The American Dystopia in Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”

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Allen Ginsberg in “Howl” (1955) proclaims his opposition to the repressed, conventional society in the fifties and presents several ways in which he and others have confronted, or escaped from, the structures of the American dystopia such as through insanity and drugs. In addition to the question of insanity in “Howl,” I will discuss his generation’s sexuality and their defiance of the sexual norms of the time in the poem. The other reaction to the times is spirituality—especially Buddhism—in opposition to the materialism described in “Howl.”

Allen Ginsberg was born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1926 and died in 1997 in New York City. His parents were both schoolteachers. His father Louis was also a poet and may have inspired Allen to write poetry as a young man. His mother Naomi may have influenced his views on politics and on society by taking him to Communist Party meetings from an early age and by her struggles with schizophrenia. After briefly studying at Columbia University, he wound up in an asylum just as his mother had.

“Howl” was a real milestone in Ginsberg’s life. After the positive reception at the first reading of “Howl,” attended by his fellow Beats and others on October 7, 1955, in San Francisco, he gradually grew more confident about himself and his writing, despite his troubled childhood and youth.¹ In this paper I will explore how he came to deal with the American dystopia in both personal and political terms.
1. Insanity and the American Dystopia

First I would like to treat the description of the nature of insanity in Ginsberg’s “Howl.” I will also include references in “Howl” to drugs, which are all partially a sign of his peers’ instability or alienation from the supposedly “sane” society of the fifties, but also an expression of freedom on the part of his fellow Beats.

Indeed, the very first lines, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by / madness, starving hysterical naked” (9) point to the desperate feeling of some people in Ginsberg’s generation. Ginsberg thought that he and other young people of the fifties could not find any sense of equilibrium despite the conventionality of that time.

Ginsberg’s coterie seems desperate and uneasy. He states that they are looking for an “angry fix” (9) and hallucinating. His description of his acquaintances can often be surreal; for example, he speaks of people who “High sat up / smoking in the supernatural darkness of / cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities / contemplating jazz” (9). On the one hand, contemplating jazz may be for relaxation or be a kind of spiritual pursuit, but Ginsberg’s peers often lived in poverty and could either be spaced out or exhausted—“hollow-eyed” (9), as Ginsberg puts it.

We can find in “Howl” several references to drugs, such as marijuana, Benzedrine, and opium, in addition to drunkenness. For example, “battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance” (10) seems like a reference to Ginsberg’s friends who probably got high out of despair or because of feelings of depression. The behavior of Ginsberg’s fellow discontents also seems impulsive or self-destructive. He describes them talking “continuously” (10) and jumping off “fire escapes” (11). Their situation was so dire that they were even “screaming vomiting” (11) and enduring jail and the “shocks of hospitals” (11). They were additionally “crying in white mausoleums” (13). He states that one person was “naked and bit detectives in the neck, and
shrieked with delight” (13). They even supposedly “howled on their knees in the subway” (13). Ginsberg’s friends and acquaintances were unrestrained and felt free, but they must have looked quite deranged to bourgeois society. Indeed, the instability of Ginsberg’s generation in “Howl” led to “suicidal dramas” (15) or obsessive behavior. Ginsberg’s peers, according to the poem, “scribbled all night” (16) and “cut their wrists three times unsuccessfully” (16). One person, he says, even “jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge” (17).

Ginsberg’s circle also had to endure mental problems. He states that they:

. . . demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury (18)

The above may be comic exaggeration or a fantasy, but the part after that seems realistic enough. Ginsberg states that instead of the lobotomy that one friend requested, he was:

. . . given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia . . . (18)

He must be referring to his dear friend Carl Solomon to whom “Howl” is dedicated. Carl, a Dadaist, asked a hospital for a lobotomy as a kind of statement about life or society, but instead received every other kind of therapy available at the time.

Part II has a wider focus than Part I, namely on the bestial nature of capitalism. Ginsberg repeatedly rails against the Biblical figure of Moloch for whom children were sacrificed. Moloch becomes a symbol of modern capitalism in this part. The poet speaks of “animal screams and suicides” (23) in reaction to Moloch.

