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Jack Kerouac in the Context of American Studies
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1. Introduction

“We gotta go and never stop going till we get there.” (Kerouac, *On the Road*)

This quote is very significant and telling for both Jack Kerouac and the development of American Studies. His novels and his characters are always on the move, constantly going somewhere, searching for something, even his way of writing seems as if it is moving and changing, as if it is active. The sense one gets while reading Kerouac’s writing is that of listening to Kerouac himself tell the story in one breath, excitedly and overwhelmingly, having so many things to tell and wanting to tell them all at once, and, as a consequence, “jumping” from one thought to another, often times not even finishing his sentences. When it comes to the field of American Studies, it is also always moving, going forward, always active in its development, relying on and incorporating the past and all of its history while being open and looking towards the future. It is an interdisciplinary field.

What this paper is going to be focused on and will try to shed some light on, is the importance and the connection of Kerouac and his novels with the development of American Studies, i.e. discovering some of the underlying paradigms and main themes of American literature that are present in Kerouac’s writing, in his thought and way of life. This paper is going to try to locate Jack Kerouac in the American Studies and literature, try to find his role and the role of his literary works within it, discovering whether he indeed has a place in the American Studies that he deserves, i.e. how has his place and significance developed and/or changed with the development of American Studies, of culture and literature in general.

This paper consist of several parts, and each of them has its purpose: a brief presentation of Jack Kerouac, a biography of sorts, which serves to provide a context for the themes that permeate his writings and his way of life; an overview of some of the main authors and paradigms within the American Studies, provided in order to later connect them

with and contextualize them within the works of Jack Kerouac; and finally the analysis of Kerouac and his writing, with the goal of discerning some of the main themes, symbols and American myths that permeate and form the basis of Kerouac's novels.

2. Who is Jack Kerouac?

This is an extraordinary story of an author, whose character was lost in the beauty of his own fiction, it is one that must be learned and understood by every modern-day reader. (Nicoletti 1)

According to Todd Nicoletti, “like the other Beatniks, Kerouac indulged in myths and fabrications about himself, which is why much information about him is contradictory and fascinating” (1). The myth and mystery surrounding Jack Kerouac may well still exist to an extent, because, in all honesty, when all is said and done, no person ever reveals their true self, their true nature, their metaphorical flesh and bones, and no one can claim to know another person inside out. A touch of mystery and the unknown is always intriguing, especially in writers and literature. However, in an attempt to write and present a well-rounded, all-encompassing and objective account of Jack Kerouac’s life and work, Paul Maher Jr., in his book *Kerouac: His Life and Work* (2007), “offers not a linear study of Kerouac’s life, but an integrated pastiche of his life and work. He investigates the key relationships that affected his development as an artist, including his three wives, numerous girlfriends, and beloved mother” (Goodreads), as well as his prematurely deceased brother Gerard. Maher tries to recount some of the crucial points, events and people in Kerouac’s life that inspired him, devastated him, left a mark on him in one way or another and through which he developed his somewhat dual, or polar personality. Therefore, in order to understand Kerouac’s literature, what he is writing about and how he is writing it, it is necessary to contextualize it, i.e. understand his life and his history, because, after all, his novels are semi-autobiographical.

Jack Kerouac, real name Jean-Louis de Kerouac, was born in Lowell, Massachusetts on March 12, 1922, to working-class parents Gabrielle and Leo, of French-Canadian roots.

He had two siblings, a brother named Gerard and a sister named Caroline. These are the main, basic parts of anybody's biography – date and place of birth, heritage and family members. However, in Kerouac's case, these are also the most significant, considering that some of those aspects and family members had had the greatest impact on his life, left a permanent mark on him as a person and as a writer. First of all, Maher describes Kerouac's mother Gabrielle and his French-Canadian roots: "Gabrielle's acute superstitions and paranoia, fostered by her abiding orthodox faith, her provincialism, and her ethnicity, which was fed by an undercurrent of Canadian folk beliefs, had the most influence over Jack" (35). Kerouac was always a believer to an extent, always had some kind of faith, a spiritualism guiding him through life, something he relied upon, or tried to reach and understand. In his youth and young adulthood he held on to his heritage, to his parents' faith, hoping to reconcile "true Christianity" with everyday life in America, he read the Bible a lot and prayed for inspiration. Later in his life he turned to different kinds of spiritualism, mainly to Buddhism. The second important aspect and influence is Jack's older brother Gerard and his tragic death. Gerard died in 1926 and left a permanent mark on Jack. It affected him deeply, and, according to Nicoletti, "Gerard's illness and death left Kerouac with guilt, believing that he should have taken his brother's place" (3). The third very important aspect is Kerouac's ethnicity that permeates a great deal of his writings and which provided him with a unique and different point of view of the world and the people around him. Kerouac was a French-Canadian growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts. He was different, he was an outsider with a significantly different upbringing, which is why he could "convey his own unique dissent toward the American way of life" (Nicoletti 3) and develop his own, unique style and voice. One of the implications of his ethnicity and upbringing was also that he was "unusually willing to seek out the alien, odd, and different when many of his peers and elders remained

guardedly xenophobic. His openness toward others in a society bent on alienating other ethnic groups through a sheer need for survival was remarkable for a boy his age” (Maher 42).

In his vast, detailed account of Jack Kerouac’s life and work, Maher also describes and explains, as he calls it, Kerouac’s dual personality which is based on several aspects. On the one hand he was serious and intellectual, sharing intellectualism and the love for books with his neighbor Sebastian Sampas, who inspired him to become a writer at the age of 17. On the other hand, he was a successful athlete, played high school football and excelled in it – he became famous for it in his hometown and even attended Columbia University on a full football scholarship. On the one hand he was very introverted, shy, and timid, always keeping to himself, and on the other, eager to explore the world, discover new things, open towards the odd and different people in society. Paul Maher summarizes it: “This polarity would be a distinct aspect of his personality, one part of his world profoundly intellectual while the other, indoctrinated by the rabble-raising rites of adolescence, embracing an appreciation for loose girls and exciting swing bands” (44).

Some of Kerouac’s many literary influences and inspirations were William Saroyan, Thomas Wolfe, Oswald Spengler, and later Dostoyevsky and Joyce. He was a non-conformist, unable to keep his job, too distracted by the world around him and what it has to offer. According to Maher, he condemned provincialism, bigotry and materialism, referring to the “three attendant ills of most middlesized cities” (93). Kerouac also enlisted in the Merchant Marines to help his “American brothers” in the war, but also for the sake of his own art, to procure new writing material, since he searched for inspiration in every and any part of the world and his life’s experiences. However, and this is another example of his dual personality, two sides of him that constantly clash, he was not accustomed to obeying orders, as rebellion is also a part of his rich character and personality. He was also drafted into the US Navy, but later medically discharged. In New York, while attending Columbia University,

Kerouac met Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Neal Cassady, the future members of the Beat Generation.

Reading Maher's vast book about Jack Kerouac, learning about his life, work and his legacy, one thing is clear – Kerouac was a complicated, unpredictable person with so many things to do, say, and write about. He was not a stationary person, far from it – he was a modern day pioneer and explorer of lands. No matter how much he travelled, how many people he met, it was never enough, he always wanted more; to him, being rich did not mean materialistically, but rich in experience, adventures, rich in people and in the amount of land he had crossed over. He was also a very conflicted person, insecure, sometimes unsure of where he belongs or to whom he belongs, what he wants and how he wants it. He transferred all of this into his unique semi-autobiographical novels.

3. Overview of the development of American Studies: Some of the main authors and paradigms

In the most abstract sense, American Studies is an ongoing debate, a continued formulation of questions and answers relating to the very idea of what America might be, and the manners in which it could be studied, both past and present. (Moses 16)

In his “American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography,” Christopher Moses talks about the irony and complexity of what he calls the “double origins” of American Studies within a single beginning – its “academic origins” and “traditional origins.” When it comes to its “academic” origins, according to Moses, they can be easily traced to the founding of the journal *American Quarterly* in 1949 at the University of Minnesota, and the organization of the American Studies Association in 1951-1952, in the light of certain changes and shifts in academic interests. More precisely, historians and literary scholars alike, started to move

away from the formalism of New Criticism that dominated at the time, according to which a literary work was a self-contained, independent aesthetic object. Their focus and direction have now changed, and American Studies is oriented towards exploring to what extent exceptionalism, innovation and creativity are fundamental themes in the discipline's origins and evolution, and, above all, towards an interdisciplinary approach, which meant "integrating literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology, and then refracting them through an American lens" (Moses 17). These changes were accompanied by a rising nationalism within the American people and the goal of discovering their role in the civilization of the post-World War II period and in the wake of the Cold War. The main school of thought and approach during these early years of American Studies development was "Myth and Symbol," with tradition as its "original unifying method" (Moses 18).

According to Moses, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, American Studies experienced a crisis of a sort, due to its rather exclusive tendencies, or rather, including only the "dead white men" in the literary canon, "forgetting" and "denying" its past, i.e. slavery, colonialism, immigration. Therefore, in the wake of that, American Studies slowly started to shift its attention to the minority and feminist studies, which were already beginning to attract more attention, and even developing into disciplines in their own right. However, the debates over theory and method remain open, for there is no single theory upon which American Studies are based nor a general, single method of research analysis of it – and this is precisely what makes American Studies so unique in the world.

When it comes to the origins of tradition of American Studies, Moses traces it back to what F. O. Matthiessen calls the "American Renaissance," i.e. nineteenth-century authors that had a great impact on the development of American identity and American Studies – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. What is significant about them is that

they were all concerned with what America was and is becoming, with the origins of its identity, with the mythology and imagery surrounding it, rather than its material, social, “academic” history. These authors were focused on the “Romantic ideal of the sublime and their belief in a transcendental aesthetic present” (Moses 21), which draws quite a few parallels with the Myth and Symbol school of thought.

When talking about the Myth and Symbol school of thought it is important to mention and explain a thesis, a paradigm in its own right, a base and a foundation that many, if not all, early authors relied upon – exceptionalism. It is one of the main arguments justifying America’s existence and place in the world. America is a special nation, chosen by God, out of which follows that America and its values derived from a metaphysical reality. The epitome of “Americanness” and a real American hero is the American Adam, entering the wilderness, free from the constraints of the society. The goal is to forget about the European conventions and start creating a unique, independent nation, and with it a national, independent, original literature. To explain and contextualize the exceptionalist stream of thought and this Myth and Symbol approach, I will refer to some of the main authors and paradigms of the American Studies.

John Higham, talks about the distinction between the intellectual history and the “classic” history of the time, emphasizing the importance of intellectual history in the context of America, American Studies and the need for a methodology. In his article, “The Rise of American Intellectual History” (1951), Higham emphasizes the intellectual history, i.e. the history of American thought, as a point of origin of the American Studies, asserting that “scholars have tried to extricate a unique, indigenous tradition from part of our intellectual heritage,” which “indicated that a deepening search for patriotic values was contributing more than ever to the lure of intellectual history,” and that, in continuation, “encouraged interventionists and isolationists alike to consult the history of American thought” (469). And

it is in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* that he recognizes hints of a "notable methodological advance" (471), i.e. in his Myth and Symbol approach. It is important first to explain Smith's usage of the terms "myth" and "symbol," what they entail and how he uses them. In the prefaces to *Virgin Land*, Smith writes:

I use the words to designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image. The myths and symbols with which I deal have the further characteristic of being collective representations rather than the work of a single mind. I do not mean to raise the question whether such products of the imagination accurately reflect empirical fact. They exist on a different plane. But as I have tried to show, they sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs. (xi)

Twenty years after the first printing, Smith adds that he wanted to "protest against the common usage of the term 'myth' to mean simply an erroneous belief, and to insist that the relation between the imaginative constructions [he] was dealing with and the history of the West in the nineteenth century was a more complicated affair" (vii). For Smith, one such important myth, a concept upon which America and its history developed, is the West, the frontier, the westward movement, explaining that "one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward" (3), relying on Frederick Jackson Turner's hypothesis that the frontier had dominated American development. Turner believed and stated that the westward movement was about to come to an end at the end of the nineteenth century, however, it stayed on because it reflected already existing ideas and attitudes, causing many historians to write in the context of it. The underlying concept was exceptionalism, connected with geographical determinism – American society, America itself has been shaped by a westward pull of what was believed to be a vacant continent. It was to

become an agricultural country, constantly expanding to the West, to the interior which was being presented as a new and enchanting region of inexpressible beauty and fertility. According to Smith, Walt Whitman was the poet “who gave final imaginative expression to the theme of manifest destiny,” and for him, “the Atlantic seaboard after all represented the past, the shadow of Europe, cities, sophistication...a conventional life and literature” (44), as opposed to the West, “a realm where nature loomed larger than civilization and where feudalism had never been established. There, evidently, would grow up the truly American society of the future” (45).

Deriving from the paradigm of the West, there were two quite distinct kinds of West and two kinds of heroes that developed in literature and the national American thought. According to Smith, the first was the domesticated agricultural frontier and the hero was a frontiersman, a noble savage, a hunter, as exemplified by James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking. This frontiersman, the hunter, is a child of nature fleeing society, he is unrestrained by civilization and the law, he represents anarchic freedom, he has no knowledge of science and the cities, but of the forest, tracking people and animals, he is an autonomous individual without fear. After that follows a different kind of West, the Wild West, the uncivilized wilderness, giving rise to another kind of hero, the fur trapper, the mountain man. The scene shifted from the deeply fertile forest into the barren plains, where nature is no longer benign. Smith explains that as this new hero moves beyond the Mississippi, he adopts many Indian ways, and his “warlike skills, practical cunning, and sheer ferocity are developed to the highest degree. The true trapper hates mankind” (82-3). The most famous mountain man was Jessie Benton Fremont’s Kit Carson, and the source of the hero’s virtue was communion with nature.

Another important concept that Smith brings up, and which arises from those before mentioned, is the idea of the garden of the world:

With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves not to marching onward but to cultivating the earth. They plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, the Garden of the World. The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society – a collective representation, a poetic idea...that defined the promise of American life... The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth. (123)

And alongside this garden, a new hero emerged, the idealized frontier farmer, yeoman farmer. This garden and the agrarian concept celebrated America as a self-reliant, democratic and classless society of great opportunities as opposed to the poverty and urban depravity of Europe, and the yeoman was a symbol of American identity, the developing democratic ideas, representing equal economic and social opportunities for all classes, what would later become known as the American dream.

