The “new American picaresque” at mid-century
An analysis of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Table Of Contents

Introduction 7

Chapter 1  What is the picaresque? 11
1.1 Problematic nature of the label 11
1.2 Toward a definition 17
1.3 Literary and sociocultural background 21

Chapter 2  The “new American picaresque” 24
2.1 Toward a Definition 24
2.2 America at mid-century 27
2.3 American 1950s literature 30

Chapter 3  Introduction to the novels and the authors 34
3.1 The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger 34
3.2 On the Road by Jack Kerouac 35

Chapter 4  A picaresque reading of Salinger’s and Kerouac’s novel 38
4.1 Formal features 38
4.2 The image of America at mid-century 41
4.2.1 The West as a Promised Land 42
4.2.2 The loss of innocence and authenticity 46
4.2.3 Consumer culture and corrosive materialism 52

4.3 The gender issue: representation of an embattled masculinity 56

Conclusion 66

Bibliography 68
Introduction

“One’s destination is never a place,” Henry Miller observed, “but rather a new way of looking at things” (25). In fact, on many occasions the act of traveling and wandering has connotations of discovering or rediscovering the self and the country one inhabits. American literary critic Rowland A. Sherrill noticed that since the early 1950s, a remarkable number of Americans have hit the road and felt compelled to write about their journeys through America upon their return home. Sherrill himself contributed a great deal to the critical scrutiny of these “road books” with his wide-ranging and sophisticated study recorded in his Road-Book America (2000). Moreover, he interpreted this reinvigorated American “road literature” that started blossoming in the aftermath of the Second World War and flourished all throughout the second half of the century as “a powerful reappearance and significant transformation of the old literary form of the picaresque narrative, a form apparently equipped for grappling with American life in the second half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium” (3). His work will serve as a vital source for this dissertation, yet whereas he takes into account post-war literature in its entirety, I will add to Sherrill’s work by specifically focusing on mid-century America as fertile breeding ground for what he calls the “new American picaresque.”

For this reason, I will zoom in on two of the most compelling novels that were published in the 1950s. J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1951) and Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957), both (in)famous for content and style, are commonly placed among the most influential as well as controversial novels that were written in the early post-war era. Their remarkable literary merit has mainly been attributed to their skilful representation of the fifties, a decade that was characterized by alienation and budding rebellion. Next to being published in the same period
and in the same country, there surely are other resemblances between the novels. Formally, they are characterized by an episodic structure and a (pseudo)autobiographical point of view. Furthermore, both Salinger’s and Kerouac’s protagonists are wandering antiheroes, which probably is the main reason why literary scholars often mention these works in the same breath with the classic picaresque narrative. Even though one could fill a modest library with all the critical surveys that have been written on these American novels in question (e.g. on themes, motifs, writing style, etc.), a profound comparative approach from this angle has not yet been conducted. Therefore, the research that will be carried out in this dissertation is an attempt to fill that gap in literary scholarship and to concentrate on a perspective which, thus far, has not received much critical scrutiny. The emphasis in this study will be on analyzing the way in which the protagonists convey the picaresque in relation to the reigning sociocultural issues and asking what makes the picaresque such a particularly apt form to deal with these early post-war novels.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I will provide a historical and cultural background to the classic picaresque novel and of how this label has been used among literary critics. First of all, I will discuss the problematic nature of the picaresque narrative by engaging with critics that shed light on the problems that prevent a workable definition. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the importance of the genre in Spain’s cultural as well as literary history and highlight the role of the picaro and the ways in which this character can be seen to function as a tool for voicing social criticism.

In the second chapter, I will analyze why it is not surprising that the picaro can be seen to reappear in American literature in the 1950s. I will elaborate on the changes in post-war American life and highlight the changing ideology and changing material conditions. Moreover, I will focus on American literature of the fifties and touch on the element of social criticism in that literary context. In addition, I will point out why the picaro can be seen as such an apt
instrument for voicing social criticism and focus more specifically on what a twentieth-century picaroon looks like.

In the third chapter, I will briefly introduce Salinger and Kerouac and the novels that will be discussed in this dissertation. This will function as a step-up for the research presented in the fourth chapter, in which I will present a picaresque reading of how these compelling novels address the changing sociocultural conditions. By relying on an open definition of genre, I will compare the novels and discuss how both can be seen to configure the picaresque. This chapter is extensively based on my own close reading of the novels and on the critical attention both works received. First, I will discuss which formal traits both these novels share with the picaresque narrative. Thereafter, I will zoom in on the image of America that is conveyed in the novels by comparing the authors’ representation to the reigning conventions. This subchapter is divided into three separate parts, beginning with an elaboration on their movement in space and the mystified image of the West. Thereafter, I will discuss the sense of lost innocence and the yearning for authenticity that the main characters of both novels clearly display. To round off this subchapter, I will bring into focus how the novels convey a sense of the 1950s changing material conditions and consumer culture. In addition to this, the chapter comprises of a discussion on gender relationships with focus on the representation of an embattled white masculinity. Moreover, the problematic position of and attitudes toward women in these novels are also worth discussing, given that the fifties was a decade of increasing freedom for women and emergent feminism.

The actual idea for investigating this subject came about after taking a course as an Erasmus student at the Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), The Beat Vision by dr. Laurence Coupe, which sparked my interest in Kerouac’s work. This master dissertation is, furthermore, in part a continuation of the bachelor paper I wrote two years ago, entitled “The American Picaresque in Jack Kerouac’s On The Road.” In this piece of writing I investigated some picaresque elements in Kerouac's famous masterpiece. As a conclusion, I argued that the
protagonists act as a certain kind of American *neo-pícaros*, as post-war adaptations of the prototypical Spanish rogue that came into being in the second half of the sixteenth century. The decision to pursue my study of rebellious post-war American literature could be explained by a handful of reasons. First of all, I felt that my research was not completely finished after writing the BA paper. In hindsight, I believe I overlooked some interesting elements that might shed a clearer and more outbalanced light on the matter. For example, I only briefly touched upon the formal features of the book and did not sufficiently distinguish between the two main characters of the novel. Both of them were characterized as permutations of the classic picaroon; however, I found out that this is in fact not entirely true. Thirdly, I consider this MA dissertation as a metaphorical terminus of studying English and Spanish at Ghent University. I therefore tried to apply and incorporate features that were discussed in various courses that I took in the last four years. By doing so, I also attempted to make this piece of writing a sort of amalgam of my higher education. Various courses I took over the years, such as *American History, American Culture, Gender Trouble in American Literature and Theory* and *Literatura Española I*, among others, were very useful to gain insights into the aspects explored in this dissertation.
Chapter 1

What is the picaresque?

Before moving toward the picaresque reading of the novels, which makes up the core of this investigation, I provide a background to the essential aspects concerned. Firstly, I will elaborate on the literary phenomenon of the picaresque as a sore spot in literary scholarship. The main stumbling blocks toward a clear-cut definition will be discussed by drawing on literary criticism from different angles. Thereafter, a summary of both the reigning sociocultural climate of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain and the literary prehistory of the peninsula will be presented. Further on, a brief elaboration on adaptations of the genre throughout the centuries will function as a step-up for the second chapter. The latter deals with the mid-twentieth century American counterpart of the classic picaresque and includes a discussion of the cultural and literary background of the American 1950s. Therein, I will point out that there were similarities between the Renaissance Spanish and contemporary American breeding ground for rebellious literature.

1.1 Problematic nature of the label

Despite the historical importance of the picaresque and the fact that this term is used a great deal, the genre of the picaresque novel does not seem to have a clear-cut definition. When we look up its meaning in two different dictionaries of literary terms, we do not get a complete picture of what this term embodies. Cuddon and Preston, for example, define it as
“[telling] the life of a knave or picaroon who is the servant of several masters. Through his experience this picaroon satirizes the society in which he lives” (666). Turco, on the other hand, states that it is “a novel that has as its hero a lovable rogue who wanders about having many adventures. The narrative is organized through the picaro’s adventures; he is not only its protagonist but also its controlling figure” (65). Although the latter already adds more elements to this generic skeleton, both of these are very bare definitions and it is essential to put more flesh on these bones. The difficulties of pinning down the formal and thematic features of the picaresque have been discussed at large throughout the twentieth century. When having a look at some of the writings on this subject (e.g. Wicks, Dunn), one soon finds that the problem is not one-sided and that various aspects come into play. I will therefore shed more light on this remarkable bone of contention in the following paragraphs.

What most literary critics commonly agree on is that the roots of the picaresque narrative can be traced back to Spain, where it appeared on the literary horizon in the second half of the sixteenth and flourished in the first half of the seventeenth century. However, this geographic location could well be considered a singular point on which literary scholars agree. Ever since its inauguration, now more than four centuries ago, literary scholars have attempted to theorize the genre of the picaresque; however, their efforts were of little avail. Some critics even argue that the impossibility of an exhaustive definition of the term is a foregone conclusion. Fernando Lázaro Carreter and Samuel Gili Gaya, among others, even argue that the picaresque simply cannot be defined (Eisenberg 204). The former claims that “the picaresque novel was a genre with no fixed characteristics, but one in which the author chose which characteristics he wished to incorporate in his work” (Ibid. 216). One critic in particular, Daniel Eisenberg, even suggested abolishing the concept of the “picaresque” altogether due to a lack of consensus among academics concerning its use.

According to Guillén “the picaresque novel-to-be begins ( . . . ) with an overture in two movements: La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes [1554], the primitive of the form ( . . . ) and the
Primera parte de Guzmán de Alfarache [1599], which would become a best seller and the main target of imitation for many decades” (73). However, attempts to gather a body of works that are picaresque did not go unchallenged. In La Novela Picaresca Española, Valbuena Prat listed twenty-four books that he believed to be picaresque, but apart from the aforementioned works, scholars criticized the “picaresque-ness” of all the other texts that were included.

The body of criticism on attempts at a workable definition of the picaresque genre is abundant and has yielded a wide variety of opinions. It seems almost as if for every new theory that was published, critics were eagerly anticipating to crush the effort ruthlessly. Wicks distinguishes two distinct critical approaches toward a definition, namely an “extrinsic or historistic” (Picareseque Narrative 17) and an “intrinsic or formal” (Ibid. 17) one. The former approach

	tends to see picaresque narrative primarily in its historical context as a segment in the development of the novel and as an episode of the social and literary history of Spain; it is primarily positivistic and sees [the picaresque] diachronically as a predominantly closed phenomenon. (Ibid. 17)

The two major contributions to this historic approach were provided at the end of the nineteenth century, namely by Fonger De Haan (1895) and Frank Wadleigh Chandler (1899), who both tried to give an exhaustive view on the picaresque narrative. Thereafter, literary scholarship diverged and started focusing on facets of the narrative (e.g. point of view, protagonists, etc.) rather than on the genre in its entirety. An intrinsic approach, on the other hand, sees

										picaresque synchronically as an open phenomenon because it tends to lift the picaresque out of its geographic location in space and its historical location in time and sees it as a developing and influential form or convention that writers have at their disposal or as a tradition inside of which writers may work and on which they may build.” (Ibid. 17)
This approach is rather formalistic because it focuses more on technique and meaning than on the issue of genre. In this light, Spanish critic Rico observed that “a genre is not initiated by the first work of its kind; it is constituted when characteristic structures are disclosed and found to operate with a generative energy in works that follow” (qtd. in Dunn 9). The biggest critical alert toward the open approach of the picaresque, however, was uttered by W.M. Frohock. He clearly does not approve of calling a work “picaresque” only on the basis of a couple of features, and claims that “for every new novel there is a critic waiting to find something picaresque in it” (qtd. in Dunn 6). Furthermore, he argues that in the process of establishing a generic picture of this type of narrative, many critics overlook considerable differences between books they ascribed to this “genre.” This has also been pointed out by Wicks who denounces that “[the] term seems to [be] applied whenever something ‘episodic’ tied together by an ‘antihero’ needs a name” (Modal Approach 240). In this regard the term “picaresque” seems to be a denominator that is fashionably rather than efficiently used nowadays.