In Part II Ginsberg gives a more detailed account of the theme of insanity, declaring his solidarity with his friend:

Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland where you’re madder
than I am
I’m with you in Rockland where you must feel very strange
I’m with you in Rockland where you imitate the shade of my mother (24)

He expresses here a sense of kinship with Carl and his mother Naomi inasmuch all three of them experienced mental illness. (As noted in part before, his mother Naomi suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and could become suicidally depressed early in Ginsberg’s life.) This eventually resulted in him having a sense of tremendous empathy for people with psychiatric disorders.

Ginsberg continues in the same vein here in the same section:
I’m with you in Rockland where you bang on the catatonic piano
the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly
in an armed madhouse
I’m with you in Rockland where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void (25)

Ginsberg views the psychotherapy that was prevalent at the time as a kind of death of the soul, so he proclaims hopefully that the soul should never die in an “armed madhouse.” Calling it armed makes it sound like a prison or a military base, neither of which are conducive to sanity or spirituality.

Later Ginsberg ironically claims that Carl accused his doctors of insanity and plotted the “Hebrew socialist revolution against the / fascist national Golgotha” (25). Ginsberg is hoping that Carl might rebel against capitalism and the repressive hospital that makes him feel victimized like Christ. Ginsberg imagines Carl metaphorically being resurrected like Christ and freeing himself:

. . . you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb (25)

Near the end of Part III Ginsberg expresses a sense of solidarity with all
the insane and fantasizes that:

    . . . there are twenty-five-thousand mad comrades all together
    singing the final stanzas of the Internationale (25)

Despite the rebellious feelings Ginsberg actually does sympathize with America, as one would feel sorry for an invalid:

    . . . we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the
    United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep (26)

At the end of Part III Ginsberg imagines the revolution of souls of his generation:

    . . . we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls’
    airplanes roaring over the roof . . . O starry-spangled shock of
    mercy the eternal war is here  O victory forget your underwear
    we’re free (26)

Then Ginsberg dreams of meeting Carl Solomon again:

    in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the
    highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in
    the Western night (26)

He hopes that his companion will survive his dark night of the soul at the mental hospital (his “sea-journey”) and make his way to his cottage.

The final part of the poem, “Footnote to Howl,” is a long reference to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Ginsberg writes:

    Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy!
    everyday is in eternity! Everyman’s an angel!
    The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my
    soul are holy! (27)

He views all creation as holy, including his friends and his mother.

At one point Ginsberg proclaims, “Holy my mother in the insane asylum!” (27), later declaring, “Holy the hallucinations” (28). In this poem he has come to accept insanity, including his mother’s mental state, which was the hardest to accept in the past.
In fact, insanity in “Howl” is like a badge of honor in an insane world. It should be noted here that “Howl” largely prefigures the writings of sociologist Erving Goffman, psychiatrist R. D. Laing, and anthropologist Gregory Bateson with respect to insanity. In a notable passage in *The Politics of Experience*, Laing speaks of the notion that the schizophrenic is out of formation—like a squadron of airplanes—in society, but he asks what if the other planes are headed in the wrong direction (98-99). If society itself has gone mad, then the mentally “ill” might actually be normal.

As we can see from the above, insanity is not just a sign of alienation or defiance, but rather an expression of freedom or even the ultimate form of sanity in an insane world. Indeed, Laing posits that “If the formation is itself off course, then the man who is really to get ‘on course’ must leave the formation” (99).

2. Sexuality and the American Dystopia

Another way that Ginsberg and the generation described in “Howl” deal with American society is rebelling in a sexual fashion.

The sexual references and imagery in the poem are not as frequent as one might think, but their provocative nature makes them stand out—even to the extent that Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the publisher of “Howl,” was arrested for obscenity. (He was later exonerated.) To give some examples, Ginsberg speaks of people who “got busted in their pubic beards returning through / Laredo” (10) in Part I. The reference to apparent nudity might just be a description of strip-searching related to drug possession, but the effect is just the same: the reader takes notice. Later in Part I he mentions members of his generation that were “naked / and trembling before the machinery of other / skeletons” (13). “Skeletons” probably just means other humans, but it may also imply that many are spiritually dead. (This might not be anything sexual.) In the same vein, Ginsberg says that someone (Bill Cannastra) was
“waving genitals and manuscripts” (13).

There are also a number of references to sex acts. For example, Ginsberg notes that some were:

. . . fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,

. . . blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love . . . (13)

Most of the sexual language is about gay sex, but sometimes Ginsberg talks about heterosexual sex, such as in these lines, saying that certain people “. . . sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset . . .” (14).

In the midst of all this sex, there was apparently not much love, but near the end of Part I, Ginsberg speaks of “midnight solitude-bench / dolmen-realms of love” (19). Then at the very end he describes the reincarnation of a “madman bum and angel” (20). It says that he:

. . . rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani ⁶ saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio (20)

This “bum and angel” character appears to be a messianic figure expressing the American yearning for love through a saxophone. The passage above and the repeated proclamation of “I’m with you in Rockland” (24-26) suggest that there is still hope for love in America, even if Ginsberg talks about so much sexual activity.

I should mention here that primarily in Part I Ginsberg often uses obscenities as a weapon to hurl against the Establishment. His verbal grenades are designed to provoke a reaction. His transgressive use of language disrupts everyday reality, especially the conservative, conformist reality of the fifties.⁷ The Zeitgeist of the time may have inspired his defiant
attitude, although he also regards sexual repression to be one of the greatest sins. We often say that rules are made to be broken. For Ginsberg, taboos are made to be violated. The sexuality is just a part of love for him. In the next section, we can see that in his view sex can even be a part of spirituality.

3. Spirituality and the American Dystopia

Ginsberg frequently refers to spiritual matters in “Howl” and other poems. Spirituality in “Howl” is ultimately an attempt to transcend the harsh reality of life under modern capitalism, more than just an escape from the many vicissitudes of existence.

Ginsberg describes one acquaintance who:

vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall,
suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark’s bleak furnished room . . . (11)

This person, probably fellow Beat William Burroughs, traveled abroad out of a sense of restlessness and also tried getting off heroin. In his own way he was seeking a better reality for himself.8

Ginsberg, incidentally, sometimes refers to time and eternity.9 Eternity is the realm of the soul, free of the conventional life in Ginsberg’s world. Not being bound to one fixed point in space or time means that the soul is not stuck in any particular situation. This is, of course, a mystical notion.10

As previously mentioned, Ginsberg implicitly refers to Carl Solomon when he speaks of “the concrete void of insulin” and the like. Ginsberg finds life in insane asylums to be soulless and oppressive just as his friend apparently did. They are like prisons for the soul to him.

Sharing the Beats’ affinity for jazz, Ginsberg apparently regards it to be a kind of spiritual music—hymns for freedom lovers and the alienated.
Indeed, he sometimes refers to jazz in “Howl,” as in the aforementioned vision of the madman bum. Elsewhere, he says that someone in his generation:

. . . lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa . . . (12)

Jazz is one way to find spiritual comfort in a difficult world.

In Part II Ginsberg begins with a description of Moloch, as mentioned before. Moloch comes to represent all the ills of modern capitalism to the poet. Ginsberg paints a dark portrait of a society plagued by the presence of “unobtainable dollars” (21), a place with only opportunity for the financial elite.

Moloch is indeed a “loveless” (21) and “soulless” (21) being. Ginsberg gives a long litany of Moloch’s vices, including these:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! . . . (21)

Moloch to Ginsberg is evil incarnate, the symbol of the woes of American industrialism.

In the second half of Part II we start to find Ginsberg’s sense of spiritual opposition to Moloch despite a lot of pessimism:

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! (22)

Moloch, according to Ginsberg, is not just a force outside of him, but an aspect of his own soul, caused by adaptation to modern American society. He vows to become more natural and spiritual in the above passage.

However, Ginsberg grows pessimistic at the end of Part II about the
possibility of everyone overcoming the external or internal influence of Moloch. He proclaims:

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river! (22)

Our souls have lost their sense of vision in the midst of capitalist society.

In Part III, after repeatedly expressing his feeling of solidarity with Carl Solomon, Ginsberg does at least offer us the possibility of freedom in the previously cited lines, “O victory forget your underwear we’re / free” (26).

