In a culture in which freedom and the rights of the individual supposedly reign supreme, it is hardly surprising that American writers should privilege the necessity for self-actualization in all its manifestations in their work. If the depiction of the struggle for identity involves forays into eccentricity, violence, and what may be regarded as unconventional or aberrant sexual practices, so be it. Boundaries are willingly violated by the characters in modern American literature, even at the risk of mental instability or the loss of the sense of belonging that conformity to social mores might provide. In the work of novelists as diverse as Jack Kerouac, Sylvia Plath and Joyce Carol Oates, the intention of the individual to pursue their singular visions and choice of lifestyle always outweighs concerns for communal acceptance and nurturance. Through a selection of the works of the abovementioned writers, these preoccupations of American fiction will be traced from the middle of the twentieth century on into the new millennium.

No artist operates in a vacuum, and even their freshest and most original work is to some extent a reflection of a dialogue with the culture they inhabit. As Kiernan (1983, p.2) points out, each decade since World War Two has witnessed significant changes in the national identity of America. Kiernan sees the mythic figure of Proteus, the shape–changer, as emblematic of the energetic diversity of the American literary imagination during these decades. There are few certainties and few literary conventions to be adhered to in this postmodern period. Nothing is taboo, and as Saul Bellow (1963, p.49) argues, American writers seek to reject the idea of the SELF; that to them is an outdated social construct, and in drawing attention to the absurdity of their existential position, they examine the dark recesses of their national psyche.

On The Road by Jack Kerouac has been labeled by many as the defining novel of the Beat movement. Although published in 1957 as a work of fiction, it is strongly autobiographical, and its characters Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee are thinly disguised portraits of Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs respectively. On The Road burst onto the quiet, ordered, repressive atmosphere of 1950s America as an explosion of unrestrained creative energy, its characters pointing to the existence of a new and wildly divergent group of artists, thinkers and musicians whose influence was to have a profound and lasting effect on American culture. In the eyes of Sal Paradise, the novel’s narrator, hipsters were the new pioneers, and Dean Moriarity was like a “young Gene Autry – trim, slim–hipped, blue–eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent – a side–burned hero of the snowy West” (p.8). The fact that Dean was also an amoral con man was of no account to Sal – he recognized this, but was mesmerized by this charismatic and mercurial character who he perhaps sought to emulate; a man who acted without restraint or deference to any kind of moral or societal proscriptions.

As Sal entered Dean’s world, he was swept up in a heady rush of sex, drugs and jazz, and given an insight into both the allure of the senses and the potential of the mind. This was considered outrageously anti–establishment at the time of its publication, there is nothing progressive in the attitudes of its male characters towards women. The Beats circle was effectively a boys club, in which women were relegated to a peripheral role. Dean himself used and abused women, and although Sal had some sense of culpability for the failure of his relationships, Dean remained unrepentant. In a passage on page 192, he explained to Sal that a real woman would allow her man to come and go as he pleased without any complaints over his conduct. The Beats also had a complicated and ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. They endorsed the right of homosexuals to express themselves, but were often uncomfortable with the open display of homosexual behavior. They felt that the Beats should privilege the necessity for self–actualization over the need for social conformity.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sal and Dean’s attitudes toward race, specifically the African–American and immigrant laborers in the U.S., and the native Mexican people they encounter on their last road trip. From our vantage point sixty years later, the pair’s pronouncements on the lives of Negroes and indigenous people seem embarrassingly, even willfully naïve. Sal and Dean adopt a romantic but entirely misguided and often patronizing attitude towards the lives of African-Americans and other non–whites. They idealize the lives of Negroes, perhaps partly because of their love for jazz – to them the music of the black man soothed their anxieties. They also sought to sympathize with the “Negro” people and endowed them with a quasi-religious experience. They believed that Negroes were so different from white people that they would never be able to assimilate into mainstream American society. This is an example of the kind of attitude that is sometimes considered “white privilege.”