Another group of critics broadens its point of view on the matter and points at the practice of genre theory in itself and its rigid concepts as the main stumbling block toward a viable definition. However, Duff states that “in modern literary theory, few concepts have proved more problematic and unstable than that of genre” (1) and in the last two centuries the generic approach has been prone to fierce criticism. Critics felt that this practice “undermines literature by squelching what we most admire in literary texts: the innovative, the unpredictable, the experimental – in short, the new, for which there may be no existing pigeonhole” (Wicks 4). Concerning this sort of “generic expectation” (Ibid. 4) that the generic labeling of a work entails, critic E.D. Hirsch argues that readers usually “[find] the types of meanings [they] expected to find because what [they] found was in fact powerfully influenced by what [they] expected” (qtd. in Dunn 4).

In the twentieth century, genre theory as a “prescriptive rather than flexibly descriptive” pigeonholing system seemed to have outdone its purpose when modernist
literature rose to the literary scene with experimentation as its main keyword, in spite of the fact that structuralism is very much tied up with modernism. Throughout this century, many critics voiced their opposing views to a generic approach, with practically each literary school delivering its own contribution to the heated debate. For example, Ralph Cohen argued that genres are open categories as opposed to closed and discontinuous ones. The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce even went further by rejecting the practice of genre theorists altogether “in defense of the unique individuality of each work of art” (Dunn 17). In his introduction to the critical reader Modern Genre Theory, however, Duff perceives that the resistance to genre theory has been dying down in the twenty-first century. This gave way to an “aesthetic stance which is more hospitable to notions of genre, and which no longer sees as incompatible the pursuit of individuality and the espousal of ‘generic’ identities, of whatever sort” (Duff 1). In this regard, I will also work with an open understanding of genre when comparing Kerouac’s and Salinger’s books.

The crossing of national boundaries also contributed a great deal to the problematic definition of the genre of the picaresque. To regard the picaresque as a genre belonging exclusively to Renaissance Spain would definitely be an erroneous point of view. In its wake, other European countries had their own branch of this particular type of fiction and many novels that were written in subsequent centuries are considered to be reminiscent of the Spanish classic picaresque. Guillén, then, argues that the genre

is sufficiently flexible, moreover, to allow for the fundamental alterations which the form underwent as it passed from Spain to France, Germany, Holland and England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The pícaro can remain a pícaro while changing the ethical justification – the ideology – for his behaviour. (98)

This image of the picaresque narrative as a protean and continuous literary form has been reinforced by Sherrill, who states that “the genre itself seems genial in adapting to new times
and places when social and cultural circumstances seem to require its reappearance” (13). He believes the figure of the picaroon “easily (or impishly) trespasses social boundaries, thus serving as a catalyst or a ‘lens’ for one of the major purposes of the old picaresque narratives – namely, running the social gamut of the culture in question” (4). Thus, his stance suggests a continuity of the genre but he adds that “‘continuity’, of course, is not ‘identity’” (11) and “not only implies but includes ‘change’” (13). Both aforementioned critics mention various permutations of the genre and stress that practically each country attached its own specific literary and sociocultural characteristics to forge a literary picaresque blend in its own right.

In German literature Grimmelshausen’s Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch (1669) is considered the most pre-eminent follower of this type of narrative, whereas L’histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane (1715-1735) by Le Sage takes this position in French literary history. The latter was, however, a “significant transformation” (Wicks, Picaresque Narrative 13) of the Spanish types and became very influential throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In fact, many writers took this particular adaptation of the classical picaresque as normative for their own work. This could be perceived in the work of English writers such as Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722) or Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749). In this way, the “genre” strayed further from the canonical works, adding more fuel to the fire of generic debate in literary scholarship. Even in the twentieth century the genre has not lost its influence and can be perceived in, among others, Günther Grass’ Die Blechtrommel (1959), Isabel Allende’s Eva Luna (1987), and many road novels that were published in post-war America.

Although it is not commonly accepted to place the narrative legacy of the canonical works under the denominator of “picaresque,” some critics nevertheless believe there is a “traceable continuity up to the present” (Wicks, Picaresque Narrative 15). In the 1960s, a sudden resurgence of interest spawned a whole new wave of investigation on the matter containing illuminating studies from different angles (Ibid. xv) and taking into account the continuity of the genre. Among this renewed interest two critics contributed a huge deal to a way toward a
definition of the picaresque, namely Ulrich Wicks and Claudio Guillén. Together with Rowland A. Sherrill’s work on the “new American picaresque,” that will be presented in the following chapter, these are of particular interest in establishing a viable definition of the classic picaresque narrative and the reemergence of this protean character in 1950s American literature.

1.2 Toward a definition

To counter the often inadequate labeling of works as picaresque, critic Ulrich Wicks worked out a theory and research guide for what he described as “the total picaresque fictional situation” (Wicks, Nature of Picaresque 243). This framework is elaborately expounded in his book Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions (1989), which he believes offers “a readjusted perspective on the picaresque, a more manageable idea of the picaresque that will help to bridge the gap between the extremities” (Ibid. 240). His twofold approach distinguishes between a modal and a generic awareness which “allows a perspective on fiction that is broad enough to recognize the larger fictional mixtures in any particular work ( . . . ) and specific enough to account for a particular group of works that share enough attributes to make them identifiable as belonging to a particular genre” (Ibid. 243). His suggested modal-structural approach offers “the largest perspective we can have ( . . . ) of the narrative makeup of a work” (Ibid. 243). Moreover, he argues that the dominance of this picaresque fictional mode is the most important characteristic of the picaresque narrative. For his modal approach, Wicks draws on a spectrum of ideal fictional modes that was introduced by Robert Scholes (see fig. 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>satire</th>
<th>picaresque</th>
<th>comedy</th>
<th>history</th>
<th>sentiment</th>
<th>tragedy</th>
<th>romance</th>
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(Fig. I: spectrum of fictional modes, Wicks 42)
The latter distinguishes seven types of fiction that are “defined by the qualities of the world that the storyteller renders” (Ibid. 240). He recognizes three possible relationships between a created narrative fictional world and the real world. This fictional world could either be better, worse than or more or less the same as the world we inhabit and is represented in the modes of romance, satire or history respectively. These are the middle and end points of the spectrum. According to Scholes, the picaresque mode “presents a protagonist enduring a world that is chaotic beyond ordinary human tolerance, but it is a world closer to our own (or to history) than the worlds of satire or romance” (Ibid. 241). Furthermore, he argues that the classical Spanish picaresque was a genre completely dominated by the picaresque mode. However, one has to take into account that the presence of one fictional mode does not prevent the work from containing other modes. In fact, the combination of multiple modes contributes to the unique nature of a literary work (Ibid. 241). The essential picaresque situation is, according to Wicks, “that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter” (Ibid. 242). The fact that the old Spanish genre is included in this continuum may be an interesting clue of the confusing ubiquity of the term.

Guillén singles out eight features that make up the picaresque. First of all, at the centre of the story there is a picaro. This character is usually an orphan “who faces early dishonor ( . . . ) and is led to break all ties with his native city” (79). He therefore leaves for a journey which is marked by a profound sense of solitude. Guillén explicitly stresses that a story with a closely-knit group of characters at its centre is, in fact, “anti-picaresque.” Furthermore, the picaroon (male or female) is not yet “adapted to ruling conventions or shaped into a social or a moral person” (79). The young boy or girl is “wounded, hardened and never quite assimilated by adult society and its many scandals” (80). As soon as the protagonist finds out that there is no refuge or “pastoral paradise” beyond society (s)he becomes a roguish character. Nevertheless, he can “neither join nor actually reject his fellow men” and becomes what Guillén calls a “half-
outsider.” Secondly, the story is written in a (pseudo)autobiographical form, using a first-person tense. A third characteristic is the protagonist’s partial and prejudiced view. He is, furthermore, “reflective, philosophical and critical on religious or moral grounds” (Ibid. 82). The general stress on the material level of existence or of subsistence, on sordid facts, hunger and money is also important. A sixth feature is the observation of various social conditions: “classes, professions, caractères, cities, and nations” (Ibid. 83). The penultimate characteristic is the twofold move of the pícaro: “horizontally through space and vertically through society” (Ibid. 84). Finally, the structure of the books is loosely episodic, which enables the writers and characters to undertake multiple journeys.

This generic approach offers an alternative angle to discuss the works and focuses on the distinct phenomena that can be linked to the picaresque. The surplus value of Guillén’s theory is that it suggests a classification of works in relation to their degree of “picaresqueness.” His research is elaborately worked out in his essay “Toward a Definition of the Picaresque” (1961) in which he distinguishes four separate uses of the term (see also fig. 2), although these are not completely different from one another:

[1]he picaresque genre, first of all; a group of novels, secondly, that deserve to be called picaresque in the strict sense – usually in agreement with the original Spanish pattern; another group of novels, thirdly, which may be considered picaresque in a broader sense of the term only; and finally, a picaresque myth: an essential situation or significant structure derived from the novels themselves. (71)
The first of the types, then, that Guillén distinguishes, comprises the inaugurating works of the picaresque although there is no such work that completely embodies the picaresque genre (72). The second group includes “works that fluctuate around a norm with respect to each of certain characteristics” (74). This strand is clearly grafted onto the main current of the Spanish classics and contains French, German, Dutch and English novels. For example, Guillén places Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Thomas Mann’s *Felix Krull* (1954) under this denominator. Thirdly, picaresque novels in the wider sense include works that do not dispose of all the characteristics that are mentioned above, but are still picaresque in a “less puritanical sense of the word” (Ibid. 94). However, the critic stresses that some traits are indispensable: the first-person point of view, the radical solitude of the orphan as a child or young man; and his lasting but ambiguous estrangement from society, reality, or established beliefs and ideologies.”

The fourth and broadest category, finally, holds a group of novels that Guillén calls picaresque myths. With the latter term, he refers to a story or plot that has been alive for many centuries, that has been altered throughout its time of existence and has “experienced different reincarnations” (Ibid. 99). Furthermore, this particular figuration “has developed ( . . . ) into a kind of permanent temptation to the human mind” (Ibid. 99). Thus, Guillén says, “a literary
myth (though not in the occult sense) assumes a certain cultural continuity and the participation of the reader in this continuity” (Ibid. 99). Whereas the other categories approach the picaresque genre from the point of view of the writer, this group is particularly connected with the understanding of the critic or reader of the theme as a whole (Ibid. 100). “It refers to a structure in the barest way, and at the same time interprets the various directions the meaning it has followed through the centuries” (Ibid. 100).

1.3 **Literary and sociocultural background**

One could argue that the early picaresque novels were ‘rebellious’ on two levels. On the one hand, they commented in a creative manner on the miserable social conditions that reigned in that particular period. Undoubtedly, the sociocultural climate contributed a great deal to the creation of the pícaro that came into existence while Spain experienced the heyday of its *Siglo de Oro* (“Golden Age”). This phase, spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was characterized by the flourishing of arts and literature. At the beginning of this period, the country was finally unified after a tumultuous era of civil war and rebellion. Politically, this union was secured with the inauguration of the *Reyes Católicos* (“Catholic Monarchs”). Moreover, with the conversion to Christianity or expulsion of the Jewish and Muslim (Moorish) community, Spain was eventually unified on religious grounds as well. This achievement was a successful ending to their *Reconquista* (“Reconquest”). More or less at the same time, the Spanish explorer Cristobal Colón discovered America and soon thereafter the *conquistadores* started bringing the wealth from the newly discovered continent to the home country. Nevertheless, contrary to what the name of this era may suggest, the lower classes of the Spanish society suffered from the considerable economic instability during this Golden Age, attributed to inflation and high taxation. The dominant caste, i.e. the nobility and aristocracy, controlled the feudal social system and had the population in its power. The latter were familiar
with famine and the pestilence, hardships that swept all over the European continent. Moreover, the Christian reform movement that rose to prominence in other parts of Europe was countered by the Counter-Reformation and Spain became a metaphorical bastion of orthodox Catholicism. This led to the installation of the religiously intolerant Inquisition that was continuously lurking for heretics and other forms of heterodoxy. This created a climate of fear and suspicion “that acquired the dimensions of a national neurosis which only a few enlightened souls were able to rise above” (Jones 3).

