Ginsberg’s “Howl” – A Counter-Culture Spiritual

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This essay was for the class “American Literature, 1945 to Present,” as taught by Dr. Robert Miltner. The assignment was to write an essay discussing a reading of one of the books outlined in the course’s syllabus.

Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” is a gospel anthem for counterculture and anti-conformity. Like the Negro spiritual, it is a social and political protest to the idea of conformity. Part I of the poem begins “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness…” (Ginsberg 9). This is the umbrella under which all of the counterculture personas stand for the rest of the poem. Though it is a very shocking and maudlin piece at first glance, Ginsberg’s voice remains almost spiritual, and through the three main parts of the work and the footnote, he works from describing a desperate world full of misfits to describing their horrible environment to ultimately showing hope and celebrating the wonder of the very things he complains about.

The best minds, then, in the words of Ginsberg, are those of the “angelheaded hipsters” he describes for the rest of Part I (Ginsberg 9). These were The Beats. He “built lines around rhetorical musical phrases that are both cadential and colloquial. The opening section of “Howl grows from a Whitmanlike repetition of a relative clause” (Swing 665). This relative clause is “who.” He describes his “hipsters” through a conversational run-on sentence, broken up into breaths by “who.” The rest of the poem is indented, showing the importance of the people of this counter-culture, and this form allows him to describe them first as people, making secondary their behaviors that label them anti-establishment or nonconformist.

Negro spirituals were borne out of the field songs of slaves in the American south. They were complex anthems with messages of hope and of the desire for freedom from the bondage of the white man who stripped the slaves of their identity. In a similar fashion, Ginsberg’s “Howl” is a message of hope and freedom from conformity for people who did not identify with the conformist climate of the 1950’s.

“Howl” is similar in form to the Negro spiritual as well. The repetition in “Howl” mimics that of such a line-song. For example, consider the lyric to “Hold Your Light:”

Hold your light Brudder Robert, -
Hold your light,
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.
What make ole Satan for follow me so?
Satan ain't got nothin' for do wid me.
Hold your light
Hold your light,
Hold your light on Canaan's shore.

“This would be sung for half an hour at a time, perhaps, each person present being named in turn” (Wiggins par. 7). This is similar to how Ginsberg names each of his “angelheaded hipsters” in “Howl.” Each person present in his Beat anthem is given his own reference in the poem. These are Ginsberg’s own personal “Brudders,” Kerouac, Solomon, Burroughs, and countless unnamed others.

In Elizabeth Swing’s article “Poetry and the Counter-Culture,” she says that Ginsberg's
work was an example of the “emergence of the beat-antiformalists over the academic poets who dominated [their] teachers’ education” (Swing 663). This could account for “Howl” and other “beat-antiformalist” works being misunderstood. It went against convention. In Jeff Poniewaz’s article, “Allen Ginsberg: Poet Prophet, Catalyst of Utopia,” he says Ginsberg was one of the most important voices in the Beat generation:

Heart and main mover and shaker of a group of artists and writers who became the nucleus of the post-World War II counterculture that moved or shook America and in turn the world, Allen Ginsberg was a sort of Paul Revere warning against World War III, a patriot urging the full flowering of the freedom America was purported to represent and was alleged to extend to the rest of the world (Poniewaz 44).

Ginsberg describes this “group of artists and writers,” as well as the people they interacted with, in Part I of the poem. As he describes the counterculture, Ginsberg “attempts to convey the spiritual essence of the Beat movement through a biographical collage,” citing references to other contemporaries of Ginsberg – including Jack Kerouac, Carl Solomon, and William S. Burroughs (Ower par. 15). This “biographical collage” includes college drop-outs, drug addicts, gays, spiritual gurus, wanderers, activists, and countless other societal misfits. There is not just one spiritual message, though. Through mention of Buddhist “nowhere Zen New Jersey,” Christian “hotrod-Golgotha,” and “bop kabbalah,” there is a romantic atmosphere of being lost, but it is righteous, hopeful, and desperate, just like a spiritual song.

He takes the reader on a pilgrimage, then, to understand the Beats. These people were from Chicago. They “bared their brains to heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated” (Ginsberg 9). These people “hallucinated Arkansas” (9). They “got busted” in “Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York” (10). They traveled “incomparable blind streets” of Canada and Paterson, New Jersey. They witnessed “roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn” (10). They “chained themselves to subways” from “Battery to holy Bronx” (10). They spent time in mental institutions, museums, visited the Brooklyn Bridge” (11). Ginsberg makes references to Tangiers, China, and Newark, New Jersey (11). He mentions Kansas, Mexico, and the West Coast (12). He talks of Chinatown, the Passaic, the highways, Denver, and a “hotrod-Golgotha” filled with these “great minds” (17).

The people along this journey all have something in common. All of them singing and jumping off bridges and walking all night – they all seem lonely. They are all looking for something. There is an overarching theme of being lost and lonely in Part I. They’re “burning for the ancient heavenly connection” (Ginsberg 9). He describes them as “a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists” (11). They “loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary Indian angels who were visionary Indian angels” (12). They “lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup” (12). Even Denver is “lonesome for her heroes” (17). This theme of loneliness and being lost is not resolved by the end of Part I. Ginsberg ends Part I with what sounds like a prayer. He says in latin, “Father, Father why have you forsaken me,” and then describes “the poem of life” being “butchered out of their own bodies” (20).

In Part 2, this lost spiritual misfit message is only strengthened, but the biography turns away from the misfits themselves and toward their environment. Ginsberg begins Part 2 with “What Sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” Of course, he is referring to the industrial, commercial America, more specifically New York City, which reeks of “Solitude, filth, and ugliness.” The concrete and metal of the city and its harsh skyscrapers are shown in the repetition here of “Moloch.” He attacks this “Moloch” for making him “consciousness without a body” and he criticizes this “Moloch” for having a soul comprised of “electricity and banks.” This all
summarizes "the evil in contemporary America that has victimized The Beats" (Ower par. 16). It speaks of the disconnect that the "angelheaded hipsters" from Part I of the poem felt toward their homes. Poniewaz says:

Allen was a teacher of Zen mindfulness regarding the environment as early as his "Howl," in which he boldly exposed "Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone!" In "Howl" he gave voice to our mammal souls caught in the steel-jaw trap of the military-industrial revolution (Poniewaz 48).

In part 3, Ginsberg revisits his repetition of a phrase, this time with "I'm with you in Rockland." He is talking to Carl Solomon, and shows his empathy and sympathy for this friend by stating that he shares his fate. Over and over, he describes the personal hell that he equivocates to Solomon's fate in being locked away in this mental hospital. The words move from shock and horror to a reconciliations of spirit and even patriotism. He begins describing Rockland as a place "where you must feel very strange" and "where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter" (Ginsberg 24). By the end of part 3, he is describing a renewed patriotism "where we wake up electrified out of the coma..." saying "O victory forget your underwear we're free" (Ginsberg 26). He describes a reunion with his friend Carl Solomon, as he "walks dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night" (Ginsberg 26). Though Carl Solomon seemingly never escapes from his prison in terms of the poem's description of events, Ginsberg seems to have found peace, a sort of "victory in the apparent defeat of his associates" (Ower par. 18). He has become an empathetic speaker, fully aware of all of the implications of his counterculture contemporaries. It is as if, in examining the people and their cities, he has connected it all and found some greater meaning.

In the footnote to "Howl," Ginsberg de-

clares that there is holiness in everything and everyone. He repeats the word "Holy" over and over again, emphasizing that "Everyman's an angel!" (Ginsberg 27). This is similar in form to the Negro Spiritual, again. Consider the lyric to "O The Dying Lamb," in which "O de dying Lamb!" is repeated throughout:

I wants to go where Moses trod,  
O de dying Lamb!  
For Moses gone to de promised land,  
O de dying Lamb!  
To drink from springs dat never run dry,  
O de dying Lamb!  
Cry O my Lord!  
O de dying Lamb!  
Before I 'll stay in hell one day,  
O de dying Lamb!  
I 'm in hopes to pray my sins away,  
O de dying Lamb!  
Cry O my Lord!  
O de dying Lamb!  
Brudder Moses promised for be dar too,  
O de dying Lamb!  
To drink from streams dat never run dry,  
O de dying Lamb!

In comparison, Ginsberg's Footnote to "Howl" is very similar in its treatment of the word "holy:"

Holy time in eternity holy eternity in time holy the  
clocks in space holy the fourth dimension holy  
the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch!  
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the  
locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the  
abyss!  
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours!  
bodies! suffering! magnanimity!  
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intel-

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kindness of the soul!

In this, the very end of the footnote to the larger work, Ginsberg cycles back around to his original statement. If “Everyman’s an angel,” then the best minds of his generation may have been every mind of his generation – he is speaking for everyone. In this, it is a sort of “prophetic awareness...the belief that everything is charged with divinity and is therefore sacred” (Ower par. 19).

Swing describes one of the most “outstanding characteristics of much post World War II poetry” as its “immediacy – a kind of instant communication, usually oral communication free from metrical complexity and baroque conceits” (Swing 665). This instant communication is a connection between the speaker-writer and his audience. “Howl” is just that. It is a poem that “begins with a personal crisis engendered in its creator by a sick society but concludes with his renewal through a vision transcending contemporary evils” (Ower par. 14). Anyone can find something in it with which to identify. It is entirely conversational in voice, and seemingly “without metrical complexity.” Just before his death, Ginsberg said in an interview with Gary Pacernick that his “rhythms were the rhythms that you heard in speech, like ‘da dada dad a dada dada.’ It didn’t mean that there wasn’t a rhythm. That’s a rhythm” (Pacernick 27). That conversational rhythm, colloquial rhythm that Ginsberg used to create this piece is what makes it accessible to so many people, and those people feel a connection with the work because its overarching themes – loneliness, spirituality, and transcendence – are familiar and inherent in everyone. Though the accounts of people and events in the poem are specific to his generation, just as the Negro Spiritual is specific to the plight of the people who developed it, he connects through the work with the “best minds” of every generation.

WORKS CITED


