
Dissatisfaction of the Character ‘Sal Paradise’ in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*

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Abstract: Jack Kerouac is a pioneer member of Beat movement which rejected materialism and consuming society and asserted a new set of values. In this article Jack Kerouac’s dissatisfaction of the contemporary society in his novel titled *On the Road* will be examined. The focus will particularly be on the dissatisfaction of the main character, Sal Paradise, who is in fact Jack Kerouac himself. Sal Paradise can only settle down for a few months in a place, just to earn a few dollars in order to be able to travel to the next destination. When at home, he is allured by the road, but when on the road, he needs to return home. He cannot reach happiness and fulfillment in either case. This unhappiness, symbolically, is the dissatisfaction of the contemporary society.

Keywords: Sal Paradise, Beat movement, dissatisfaction, motion, contemporary society.

Jack Kerouac'ın *On the Road* Eserinde 'Sal Paradise' Karakterinin Tatminsizliği

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Öz: Jack Kerouac, Beat hareketinin öncülerinden biridir. Beat hareketi materyalizmi ve tüketici toplumu reddedip yeni değer yargıları benimsemiştir. Bu çalışmada Jack Kerouac'ın *On the Road* adlı eserinde çağdaş toplumun bu tatminsizliğini ele alınmaktadır. Romanın kahramanı Sal Paradise, Jack Kerouac'ın kendisidir. Sal Paradise bir yerde ancak birkaç ay kalır ve kaldığı süre içinde sonraki hedefe gidebilmek için çalışıp birkaç dolar kazanmayı amaçlar. Evindeyken seyahat özlemi, seyahat ederken de ev özlemi çeker. Hiçbir onu mutlu etmez. Sürekli bir tatminsizlik duygusu yaşar. Bu mutsuzluk, simgesel olarak, çağdaş toplumun mutsuzluğudur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sal Paradise, Beat hareketi, tatminsizlik, hareket, çağdaş toplum.

After the Second World War there was a gloomy atmosphere in the United States. The hard life conditions caused many social, political and cultural problems. The Beat Generation came into scene in such an atmosphere. Jack Kerouac is a pioneer member of this movement. The Beat members reject the materialism and consuming based approach. Instead they bring forward a new set of values. The Beat Generation is also called the beat movement. This group of American writers emerged in the 1950s. The phrase of 'Beat Generation' was introduced by Kerouac in 1948. Kerouac expanded the meaning of the term over time adding the paradoxical connotations of "upbeat" and "beatific".¹

The Second World War split up the American community into two groups: a group of consumers who were proud of calling themselves bourgeois, many of whom developed as white class who enjoyed prosperity; and a second group who witnessed the destruction of the war, hence, was in despair, angry with the current values and tradition of the community. This second group was represented by the Beats who had a notion of 'nonconformity, rebellion and rejection' of the hypocrisy of the consumer culture. Emerged from coffee houses, downtown clubs, and bars of San Francisco and the corridor of Columbia University, the Beats were in the hope of discovering a 'New Vision'. They were demanding a way of life free living from bourgeois considerations as security, moderation and self control. They created a strange and a 'glittering' life style experimenting sex, drug, jazz, religious experimentation, public living, anarchist politics, travel, speed and criminality (Parkins, 2014).

During Second World War veterans got used to morphine since it was a remedy for the ones with shot wounds. When they were back, they continued using drug, which later became available in shops. Drug use increased steadily, particularly among the Beats. The Beats developed a new language -blend of black argot, jazz terms and dope lingo and a new music, the jazz, which influenced

¹ Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg & William S. Burroughs, *The Beat Generation: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs*, Mainz: Pedia Press. 2005, s. 3.

and inspired many Beats and beat writings. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other Beat members spent much of their time in jazz clubs. Here, they discovered the magic of the music and started adopting the jazz as a life style. As Maynard stated

Jazz served as the ultimate point of reference, even though, or perhaps even because, few among them played it. From it they adopted the mythos of the brooding, tortured, solitary artist, performing with others but always alone. They talked the talk of jazz, built communal rites around using the jazzman's drugs, and worshipped the dead jazz musicians most fervently. The musician whose music was fatal represented pure spontaneity.²

One of the Beat authors John Clellon Holmes commented what jazz meant for the Beats members.

