



ALLEN GINSBERG - POET REPRESENTATIVE OF BEAT MOVEMENT & THE CONTINUITY OF THE "SONG" OF WALT WHITMAN

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Abstract:

Allen Ginsberg's work represents a culmination of modernist poetry while, being at the same time, a great example of the deconstruction of the modernist form. Ginsberg struggled to move away from the formal poetry styles that predominated the academic disciplines of literary criticism and writing in the mid-twentieth century. Both his life and his art inhabited a space outside of the mainstream. His poetry aimed to recreate patterns and conversation forms of speech using the free verse and long line as a template for experimentation. Though his poetry was initially rejected by critics and many contemporaries, Ginsberg's work came to exemplify the poetic styles of the Beat generation.

Keywords: beat movement, modernist poetry, free verse, poetic style, inspiration

1. Introduction

1.1 Beat Generation and Origin of Movement

Beat as a movement began after World War II, it was as a reaction of some against the conformism of society and foolish acceptance of the new materialist roles. After the end of the war, consumer goods became key to American Way and other, simpler things did not have much importance. Television began to show functional families that could never exist in real life and products that guaranteed to do everything "better". With protracted anti-communist fever and accusations coming out everywhere, Allen Ginsberg felt a pain in what he called "The lost America of Love."

"Beat Generation" consisted of people who were poised with American materialism and mentality, who wrote mind-boggling poetry and books and tried to use the words in the same way as famous jazz artists, such as Charlie Parkerⁱ and Miles Davisⁱⁱ some of the best-

ⁱ Charles Parker Jr. (August 29, 1920 – March 12, 1955), also known as Yardbird and Bird, was an American [jazz saxophonist and composer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Parker). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Parker)

ⁱⁱ Miles Dewey Davis III (May 26, 1926 – September 28, 1991) was an American jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer. He is among the most influential and acclaimed figures in the history of jazz and 20th century music. Davis adopted a variety of musical directions in his five-decade career which kept him at the forefront of a number of major stylistic developments in jazz. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_Davis)

known "beats" such as Jack Kerouac, a prose writer whose works include: *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*, Allen Ginsberg, who wrote the already famous great poem *Howl*, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti,ⁱⁱⁱ who owned a bookstore and published many writings of Beat writers, as well as many of his poems.

*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 fix,
angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the
machinery of night ...*

Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"

The first book that could be called "Beat" in every sense was *Go*, by John Clellon Holmes (1952). Characters at *Go*, resemble many of the Beat Generation representatives - the characters were mostly dissatisfied writers grouping together in New York City. John Clellon Holmes also published an article in the New York Times newspaper entitled "*This is the Beat Generation*" in the same year. However, Holmes was not really accepted as Beat by others and the Generation did not look into the public until the shameful trial of Allen Ginsberg "*Howl*" in 1956 (charges were eventually dismissed).

1.2 Beat writing style & inspirations

Walt Whitman had a prevailing influence on the Beat Generation (especially his poems at *Leaves of Grass*) - his work abandoned the traditional patterns of the verse and often focused on awakening and self-deception. His work, along with that of young jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker challenged the audience for new ways of thinking.

Beat writing often reflects Buddhism and other Asian ways of thinking, a result of Zen Buddhist philosophy followed by many great Beats. It focuses on the weakness and hopelessness of life, as well as Satori.^{iv} Beat Poetry sometimes uses the Haiku^v form, but it can also be with a free range - (depending on the author and the part).

"*Howl*" is a poem by Allen Ginsberg that really brought the Beat movement to the world. It is in swing and is filled with free conjunctions and is also given a true portrayal of American frustration.

*"...whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and
jails and wars, whole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant
eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement, who vanished into Nowhere Zen New
Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall*

ⁱⁱⁱ Lawrence Monsanto Ferlinghetti (born March 24, 1919) is an American [poet](#), [painter](#), [socialist activist](#), and the co-founder of [City Lights Booksellers & Publishers](#). Author of poetry, translations, fiction, theatre, art criticism, and film narration. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_Lights_Bookstore)

^{iv} *Satori* (悟り) (Chinese: 悟; pinyin: wù; Korean: 오; Vietnamese: ngô) is a [Japanese Buddhist](#) term for [awakening](#), "comprehension; understanding". [1] It is derived from the Japanese verb [satoru](#).

