

ALLEN GINSBERG'S *HOWL*

A Literary and Cultural Analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea for this Bachelor thesis was born out of interest towards the literary movement of The Beat Generation in the United States of America, with special focus on the figure of Allen Ginsberg and his famous poem *Howl*. We would like to explore their position in the literary establishment of the 1950s' America, taking into consideration their evolution as a countercultural literary movement, and to look more specifically at the case of *Howl*. Described as “the voice of a generation” and “the poem that changed America”,¹ *Howl* actually became the image and insignia of a generation which, shaped and influenced by the direct effects of the Lost Generation a couple of decades earlier on culture and consumerism, rebelled against the establishment and motivated the great social change that the world, and particularly the United States of America, experienced from the decade of the sixties onwards. Its effect and significance on American and even global history is undeniable, still when some question its literary value. For once, a literary product trespassed the boundaries of the literary world, becoming an extraordinary social and cultural weapon on whose base many laid the foundations of their personal revolution.

When Allen Ginsberg in the late 1950s read Walt Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*, he was shocked by the following line: “What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls /restrain'd by decorum...”² However, he was shocked in a good kind of way, because it was on reading this line that he discovered the meaning of his own personal *Howl*. The poem laid out just what happened when all those “restrained howls” finally burst through the veneer of decorum, releasing those “who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in

¹ *Howl*. Dir. Robert P. Epstein. Radiant Cool. 2010. DVD.

² Whitman, Walt, and Malcolm Cowley. *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking Press, 1959. Print.

the filthy Passaic, hoped on negroes, cried all over the street /and threw up growning into the bloody toilet, moans on their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles.”³

Indeed, Ginsberg’s poem is a mid-twentieth century extension of Whitman’s catalog still finding poetry in the most unlikely urban places. Whitman’s “I” remains the unfazed observer, looking closely, observing the good and the bad, the adulteries and the emergencies and the hidden lusts, reporting them, and then moving on. His persona here is not unlike the “impassive stones” of the city itself that “receive and return so many echoes”. “Poems are always vibrating all around us, if we only open our ears”.⁴

Although historically separated by one whole century, the parallelisms between Ginsberg and Whitman are so patent that we could almost talk of Ginsberg as the Great American Bard’s son (speaking in literary terms of course). Both became great American literary and cultural icons of their time, making a show of very particular personae that sometimes even overtook their role as literary figures. The influence of Whitman on Ginsberg and the Beat Generation will also be further explored, as will be other inspirational sources and influences such as the English Romantics or the Modernist writers, among others.

Taking all this into account, we will try to set up a series of comprehensive lines of analysis that will make for an easier understanding of the poem *Howl* both internally and also in reference to the social and literary context that shaped its creation, including an insight into the Beat Generation, of which this poem is one of the main representations and achievements.

³ Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Lines 205-2013. Print.

⁴ "IWP WhitmanWeb." *IWP WhitmanWeb*. N.p., 1 Jan. 2012. Web. 17 June 2014. <<http://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/section-8#>>.

2. PANORAMA OF THE 1950S AMERICAN LITERATURE CONCERNING *HOWL* AND ITS CONTEXT

2.1. THE BEAT GENERATION AND THE SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE

The Beat literary movement had its beginnings in New York City in the 1940s. “Beat” is a label that designates a group of writers and their friends and affiliates who met at Columbia University and gained fame and notoriety during the ‘40s and ‘50s. It is still not quite clear what the origin and real meaning of the word “beat” is; several postures in this debate vary from “downtrodden” and “weary of the world” to “beatific and “angelic”, but it is generally accepted that Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) first used the term in 1948 to characterize himself and a small group of friends: Allen Ginsberg (1926-1968), William Burroughs (1914-1997), Neal Cassady (1926-1968), and Herbert Huncke (1915-1996), but with dozens of other writers associated with the Beat spirit –a spirit so diverse that the best unifying principles are individuality and intensity of expression.⁵

Some critics praise the figure of Neal Cassady and his position in the group, arguing that he served as an early literary (and behavioral) model and source of inspiration for their writer friends;⁶ others, however, claim that perhaps the Beat Generation should be referred to as Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation, owing to his relevance in the movement.⁷ Even though it is true that Neal Cassady was the muse of the Beat writers, one might be tempted to say that if he had not existed, Jack Kerouac would have had to invent him. But for many students of the Beat Generation, Kerouac

⁵ Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "Allen Ginsberg." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web.

Lawlor, William. "General Introduction." *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Web.

⁶ Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "Beat Poets." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web.

⁷ Lawlor, William. "General Introduction." *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Web.

did invent Cassady:⁸ his frantic character who is always moving is portrayed mainly as a hero, an incredibly flawed hero that keeps spinning in his own decadence, the very pretext of *On the Road* (“I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty, the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty”), the soul of America and of his generation (“He was BEAT –the root, the soul of Beatific”).⁹ Neal Cassady is romanticized as the Beat hero also by Ginsberg in *Howl*:

who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver –joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses’ rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & specially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns & hometown alleys too¹⁰

But it was sometimes more of a literary creation than a real life character. Kerouac, however, was the so-called King of the Beats, the incarnation of the Beat spirit. Kerouac coined the phrase “Beat Generation”, and he ultimately became the “Suffering Servant” who endured personal tragedy, hostility and misunderstanding. Yet other critics, such as Ann Charters argue that Ginsberg, not Kerouac or Cassady, was the source of unity for the Beats. Charter writes that Ginsberg “brought the whole Beat Generation into being with the strength of his vision of himself and his friends as a new beginning –as a new generation”.¹¹

The name Beat Generation was designed to signify the renegade, downtrodden position that these authors held in a society that was growing increasingly materialistic, status-conscious and conformist and it also drew a parallelism with a similarly

⁸ Hemmer, Kurt. "41, Cassady, Neal." *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature*. New York: Facts On File, 2007. Web.

⁹ Kerouac, Jack. "III.3.20." *On the Road*. New York: Viking, 1997. Print.

¹⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl, and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Lines 145-153

¹¹ Charters, Ann. "24." *Beats & Company: a Portrait of a Literary Generation*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1986. Web.

disenchanted group of American writers in the period after World War I: the Lost Generation. Once again, a World War (in this case the second) had not led to a spiritual and cultural reawakening. On the contrary, the Cold War and its threat of nuclear annihilation, along with an ever-more-powerful military-industrial complex were working against the spirits of many Americans. Like many artists and intellectuals of their time, and like many artists and intellectuals of the Lost Generation some years before, the Beat poets were increasingly disillusioned with a society in which they did not seem to fit. McCarthyism was turning the country into a more and more repressive society and the literary forms were stiff, so the Beat answer was a blatant breaking with accepted social, sexual, and literary norms, in search of confrontation with a cold and mechanistic society.

During the first years of the Beat Generation in the East Coast, they went practically unnoticed by the established literary criticism. At this time, the Beat Generation evolved in a personally interactive way, discussing and exchanging books while traveling across the United States and abroad, assembling material for their future creations, and exchanging their works-in-progress in manuscript form and debating their merit heatedly in coffeehouses and jazz clubs. Throughout the same period, Ginsberg attracted the attention of the poet William Carlos Williams, to whom he sent some of his poems and who later became Ginsberg's mentor. Despite all this creative activity, none of the New York Beat poets managed to break into the very exclusive and snobbish New York literary establishment, firmly controlled by the formalist academic poets, and it became apparent to Ginsberg that a change of scenery was necessary.¹²

¹² Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "The Beat Moves West." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web. Pg. 3.

Following Kerouac, Ginsberg moved to San Francisco. He had a letter of introduction by William Carlos Williams, which became the key for him to discover the bohemian literary community of the Bay Area. This literary community consisted of a group of poets whose work followed open forms of poetry and had an emphasis on orality, often accompanied by jazz, over the printed form. Moreover, they enjoyed a certain kind of support from the literary spheres which the East Coast Beat poets lacked. This spontaneous youthful literary activity of the West Coast, combined with the more established and academic San Francisco Renaissance movement, which revolved around the poet Kenneth Rexroth, the Bay Area's bohemian impresario and veteran poet, and had influences of modernist writers such as Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams himself, is what gave birth to the Beat Generation as it is known today (not to be confused with the San Francisco Renaissance itself). More names were added to the list of "Beats", among the most prominent ones: Peter Orlovsky (1933-2010), Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919) or Philip Whalen (1923-2002). They kept on with the East Coast Beats' tradition in terms of open-verse forms, spontaneity and spoken poetry; and they introduced some influences from the West Coast tradition such as a greater awareness of Native American and Latino cultures and a reinforced interest in Asian mysticism and ecology.¹³

The most crucial event for the Beat poetry was the poetry reading at Six Gallery, perhaps the leading showcase for young artists in San Francisco, on October 7, 1955. Gary Snyder was on it, and Philip Whalen was "in on the deal" too. Rexroth would be the master of ceremonies, and also on the program was "a person named Allen Ginsberg", whom he recently met and was just getting to know. Ginsberg was largely

¹³ Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "The Beat Moves West." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web. Pg. 3.

unknown and yet had a certain cachet among the poets in the West because he was a friend and disciple of Williams.