On the other hand, it could be understood that the writers wanted to do away with the literary conventions that held sway over the continent. If we take a closer look at the literary timeline of Spain, we find out that the picaresque narrative was preceded by the popular knight-errant tales (e.g. Montalvo’s *Amadis de Gaula* (1508)) and the pastoral literature (e.g. Montemayor’s *Diana* (1559)). The former were characterized by the ideal of chivalry and the behavior of its heroes was regarded as the epitome of heroism, whereas the latter focused on idealistic romance:

The secular literature of Golden Age Spain was in the main to reflect aristocratic ideals and conduct. The exemplary heroes and heroines of fiction and drama were usually *hidalgos* [“members of the nobility”] ( . . . ). When members of other classes take the leading role they are usually other than exemplary, as in the picaresque novels. (Jones 4)

However, these types of narrative did not correspond with the reigning sociocultural climate in which the lower classes of the population found themselves. The unreal heroes definitely did not mirror the harshness of the era. With the advent of the picaresque novel, writers laid down a norm for subsequent Spanish literature by turning to a more realistic approach. The heroes at the centre in the epic, the romance, and the courtesy books were satirized and instead replaced by anti-heroes. These displayed an image of society that was more in touch with what the ordinary people experienced. In this way, the picaresque could be regarded as a kind of “counter-narrative,” a term coined by Guillén that refers to “a genre or
subgenre that develops in implicit or explicit opposition to an existing genre: for example, ‘anti-
pastoral,’ or various kinds of novel which defined themselves against romance” (qtd. in Duff xi). 
Furthermore, along with the aforementioned powerful literary traditions the picaresque 
narrative ushered in the advent of the novel which gained popularity in the early seventeenth 
century with the publication of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605-1615). The main differences 
between romance literature and the novel then were that the books of this former group were 
easy to follow and were morally clear. Moreover, the heroes in these stories did not change. 
Novels, on the other hand, portrayed a ‘clash’ between the protagonist and the world 
surrounding this character. The figures at the centre were not longer steady and could evolve in 
accordance with their actions.
Chapter 2

The “new American picaresque”

We could ask ourselves why at mid-century the picaresque narrative resurfaced on the American literary horizon. What were the changes in American life and writing that created the breeding ground for this permutation of the old Spanish narrative? What did the cultural space that the new American picaroons occupied at the hinge of the twentieth century look like? Answers to the above questions are therefore to be found in the sociocultural climate and literary scene of the tumultuous post-war era. Both of these aspects will come under close scrutiny in the following paragraphs. However, first it is worth dwelling on Sherrill’s description of this new branch of picaresque narrative.

2.1 Toward a Definition

In his Road-Book America, Sherrill describes a resurgence of the classic picaresque narrative from the 1950s onwards. He establishes a parallel between the quintessentially Spanish genre and the sheer number of journey narratives that were written in post-war America. Major examples of this new current in American writing are, among others, John Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley and William (Least Heat Moon) Trogdon’s Blue Highways. The genres to which all of these novels belong are diverse: autobiographical writing, fiction, documentary-style portraits, etc. Moreover, in most of these travel narratives “the issues of genre seem utterly confused” (Sherrill 1). However, the continental shift and the temporal
divide between the Spanish narrative and its American twentieth-century counterpart implies a change in form, because the new avatars “[had] to travel new and different social, cultural, and geographical territories” (Sherrill 33). Due to the extension of movement and the increased manners of mobility, the American picaro could cover broader ranges of the continent. This entailed that America became “newly ‘alien’ in its sheer size and variety,” and traveling allowed to “enter and experience elements of a terra incognita.” In his studybook he suggests the following:

[The road book phenomenon is freighted with cultural significance when approached by way of a particular critical perspective. To the extent that these books can be understood to stem from and to be responsive to a complex of situations and issues in the contemporary American culture of their origin, as narrative expression is conditioned by its place and time, then this specific mode of literary formation – the journey story – might be thought disclosive of that complex, indeed even thought elicited by the cultural situation.” (2-3)

Yet whereas Sherrill takes into account post-war road literature in its entirety, I will zoom in on the fifties and the two aforementioned books. Although formal features constitute an important facet of the picaresque narrative, the focus in this dissertation will be on the way in which the protagonists function as picarons and act as tools for voicing criticism in a post-war American climate. Sherrill believes that in the group of works incorporated in his study and labeled by him as “new American picaresque,” one can attribute three different purposes in the responsiveness of the central figure. First, the various picaros or picaras can be interpreted emblematically:

[They] can stand not only as embodying problems of the contemporary American ‘self’ but also, by virtue of his or her ‘road work,’ as locating, even eventually inculcating, solutions to such problems. Even those picaros who fail on this count turn out to be quite revealing with respect to the problems. (6).
The picaro’s moving in and out of society enables writers to work through these problems and to offer an alternative because in Sherrill’s opinion the *homo viator* (the “human travelling”) is always a *homo spectans* (the “human seeing”). Second, he argues that the significance of the picaresque also lies “in its being equipped, as nothing else seems quite to be, for the cultural work of wrestling with the meanings of the topographical and social whole” (6). Third, Sherrill suggests that by “traveling such a transitional epoch, the forms and actions of the central characters extend the cultural work by crossing through some of the spiritual conditions of the age” (6).

These narratives clearly revivify the potency of the picaresque of “[surpassing] the limits or at least to supplement the vistas of the contemporary literature of alienated ‘interiority’” (Sherrill 175). The picaresque provides the reader with a narrative agent to explore the ‘outside’ at a time when America found itself in a tumultuous period of flux (Ibid. 175) and gives readers, by seeing with and through the eyes of these narrative witnesses, access to scenes and behavior of which they otherwise would not be aware. Furthermore, the picaroon at the center of the novel usually touches on “the myriad different Americans’ ways of ‘thinking’ or ‘fashioning themselves’” (Ibid. 176). By operating on the sociocultural margins, the focal characters provide “different viewpoints with which [the reader] can think through the culture anew from directions and with perspectives that crosscut the conventional grain” (Gunn qtd. in Sherrill 177). This form of social stocktaking is, however, only possible when they are on the road. In this regard, Leigh Brown has argued that “Americans have long regarded the highway as sacred space, a place of romance, solitude and self-discovery, and the healing, redemptive power of the road has spawned a genre of literature – not to mention television shows, films, and pop music” (par. 5).

### 2.2 America at mid-century
It is hard to define a decade in a handful of terms that catch its overall meaning. This is definitely the case when the decade is characterized by an inconsistent society which is very much in flux. The 1950s were, in fact, an important transition period in American history and conceived of as a leap from the joyless years of the Great Depression and the Second World War to the revolutionary sixties and the emerging counterculture and political activism. In the aftermath of the global military conflict, America enjoyed a booming economy which had already started thriving during wartime. After all, the American home country did not suffer the mass devastation from which Europe and Asia had to recover. The emerging prosperity ushered in an expansion of middle-class life with consumerism and affluence as key words. This made the country turn into the biggest economic and political force in the world, a role that had also been attributed to Spain during their “Golden Age.” In addition, an increase in marriage rates and the ensuing baby boom paired with a huge increase of job opportunities created a positive atmosphere in the early post-war years. In this regard, Norton et al. note that American citizens defined a new American Dream, “one that centered on the family, a new level of material comfort and consumption, and a shared sense of belonging to a common culture” (533). Heath and Potter, on the other hand, argued that it was “a world of complete conformity, where happiness is achieved at the expense of individuality, creativity and freedom” (124). In 1956, moreover, the Highway Act was passed which created a further expansion of the interstate highway system that had started shortly after the war. By the end of the decade, the whole of the vast American country was linked by roads that snaked all over its territory.

The prosperous economic condition, however, brought a considerable number of people to question and challenge mainstream views. Although the general standard of living was improving, not everyone shared in the wealth of the booming country. Poverty and racism, among other social problems, still affected parts of the population and continued to divide society. Various groups of people could not reconcile with the current state of affairs in American society and resisted to national status quo that the United States tried to maintain.
Moreover, a feeling of mistrust and insecurity reigned among the population. Both externally - with the emergence of the Cold War - and internally - with regard to the ethnic minorities in the country - an atmosphere of suspicion was created.

After the Second World War, the country engaged its population into the Korean War (and later the Vietnam War) due to which the wartime frame of mind quickly reappeared. What was at first presented to the public as a political pastoral turned out to be a hoax and left most of the people disillusioned, betrayed by politics. In addition, the government fed the feelings of hatred against a new common enemy, i.e. communism. Although the Soviet Union was not an immediate threat to America, the Truman administration nonetheless presented this nation to the American population as capable of launching nuclear attacks in the blink of an eye. This provoked an atmosphere of hysteria and suspicion, also known as “Second Red Scare,” topped by the red-baiting, anticommunist crusade of senator McCarthy. He was convinced that communists were integrating in American society and that their espionage would enable them to destroy the country from the inside. In a period spanning from roughly 1947 until 1957, “McCarthyism” ushered in an intense fear of communism that held the whole of the continent in its spell. This feeling was also manifested by a “flurry of enthusiasm for air-raid shelters” (Zinn 441) and an increase in movies about extraterrestrial invasions from outer space that were understood to represent the Communists (e.g. Invasion of the Bodysnatchers).

Furthermore, the climate fostered the development of the atom and hydrogen bombs and the emergence of the so-called “space race.” According to Halliwell, this cold war ideology is central to understanding the 1950s culture and the reconfiguration of American society. The politics of containment fostered a form of inward-looking conservatism and conformity which heightened the intolerance toward dissenting points of view. In this regard sociologist C. Wright Mills’s publication White Collar: The American Middle Classes (1951) describes the middle class population as mere servants to a ‘power elite’ or unthinking cogs in the social system. From another angle, David Riesman studied the changing post-war American character in his book
The Lonely Crowd (1950) and defined “a new character type that emerged after the war, the anxious 'other-directed' individual who struggled to contend with moral certainties” (Halliwell 64).

As mentioned above, minorities (e.g. African Americans) also found it tiresome being disfranchised and they bemoaned the fact that they were not represented by the government. The intervention of America in the World War was a thorn in their side, because the treatment of anti-Semitism did not parallel the treatment of the minority groups in the home country (e.g. segregation, job discrimination and xenophobia). America was therefore at odds with their own legislation which promoted the idea that every citizen should be treated as equal and should be granted the possibility to pursue happiness, regardless of their race. A closer look at the early years of the decade reveals that America was already struggling heavily with equal civil rights, even though the likes of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King had not yet risen to the public stage. In 1954, an early impulse for racial desegregation was given with the US Supreme Court “Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka” decision which meant a clear incentive for school desegregation. Nevertheless, the struggle for equal rights was far from settled at that point and it would take at least another bloody decade with multiple race riots before their aim was achieved.

Another population group fighting a battle for liberation and emancipation were the women of the United States who wanted to do away with the stereotypical gender roles that mirrored the Victorian age. These suffocating generic roles that were imposed on them prescribed a feminine domesticity, whereas men enjoyed ‘independent’ life in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the distinction between happy men and unhappy women is an ill-considered representational image of the reality at that time. In the part on gender issues in both novels, I will elaborate on this phenomenon.