^v *Haiku* (俳句) [listen](#) ([help](#)·[info](#)) (plural *haiku*) is a very short form of [Japanese poetry](#)

...

who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried, who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse and the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion and the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising and the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxi cabs of Absolute Reality, who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways and firetrucks, not even one free beer

(Howl, 1956)

Allen Ginsberg started a legend with *Howl* in 1956, making it together with Jack Kerouac, the voice and founder of the Beat Generation. Another famous Beat work is "*Naked Lunch*", (1959) a collection of short stories by William S Burroughs, "*Naked Lunch*" was published in 1959, giving Burroughs a glimpse of the past, widely regarded as his best work, even though he published other books such as "*Junky*" which reflects his addiction to heroin. Burroughs also went through a "reflection" phase after the ending of "*Naked Lunch*", in which he tried to rewrite the novel from the fragments of other works - Beat Generation authors were always in search of the promotion of something new, something completely different from the art of the future - art that people were taught to expect. Beats were against the solid rationalism of society that they did not have an interest in active resistance, crusade, or any other movements. The Beats were indifferent enemies of society, but nevertheless enemies because they perceived the ugliness of materialism and its idle values. They were indifferent because they came to the conclusion that they could not change the society, a change that could only come from within. So the Beats stayed cold waiting for opportunities. According to the Beats, civilization lived a great lie and the concepts of the unit and neighbor were reduced to a minimum: "*All people look like grotesque masks because they hide their knowledge from one another*". So for Beats people are more real than the society allows them to be. Inhuman control over people by some atrophies their individual desires. The truth about the humanity that the society totally censures is given by Ginsberg to "Footnote to Howl"; - "*Everything is sacred! Every day is holy! Everywhere is sanctity! Every day in the past! Everybody an angel!*" (1956)

The human spirit balances absurdity and the struggle continues between chaos and idealism. And further, the law of chaos is the law of ideas, while we are conscious of the chaos. Without quick remarks and stored ideas, we cannot apply to a world of action. But we live so much in a practical world and it tends to blur our outlook. Ginsberg clears that opaque veil that surrounds the conventional symbols of reality. The higher the degree of spiritual growth of the poet, the greater the tension between the "parts" in the LSD poetry. The extraordinary vision abandons the level where things crystallize in the final form and plunge deep into the stream of where the crystallization centers arise, where the true battle develops and turns back into a new form. It is to be said that he created it himself, but that he revealed pure truths among the truths. Just as Whitman feels embedded in every cell in the

world, Ginsberg also "gets into" each of the scenes feeling the essential genesis, sometimes as multi-cellular creature, and then as animals and further into transgendered mental limits. At some point he is physical, then metaphysical, experiencing multidimensional states.

Allen Ginsberg's poetry may have been influenced by some of his previous or literary contemporaries, including writers and poets. But it was the voice that created "*Leaves Of Grass*", which shaped Allen Ginsberg poetry, the Beat poet whose most famous work is a direct reminder of Walt Whitman.

1.3 "*Howl*" and stylistic similarities between Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman's Poetry

To take as an example a poem by Allen Ginsberg, we can draw a parallel between "*Howl*" and the poetic style carved by Walt Whitman.

The use of litany repetitions characterizes "*Howl*" as it is typical for most of the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Released by any need for rhymes or metrics, choosing instead to emphasize the act of identification and naming the inhabitants of a particular and changed world, "*Howl*" specifically refers to many of Whitman's works.

Ginsberg repeats the term "who" to open many of the lines in the first part of "*Howl*", Whitman often uses such recurring identification devices as we can see here in *Song of Myself*:

*"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... "*

(Song of Myself, pg.43)

These stylistic similarities are perfectly straightforward and clear even during the first reading, so it is not surprising to look at the stylistic relationships between Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman: Ginsberg's Poetry with its full opening of the subject's vibrancy and form as well as visionary qualities owes much to a tradition that stretches from Walt Whitman to William Blake.^{vi} Whitman saw the poet's function of expressing himself in verse. The real successor to Whitman was the radical and non-conformist American poet Allen Ginsberg.^{vii}

1.4 Defining a World

Allen Ginsberg's Poem "*A Supermarket in California*"^{viii} is a famous homage to the American romantic poet, drawing a clear line of ideas from 1850 to 1950. In particular, the common

^{vi} <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/allen-ginsberg>

^{vii} <http://home.clara.net/heureka/art/whitman.htm>

^{viii} <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-supermarket-in-california>

notions between the two poets are centered on a desire for a personal connection with the world in general, a kind of mystic will to engage in this world moment.