The Six Gallery reading was a “poetickall bombshell”. It was, as the Beat Generation itself, a direct and deliberate response to the culture of the bomb and to American power and wealth. The cultural importance of the reading comes clear if we think about the United States in the era after World War II, as already discussed above, and era that profoundly shaped Ginsberg and the Beat writers. Like *On the Road* and *Naked Lunch*, *Howl* was a product of the Cold War. Behind the calm exterior, the idealized domesticity and the happy family, there was anxiety, paranoia, and restlessness. Writers described, in darkly pessimistic works, the end of the American dream, and the fissures in American society. The U.S. government regarded writers as dangerous. Hollywood directors and screenwriters were jailed. In academia and literary magazines, teachers and critics warned against innovation and radicalism.¹⁴ W.H. Auden urged caution. It was not the time for “revolutionary artists” or “significant novelty in artistic style”. Before any new literary works could be written there would have to be a “cultural revolution”, he insisted.¹⁵ The Beat Generation was the spirit of that revolution.

The Six Gallery reading was rebellion at its best. It marked the start of the cultural revolution that would sweep across America in the 1960s, helping create the conditions for the Free Speech Movement.¹⁶ The crowning part of the evening was Ginsberg’s first reading of *Howl*, which he did in a “small and intensely lucid voice”, becoming increasingly sober and surprising everyone and himself with his own “strange

¹⁴ Raskin, Jonah. "Poetickall Bombshell." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print.

¹⁵ Auden, W. H. Foreword. *A Change of World*. By Adrienne Rich. New York: AMS, 1971. Print.

¹⁶ Raskin, Jonah. "Poetickall Bombshell." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print.

ecstatic intensity”.¹⁷ It almost instantly catapulted the Beats, and Ginsberg in particular, to fame. The day after the reading, Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a telegram. He wrote, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?”, the same words that Ralph Waldo Emerson had written Walt Whitman to praise *Leaves of Grass* exactly a hundred years earlier. The parallelism is significant.

The news of the event at the Six Gallery spread quickly, and for the first time, the literary establishment of the West Coast expressed some interest in the Beat poets. Richard Eberhart wrote:

Ambiguity is despised, irony is considered weakness, the poem as a system of connotations is thrown out in favor of long-line denotative statements. . . . Rhyme is outlawed. Whitman is the only god worthy of emulation.¹⁸

This newly drawn interest, combined with the series of obscenity trials (most notably the one involving Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1957) really attracted the attention of the public towards Beat literature. However, even after the newly drawn interest in Beat literature, still comparatively few people ever read these pieces, and the literary establishment continued to attack and brutalize them in literary publications, because they regarded them as “intruders” in their territory.

At the end of the ‘50s and beginning of the ‘60s the Beats were parodied and cartoonized. In fact, the depiction of the Beatnik in popular culture was designed by their detractors, and it is a “Flanderization”¹⁹ of those who attached themselves to the Beat movement –essentially the hipsters of the 1950s. It is not surprising that none of

¹⁷ Morgan, Bill. "Six Gallery (now the Silkroute Carpet Store) 14. 3119 Fillmore." *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: a Literary Guidebook*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2003. Web.

¹⁸ From the *New York Times Book Review*, 2 September 1956. 1956 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission. Reprinted with background material in *To Eberhart from Ginsberg* (Lincoln, Mass: Penmaen Press, 1976)

¹⁹ **Flanderization:** The process by which a single trait from a character is overstated and brandished to the point that it becomes the character's only trait. Flanderization is almost always for the worst and tends to draw viewers away from the the medium that the character represents. (reference: <http://es.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Flanderization>)

the real members of the Beat Generation actually conform to this Beatnik stereotype.²⁰ This parody meant the increasing absorption of the Beat legend into American mainstream commercial culture, and it meant the beginning of its decline. The Beat poets soon disintegrated as a group, although some writers such as Ginsberg kept on with their literary production well into the second half of the 20th century.²¹

2.2. ALLEN GINSBERG

Allen Ginsberg was one of the central figures of the Beat Generation, and also one of the most popular American poets of the 20th century. His literary role reached the level of his own literary production, having served as an intermediary between many Beat writers and potential publishers. Ann Charter argues that he was the source of unity for the Beats. She writes that Ginsberg “brought the whole Beat Generation into being with the strength of his vision of himself and his friends as a new beginning –as a new generation. He wove the threads that kept them together, just as he held together the threads that tied his life and his art to the generation of poets before him –Blake, Whitman, Mayakovsky, William Carlos Williams- and to his father and to the memory of his mother Naomi”.²² Ginsberg was a master of communications and persuasion, and applying his early experience in marketing, he connected ideas with thinkers, books with readers, and performances with audiences. He was the charismatic person whose personal contacts and public oratory helped the Beats to emerge, flourish, and endure.²³

Ginsberg was a poet of minorities: a major figure in American gay literature (he took an active role in the Gay Liberation Movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s in San

²⁰ "Tvtroperville." RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.

<<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Beatnik>>.

²¹ Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web.

²² Charters, Ann. *Beats & Company: a Portrait of a Literary Generation*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986. Pg. 24. Web

²³ Lawlor, William. *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Pg. XIII. Web.

Francisco), as well as a converted Buddhist with a Jew heritage and a communist; he participated in many counterculture movements, being one of the major voices in the antinuclear movement, the struggle for gay civil rights, the free-speech movement, the hippie movement of the 60s (befriending, among others, Timoty Leary , Ken Kesey, and Bob Dylan), and the Democratic Left's struggle against the traditional Right.

It was perhaps this social activism, along with the traditional American poetry forms towards which he turned in his literary production, and specially *Howl*, his most celebrated poem, that made Allen Ginsberg the most universal of the Beat Poets. The voice he employed in *Howl* not only has influenced the style of several generations of poets, but also has combined the rhythms and language of common speech with some of the deepest, most enduring traditions in American literature.²⁴

Born on 3 June 1926 in Patterson, New Jersey, Irwin Allen Ginsberg was the son of parents who were enormously influential through his life. His father, Louis Ginsberg, was a schoolteacher and a fairly renowned lyric poet. Naomi Ginsberg, Allen's mother, was a Russian immigrant, political activist and communist sympathizer. She was often confined to sanitariums for long periods of time when her paranoid schizophrenia became too disruptive at home. As he entered his adolescence, Allen became painfully aware of his homosexuality. His youth was marked by his mother's deteriorating mental condition, and many of the crucial events of his youth as well as his thoughts about Naomi's descent into mental disability and paranoid ravings are recounted in *Kaddish*, his lengthy masterwork. Ginsberg's relationship with his mother, as well as the topic of mental insanity and psychiatric institutionalization, and his disappointment with his father, a locally renowned poet in New Jersey who preferred the quite middle-class life

²⁴ Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "Achievements." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*: Salem Press, 2011. Web.

life of a schoolteacher despite the family's socialist-communist background, would later have a great influence on his work.

After graduating from high school, Allen entered Columbia University, where he met Lucien Carr, and, through him, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, two men who, in the decades to come, became Ginsberg's two main confidants and influences. He was temporarily suspended from Columbia in 1945. Living a bohemian lifestyle ("subterranean", in Kerouacian terms) that included drug use and acts of rebellious and occasional criminal behavior, and as a condition of his readmittance to Columbia, Ginsberg agreed to be sent to the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute for psychiatric treatment. There, he met Carl Solomon, an eccentric intellectual seemingly hell-bent on destruction who had been undergoing shock treatment, and he would dedicate *Howl* to him. To Ginsberg, who spent hours discussing life and literature with the troubled patient, Solomon was proof of a "great mind destroyed by madness", not unlike the sorrow Allen felt when he considered his mother's mental decline.²⁵

Despite living in a sort of conflict between his formal and informal education, his admiration for the Columbia circle of academics (including Lionel Trilling) but also for his rebellious circle of friends, few questioned his talent. He contributed some polished rhymed poems to the university's literary journal and discussed his literary works with his father, while concurrently earning a reputation among the bohemian gang of Burroughs and Kerouac, who met regularly in New York City to discuss literature and the social issues of the day. Burroughs, in particular, urged his friends to think outside the margins.²⁶ It was also in New York City where they met Neal Cassady,

²⁵ Lawlor, William. *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Pg. 121. Web.

²⁶ Lawlor, William. *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Pg. 119. Web.

a young Denver hustler, a central figure and influence on the lives and works of most Beat writers, specially Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg himself. Also there, Ginsberg experienced his so-called visions, in which he heard what he perceived to be the voice of William Blake speaking to him through the ages. All these experiences are collected in Kerouac's *On the Road*, a defining work of this generation, described by *The New York Times* as "the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as 'beat,' and whose principal avatar he is."²⁷

During the early 1950s Ginsberg began correspondence with William Carlos Williams, who wrote a recommendation letter for him, and guided and encouraged his early writing. His poetry took a dramatic turn for the better when he became friends with Williams, who had little use for Ginsberg's rhymed poetry and encouraged him to use concrete images and everyday speech in his work.²⁸

Desperate for any kind of movement in his life, after travelling in Mexico and Europe, in 1954 Allen moved to San Francisco to be at the center of the thriving poetry community, which was essentially guided by the poets Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan. There he met his lifelong companion, Peter Orlovsky, and began to focus more on his poetry, which reflected the dramatic changes in his life. Some of the poems from his early days in California –*America, In the Baggage Room at Greyhound, A Supermarket in California* and *Sunflower Sutra* rank among the best works Ginsberg produced.²⁹

²⁷ Millstein, Gilbert. *Books of the Times*. The New York Times. September 5, 1957.
Kerouac, Jack. *On the road*. New York: Viking, 1997. Web.

²⁸ Lawlor, William. *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Pg.121. Web.

²⁹ Lawlor, William. *Beat Culture Lifestyles, Icons, and Impact*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Pg.121. Web.