In a similar vein to sixteenth-century Spain - seemingly in a “Golden Age” - the outward appearance of post-World War Two America thus was that of a prosperous, buoyant country.
Nonetheless, J. Ronald Oakley defined the era as “an age of great optimism along with the gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowery rhetoric about equality along with the practice of rampant racism and sexism” (Oakley qtd. in Halliwell 4). The social conditions in Renaissance Spain and contemporary America are thus similar in a way that they “both [countries] glitter from without while suffering turbulence, disorder, and ambiguity from within” (Sherrill 36).

2.3 **American 1950s literature**

The American literary scene of the early twentieth century was tumultuous. From the 1920s onwards modernist literary critics such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound had voiced their opinions on the literature that was produced in this period. For example, Williams lamented the state of American literature and denounced its models; the exhausted material and cliché-ridden language of the historical novels of his “derivative nature (...), [its] lack of originality, and [its] dependence upon European day; the tendency of such novels to oversimplify or misrepresent the American experience; and the formulaic quality of genres such as detective novels. (Boone 1)

He made a plea for an artistic revolution and urged for experimentation, which was carried out by the modernist movement with its stylistic innovations and psychologically troubled characters. In their efforts, however, they did not devote equal attention to the outside world or to life that was felt as common. Examples of this literary phenomenon are authors of fictions such as James Joyce, William Faulkner and Jorge Louis Borges. Their literary response to the modern world thus concords with the social and spiritual alienation and the individualism of each person in the modern world. Modern existence made many writers feel “alienated by the vulgarities, onslaughts, and disintegrations” (Sherrill 49) and they forced their narrators into an inner world of subjectivity with stillness and repose. This kind of literature was characterized
by a personal and imaginary narrated world with which many readers could not identify. “The lacuna,” Sherrill says, “left by this style of fiction is precisely the one the new American picaresque apparently seeks to fill” (50).

After the Second World War, however, the hitherto reigning modernist literary expression seemed to become “inadequately responsive to [the sociocultural] circumstances” (Sherrill 48) and writers were “seeking new literary modes better suited to the changing post-war climate” (Halliwell 54). Furthermore, Dickstein writes that “[d]espite the emergence of writers who were moving in new directions, the late 1940s was hardly a stellar period in American fiction and very few major novels were produced. Most of the books either dealt with the war or reflected its aftermath” (165). In addition, the remarkable expansion of the paperback market in the early post-war years saw many writers adapting their style to meet the demands of the mass audience. The climate of censorship to prevent dissenting political and social views from spreading even made some writers succumb to the culture of consensus, whereas other writers returned to the modernist experimentation to resist the call of commercialism. Multiple authors, nonetheless, “turned away from economic and social concerns to engage more with spiritual and personal issues [and] reflected a deep sense of malaise that contrasted with the surface buoyancy and optimism” (Ibid. 165). They forged outsiders who, embedded in a climate of frustration, were rebelling against the establishment. These antiheroes would emerge as “the great nay-saying figures in American culture” (Ibid. 166). This literary reorientation is reminiscent of Spain’s literary horizon when the picaresque arrived. In this light, Sherrill observes that

the early venture in realism by picaresque fiction, which many critics believe [to be] the prototypical narrative form that would evolve into the ‘realistic’ modern novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, finds a point of revival just when the ‘modern’ novel has apparently hit a certain limit. As the novel of descriptive verisimilitude shaded into the narrational stuff of so-called psychological realism and then, further, into the hyper-realisms of postmodern expression, the ‘high’ literary artist
increasingly refused to pretend to represent any objective external reality and submitted fully to what Erich Heller has called ‘the artist’s journey into the interior.’ (49)

In Sherrill’s view, then, the reappearance of the picaro in American literature in the 1950s is not surprising. He argues that “[i]f any standing literary formation can begin to accommodate such a frenetically experienced world, the picaresque, again, would seem the most likely” (39). The reasons for this assumption are that the focal character of this genre is “always moving, and always apparently moving by coincidence, rebound, fortune, and fortuity [and] the old Anglo-European picaresque bequeaths its evidently ‘plotless’ but ‘realistic’ course through ambiguous realms of experience generously to the narrative structure of the new American picaresque” (39). The genre clearly struggles out of interiority in order to render the outside world by depicting a mobile, experiential life on which the focal character is accompanied by the reader. This could thus be regarded as a turn from the complex modernist trademarks.

The clash between those on the margins of society and the mainstream, between the radical and the conservative, between a dominant and emerging counterculture would create an intense dynamic which generated a wide range of voices and opinions. The sweeping discontent with the current state of affairs and the status quo was transformed and found its expression in various forms of art. It could be perceived in innovating literature, poetry, music (e.g. growing popularity of jazz and bebop) and movies (e.g. James Dean in Nicolas Ray’s Rebel Without A Cause). In this literary climate, a group of writers gathered into a remarkable movement known as the Beat Generation and rose to the stage in the fifties. They had strong links with jazz and abstract expressionism and saw themselves as outcasts, exiles within a hostile culture. The figureheads of this group were Williams Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg. Other novelists, such as Ralph Ellison, dealt with “the loss of personality in a world that trivialized individual differences” (Dickstein 170). Still other fiction writers subjected a critical examination of society and the self, such as Sloan Wilson’s The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit and the aforementioned Riesman and Mills.
We could thus argue that the classic picaresque and its American counterpart share traits concerning the breeding ground in which they were written. I believe they could both be regarded as “counter-narratives,” because they opposed the outworn preceding literary genres that did not respond adequately to the reigning sociocultural climate. Furthermore, both narrative branches scratched beneath a surface buoyancy that was at odds with how a considerable part of the population felt at that moment.
Chapter 3

Introduction to the novels and the authors

Both of the writers I will discuss were figureheads of the post-war American dissent in literature, who with their writing transgressed the boundaries of what was acceptable in an America that desperately wanted to maintain the status quo. In doing so, they are often regarded as prophets or instigators of the counterculture of the sixties, that tried to do away with many conventions that ruled during the preceding decades. It will be clear from the following chapter that the protagonists of the novels at stake give us a peek at the societal issues at mid-century and that they are excellent lenses through which the reader can experience the confusing decade.

3.1 The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger

In 1951, Salinger published a book that would soon become an instant classic with adults as well as adolescents. The Jewish writer himself might have been aware of the uniqueness and ingenuity of his work because during his college years, Joe Wolverton wrote, he told his fellows that he would be “the author of the next Great American Novel” (par. 2). The Catcher in the Rye tells the story of a teenager named Holden Caulfield. The reader soon finds out he has been expelled from Pencey Prep, a prestigious school in Pennsylvania, for flunking too many courses. However, he is allowed to stay until the winter holiday, but after coming to blows with one of his fellows he decides to leave earlier. Out of fear for his parents’ reaction, he decides to hide away for a while. He takes a train to New York City, which is not far away from Agerstown, and swarms through Manhattan for three days. On his foray into the city, he feels lonely and smokes
and drinks a lot. Meanwhile, Holden – who despises the superficiality or “phoniness” of people – is confronted with many sorts of people (e.g. tourists, pimps and prostitutes). He secretly meets with his sister in their home apartment after his disillusionary days in New York. However, he cannot stay because his parents do not expect him to come home before the start of the holiday. He therefore decides to spend the night at the house of his former English teacher. In the middle of the night he leaves hastily due to an encounter with the drunk teacher that Holden interprets as a sexual advance on him. Right before the end of the story, he plans on going to the West. However, he comes to realize his idea is impossible and has an emotional breakdown. In the final pages, we find out he has been hospitalized for his mental problems.

The novel is most commonly associated with the themes of alienation and rebellion, which are equally applicable to Kerouac’s book. The book has a large history of censorship and challenging on grounds of its sexual references and blasphemy. According to a complaint, it features “237 goddams, 58 bastards, 31 Chrissakes, and 1 fart” (Steinle 3). For many years, it was even highly controversial at American high schools to assign the book. Up until now, the late Salinger remains an enigmatic writer for critics due to his reclusive nature. After The Catcher in the Rye, the author wrote a couple of short stories that, however, never met the success and recognition that he achieved with his only novel. Soon thereafter, he shied away from the literary scene for good.

3.2 On the Road by Jack Kerouac

Each character and every scene in this novel corresponds to respectively a friend or an event in Kerouac’s real life. In accordance with The Catcher in the Rye, it was written in 1951 but it took six long years before it was finally published. The text was composed in only three weeks’ time on a 120-foot scroll of paper and gives us a detailed description of three restless years during which Kerouac went on four road trips. The main characters are narrator Sal
Paradise and Dean Moriarty, pseudonyms for Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady respectively. Kerouac had to replace the names of the real characters because the publishing company thought the novel could be libelous, although the author wanted to keep them for reasons of authenticity. Sal and Dean - who share a liking for jazz music, drugs, poetry and women - are driving across the American continent to get some 'kicks' and find a place as an outsider in America. Sal dreams of going to the West and crosses the continent for the first time to join Dean and his intellectual group of friends in Denver. Thereafter, he goes further West by himself and temporarily works as a fieldworker in California, among other odd jobs. The following year Dean comes to visit Sal in the East. The latter gets Dean's bug to travel around the continent and they head for New Orleans to visit their friend Old Bull Lee, pseudonym for Beat novelist and poet William Burroughs. The following winter, Sal visits Dean and the frantic pair experience other crazy adventures. While being on the road, they meet lots of interesting people who are beaten down, just like they are, and attend wild jazz sessions. In spring, Sal undertakes his fourth trip and heads towards Denver alone, but Dean joins him on his trip and they decide to go South, all the way down to Mexico City. However, Sal gets dysentery and at that point Dean abandons his friend to fend for himself. The story ends in New York City where both friends meet up again a year later and eventually part ways.

The cultural impact that this book has had has been gigantic and it soon achieved the status of a holy book for the disaffected American youth in the mid-50s. Even more, Kerouac was regarded by many as the voice of a whole generation. Bob Dylan, among others, once said that *On the Road* changed his life and that it would change the life of everyone who read it. Kerouac, who was also a prolific poet, wrote several more novels, such as *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Big Sur* (1962), but none of these received the same appraisal or attained the status that had been granted to the novel we are discussing here. Especially in literature and cinematography its influence remains. For example, Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) and American road movies such as *Thelma & Louise* (1991), or more recently
Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ digital piece of art called *Dakota* (2002), clearly display its influence. Moreover, later this year a movie adaptation of the novel by Walter Salles will be released.
Chapter 4

A picaresque reading of Salinger’s and Kerouac’s novel

4.1 Formal features

Although Sherrill only briefly mentions the novels that are at the center of this dissertation, they have been linked to the picaresque narrative before. This has been the case in reference books such as the Cambridge History of American Literature and American Culture in the 1950s. Furthermore, the famous Beat poet Allen Ginsberg referred in an interview to Kerouac’s novel as a “great classical picaresque literary device” (Clark par. 30), whereas Ihab Hassan regarded The Catcher in the Rye as a “neo-picaresque book” (Marsden 30). I will therefore investigate how Kerouac’s and Salinger’s novels fit in the “new American picaresque,” because these two hallmarks of the early post-war literature were the first books to arrive on the scene of this reinvigorated literary genre. In order to allow using the designation “picaresque” in regard to these novels, however, there have to be shared traits with the classic picaresque narrative. In the following paragraphs, I will investigate to which extent the novels at stake can be called picaresque.