According to Tytell, Dean is “a Promethean version of the holy primitive, a shaman’s shaman, a combination of opposite tensions that reveal the crucible of creativity” (1976, p. 162). This accords with Sal’s various perceptions of him as a mystic, a prophet, a visiting angel of terror, and a kind of holy fool whose unadorned sensuality brings those around him into new and even ecstatic quasi-religious experiences, with or without the aid of mind-altering drugs.

Rampant individualism aside, even Dean occasionally longs for the comfort and security of family life, as evidenced by the trail of wives and children he leaves behind him during his restless journeys. However, his narcissistic and feckless character means that he is unable to sustain these relationships, and he finds more empathy and solace in the community of his male friends. Here he is embraced, accepted, even admired, and it is worth noting that although On The Road was considered outrageously anti-establishment at the time of its publication, there is nothing progressive in the attitudes of its male characters towards women. The Beats circle was effectively a boys club, in which women were relegated to a peripheral role. Dean himself used and abused women, and although Sal had some sense of culpability for the failure of his relationships, Dean remained unrepentant. In a passage on page 192, he explained to Sal that a real woman would allow her man to come and go as he pleased without any complaints over his conduct. The Beats also had a complicated and ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. They endorsed the right of homosexuals to express themselves, but were often uncomfortable with the open display of homosexual behavior. They felt that the Beats should privilege the necessity for self–actualization over the need for social conformity.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sal and Dean’s attitudes toward race, specifically the African–American and immigrant laborers in the U.S., and the native Mexican people they encounter on their last road trip. From our vantage point sixty years later, the pair’s pronouncements on the lives of Negroes and indigenous people seem embarrassingly, even willfully naïve. Sal and Dean adopt a romantic but entirely misguided and often patronizing attitude towards the lives of African-Americans and other non-whites. They idealize the lives of Negroes, perhaps partly because of their love for jazz – to them the music of the black man soothed their anxieties. They also sought to sympathize with the “Negro” people and endowed them with a quasi-religious experience. They believed that Negroes were so different from white people that they would never be able to assimilate into mainstream American society. This is an example of the kind of attitude that is sometimes considered “white privilege.”

As Richardson (2001, p. 222) notes, in 1955, two years before On The Road was published, Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman, and Rosa Parks was arrested fighting bus segregation. Yet we have Sal wishing to “exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted ecstatic Negroes of America” (170) Richardson believes that Kerouac’s version of social life in
Miller (1967, pp.11-12) listed four elements he believed to be characteristic of modern American fiction. They are: the inverted or nightmarish world, the disoriented hero, spiritual nausea, and a comedy of outrage, featuring instances of horror and humor. All three novels under discussion give Miller’s theory credibility, with The Bell Jar in particular exhibiting these qualities in its description of a descent into mental illness. While On The Road is emphatically a novel of male experience, The Bell Jar presents life in the socially repressive 1950s from the perspective of a young female artist. It is commonly accepted that the book is a fictionalized but reasonably accurate account of Plath’s own breakdown and subsequent recovery, but it also embraces wider themes relevant to young women’s experience. The novel is set between the demands of society and their creative drives. The Bell Jar takes the reader on an interior journey, and compared to On The Road it can seem a flat, dull and disquieting narrative, leached of colour and liveliness. This is no doubt intentional on the author’s part, since it gives the reader some appreciation of the experience of diminution of effect that occurs as Esther sinks deeper and deeper into depression. Here again we have an individual unwilling to accept conformity to accepted notions of what it is to live the American dream. In Esther’s case, this would entail marrying a ‘nice boy’ like Buddy Willard, settling down, and having babies, and giving up any idea of a career as a writer. After all, to Buddy a poem is only “a piece of dust” (p. 59), and he believes that once Esther has children she will think differently, and lose her desire to write. To Esther such ideas are anathema. She fears, however, that this might happen: “I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state” (p.90).

