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Queer Heroism and Cultural Assimilation in Ginsberg's *Howl*

Allen Ginsberg is widely recognized as one of the defining voices of the Beat Generation and one of the most innovative stylists of twentieth-century American poetry. Characterized by gritty diction, rhythmic syntax, extended repetition, and improvisational energy, his poetry explores questions of identity, spirituality, and sexual liberation while challenging the cultural assumptions of postwar America. Although *Howl* is often read as a poem of protest against conformity and materialism, its formal qualities reveal a more complicated relationship to the culture it criticizes. Ginsberg's breath-based syntax, biblical parallelism, and repetitive structure transform queer sexual experience into a form of heroic resistance. Yet these same stylistic choices draw heavily upon traditional American and biblical models of heroism, revealing a persistent tension between cultural rebellion and cultural assimilation. Rather than presenting liberation as a complete rejection of mainstream values, *Howl* suggests that resistance itself is shaped by the very cultural traditions it seeks to oppose.

Ginsberg described the composition of *Howl* as fundamentally dependent upon breath rather than conventional poetic meter. Reflecting on the poem in an interview, he explains:

"Inspiration ... a feeling of heightened breath or slightly exalted breath, when the body feels like a hollow reed in the wind of breath ... a kind of inspiration, a kind of breathing that is in *Howl* ... a question of quality of your attention to your own mind and your own thoughts" (Pacernick).

This description reveals that the poem's apparent spontaneity is in fact carefully disciplined. Breath becomes both a structural principle and a philosophical one, allowing syntax to imitate the movement of thought itself. The long, accumulating lines create the impression of unfiltered consciousness while remaining carefully patterned through repetition and parallelism. Ginsberg's organic approach to language therefore conceals a highly controlled poetic technique. The tension between freedom and discipline mirrors the poem's larger concern with negotiating resistance and conformity within American culture.

On its surface, *Howl* appears to present a straightforward protest against postwar materialism and social conformity. Beneath that protest, however, the poem also explores the relationship between sexuality, identity, and the cultural mythology of the American hero. The speaker's voice invites readers into an intensely self-conscious narrative in which sexual confession becomes inseparable from broader questions of national identity and belonging. The poem's heroes are not military leaders or political figures but sexual outsiders whose experiences challenge the dominant values of mid-century America. Ginsberg writes:

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,
 who blew and were blown by those human seraphims, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,
 who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may,
 who hiccupped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond and naked angel came to pierce them with a sword (Ginsberg).

In short, the passage exemplifies Ginsberg's characteristic style. The repeated anaphora of "who" creates a biblical rhythm that transforms a series of individual experiences into a collective testimony. The absence of conventional punctuation encourages the reader to move through the passage according to breath rather than grammatical closure, reinforcing Ginsberg's compositional method. At the same time, the poem's explicit language refuses the euphemisms traditionally imposed upon queer sexuality, presenting same-sex desire with an openness that was radical in the cultural context of the 1950s.

Yet Ginsberg's language does more than celebrate transgression. The descriptions repeatedly invoke religious and heroic imagery—"saintly motorcyclists," "seraphims," and "angel"—that elevates marginalized figures through symbols inherited from the very traditions the poem appears to reject. Sexual outsiders become saints and visionaries rather than merely social rebels. In doing so, Ginsberg borrows familiar cultural models of moral authority to legitimize queer experience. The poem therefore occupies a paradoxical position: it resists dominant constructions of sexuality while simultaneously relying upon recognizable heroic and religious archetypes to articulate that resistance. Rather than escaping American cultural mythology altogether, *Howl* reshapes it from within.

The paradox of resistance becomes even more apparent when Ginsberg's poetic method is considered alongside the Beat movement's broader cultural project. If sexual liberation functions as a protest against dominant social taboos, then the poem's reliance upon traditional models of spiritual and heroic perfection complicates that protest. Rather than simply rejecting American culture, Ginsberg demonstrates how difficult it is to escape the symbolic language through which American identity is constructed. The Beats' challenge to postwar conformity depended not only upon rejecting cultural conventions but also upon reshaping inherited literary, religious, and national traditions.

As Nick Selby argues, "The Beats remind us of the value of free speech as a weapon against taboos: of the force of culture itself in the struggle against social, political, psychic, and cultural constrictions ... their language must become our vision" (Selby). Selby's observation is particularly useful because it emphasizes that language itself becomes an instrument of

resistance. Ginsberg's poetry does not merely describe liberation; it attempts to enact liberation through the rhetorical device of form. The expansive lines, repetitive syntax, and relentless accumulation of images refuse the restraint expected of conventional postwar poetry. At the same time, however, this formal freedom remains indebted to recognizable rhetorical traditions, especially biblical parallelism and prophetic speech. The poem's revolutionary voice therefore derives much of its authority from the cultural traditions it appears to challenge.

This tension between innovation and inheritance reappears in Ginsberg's treatment of sexuality. Elsewhere he writes, "While you are not safe, I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time" (Ginsberg). The statement rejects the illusion that anyone can remain detached from the social conditions shaping modern life. Safety itself becomes impossible because identity is always implicated in broader systems of power. Consequently, Ginsberg presents queer identity not as a private condition but as a public challenge to the moral assumptions governing postwar America. Sexual confession becomes a political act precisely because it exposes the instability of those assumptions.