During this productive period, Ginsberg wrote *Howl and other Poems*, with the title poem gathering enormous attention both for its rupture with the prevailing aesthetic models and for its ensuing obscenity trial, which Ginsberg and his publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, won. The poem, which was born as an artistic exercise and was not intended to be published, gained him international fame and actually changed the face of modern poetry.

Allen Ginsberg read the first part of *Howl* during the historic reading at San Francisco's Six Gallery on 7 October 1955. Most of the prominent poets at the new bohemian San Francisco literary scene were there, including Jack Kerouac, who, despite not reading, was very much at presence, passing around wine jugs and punctuating the end of each long line of *Howl* with shouts of "Go!" and "Yes!".

His reputation as a poet and social critic, which had grown incredibly high after the reading and the ensuing obscenity trial, was confirmed with the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* and *Kaddish and Other Poems* by City Lights Publishers, an independent bookstore-publisher combination founded by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ginsberg continued producing poems until his death, many of them significant to American contemporary poetry. Also, the growing notoriety of the Beat generation drew Ginsberg into the media spotlight in the 1960s, and he was active in the promotion of work by his friends. His political activism, particularly in reaction to the Vietnam War, and close association with the counterculture, also continued during the 1960s and 1970s, decades in which he took part in several movements and protests.

3. ALLEN GINSBERG'S *HOWL* (1955): A CRITICAL APPROACH

3.1. INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM

From the very first moment, *Howl* was an experiment in form and structure. In a letter to the poet and critic John Hollander, Ginsberg said, "*I am sick of preconceived literature and only interested in **writing** the actual process and technique, wherever it leads.*"³⁰ About *Howl*, he insisted that it was an experiment with form itself. "FORM ON FORM", he insisted. It was indeed a brave attempt to reinvent worn-out poetical forms, and traditionalists distrusted its unconventionality.³¹

On the basis of *Howl*, there is a true rejection of categorical knowledge and formulated theories, and its own wonder and power lies precisely in the poem and the author's receptiveness to the world and its natural marvel, its ability to look at what Keats called "negative capability" –the strength of mind to hold "opposite, contradictory thoughts... without an irritable reaching after fact and reason".³²

On the one hand, there is rejection of established criticism and any sort of conforming to literary currents, a definite search for the author's own voice and method; but on the other hand *Howl* does very clearly bear the heritage of authors such as T.S. Eliot or movements such as the New Criticism, despite definitely not being "autonomous and divorced from historical context" or "uninterested in the human meaning, the social function and effect of literature" at all.³³

³⁰ Ginsberg, Allen, and Bill Morgan. "Letter to John Hollander." *The letters of Allen Ginsberg*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press, 2008. Web.

³¹ Raskin, Jonah. "This Fiction Named Allen Ginsberg." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print.

³² Li, Ou (2009). *Keats and Negative Capability*. Continuum International Publishing Group. Web. Pg. 4. Raskin, Jonah. "Another Coast's Apple for the Eye." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print.

³³ Wellek, René. "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Summer, 1978). Web. Pp. 611–624.

Jancovich, Mark (1993). *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-41652-3. Web.

Indeed, Ginsberg did sometimes fall for contradictions, and while he “wanted a revolution in the classroom, a radical change in the way that poetry was taught” and “was prepared to chase the New Critics from the halls of the academia”,³⁴ *Howl* met, as already discussed above, many of the formalist characteristics that set it close to the works of those New Critics he so much rejected. Concurrently, he both respected and railed against Eliot’s authority, and even so, *Howl* seems to meet most of the criteria as for what a classic is that Eliot mentions in his incisive 1944 essay.³⁵

With all its innovations and the strong focus on the literary legacy that the poem carries, *Howl* quickly carried Allen Ginsberg into public consciousness as a symbol of the avant-garde artist. In the process of seeking for his own voice, he became the origin of a free verse tradition for a postwar generation that was also looking for its own source of expression.

Contrary to New Criticism, interpreting a poem without placing it in a social and historical context, and without discussing the life of the poet made no sense at all for Ginsberg, and he uses his own poem to make his point. Thus, *Howl* is filled with autobiographical experiences, references to its historical and geographical circumstances and allusions to local myths and heroes. In order to understand the poem, Ginsberg explained, it was important to understand the Cold War and the warring impulses in his own personality.

We could even understand *Howl* as the product of an indirect catalogue of life factors, influences, and mentors ranging from the poet’s own father, Louis Ginsberg,

³⁴ Raskin, Jonah. "Famous Authorhood." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 182.

³⁵ Raskin, Jonah. "Best Minds." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 224.

Ridley, M.r. "What Is a Classic? T. S. Eliot : What Is a Classic?" Pg. 32. London: Faber, 1945. Cloth, 3s. 6d. Net. *The Classical Review* 59.02 (1945): 64. Web.

whose interest in literary history was part of Allen's solid grounding on prosody; to William Carlos Williams, whose use of the American vernacular and local material had inspired him; or great scholars such as art historian Meyer Shapiro at Columbia, who had introduced him to the tenets of modernism from an analytic perspective. In addition, we shouldn't forget the effect of his friendship with Kerouac, Cassady, Burroughs, Herbert Hunke, and other "subterraneans", dropouts, revolutionaries, drug addicts, jazz musicians, and unconventional artists of all sorts, who celebrated Ginsberg's eccentricity and homosexuality, who were lovers, friends, or literary critics, who exchanged letters, poems, and opinions and who formed an unconventional but highly creative community.

A big part of this creative activity revolved around the use of drugs, which Ginsberg used to a great extent because of their possibilities for visionary experience. Under their influence he suffered ecstatic experiences of transcendence which illuminated the way of his poetic creation. Drugs, along with bad companies led to his eight-month stay in a psychiatric hospital. Mental instability had already been a factor in Allen's life, with the figure of his tormented mother, and would play a crucial role in his career as a poet and also in the writing of *Howl*. Madness is present throughout his work, both literally and allegorically, not only in the figures of those tormented and confined in asylums like his mother or Carl Solomon, in whom Ginsberg is able to find a level of visionary holiness attributable to his insanity, but also in the collective mind of the America of the fifties, in which mental institutionalization is paralleled to the military industrial complex and is eventually symbolized in the figure of Moloch, the destructive symbol of mad, greedy capitalism that stalked the country. He was conscious of the state of things, produced to a great extent by McCarthyism, and he revolted against it. And since the literary establishment of the time was a reflection of

this state of numb conformism, his revolution was not only socio-political, but also poetical.

In conjunction with his disenchantment with what he saw as failures of the government (who failed to correct the abuses of the Moloch that was “slaughtering” the “lamblike youths” like him and his friends), he developed an idealized conception of “the lost America of love”³⁶ that was based on his readings of nineteenth century American literature, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau in particular, and reinforced by the political and social idealism of contemporaries such as Kerouac, Snyder, and McClure.

In writing *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg was able to bring together all these concerns, and make them noticeable social and political references in the poem. However the formal structure of the poem was not so obviously carefully crafted, and its apparently mediocre simplicity and dullness were criticized by authors such as W. H. Auden, who told Allen that he didn’t like Shelley and didn’t like *Howl*, either. For him, it had “no vitality or beauty” and it as “full of the author feeling sorry for himself”.³⁷ Thus, Ginsberg found it necessary to explain his intentions in a series of notes and letters, emphasizing his desire to use Whitman’s long line “to *build up* large organic structures”, his use of Cézanne’s aesthetics adapting them to poetry (petites sensations), and William Carlos Williams’ modernist “new poetics of looking”. He realized that he didn’t have to conform to what anyone thought a poem should be, and it was in following his own “romantic inspiration” and simply writing as he wished that he finally managed to find his individual voice and thus, come up with an “emotional time

³⁶ Reisman, Rosemary M. Canfield. *Critical Survey of Poetry*. 4th ed. Pasadena, Calif.: Salem Press, 2011. Web. Pg. 110.

³⁷ Raskin, Jonah. "Famous Authorhood." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 197.

bomb that would continue exploding in the U.S. consciousness”³⁸ in the form of a three-part prophetic elegy, which he described as a “huge sad comedy of wild phrasing”.

3.2. ANALYSIS

3.2.1. PART I

Howl was written between 1955 and 1966, although the draft for the most famous First Part was finished in just one night, before the well-known reading at the Six Gallery. It consists of three parts and a fourth one, *Footnote to Howl*, which is independent from the rest of the poem because it differs from it in issues of rhythm and structure.

The poem’s subtitle “For Carl Solomon” already brings some insight into what is to come. It refers to a close friend and mentor of Ginsberg, whom he met in a mental institution. It is a great example of how the author learned that a part could express a more vivid sense of the whole, making it seem more ominous, and how he applied that in his poetry. Despite being an individual person, Solomon represents a whole category of people, an example of the whole generation, a manifestation of madness. He will appear later in Part III.

The very title of this poem sets up a specific environment that will be developed throughout the whole work. The title is the first contact we have with any piece of literature, its presentation to the reading public; it makes the first impression for something that will be built up more thoroughly and profoundly later on. So then, why “Howl”? A howl is something that is to be heard; it is loud, wild, animal-like, and thus somewhat instinctive and coming out of the very nature of the one who screams it. In proclaiming that the whole poem is a howl, what Ginsberg does is symbolically to put

³⁸ Ginsberg, Allen, and Barry Miles. "Author's Preface to Howl." *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts & Bibliography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. Print. Pg. 11.

himself in a defined position in which he is screaming aloud something that arises from deep inside him, raw and unaltered, crude, unrefined and almost unconscious. He is not shouting, yelling, crying or screaming, terms that might imply a more human meaning: he chose to howl, with all the visceral and animal connotations that the word implies, and he ripped this howl from a place beyond time and beyond space, from the living bowels of Moloch itself to show it to the world:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, /dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix³⁹

This is the opening line of *Howl*, probably the most famous line in Ginsberg's poetry and perhaps one of the best-known in 20th-century American poetry. It sets up the pace and the theme for the rest of the poem, as well as a very clear subject that will be recurrent all throughout this section: "the best minds of my generation". Who are actually those minds the poetic voice is talking about? It does not refer to the most famous, prolific, or well-known ones, nor to the ones that linger in the circles of the poetic academia. Quite the contrary, really. Those "best minds" are the figures that have been rejected by society for their unwillingness to conform to its regimented institutions and ideas, like Ginsberg himself and his bohemian, outcast friends. By calling the bohemian underground of outcasts, outlaws, rebels, mystics, sexual deviants, junkies, and other misfits "the best minds of my generation" Ginsberg emphasizes their search for cosmic enlightenment, for as angry and hysterical as these individuals are because of the culture that suppresses them, he also suggests that they also represent a certain kind of salvation for the rest of America, though this salvation has yet to be achieved. He calls these individuals "angelheaded hipsters" and suggests that they are "burning for

³⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. "Howl." *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Lines 1-2.

the ancient heavenly connection with the starry dynamo in the machinery of night”⁴⁰, that is, they long for a relationship with the spiritual, for a moment of vision represented by the starry sky. It is, as the author said, a “lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamb-like youths”.⁴¹ The youths here are “burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue”⁴². In Ginsberg’s eyes, the advertising industry, the fashion industry, and the book industry are at the very heart of the inferno. They dominate the ninth circle of this urban hell.⁴³ It is a very Blakean definition of the subjects of the poem, but unlike the Blakean kids in *Songs of Innocence*, the author suggests that the lamb-like youths in *Howl* aren’t simply innocent victims. They have led themselves to slaughter, much as they have “chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to Bronx.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the “best minds” in *Howl* are victims of themselves, of their own society, as Ginsberg argued. For him, it was society that was to blame for madness. Innocent angels were driven mad by an insensitive system in which they, however, also took part.

There is definitely a strong spiritual dimension which is applied to those angelheaded hipsters in this poem, as well as to many of the Beat writings. However, it is not clear to which sort of belief system this spirituality is related, where the key to the truth is. There are references to many religious traditions throughout the poem: these “best minds” “bared their brains to Heaven under the El”,⁴⁵ which is a Jewish name for

⁴⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Lines 6-7.

⁴¹ Ginsberg, Allen. “Notes Written on Finally Recording ‘Howl.’” *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. Web.

⁴² Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Lines 194-195.

⁴³ Raskin, Jonah. “Another Coast’s Apple for the Eye” *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg.136.

⁴⁴ Raskin, Jonah. “Another Coast’s Apple for the Eye” *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg.142.

⁴⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Lines 5-6.

God used in the Hebrew Bible by the Jews; they saw “Mohammedan angels” in their vision⁴⁶, a clear allusion to Islam; later in the poem there is a mention of the Seven Words “eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani” (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”⁴⁷), which belong to the New Testament canon and thus to Christian tradition; and there are further remarks of other myths such as Buddhism, among others.

The setting of these “best minds” is also established at the beginning of *Howl*. We, as readers, witness an urban context in which there is a clear focus on the frenzy and movement that traditionally dominates city landscapes as opposed to natural environments. Ginsberg will go on with this feeling of grey, urban motion all throughout the first part of *Howl*, because it is a very important thematic background for this work. We should bear in mind the fact that the twentieth century utterly changed the American landscape, and the new urban industrial culture became a turning point in population distribution. For the first time in history, more people were living in cities than in the country, and thus, most of the poetic and cultural activity, including the revolution of all these “best minds”, took place in urban environments, most of which fostered vibrant art, music, and literary scenes. The best example of this was San Francisco.

There is a strong focus on location in this poem, not only in the already mentioned dichotomy “rural versus urban environment”, but also in the presence and mention of specific cities and locations. This focus on setting has a lot to do with the feeling of motion and speed that reigns in *Howl*, because, as already stated, those “best minds” are always on the move, rushing from one place to another. Responding to the

⁴⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Line 6.

⁴⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. “Howl.” *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Line 295.

quasi-religious language, and the verses that seem to either praise or pray, locations become mythic places with distinctive personalities, symbolist sites that turn central in connecting these people across the country, even pilgrimage places. Thus we have Arkansas (line 16), Laredo, New York (line 25) Canada and Patterson (line 33), New Jersey (line 63) or Oklahoma (line 83), among others. It is a portrait of the continent based on its cities, and again the part is taken as an expressive element to convey a more vivid sense of the whole. It is also the portrait of the first American generation that was able to travel widely with relative ease, and that is actually what the Beats did, as Kerouac showed in detail in his novel *On the Road*. As a matter of fact, this ability to travel to different places, to see and experience different parts of the country, and to observe a kind of national life was a central theme to Beat literature.⁴⁸

A special emphasis is paid to New York City as the main setting for the description of the subjects of the poem. New York was a meeting place for many of them, and it is described by Ginsberg again in very contrasting terms. References to places in the City are spread throughout the poem, making the reader almost able to embark on a subway trip through the city following them: Paradise Alley (line 27), Brooklyn (line 39-40), Battery and Bronx (line 42), Zoo (line 46), Bickford's (line 47), Fugazzi's (line 49), "from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge" (lines 51-52). In the mention and description of all these places there are idealized images of nature and the city, which highly contrast with the harsh situations lived by these "best minds" there, with their alternative way of life in the slums, flirting with drugs and other questionable activities. We can see two different sides of New York City, the one that everybody sees, with its everyday common life, its "solidities of

⁴⁸ "Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Summary and Analysis." *Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Study Guide : Summary and Analysis of "Howl," Part I, verses 1*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014. <<http://www.gradesaver.com/allen-ginsbergs-poetry/study-guide/section1/>>.

halls” (line 35) and storefront boroughs (line 37); and the so much darker one that the Beats live and experience, “with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls” (line 30). We can almost see them travelling frantically from one place to another, high on Benzedrine, where the noises of reality (“the noise of wheels and children”, line 43) “bring them down”, leaving them “battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance” (line 45).

In *Howl*, Ginsberg captured the ambiance and the atmosphere of New York –its real and surreal weather. There are almost no dates in the poem and also very few references to historical events. Only references to “wars”, “wartime”, and to “the scholars of war”, but which, Ginsberg does not say. It is an Orwellian world of constant and continuous war.⁴⁹ This tour of New York and the following accounts of the Beats’ travels across America (lines 63-105) are sprinkled with instances of Ginsberg’s own life experience. The mention of Benzedrine can be an allusion to the very writing of *Howl*. The characteristic frenetic rhythm and apparent stream-of-consciousness style, the random connections and interweaving of conversations, the endless rhythm and non-stop talking that characterize this poem are also effects of the use of this drug, which Ginsberg knew pretty well.

The following lines are based on the travels and stories of Allen and many of his friends and acquaintances. They are partially parallel to and best exemplified in Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The use of all these life experiences helps create an image of the reality of life on the road, and, once again, adds up to the moving rhythm of the poem. Ginsberg seems both awed and jealous that these persons have been able to leave their home with no strings or guilt, “leaving no broken hearts” (line 71). It is very

⁴⁹Raskin, Jonah. “Another Coast’s Apple for the Eye” *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pp. 134-135.

interesting the presence of a very strong symbolic line that represents the world of the railroad. Trains were one of the most effective ways of travelling, especially for people with no economic means who would hop from one to another hoping not to be caught in order to move across the country for free. They were known as hobos and came to be one of the most symbolic figures of 20th-century American culture; their ways and costumes appear also (somewhat romanticized) in *On the Road*. Line 72 of *Howl* emulates the rhythm of those trains passing by: “boxcars, boxcars, boxcars racketing through snow” and the obvious alliteration in it reminds of their sound moving down on the tracks probably heading West. Because again, in *Howl* as well as in *On the Road*, *Leaves of Grass*, or in the works by Jack London, the West becomes the mythical destination at the end of the trip, that which finally shows that it is the journey that is important, and not the destination. As Wallace Stegner says,

It should not be denied... that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led West.⁵⁰

It is precisely in the West Coast where these minds “reappeared” (line 95), in an account of the author’s own life and the establishment of the Beat Generation around the Bay Area. However, they were prosecuted by the law because of their alternative lifestyle and their rejection of the establishment. They protested “against the tobacco haze of Capitalism” and “distributed supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square” (lines 99-102). During the 50s, politicians such as Joseph McCarthy identified elements of Beat ideology as Communist and as a threat to the nation’s security.

Besides the American West, there is also a fascination for the exotic and faraway lands that comes real in this poem. There are allusions to the Far East and Africa: “suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under

⁵⁰ Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971. Web.

junk-withdrawal in Newark's bleak furnished room" (lines 66-68) and "who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love" (lines 17-19). It is these far places where the thoughts and dreams of many of these minds are, and, in effect, Eastern religion, philosophy and mystical thought were great influences on the works of the Beats. Other important influences are also mentioned in this poem, including "Blake-like tragedy" (line 16), "platonic conversationalists" (line 54), and "Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross" (line 75).