These sentiments, written well before the second wave of feminism, seem like the rhetoric of a seasoned campaigner for women’s rights. Yet Plath was not a strident feminist, nor is Esther concerned for the rights of all women. Her concern here, and at all points through the novel, is for herself. It is noticeable in what Lydia Bunztten calls the “pervasive sourness” (1983, p.110) of the novel that Esther displays no empathy for others, and is totally self-absorbed. This may in part be symptomatic of her illness, but reads more like an inherent trait. Esther particularly dislikes men, and her determination to lose her virginity is at odds with her disdain for those she selects to deflower her. This pre-occupation with sex is juxtaposed with her ambivalence to the idea: on page 6 she confesses that she “always had a hard time trying to imagine people in bed together” Aird (1973, p.90) suggests that Esther has divided women into three categories. There are the wise ones, (Jay Cee,) the safe girls-next-door (Betsy,) and the experienced ones (Doreen. She wants to be like Doreen, but eventually leaves New York dressed like Betsy, after an unpleasant tryst with the disinterested Marco. If Bundtzen (1993, p.150) is correct, Joan represents a shadow side of Esther; perhaps her “repressed masculinity”. Doubtless, Esther is all too aware how much easier her career path would be if she were a man. Her attitude towards Joan swings between interest and repulsion, and yet Joan’s suicide frees her from this confusion and allows her to vicariously experience the death of that shadow self and move towards a stronger desire to survive. There is little doubt that Esther is deeply conflicted about sex, probably because of the associated fear of pregnancy. There are many references to babies in the text, and these are more often than not associated with images of pain and marks about death. This is hardly surprising. The incident in which Buddy took her to see the hospital ‘sights’, including corpses of adults, dead babies in jars, and a woman giving birth, made a lasting and unhealthy impression on her.

Esther’s fascination with death and suicide is introduced in the very first page of the novel, with mention being made of cadavers and the execution of the Rosenbergs. This passage also introduces the reader to the prevailing social climate; the claustrophobic Cold War atmosphere in which non-conformity was regarded with deep suspicion, and in which Esther senses that any deviation from the accepted roles designated for women will result in punishment. Her story reveals the cultural tension inherent in the position of a female artist struggling against attitudes which equated women with marriage and motherhood, and regarded any other choice as selfish or even unnatural. The image of electrocution also signals the electric shocks Esther will later be subjected to. The violence in this novel is predominantly Esther’s violence to self, real and imagined. She flirts with suicide repeatedly, but sabotages herself as though she does not really want to die. Her first genuine attempt seems almost like an attempt to return to the safety of the womb. She chooses the enclosed space under her mother’s house, in a darkness “thick as velvet” (p.177,178), where she is lulled to sleep in a “swimming tide” reminiscent of amniotic fluid. Her previous mad lurch down the ski slope had also been propelling her to a point where she saw “the sweet white baby cradled in its mother’s belly” (p.105). Bundtzen (p.134) takes Esther’s mental illness to be partly due to an unresolved Electra complex, but although she claims to hate her mother and treats her with cruel indifference, there are indications that she hates her father more for abandoning her by dying. She may also see her madness as hereditary: she describes her father as coming from some “manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia” (p.34).

The image of the fig tree may give the clearest indication of what has plunged Esther into her numb and despairing mindset, from which she views the world with a dour perspective that occasionally manifests in a kind of gallows humor. Esther recognizes her good fortune – she is a gifted and intelligent young woman with the world at her feet, yet she fears failure desperately. She sits in the fig tree, paralyzed by the fear of making a choice, (since accepting one possibility seems to entail relinquishing others,) and thereby losing everything as the figs rot and die. Her breakdown at least gives her the opportunity to escape the pressure to succeed that she is under. Beneath the bell jar, although the air is sour and suffocating, nothing is expected of her. Although Esther eventually emerges from the bell jar to resume her life, there are suggestions that the pressure of conforming to societal expectations could again tip the fragile balance of her psyche. As we know, in the case of Esther’s creator Sylvia Plath, that was indeed the case.

