



Candor and Apocalypse in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*

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Introduction

The first time I read *Howl* I was surprised, to say the least. It resembled none of the poetry I had read up to that point. In comparison, everything else seemed bleak, unimportant, and fancy for the sake of fanciness. *Howl* appeared like a brutal blow to the senses—a rough, desperate call—indeed, a howl! The honesty and acuteness made it beautiful. After deciding to write about it, I have studied a multitude of secondary sources, mainly by writers who were Allen Ginsberg's friends, and the more I read, the more I discover that my initial feelings are shared by most of those who heard or read it first. On its publication in 1956, it was not only welcomed with enthusiasm and excitement, however. Many ruled it obscene, others thought it should not be regarded as poetry. Intellectuals in academia saw it as an attack on their opinions and work. Nevertheless, it struck America as a poetical bomb, and it has stuck since. The objective of this essay is to pinpoint the quality of *Howl*—to determine wherein the distinctiveness lies.

For the analysis of this poem it is beneficial to know a bit about Ginsberg's life up to the point when he finished it. There are many names of cities, people, bars, etcetera that need to be explained. There is also frequent usage of vernacular language, local slang and symbolic word combinations that are easier to understand if one knows a bit about Ginsberg and his friends. There is, indeed, a risk of over interpreting, but it is natural that the life of the poet is part of the poem and vice versa.

The first part of this essay covers the social context of *Howl*, and a brief account of Ginsberg's history that is relevant for the interpretation of the poem. Then follows a section about when Ginsberg first read *Howl* at Six Gallery in San Francisco, probably the most crucial event in the history of *Howl*. It was at this reading that contemporary poets recognized the impact that *Howl* had and it was, logically, shortly after this that *Howl* became a renowned poem in America.

As I will explain in the first part, Ginsberg was very inspired by great poets of the past, and according to Jonah Raskin, who has had access to Ginsberg's diary, he imitated most of them in the process of finding his own style. Thus, it is important to mention a few of his inspirations and work out in what way they served as influence on *Howl*. The last part is dedicated to the prosody and structure of *Howl*, and what effect it has on the content and presentation.

Gathering Momentum for the Howl

Howl is often referred to as a revolutionary poem. It appeared during a quite tumultuous time in America—right after World War II, at the beginning of the Cold War and in the midst of the “Bomb-hype”. The Korean War also took place around this time. There was widespread fear of the infiltration of foreign ideologies (mainly Communism, of course), the result of which was unwarranted persecution by the authorities. A great divide appeared between those who considered themselves patriotic in the sense that American values must be protected by any means, and those who felt that truth was being compromised and that the USA was becoming a totalitarian police state through the military-industrial-nationalist complex (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* xii). Many writers at the time were being prosecuted by the McCarthyists, which led to even stronger protests by, among others, the literary society. Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, that was published in 1953, is an allegory that likens the Salem witch trials of 1692 to the business of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950’s. Criticism was also directed towards the material culture of business that was emerging. Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and also Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* portray the tragic lives of people who thought they would find happiness in the world of business.

By the time these works were being published and were receiving recognition in the country, Allen Ginsberg had been working for a while on the draft that he eventually referred to as *Howl*. Between 1943 and 1948 he attended Columbia University twice (Burns 6) but “rebelled against the society that Columbia tried to impose on him and his fellow undergraduates,” according to Raskin (47). He did not like the curriculum and blamed the teachers for being old-fashioned, so he read books that were not encouraged. Simultaneously, he found friends who shared his views in different ways. The writer and former football-student Jack Kerouac, heroin and morphine addict William Burroughs, Lucien Carr who, after Ginsberg and Burroughs failed to report the murder of David Kammerer, was convicted of manslaughter, and thief and drug addict Herbert Huncke, became those who Ginsberg spent most time with. These are surely a few of the people he had in mind when he wrote the opening line of *Howl*: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed...” (9). Hanging out in the suburban areas of New York, under bridges, on rooftops and in windowless apartments shaped the way he thought of the city. In *Howl* it appears like a very dark, smoke-stacked and ungodly arena for the machine-like corporate society.

It was also during this time that he read Arthur Rimbaud and tried hard to convey his greatness to his teachers, who were unfamiliar with his work. Rimbaud's poetry resembles *Howl* in its darkness and self-destruction. Madness is a recurring theme in both writers' poetry. Ginsberg also developed a liking for Walt Whitman, who, to some extent, reminded him of himself. In his earlier years he did not appreciate Whitman much because he was so open about homosexuality, but when Ginsberg became more comfortable about his own homosexuality, he discovered Whitman's genius (Raskin 40-41). Like Whitman, he did not adhere to established rules of language and he was concerned with the state of America. After the publication of *Howl* he wrote that Whitman's poetry was "like the style of the verses in the Bible, large magnificent strophes, building up to mighty climaxes, or like a massive Bach oratorio" (Raskin 42). It is apparent that he had read much of Whitman's work and adapted a similar style in *Howl*. He was also much inspired by William Blake and T.S. Eliot, as he expressed in his diary in 1949: "The clearest expression of what I have in mind is in Blake & Eliot" (Raskin 85). In 1948 he claimed that he had a vision while reading Blake's "Ah! Sunflower" in which he could hear Blake himself reading the poem aloud. In an interview with Jack Foley on the KPFA radio station Ginsberg says that he made up the story (Raskin 78). Whether or not it was his mind's invention, Blake was an important inspiration.

In June 1949, Ginsberg was admitted to the New York State Psychiatric Institute as a patient after an incident where he and Herbert Huncke (whose driver's license was suspended) had escaped from the police in a stolen car, fled back to Ginsberg's apartment where the police later arrived and arrested Huncke. Ginsberg somehow avoided criminal charges, by agreeing to receive psychiatric treatment. Ginsberg himself wrote in his journal that "the punishment literally fitted the crime" (Raskin 90). The "crazy house," as he called the mental hospital in his letters to Jack Kerouac increased his dark thoughts about society. Ginsberg also described the Institute as Kafkaesque in the way that the doctors in their white coats could mold even the most defiant patients (Raskin 51). Mental hospitals appear many times in *Howl*; in one stanza Ginsberg mentions three hospitals: "Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid / halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rock- / ing and rolling in the midnight solitude bench / dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a night- / mare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the / moon" (19). Those lines give a strong feeling of darkness and sinisterness in connection to the psychiatric institutions. His mother, Naomi, was a mental patient of Greystone (where she died in 1956), and the visits he paid her there left impressions

that he would write much about. In the hospital he also met Carl Solomon, a poet, to whom *Howl* is dedicated. Part III of *Howl* seems directly addressed to Carl Solomon, but in February 1986 Ginsberg wrote, “I’d used Mr. Solomon’s return to the asylum as occasion of a masque on my feelings toward my mother” (*Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 111). Nevertheless, they clearly express a disturbing feeling of the psychiatric asylum, a feeling that Ginsberg had experienced first-hand.

After the period in the institution and after he received his B.A. at Columbia University, Ginsberg seemed optimistic to start a new, sound life. He wrote to Kerouac, saying that he wanted to abandon his homosexuality and find a wife. To his father’s joy, he dated women and actually had sexual intercourse with a few. However, this did not last, and before long he felt a need to be overt and honest, not only to others, but also to himself. He was displeased with his plain job as a market researcher and he was beginning to tire of New York. A few of his friends lived out West; Neal Cassady lived with his family in San Jose, Kerouac’s dislike of the city had turned into appreciation, and so Ginsberg began looking west. In 1953 he set off for California, finally arriving the following year (Raskin 117-119). The dramatic change of environment must have nurtured his poetic sense, because during the three years he spent in California he wrote a lot and apparently of high quality—it was now that he began earning recognition for his poems. “Siesta in Xbalba, In Back of the Real” and *Howl* were all written during the time he was away from New York. Perhaps it was as Kerouac claimed, that San Francisco was a city that spurred creativity, or as Ginsberg said, that it was “Athens-like” and inspirational (Raskin 123). It might also have been as simple as a change of environment that allowed him to look at his time in New York in retrospect, and from a distance, as an era finished, endured and left to the past. In fact, *Howl* speaks mostly about New York—a city that is very different from the cities on the West Coast. The west offers contrasts like smog against a clear blue desert sky, box houses scattered on brown hills with ferns and the steep cliffs above the Pacific Ocean. In comparison, New York seems very metropolitan and industrial with tall buildings and deep subway tunnels. The dark mysticism of New York in *Howl* feels like the utter contrast to light San Francisco.

The Day of Recognition

When the famous reading at Six Gallery was drawing near, Ginsberg and Kerouac lived in a cottage on Milvia Street, a place frequently visited by fellow writers, and generally a place

where activity was high. Ginsberg was approached and asked to organize a poetry reading at a run-down venue in San Francisco. At first he was hesitant, but after he had written a rough draft of *Howl* he changed his mind (Raskin 18). With the expertise he had in marketing, and with the help of enthusiastic friends, the event was advertised; leaflets were sent to poetry pundits and signs were posted on walls. The poets who would be performing were enthusiastic about the event, anticipating a defiance of the established society of poetry. The atmosphere was far from academic—rather bohemian, indeed. The crowd, at first stiff, was loosened up when Kerouac collected money and bought gallons of cheap wine which he passed around. The poets, too, were far from the traditional kind. Raskin writes about them,

What they had in common was a profound love for poetry, a belief in the vitality and integrity of their own work, and a deep discontent with the militarism and materialism of American civilization. They were all spiritual seekers of one sort or another, and they all were willing to take personal risks—to experiment not only with poetry but with politics, drugs and sex. (16)

The audience's expectations, perhaps shaped by the giddy beginning of the gathering, were of hippy-ish mirth and wit, but it was not long before they were left stunned at the beauty and acuteness of the poetry that was being performed. When Ginsberg went on stage and began reading he was at first quite shy and plain in his presentation (*Howl* was at this stage merely a draft), but as he went along he gained confidence and began realizing the meter of the stanzas and the weight of the words. Raskin argues that “the poem made the poet” (18). After each line the audience was urging him on, and when he was done, he was in tears, and so were many of the spectators.

For Ginsberg, whose poetry had been rejected numerous times, the Six Gallery reading provided him with the acclaim he long had sought. And, true enough, a few days after the reading, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, operator of City Lights Books in San Francisco, wrote a letter to Ginsberg asking for the *Howl* manuscripts. *Howl* was published by Ferlinghetti in 1956. The Six Gallery event reassured the revolutionary poets and publishers that they were on the right track after all and that they could be successful in what they were doing, maybe because this was the first time that they acted together with the focus solely on poetry, creating a sense of strength in the group. Alone, they all considered themselves slightly mad outcasts unfit to meet the stationery society of literature and, more importantly, the increasingly hostile political climate against which they were rebelling. Together, however, they felt that it was possible to stand up and to be seen. Ginsberg, in particular, needed encouragement and

reassurance after his many failures. The Six Gallery reading provided him with this reassurance which eventually materialized as a neat book containing ten poems, including *Howl*.

The True Sound of the Howl

What the Six Gallery also proved was that a new kind of poetry was emerging and gaining popularity. Michael McClure who also read his own poetry that night wrote about *Howl*:

In all of our memories no one had been so outspoken before—we had gone beyond a point of no return—and we were ready for it, for a point of no return. None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellectual void—to the land without poetry—to the spiritual drabness. [...] Ginsberg read on to the end of the poem, which left us standing in wonder, or cheering and wondering, but knowing at the deepest level that a barrier had been broken, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases. . . . (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 168)

Judging by McClure's words the Six Gallery reading was a huge turning point for the small group of poets, both mentally and professionally.

Notice that McClure used the words “voice” and “body” about Ginsberg. This seems to suggest a deeply rooted connection between the poem and the writer or the one presenting it, as if its essence could only be conveyed by the creator himself, supported by his body—his tool. This idea goes hand-in-hand with Ginsberg's philosophy of poetry. In many interviews he speaks about inspiration in its true sense, the physical act of inhaling air, and the importance of that act for the effect of the following expiration—the presentation of the poem. According to this idea, the reader of the poem does not only read a text from a piece of paper, but he also shares something from within his body. In an interview with Gary Pacernick, Ginsberg says that “The breath is inspiration itself. Breath is itself, breath is breath. Where there is life, there is breath, remember? Breath is spirit, spiritus” (in the section about inspiration). So, on a deep level, he is suggesting that apart from sound, the reader is also giving spirit.

Another detail seen in *Howl* that sets Ginsberg apart from the respectable contemporary poets is his mixed language. Raskin defines it as “a language of the everyday

and of Judgement Day—a language of the mundane and the apocalyptic” (xxi). A good way to show this contrast is to compare one stanza from Part I to one from Part II:

who wept at the romance of the streets with their
pushcarts full of onions and bad music, (15)

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the
crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of
sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgement!
Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stun-
ned governments! (21)

There is a stark contrast between “pushcarts of onions and bad music” and “Moloch the incomprehensible prison”—a very ordinary description contra doomsday prophesy. Instead of sticking to a line of thought of a certain tone, Ginsberg uses whatever tone is suitable to describe his mood or his message—or whatever image that was in his mind at the moment. The effect is that the reader stays alert, because the brain is not used to this contrast. It awakens a sense of reality, because—is it not in very mundane moments that we get strange thoughts, or while doing ordinary tasks that we might get a shrill by the thought of death, life, or what Ginsberg chose to call the “incomprehensible prison”? Although these two excerpts are quite far apart, one can sense the fluxing language even within the stanzas.

Speak it and Breathe it

The greatest influence on Ginsberg was undoubtedly his good friend Jack Kerouac. Ginsberg often spoke and wrote about how Kerouac inspired him, and how he sometimes just paraphrased Kerouac in his own poems. In a sound recording of a class on Kerouac from 1988, Ginsberg says, “I have always been happy to declare that my own style of writing and reading [...] has just been an imitation of Kerouac” (Ginsberg *MCB* 4.00). Kerouac himself was fascinated by bebop jazz, which is characterized by its tempo shifts, improvisation and generally free nature compared to the popular swing jazz of the early 1940’s. Ginsberg explains, “When Kerouac imitated the bebop rhythms of Charlie Parker and [Dizzy] Gillespie, he was actually imitating [...] speech, to words, the rhythms which they had adapted to the saxophone to notes. And the whole point of bebop was the change of rhythm” (Ginsberg *MCB* 14.49). So what the bebop musicians did was observe the sound of normal dialogue, and then trying to make their instruments sound like that. Similarly, Kerouac tried to make his poetry

sound like the bebop music, which turned out to sound like nonsense. However, because he followed the natural flow that his mind provided, the rhythms, hesitations, syncopations and accents seem very natural. In context, his poems make perfect sense because they rely completely on the artful quality of the human mind, and they turn out to be a literary equivalent of a surrealist painting. Kerouac tried to convince his friends not to think about grammar, words or syntax in the writing process. He created a poem, or a guideline, called “List Of Essentials” that Ginsberg put up on the walls of his room (Raskin 129). On this list are the following lines:

21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
 22. Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better
 23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
- (Kerouac ll. 21-23)

Not only is the advice that Kerouac gives in these lines of value to writer, but it is also important as a document that specifies the style of much of the writing that came from the beat generation and their followers. Since it is so untraditional in its language it serves as a very inspirational guide; an aide that changes slightly in meaning each time it is read.

From the day we are born, we teach our minds to like logic, coherency and structure, and moving from one subject to another is easier if there is a smooth transition preparing the mind for what is to come. When we write we believe that the reader will understand the point if there is a distinct line of argument. However, in speech we do not have time to construct this structure, so most of what we say is spontaneous and comes straight from the mind. The structure of *Howl* resembles that rambling style of speech. When we read a carefully constructed synopsis, the success relies entirely on the quality of the argument. The writer has to invent a way of reasoning that he/she thinks will be easily understood, thus, perhaps, compromising the essential message. In speech the argument might be insufficient but we still understand each other. Mostly, the speaker does not have time to construct his/her argument, the message is not compromised for any benefit or interest, and is for that reason pure. An argument is designed to convince the reader of a certain opinion or thesis. A description of an image is nothing more than just that—a description, and nothing is forced upon the reader. Anything that is not forced is more appealing to the free mind of the human being.¹ In fact,

¹ At this point an alert reader will realize that I am contradicting myself by trying to explain the insufficiency of logic, using logical arguments.

Ginsberg speaks of the techniques of Kerouac, and the influence of jazz in the ending lines of the first part of *Howl*:

to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human
prose and stand before you speechless and intel-
ligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet con-
fessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm
of thought in his naked and endless head,
[...]
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in
the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the
suffering of America's naked mind for love into
an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone
cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered
out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand
years. (20)

Despite Kerouac's conviction and his influence on his fellow writers, Ginsberg did not embrace the spontaneity technique as fully as Kerouac had hoped. The fact remains that he still felt strongly about the literary tradition, and his Columbia years had indeed made an impact on his style. His arrival at the seemingly spontaneous style in *Howl* was actually a result of much writing and practicing, and even reading aloud to himself (Raskin 167). He was very preoccupied with the craft of writing and the heritage of poetry, which can be partly explained by the fact that his father, Louis Ginsberg, was both a teacher and a poet of the traditional line (Raskin 26). Despite his efforts in his youth to disregard his father's influence on his poetry, it is very likely that he was affected by the old school to which his father belonged.

After writing the first drafts of *Howl* he sent them to Kerouac, who then lived in Mexico City. The typescript was packed with scribbled notes, crossed-out words, substitutions—all kinds of revisions, like “incarceration” instead of “incarnation” and “turpentine & paint” instead of “poetry & paint” (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 13). Kerouac thought *Howl* was “very powerful,” but he disapproved of the revisions. Raskin states, “The manuscript he received in the mail was seriously flawed, he felt, because it had ‘secondary emendations made in time’s reconsidered backstep.’ What Kerouac wanted was Allen’s ‘lingual SPONTANEITY or nothing.’ That’s not what he would get” (168). At this point Ginsberg was discovering his own poetic voice and began departing slightly from Kerouac’s school of

spontaneity. In an interview from the documentary *The Source*, Kerouac said that he wrote *On the Road* in three weeks (19.39). Ginsberg wrote the first draft of *Howl* early in August 1955 and made many minor changes, and added parts II, III and *Footnote to Howl*, and finally finished it in the Spring of 1966 (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* xiii). So apparently, much as Ginsberg liked to believe that he was imitating Kerouac's style, he was actually much more conservative in style and writing process. Notwithstanding, it is impossible to dismiss the impact Kerouac's advice on writing had on Ginsberg—there are clear similarities in style, and at times Ginsberg even paraphrased Kerouac:

The basic method and the ear and the inspiration and the territory and the long verse line in the improvisational character in [...] the melodic, vowellic moan in my work is straight out of Kerouac, even to the point of paraphrasing “kind king light of mind” which is just an adaptation of Kerouac's “kind king mind,” a phrase of his. There are any number of phrases built into poems that are well known that I've written [...] which are just take-offs of phrasing of Kerouac, written for Kerouac's ear, to please him, or to please myself pleasing him, or just companionable... yeah.

(Ginsberg *Mexico City Blues* 4.20)

So, Ginsberg took Kerouac's method, wrote spontaneously, and then spent months revising and editing, finally producing a concoction of jazz-like improvisation and archaic, strict poetic voice—a fusion of old and new. The spontaneous image in his mind is there, indeed, but in all certainty Ginsberg sat up whole nights searching for the “right word.” The outcome is a perfect manifestation of the poem as a reflection of the poet. Academic tradition was part of Ginsberg's life, Kerouac's impromptu poetry was too, and both of them shine through in *Howl*.

Naked Before the People

Continuing on the path that Kerouac was on, we arrive at the topic of nakedness, or candor. Ginsberg was very conscious about his body as well as about his mind as a young boy. He felt embarrassed about both and many of his earlier poems deal with the “mind/body dichotomy”. He seemed to have a certain exhibitionistic fascination; more than a few times he stripped down and showed his naked body to the world (Raskin 35). This discomfort is clearly presented in *Howl*: “who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked / and trembling before the machinery of other / skeletons” (13). There is a sense of shame of the body before other more traditionally well-built bodies, described as machine-like. It took many years for

Ginsberg to overcome his shyness, or discomfort—at least in public. It is possible that he never did feel entirely comfortable about his body. However, he gathered courage through acceptance of his body, which developed into a need to strip down completely before people. This urge to be naked, physically, goes hand in hand with nakedness in the literary sense. *Howl* is very crude in many ways; most explicitly in a sexual way. Lines such as “cock and endless balls,” “ultimate cunt,” “snatch of the sunrise,” “genitals and manuscripts,” “fucked in the ass,” (pp. 10, 13, 14) are uncensored and clearly sexual. There is only one censored word: “with mother finally *****” (19) (read as “asterisked”). Readers might assume that much of this is figurative, symbolic or exaggerated, but the accounts of Ginsberg’s sexual experience, particularly his affairs with Neal Cassady, prove that he actually left a lot out of the poem—probably out of respect for his friends. Neal Cassady was a friend, lover and hero of Ginsberg’s, as is stated in *Howl*: “N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver” (14).