From this moment, *Howl* goes on, and continues to document the holy madness of these "best minds of my generation". Line 115 represents an important place in the succession of the catalog of madness, because there is a newly introduced focus on sex which takes over the poem from this point on. Taking into consideration Ginsberg's sexual orientation and inclinations, it comes as no wonder that sexual practices will again become a revolution against the establishment, and that the sex lives of the Beats were, of course, in no way conventional. Their presence in *Howl* was a big challenge in an age where homosexuality was still condemned, and even sexual intimacy within marriage was strictly regulated by law. And the references to sex in *Howl* are not at all prude and tender, nor set aside to privacy. They come out graphically, defiant. In *Howl* Ginsberg describes anal sex, oral sex, and what middle-class Americans in 1955 would surely have called promiscuous sex, in a language that expands the vocabulary of poetry. In the same way he had made Carl Solomon into a mythical lunatic ranting and raving behind the bars of the asylum, he turned Neal Cassady into an icon of the relentless search in quest of ultimate freedom through sex. Cassady is the sexual hero of *Howl*, the "Adonis of Denver" (line 147).

Ginsberg took the language of drug addicts, homosexuals, and sexual outlaws, and brought it where it had rarely if ever been before: into the pages of American

poetry. Mostly there is a sense of despair and desperation about sex. Ginsberg's heroes hunger for sex much as they hunger for everything else in life, from food and wine to jazz and spirituality. Americans were insatiably hungry, he felt, and always trying to feed the emptiness inside with things, images, and their own inflated ideas of themselves.⁵¹

There is also a lot of suffering in this poem, and in some way, this suffering is closely connected to the idea of spirituality that the heroes in *Howl* chase. They were suffering because of their inability to adapt, and Ginsberg sees holiness in this suffering too. He converts his heroes, the "best minds", into the martyrs of their time, who are prosecuted and even end up dead for defending their cause, most of the time by self-destructing. Actually, suicide was a very present fate in Ginsberg's life, as it befell many of his friends and acquaintances. By 1955 he knew at least a dozen individuals who had attempted or committed suicide, he had listened to Kerouac talking about it for years, and had witnessed Burroughs' self-destructiveness. He himself had suicidal impulses, and American society at large was self-destructive too. This made it possible that in *Howl* he could look at suicide with irony and a sense of humor: the characters in *Howl* create "big suicidal dramas" (line 164), they "jump off the Brooklyn Bridge" (line 201) and "cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully" (lines 190-191). No one ends up with any sort of remaining dignity, and still, Ginsberg treats them all with compassion. We again see the "lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamb-like youths".⁵² A lament for all these souls "who wept at the romance of the streets" (line 171), "who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge"

⁵¹ Raskin, Jonah. "Mythological References." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pp. 145-146.

⁵² Ginsberg, Allen. "Notes Written on Finally Recording 'Howl.'" *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. N.p. Web.

(line 172), “who cooked rotten animals” (line 182), “threw their watches off the roof (line 187) and became forgotten, outside of “Absolute Reality” (line 200).

In 1949, when Ginsberg was admitted to the New York State Psychiatric Institute as a patient, the fact that he was about to enter a hospital for the insane didn't seem to disturb him. It actually gave him a certain sense of validation, since being a poet seemed to entail a certain kind of madness. There was a long tradition of mad poets that went back to the Greeks and found its maximum expression in the 19th century Romantics and many 20th century writers (such as Sylvia Plath or Ezra Pound), and in some way Ginsberg was proud to belong to it. Again, madness and the madhouse were factors that had a tremendous effect on Allen's life. They were very present to him in the figure of his mother from a very young age, and later on, he seemed to be drawn to unstable personalities like William Burroughs, Neal Cassady or Carl Solomon.

For years, Ginsberg had been thinking and writing about madhouses, madmen, and madness. Now, for the first time, he was conscious of those thoughts, and that consciousness moved him closer to *Howl*, in which madness is of course a central topic. He used his time at the New York State Psychiatric Institute to shape his own persona as a mad poet and to create the mythology of madness that infuses *Howl*. The anonymous heroes of *Howl*, those “best minds”, have been “destroyed by madness”. They are archetypal madmen, “madman bum and angel Beat in time” (line 289). Then, too, in *Howl*, America is an “armed madhouse”. It is a country of “madtowns” (line 254), “visible madman doom” (lines 152-153), and “invincible madhouses” (part II, line 338).⁵³

⁵³ Raskin, Jonah. "Just like Russia." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 92.

In line 270 Ginsberg makes the first reference to himself, and this reference signifies a brief change in the poem. In contrast with the disjointed narrative documenting the lives and events of the Beats that dominates the rest of the poem, lines 270-273 are purely conversational. The focus turns to Carl Solomon, the dedicatee of the poem: “ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe” (line 270). Solomon here functions as a beacon for the rest of the “best minds”. He is the most insane of all, and yet he is also the most brilliant. As long as his mind, as that of the rest of the heroes of the poem, is not understood for his brilliance, he, and Ginsberg, and the rest, will not be safe. The meaning of madness is put to question here: are these really the mad ones as opposed to the allegedly “sane” conformist society?⁵⁴

Again, these mad “best minds” are, for Ginsberg, truly the most holy and devoted and cherished of the world. He argues that what he is writing “might be left to say in time come after death” (lines 290-291) and that their voices will “reincarnate in the ghostly quotes of jazz” and “blew in the suffering of America’s naked mind”. Their bodies, the lives, or their deaths will be the vindication of the “absolute heart of the poem of life” (line 297).

3.2.2. PART II

According to Ginsberg, “Part I, [is] a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamblike youths; Part II names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb”⁵⁵. The Lamb, as already discussed, designates the “best minds” of part one, the alternative rebellious Beats of which Ginsberg was one. The monster of mental consciousness in part II takes the name of “Moloch”. Part II

⁵⁴ "Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Summary and Analysis." *Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Study Guide : Summary and Analysis of "Howl," Part I, verses 77-222*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.
<<http://www.gradesaver.com/allen-ginsbergs-poetry/study-guide/section2>>.

⁵⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. "Notes Written on Finally Recording 'Howl.'" *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. Web.

of *Howl* is mainly a long succession of metaphors and symbols of all the political and social features that menace the holiness in the world and the best qualities of human nature. It is a challenge to establishment, to political power, institutions like education, mental health, and public safety. In 1975, twenty years after he wrote *Howl*, the author insisted that the “key phrase” of the whole poem was “Moloch whose name is the mind” (line 329). This phrase derives from Blake’s image of “mind-forg’d manacles”. What Ginsberg seemed to convey here is that the human mind was its own worst enemy.⁵⁶

The name of Moloch derived from the Canaanite God of fire, Molech, to whom children were offered in sacrifice. It has been used figuratively in English literature from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) to Blake’s illustrations of *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (1803-1815) to refer to a person or thing demanding or requiring a very costly sacrifice. Israelite society for several centuries intermittently practiced human sacrifice which in theory it rejected. America, *Howl* Part II tells us, does the same thing. William Blake’s Moloch represents the obsessive human sacrifice of war, especially as connected with perversely suppressed sexuality. Ginsberg’s Moloch also has this aspect, and it is a figure for the oppressiveness of a modern industrial and military state, exuded from Reason; it is a God, but also an enemy, and thus it has the power to give to some and take from others, as the beastly capitalism it represents.⁵⁷ As a God, Moloch also becomes a judge: “Moloch, the heavy judger of men!” (line 309).

In this lengthy description, Moloch represents the immoral power of Government, which does not collect the people’s hopes and ambitions as much as it collects their sorrows and inability to advance, the soulless dominance of industry and corporate power, and Moloch’s soul is “pure machinery” (line 315), “electricity and

⁵⁶ Raskin, Jonah. "Another Coast's Apple for the Eye" *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg.142.

⁵⁷ Ostriker, Alicia. ""Howl" Revisited. The Poet as Jew." *American Poetry Review* 1 July 1997. Web.

banks” (line 326), symbols of industry and business. For Ginsberg, American progress in the discarnate way that evolved during the 20th century is actually a force that impoverishes the American spirit.

No one is immune to the power of Moloch, because in some way, it is a part of the people too, even a part of Ginsberg himself: “Moloch who entered my soul early!” (line 333). He intends to show how we are all part of the powers of Moloch, and even if detached, we have been, in some way, shaped and defined by it from the moment in which we grew up in a society dominated by Moloch. Moloch has become a part of the minds of America, and resisting it is useless. Going back to part I, it is the act of trying to disentangle from the influence of Moloch that drives one insane.

For Ginsberg, all the things that Moloch represents in *Howl* Part II are what caused the death of America. However, some minds made a choice about how to live their lives rejecting the shade of Moloch, but it was this choice that drove them to insanity. There is both blessing and curse in their journey.⁵⁸

The Moloch section of *Howl* was as dark and depressing as anything Ginsberg had written, but a new note of joy could also be heard. The children raise the city to “Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us” (line 345). Even in the inferno, paradise might be found.⁵⁹

3.2.3. PART III

Ginsberg exorcised his fears of going mad by writing about the madness of Carl Solomon, who appears briefly in Part I of *Howl*, and then again in Part III as the major

⁵⁸ "Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Summary and Analysis." *Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Study Guide : Summary and Analysis of "Howl," Part II*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014. <<http://www.gradesaver.com/allen-ginsbergs-poetry/study-guide/section3/>>.

⁵⁹ Raskin, Jonah. "Another Coast's Apple for the Eye" *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 139.

character. The first line of the last section of *Howl* begins, “Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland”. It is a “litany of affirmation”. His name was perfect for a poem about madness and wisdom; like the Solomon of the Old Testament, Ginsberg’s Solomon was a wise man. All the “Solomons” of the modern world were in madhouses, and that is what was wrong with the modern world, Ginsberg felt.⁶⁰ The third part of *Howl* presents a picture of an individual who is a specific representation of what the author conceives as a general condition.