Due to the direct first person type of narrative, both Salinger and Kerouac convey a view on the outer world which makes the reader see through the sham of contemporary society. Moreover, the inner world of the troubled characters’ minds is represented at once. By adopting this particular style, it could be argued that both authors enabled their readers to see beyond the general standardized lifestyles that they perceived of as depressing and soulless. Throughout the story, for example, Holden explicitly addresses the reader quite often, which
heightens the proximity of the latter to the events he describes. This is already apparent from the opening line of the novel: “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, ( . . . ) but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth” (1).

In a typical picaresque fashion, Sal Paradise takes for the road due to his estrangement from the reigning sociocultural conventions and his feeling of not belonging, to which he refers by exclaiming that his “life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost” (15). In a similar vein to Sal, Holden Caulfield’s incentive for his brief solitary sojourn in Manhattan was brought about by the feeling that “he was sort of disappearing” (4) and that he “needed a little vacation because [his] nerves were shot” (45). Joyce Rowe considered this image of disappearing a symbol for the “bleak moral climate which destroys the soul [and] seems representative of the general tone of American cultural commentary in the aftermath of World War Two” (77). Both protagonists thus seem to consider getting on the road or leaving their place of residence as an antidote to the bland conformism, a possible shot in the arm or as a potential “recuperative process” (Sherrill 90) for their emotional distress. However, unlike the classic picaresque, the theme of alienation is not caused by a precarious financial position, but could rather be explained by a psychological unease. This chimes with Shaw’s conviction that “[the] modern American picaresque novel is thus the literature of voluntary alienation. The contemporary picaro is a conscious rebel, not a rebel or an outsider by birth, providence, or circumstance” (qtd. in Wicks, Picaresque Narrative 277). Given that the wandering characters at the center of attention in these novels are outsiders who set out on a journey that takes them temporarily out of society, their voices could thus supplement the reigning points of view because they could experience other forms of reality while on the road. The wayward course(s) of these protagonists enable them to explore different parts and layers of American society, which sets them up for a critical response to what they experience along the way.
The character that displays most traits in accordance with the traditional picaro as defined by Guillén is Kerouac's Dean Moriarty. We can attribute several characteristics reminiscent of the Spanish picaresque ancestors to him. For example, from a very young age he was hardened by the rough life he was born into. His mother died when he was a child and his father was a drunkard whom he had to take care of. In fact, he could be considered an orphan because eventually his father also abandons him. Due to his battle to survive in a hostile society he is forced to delinquent behavior (e.g. stealing of cars). That the narrator, however, is less a rogue than a scaredy cat is apparent on many occasions in the novel. Sal only crosses this threshold to the picaresque while being the road. For example, he always drives very carefully because he is “fearful of the wheel” (109). Furthermore, when a man on the road brings up the idea of robbing someone on the streets, he is very reluctant toward it. I believe Sal could thus be seen more as a “John Doe” type of character than the “John Wayne” antics of Dean Moriarty. He only crosses the threshold to the picaresque while being on the road and indulges in excesses when he spends time with Dean and his crazy friends. Nevertheless, after every retreat he simply remains an outsider discontented with conventional society values rather than a rogue who indulges in mischief or conning as a way of life. An argument that does not advocate for labeling Kerouac’s novel picaresque in the old Spanish fashion is the fact that Sal and Dean travel together and are sentimentally close to each other, which thwarts the condition of solitude by which the classic picaroon is identified. Contrary to the characters at the heart of Kerouac’s road novel, Holden is truly a solitary figure in similar vein of the Spanish set examples. His loneliness is stressed on many occasions during the novel. For example, when he wants to call somebody at arriving in New York City, he realizes there are only three people in his address book that he possibly could call. Ultimately, he decides not to call anyone. He also invites a lot of people to have a drink, but they decline his invitation apart from a group of tourists who make fun of him. According to Sherrill, Salinger’s Holden Caulfield is definitely a permutation faithful to the classic picaro because he “displays not only [the] ejected
‘outsidership’ while he is cut loose in the city to make his way but also, saturated in the immediacies of his episodic adventures, that reflexive responsiveness, leveling style, perduring innocence, and hopeful openness, that belonged earlier to Lazarillo” (25).

Both The Catcher in the Rye and On the Road clearly portray a figure’s movement in space; nevertheless, the itineraries of the protagonists are not likewise in terms of duration and covered distance. Holden leaves from his school in Agerstown (Pennsylvania) and travels to New York City’s Manhattan where he swarms the streets for two and a half days, whereas Sal recounts his adventures experienced on four road trips over a span of three years. The aforementioned expansion of the road system in early post-war America enabled Sal and Dean to exploit the increased possibilities of mobility to the hilt. The former lived at his aunt’s in Paterson (New Jersey) before hitting the road in far-flung ways and exploring many different cities in a tearing rush, while Holden is confined to the scene of Manhattan.

From the above, we could derive that both novels share traits with the old picaresque, but they are not merely imitations of the inaugural narratives of the tradition. They could be regarded as contemporary American permutations, renewing the defining form by adding their own bland or twist to the genre. Therefore, I think we could thus place both of these narratives in the “picaresque-like fictions” strand coined by Guillén, if we dismiss the fact that there are two protagonists at the center of Kerouac’s novel.

4.2 The image of America at mid-century

In Sherrill’s words, “[the] picaresque narrative operates as a social-psychological diagnostic tool of the ‘ills’ that afflict selfhood, and the picaresque curriculum, the experiential course of life, might be instructive of a special kind of cure” (85). By taking up this argument, I will scrutinize to which extent the focal characters of both novels we are discussing here give their own particular slant on the sociocultural climate of early post-war America. What are the
problems Sal Paradise and Holden Caulfield are struggling with in contemporary American society, what aspects of contemporary society do they criticize, and which “cures” do they suggest through their actions to counter their unease?

5.2.1 The West as a Promised Land

Although both Sal and Holden live in the East, both seem to have a palpable yearning for the open spaces of the West. Holden’s adventures in New York do not offer any solace for his troubled mind. In contrary, he suffers a nervous breakdown marked by his loss of hope and a feeling of great sadness and powerlessness due to his social maladjustment. When his foray into Manhattan thus does not provide solace for his troubled state of mind, Holden explicitly mentions his desire to leave for the Western part of the country in a final attempt to give himself a new lease of life:

I decided I’d never go home again and I’d never go away to another school again. (. . . ) I’d start hitchhiking my way out West. What I’d do, I figured, I’d go down to the Holland Tunnel and bum a ride, and then I’d bum another one, and another one, and another one, and in a few days I’d be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody’d know me and I’d get a job. (. . . ) I’d build me a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life. (178)

Nevertheless, Holden never puts the action to the word and does not leave for the West. Instead of this, he remains in New York City before being hospitalized in a Californian sanatorium, which was obviously another type of West he had dreamed about. Eventually, he even says that “you can’t ever find a place that is nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any” (183). On the contrary, Sal does travel more than once to the other side of the vast American country together with Dean. He was feeling run-down by the “overwhelming impersonality of [New York], the masses of its inhabitants and their unapproachability” (Tytell 56). What, then, makes
the West such a desirable place for these characters? What sort of feeling does it arouse in their minds?

The purpose of their peregrinations could, in fact, be interpreted as an attempt to recapture the lost innocence of the American people and the country in itself. The West seems to offer an unbounded freedom, some sort of pastoral utopia that the characters apparently cannot experience in their homestead. In this regard, Dickstein notes that

[the] westward movement is always renovating and apocalyptic, offering the promise of a fresh beginning, a new life. ( . . . ) The East represents a stale, unhealthy, ossified civilization, an indoor civilization out of touch with nature, while the West is a brave new world, full of explosive energy and dangerous possibilities. (179)

Tytell believe that they were, in fact, in search of “the freedom and innocence of a lost frontier” (52). The fact that both Sal and Holden long for the West could be explained by their urge for a quiet and peaceful environment, where they could experience a sense of the country America once was. More specifically, it is a place uncontaminated by the materialistic and “phony” way of life that they feel many of their contemporaries embody.

Throughout Kerouac’s story, a feeling of nostalgia for the ‘real’ America can be perceived. When the two “broken down heroes of the West” (173) meet their friend Old Bull Lee, he also gets sentimental when he thinks of the old days in America when the country was “wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone” (131). Kerouac’s characters are also frustrated by the fact that Americans merely do what they are supposed to do. The clearest exemplification is when Sal works for a short time as a guard in the barracks for overseas construction workers in Mill City where his fellow guards believe that law and order have to be kept at all time. Holden, on the other hand, has fear of becoming one of those “[guys] that always talk about how many miles they get to a gallon in their goddam cars. Guys that get sore and childish as hell if you beat them at golf, or even just some stupid game
like ping-pong. Guys that are very mean. Guys that never read books. Guys that are very boring” (111). The Beats in Kerouac’s story clearly refuse to conform to the suspicious behavior that reigned among the population and traveled all over “old tumbledown holy America” (136) to get some ‘kicks’ and to spend time with the people that they meet along the way. Dean Moriarty expresses his disillusion and discontent with contemporary American society while they are driving toward the West for the first time: “I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do” (109).

The cross-country movement also seems to hold the promise of a spiritual rebirth, as Sal expresses in the following excerpt: “I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (15). Interesting in this regard is the fact that they are looking for “a place where nobody’d know me” (Salinger 178), driving along a “protective road where nobody would know us” (Kerouac 203). However, the West does not live up to its promise. Soon Sal comes to realize that “LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities; New York gets god-awful cold in the winter but there’s a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in some streets. LA is a jungle” (77). Sal realizes that paradise is not just a spot on the map and that the West is no utopia either. He had left the East filled with dreams, but soon discovers that the whole continent is nothing more than a “sad paradise.” The luring and unparalleled freedom seems to be taken away “because the Pan-American Highway partially civilizes this nation” (271).

It should be mentioned that Sal quite often refers to his companion Dean in relation to the West. In fact, he believes that Moriarty embodied a new energetic revivification of America and referred to him as “the spirit of the West.” This demeanor was in stark contrast with a “feeling that everything was dead” (3) that Sal uttered at the beginning of the novel. Furthermore, when introducing Dean and his first wife Marylou to his friends in New York, the latter asked him where he found these wonderful people, to which Sal tellingly replied: “I found them in the West” (113). Furthermore, Sal admits that Dean is his “chief hero of the Western”
(124) and goes as far as comparing him to an angel who had “the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint,” (35) who was excited about everything he experienced on and off the road. Contrary to his “New York friends [who] were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society, ( . . . ) Dean just raced in society” (9-10). On one of the first pages, Sal describes the kind of the people he thinks highly of:

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’ (7)

This statement could actually be interpreted as a description of Dean, the friend he “shambles after,” (7) or at least how this roguish type of character is perceived through the eyes of Sal. Ann Charters’ description of the relation between Sal and Dean also adds weight to this assumption: “Sal is a morally consistent presence in the book, a solid backdrop for the encounter with the dazzlingly unpredictable whirlwind called Dean Moriarty” (xx). Because of his tricks, eccentricities and amorous adventures, Dean is often regarded by his (Beat) relatives as an amoral person. However, Sal defends his friend and considers his behavior rather as a “wild yea-saying overburst of American joy” (9).