Most of the sexual parts are quite rough and in want of romance. There is a clear sense of sadism and masochism and master-slave relations. To add to the already unthinkable controversy, considering the conservative moral climate in America in the late 1950’s, there are descriptions of homosexual intercourse: “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly / motorcyclists, and screamed with joy” (13). There is only one sexual line that gives a feeling of romance: “who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, / the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean / love” (13). The reading of these lines is probably accompanied by a sense discomfort, perhaps even disgust, to many readers, but also a great deal of humor. If we believe that Ginsberg wrote candidly, the events described were certainly experienced with the same feelings. William Carlos Williams, famous poet and mentor to Ginsberg, writes in the introduction to *Howl*, “It is the poet, Allen Ginsberg, who has gone, in his own body, through the horrifying experiences described in these pages” (8). The phrase “in his own body” is one of the key issues in *Howl*, and the sexual parts play a huge role in emphasizing the awkwardness, crudeness and desperation of the experiences. The nakedness that Ginsberg spoke so frequently about is the central agent in achieving that effect.

It is not only sex and socially inappropriate words that make *Howl* controversial. There are numerous lines that indicate that Ginsberg and friends used drugs of various kinds. As stated, Huncke was addicted to morphine and heroine and in *Howl* Ginsberg speaks about both Peyote and Marijuana (10).

These controversies did, obviously, not pass unnoticed by the public and the authorities. On March 25, 1957, 520 copies of *Howl and other Poems* were seized by US customs (Raskin 211) (it was being printed in England), but shortly thereafter the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) informed customs that the seizure was illegal, and the books were released (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 169). This seemingly unimportant event might have been one of the most important catalysts for the recognition of *Howl*. The publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg predicted that there would be trouble and Ginsberg even said “I even hope it does” (Raskin 212), understanding that publicity of any kind was good. This was not the end of the opposition, however. On May 21, 1957, police arrested both Ferlinghetti and one of his employees, and within a couple of months a trial was underway (Raskin 216).

Jake Erlich (who had nicknames such as “Never Plead Guilty” and “Jake the Master”) of the ACLU had, prior to the publication of *Howl*, offered to defend it without charge if it happened to go on trial. Laurence Ferlinghetti declared that “the critical support for *Howl* (or the protest against censorship on principle) was enormous” (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 170). The First and Fourteenth Amendments in the United States Constitution protect the freedom of speech and prohibits censorship of literature ruled as obscene unless it is found to have no social importance (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 171). So the first objective was to determine whether *Howl* was of social importance which required a roster of prominent literature critics, writers, poets and teachers to be called up to the witness stand. This changed the court proceedings into a sophisticated discussion about *Howl*, poetry in general and, more importantly, the role of poetry in society. One of the witnesses, Mark Schorer, a professor of English, said, “I think that *Howl*, like any work of literature, attempts and intends to make a significant comment on or interpretation of human experience as the author knows it” and when asked by the prosecutor to explain certain passages, he replied “You can no more translate it back into logical prose English than you can say what a surrealist painting means in words because it’s *not* prose” (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 172). As the opening chapter of this essay proclaimed, *Howl* is partly a reflection of the author’s anxiety about the state of society, which is a great part of the “human experience,” as Schorer formulated it. Another witness, book critic Luther Nichols, argued,

Ginsberg’s life is a vagabond one; it’s colored by exposure to jazz, to Columbia University, to a liberal and Bohemian education, to a certain amount of bumming around. The words he has used are valid and

necessary if he's to be honest with his purpose. I think to use euphemisms in describing this would be considered dishonest by Mr. Ginsberg.

(Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 172-173)

As has been clearly demonstrated, certain words are obscene, but the work in its entirety is not necessarily obscene for that matter. It was almost unanimously agreed that the honesty of the author must not be compromised only to protect people from filth. In reply to those who argued that Ginsberg could have used less filthy words, Judge Clayton Horn wrote in his final statement, "No two persons think alike; we were all made by the same mold but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism?" (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 174). Since Judge Horn agreed that *Howl* is of social importance, he ruled the defendants not guilty.

The outcome of the trial is of special importance partly because it provided an official verification of poetry, regardless of whether some content is obscene. It also established the idea that a poet reflects parts of the society in which he/she dwells. The key word, again, is candor. Without the candor of the poet, there is no social importance because there is no mirroring of experience. For a mirror to be called a mirror, there has to be a reflection of reality. Similarly, a poem of social importance has to reflect some kind of reality, which is only achieved by the candor of the creator. That idea is not new, however—several works of art have been regarded as mirrors of their contemporary society, but *Howl* is probably the first work of poetry after World War II that bears that identification. Walt Whitman can be regarded as Ginsberg's predecessor in this sense.

The Verse and the Rhythm

As previously stated, Walt Whitman was a great inspiration to Ginsberg. The style of *Howl* is clearly kindred to Whitman's style, as Raskin explains,

Like Whitman he wrote long poems with long, prose-like lines and long catalogues of things and people and events. Like Whitman, he wrote for America and about America, and like Whitman he sang about himself in the first person. Neither Whitman nor Ginsberg extinguished his personality in his poetry. (20)

The long verse lines are very typical characteristics of both poets. The introduction of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is written in prose that borders on stream of consciousness. There are no recurring cue points for rhythm and there are no planned rhymes whatsoever. The prose somewhat resembles vernacular speech. *Howl* is similarly prose-like and unconventionally

structured, but what makes *Howl* different is the very strong rhythm. Some lines, or strophes, are so long that it seems impossible to maintain a rhythm, and some are so short that they feel abrupt in isolation. However, throughout part I, there is the recurring “who” which gives the effect of a base drum or a gun shot in a race, and it makes each statement take off like a catapult. Similar alliteration is found in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Planned alliterations, like starting several lines with the same letter or word, are quite easily detected, but there are also several alliterations that are not intentional rhythm enhancers, but that have that effect anyway. The similarity between Whitman’s and Ginsberg’s alliterations are particularly interesting because none of them used rhyme for rhythm in their long poems. Rhyming poems tend to be shorter, more lyrical, and because there is a limited number of possible rhymes, the form is quite confining. Alliteration is a natural, frequent occurrence in speech, and is therefore also natural in poetry.

Not every strophe in Part I starts with “who,” but the momentum created by the existing “whos” is so strong that the rhythm is never lost. On the contrary, it escalates as one reads along. This is due to the density of the language within the strophes (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 163). A good example of that density (also achieved by using alliteration) is found towards the end of part I, after a stretch of 45 strophes starting with “who”:

And who were given instead the concrete void of insulin
 Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psycho-
 therapy occupational therapy pingpong &
 amnesia (18)

Here is a display of words packed together without clear grammatical structure, which is very typical of *Howl*. The absence of commas eliminates the pause between objects and keeps the momentum. Also, had there been commas (insulin, Metrazol, electricity, etc.) it would have looked like a shopping list or something of that domestic kind, which it is not. Likewise, the ampersand instead of “and” gives the text a smoother flow, and delays the pause until the beginning of the next strophe—in this case a familiar “who,” “who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic / pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia” (18). Note the mid-strophe comma. The result of the infrequent use of commas in the strophes is that, once it appears, it is emphasized much more than usual. Whitman’s poetry is similar in effect, but different in style. Instead of the extra-emphasized comma, Whitman uses the mid-sentence ellipsis, with two to four full stops depending on the weight of the pause. Here is a typical

example: “There swells and jets his heart There all passions and desires / . . all reachings and aspirations” (Whitman 121).