Ginsberg, like Whitman before him, made all almost the impossible to define the "world at large" in order to characterize the society in which he lived and the passionate desire to love it, being part of it even when the world proves to be unpleasant.

1.5 The Individual, Ideas and Society

Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman also emphasized ideas of individuality, drawing attention to the fact that society is entirely composed of individuals.

Both poets directly suggested that although society can influence us to maintain certain values, we can all choose to participate actively in cultural mechanisms and work to create new norms and systems of values.

"*Song of Myself*" is a testament to the idea of expressing the truth about the power (collective). The self-published work of Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*,^{ix} determined to explore the nature of individuality, while defining the individual in relation to his society.

Whitman was very uncompromising about values in his poetry. He dealt with difficult topics with remarkable intellectual honesty. Allen Ginsberg did the same in his writings about his complexity, American sexuality, drugs, and many other controversial subjects.

While Walt Whitman's tendency was to focus on philosophical and metaphysical topics, he also explored taboo of sexuality challenging the prevailing moral rigidity of his time.

In his famous work *Howl and Other Poems*, Allen Ginsberg opens the envelope of social reflection, with his extravagant and grim descriptions of American society. Though the work was considered at the helm of the Beat Generation movement, Ginsberg was inspired by other American authors. The main figure in this category is Walt Whitman, the 19th century poet and essayist of the Transcendental American Movement. Whitman's influence on Ginsberg is well documented. Whitman, being the father of the free verse, used long descriptive lines to point out intense emotions, a technique that was used by Ginsberg for the same effect. Also, in the purpose of poetry there is a common ground. Both see the world from an outside view, as if it were seen from someone who is not part of the present society. Both poets effectively determined the established criterion of their environment.^x

However, Whitman's main effect at Ginsberg was how he personified him in the "*Supermarket in California*" poem. The first reference was specifically to Whitman's sexual orientation. This common approach is the immediate link that can be found between the two poets. Jonah Raskin tells about common sexual orientation as being a "shared perspective", giving the two poets the same view on America as an outside looking in (Raskin, 2005). Ginsberg then sees Whitman by inspecting and exploring the super-market; the super-market being a symbol of post-war consumerism in the 1950s. Whitman is known for his realistic perspective on society in his poems, largely defined in "*Song of Myself*". Whitman in

^{ix} Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (orig 1855 ed), ed Malcolm Cowley, Penguin, 1959

^x Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2005.

Ginsberg's poem also inspects society, pointing to its flaws in an unusual way. The spiritual feeling of presence is also a borrowed motive. Whitman often comments on the spiritual feeling that connects the natural world to the artificial one, often with the optimism that nature is, in essence, a healing force (Raskin, 2005). Ginsberg arrives at the same conclusion. However, he is far more pessimistic in his approach and condemns the distorted nature of human relations with their own artificial world.

An important influence Whitman has on Ginsberg is the fact that Whitman has been disconnected from the literary establishment of his time, with his long winded style, sexual exploration, and appearance of himself as a regular man rather than a cultivated elite poet. In his *American Scream* book, John Raskin explains that "*until late in 1955, Whitman was still largely untaught in college poetry classes and still largely unappreciated in academic circles, though he had a solid reputation in the nonconformist world.*" This is largely related to Ginsberg's experience in the literary world, as the two writers did not become well known for a considerable period of time after they had begun writing.

"*Howl*" also has a similar and fluent style that reminds you of Whitman. Raskin speaks of Ginsberg's style by pointing out that just like "*like Whitman he wrote long poems with long prose like lines and long catalogues of things, people and events*" (20). This idea is particularly followed by the first poem in the text. Just like Whitman, Ginsberg presents a lurid view of the country, leading the reader from the chaotic suburbs of New York, Denver, San Francisco and everywhere else.

Another similarity between the poets was their subject matter. Raskin says: "*Just like Whitman, Ginsberg writes for Americans and about America.*"^{xi} But Ginsberg does not have an optimistic view of his country and what it was or could have been made clear in Whitman's poems. What is easy to see in some of Whitman's poems is love and warmth for his companions and a kind of trust and sense of solidarity with the masses with which he came into contact with, in the streets of cities and the countryside. Raskin states that "*unlike Whitman, Ginsberg had often had no confidence in the masses ... he knew very well, the masses could be manipulated.*" But at the same time, Ginsberg is certainly worried about the co-citizens, and at one end note at "*Howl*" expresses this. While Ginsberg calls "*Everything is holy! Everyone is Holy! ... Holy is the great middle class lamb! ... Holy New York Holy San Francisco*", (27-28) sounds like one urgent ecstatic prayer for Americans to arrive in the sense that their country, the world, and they themselves are sacred, that they are not merely disposable items or products that are consumed, that they are sacred and are worthy of not being under the ongoing threat of nuclear destruction.