In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them, and their lives knew a gospel for the first time. It was more than music; it became an attitude toward life, a way of walking, a language and a costume; and these introverted kids... now felt somewhere at last.³

Beat movement developed in the 20th century when modernism maintained its influence. Although in some ways the Beats showed reaction to modernism, they were influenced by modernist writers such as Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Williams' influence was enormous for he encouraged the Beats to create an American style instead of following the European poets. Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe were the Kerouac's influences as modernist figures.

Sigmund Freud's views and analyses encouraged the Beats, particularly Kerouac and Ginsberg used Freud's ideas for their self expression. They did not avoid declaring their homosexuality, drug use, shameless exhibitions which of all were abnormal to the social conservative classes. Following Freud's principle of free association, they ignored controlling their thoughts and unconscious feel-

² John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993, s. 48.

³ John Clellon Holmes, *Go*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002, s. 13.

ings with a spontaneous expression way. John Ciardi claims that there is a "symptomatic of a narcissistic sickness in all Beat writing. The object seems to be to document one's own psyche on the assumption that every reader will find it as interesting as your psychiatrist does."⁴

The Beats produced a non-conforming writing style. Kerouac was a strict defender of spontaneous style. The works of this movement reject conservative American values and the dogmas. Suppressed by the traditional customs, the adults adopted these works and followed the ideas. Kerouac's *On The Road*, Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* deeply affected the adults giving a path to their lives. The Times reviewer, Gilbert Millstein mentioned that

Just as, more than any other novel of the Twenties, *The Sun Also Rises* came to be regarded as the testament of the Lost Generation, so it seems certain that *On the Road* will come to be known as that of the Beat Generation.⁵

Kerouac was born in Massachusetts in 1922, and he is the precursor of the Beat Movement. *The Town and the City* is Kerouac's first novel and it was published in 1950. After this novel he worked on a novel about his adventures but he then gave up. The first version of *On the Road* was completed in 1951. After the publication of *On the Road* in 1957, Kerouac became famous. Kerouac proved his art in novel rather than his poetry.

Swartz claimed that "The book did more than merely making the country "aware" of the Beat Generation; it amplified and popularized the condition of knowledge that gave the signifier "Beat Generation" cultural significance and resonance".⁶ According to Charters, "*On the Road* can be read as an American classic along with Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The*

⁴ Edward M. Cifelli, *John Ciardi: A Biography*, University of Arkansas Press, 1997, s. 2013.

⁵ Gilbert Millstein, "Books of the Times: *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac", New York Times, September 5, 1957.

⁶ Omar Swartz, *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999, s. 9.

Great Gatsby as a novel that explores the theme of personal freedom and challenges the promise of the American dream”.⁷

On The Road is the story of two young men, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Sal is an ingenuous writer whereas Dean Moriarty is wild man who gets pleasure out of life. His joy is travelling from end to end of America. When they travel they pass through wilderness, villages, towns, jungles and deserts. The aim of the journey is total freedom from conceptions and ideologies. The only motivation is moving forward to achieve freedom to escape from social boundaries and to enjoy life through sex, drugs and music:

“We gotta go and never stop going till we get there.”

“Where are we going, man?”

“I don’t know but we gotta go.”⁸

There is a perpetual motion throughout the novel so that they sometimes even forget what they are searching for. The aim of Sal Paradise’s journey is get somewhere and to meet: “I cursed, I cried for Chicago. Even now they’re all having a big time, they’re doing this, I’m not there, when will I get there!”⁹ Dean Moriarty is a mad character traveling constantly back and forth to New York. His energy and craziness affect others, especially Sal Paradise. When they come together they drink big amounts of alcohol, use drugs and sleep with a lot of different women. Dean becomes a fascination for Sal and encourages Sal’s desire to travel. Dissatisfaction with the contemporary society of the Beats shows itself in Sal’s constant desire to move in *On The Road*. As he travels he constantly looks for the next stop, he is not satisfied where he is nor is he interested in his current location anymore:

Now I could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promised Land, way out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and the plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night.¹⁰

⁷ Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987, s. vvi.

