

The 1960s were a time of experimentation. A portion of the young generation was experiencing deep-rooted shifts in their sensibilities. The youth, referred to by many as “longhaired freaks” or “flower children,” began altering the moral landscape of society in a way that would permanently change American culture. The social and political events of the time opened people’s eyes to the evils of society. After WWII, conformism was at its peak and the post-war economic boom was taking hold and turning the country into a capitalist, materialistic society. During the 1950s, the majority of American families were striving for the “American dream.” The ideal life consisted of living in a suburban neighborhood in identical houses surrounded by white picket fences. The husband went to work in the office everyday while the wife stayed home to cook, clean and take care of the children. The children were expected to go to college and then get a job of their own, restarting the unrelenting cycle.

The counter culture began against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Many of the youth opposed the war and began to protest it, along with other issues such as racism, gender issues, consumerism, and the conservative nature of the society in general that had never been commonly questioned until now.

It was as if a veil had been removed from their eyes and, for the first time, the way they began experiencing and living as the world around them changed. It was a time for new ideas and philosophies and a time of revelations and change. Hippies were stepping outside the boundaries of “normal” and acting out in a way that most people had never considered. They were rejecting the traditional American way of life, which they thought to be greed-based and emotionally isolating, in search of a new path of sharing and openness.

The entire counter-culture of the 1960s began with a group of young, rebel poets and activists who met in New York City and San Francisco during the 1940s. These intellectuals were called “Beatniks,” and the social movement they began that led into the counterculture movement, is called the Beat Generation.

The Beat Generation was a group of friends, many of them writers, who gathered around and interacted with Allen Ginsberg. The main members included: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, all of whom met at Columbia University in New York City in the mid 1940s. Over the years, more young intellects joined their group, such as Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. These men are responsible for some of the most influential literature of the 20th century. Many of them wrote books; however, the most memorable work from the Beat Generation is the twenty-page poem, “Howl,” written by the movement’s central figure, Allen Ginsberg. “Howl” has helped to shape society as well as reflect the social change of the Beat Generation.

The term "Beat" came from the slang of the time and referred to the world of dropouts, drug addicts and petty thieves, the people that Allen Ginsberg and the rest of the generation drew inspiration. The “Beatniks” were denouncing the dehumanizing nature of America’s corporate culture and stirring up a rebellion. They rallied against their parents’ confined ideas of love and sexuality and the taboos around experimentation and free thought; although they were a relatively small group, the impact they left on American culture was remarkable. They broke free from traditional social and literary constraints and fostered new, experimental writing techniques and lifestyles, stepping as far away from social traditions as they could. They tried to find truth,

justice and freedom in their work; everything that the mainstream culture wanted as well, but they just had different means of achieving these things.

“Howl” both reflects the social change Ginsberg experienced and also played an important role in reshaping American culture. The poem is bold, straightforward and expressive – all of the trademarks of Beat literature. “Howl” is propelled by the tension between the individual and society. Ginsberg was trying to make a statement about the disturbing, materialistic direction that he believed society was headed. The poem is a cry of protest against the soul-crushing conformism of American mainstream culture and a hymn to the holiness of everything about the human body and mind. It is emotionally explosive and expansive, a cultural panorama of sorts. The poem is a deeply personal extension of Ginsberg’s relationships, particularly those with his close friends and family, from which much influence and incentive to write the poem can be given.

Many of the most inspiring and influential characters in Ginsberg’s life and work suffered from mental illness and many passages from “Howl” refer to these people. Allen Ginsberg’s mother suffered from paranoid delusions and suicidal tendencies and was confined in mental hospitals for most of Ginsberg’s youth which resulted in a difficult childhood and a complicated relationship with his mother. After writing “Howl” he stated that a lot of his inspiration for his work had come from his unresolved emotions regarding his mother (Allen Ginsberg-Wikipedia). Ginsberg himself was in a psychiatric ward for seven months in 1949, where his counselors attempted to turn him into a “normal” young man, by convincing him that his homosexuality was a mental illness and something he could overcome. Ginsberg later stated that during his time in the mental hospital, he realized that society did not demand for one to be normal, but rather to *act* normal (Morgan). His experience in the hospital only made him feel worse about himself. When he left the hospital he said, “I really believe, or want to believe, I really am nuts, otherwise I’ll never be sane.” He wanted to be able diagnose his so-called quirks, such as his homosexuality, in order to not be held personally responsible for them. He wrote “Howl” five years after being discharged from the mental institution, as his life was spiraling into chaos and depression, which drove him to write about the confusion that he was experiencing.