Some critics, however, interpret the focal characters of both novels from a bigger perspective. They believe they set out on their journeys to test the pretenses of the American Dream. For example, Ann Charters believes that Sal’s crossing of the continent is an attempt to “to pin down its promise [of the American Dream] of unlimited freedom by following the example of Dean Moriarty” (xxi). The latter is at a certain point in the story even addressed by Carlo Marx – a pseudonym for Allen Ginsberg – with a significant metaphor: “Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?” (108). Vopat added to this stance of seeing Dean Moriarty as a personification of fifties America by arguing that
Dean Moriarty is himself America, or rather the dream of America, once innocent, young, full of promise and holiness, bursting with potential and vitality, now driven mad, crippled, impotent (“We’re all losing our fingers”), ragged, dirty, lost, searching for a past of security and love that never existed, trailing frenzy and broken promises, unable to speak to anybody anymore. (qtd. in Bloom 17)

4.2.2 In search of lost innocence and authenticity

Dean clearly expresses his desire to take stock of everything along the way, which clearly chimes with one of the main purposes of the old and new picaresque narratives, namely “running the social gamut of the culture in question:”

Now, Sal, we’re leaving everything behind us and entering a new and unknown phase of things. All the years and trouble and kicks – and now this! so that we can safely think of nothing else and just go on ahead with our faces stuck out like this, you see, and understand the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven’t done before us. (251-252)

While on the road, they meet an array of different people, of which many are tramps just like they are. Among these people there are old friends, security officers, farmers, fellow drug addicts and writers, marginalized racial minorities. Meanwhile, they also take in the American landscape that flashes before their eyes. In both novels, the authenticity of various facets of people and ordinary life is called into question and on their journeys they try to look for alternative spaces where they can recapture this lost ideal and get away from the narrow-mindedness of their peers. Whereas the ties Sal leaves behind represent the core values of post-war America, his courses of mobility in space enables a way to explore the margins of society and thereby provides different angles of vision, “even restoring to view things that otherwise might have been neglected or ignored altogether” (Sherrill 5). In this way, the new picaresque “forges its particular form of cultural response not in satire but in exploration, discovery and
map-making in an America in so many ways become *terra incognita*” (5).

The Beats were looking for an alternative vision to American society that they experienced while looking for ‘kicks’ and exploring other environments that were different from the narrow-minded America of that particular period. They believe that this could be retrieved in the lives and soul of the racial minorities in the country (especially African Americans and the Native people). They found this alternative in the lifestyle and behavior of the excluded ‘others’ that they met on the road, or as Sal calls them: the “great fellahin peoples of the world” (89). This term is an adaptation from the term *fellahin* (i.e. Egyptian peasantry) used in the book *The Decline Of The West* (1922) by the German philosopher and historian Oswald Spengler. According to Robert Holton, it refers to “the peoples - in North America and throughout the world - who appeared to him to be culturally situated outside the structures and categories, the desires and frustrations, of modernity” (271). Sal Paradise finds the feeling that he has been yearning for in the people he meets along the road and especially Mexico seems to match his dreams of an idyllic society.

From certain expressions, one could, however, understand that the Beats in this story are prejudiced with regard to the minorities in the novel. For example, Dean reproaches the Okies—a denoting term for people from Oklahoma—who come over to work on the cotton fields in California for their incredible dumbness. On another instance, Dean exclaims that at the bottom of South America the Indians are seven feet tall and eat cocaine on the mountainside. However, after spending some time with these outcasts, they change their views. During their road trips between East, West and South (Mexico) and after spending crazy nights in “Negro” bars, it appears that Sal and Dean (and the other Beats in the story) feel attracted to the marginalized racial others that are living in their country and Mexico. At a certain moment, Sal Paradise explicitly says:

( . . . ) wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. ( . . . ) I wished I were a
In his article, Robert Holton claims that the Beats were attempting to rethink the white American (male) subject with regard to the racial diversity of the nation. For example, Sal Paradise describes Mill City (where his friend Remi Boncoeur lives) - “the only community in America where whites and Negroes lived together voluntarily” (53) - as the wildest and most joyous place he had ever seen. In Holton’s view, the book not only gives a portrait of a specific moment of the past. It could also be read as a book that gives us a peek into the American twenty-first century with various races living together in harmony. This argument could be validated from the following description of the audience watching a softball game: “Near me sat an old Negro who apparently watched the games every night. Next to him was an old white bum; then a Mexican family, then some girls, some boys – all humanity, the lot” (164). This statement is actually quite revolutionary for its time and it could be interpreted as an anticipation of the expression of Martin Luther King’s dream in 1963.

Especially in the penultimate chapter, when the frantic pair travels all the way to Mexico, they get to experience a way of living that is completely different from the “smokestacks, smoke, railyards, red-brick buildings, and the distant downtown buildings” (33) they saw when passing through Denver. At the sight of the Mexican landscape and people, Sal exclaims that the earth is truly an “Indian thing” or at least so the myth goes. The Beat protagonists are clearly aware of the ancestry of their country, where the Native Americans used to live in harmony with nature, but everything had to make way for industrialization and financial gain.

However, the description of the farmers they meet in the West as well as in Mexico is quite idealizing. They envy those people because the latter are in some way connected with the earth in a way they cannot seem to grasp. When Sal had a short-time job as a cotton picker, he
thought it was beautiful kneeling and hiding his hands in the earth. It made him feel as if he was a man of the earth, something he had dreamed of for a long time. They truly admire the “earthiness” and primitivism of the Natives and equate their outsider status with authenticity, like Steve Wilson (305) argues. This makes the Beats even feel more alienated in contemporary American society, where “boys and girls have such a sad time together” (51).

Another indication of their desire to join the fellahin is that they are fond of - almost to the point of deification - jazz music (especially bop), a genre that was “going like mad all over America” (13) at that time. The novel contains large descriptions of jazz (bebop) performances. This kind of music was originally created as an expression of the oppressed and dispossessed peoples in North America. In fact, Dean was a connoisseur of this genre and appreciated the authentic aspect of this music. For example, he only likes the great 1949 days of George Sharing (a great jazz pianist), before he became cool and commercial and at a certain moment smashes a hillbilly record because of its lack of authenticity. Moreover, Sal and Dean once saw a white hipster “fairy” wearing a Hawaiian shirt who was asking a jazz collective if he could join them and they found it a horrible sight. Their great liking for the African-American musicians is also reflected in Kerouac’s style of writing with “run-on sentences, capitalizations, eccentric punctuation and poetic repetition of sounds” (Malcolm 93). This sort of “spontaneous prose” is based on his knowledge of jazz improvisation. That is also why his writing style is sometimes called “bop prosody.” The following quote is an excellent example of this writing style: “Yes! Yes! Yes!’ He yelled. ‘We’ve all got aunts; well, let’s go, let’s see the aunts and the uncles and the grocery stores all the way ALONG that road!!” (146).

However, we can argue that the view of the two protagonists is a very short-sighted one. Their deification and the pastoral representation of these minorities has a tendency toward naivety and excessive romanticizing. This assumption has also been made in an article by Mark Richardson with regard to the description of farm labor while the protagonists are driving through Mexico. They expected to encounter lots of criminals, but they truly experienced a
culture-shock. These were “men of the earth” who seemed to escape from the American consumption society and the pressure that this way of living involves. They felt as if they have arrived in a “strange Arabian paradise” and “finally found the magic land at the end of the road and never dreamed the extent of the magic” (251). Another example of excessive generalization is when Sal refers to the outcasts as “the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (164) who “[knew] nothing of disappointment and ‘white sorrows’ and all that” (165). With this statement, Sal seems to assume that all African Americans have a happy life in contrast to the white world. However, one could also ask oneself if this is naivety on the part of Sal or on Kerouac’s part. It is by any means a utopian vision, or as Richardson describes it: “a peasant dream.” Furthermore, the critic suggests that the protagonists of Kerouac’s novel are, in fact, “reducing Mexican-American and Black farm laborers to the stereotype of poverty and free of White worries and responsibilities” (235), which seems to be short-sighted indeed. Jon Panish, on the other hand, compares Kerouac to the “romantic racialists” of the 1840s and 1850s and believes that he was

[not] any closer ( . . . ) to representing America’s oppressed minorities in ways that respected those groups and their history and traditions. Not recognizing their own complicity in perpetuating racist ideology, Kerouac and others continued the tradition of primitivizing and romanticizing the experiences of racial minorities (particularly African-Americans) and raiding their culture and contemporary experience for the purpose of enhancing their own position as white outsiders. (107-108)

In 1957, Norman Mailer wrote his pamphlet “The White Negro” in which he gives an explanation of the “hipster.” In this essay, he describes these people as outsiders to American society who were treated by the white population as if they were Negroes. That is why he thinks they could be considered white Negroes. This description appears to be a perfect match with the Beat way of life as described in this novel.
Contrary to Sal and Dean who are in search of the marginalized “otherness” of the country, Holden does not trespass any racial boundaries. In fact, race is not an issue that is featured in Salinger’s book. Nevertheless, on his odyssey through the streets of New York he mingle with many different sorts of people. The hotel where he stays is “full of perverts and morons, screwballs all over the place,” (55) although he confesses “that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch, even if you don’t want it to be” (55). Almost all of the people that Holden meets fail or disappoint him: “roommates, parents, prostitutes, college boys, taxi drivers, elevator operators [and] spoiled mentors” (Dickstein 173). Whereas Kerouac’s protagonists encounter the feeling they were missing in places where minorities live, Salinger’s protagonist gives us a bleaker account of his vision on authenticity and innocence. Holden criticizes many different elements of society by calling them “phony,” which turns out to be the most prominent adjective in the novel. It is used to refer to insincere and hypocritical behavior, words, professions, schools, movies, musicians that do not play with heart and the adult world in its entirety.

A recurring theme in the novel is indeed the opposing views of young people and adults, or at least the representation of this difference. The grown-ups in the novel always swamp Holden with advice and social responsibilities that they want to impose on him. Nevertheless, Caulfield clearly dismisses their way of life as inauthentic. Old Spencer and Mr. Antolini, the teachers who wants to convince him to commit himself to his studies at Pencey Prep are good examples of this stance. However, Holden comes to realize that the world of teenagers is as “phony” as the world inhabited by adults and he equally comes to despise his peers. At the end of the story, his encounters with the other people while being on the road turn out to be ineffectual. We could thus argue that his odyssey in search of a cure for his emotional distress is jeopardized. In the end, Holden seems to comply with the reigning conditions or as Bloom believes: “a newly quiet acceptance ( . . . ) of the human condition as it is, and must be” (41). When at first he wanted to do away with the shackles of society by leaving his school and
fellows behind, the final lines of the book offer another point of view: “About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even Old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It’s funny. Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody” (192).

As Rowe argues, “Holden holds to his own vision of authenticity in the teeth of a morally degraded society” (78) and is looking, in his former teacher Mr. Antolini’s words, for “something [his] environment [cannot] supply” (Salinger 169). When asked by his sister Phoebe what he truly likes in life, Holden can only come up with dead people: his brother Allie and his former schoolmate James Castle who jumped out the window after being bullied. However, he also likes the two nuns he met on his journey through Manhattan because they were honest and sincere. The person whom he is most fond of is, in fact, his sister Phoebe, who could be regarded “to stand for childhood itself” (Bloom 39). Because Holden already passed the childhood stage and is in between childhood and adulthood, he romanticizes the life of children because it seems to be unaffected by the sham and hypocrisy that adulthood implies in his view. Steinle believes that this opposition could be regarded metaphorically as “America’s own process of maturity, from innocent and idealistic ‘childhood’ to the ‘adult’ pursuit of status and power in both our private lives and as a nation” (4).

4.2.3 Consumer culture and corrosive materialism

Both novels shed light on the emerging materialistic behavior that was ushered in by the soaring post-war economic growth “fueled by consumer spending” (Norton et al. 535) and government programs (e.g. GI Bill of Rights). The market was flooded with new consumer goods: television sets, new cars and modern appliances were all selling like hot cakes and raised the material comfort for large parts of the American population. Furthermore, shopping centers mushroomed throughout the decade and advertising became very influential in the lives of
ordinary Americans. The increasing standard of living made industries expand their production and contributed to the transformation of America into a middle class nation. However, it should not be overlooked that this pervasive dominance of consumer spending was mainly to be found among “those in the white, educated middle class” (Graham 13).

