
Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Themes of Rage, Madness and Hope

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked," opens the first lines of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (9). But is it truly the people who are at fault, or rather has society itself gone mad? Allen Ginsberg's famous poem is primarily a response to western polite society and the struggles of the beat generation. Well, 'response' seems like too gentle a term for it. 'Howl at,' though, would be a bit too on the nose. Many of *Howl*'s themes and ideas can be traced back to the poetry of Walt Whitman, but the rage and ferocity is new. Throughout the poem ring echoes Jesus's cry of 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (20).

The 1950's in America were a time of prosperity, intense nationalism, the nuclear family, and paranoia about anything that deviated at all from the norm. Naturally, there quickly arose an equal and opposite reaction. Cue (among other things) the beat generation, proto-hippies rebelling against post-WWII materialistic and conservative society. Immediately, they were reviled for their extreme (for the time) liberal thought, drug use, and suspected Communist sympathies (this was the fifties).

Although Ginsberg's *Howl* was hardly the only important piece of literature to come out of the movement, it is the one most often taken as a symbol of the group's extreme discontent and corresponding backlash against stifling societal norms. It's also partly autobiographical- Ginsberg uses pieces of his life and the lives of the people he's met to paint the details in his poetry- his mother's insanity, the self-destruction of friends, current events and struggles of the time, his own homosexuality. These add to the realism that grounds the more hallucinogenic or romantic moments.

Howl is, as the name would suggest, a primal scream- at injustice, at everyday misery and indignity, at the world the way it is. The poem encompasses the best and worst of the beat generation- the hallucinogenic highs and the crushing depression, the finding of love and acceptance in strange cities, and the continued censure by authorities. It's not the most coherent poem, and it's not supposed to be. It's actually meant to shock, to offend. Allen Ginsberg is writing in equal parts to his fellow outcasts (who would understand), and the society that cast them out in the first place, rubbing his verses in their faces until they could no longer pretend that he is invisible.

As to the style and subject matter, one cannot escape comparison with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Quite apart from Ginsberg's obvious and vocal respect for the man (see 'A Supermarket in California'), the homosexual overtones (somewhat more obvious and prevalent in *Howl*), rapid sliding between different concepts and images, heavy use of mysticism, and characters from the lowest rungs of society are all visible in each. *Howl*'s poetic heritage and all-encompassing nature can be easily traced back to *Leaves of Grass* and its effects on philosophy and writing.

Notably, in the 'Footnote to *Howl*,' Allen Ginsberg declares repeatedly that "Everything is holy!" (27), echoing Whitman's claims that "Whoever degrades another degrades me.... and

whatever is done or said returns to me [...] Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from" (Whitman48-49). This is a far cry from the darker moments of the poem, and I think that it exists to both give hope and to emphasize what Ginsberg is fighting for. Everyone and everything are intrinsically holy and have worth, regardless of the views of society.

But where Whitman is in ecstasy, Ginsberg is furious. He rants against a society that allows pointless death out of ignorance or apathy, that gives people what they want instead of what they need, culminating in the famous 'Moloch!' passage. He turns everything on its head, breaking the facade of perfection. Instead of being reviled, the beat generation are referred to as "angel-headed hipsters" (9) with "the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies" (20). In a time in which being openly gay could get one arrested and bigotry ran rampant, he responds by making the very act of homosexual sex deific and the participants saintly:

"who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love" (13).

Suddenly, all of America's symbols of power and normalcy are turned into vision of hell, culminating in the ultimate symbol of modern war- the atomic bomb. He turns skyscrapers, cities, money, into macabre monuments to greed:

"Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! [...] Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invisible mad houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!" (22).

Meanwhile, the outcasts of society are shown to be the only sane ones, who react with self-destruction after they "saw it all! [...] They bade farewell!" (23). "Ten years' animal screams and suicides" becomes not madness and a horrific breaking of a taboo but a sane response to an insane world (23). Ginsberg mourns them, but does not blame them.

Howl's value is not merely historical. Today, Allen Ginsberg's writing still rings true as a voice for the dissatisfied younger generation. An violent outpouring of frustration, love, hate, despair, and hope, Howl will be around for as long as there is a will to fight against injustice, hopelessness, and fear of the 'other.' Perhaps it is Ginsberg's rage that gives the reader hope. He has not fallen into despair and ended his life, he's still fighting on, refusing to give up. The world can still change.