Joyce Carol Oates is a writer whose work consistently focuses on the dark underbelly of American society, and consequently the issue of violence is often prominent in her novels. There is an almost Gothic sensibility in the lingering menace and evil intent that broods beneath her wickedly incisive portraits of the people and places in her work. Oates is a perceptive chronicler of the lives and times of Americans, from the wealthy and privileged to the poor and disenfranchised. In The Tattooed Girl she has assembled an eclectic mix of characters to investigate class interaction, and whether their allegiances will be individual or communal. Echlin (2004, p.53) quotes Oates as saying that her work “deals with the phenomenon of violence and its aftermath, in ways not unlike that of the Greek dramatists”. This may explain the use in The Tattooed Girl of a motif which incorporates the following lines from Virgil:

"Easy is the way down into the Underworld: by night and by day dark Hades’ door stands open, but to retrace one’s
Joshua Seigl, the wealthy academic and writer, is a loner and an individualist. He is ashamed of The Shadows, the book that brought him early success, because he feels he may have cashed in on The Holocaust to achieve recognition and success, and now seeks to distance himself from his family’s past. Since Joshua’s mother wasn’t Jewish, technically Joshua isn’t either. “I am not my ancestors, Seigl thought desperately... I am somebody myself” (p.49). In spite of avoiding emotional closeness, Seigl still feels the loneliness of not belonging. On page 217, the text has him “still looking for a way in”, a way to fit and feel the warmth of human closeness. Yet when people such as Sondra try to get close, he holds them at arms length.

Alma Busch is the assistant he hires on impulse. The reader sees that he is sexually attracted to her, and curious about this female so unlike the well-heeled and articulate women of his milieu. Alma is “white trash” in the eyes of most of these people; a semi-illiterate, clumsy, downtrodden young woman from an impoverished industrial area of Pennsylvania, But Alma is much more than this. The author makes her character’s function plain in two passages. The first reads: “I am a child of Hell. I am an American and a child of Hell” (p. 143). On page 205, Alma, in an anti-Semitic rant, thinks: “You have no right. You buy and sell souls. You are the Anti-Christ. I am your punishment. I bring not peace but a sword”. The use of Christian and biblical imagery is interesting here. Seigl professes to have no religion: he is a philosopher. Alma attends church regularly, though, and has a dogged, simple faith, in spite of life’s vicissitudes. Schilling (2005, p.23) believes that Oates has a strong aversion to Christianity, and notes that the faith of her Christian characters is either “inconsequential...pathetic...or downright menacing”. Alma’s beliefs seem to be portrayed as naïve and ineffectual, as in the following patronizing passage: “She went to church sometimes. Seigl was touched. Alma Busch believed in God.

Yet this was typical of her class, her type. An irony of history. Those in whom God does not believe, believe in God” (p. 222).

The novel is punctuated with references to class and anti-Semitism, the most emphatic of which are articulated by Dmitri Meatte, Alma’s sadistic boyfriend, who waits on Joshua with an oily attentiveness while being privately consumed with hatred and envy of his rich, successful customer. Dmitri is a Holocaust denier, and he infects Alma with his hatred and prejudice even as he beats, rapes and pimps her. Alma is indeed Seigl’s visitation from the Underworld. She comes to him from a part of American society he cannot conceive of. Seigl imagines human suffering represented in large-scale historic episodes such as the Holocaust, but here is a woman who has suffered hell on earth, and has the scars to prove it. She has been beaten, raped, used and degraded by men since childhood, and, like the Holocaust survivors, carries with her the evidence of her shame and torture; botched and ugly tattoos which mar her face and body. So nightmarish is Alma’s world, so disconnected is she from a sense of self, that she accepts Dmitri’s attentiveness while being privately consumed with hatred and envy. Whether the reader is comfortable with them or not, perhaps the dark, violent forces at play beneath the powerful and prosperous façade of modern American society are every bit as savage and destructive as Oates indicates. All three of the novels discussed have engaged with elements of American culture through the filter of a main character who is a writer, and by nature an observer and recorder of human experience. In a time frame of sixty years, the preoccupations of these novelists have changed surprisingly little. All these works reveal in their characters a kind of stubborn individualism which militates against the status quo and rejects the communal bonds that conformity offers. In doing this, the authors’ world-view has indeed place much emphasis on sexuality, violence and irrationality. These features of the modern American novel are, it seems, highlighting aspects of the American psyche, of which the literary imagination has continued to be a provocative yet accurate mirror.

References:

References: