

Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" as manifesto of Beat Generation Poetry

For MA (English) Students at MGCUB

- “Howl” is regarded as the central text in Beat Generation Poetry, much like “The Waste Land” in the ‘imagist movement’.
- It describes the horror, hopelessness and frustration in the life of Beat Generation artists.
- As a subculture, the movement voiced the dissent against the oppression and exploitation of the individual in authoritative society and sounded a long distressed cry for emancipation. The poem represents such typical feelings and was welcomed by some as a revolutionary poem.

- As Skalleberg Lucas states in his essay “Candor and Apocalypse in Allen Ginsberg’s Howl”, the then American society was divided into two groups, one was the patriotic one that thought of preserving the American values while the other that thought of truth being at stake and that the USA was becoming a totalitarian state with the nexus of military-industrial-nationalist complex.
- “Many writers at the time were persecuted by McCarthyists, which led to even stronger protest by, among others, academicians”.
- Arthur Millers’ dramas, written around the same time like *The Crucible* and *Death of the Salesman* voiced dissent against authoritative regime and business mindedness.

- Allen Ginsberg took admission in Columbia University but rebelled against the teachers for being old-fashioned and read the books that were not allowed.
- Skallberg writes about the influences behind writing *Howl* and mentions that “in the university, Ginsberg, found friends who shared his views. The writer and former football –student Jack Kerouac, heroine and morphine addict William Burroughs, Lucien Carr who, after Ginesberg and Burroughs, failed to report the murder of David Kammerer, was convicted of manslaughter, and thief and drug addict Herbert Huncke, became those who Ginesberg spent most time with”. Such characters are well presented in the poem.

- Allen Ginsberg was inspired by Rimbaud and Walt Whitman. Because Whitman was very open with the themes of homosexuality, Ginsberg could appreciate him only when he became comfortable with his own homosexuality.
- Like Whitman, Ginsberg challenged the established rules of language and poetry.
- Blake and T.S. Eliot were other two inspirations for Ginsberg.
- Ginsberg was also admitted to a Psychiatric hospital which he himself chose to escape the criminal punishment for stealing away the police car. He mentioned in a letter to Jack Kerouac that the 'crazy house' increased his 'dark thoughts' about the society.

- Mental hospitals appear in the poem at different places:

“Pilgrim State’s Rockland’s and Greystone’s foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon”

Ginsberg’s mother was also a patient in mental hospital.

In the hospital, while visiting his mother, he had once met Carl Solomon, a poet , to whom Ginsberg dedicated his poem “Howl”.

- When Ginsberg first recited the poem in Sixth Gallery, the atmosphere was of hippy-ish humor and wit. Readers and poets were themselves unconventional and bohemians.
- Many poets, when alone, had thought themselves as mad outfits and had never hoped to gain any space in the stationary world of the literature.
- When Ginsberg started reciting the poem, he was hesitant and shy at first but later on, as he saw the stunned response of audience who were taken aback by the beauty and preciseness of wordings, Ginsberg became enthusiastic.
- Many in audience and even Ginsberg wept at the event as it powerfully gave start to the new kind of poetry and space to these outfits.
- Soon after the event, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, asked for the manuscript of the Howl and published it in 1956.

- When the poem was first published in 1956, it got enthusiastic reactions. Some passionately welcomed it as a 'poetic bomb' with its obscene vocabulary and counter-culture voice, while many academicians took it as a statement against their work and ideas.
- The poem gives a feeling of shock to readers with its unconventional style of writing.

- Allen wrote the poem in free style and in the form of catalogue where he describes the various scenes of lifestyle as lived by the artists of this subculture.
- The writer used images and local slang, obscene vocabulary, vernacular language to describe the counter-culture of drugs, free and unconventional sex, hallucinations and hopelessness.
- The high emotions presented through various, juxtaposed phrases correspond to the psyche of the characters taken from the Beat Generation.

- The crude and explicitly sexual references are evident in phrases like “cock and endless balls” “ultimate cunt” “genitals and manuscripts” “fucked in the ass”.
- Such vocab might give the impression that writer used them as exaggerations, but the reality of writers affair with Neal Cassady proves that he actually left a lot unexpressed, out of his love for his boyfriend whom he regarded as one of his inspirations. Allen refers to him in the poem itself “N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver”.

- Because of the use of the apparent obscene words in the poem, the publisher had to face the court trial.
- U.S. constitution protects the freedom of speech and prohibits the censorship of literature ruled as obscene if it has larger social purpose.
- This amendment invited many literary scholars and teachers to interpret the work to see it's social purpose.
- Mark Schorer reflected that "Howl, like any work of literature, attempts and intends to make a significant comment on or interpretation of human experience as the author knows it".

- The judge Horn declared defendants not guilty.
- He wrote in his final statement: “No two persons think alike, we were all made by the same mould but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to Vapid innocuous euphemism?”

- “Without the candor of the poet, there is no social importance because there is no mirroring of the experience” - Skalleberg

- The violent, and ecstatic character of oppressed people gives the frantic tone to the poem.
- It represents the helplessness and despair of the oppressed people who have only one agency to express themselves which comes in the form of a howl: a long cry.
- The poem is candid reflection of the life of the writer as well.

Sources:

- Skalleberg, Lucas. “Candor and Apocalypse in Allen Ginsberg’s Howl”. Center for Language and Literature, Lund University, 2008.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl*. Monroe: City Light Books, 1959.