First of all, I believe Holden Caulfield’s family could be associated with the materialistic stance that came on among the population and which is referred to in the novel on many occasions. In the first paragraph of the novel Holden bluntly calls his older brother D.B. a “prostitute” for writing movie scripts. Before he moved to California to pursue the wealth it beckons, D.B. was an author who wrote a book of short stories which was Holden’s favorite book. However, now he despises him for his inability to resist the commercial lure of Hollywood and believes his move stopped him from being an honest, authentic writer. When visiting him in the mental hospital, D.B. comes over in “a little Jaguar” which could be interpreted as a symbol of the material wealth he had accumulated. In fact, he condemns the movie industry altogether for being unrepresentative of real life and putting up fake idealistic images that one cannot live up to. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies” (1). The effect movies have on his imagination are palpable throughout the story. Nevertheless, he likes “imitating ( . . . ) those guys in the movies” (25) and after the bust-up with a pimp called Maurice he dreams of taking revenge with very cinematic overtones. Kerouac also reflects on the phenomenon that movies create unrealistic images of life while being in Los Angeles: “Handsome queer boys who had come to Hollywood to be cowboys walked around, wetting their eyebrows with hincty fingertip. The most beautiful little gone gals in the world cut by in slacks; they came to be starlets; they ended up in drive-ins” (78).

Moreover, Holden also dislikes his father’s job as a corporation lawyer. He describes this occupation as follows: “They’re all right if they go around saving innocent guys’ lives all the time, and like that, but you don’t do that kind of stuff if you’re a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot”
His school, an elite boarding school, could also be considered an embodiment or metaphorical bastion of materialist America because “they advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hot-shot guy on a horse jumping over a fence” (1-2). Although not all of his fellow pupils are as well-born as he is, still “quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families” (3). However, Holden is convinced that “[the] more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has” (3).

The teenager is part of a wealthy upper middle class family living on New York’s Park Avenue and could therefore not completely be considered to be an outsider from his environment as it is the case in the traditional picaresque fashion. Holden seems to embody the reluctance to comply with this way of life, a behavior that he shared with many others during the early post-war years. However, Holden himself also took money on his trip to New York, but although he seems to display the behavior he himself despises so much he actually sets little store to this. He spends it on his stay in the hotel, in bars and clubs, taxi drivers and the nuns he meets and whom he gives ten dollar for charity. In his own words, he spent a “king’s ransom in about two lousy weeks” (96) and confesses that he is a “spendthrift at heart” (Ibid.). Furthermore, he feels sorry for his roommate at Pencey for having inexpensive suitcases, which is in stark contrast with his made from “genuine cowhide” (97). Moreover, he also found it depressing when he was eating bacon and eggs whilst the two nuns were only eating toast and coffee. Based on this behavior it could be argued that Holden feels for those who are less wealthy than he is. Later on his journey he gradually dismisses the value of money; for example, by throwing his change in the lagoon in Central Park. Dane Wakefield argues that “Holden is repulsed because material values draw on what little store of love there is in the world and expend it on ‘things’ instead of people” (qtd. in Fruman 81). This stance could be interpreted from the instance in which he is clearly mocking a symbol of materialistic modern America:

Take most people. They’re crazy about cars. They worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they’re always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car
already they start thinking about trading it in for one that’s even newer. I don’t even like old cars. I mean they don’t even interest me. I’d rather have a goddam [sic] horse. A horse is at least human, for God’s sake.” (117)

On his journey through the Big City, he meets different people who seem to put different perspectives on the matter. In this manner, Salinger’s focal character, in the old picaresque fashion, is “running the social gamut of the culture in question” (Sherrill 4). His mobility enables him to venture into the movies, night clubs, hotel, etc. which portrays different social spheres or environments which all shed light on different approaches toward the sociocultural atmosphere. In this regard, Holden’s foray into New York, by means of a temporary spatial and social dislocation, is one which he could possibly find alternatives for what depresses him at home and at Pencey Prep. Holden is in this manner an ideally crafted literary device who his access to a pluralistic social scene.

Sal Paradise also laments the tendency toward turning ideas and objects into consumer objects or commodities. For example, when he hitchhikes his way West for the first time, he visits the Wild West Week in Cheyenne, Wyoming. However, it misrepresents the old spirit of the West and Sal is very much affected by this pathetic display where “fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire” (30) crowded the sidewalks. He expresses his disappointment by saying that “[he] felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (Ibid.). James T. Jones referred to this event as “a travesty of frontier life staged by the local Chamber of Commerce” (Bloom 147). On another occasion, Sal wanted to sit peacefully on the muddy banks of the Mississippi River, but the wire fence that had been constructed around it was blocking his view. It is due to these observations along his way that Sal seems to rediscover the vast American country and finds out how even the places he dreamed of where already contaminated by the uprising sweep of commodification.
As already mentioned before, home is a consistent backdrop who provides him with the things they cannot find on the road, usually money and food. However, Sal himself also participates in this spending spree for luxury goods, because when he returns from one of his road trips, he decides to buy a new electric refrigerator together with his aunt, adding that “it was to be the first one in the family” (97). This purchase may convey his tendency toward a middle class family, given that Amy Hungerford regarded this appliance as “a symbol of American middle class domesticity and the consumer society” (15).

The image of America that is portrayed in both novels does not match the ideal image of a world that both Salinger’s and Kerouac’s focal figure have in mind. Sal, Dean and Holden are all looking for an alternative by leaving their residences and temporarily remove them from the societal shackles that suffocate them. The picaresque quest for innocence, authenticity and places uncontaminated by materialism sets them up for a metaphorical pilgrimage to the West. Although Holden never hits the road for this destination, Sal finds out that even this spot on the map does not offer a sense of the freedom they are yearning for. While both Kerouac and Salinger provide the reader with a romantic ideals, in the end these seem unable to counter the unease felt by their protagonists. Their resistance is therefore not complete (both end up at home), nor do they completely immerse themselves in the reigning sociocultural atmosphere.

5.3 The gender issue: representation of an embattled masculinity

At mid-century, an ideology of familialism emerged in America due to which the domestic sphere gained status with both men and women. During this period, homes and families appeared to function as a kind of refuge, a safe haven from the Cold War climate of fear and suspicion. This popular image of the patriarchal “nuclear family” was exemplified in television series such as Father Knows Best and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet. However,
David Savran noted that “the popular image of the United States in the 1950s – a land of prosperous and happy families in their comfortable suburban homes, of domesticated sexuality and stable gender roles (…) is woefully inaccurate” (6). Underneath the buoyant, complacent surface both sexes “felt limited by social pressures to conform to narrowly defined gender roles. (…) [They] usually adopted distinct roles, with male breadwinners and female homemakers” (Norton et al. 546). In this “domestic version of containment” men went out to work and supplied the familial income, while women stayed at home to take care of the children, do the housekeeping and provide emotional satisfaction.

Nevertheless, both sexes struggled to maintain these rigid gender roles and suffered from its implications. Women had briefly taken the role of family breadwinner during the war by taking the jobs of men that went to the front. This meant that they had enjoyed life in the public sphere for a short span of time. However, once the war was over women were reinstated in the domestic sphere where they reluctantly had to stay and fulfill their prescribed chores. Although one has to be cautious not to generalize about this situation – there were also happy housewives and post-war career women – there was definitely a tendency toward an unequal treatment of females with regard to men. Furthermore, those that stayed in employment usually got a wage that was considerably lower than their male colleagues. Due to the mandated pattern many women felt isolated from the outside world in which their husbands operated. The spokeswoman of this female discontent was Betty Friedan who addressed the status of women in The Feminine Mystique (1963) and whose work contributed to the jump-start of the feminist movement of the 1960s. In her work she describes “the culturally constructed image of the passive, homebound, uneducated, eroticized and cosmeticized femininity” (Benshoff 272). All the same, the American men equally suffered from the normative sex role system. In academic circles, Arthur Schlesinger referred to this phenomenon in an article with the telling title: “The Crisis of American Masculinity” (1958). In the opening sentences, he voices his concern over the post-war male subject:
What has happened to the American male? For a long time he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. (…) [By] mid-century, the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. (292)

The critic believed that men were distraught by an increasing feminized world, which caused insecurity among American men. Furthermore, Schlesinger was worried that this ambiguous situation nourished homosexuality, a behavior of which society vehemently disapproved. By extension, all the deviant attitudes that did not fit into the prescribed generic molds were marginalized.

Both Kerouac’s and Salinger’s novels have male protagonists at its center. It could thus be argued that they these characters voice problems of the discontented American men living under this generic settlement. In accordance with Sherrill’s description of the “new American picaro,” these focal characters can provide the readers with a vicarious access to the reigning attitudes “as a ‘carrier’ of the ills that beset contemporary selfhood” (84). The issues concerning masculinity are apparent in Kerouac’s novel and have been widely discussed among literary critics. The amount of scrutiny on this issue was, however, not paralleled with regard to The Catcher in the Rye. At first glance Salinger’s novel does not seem to contain references to the gender ideology debate; nonetheless, there are indirect references to an embattled masculinity in Holden’s behavior. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how these new picaros move in and out of gendered roles and spheres and how Kerouac and Salinger picture a gender ideology in flux through their protagonists.

First, we will have a look at the portrayal of gender roles regarding Kerouac’s novelistic antiheroes. The following quote - uttered by Sal in the first part of the novel – provides the reader with his view on the home-centered life and women:
All these years, I was looking for the woman I wanted to marry. I couldn’t meet a girl without saying to myself, [sic] What kind of wife would she make? ‘I want to marry a girl,’ I told them, ‘so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time – all this franticness and jumping around.’ (105)

From this passage we can derive Sal’s reactionary stance toward the social institutions of home and marriage. He sees women as wives and wants to settle for an easy-going life instead of the frenzy he and Dean experience on the road. Dean, in contrast, opposes this view on women and a traditional lifestyle and could be regarded as an emblem of hedonistic behavior. Some critics, such as Swartz, even describe him as a prophet or harbinger of the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s. His sexual prowess could be summarized as “a mad tirade of adultery, bigamy, wife-sharing, divorce, marriage, pregnancies and innumerable one-night stands” (79). He gets married three times but divorces each of the women and abandons them and the children to fend for themselves. On one occasion, Sal even “drew [his] GI check and gave Dean eighteen dollars to mail to his wife; [who] was waiting for him to come home and [who] was broke” (117). The latter clearly lacks a sense of responsibility for anyone and sees women merely as disposable sex objects. He strikes the reader as a phallocentric strong male figure who shows little emotion, a character for whom “sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life” (4).

Whereas Dean at times displays misogynist behavior (e.g. by hitting his mistresses), Sal seems to take a more moderate stance toward the other sex. In this regard, Swartz argues that Dean is “leading the assault on the old values, gallantly ushering in the new” (75). However, I believe this statement is not completely true because both protagonists seem to be in favor of a patriarchal society rather than an egalitarian one in terms of gender differences. Their deviant behavior is particularly palpable at the end of the narrative. After spending a considerable amount of time together, Sal aspires Dean’s sexual prowess and starts to take up Dean’s antics himself. We could thus argue that Dean lured Sal into his frantic lifestyle marked by sexuality
and strong masculinity. This is exemplified in the best possible way in the Mexican whorehouse at the end of their final road trip where they indulge in excessive debauchery that is clearly at odds with Sal’s earlier statement that “boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk” (51):

I was set upon by a fat and uninteresting girl with a puppy dog, who got sore at me when I took a dislike to the dog because it kept trying to bite me. She compromised by putting it away in the back, but by the time she returned I had been hooked by another girl, better looking but not the best, who clung to my neck like a leech. I was trying to break loose to get a sixteen-year-old colored girl who sat gloomily inspecting her navel through an opening in her short shirty dress across the hall. (262)

Cresswell, from another point of view, argues that the mobility of the novel could be interpreted as a struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tension and that Kerouac “reinforces the dualism of private/public as a gendered distinction” (257). The literary critic believes their actions could be interpreted as fleeing from the shackles of domesticity, thus leaving the feminine space of home for the public sphere and the open road which has been associated with masculinity. The first sentences of the novel give weight to this dual interpretation:

I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. (3)

From a picaresque point of view, we could thus argue that Sal is moving in and out of society to find alternatives for the gender restrictions he perceives in his homestead. From the very beginning of the novel we see the abandonment of a woman and the arrival of a male friend, Cresswell says. This could be linked to Kerouac’s own life, where his mother was a very
oppressive, powerful influence due to his father’s psychological problems and the ensuing declination of paternal prestige (Tytell 54). Ann Charters, furthermore, adds to this by saying that Kerouac lived “a kind of monastic life at home with his mother most of the time” (ix).