The pattern here is based on a statement-counterstatement form, and Ginsberg envisioned it as pyramidal, “with graduated longer response to the fixed base”.⁶¹ Affirming his allegiance to Solomon (and everyone like him), Ginsberg begins each breath unit with the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” followed by “where...” and an exposition of strange or unorthodox behavior that has been labeled “madness” but that to the poet is actually a form of creative divine sanity. The poem concludes with a vision of Ginsberg and Solomon together on a journey across an America that transcends Moloch and madness and offers utopian possibilities of love and “true mental regularity”.⁶²

3.2.4. FOOTNOTE TO HOWL

Footnote to Howl was written separately from the rest of the poem, because it differs from it in terms of structure and rhythm. The key to understanding the rhythm and structure of *Footnote* is to hear the poem as if it is being read in a jazz styling.

The word “holy” is meant to ground the rhythm of the poem just as the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” grounded Part III. *Footnote to Howl* is the compensation

⁶⁰ Raskin, Jonah. "Mythological References" *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Print. Pp. 154-155.

⁶¹ Ginsberg, Allen. "Notes Written on Finally Recording 'Howl.'" *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. Web.

⁶² Reisman, Rosemary Canfield. "Howl." *Critical Survey of Poetry: Beat Poets*. : Salem Press, 2011. . Pg. 111.

for all the negativity that predominates in the rest of the poem. It is an “affirmation”, meant to remind human beings of their own dignity.

When this manic *Footnote to Howl* announces the holiness of everything, it produces an absurd, irrational, extravagant inversion of Part I. This ecstatic revelation has its literary source in the “Holy, holy, holy” shout of the seraphim praising God in Isaiah 6.3, but as in Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which is one of Ginsberg’s most important models here, “everything that lives is holy”. Whitman, too, had claimed “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from; the scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer”⁶³

3.3. FORM AND STYLE

What made *Howl* a revolution in Ginsberg’s poetry and in American literature in general was his discovery of a new highly innovative form that makes this poem genuinely dramatic. It seems likely that *Howl* will occupy a singular place in his body of work, not only for its pivotal role in the making of the Beat Generation and the counterculture of the 1960s and the 1970s but also for the poet’s own explosive language and his innovative sense of form. Like *Leaves of Grass*, *Howl* was an experiment with language. Ginsberg combined the vernacular with the lexicon of holy men, mixed obscenities with sacred oaths, linked the slang of the day with the rhetorical flourishes of the founding fathers of the Republic. He spoke the language of immigrants, natives, New Yorkers, hipsters, and transcendentalists; he borrowed from Latin and broke new verbal ground. Ginsberg honored the language of dead poets, but also the language of the living street. As he wrote *Howl*, he became intoxicated with

⁶³ Whitman, Walt. *Song of myself*. 1892 version. Web.

Ostriker, Alicia. ""Howl" Revisited. The Poet as Jew." *American Poetry Review* 1 July 1997. Web.

words and the sounds of words, and, even today, reading the poem yields a feeling of intoxication.⁶⁴

The form in *Howl*, as already mentioned, includes a series of simultaneous innovations. First is incantation: each of the poem's three sections uses a repeated word or phrase ("who", "Moloch", "I'm with you in Rockland") as an anchor, establishing a rhythmic and syntactical frame for its wild flights of imagination. These repetitions give the author the fixed point he needed and to which he could return. He uses them to "eep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention."⁶⁵ The poem's quickening rhythms resemble several things, from a spiritual trance to an imitation of sexual intercourse, and they lead the reader to the climactic moment of enlightenment at the poem's center.

Second is the verbal unorthodoxy within each stanza, the magically felicitous combination of seemingly unrelated words. The fact that Ginsberg viewed himself as one of the true inheritors of Modernism and his friendship with Williams have a lot to do with his fundamental poetic act of employing visual perception to shift apprehension of the phenomenal world from the quotidian to the supernatural. He inherited the poetics of looking from William Carlos Williams and Cezanne. And this, in turn, has a lot to do with the untraditional "juxtaposition of images" present in *Howl*. Through the influence of Cezanne, he understood the process of looking as an active rather than passive experience. By presenting a subjective viewpoint, Impressionist artists insist that their audience participate in the process of reassembling the fragments into a more

⁶⁴ Raskin, Jonah. "Best Minds." *Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. . Print. Pg. 226.

⁶⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. "Notes Written on Finally Recording 'Howl.'" *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. Web.

coherent whole. Like Williams, Ginsberg found Cezanne's balance between passive recording and active interpretation of form a model for his poetics:

Cézanne doesn't use perspective lines to create space but it's a juxtaposition of cone color against another color [...] so, I had the idea [of the] juxtaposition of one word against another, a gap between the two words – like the space gap in the canvas – there'd be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence.”⁶⁶

In a journal entry that he entitled “A Few Notes on Composition”,⁶⁷ he wrote this advice to himself: “Join images as they are joined in the mind: only thus can two images connect like wires and spark”. And he told himself, as William Carlos Williams had told him years earlier, “Do away with symbols and present the facts of experience. They will speak for themselves”. In *Howl*, the image of the “hydrogen jukebox” (line 50) is the clearest example of what he had in mind when he wrote, in *Howl* itself, about making “incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed” (lines 277-278).⁶⁸ It captures the pop energy and nuclear anxiety of the fifties. Here we can clearly see how *Howl* is also a poem about itself, a poem that refers to itself and communicates with itself: an autotelic poem.⁶⁹

Going back to the lexicon, as the prime maker of the language, the poet reclaims his right to assign meanings to words accurately despite the efforts of the State Department to control discourse. According to this, Ginsberg followed in *Howl* the Modernist goal of restoring visual emphasis to poetry through the use of concrete images. This led him to employ a technique of rapid sketching that rushed images

⁶⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, and David Carter. *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Pg. 30.

Jackson, Brian. “Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg”. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Austin: Fall 2010. Vol. 52, Iss. 3. Web. Pg. 298.

⁶⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. “A Few Notes on Composition”. *Journals: Mid-Fifties, 1954-1958*. Edited by Gordon Ball. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

⁶⁸ Raskin, Jonah. “Famous Authorhood.” *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. . Print. Pp. 159-160.

⁶⁹ Raskin, Jonah. “Another Coast's Apple for the Eye.” *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. . Print. Pg. 137.

together, frequently omitting syntactical links much as Cézanne left “gaps” or white spaces between colors in canvases. Ginsberg believed that such gaps represented moments of acute perception –Cézanne’s *petites sensations*- which were experiences of mythic time.⁷⁰

Thirdly, the poem brilliantly uses its long lines to outpace the natural rhythm of breath. The verses of the poem are marked by the long draws of Ginsberg’s voice. He adapted his speech to *Howl* as much as he adapted *Howl* to his speech, and there is an intrinsic oral quality to this poem that almost proves that it was written to be read out loud. Ginsberg’s readings of *Howl* actually became famous after the extremely well-known reading at Six Gallery in San Francisco, which was the proper ecstatic debut for the social coming out of the poem. This long-line formal organization was, according to Ginsberg, a further exploration of Whitman’s style: “No attempts had been made to use it in the light of early twentieth century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to build up large organic structures.”⁷¹ But Ginsberg’s use of the long line stemmed not only from Whitman, but also from the Surrealist aesthetic. The “long rushing lines” of Surrealist poetry should be, according to André Breton, a “monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any interruption on the part of the cerebral faculties”. The effect is directly related to the Surrealist desire to create a visceral impact on the audience. Also, according to Artaud, “true poetry is always Genesiacal and chaotic and always has its roots in Genesis and Chaos. When poetry isn’t somewhat anarchic, when it lacks fire

⁷⁰ Jackson, Brian. “Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg”. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Austin: Fall 2010. Vol. 52, Iss. 3; pg. 298. Web.

⁷¹ Ginsberg, Allen. “Notes Written on Finally Recording ‘Howl.’” *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*. Ed. Bill Morgan. NY: Harper Collins, 2000. Web.

and incandescence or the magnetic whirlwind of worlds in formation, it isn't poetry."⁷²
This is all achieved by Ginsberg in *Howl*.

It is also the extensive use of anaphora as in Whitman's poetry that creates the feeling of a never ending line. It places the rhythmic emphasis at the beginning of the line and creates tension because of the non-periodic grammatical structure. The tension is reinforced by the list of surreal tropes as well.⁷³

In the moment of the creation of *Howl*, Ginsberg had the Whitmanesque capacity to be everyone and everywhere, himself and almost everyone else in the poem. It was his ability to stay detached from Allen Ginsberg that allowed him in part to create the poem; he let his imagination take him where it would. And when he emerged from this trance, he used his critical faculties to rearrange and revise the poem. He again detached himself from the work and looked at it critically with an eye to improving it.⁷⁴ Thus, the I in *Howl* is an extremely ambiguous and variant subject. At times, the "I" releases itself or is released into its surge of empathic madness and Ginsberg, in Blakean terms, becomes what he beholds, but the personal identity of others is transcended and no "I" interrupts the utterance of ecstasy.

In the end, the success of *Howl* is, partially, its ability to accomplish Ezra Pound's often repeated command, "make it new". Ginsberg, shouting his barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world in *Howl*, began to change traditional poetic conception, and, over the years, consistently validated the primacy of personal experience for

⁷² Jackson, Brian. "Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Austin: Fall 2010. Vol. 52, Iss. 3; pg. 298. Web.