Moreover, he felt that it was a "democratic duty" (23) of the poet to write about domestic problems and faults and expose them to the public. "*Howl*" follows the tradition of American patriotism, while patriotism is not blind faith in the government or having a Manichean view of it. Ginsberg accepts this assignment, stating "*It occurs to me that I am America*"(41). The poem itself indicates a deep break within the nation and a question of its ideals, but most importantly, the response to the poem certainly shows the recognition of

^{xi} Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2005 .p.20

these mistakes and the need to move away from the old way of thinking. John Raskin speaks of this identification by stating that "*Howl*" - "spreads a strange power. It connects us together by giving us a sense of identity."

In conclusion, "*Howl*"^{xii} is clearly a large number of different influences, a kind of fusion between "*World weariness of T.S. Elliot and the innocent wildness of Walt Whitman*". (Morgan; *The Book of Martyrdom* p.244). It still has the power to shake American notions of themselves and their country, with its persistent thought and energy provoking declarations of life in America.

The comment that the two poets make about the spirit of America brings comparisons to a conclusion. Whitman gave legendary importance to the power of American independence and individualism. Many of his works are completely patriotic, calling on the mighty power of the American spirit to strengthen the country. Ginsberg, however, does not share Whitman's views on American society. Ginsberg thought that everything that existed from Whitman's wonderful American spirit was left in the shade of conformation and materialism of the post-modern period.

Ginsberg worked over and over again to design *Howl*, the famous shout of the "best minds" of a generation and his first major poem. He was inspired to write the poem in October 1954, while he was looking out the city from his apartment in New York. As he was watching the buildings, he was captured by the notion that "*he saw the lights of those buildings transform into the face of an evil monster,*" and that "*Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows*" became the driving image of the poem. (Morgan 184) He began writing *Howl*, exactly that night and would devote "*all day long attention*" for over a year. He completed the first and last sections about August 1955, but his diaries from the rest of that year and after 1956 reveal the great degree with which he was still involved in completing the rest of the work. When Ginsberg wrote *Howl*, he was acting more like a poet in the traditional and formalist vein, as never before. In the writing of that controversial work, Ginsberg spent hours bowing over a typewriter, processing the form and metric, and struggling to master the words on the page. In other words, he was a poet who was honoring the time-honored tradition of other poets.^{xiii}

Both *Howl*'s contents and notes in the Ginsberg journal of the mid-1950s show his active engagement with the works of some great poets during *Howl*'s writing. William Blake was one of these poets and, in fact, Ginsberg owes his "*Howl*" to him. In 1948, Ginsberg experienced a hallucinatory illusion while reading Blake "Oh Sun-Flower!". He believed that he heard the poet's voice reading the poem. While Ginsberg's mind wandered toward another Blake poem, "*The Sick Rose,*" he felt that "*the whole universe was unfolding before him*" and Ginsberg "*spent a week after this living on the edge of a cliff in eternity*" (Morgan; *The Book of Martyrdom* 266) Ginsberg's phrase of the "radiant, hallucinating eye on Arkansas and Blake's bright tragedy" at "*Howl*" is a reference to his experience with Blake. Although this incident was a determining moment in the life of Ginsberg, which he would repeatedly seek to

^{xii} Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishing, 1956. 29-30. Print.

^{xiii} *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems: 1937-1952* Paperback – February 5, 2008 by [Allen Ginsberg](#) (Author), [Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton](#) (Author), [Bill Morgan](#) (Author)

recapture with the help of drugs and mysticism, he was initially afraid of this. Naomi Ginsberg, Allen's mother, at that time was admitted to the Pilgrim State Hospital in New Jersey on basis of insanity, and his fear that hallucinations were a symptom of an inheritance of her mental illness made him go to the Columbia Psychiatric Institute, where he met Carl Solomon, the man he mentioned in the extended title of *"Howl"* on the first day of his stay.