Ginsberg often said that his biggest inspiration for the writing style of “Howl” came from Jack Kerouac’s concept of “spontaneous prose,” the idea that writing should come straight from the soul without any conscious restrictions. “Howl” did not abide to the meter and format that was used for standard poetry. It is organic and flowing, a poetic stream of consciousness. He thought of his writing process as sketching with words-- it was like a casual conversation with rhythmic richness and articulation of feeling. He also drew inspiration from the free-style of the 19th century poet, Walt Whitman, as poet Galway Kinnell has said, “I feel that Ginsberg is the only one to understand Whitman and to bring into the poetry of our time a comparable music.” Both Whitman and Ginsberg critiqued American democracy and explored the quest for truth in everyday life.

Compared to other literature of the time, “Howl” was considered obscene. During the 1950s, homosexuality was seen as a mental illness and deemed illegal in all states. Most of the explicit content in “Howl” was in reference to homosexuality, which caught the general public off guard, considering that no other authors were writing about it. However, when Ginsberg

wrote "Howl," he never intended to show it to anyone but a few of his closest friends because he thought it to be too deeply personal; but he did give several readings of "Howl" before it was ever published.

The first reading was on October 7th, 1955 at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, a small, former auto-repair shop with dirt floors. It was an intimate gathering and all of Ginsberg's closest friends were present, including Kerouac and Gary Snyder. No one in the audience could have guessed that what they were about to witness would spark an entire literary revolution that would reverberate through American culture for decades to come.

"In all our memories no one had been so outspoken in poetry before," Micheal McClure, a poet in the audience, remembered. "We had gone beyond a point of no return--and we were ready for it... 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. We wanted to make it new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it. We wanted voice and we wanted vision." Ginsberg introduced America to a new type of poetry, one without any structural constraints or guidelines. He was writing free poetry about a free generation.

Soon after the reading, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, owner of the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, told Ginsberg that he wanted to publish "Howl," along with a few other of his poems as part of a series of "pocket books" of poetry. After the first printing of "Howl," with 5,000 copies in print, Ferlinghetti was confronted by the San Francisco police and charged with obscenity for the content of "Howl" saying, "you wouldn't want your children to come across it." The current laws did not allow any "obscene" works of literature to be published and "Howl" contained numerous swears as well as references to heterosexual and homosexual sex. Ferlinghetti plead not guilty and testified that the poem had social importance, bringing nine literary critics as witnesses to court. In the end, the judge stated that "Howl" did, in fact, have literary merit arguing, "the theme of 'Howl' presents unorthodox and controversial ideas. Coarse and vulgar language is used in treatment and sex acts are mentioned, but unless the book is entirely lacking in social importance it cannot be held obscene." A month after the trial began, Ferlinghetti was found not guilty. The trial served as a large step forward in America's quest for freedom of expression.

In retrospect, the trial can be seen as the moment when the entire country was exposed to the power of "Howl" and the entire Beat generation. The fact that many people considered "Howl" offensive was important to the success of the poem. Allen Ginsberg is responsible for "loosening the breath of American poetry," critic Helen Vendler wrote in 1986. It is responsible for "loosening the breath" of many topics including, homosexuality, art, politics, poetry, music, and drugs (Shinder).