In his book *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis continues in a similar tone, emphasizing America's special and exceptional role in the world that is "starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race" (5). But what is important for Lewis and what he bases his approach on, is the separation from Europe, and with it, more importantly, the separation from the past. He introduces a new kind of hero:

The heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes. America ... was not the end-product of a long historical process ... it was something entirely new ... the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever

awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. (5)

America was Adam; an innocent occurrence made by a superior being, a god, without past, without past sins, basically starting *ex nihilo*, with a mission to become one of the greatest, to be an example, to lead and to create a new world. And this symbol of Adam and the Fall was quite literally used in narrative fiction, by novelist and historians alike. Examples and the evolution of the Adamic hero, or the hero of American fiction in general, according to Lewis, can be found in authors such as Hawthorne, Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Brockden Brown, Robert Montgomery Bird, but perhaps one of the most representative examples is Henry Thoreau's *Walden*. It is one of the canonical texts of American literature, a story of Thoreau leaving Boston and going into the woods. There he keeps a diary, and what he records is a ritual of cleansing, a purifications of sorts, a desire for a new kind of life, while also prescribing a "cure:" "the total renunciation of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct, and the total immersion in nature" (Lewis 21). According to Lewis, Thoreau was concerned with nature and people being strangled by conventions from the Old World, and what he wanted was for those conventions to be washed away so that the natural could reveal itself again and create its own conventions.

Lewis, too, focuses on intellectual history in his attempts to outline American mythology, and is "interested rather in the history of ideas and, especially, in the representative imagery and anecdote that crystalized whole clusters of ideas" (1). For him, the intellectual historian "should, in fact, look for the images and the 'story' that animate the ideas and are their imaginative and usually more compelling equivalent... And while the

vision may be formulated in the orderly language of rational thought, it also finds its form in a recurring pattern of images” (3). Lewis is conscious about what he is doing as an American Studies scholar; his sources are thinkers and artists, poets and novelists that transformed the issues of their time onto a conscious and coherent narrative and have thus produced the myth of their nation. In his article “The American Adam and the State of American Studies,” Roy Harvey Pearce talks about the development of American Studies as a discipline, referring to *The American Adam* as one of the most important texts in the Myth and Symbol school. According to Pearce, when it comes to the conception of America as the authentic Adam, “Lewis does not simply trace the overt, apparent history of the conception; nor does he analyze dialectically its ‘philosophy.’ Rather he deals with its expression; he treats it critically and dramatically, as a working belief held, imaged, and so explored by Americans of major creative vision” (Pearce 104).

One other important scholar of the Myth and Symbol school who should be mentioned is Perry Miller with his *Errand into the Wilderness*. Even though he relies on the past, even reconstructs, or reimagines the past, as opposed to the previously mentioned authors who advocated and relied upon the separation from the past and Europe, Miller does describe and explore an important myth that underlines American thought. Miller focuses on the Puritan past of the settlers in the Plymouth Colony. However, according to Robert Fuller, he did not present an objective account of the past, but rather searched for a coherent model, a ‘usable’ past to describe America. He chose the Puritans of the Plymouth Colony as the point of origin, ignoring the Virginian settlers in Jamestown. Fuller explains:

Thus began a career of historicizing the American past in a manner that served both as cathartic self-explanation and as a call to national destiny. This project, predicated on ideals of American exceptionalism and a fictive historical integrity that have since come under substantial scrutiny and revision, initially led him to the spiritual origins

of the American past. He chose the Puritans, he tells us in a characteristically evasive tautology, because "I wanted . . . a coherence with which I could coherently begin" (vii). (103)

Nonetheless, Miller's great contribution to American Studies is irrefutable. As he relates, the Puritans thought of themselves as God's messengers sent on an errand by His providence, and the aim was to create an ecclesiastical government, a Biblical polity, a rigorous Protestant society of solidarity that will serve as a role model for the rest of the world, a universal social model. They came to America, to an unknown, bare land where they could carry out their errand and start anew. Miller also turns to John Winthrop, who said that America is to become a city upon a hill, a utopia, a model city for the rest of the world to look up to. That concept is still today present in American identity. Another important concept that Miller brings forth is that of nature, or rather, nature versus civilization as "*the American theme*" (205). Nature in America means wilderness, explains Miller, and has been explored by many authors time and time again. America is Nature's nation, explains Miller:

a nation that was, above all other nations, embedded in Nature: if from vernal woods (along with Niagara Falls, the Mississippi, and the prairies) it can learn more of good and evil than from learned sages, could it not also learn from that source more conveniently than from divine revelation? Not that the nation would formally reject the Bible. On the contrary, it could even more energetically proclaim itself Christian and cherish churches; but it could derive its inspiration from the mountains, the lakes, the forests. There was nothing mean or niggling about these, nothing utilitarian. Thus, superficial appearances to the contrary, America is not crass, materialistic: it is Nature's nation, possessing a heart that watches and receives. (209)

Americans saw themselves as a nation embedded in nature, in tune with nature and that is what made them closer to God, what drove them, what marked and singled out their future.

And this concept, this myth is closely related to Smith's myth of the virgin land and Lewis' American Adam – all signifying and representing a new start on a bare continent, unburdened by past and the customs of civilization.

In his book *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx introduces another paradigm, another important myth of the American Studies. He states that his purpose is “to describe and evaluate the uses of the pastoral ideal in the interpretation of American experience,” by exploring how this pastoralism adapted to the conditions of the New World, as well as how it functions or how it changed with the coming of industrialism (4). What he is describing is the presence of nostalgia in people's minds, they are longing for quiet, green lands and forests which they identify with happiness and serenity, and have developed an unusual hostility towards the urban and the civilization. This Marx calls “popular and sentimental” pastoralism, but there is another one, “imaginative and complex.” When it comes to the latter one, Marx explains, “one has only to consider the titles which first come to mind from the classical canon of our literature – to recognize that the theme of withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is central to a remarkably large number of them ... one thinks of Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway” (10). And to all that he adds a simple but effective and evocative device – the image of a machine interrupting and disrupting the “garden” and the pastoral ideal, the quiet nature: “Now tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety” (Marx 16). With this Marx is trying to juxtapose two worlds, two opposites, one representing rural peace and simplicity and the other urban power and sophistication.

Emerson, on the other hand, sees machine power as “an instrument of national unity” (Marx 234), he does not see it as something disruptive and inherently bad, but as something that can eventually serve the rural ideal. And it is the poet's, the artist's task to bring the

machine, the technology closer to people, to “dispel the ugliness which surrounds the new technology,” by incorporating them into their work (Marx 241).

Connected to the previous paradigms and authors, but mainly to Smith’s *Virgin Land* and Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, is another important author, Alan Trachtenberg with his book *Brooklyn Bridge*, “the last installment of the myth-and-symbol chapter in American studies scholarship,” according to Hoskins (102). It is the last one, as he explains, because shortly after its publication, the myth and symbol school of thought came to be criticized and scrutinized due to the cultural events of the 1960s. Trachtenberg tells the story of the Brooklyn Bridge from its conception in the minds of a few men in the early nineteenth century, through the tumultuous time of its building, to its later symbol or even myth status, becoming a source of awe and inspiration for numerous artists from many different areas of cultural activity and life. In this bridge, Trachtenberg sees both history and myth, a symbol of a unified American character.