As I noted before, in “Footnote to Howl” Ginsberg asserts that “Everything is holy” (27). At the end, he declares, “Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!” (28). This last part of “Howl” is like a prayer in which humans, their bodies, and environment are considered holy, deserving of respect just for existing.

Despite a sense of alienation expressed throughout the poem, in the final part Ginsberg offers us more of an all-encompassing vision of life here. Spirituality and a general restlessness are ways that he and his friends deal with their frustration with the repressed, conventional society around them.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have described three ways that Allen Ginsberg and his generation tried to cope with the overly materialistic and stable society of the fifties: insanity, sexuality, and spirituality. Insanity seems like more of a reaction than a solution to any sense of angst, but Mead-Brewer notes in The Trickster in Ginsberg that Ginsberg once said to a reporter that “I mean everybody is a little mad” (32). In other words, his friends and others were living beyond the bourgeois conventions of society, just as the mentally ill were out of formation with society (as Laing would phrase it). The Beats and their coterie were defining their own reality back in the fifties and after. Madness could be a burden, or viewed as offensive or even dangerous, but it
could also serve as a badge of honor to wear in an insane world, as I noted in part earlier.

In a similar fashion Ginsberg speaks provocatively about sex and sexuality as a sort of antidote to the repressed nature of society. Repression must seem like the worst sin of all to Ginsberg, and so he dares people to indulge in the erotic pleasure of their choice, heterosexual or homosexual. Breaking taboos like that might have helped counteract the influence of neurotic fifties society.

As for spirituality, it may seem like just an escape from reality, but Ginsberg and the Beats were always quite concerned with the individual’s role in society and tried to live outside its strictures. Religion, especially Buddhism, helped them deal with life.

According to Mead-Brewer in *The Trickster in Ginsberg*, Ginsberg described “Howl” in various ways throughout his life, including a “coming out of the closet” (33) in 1974. Interestingly enough, by 1986 he deemed it an “emotional time bomb that would continue exploding [the] military-industrial nationalist complex” (33). “Howl” was both a work of personal catharsis for the poet and a sociopolitical manifesto.

**Notes**

1. For more about Ginsberg’s life with respect to his family and the Beats, etc., refer to Barry Miles’s *Allen Ginsberg: Beat Poet*.
2. Ginsberg is referring to his acquaintance Bill Cannastra.
3. Ginsberg means the Beat poet and singer Tuli Kupferberg, who jumped off the Manhattan Bridge but survived despite a spinal injury.
4. Rockland is a reference to the mental hospitals where his friend Carl Solomon and his mother stayed: namely, Columbia Presbyterian Psychological Institute, Pilgrim State Hospital, Rockland State Hospital, and Greystone Park State Hospital.
5. At the end of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (1790?) Blake writes, “For every thing that lives is Holy” (59).

6. He is making reference to Christ asking God on the Cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” as in Matthew 27:46.

7. Mead-Brewer indirectly addresses the issue of taboo language, noting that Ginsberg has a “keen recognition of the fact that arbitrary social boundaries and rhetorical constructs (such as those which prompted the attempted banning of ‘Howl’ as obscene, those that . . . promote the persecution of homosexuals . . .) are deeply engrained components of how people understand the world . . .” (100).

8. Burroughs lived in Tangiers at one point. “Bone-grinding” might mean gay sex. Burroughs was no saint, but his travels were like a spiritual journey, or at least an escape from a conventional life in America. In particular, he regarded getting high on drugs to be like a spiritual state of being—a controversial notion even today. (In contrast, Ginsberg eventually came to view taking drugs as an unsuccessful means of attaining enlightenment.)

9. For example, Ginsberg mentions someone who threw his watch “off the roof to cast their ballot / for Eternity outside of Time . . .” (16). The person in question was a college classmate, Louis Simpson, who stayed briefly in a mental asylum.

10. Mead-Brewer discusses Ginsberg’s view of time at length in The Trickster in Ginsberg (99-124).

11. The fifties were not as uniformly conformist as the Beats and others maintain. David Halberstam explains in The Fifties that many of the social protest movements in the sixties began in the decade before. Likewise, the Beats created the counterculture that would later evolve into the hippie movement.
Works Cited