"Howl" is divided into four various sections, each relating to the author's experiences and influences. The first section is a seven-page list of "all the spirits broken, impaired, or thoroughly destroyed by a force he would not name until the second part of the poem" (Burns 104). In the first line of "Howl", Ginsberg writes, "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." This opening line refers to his friends and acquaintances,

traveling the country with little or no money; all of the misunderstood artists and poets, many of whom had died in recent years from drug overdoses or mindless accidents.

Ginsberg uses his friend Carl Solomon, whom he met during his time in the mental hospital, as an example of a person who was ground down by this relentless evil presence when he writes, "*who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons, who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in police cars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication...*" (Ginsberg 7). Ginsberg is re-telling actual events that took place around him and in this sense, "Howl" serves as an important historical document, capturing the events that took place during the Beat Generation as well as the spirit which accompanied them.

In the second section of "Howl," Ginsberg finally addresses Moloch, the unnamed evil force that "ate up their brains and imagination" and the many other ways in which Moloch is destroying his generation. Moloch is a god in the Hebrew Bible to whom children are sacrificed. In "Howl," however, Moloch represents the aspects of the mainstream culture. Moloch represents a monster that kills youth and love, his mind is "pure machinery," his blood is "running money," and his fingers are "ten armies." Ginsberg explores these things, and names, war, government, machinery, capitalism and materialism as destructive elements to the soul.

The third section of the poem is the most direct address to Carl Solomon. In the poem, Ginsberg names the mental institution where he first met Solomon, "Rockland," saying, "I'm with you in Rockland where you're madder than I am." Ginsberg is implying that he sympathizes with all of the people who were driven insane by the structure and conformity of society. He also expresses his frustration with the unjust and inhumane ways of the United States mental institutions. He writes, "the soul is innocent and / immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse." Ginsberg believed that Solomon was a genius and to let Solomon's "soul" die in an "armed madhouse" is to lose one of the world's "best minds."

"Howl" was a call to all of the other outcast artists and writers around America, an invitation to make a radical change in their work and inspiration that they could succeed. Ginsberg sent "Howl" to one of his friends, writing in a note, "I think what is coming is a romantic period ... a reassertion of naked personal subjective truth." He was right; the publication of "Howl" was certainly wake-up call, letting other artists and authors experiment through their own work. The poem also informed the rest of society about prevalent issues that they should consider and question such as the government, homosexuality and capitalism. The publication of "Howl" set the San Francisco scene buzzing; it was the start of a new era where people began to question societal norms which they had previously taken for granted.

The publishing of "Howl" had an immense effect on how our culture views the role of poetry in our society. After "Howl" poetry was no longer a two dimensional piece of writing on a page. As Ginsberg stated, "art is a community effort - a small but select community living in a spiritualized world endeavoring to interpret the wars and the solitudes of the flesh." Instead of the artist creating their work in solitude and then leaving it to be received by the public, they experienced it mutually. "Howl" revolutionized poetry and art as a whole, turning it into a communal human experience, one where an entire community comes together to enjoy art. This

mutual experience was made possible by the poetry readings that were so often held by the “Beatniks.” Never before had poetry been so frequently read aloud for joy.

“Howl” is a poem with a culture to put into it, in the sense that by writing about the Beat Generation he was also creating it. “Howl” inspired people to change their lives, quit their jobs, and live the life they had always dreamed of, and it continues to inspire do this today. Today, over 50 years after it was written, “Howl” is never out of print. It has been translated into more than two-dozen languages, sold more than 1,000,000 copies, inspired many writers and artists alike and is considered a literary classic. But why is it that this poem continues to fascinate us?

In my opinion, it is because we are always yearning for human experience. We crave adventure but we also crave other people’s adventure and experiences. We love to live vicariously through others, listening to their experiences and conjuring up images in our own minds. When I read “Howl,” the words paint vivid pictures in my mind of the lives of people who choose not to conform to the societal expectation that many of us are bound to. Ginsberg describes the lives of the starving artists “who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup,” and some part of each of us wants to experience that life. Reading this poem reminds me that when a person has the courage to speak their mind, their words *do* have the power to change a nation.