The poem's ethical conflict reaches its fullest expression in one of its most ambitious passages:

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time and Space through images juxtaposed,
and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the
elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with
sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus
to recreate syntax and measure poor human prose and stand before you speechless
and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to
conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head (Ginsberg).

Here Ginsberg links artistic creation with spiritual revelation. The speaker imagines poetry as capable of recreating syntax itself, suggesting that liberation begins with transforming language rather than merely expressing new ideas. Yet the passage also introduces a profound contradiction. The speaker stands "shaking with shame," simultaneously rejected and confessing. The language of confession recalls religious ritual even as it seeks to challenge the moral system from which that ritual originates. Rather than escaping inherited structures of judgment, the speaker remains entangled within them.

This contradiction raises an important question that runs throughout *Howl*: how can a marginalized identity resist assimilation while speaking through the language of the dominant culture? Ginsberg never offers a simple resolution. Instead, he dramatizes the impossibility of complete separation between outsider and mainstream. His use of obscenity, religious imagery, and visionary rhetoric repeatedly places rebellion alongside cultural inheritance. The result is an ironic form of resistance in which liberation depends upon transforming existing symbols instead of abandoning them altogether.

Consequently, *Howl* is not merely a celebration of transgression. It is also a meditation on the limits of transgression itself. The poem recognizes that every act of resistance risks being absorbed into the cultural systems it opposes. Queer identity, Beat aesthetics, and even poetic innovation become legible through symbols already familiar to American readers. Ginsberg's achievement lies not in escaping those symbols but in exposing their instability. By placing queer experience within the language of prophecy, sainthood, and heroic sacrifice, he forces readers to reconsider who may occupy the role of the American hero.

Ginsberg's own reflections on *Howl* reinforce the extent to which its apparent formal innovation is rooted in inherited literary traditions. Discussing the poem's construction, he explains:

"If you'll notice, it's done in the parallelisms of the Bible. And my own verse line is drawn from that" (Pacernick).

This acknowledgment is significant because it reveals that the poem's revolutionary style is not created in isolation from tradition but emerges through its transformation. The biblical cadence that structures *Howl* lends the poem prophetic authority while simultaneously placing it within one of Western culture's oldest rhetorical traditions. Ginsberg therefore presents himself not as a poet who abandons tradition but as one who appropriates and revises it in order to articulate experiences that had long been excluded from public discourse.

That strategy, however, also intensifies the poem's central paradox. The same biblical language that empowers Ginsberg's critique of postwar America is inseparable from cultural institutions that historically condemned homosexuality. Rather than avoiding this contradiction, *Howl* incorporates it into its poetic vision. Religious language functions simultaneously as a source of authority and as a reminder of the moral structures against which the poem struggles. The speaker's repeated movement between confession, prophecy, ecstasy, and shame reflects an identity that cannot be fully separated from the culture that produced it.

Selby argues that "the sexual rebel is now a popular hero squarely within the discourses of the mainstream, rather than at its margins" (Selby). This observation helps explain why *Howl* remains such a compelling work of American literature. Ginsberg does not simply oppose mainstream culture from an external position. Instead, he demonstrates how acts of resistance inevitably become incorporated into the narratives through which a culture understands itself. The Beat poet, the queer outsider, and the American visionary are not mutually exclusive identities; rather, they become intertwined within the poem's symbolic structure. What begins as marginal experience gradually assumes the cultural significance traditionally reserved for national heroes and prophets.

This process does not invalidate the poem's political or artistic ambitions. Instead, it reveals the complexity of cultural change. Social movements rarely transform society by existing

wholly outside it. They reshape inherited symbols, institutions, and narratives until new identities become visible within familiar cultural forms. Ginsberg's achievement lies in demonstrating that queer identity can occupy the imaginative space once reserved for biblical prophets, romantic visionaries, and American heroes. His poetry redefines those traditions without entirely abandoning them.

Ultimately, the power of *Howl* resides not only in its explicit challenge to postwar conformity but also in its formal complexity. Breath-based syntax, biblical parallelism, repetition, and accumulative imagery create a poetic style that appears spontaneous while remaining carefully structured. Those formal choices mirror the poem's larger exploration of identity, revealing a speaker who is simultaneously rebellious and deeply shaped by the culture he resists. The tension between liberation and assimilation is therefore not a flaw in the poem but one of its defining artistic achievements.

Rather than presenting sexual liberation as a complete escape from dominant American ideology, *Howl* portrays liberation as an ongoing negotiation with the cultural traditions that continue to shape individual identity. Ginsberg transforms the language of religion, heroism, and national mythology into vehicles for queer expression, demonstrating that resistance is most powerful when it exposes the instability of the very ideals it confronts. In doing so, *Howl* secures its place as one of the most influential poems of twentieth-century American literature, not because it resolves the contradictions of identity and culture, but because it compels readers to inhabit them.

Work Cited

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