However, it was Walt Whitman, more than anybody else, whom Ginsberg called muse. Ginsberg had worshiped Whitman's work since the age of fifteen, and at the time he started working with *"Howl"*, he believed that Whitman was the greatest poet in American history. As evidence of his reading lists from 1955 and the 1956 journals, Ginsberg read Whitman obsessively as he was writing *"Howl"*. At that time, he was *"interested in the free verse and long line poetry,"* the forms he used to *"Howl"* and he considered Whitman as a guide to these efforts. Ginsberg explained that he *"began to explore all the literature he could find about it, including Whitman's reading from start to finish."* In his diaries, Ginsberg had some dreams about Whitman, and there is even an entire introduction devoted to exploring the **"eye-catching look in Whitman's eyes"**. In short, Ginsberg was completely consumed with Whitman during the *"Howl"* period of creation.

The *"Howl"* Epigraph is from Whitman's *"Song of Myself"* and in many ways the poem acts as an artistic dedication to his predecessor. Just like Whitman, Ginsberg uses free verse and lists, and *Howl* has the same visual image on the site as *"Song of Myself"*. In addition, Ginsberg is also identified with Whitman in terms of sexual orientation, although Ginsberg's images are much clearer than Whitman's, subtle and often unclear, there is a common thread again. Ginsberg seems to have adopted the personality of the poet of *"Song of Myself"*. When an interviewer later asked him how he felt when he was writing *"Howl,"* Ginsberg replied that he had *"a sense of being self-prophetic master of the universe"* – quite the Whitmanesque sentiment indeed (interview with Clark 53). However, as Ginsberg presents a fluctuating image after another, it is clear that *'Howl'* is also a conscious contradiction of the festive tone of *"Song of Myself"*. While Whitman embraces the musicality of language, Ginsberg acts in a deliberate effort against it. Ginsberg gives the obscene and often embarrassing views among others of those *"who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism"* and those *"who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of coldwater flats"* (*Howl* 31; 4). He sketches on discordance in order to emphasize the criticism he makes of America, because ultimately his poetry is not a song for himself, but a scream for the "best minds" of his generation. However, Ginsberg's contemporaries are acquainted with Whitmanesque's quality of his screaming. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti heard about *"Howl"* reading of Ginsberg at Six Gallery in San Francisco, he wrote to him to say, *"I greet you at the start of a great career"* - a direct echo of Emerson's words to young Whitman. (Morgan 212)

The approach between Whitman and Ginsberg is particularly evident in Whitman's *"Passage to India"* and Ginsberg's *"Sunflower Sutra"* (1955). In both of these works, speakers express romanticism with the idea of returning to the appreciation the beauty of nature as it being juxtaposed with the progress and rapid expansion of industrialization and modernization of the Western world. *"I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad*

surmounting every barrier, I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying freight and passengers, I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle, I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,"(Whitman). Whitman uses the locomotive and railroads in California in order to symbolize modernization and the industrialization of the Western world. By doing so, he recognizes and even watches the progress of humanity, but Whitman's main points of reference are the importance of return and the recognition of the roots of mankind through the characterization of the Eastern and Western worlds that juxtapose each other face-to-face. *In the Old World the east the Suez canal, The New by its mighty railroad spann'd The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires; Yet first, to sound and ever sound , the cry with thee O soul, The Past! the Past! the Past! The Past- the dark unfathom'd retrospect! The teeming gulf-the sleepers and the shadows! The past- the infinite greatness of the past! For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past? (As a projectile form'd, impell'd passing a certain line, still keeps on, So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)"* (Whitman).

Just like Whitman, Ginsberg uses the image of the locomotive (as a projectile form, impinging on a certain line, still keeps on, So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past. in his poem "*Sunflower Sutra*" to represent the industrialized Western world and to highlight the beauty that he finds in a sunflower or the simplest things of the past that one may not notice in the industrialized world. His poem's title in itself also alludes to Sanskrit, and to return to the values of the Old World, or the birth which is exactly what Whitman had done with his poem *Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?"* (Ginsberg).

The image Ginsberg creates here suggests the forgetting of each one's roots as he suggests this sunflower has acted as it died, and lost its identity under the shadow of the locomotive. This is comparable to what Whitman does in his poem, as he suggests that the rise of the new western society has made the old world appear outdated and useless in the eyes of many.

The link between these two poems indicates the profound impact that Walt Whitman had on Allen Ginsberg and as a result in the entire Beat movement. These two poets were looking for what they wanted in life in the Eastern world, and in the beauty of the natural world as it was before it was touched by the consequences of technology and modernization. Both poets express similar values that suggest returning to the eastern way of thinking, appreciating the roots of the old world, and how the birth of the new world came as a consequence of it.

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Flutura Boci
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