⁷³ Jackson, Brian. "Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Austin: Fall 2010. Vol. 52, Iss. 3; pg. 298. Web.

⁷⁴ Raskin, Jonah. "Famous Authorhood." *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. . Print. Pg. 167.

contemporary poets.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Ginsberg's poem seems to meet most of the criteria for a classic that T.S. Eliot formulated: it is "one in which the whole genius of a people will be latent", and it "expresses the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the people who speak that language". When reading a classic, Eliot observed, we do not say "this is a man of genius using the language" but rather "this realizes the genius of language". Although being an experiment, in *Howl*, Ginsberg realized a great deal of the genius of the American idiom, pretty much the same way Whitman did with his *Leaves of Grass*.⁷⁶

3.4. IMPORTANT THEMES

3.4.1. MADNESS/ SANITY

The title suggests one of the major topics in the poem, madness. Ginsberg howls here almost in the same way wolves howl to the full moon; the moon itself is a call for madness, hence the etymological origin of the word "lunatic" (from Latin *lunaticus*, "moon-struck"). And madness in *Howl* is relative. The poem subverts completely the notion of sanity: it is a huge praise for all those mad people, and Ginsberg turns them into epic heroes in a similar, highly romanticized way as Kerouac had done earlier in his famous lines from *On the Road* (and not-surprisingly, they are both talking about the same particular individuals):

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 talk about 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 center-light pop, and everybody goes ahh...⁷⁷

In a deeper way, madness in its different forms (even the one induced by drugs) is portrayed in Ginsberg's work as an elevated state of consciousness that is intimately

⁷⁵ Moramarco, Fred. *Moloch's Poet: A Retrospective Look at Allen Ginsberg's Poetry*. Web. N.p.

⁷⁶ Eliot, T. S.. *What is a classic?: an Address Delivered Before the Virgil Society on the 16th of October, 1944*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1945.

⁷⁷ Kerouac, Jack. "III.3.20." *On the road*. New York: Viking, 1997. Print.

related to the ability to “see beyond”. The “mad” people in the poem are the only ones who can realize the oppression exerted by Moloch and in some way revolt against it; they are “holly”, “angelheaded”. That connects directly to Ginsberg’s own experiences of visions induced by drugs, resembling William Blake and also Rimbaud’s philosophy of poetry. In the French poet’s own words:

I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the great learned one! – among men. – For he arrives at the unknown! Because he has cultivated his own soul – which was rich to begin with – more than any other man! He reaches the unknown; and even if, crazed, he ends up by losing the understanding of his visions, at least he has seen them! Let him die charging through those unutterable, unnameable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where he has succumbed! ⁷⁸

3.4.2. MACHINERY AND THE CITY: MOLOCH

There are many different descriptions of urban spaces in *Howl*. Ginsberg makes heavy emphasis on New York City in particular, making his readers prowl the streets of New York as if it were Dostoevsky’s Saint Petersburg. The sense of movement and travelling is constant in the poem, and it is also a feature common to most of the Beat works. *Howl* also introduces one of the most recurrent themes of American literature: the mythical journey towards the West.

Urban contexts are seen as environments of freedom, but also as prisons that can entrap the mind and ultimately destroy the individual. They stand for freedom in the sense that they allow for the self-realization of the heroes of the poem in multiple ways; but it is also true that they are forced to do their activities in secrecy, that they are

⁷⁸ Rimbaud, A. "Seer." Letter to Paul Demeny. 15 May 1871. MS. Charleville, n.p.

marginalized from society. Forms of injustice are represented by the authorities in the city, as well as the apocalyptic idea of destructive machinery, which derives from the city as a mass, as the most true representation of the consequences of crude Capitalism.

All these unfair, destructive situations are what ultimately drove the Beat artists and poets underground, to mental instability, to drug abuse and violence. The city is somehow the particular embodiment of an oppressive force, Moloch, which threatens the holiness of all these minds.

3.4.3. THE NATURAL WORLD

Although Ginsberg lived his whole life in the city and grew up in an urban environment, he sees himself partly belonging to a tradition of poetry that stretched back to the Romantic Age, a period of opposition of natural versus urban environments, in which the awe of the natural world is the highest and holiest form of artistic and social expression. Ginsberg denounced in his poetry the acts of humanity that threatened nature, and one of the most relevant examples is the Nuclear Fear and his opposition to the nuclear bomb. References to this, such as the “hydrogen jukebox” image, are present in *Howl*. In Part I of *Howl* the poet denounces the industrialized world that destroys nature and ultimately destroys the soul of humankind.

3.4.4. THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

In his testimony after the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956, Kenneth Rexroth was the first person (apart from Ginsberg himself in the very act of writing) to ever establish a connection between *Howl* and the prophetic tradition:

The simplest term for such writing is prophetic, it is easier to call it that than anything because we have a large body of prophetic writing to refer to. There are the prophets of the Bible, which it resembles in purpose and language and in subject

matter...There is the denunciation of evil and a pointing out of the way so to speak. That is prophetic literature⁷⁹

Indeed, *Howl* has a sort of prophetic element to it that goes beyond any casualty. It belongs to a long line of prophetic writing tradition which, in general words, has an aim of denunciation and lies its foundations in relation to a clear established dichotomy between good and, on which it acquires a radical position by condemning evil. One of the aims of Ginsberg in *Howl* is exactly that, to spell out an argument against the direction that American culture and society was taking.

Following Rexroth's quote, we can argue that *Howl* belongs to the prophetic tradition in two different ways. On the one hand and in purely stylistic terms, the poem relies on the traditions of Judaism and other religions, with a special emphasis on the Hebrew Bible, as major sources of style. There is a clear influence of Biblical prose, which establishes a connection between *Howl* and the Old Testament in the first place. Some of the techniques that Ginsberg used in order to come up with his own voice, his personal method and his characteristic breath lines, such as the use of repetition to build tension toward a climax, are directly inspired by the Holy Scriptures. This feature is very clear in *Howl PART I* in verses such as "who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded & loned in Denver and finally went away to find out the Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her heros",⁸⁰ with the long line, the uninterrupted syntax and the obvious reiterations of words and structures.

On the other hand, once we get into more detail, that previous superficial connection is reinforced thematically. In writing a poem such as *Howl*, Ginsberg is

⁷⁹ Rexroth, Kenneth. quoted by Lawrence Ferlighetti, "Horn on Howl". *On The Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*. ed. Lewis Hyde. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984. Pg. 50.

⁸⁰ Ginsberg, Allen. "Howl." *Howl, and other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956. Print. Line 220.

taking the role of the prophet to call on America to repent for its reliance on greed and industry, its inclination to war and political prosecution, and the hate and rejection faced by those who lie outside the middle-class mainstream establishment. He takes the part of the “seer”, as the one who owns the universal truth of the world and has come to “free” those who are still blind but willing to listen. His own trust in his visionary quality is what justifies for him the adoption of such a preaching attitude. The author is actually paralleling the biblical prophet Ezekiel, whom in the Hebrew Bible is called by God to announce the destruction of Jerusalem and to call the Jews for repentance in order to be saved. The prophetic voice that Ginsberg and America share draws a positive element from all the negativity that it seems to entail. By speaking against his own culture, the poet is also putting forth hope for its salvation.

3.5. INFLUENCES. INSPIRATION. MENTORS AND IDOLS

As already mentioned in this study, one can see in *Howl* a catalogue of literary influences that helped Ginsberg create his own particular form of expression. Since a very young age, he had been experimenting and creating, and his approximations to different writers at different times left traces that were present in his poetry many years later. It is also the great emphasis on “personal experience”, in a Pound-Eliot legacy fashion, that makes it possible to look to Ginsberg’s life in search for his poetic sources. The influence of Whitman is obvious, and many agree that Allen Ginsberg is the American poet who most legitimately resembles him. Certainly, Ginsberg’s long lines and catalog technique, which accounts for the liberation of rhyme and fixed meter in favor of the act of naming and identifying things, actions, and characters, directly drink from the source of Whitman’s poetry. Ginsberg makes use of repetitions of the same word at the beginning of the verses to give the poem an internal sense of rhythm and structure, a device that was earlier used by Whitman in *Song of Myself*. In the following

extract we can see the strong parallelisms in style and the repetitions that also shape

Howl:

It cannot fall the young man who died and was buried,
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side,
Nor the little child that peep'd in at the door, and then drew back
and was never seen again,
Nor the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with
bitterness worse than gall,
Nor him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder,
Nor the numberless slaughter'd and wreck'd, nor the brutish koboo
call'd the ordure of humanity...⁸¹

However, the influence was not only stylistic but also thematic. Both Ginsberg and Whitman made a strong emphasis on ideas of individuality, and on the situation of the individual against the corruption of society, which oppresses him. Both poets have left in their poetry living testaments of their ideas about speaking (uncomfortable) truths to the established power.

Whitman considered it function of the poet to express himself in verse. The true successor to Whitman was the radical and subversive American poet Allen Ginsberg.⁸² Ginsberg's poetry with its exhilarating openness of subject and form and visionary qualities owes much to a tradition stretching back through Walt Whitman to William Blake.⁸³

Ginsberg's relationship with William Blake, is, perhaps, as intimate as that with Whitman, or even more so. It has its critical point on the alleged vision Ginsberg had of Blake reading his poems *Ah Sunflower*, *The Sick Rose*, and *Little Girl Lost*. Ginsberg took this occurrence as a pivotal moment for him and his comprehension of the

⁸¹ Whitman, Walt, and Malcolm Cowley. *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. New York: Viking Press, 1959. Print. Pt. 43.