Trachtenberg celebrates progress. For him “Progress is a ‘return’ to the past” (17), and roads mean progress. They link the modern West with the traditional East, bringing history to the New World, as he explains it. Therefore, he also celebrates the road: “Not the land, not the garden, but the road ... has expressed the essential way of American life” (21). Encompassing all the previous paradigms and symbols, Trachtenberg provides a well-rounded conclusion to the myth-and-symbol school of thought, and opens the way to the analysis and the discussion of the main focus of this paper – Jack Kerouac, who also embraced the concept and the symbol of the road, dealing with it and celebrating it throughout his life and his writing.

4. Jack Kerouac in the context of American Studies

In the following section of this paper, the discussion will be focused on Kerouac's place and significance within American Studies, i.e. on what he has contributed to the ever developing and changing American Studies, how he found his place within them and whether he fits in with some of its main paradigms and themes, how he has influenced and/or changed American culture, and what his legacy is.

4.1. Kerouac and the Beat Generation

Since its beginnings, America has been oriented towards progress, towards development, towards separating itself from the world, making itself distinct, different, special and recognizable in the world. As this was the case on the political and economic level, so it was on the cultural, and, within it, the literary level. When it comes to culture and literature, progress is, to a certain extent, a vicious circle. In every period in history there is an establishment, i.e. an established ideology, set of books, authors and themes that are a part of the canon. For every establishment, on the other hand, there is a different set of authors, books, themes and ideas that aim to challenge that establishment and its ideology, subvert it, challenge the *status quo*. Another characteristic that most of these subversive ideologies that challenge the establishment have in common is the effort to bring literature closer to the everyday, average people, make it accessible to all people, not just the elite, the highly educated intellectuals. The Beat movement and its representatives try to do exactly that, and that is why this movement is important, but often times overlooked and disregarded due to some other, less significant characteristics of it. They found inspiration in the world and in all that it has to offer, they believed in living their life openly, adventurously, fighting against social constraints along the way, as explained in the words of Todd Gitlin:

They felt cramped by the postwar bargain of homes and mortgages, steady jobs, organized suffering; they wanted to run around, hang out, get away, find spiritual bedrock. If the true-blue Fifties was affluence, the beats' counter-Fifties was voluntary poverty ... They unplugged from the standard circuits of family, job, and good behavior in order to overthrow sexual taboos, to commit uncivil disobedience against a national dress code which required trimmed minds to match trimmed lawns. (46)

In the following passage, Paul Maher Jr. explains when the concept of "beat generation" came to be, as well as the original and literal meaning of the word "beat," due to which the writers of the Beat Generation came to be disregarded, under-appreciated and looked down by the society:

It was around this time, in 1948, that Jack Kerouac coined the term "beat generation" with novelist John Clellon Holmes, who went on to write an essay, "This Is the Beat Generation" for the *New York Times*. "Beat" originally meant "spent": "bad or ruined." It suggested to be "beaten down" or exhausted, both physically and materialistically, and referred to the generation who had come of age during the Second World War but could not polarize themselves as either clean-cut white-collars nor dutiful militants. "Beat" metamorphosed into a conscious objection to straight but spirit-killing jobs, with its adherents preferring to eke out their existence on that dividing line between material comfort and bohemian squalor, at best, or in outright indigence, at worst. This struggle to survive often encompassed selling or using narcotics, promiscuity, a kind of restlessness, and sometimes a sense of spiritual bankruptcy. (176)

Ann Charter adds in the Introduction to *The Portable Beat Reader*, "The word 'beat' was primarily in use after World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted" (xvii). And it is due to these, exceptional

circumstances of the time - the end of World War II, the atomic bomb dropped on Japan, and the Cold War which was to follow –, and the people, or better to say, the generation, that was affected by them and lived through them, that was born out of those circumstances, that was beat or beaten down, that the name Beat Generation came to be.

In order to better analyze this generation, the qualities of the writers that emerged after the World War II to from the Beat Generation, their works and the impact they left on the American history and literature, it is important to first determine what the concept of generation entails, what it refers to. In that task we can base our understanding of what generation is on F. Scott Fitzgerald's definition:

By a generation I mean that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times in a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas inherited in modified form from the madmen and the outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after, whose ideas are less clear-cut and defiant. (My Generation)

Becoming a part of this circle of writers, 'creating' this generation, or rather the concept of the beat writer, was a way for those young disaffiliated young people of the post-World War II to deal with the world around them, a world, as it seems, where they did not fit in, where they could not find any sort of belief system or spiritual values, something or someone to believe in, something or someone to guide them in the way that they needed.

In attempts to better describe this generation that he was a part of, or even a leader of, Jack Kerouac went a step further:

To this original meaning Kerouac added a second: "beatific." In this sense, beat captured a sort of holiness that came with being among the downtrodden masses – comparable to what Prince Myshkin experienced in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. In

Kerouac's world, these masses included lost sailors, dusty hoboes, drunk and despondent husbands, disillusioned soldiers, and truck stop diner customers. Just the type he was about to meet on the road. (Maher 176)

Kerouac tried really hard to avoid the stereotypes that were attributed to him and his generation, wanting for the public and the literary circles to take them and their work seriously. For him, the Beat Generation had a deep spiritual value, but Kerouac failed to convince them all in that fact. This was, perhaps, due to the fact that Kerouac would, on numerous and frequent occasions, appear intoxicated for magazine or TV interviews. Even though many of them drank in excess, used drugs and expressed and practiced their sexuality regularly and openly, that was merely one side of their lifestyle – they were also intellectuals, solid writers and thinkers, with much to say. And it is partly through their open and unrestrained lifestyle, and partly through their novels and poems that they voiced and expressed their dissatisfaction with the circumstances they were living in, they “protested their country's excesses on the front lines. They advocated personal and social changes that made them heroes to some readers, and heretics to others” (Charters xxxi). It was probably due to their lifestyle, as well, that the term Beat Generation began to be used as a label for other different groups of people, and much to Kerouac's and the Beats' dissatisfaction, “the word ‘beat’ lost its specific reference to a particular subculture and became a synonym for anyone living as a bohemian or acting rebelliously or appearing to advocate a revolution in manners” (Charters xxi). Todd Gitlin states that “Most of the beats were inconspicuous; indeed, that was part of the point of being beat, whether that meant self-consciously beaten or beatified. Most of them dressed simply ... Only a minority wore the notorious beards as badges of identity” (45-46). He also adds that not a lot of the Beats wrote, they were not all authors, but that those who did write, on the other hand, “were ferociously articulate, wrote

furiously, and – as virtually all the mass and not-so-mass media demonstrated in chorus – scraped an American nerve” (46).

To the Beats, art was life and life was art, they did not and would not separate the two. What was important for them was writing what they lived, writing in the way that their life could be experienced through their art. Gitlin explains that “Their styles and ways of work were transcriptions of their ideals. In keeping with their refusal to separate art from life, they even devised appropriate technologies” (48). For example, Kerouac did not like to be interrupted while he was writing; he would, as his fellow Beats would say, “binge-write,” and he thought that changing the paper in the typewriter was a waste of his precious time, so he decided to resolve it and save some time –he taped the papers together, creating continuous rolls of paperso he could type his novel-length manuscripts over the period of several strenuous days and weeks.