Each journey they undertake, in fact, ends in a city in which they meet women whom they make love to. However, their stay is always restricted in time in their urge to “[leave] confusion and nonsense behind and performing [their] one and noble function of the time, move” (121). Although this interpretation gained ground among literary critics, Linda McDowell argues for a deconstruction of this dualism from a feminist point of view. She suggests that women at home also rejected the gender hegemony and that mobility was not a necessary condition to attain their goal.

To a certain degree, I believe it could indeed be argued that they “reject the normal female desire for full and reciprocal love as an unconscionable demand and an intolerable burden” (Schlesinger 294). However, throughout the story Sal displays behavior on basis of which we could argue that his resistance to domesticity is not complete. In this way, the assumption that he is a “half-outsider” is reaffirmed. Paradise, in fact, lives with his aunt in New Jersey and we learn that before his life on the road started, he took trips with his aunt to other parts of the country. Contrary to Dean, he cannot cut the ties with his home completely. This could be derived from the fact that he keeps on sending his aunt money and postcards while being away from her. His aunt is always in the back of his mind and Sal acknowledges that he always has a “home to go to, [a] place to lay my head down” (97). This is in sheer contrast with Dean who clearly lacks a sense of home. He had spent most of his time in reform schools and in prison and from an early age onwards had to fend for himself, in a similar fashion to the old Lazarillo and Guzmán. Because he never experienced the traditional familial life, we could argue that he lacks a sense of this social unit.

The valorization of male friendships seems to pervade the whole novel, with the intense relationship between Dean and Sal at its heart. Apart from Dean, who abandons Sal eventually,
all the men remain faithful to their comrades as an exemplary form of male bonding. For example, Dean takes a picture of himself with Carlo Marx that he cuts neatly down the middle and saves in his wallet. Although it should not be overlooked that there is always a woman waiting for them at the end of the road, they choose male friendships over relationships with women. Dean is regarded as an archetypal Western hero and seems to function as a prototypical embodiment of masculinity. Through Sal’s eyes, who “knew queers all over the country” (66), we also get scenes in which homoeroticism is hinted at. Although this phenomenon was unacceptable at that time and Kerouac was forced by the publishing company to edit all the overt homosexual references, Dean’s tendency toward ambivalent homosexual behavior is still apparent from some passages in the novel. For example, on many occasions Dean is described as being naked when Sal visits him and in one of his temporary residences there is a nude drawing that clearly depicts his penis. Furthermore, there are also references to Dean’s secret relationship with Carlo Marx. In this regard, I believe Dean could metaphorically be regarded as a sponge, sucking up many sexual transgressions (misogyny, adultery, etc). Most of the behavior that was labeled by society as crossing the boundaries of what was acceptable could be found in Dean’s demeanor.

A consistent feminist perspective from the women who have to endure the frenzy lifestyle of their male counterparts is clearly lacking in this novel. Kerouac, however, at times voices the miserable situation of the ‘passive’ homebound wives through the laments of Sal who feels for the “housewives with nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to believe in” (222). At a certain moment in the story he “realized that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of the men” (170). Further on in the story, he also says that “[t]he truth of the matter is we don’t understand our women; we blame on them and it’s all our fault” (170). This opinion is not shared by Dean, who is very much in favor of a patriarchal society. This belief could clearly be derived from his view on the ideal female he once described to Sal:
“Now you see, man, there’s [a] real woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour in the night with anybody and have talks in the kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, and that’s his castle” (185).

However, although they may not be family men, some of the values they stand for are traditional to the point of being reactionary. Both of them clearly subscribe to patriarchal viewpoint, especially Dean. Through the eyes of Sal we also get a view on deviant women who attempt to escape from their subordinated status, because not in a similar vein to the men not all females sheepishly underwent their plight. For example: “‘And another thing, you dirty man,’ yelled Lee Ann. ‘Tonight was the last time I’ll ever make you your filthy brains and eggs, and your filthy lamb curry, so you can fill your filthy belly and get fat and sassy right before my eyes’” (68). At the end of the third chapter of the novel, Dean was also told off by the gang of “wives of his disciples who had him on the carpet for the sexuality and the life he had helped bring into being” (177).

In comparison with the literary criticism the gender aspect has sparked in regard to Kerouac’s novel, the amount of scrutiny of this issue in Salinger’s novel is considerably less. However, in 1945 Salinger himself had criticized in Esquire “the hypermasculine war novels for showing ‘too much of the strength, maturity, and craftsmanship critics are looking for, and too little of the glorious imperfections which teeter and fall off the best minds’” (Dickstein 186). In a picaresque fashion, Holden Caulfield also takes to the road, but I believe the gendered distinction between the public and private sphere is not at stake in his story. Contrary to Kerouac’s male protagonists, the adolescent is fleeing from an all-male preparatory school after being expelled. Nevertheless, some critics provided a gendered reading of the novel, highlighting the interpretation of a masculinity in crisis and Holden as a young man attempting to shape his male identity. This assumption is based on several passages from the novel that could be interpreted in terms of contemporary American manhood.
Carroll interpreted the novel as addressing “the instability of gender roles and expectations in post-war America” (84). She draws on the mythic image of the catcher in the rye, a role that Holden so desperately wants to fulfill. He wants to become the male protector by metaphorically catching children who are playing in a field of rye from falling off the edge of the cliff. It is believed that this image reflects and reinforces “cultural expectations of men as primary defenders of innocence, justice and freedom. Nevertheless, the image proves to be unrealistic and could therefore be interpreted as a metaphorical suggestion of the metaphorical impotency of masculinity at the hinge of the twentieth century.

Sally Robinson gave her own view on the masculine undertones in the novel in her article “Masculine Protest in Catcher in the Rye” in which she discusses the reigning models of masculinity in the nineteen fifties and describes Holden as an adolescent shaping his male identity. She looks at the matter from a consumerist angle and argues that Holden “bemoans the ‘prostitutions’ required for full male membership in American culture” (Graham 72). This link to consumerism and materialism will be discussed at large in the following chapter. Hekanaho, on the other hand, made a queer reading of the novel and focused on the depiction of non-hegemonic masculinity and sexuality.

As it is the case in Kerouac’s novel, deviations from the normative masculinity are apparent. Holden does not really come across as a clear-cut masculine adolescent if we look behind his façade of foul language. In fact, I believe there is a feminine side to him that is apparent from his emotional distress and mental breakdown. This behavior is not in accordance with the image of the strong, potent male. Nevertheless, Holden seems to be well aware of his behavior when he himself says that he is “one of those very yellow guys” (80). This is also hinted at after a fight in the dormitory with one of his fellow pupils, when he stands in front of the mirror looking at the blood that was over his face and clothes: “It partly scared me and it partly fascinated me. All that blood and all sort of made me look tough. I’d only been in about
two fights in my life, and I lost both of them. I’m not too tough. I’m a pacifist, if you want to know the truth” (40).

In this regard, Carroll argued that “[Holden] desires to be a peacekeeper at precisely the time that the United States emerged as a world super power, and he fears women at a time when many Americans identified homosexuality as deviant and unpatriotic” (Ibid. 85). His strange encounter with a prostitute in the hotel might also be revealing of his attitude toward sex. After being set up with the woman in his hotel room, he cannot bring himself to have intercourse with her. This is in sheer contrast with the Beats portrayed in Kerouac. In his virginal innocence, Holden seems to be reluctant to sexuality and even exclaims that “sex is something I just don’t understand”(56).

To round off this chapter, we can argue that Kerouac’s antiheroes challenge and call into question the hegemonic constructions of gender, by displaying subversive models of gender and sexuality. This is most prominently expressed by Dean who is undermining or leading the ‘assault’ on traditional moral values. Nevertheless, the resistance is not complete and, moreover, restricted in time. Sal always has a home to return to, which is also the case for Holden Caulfield. Salinger, on the other hand, seems to reinforce the anxieties with which the male subject had to cope in the early post-war years. Holden could be regarded as exemplary of this climate of confusion, emblematically taking up the “ills” with which the contemporary American male self was confronted in the early post-war years. Sal, Dean and Holden all offer an escape from the shackles of their residences, but nevertheless their attempts are in vain. Although unsuccessful in their attempts to redefine the male ideal, both writers, nonetheless, seem to offer the reader a different moral reality than the view that was propagated in the dominant culture, which is after all one of the main aims of the picaresque narrative.
Conclusion

From what we have discussed, it is clear that both Kerouac and Salinger did not simply mime the inaugural works of the picaresque narrative, nor could their novels be regarded as mere formulaic revivifications of the classic genre. Although not completely faithful to the narrative charter of the genre, these early post-war novels clearly stand in formal continuity with the early examples of the Spanish literary tradition. Both Sal Paradise and Holden Caulfield temporarily cut themselves loose from the shackles of their residences in order to take for the road. In this manner, they temporarily take up a mobile or nomadic way of life which is the quintessential characteristic of the “new American picaresque.”

In terms of the “social labor” of the genre, the picaresque conveys an apt form to address the complexities and upheavals in contemporary American society. Their “road work,” in fact, consists of “supplying different viewpoints with which to think through the culture anew from directions and with perspectives that crosscut the conventional grain” (Sherrill 176-177). By moving in and out of gendered or materialist spheres and roles, they tackle social conventions and provide the reader with an avenue into a nonconformist way of life. As a literary vehicle, this permutation of the old Spanish narrative allows the reader to leave their embattled and restricted self for the one that these focal characters presented and on many occasions closer to their aspirations.

In a similar vein to Sal Paradise, Holden Caulfield lamented the diminishing ground for authenticity and personal freedom. By leaving “confusion” behind, these characters try to find a cure for their emotional distress in the outside world. Their trajectories could therefore be understood as “errands into the wilderness” (Sherrill 44), as attempts to rediscover the
American country that had become alien to them by looking for a vantage point outside of societal constraints. Sal seems to encounter the feeling he is yearning for in the presence of racial minorities, whereas Holden celebrates childhood for its link with innocence and a life unaffected by the hypocrisy of the adult world.

However, their antics could not be considered to be a clarion call for rebellion because both these novels clearly convey the tension between acceptance of and unease with the reigning social conventions. The places they leave behind (families, homes or school) could be interpreted as embodiments of the materialistic values that were coming on in American society. Despite their attempts to escape from this behavior, their efforts do not seem to offer a viable or sustainable alternative. Both Sal and Dean could, in fact, be regarded as “[escaping] demands of society rather than to change society” (Dickstein 174). Furthermore, we get the impression that at the end of the novels the protagonists also get entangled in mainstream society. The focal figures have to comply with the new American way of life for the sake of their survival. Eventually, they do not accomplish any form of self-recovery with their temporary mobile life or “road work” and are not successful in their attempts to surpass the things they are suffering from. Both Sal and Holden return home in the end. However, in spite of the fact that the central figures of both novels did not find the cure they chased after and relapsed upon their final return home, these works can nevertheless “serve at least an indirectly diagnostic purpose in isolating and exposing those instances in which the 'dis-eases' of the [American mid-century male] self can be discerned” (Sherrill 107).
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