⁸² "Walt Whitman." *Walt Whitman*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.
<<http://home.clara.net/heureka/art/whitman.htm>>.

⁸³ "Allen Ginsberg." *poetryarchive.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.
<<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/allen-ginsberg>>.

universe, affecting fundamental beliefs about his life and his work. The visionary quality of Ginsberg's poetry is highly influenced by that of Blake's; the responsibility of his vision, to communicate it to others, became his main aim as a poet. He saw himself at the time as a poet with a mission: to set people free from their slavery to the material world and its insane demands, the worst of which was denying the fundamental holiness of existence. Out of this "Blake experience" he developed a theory of poetry as a means to alter the audience's thought process, so that the infinite and the eternal would be visible:

Since a physiologic ecstatic experience had been catalyzed in my body by the physical arrangement of words in so small a poem as "Ah, Sunflower", I determined long ago to think of poetry as a kind of machine that had a specific effect when planted inside the human body, an arrangement of picture and mental associations that vibrated on the mind bank network: and an arrangement of related sounds & physical mouth movements that altered the habit functions of the neural network.⁸⁴

Poetry, then, is no longer words on a page, but rather symbolic energy of transformation on a page, a Bard's song which, when sung, transforms all hearers into visionaries as well.⁸⁵

The influence of Blake and the Romantics in Ginsberg's poetry is specially apparent in the themes of madness and discarnate capitalism (as parallel to the rejection of the industrial revolution in the 19th century). Allen actually aspired to a certain sort of illuminated madness of which the 19th century Romantics were the maximum exponent. Following their fashion, the poet becomes the voice of alienation and separation from society, disillusioned by its elitism, social injustice, industrialism, materialism, and by its plunge into a vacuum of spiritual deterioration and directionlessness.

⁸⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. "To Young or Old Listeners: Notes on the Songs of Innocence and Experience." *Sparks of Fire*. ed. James Bogan, Fred Goss. Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books 1982. Web.

⁸⁵ "Allen Ginsberg: Prophet of America" . N.p., n.d. Web. 17 June 2014.
<<http://www.angelfire.com/ab2/blake1/page5.html>>.

In some way, this sense of alienation, the disenchantment after a war, and the transformation of society are themes present in *Howl* which connect the poem with the Modernist literary tradition of the 20th century. Stylistically, Ginsberg is a direct inheritor of Modernist experimentation with language. Understandably, seen within the historical Beat context, Ginsberg's relationships with Blake and Whitman caused some critics to characterize him as a neo-romantic. Nevertheless, Ginsberg viewed himself as one of the true inheritors of Modernism, not only on account of his relationship with William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, but also regarding his further exploration of the innovations of the French avant-garde, especially Surrealism and the works of Antonin Artaud.

Many of the writing techniques that Ginsberg borrowed from Pound and Williams were actually adapted from the plastic arts. Specifically, Ginsberg adopted Williams' approach of observing the phenomenal world in order to identify the "true value" of each object, a technique that Williams derived from Paul Cézanne's "petit sensations", and combined it with Pound's impressionistic mimesis of perception. The concept of surreal juxtapositions that Ginsberg evolved has already been explained.⁸⁶

Other sources for Ginsberg's poetry include Japanese Haiku, where he discovered the use of the ellipse; he drew on his Jewish heritage, his travels in the Orient, and his intensive study of Tibetan Buddhism infused his work with yet another layer of allusiveness; in addition to Whitman, Blake, and the Modernists, he learned much about writing poetry from Milton and Christopher Smart, Edgar Allan Poe and French writers such as Céline and Rimbaud (with whom he identified); from Jazz he took the rhythm and cadence of his poetry to make it personal, and from Pound he

⁸⁶ Jackson, Brian. "Modernist Looking: Surreal Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Austin: Fall 2010. Vol. 52, Iss. 3; pg. 298. Web.

learned to “make it new”. The rest of the Beat Poets, specially Kerouac, served as mentors and critics, and from them he took the hysteria and rushing sensation about life, the imitation of drug experiences, and the fascination with movement. It was the combination of all these influences, together with the life events that shaped Ginsberg’s own existence what made *Howl* the great and influential poem that it is.

4. CONCLUSION

In order to execute a comprehensive study of *Howl*, it is necessary to draw on the cultural background of the poem as we have intended in this study. *Howl* is in part a reflection of the American culture and society of the 1940s and '50s; however, in writing this poem, Ginsberg is definitely not referring to the products of the mainstream culture of the "True America" of the McCarthy era, those middle class individuals built up in more or less academic environments who were part of the new network of devastating consumerism and supported conservative values, patriotism, and the development of a new military-industrial complex. He is actually doing the opposite thing, applauding those who dared to manifest against that society. They were in some way outcasts, vagabonds, driving their cars across an alternative America, having sex, drugs, and leaving written proof of what they did. They were exploring a new way of writing, and at the same time a new way of living. They just revolted against a social and economic system they did not consider fair, and tried to make as much noise as possible. They did not even have a name, they were the Beat Generation way longer before it was known as the Beat Generation. And that was their personal form of protest.

We are just talking about a small group of "friends" who did what they did because they felt like it, because they were not comfortable with the life they were being forced to live; they did not even have an aim; they just did it for the sake of living, and claiming their freedom. They were like a new Generation of 20th-century-Romantics who actually knew each other, hang out together, spent time together, wrote together and constituted the seed for one of the most important modern cultural revolutions before even being aware of it. And Ginsberg calls them "saints" because they dared to do so. It was not always that much fun, and although their lifestyle appears sometimes

romanticized in *Howl*, it had its dark side too, and the writer also gives record of that. Who would think that a life of drugs, vagabonding, being crazy, not having a place to call home is all a bed of roses? There's the withdrawal, and the living on the streets, the cold of the underground tunnels, the not having a place to sleep, or a thing to take to the mouth, the having sex in questionable conditions, even being forced to pay for that, (or being paid for just to have some money to eat, or get a fix, or whatever). They were also martyrs in some way, victims of a mainstream society that, in general words, rejects what's not "normal" or "supposed to be", the ones who made possible a new view of the world and opened the eyes for a lot of people coming after. And all of those things are portrayed in the poem in a masterly way that, in its style, depicts the frenzy, the motion-sickness, the blurry-eyedness and the numbness that filled their lives. *Howl* is really a poem of minorities. Of the homosexuals, the rejected, the outcasts, the visionary, the crazy. In relation to this, we can bring up two different but at the same time related connections:

On the one hand it is worth mentioning the incredible influence that *Howl* represented for later cultural movements in the twentieth century, namely the sixties revolution in America. We have to say, however, that a big part of this influence was driven by the enormous fame that the poem (and all Beat literature in general) acquired after the obscenity trial to which it was submitted in 1957. Were it not for that trial, would *Howl* have made such a great impact and thus become such an important influence?

On the other hand it seems like the situation has not changed much since then. Our current social and economic structure is a direct consequence of the seed that was sown in the fifties right after World War II. Although we must admit that a lot of improvements have been made since the poem was written (namely the acquisition of

fair social rights in an official context for a lot of minorities, some of which Ginsberg himself was part of, such as the homosexual community), it is also true that – recognizing the situations are not the same- all the problems that Ginsberg points out in *Howl* are still out there, given that the system that was in place back then has been developing and consolidating ever since. The aggressive consumerism in the developing world is now reaching points no one would have even dared to imagine some years ago; governments and economic forces are still a yoke for the vast majority of the population; discrimination of minorities is still very real; warfare industry moves millions and millions of dollars without looking at the faces of the thousands of people it bumps off year after year; the “machinery” of Globalization devastates the economically disadvantaged sectors of the population, forgetting about those who are outside the imaginary canon of the twenty-first century society just the same way it did with the Beats.

Putting all we said before together, what the Beat movement represented as a whole, with *Howl* as their keystone and revolutionary motto, not only literarily but also socially -and this may have even been more transcendental- was the birth of the first modern Western counterculture. What this means is that most of the revolutionary movements that took place after the publication of *Howl* have been in some way, intentionally or not, fed by its influence, or at least have repeated the same pattern; even if they were not a direct consequence of the publication of the poem, and they may not have been, it still carries a very heavy symbolic charge that directly connects to them. In a nutshell, *Howl* is more than just a poem with apparently no profound significance. It is dark and difficult, and with every reading something new about its meaning we hadn't realized before comes to light. Reading it several times is somehow like peeling an onion layer by layer.

One way of understanding society would be different forces pulling against each other in search of some kind of balance that is eventually never achieved; this poem is, in the end, a symbolical reaction against the status quo that comes alive in the most human of forms. Most importantly, it constituted the proof of how all those revolutionary voices can actually make the foundations of an established system wobble and cause a social explosion that still resounds years later. This *Howl* still resounds nowadays.

Apart from this, the pure literary value of this poem should not be denied either. It seems likely that *Howl* will occupy a singular place in the panorama of American poetry not only for the reasons mentioned above but also for its explosive language and innovative sense of form. It is also the literary expression that matches the immense persona that Ginsberg had created for himself all throughout his life –the persona of an American prophet-, created after pieces of his own life, and pieces of American history and society.

Indeed, the “howl” Ginsberg brought forth was unruly, powerful enough to upset traditions and values, and incite actions on its behalf. As he once told on looking at some aspiring poet’s poems, “Why not make some noise?.” That is, exactly, what *Howl* did.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Shinder, Jason. *The poem that changed America: "Howl" fifty years later*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Web.

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