According to Gitlin, apart from some of the already mentioned, other main and distinctive characteristics and symbols of the Beats are “buddyhood,” the road, disobedience, spontaneity in life and in writing, jazz as their greatest influence. In an ironic and satirical way, Gitlin offers picaresque descriptions of those characteristics. When it comes to the concept of buddyhood, Gitlin explains that “the beats were true brothers on the road together sharing wine, women, and mantras” (47). What this means is that they particularly cherished their buddies, more specifically male buddies – those were the relationships that they relied upon, because it was only among themselves that they could understand each other and find true meaning. Relationships with women were not so stable and appreciated. Unfortunately, women were only a passing concept – they would meet them on the road, have a short relationship or just sex and then leave; some even got married, but they would constantly leave their wives, and sometimes children, in order to go back on the road, which was criticized by Ann Charters: “The Beat Generation did less well for its women. Reflecting the

sexism of the times, the women mostly stayed on the sidelines as girlfriends and wives ... most women living with or married to the Beats, for example Carolyn Cassady ... took care of the children, worked to support the family, and did little writing, mostly memoirs years later” (xxxiii). That is not to say that the Beats did not love or appreciate certain values, they did, they valued love and family, they were very spiritual, they preached love and celebrated companionship, a certain “buddyhood.” They did all that in their own way, different way, they stood out of the norms of the society and, because of that, were outcast and underappreciated. One of the ways they rebelled against society, against what was socially acceptable at the time, was interracial sex and exaggerated fascination with the “Other”: “Interracial sex was an affirmation of raw impulse against the overupholstered paleface mind. They grooved on white working-class men ... and on Mexicans and blacks” (Gitlin47).

When it comes to their writing and their language, their way of expression, jazz music had the greatest influence over them. They wanted a spontaneous, rhythmical writing and, once again, something that was different, something that opposed the restrained minds and writings of the time when “literary studies emphasized cool distance, teeth-gritting irony, the decorous play of literary reference” (Gitlin49):

Kerouac insisted that language be ‘undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musicians) on subject of image’; that there be ‘no periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needles commas – but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musicians drawing breath between outblown phrases)’; ‘not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang!’; that there be ‘no

pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained...’ (Gitlin 48)

And this kind of writing, adds Gitlin could have been, and was, perceived in a completely different way by an “unenlightened” mind – “like dull indiscriminate blurs, as if a burned-up world were showering them with a storm of sparks and ashes glimpsed through the windshield of a car hurtling down the road at high speed” (49). The Beats’ main influences were Rimbaud, Yeats and the Surrealist, states Gitlin, and continues describing their way of life and work:

They went to great lengths – literally! – refusing to observe hierarchies of value; life was a succession of stopping-off points, each just as sacred and (un)important as the others. All beginning and end was artifice, all life momentary – and exquisite. They were consistent, then, when, cultivating Rimbaud’s ‘systematic derangement of the senses,’ they used *crazy* as an affirmation. Their exuberance knew despair. (49)

They put everything they had into their writing. It was a flow of feelings and experiences just pouring itself onto the paper, it was spontaneous, it was fast, it was free, unconstrained, everything was permitted and everything was possible. They wrote what they experienced, what they went through, what they knew and what was on their mind.

The Beat Generation was not understood, appreciated nor respected at their time, as already mentioned several times. Moreover, they were constantly at the mercy of the critics and especially the mass media, who were “horrified and titillated,” and at the mercy of the police that was often stirring up hysteria, “most notoriously by arresting Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1956 and charging him with selling obscene material including, among other items, ‘Howl’” (Gitlin 52). Gitlin describes the media as “omnivorous,” destroying the Beats’ reputation for popular amusement, converting them into object of laughter, into comic relief.

However they were treated and (dis)respected, the Beat Generation left their mark in American culture, literature and national thought. They may not have been deservedly respected and appreciated back then, but that changed with time: “As the beats’ energy rippled outward in the late Fifties, they left behind more than modish jadedness and touristic coffeehouses. *Evergreen Review* mixed the beats with European absurdists and other miscellaneous literati, and carried their word beyond their small circles” (Gitlin 53).

4.2. American Studies, Jack Kerouac and the myths of Americanness

It is right around the time when the Beat Generation came into existence, in the years before and after the Second World War, that the new field of American Studies started to emerge and came to maturity, and the “Americanists undertook the search for a central myth of America” states Philip Fisher in his Introduction to *The New American Studies*, a collection of essays that represent a new idea of what American Studies are, a new generation of the American Studies. He names some of the most important figures and works with which it all started, whose main thoughts, myths and symbols were exposed and briefly analyzed in the earlier parts of this paper:

Such key works as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, R.W.B. Lewis’s *American Adam*, or Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence* encouraged a study of literature, everyday culture, and history around a shared mythic content that captured American uniqueness and national identity. (viii)

Fisher also adds that the first myth, however, was defined half a century earlier. This was Frederic Jackson Turner’s frontier myth, which later set the stage for the first generation of academic study of American culture. After the frontier myth, or the myth of the West, came

the second most important myth – that of the Puritans, or “a myth of New England culture” (ix). According to him, this was a myth about the importance of intellectuals, and later in the twentieth century university professors. This movement into universities is to him a crucial fact, more important than any other thus far, because it is the way in which “American studies and American literature everywhere arrived at legitimacy” (Fisher ix).

Marcus Cunliffe is also concerned with the emergence of American Studies, the period leading up to it, i.e. the changes in literature that have taken place in the twentieth century, since the 1900s, and whether those “avant-garde” and “highbrow” literatures and directions, as he calls them, are indeed representative of the American society, of its character and psyche. He describes the changes that took place around that period, and the influence they had on the developing American literature, which was, it can be said, in a perpetual search for its basis, its source, the “Americanness” upon which to rely and set its standards. During the First World War and the period leading up to it, “American literature was dominated by the standards of the educated, Protestant, Europe-oriented middle class” (Cunliffe 370), so that would make the search for true “Americanness” rather hard. Another obstacle was that there was a great deal of censorship involved due to that fact, or rather, the need of the Americans to emphasize their morals, their moral superiority and cleanliness. What arose out of that is that the literature also had a didactic role and effect, so in spite of their claims and the writer’s “duty” to depict the “real” American ways and the “real” American man, the didactic role and implementing moral lessons would have had primacy over it. It is only after the War, or rather in the period between the two wars that some of the main authors started to emerge with their myths and symbols of Americanness that have persisted to the present day, which is thanks to the fact that the censorship slowly began disappearing and “an entire substitution of values was taking place, away from the old ethic of he-man competitiveness towards a new, relaxed, communal style” (Cunliffe 372).

This is where the Beat Generation and their representative Jack Kerouac find fertile ground for their, to an extent, revolutionary ideas and works. The writings of the Beats do not have a didactic role, nor a moral one, or, to be extreme, they are not even moral. Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* was published in 1957, though it was written much earlier. It is a blend of autobiography and fiction, at first glance reads as an erratic, psychotic even, disconnected stream-of-consciousness account of the narrator Sal Paradise's life on the road, or rather his adventures and journeys spanning over several years. While it seems like that initially, it is, on the contrary, a depiction of a whole generation, or even a creation of a whole new generation – the beat generation. The novel entails much more than it allows to be seen on the surface, it demands a closer reading if one wants to discern all the implications of it, analyze the impact it has had on American culture, or place it in the context of the development of American Studies and its paradigms. The novel is semi-autobiographical, based on Kerouac's real life, adventures and the people he knew. Many, if not all of the characters in the novel *On the Road* – as well as in many other novels – are based on and represent the people Kerouac knew. In *On the Road*, Kerouac is represented through the narrator, Sal Paradise.