While *Leaves of Grass* has no apparent, structured rhythmic meter, *Howl* does, even though it might be hard to discover. The previous paragraphs deal only with Part I and the clear “who” alliteration, but in fact, Parts II and III are poetic constructions which appear to be symmetrical. Part II has a similar rhythmic base as Part I (the “who” base), in the repetitious “Moloch.” “The long line [of Part I] is now broken up into component short phrases with ! rhythmical punctuation. [...] The key repeat BLANG word is repeated internally in the line” (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 163). The frequently repeated rhythmic “Moloch” carries this section forward with extremely intense momentum, which has a neat effect on the content. Moloch—a Canaanite fire god (mentioned in Leviticus) to whom the worshippers sacrificed by burning their children (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 139)—serves as a symbol of every horror and/or evil that Ginsberg could think of. This is absolutely the most hell-ish and prophetic part of *Howl*, “Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the / loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy / judger of men!” (21). The nine stanzas of the definition of Moloch is followed by climaxes, “Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! / gone down the American river!” (22) It is a very effectual buildup from the increasing rhythm created by the symbiosis of the repetitious Moloch and the horrific associations, to the climaxes which then ebb out into the ending where Ginsberg brings back the idea of the “best minds” who went mad, “Mad generation! down on / the rocks of Time! [...] they saw it all! [...] They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! (23).

Part III continues with the rhythm carried on by a base which is, “I’m with you in Rockland” (24-25). The base is followed by a reply (each reply is supposed to be one breath unit) which increases in length up to the penultimate stanza which is far too long for one breath. The entire part is constructed as a pyramid, or as Ginsberg said, a “brick shithouse” (Ginsberg *Howl 50th Anniversary Ed.* 163). In effect, it is slightly different than Part II in its buildup, because of its longer lines. It is more like the wail of a siren than the apocalyptic howl in Parts I and II.

The final Part, “Footnote to Howl,” is basically structured the same way as Part II, but with “holy” as the rhythmical base. It starts off with, “Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! / Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!” (27)—a repetition that obscures

the word and almost makes it sound comical, after going through the dark, hell-ish howling of the previous parts. There is indeed a comical touch in lines like, “Holy the lone juggernaut” and “Who digs Los Angeles IS Los Angeles” (28), and the notion that everything is holy, in combination with the already obscured word and exaggerated comparisons, makes the entire part melancholically funny. The explanations of holiness build up to the final line of *Howl*, “Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent / kindness of the soul!” (28), which is an unexpectedly positive ending to an apocalyptic poem. It is brilliant, though, because of the shifts in tempo that, hand in hand with the content, build up to a high note of optimism and faith in the benignity of the human soul.

Conclusion

After studying this poem for quite some time, it is still difficult to concretely determine everything that makes it such a powerful and unique poem. As Mark Schorer so accurately explained, it is impossible to translate a poem into prose because it is not prose, and for the same reason it is nearly impossible to explain the impact a poem has, in prose. Logical, academic reasoning may very well be a contrasting point to poetry, and for that reason, an inadequate tool for interpretation of content and import. In most cases the need to make statements and reach conclusions leads to over-interpretation. The conclusions I have made are not of interpretational nature. Likewise, the message or vision that *Howl* brings to me or you is left outside of these pages, because they are entirely personal. What is possible, however, is to determine in what technical aspects *Howl* deviates and excels.

After meticulous scrutiny, a poem will often lack the verve and force of its first readings, but *Howl* possesses some characteristics that are physically appealing to most people, and that make its quality lasting. First and foremost is the candor—the very heart of Ginsberg’s poetry, and consequently, *Howl*. The fact that it passed a debated obscenity trial despite its occasional filthy content, is evidence enough that it mirrors the contemporary political, literate and moral society at the time of its emergence. Additionally, the fact that Ginsberg’s contemporary poets and friends hailed it as being powerful and acute, verifies the candor of the poet. From the opening lines to the ending stanzas, the reader is eerily reminded of the effects that America had on certain people. The great popularity of the poem is a statement in itself that its social importance is undeniable.

An aspect that has often been bypassed by critics is the technical structure of *Howl*. Derived from one of Ginsberg's favorite poets, Walt Whitman, is the deviation from lyrical, rhyming verse to the powerful rhythmic momentum of alliterations and fixed bases. The structural buildup to climax and, eventually, to the coda, is well synchronized with the desperate howl, the sense of apocalyptic prophesy, and finally the optimistic ending note of hope for humankind. With the advice and enthusiasm of his friend, Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg combined his literary tradition with free, spontaneous imagery of the mind and created a marriage of old and new; a formula that is potentially appealing for literary traditionalists as well as for rebels.

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