when “Babe cook[s] a big breakfast” (Kerouac 249) for all of the men. The concept of the ideal woman as domesticated and submissive is exemplified when Sal

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and Dean meet “the sweetest woman in the world,” and Sal notes, “she never asked Walter where he’d been, what time it was, nothing. . . She never said a word,” leading Dean to comment, “there’s a real woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint” (Kerouac 192). Conversely, Sal criticizes Lee Ann, Remi Boncoeur’s girlfriend, for being too outspoken, labelling her “that untamed shrew” (Kerouac 73), while he comments later that he cannot stay with a girl because “She wanted me to be her way” (Kerouac 120). Similarly, Marylou is portrayed in an increasingly negative light when she refuses to be domesticated, showing that “to the extent that women show volition, they are dangerous” (McNeil 189).

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This idea that it is women that should take care of household duties means that in *On the Road*, women remain

in “immobile place-bound domesticity” (Enevold 406) because “the road narrative’s gendered past and pattern... mobilizes men and makes women stationary” (Enevold 405). The women characters are left at home, which becomes a symbol of “containment and control” from which only the men are allowed to escape for any measure of time (McNeil 186). Marylou is notably the only female to join the men on a road trip for an extended period. In the novel, the road is figured as a male space, and the road trip experience “becomes a male identity project which engages in a culturally dependent spatial othering of women” (Enevold 405). While on the road, the polymorphous group of males become their own version of the nuclear family, and their need for females in any substantial capacity is basically eliminated, as Kerouac attempts to “preserve male dominance against the female-centered nuclear family and the effeminization of consumer culture” (Elmswood 342).

Finally, in *On the Road* women are portrayed as boring, stifling, “passive seat-fillers, shadowy imitations of the feverish, insightful men” (Thomson), and the female characters represent “a negative stability in terms of institutionalized commitment, dependence, and conditions, from which ‘evolving men’ should attempt to escape” (Enevold 411). Allen Ginsberg described the Beats as a “boy gang,” and *On the Road* clearly echoes this mentality by valorising male friendships and uncommitted sexual relationships above all else (McNeil 178). In the “othered” role imposed upon the women, they are shown as a negative influence on the men; for example, Galatea is depicted as a nuisance who “kept complaining that she was tired and wanted to sleep in a motel” (Kerouac 107), while Dean complains that Camille is “getting worse and worse man, she cries and makes tantrums, won’t let me out to see Slim Gaillard, gets mad every time I’m late...” (Kerouac 172). Their status as killjoys is further demonstrated when Sal says, “we got back to the girls an hour late and of course

they were mad” (Kerouac 147); and at the end of the novel, he talks alliteratively of Dean’s “wives and woes” (Kerouac 285), thereby strongly interlinking the two. In direct comparison to the males, who support each other and form strong friendships based on adventure and true understanding, female characters are relegated to bit parts and to the role of killjoy.

While reading *On the Road*, it is clear that female characters such as Marylou are subjected to the male gaze, objectified, infantilized; and if they are not viewed as “pure” and “domesticated,” they are insulted or disregarded as “whores.” Furthermore, their characters are underdeveloped and side-lined, portrayed as bores and/or burdens, while male friendships are depicted as supportive, unaffected, and generally superior to committed heterosexual relationships. Meanwhile, male characters in the novel can have sex with as many girls as they please without being labelled using derogatory terms, can mistreat the women in their lives without repercussions, and are free to flee to the male space of the road whenever they please.

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