Travelling across the country over a three-year span, from New York to the West coast, Kerouac, i.e. Sal Paradise, the character that represents him in the book, met an array of new people along the way, many of them being a part of his 'Beat crowd.' Many of those trips were encouraged by and occurred because of Neal Cassady, i.e. Dean Moriarty in the book, to at least some extent. According to Nicoletti, Cassady was an inspiration for many other Beat writers and not just Kerouac, due to his very rich, adventurous, exciting and sometimes dangerous way of life. He is the one that initiates action in the novel: "As the character, Dean Moriarty, Cassady puts into action the entire plot, removing Kerouac from the depressing

house of his mother in New York and out in to the world” (Nicoletti 9). Moriarty/Cassady is the agent of the action, and Kerouac/Sal Paradise is only the observer.

When it comes to breaking the rules of rigidly structured norms of literature and society, Kerouac does not disappoint with his innovative, spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness style of writing: “Kerouac uses a variation of this technique [stream of consciousness] in his writing, with a free flow of thought and intent to give the reader the actual workings of [his] mind during the writing itself,” explains Nicoletti, adding that “Kerouac was indeed a proponent for writing like one speaks, and this was relevant in all of his writings, especially *On the Road*. By applying stream-of-consciousness writing in an extended narrative of prose, such as this novel, Kerouac surpassed his colleague Ginsberg” (11). Apart from the writing style, there is another aspect of the novel that celebrates breaking from the society’s norms. Being an outsider himself, marginalized in more ways than one, be it his origin, his style of writing, his lifestyle, his life choices, his state of mind (often times he did not know who he was, who he wanted to be, what he wanted to do, what defined him, what was his purpose in life), he identified and enjoyed interacting with, as well as wrote about the marginalized people, those on the fringes of society:

Jack Kerouac sets out at mid-century to surround himself with the lives of those beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ American society. Fictionalized in *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*, his quest leads him to live with hobos, befriend criminals and drug users, and have interracial affairs with Mexican and Native American women – all this in the confining social environment of late 1940s America, when conformity was seen as a civic good. (Wilson 302)

Kerouac and the rest of the Beats sought and found inspiration in the strange, the different, in the marginalized, the outsiders, they were inclusive, as opposed to the very exclusive America and American literature at the time.

When it comes to the West, Turner's frontier hypothesis, the myth of the true American hero, the American Adam, and entering the wilderness, Kerouac is here again: "we gotta go and never stop going till we get there" (Kerouac 225). "Paradise is on a search for authenticity in a mid-century America bent on conformity and convenience" (Wilson 303) and this is obvious and clearly stated in the very beginning of *On the Road*, in the second sentence: "I had just gotten over serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with ... my feeling that everything was dead" (7). According to Wilson, Kerouac and his narrator, Sal Paradise, are on a constant search for enlightenment, authenticity, a spiritual cure. Kerouac is searching for those things first through Dean Moriarty, his buddy in the book who was based on Neal Cassady, his real-life friend. Kerouac is actually not a man of action, he is constantly conflicted, he is an introverted and somber person, which he slowly, with becoming famous and not really tolerating the attention well, tries to compensate and hide through alcohol and drug abuse. Cassady is the instigator, the agent, the doer, the man of action who encourages Kerouac to go on road trips and adventures with him, which is how he will discover this authenticity, the essence of being American. They are frontiersman, always on the move. Brian Ireland explains how many writers and historians, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Frederick Jackson Turner, have talked about the constant movement that America is focused on. America's spirit and character are inherently restless, and concludes that "the road has always been a significant and persistent feature of American culture" (498). He further contemplates that idea:

Is it possible, as Steinbeck and Lewis suggest, that there is some sort of "nomadic gene" that is more prevalent in the United States than elsewhere? ... the idea is hard to resist. How else can one explain, for example, the abundance of road stories in the United States and the popularity of such artistic wanderers as Robert Johnson, Woody Guthrie, Jack Kerouac and Bob Dylan? ... While not unique to the United States, the

frontier experience has therefore left an enduring imprint on American culture and this is reflected in the road genre. The continuing popularity of the frontier outlaw is perhaps the most obvious example of this. (Ireland 498-99)

Ireland also concludes that this road genre, where men explore their limits and the limits of their land, and of their freedom, is also at its core a stand against the social, cultural and political boundaries.

Fisher adds to that idea and explains that:

Within American studies the study of America had become the study of dissent. The rebels and dissidents came to the front as the leading patriots ... The search for central myths, myths already closed off, like the frontier at the moment it was first described as the single most vital experience for American identity, was inseparable from the study of resistance within culture. (xi)

And according to Cunliffe, there are actually always two cultures in America, two different worlds, and a “gulf” between them: there is the “adversary culture” and the “middle, mainstream, or official culture” (384), to which he later refers as the “responsible” culture or literature (385). Trying to explain it more precisely and present the changes that have occurred in culture and literature, he subdivides and presents the changes through several periods or phases, starting from 1900, because “Within each, common preoccupations can be recognized, and each has tended to reject the assumptions of its predecessor” (387). The first one (1900-1920) could be called one of reform or progressive, a “revolt against formalism” (387), the second (1920-1940) was not really keen on social or political protest and reform, but deep antagonisms were present throughout society, to the extent that the whole culture at the time could have been called “adversary” (389), the third phase (1940-1960) was war time, with new moods and views, a lot of the writing concerning the war, but also those, ironically,

very apolitical, where authors “immersed themselves instead in the discovery of self” (391): “During the 1950s California, and the North-West of Oregon and Washington State (followed subsequently by Alaska), became the latest of America’s succession of Last Frontiers, where individuals could still seek open space in which to ‘be themselves’.” (391) Here we have the Beat authors and Jack Kerouac as their representatives who “caught the unwilling compulsions of the decade’s foot-on-the-gas nomadic cronies” (391). People are no longer enthralled by the European civilization, they see no future in communism nor in socialism, what prevailed was “a combination of jadedness and qualified optimism” (392), the latter due to the prospering economy. The fourth phase (1960-1975) “saw an extraordinary change,” “Horror and hatred of the political scene seemed about to boil over in 1968” due to the Vietnam War. Then later, in 1980, the Republican Reagan came to power and “radicalism was ‘out’: the in-thing was patriotism” (395), there was “far more talk of a return to traditional values – self-help, prayer, family” (396) – but what Cunliffe believes, is that this was an “act of amnesia,” and that it is doubtful that the society changed so deeply and suddenly, and forgot all about the Depression, the war, all the bad things basically. Black, Native American and feminist literature started to gain ground at this time.

As the circumstances of American society and the position of literature changed with years, so did the role of the writer:

In 1900 the typical author was a Protestant, probably of British descent. During the next decade this Gilderish man of letters mutated into many different forms. He might well be Jewish or black or avowedly homosexual. He might be living almost anywhere from Seattle to Casablanca. He might be teaching in a university – a striking development since 1945. And of course ‘he’ might be a ‘she’, though until the 1980s most of the prizes were still being borne off by male authors. (Cunliffe372-373).

These changes were also happening within each phase of the development, as well as within each author, and Kerouac is not an exception. With each book his style progressed, as well as his thoughts and realization. In *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac, or rather Leo Percepied, the character that represents him, realizes that what had always pained him: “the writer’s true role to be that of extracting meaning from those who live it, because as a writer he cannot live authentically himself;” he realizes that he has to suffer and renounce his personal relationships in order to be a good writer, in order to “recreate them as literature” (Wilson 310). It is here that he finally understands what he tried to understand in *On the Road* when Dean Moriarty left Sal Paradise alone when he was sick, and when they parted ways at the end of the novel: “authenticity in life requires abandoning our need for personal ties” (Wilson 307).