⁸ Kerouac, *On the Road*, New York: Penguin Books, 1956, s. 148.

⁹ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 9.

¹⁰ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 12.

Sal looks forward to going to Denver to meet his friends. However, going to Denver is not enough to satisfy his travelling desire. Before going to Denver, he begins to dream about the next destination after Denver which is San Francisco.

“We’re going to LA!” they yelled.

“What are you going to do there?”

“Hell, we don’t know. Who cares?”¹¹

This shows that not only Sal but also the other characters in the novel also share same feelings. The major concern is motion, getting somewhere is the secondary condition. They do not have a destination and do not care about it.

I said to myself, Wow! What’ll Denver be like! I got on that hot road, and off I went in a brand-new car driven by a Denver businessman of about thirty-five. He went seventy. I tingled all over; I counted minutes and subtracted miles. Just ahead, over the rolling wheat fields all golden beneath the distant snows of Estes, I’d be seeing old Denver at last. I pictured myself in a Denver bar that night, with all the gang, and in their eyes I would be strange and ragged and like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only Word I had was "Wow!" ...and here I was in Denver.¹²

Sal identifies his journeys with religious acts. He implies that his travels are as holy as the Prophet’s. He wants to give the reader the sense of the importance of his motion and his own feelings of urgency. In the course of novel, the readers feel that after Sal reaches his destination, he will get what he wants. However, it is obvious that he confirms his dissatisfaction once more as soon as he arrives in Denver: “Suddenly we came down from the mountain and overlooked the great sea-plain of Denver; heat rose as from an oven. We began to sing songs. I was itching to get on to San Francisco.”¹³ Although Sal has the freedom to go wherever he wants, he finds just a few places to explore. Sal and his friends from Denver

¹¹ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 17.

¹² Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 24.

¹³ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 37.

try to bring their life and insanity to this mountain town; ultimately, they find out that they do not have a place there, so they leave the town sadly.

Sal's friends take him to the party and they sing songs together, however, Sal feels uncomfortable since he wants to move. After spending one night at the house, Sal leaves again in the morning. "The bus rolled out of the storied, eager Denver streets. 'By God, I gotta come back and see what else will happen!' I promised."¹⁴ These lines show that Sal is so focused on travelling that he is planning to come back to Denver even before he has left there.

How disastrous all this was compared to what I'd written him from Paterson, planning my red line Route 6 across America. Here I was at the end of America - no more land - and now there was nowhere to go but back. I determined at least to make my trip a circular one: I decided then and there to go to Hollywood and back through Texas to see my bayou gang; then the rest be damned.¹⁵

When Sal arrives in San Francisco, he meets up his old friend from college. He gets Sal a job as a guard in the shipyard barracks. One night, Sal is supposed to keep order there. But he acts on the contrary and he joins them and gets drunk. He raises the American flag upside down. His disrespectful act may cause him to be jailed. As a result of his behaviors his relationship with his friends deteriorates and he becomes tired and lonely. Sal travelled to west as far as possible but his journey has been a total disappointment. Because he cannot find what he is looking for. No matter whatever he has been looking for. Finally he sees that his travel has come to the end. The only thing to do is to head back to East. That's why he gets on a bus and goes back to Los Angeles. He meets a friend there. They decide that they need to earn money before travelling to New York. So, Sal gets a job which is picking cotton in the field. However, his desire of moving does not let him stay long: "I was through with my chores in the cotton field. I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back. I shot my aunt a penny post-

¹⁴ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 39.

¹⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 50.

card across the land and asked for another fifty."¹⁶ Sal Paradise travels back and forth around the United States and he is unable to find anything to fulfill his desires anywhere.

As the experiences of the protagonist of *On The Road*, Sal Paradise display the Beat Generation's dissatisfaction with contemporary society. As shown, at the end of the novel, Sal Paradise can only settle down for a few months in a place, just to earn a few dollars to travel to the next destination. When he is at home he needs to travel but when he travels needs to return home. He lives in a dilemma and he cannot reach happiness and fulfillment in either case.

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¹⁶ Kerouac, *On the Road*, s. 63.