

“Howl”—Allen Ginsberg (1959)

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Essay by David Wills (guest post)*



Allen Ginsberg, c. 1959

The Poem That Changed America

It is hard nowadays to imagine a poem having the sort of impact that Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” had after its publication in 1956. It was a seismic event on the landscape of Western culture, shaping the counterculture and influencing artists for generations to come. Even now, more than 60 years later, its opening line is perhaps the most recognizable in American literature:

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...”

Certainly, in the 20th century, only T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” can rival Ginsberg’s masterpiece in terms of literary significance, and even then, it is less frequently imitated. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then Allen Ginsberg must be the most revered writer since Hemingway. He was certainly the most recognizable poet on the planet until his death in 1997. His bushy black beard and shining bald head were frequently seen at protests, on posters, in newspapers, and on television, as he told anyone who would listen his views on poetry and politics.

Alongside Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel, “On the Road,” “Howl” helped launch the Beat Generation into the public consciousness. It was the first major post-WWII cultural movement in the United States and it later spawned the hippies of the 1960s, and influenced everyone from Bob Dylan to John Lennon. Later, Ginsberg and his Beat friends remained an influence on the punk and grunge movements, along with most other musical genres. “Howl” even helped put to the death censorship in the United States, changing what could be said on paper and in public.

But why was it “Howl” that caused so much change? What was special about this one long, explicit poem filled with dense personal mythology, a poem that could only be fully understood when extensively annotated?

A decade prior to Ginsberg’s first reading of “Howl,” the United States emerged from World War II as the new superpower, the country which would lead the world out of war and into peace. While the old powers of Europe lay in ruins, it was the beginning of a period of unrivalled prosperity for America, and to many those years seemed almost paradisiacal. The American Dream seemed within the grasp of millions, and all across the country, consumer culture shifted into fifth gear as advertisers let the population know just what they needed to buy.

In and around the grounds of Columbia University, however, a small group of men and women remained unconvinced and disinterested by this new world order. Among them was Allen Ginsberg, a precocious young man eager to make his mark on the world of letters. In the late 1940s, he explored New York with his friends before heading out across the country with the likes of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady. But it was a trip south of the border that saw him break through in terms of poetic output. In 1954, he spent several months exploring the jungles of Mexico, while writing poetry for up to ten hours a day. By the time he returned to the U.S., his own poetic style had changed dramatically.

Before long, he was working on “Howl,” a poem ostensibly about his friends from New York. The events within the poem describe his experiences over the previous decade, in a language partially derived from Times Square “hep talk,” filtered through a style he’d stumbled upon deep in the jungles of Chiapas, in long lines borrowed from Christopher Smart, an 18th century English poet. It was personal and confessional, and yet in his poem he somehow spoke for his generation.

“Howl” is often referred to as an angry poem, a work that flew in the face of convention and railed against social norms. Although there may be a grain of truth to this, it is not a particularly angry poem at all. In the poet’s own words, although an oppressive society is the villain and opposition to its villainy equates to a madness that results in incarceration or death, the poem’s overall tone is one of “mercy and compassion.” It certainly laments the pain and suffering endured by certain people, but it is also a celebration of an alternative way of life. One does not need to know who the people in the poem really were or what the true stories were behind the cryptic allusions in “Howl” in order to appreciate the poem. There is a feeling that comes through that has influenced people for decade after decade, and will continue to do so well into the future.

When Ginsberg read his poem at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco, on October 7, 1955, the publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti was sitting in the audience. Immediately recognizing the significance of what he had just heard, Ferlinghetti sent a telegram to the young poet, saying “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?” in reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous letter to Walt Whitman. The following year, City Lights published Ginsberg’s poem in the collection, “Howl and Other Poems.”

Although “Howl” caught the attention of many in the literary community, it was the events that transpired after that ensured its success. In 1957, after seizing more than 500 copies of the book that were being imported from a printer in England, the authorities raided City Lights Bookstore and charged Ferlinghetti with obscenity. Ferlinghetti engaged the ACLU to fight the charges, resulting in a well-publicized trial. Eventually, after the testimony of various literary experts, “Howl” was judged to have “redeeming social importance” and its publication was permitted.

Although its immediate popularity was due in part to the controversy surrounding the trial, “Howl” has endured for more than 60 years as one America’s most significant poems. It continues to captivate readers young and old, and is even included in syllabi across the U.S. and around the world as one of the most important works of 20th century literature.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.