What appears here, between the lines, is another concept of Americanness, the myth of the American dream and the journey towards it. For Kerouac, it had not been an easy journey. As was said in the beginning of this paper, Kerouac had a somewhat dual personality, he was very conflicted about his feelings, his identity and his place in the world, which probably stems from his ethnicity, the fact that he is both French and American, but cannot seem to completely fit within any of those categories. And symptomatic of that is an interesting interpretation of *On the Road* that Karen Skinazi offers: “Though autobiographical in nature, *On the Road* focuses as much on an outsider—an unheroic character, a passenger on the road to the American Dream, as on the insider—a heroic figure. The heroic figure, Dean Moriarty, is the one to drive his way into the spotlight” (86). For her, the novel is an autobiographical one, but in the way that Jack Kerouac has split his personality, his identity into two parts, or rather two characters. According to her, both Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are Kerouac, two sides of the same person, both with their faults and virtues:

Kerouac splits his ethnic (French) and national (American) sides into two figures, Sal and Dean, to demonstrate the deficits and benefits of both parts of a hyphenated identity. Italian Sal sees himself as the eternal outsider, whereas Dean is America itself. Yet Sal uses his outsider qualities to connect with other outsiders whose “roots” are beyond the limits of nationhood. And Dean, despite the seemingly endless freedom of his “routes” across the country, is stuck in old tropes of Americanness that do not afford him new possibilities. Together, they create a vision of America that is full of its own grandeur, while refusing to be insular. (85)

Kerouac is the “other” and he in a way represents the other, and also the readers, who are also the others, he lives vicariously through Dean, experiences his adventures and the road life, the Americanness through Dean, the hero of this novel, and takes us, the readers, along for the ride. We are “an expression of Kerouac’s ethnicity” (Skinazi 89). Since we are not experiencing this directly, we can identify more with Sal Paradise, the narrator of the book, the passive, ethnic side of Kerouac, and together with Kerouac/Sal Paradise admire Dean Moriarty and his openness, his ability to genuinely experience his Americanness, to understand what is truly American, to be completely self-reliant and self-sufficient, to realize that the point of going on the road is just that – going, moving forward, experiencing the road. It can be concluded that “Kerouac’s objective in *On the Road* is to find and discover America” (Skinazi91). She describes the duality of the novel, of Kerouac himself: “He wants to be a part of the American Dream, but he cannot get on the right road. *On the Road* is a novel that both captures the westward movement that is the foundation of American myth—and yet, resists it.” (91)

Quite a few parallels can be drawn here between Kerouac and SacvanBercovitch, especially when it comes to the origin of the two, the concept of “otherness” and seeing America from a different perspective. Bercovitch’s parents were Jews born in the Ukraine

who later emigrated to Montreal, Canada, where Bercovitch was finally born. He later moved to the USA, where he studied, worked and became more and more interested in the American culture. Therefore, Kerouac and Bercovitch were both Canadians, immersing themselves into the American way of life, studying America and its culture from a completely different perspective, as outsiders looking in, bringing about different points of view, different thoughts and different understandings of what Americanness is and was, how it came to be, and what it means to different people, how they perceive it.

When it comes to specific contributions Bercovitch made, arguably the most important one was directly challenging Miller's understanding of Puritanism. According to Harlan, "Bercovitch is rewriting the entire chronicle of American history- its underlying structure, its essential content, its fundamental meaning. He is reconstructing the American past, recasting who we have been and redefining who we should become" (952), opposing Perry Miller, to whom Puritanism was a "redemptive discipline," "an indispensable guide for sojourners in the wilderness," that "demanded harsh and unrelenting self-interrogation" and "gave us our best ideas about what we should value and how we should live" (949). Puritanism is now re-interpreted as "meanspirited and hegemonic," "self-flattering and pleasing to the heart," an insignificant and inconsequential episode in the history of colonial British America" (Harlan 950). That is how far Bercovitch reached and succeeded.

Going back to our main focus, Kerouac, he also realizes some different truths and draws conclusions different from those generally accepted and rooted in the collective mind. Skinazi states that it was a different truth that was achieved and realized by the narrator/author – "Americanness is made in more than one place" (99). While following and living by the great and all-important Myth of the West, Sal Paradise/Kerouac actually, and possibly unknowingly, debunks the very same myth: "I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different" (Kerouac 101). The

Ghost was an old man, who wanted Sal to follow him, and who, to Sal, appeared lost and confused. But it is precisely him that taught Sal/Kerouac a valuable lesson. The Myth of the West is merely a myth, and even though it is thought to be *the* symbol of America, the American dream and the constant pursuit of happiness, not everybody can find their happiness or meaning in the West. This is that one, ethnic side of him coping with the American dream. On the other side, however, he is aware of the complete opposite, that the West, going on the road, to the frontier, being on the road is what true Americanness is – presented, described, and probably lived through Dean, the hero of the novel.

Being unable to cope with himself, with his identity, he idealized and took comfort in the others he thought to be like him. He was maybe even overly fascinated by those socially rejected and marginalized groups, searching the truth in them and recognizing a “certain essential humanness” in them: “Kerouac’s search for truth would involve ‘digging’ the lives of the dispossessed – not merely studying Blacks, Mexicans, criminals, but attempting to *become* them for a time” (Wilson 303). In the novel, he explicitly expresses his wish to be someone else, to be them: “wishing I were a Negro,” “wished I were a Denver Mexican,” “I was so drearily a 'white man' disillusioned” (Kerouac 169). With this fascination and its troubles, Kerouac brings about another way of achieving true Americanness, another myth that underlies American thought, which is the pastoral ideal, the idea that working in and off of nature is where he will find his true self. It is an “idyllic cast [that] Kerouac gives to the lives of the Mexican and African American migrant farm laborers” (Richardson 223), describing with joy and fascination how he picked cotton with his girlfriend Terry in *On the Road*:

We bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful. Across the field were the tents, and beyond them the sere brown cottonfields that stretched out of sight to the brown arroyo foothills and then the snow-capped Sierras in the blue morning air. This was so much better than washing dishes on South Main Street. But I knew nothing

about picking cotton. I spent too much time disengaging the white ball from its crackly bed; the others did it in one flick. Moreover, my fingertips began to bleed; I needed gloves, or more experience. There was an old Negro couple in the field with us. They picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in antebellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, and their bags increased. My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work. (92-3)

It almost seems as if Kerouac is unaware of the plight and hardship of the history and the present of the people he is describing. He often romanticizes and idealizes them and they cause a certain degree of envy in him, but not a bad or resenting one. It is rather, what Richardson calls it an "idealizing envy," and explains that "Kerouac does not ask us to pity them, to champion them, or anything else. He asks instead that we wistfully love them best (and need them most) just as they are" (227).

Connected with labor, working and living in nature, living off of land, is the theme that Kerouac deals with in his other novel, *Big Sur*, Kerouac's another autobiographical novel. According to Jason Haslam, it is where he appropriates and transforms "a Thoreauvian-style transcendentalism" (445). It can be said that this novel is relatively more mature to an extent, in the way that it has a more solid background, Kerouac is more aware of himself and what he is going through. There is a more or less clean, linear line of his descent into madness, of which Kerouac i.e. Jack Dolouz, the character in the novel that represents him, is aware himself; he recounts the "bad signs" or "omens" that led to his mental downfall. This novel was written some ten to fifteen years following his life on the road and his novel *On the Road*, so naturally he is more mature and experienced which is evident in *Big Sur*. He has

abandoned some parts of his beatnik, “roady” lifestyle, but not all of them. He is still prone to excessive drinking, partying, and his love for women is still irrefutable. This novel can very well be compared to Henry Thoreau’s *Walden*, which is one of the canonical texts of American literature, a story of Thoreau leaving Boston and going into the woods. There he keeps a diary, and what he records is a ritual of cleansing, a purifications of sorts, a desire for a new kind of life, while also prescribing a “cure:” “the total renunciation of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct, and the total immersion in nature” (Lewis 21). According to Lewis, Thoreau was concerned with nature and people being strangled by conventions from the Old World, and what he wanted was for those conventions to be washed away so that the natural could reveal itself again and create its own conventions. And that is what Kerouac wanted to do, or something similar. Around the time that Kerouac went to the cabin in Big Sur, his fame was reaching its peak, following the success of *On the Road*. He needed to get away from society, needed some peace and quiet where he can find his inner peace again, his true self:

The difference in this novel is the protagonist, Jack Duluoz, who is actually the true hero of this story. Kerouac left New York for a retreat at Big Sur, to come clean from alcohol, and to avoid his fame that followed his first two major novels. Big Sur tells the story of this relief that fails him, because Duluoz has a mental breakdown and returns to alcohol in the end, while returning to his home, his mother’s house. (Nicoletti 14)

He may not have succeeded in his new attempt at living freely, alone, in the nature, but what can be said about Kerouac is that he is trying to find ways of achieving his true Americanness, finding what is truly American, living the American dream: “One could convincingly argue that Kerouac romanticizes the life of the downtrodden, as well as his own life, but of course this may be the very point. Creating fiction from autobiography is an act of

conscious myth-making” (Wilson 314). He may not be successful in some of his endeavors, but perhaps that is the point, at least for him – a constant search, movement, following the great myths of America, searching for them and their meaning and maybe even making the way for some new myths and new meanings.

4.3. Where is Kerouac now?

Kerouac has left his mark in many ways, in many spheres and on many people. Kerouac and his novels, especially *On the Road*, have had a great impact on many generations, and hopefully will have on the generations to come. People read him, people read about him, articles are being written about his life, his literature, his importance. Kerouac is also present in the film industry, where the younger generations can hear and learn about him, and maybe even become interested enough to read one of his books. For example, a movie, based on *On the Road*, from 2012, could introduce Kerouac to younger generations who have not heard of him, or are not very familiar with him and his novels.

When it comes to literature per se, in his essay Cunliffe emphasizes that there is a problem in how we define literature and what it actually includes. At one point, he writes that if we would confine literature only to the printed word, it would be “only a tiny proportion of an immense, heterogeneous output” (374). He argues that “literature in the broadest sense could include everything that is sung, spoken or put into print,” and adds that “There could be something foolishly blinkered about discussing twentieth-century novels without any reference to the cinema” (374). What this could mean is that as the world changed and changes, the film and the cinema have become, and are still becoming more and more important parts of culture. Books are being adapted for screen, writers are turning into screenwriters; books and authors influence the film and vice versa. When talking about the

present day, this ever-changing, digital technological age, books are read much less than before, and the film industry, especially Hollywood, which has basically become the epitome of film industry, have a much bigger influence and impact on today's youth. If there were no films, adapted from or based on books, some people would have never heard of certain 'important' or 'classic' books and authors, albeit those terms are very relative.

In conclusion, R.R Reno portrays the impact Kerouac has had on the today's culture and frame of mind:

Transgression and marginality have become the new normalcy. The bohemian rejection of social convention was first theorized as a normal stage of psychological development ("adolescent rebellion"), and more recently it has been made into both commercial fashions and academic dogma. Aging rock musicians go on tours and play their songs of youthful lust and rebellion to graying Baby Boomers who need Viagra. College professors theorize transgression as an act of political freedom. It's easy to see that Kerouac's road that leads from the Beat fantasies of primal innocence to our own day, where white boys from the suburbs dress like drug dealers, girls like prostitutes, and millionaires like dock workers. Crotch-grabbing rap singers play the role of well-paid Dean Moriartys. (31)

It can be concluded that rebellion and the breaking of social conventions have become inevitable parts of society, especially with the youth, the young people fighting for a better world and for a better place in the society. What Reno also points out, is that this kind of behavior has become very popular and, ironically, very mainstream. People can be seen dressed rather carelessly or as the Beats used to dress, wanting to be the Dean Moriartys of our age. Difference and rebellion have become the new 'normal.' Kerouac's road and the freedom that it brings and demands have found their way into the present.

5. Conclusion

America has always, since its beginnings, strived to reach the ideal of the perfect 'city upon a hill,' a land that was given a special place in this world, a land that has a special and exceptional role to play and to maintain. And when the American Studies emerged it based its concepts and paradigms on those ideals.

This paper dealt with how Jack Kerouac, as the leader and most famous representative of the Beat Generation, found his place within the American Studies, within the context of the myths and symbols it developed and relied upon. In order to contextualize Kerouac and American Studies and connect them, it was important first to present a short biography, an overview of Kerouac's life, his influences, events and people that affected him and later his writing. He was of French-Canadian origins, born to Christian parents, and had a certain dual personality, dual identity. On the one hand he was very introverted, shy, and timid, always keeping to himself, and on the other, eager to explore the world, discover new things, open towards the odd and different people in society. This was all reflected in his way of life and in his writing.

What was then analyzed was which myths and symbols permeate Kerouac's writing and form a base upon which he built his stories, and with that, his way of life, due to the fact that his novels are autobiographical and depict real events from his life. Some of the most important and influential myths that have persisted since the beginning of American Studies, and still have some impact and a place in the American mind and literature are: the American Adam, a real American hero entering the wilderness, free from the constraints of the society; the West, the frontier, the westward movement, America as an agricultural country, constantly expanding to the West.

This is where the Beat Generation and their representative Jack Kerouac find fertile ground for their, to an extent, revolutionary ideas and works. With his innovative way of writing, a spontaneous stream-of-consciousness prose, he disregarded the conventions and the customs of the time, relying on some of the most important concepts and themes of true Americanness. In *On the Road*, one of his most famous and representative novels, Kerouac is a frontiersman, always on the move, exploring the West in this road genre, where men explore their limits and the limits of their land, of their freedom. Apart from that, this novel is also, at its core, a stand against the social, cultural and political boundaries.

In his novels, Kerouac brings about another way of achieving true Americanness, another myth that underlies American thought, which is the pastoral ideal, the idea that working in and off of nature is where he will find his true self. This theme is present in *On the Road*, where he finds peace in working in the cotton fields, but it is most obviously depicted in the novel *Big Sur* which draws quite a few parallels with Thoreau's *Walden*. Thoreau was concerned with nature and people being strangled by conventions from the Old World, and what he wanted was for those conventions to be washed away so that the natural could reveal itself again and create its own conventions. This is what Kerouac tries to do as well, in attempts to find peace and his true identity, his Americanness, in the nature.

Kerouac was successful in some of his endeavors, less successful in others, but what matters in the end is that constant search, movement, following the great myths of America, searching for them and their meaning and maybe even making the way for some new myths and new meanings.

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