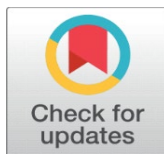


RELOOKING BEAT GENERATION AND THE SPIRIT OF REBELLION IN HOWL

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ABSTRACT

In the history of American Literature, the Beat Generation secures a position which defines the spirit of protest in literature. The Beat Generation or Beat Movement was not only a literary movement but also a cultural movement that spearheaded several counter-cultural movements in the second half of twentieth-century America. This essay explores and examines the rebellious traits of the Beat Generation by addressing their style, technique, language and content. While the Beats were against the conformist values of post-war America, they also challenged the established traditional values. These challenges and protests are studied by analysing Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl". As "Howl" marked the beginning of a new era in literature. The poem is not only rebellious in style or content, but it paved the way to an end to censorship of literary texts. The paper briefly delves into the history of the movement and how it corresponds with the content of the "Howl".

Keywords: Beat Generation, Bohemian, Nonconformist, Rebellion

1. INTRODUCTION

The post-war period marked the beginning of a significant turn in the history of American literature. Prior to the wars, the wealth and power of the European nations overshadowed America politically and economically. But it was not long before the world saw the capability and the prowess of America. In the aftermath of the two world wars, America's economy boomed, literally becoming one of the most developed nations in the world. The development in science and technology contributed to its status as the richest and the most powerful nation in the world. However, questions were raised from several quarters on how America was endorsing materialism and conformism. Several sections of society stood against what they saw as a negative development. Moreover, the exercise of individual behaviour was not possible, for "Nonconformity was risky at a time when most jobs required taking a Loyalty Oath and swearing that you had never been, nor would ever be, a communist" (Mofford, 1998, p.6). As a result, "The Beat Generation", one

of the most prominent literary groups in America, took birth in the 1950s. Unlike the earlier literary movements, the Beat Generation movement was very influential, shaping the cultural and political outlook of the Americans and spearheading numerous other cultural and social movements.

In the introduction to the *Portable Beat Reader*, Ann Charters writes about the “beat” as “primarily in use after the World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted. The jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow combined it with other words, like “dead beat” or “beat up”.

The Beat Generation was the outcome of the efforts of like-minded young writers who aimed at bringing about a revolution in literature. To a large extent, The Beat writers revolutionized American literature and culture. Rebellious in spirit and non-conformist, prominent figures of the group, like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S Burroughs, were highly influenced by Jazz and underground music and Eastern spirituality, especially Buddhism. Moreover, their association with the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance is notable as “...the Six Gallery seemed to have attracted every significant member of what would later be termed the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance” (Schumacher 214). The Beats, being hipsters, indulged in recreational drug use, bisexuality, free sex, and travelling most of the time. Their bohemian lifestyle was in itself a rebellion against the established systems. In Juliet Haines Mofford in *The Beat Generation* writes that they were a disillusioned group:

For the post-war Americans, particularly those among the younger generation, the rows of suburban trackhouses were no more than “little boxes,” promising imprisonment...its lack of ethnic and economic diversity...seemed absolutely stifling. Disinterested in joining the “rat race,” these post-World War II misfits infuriated middle-class Americans because they refused to conform to the consumer culture. (1998, p.6)

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF BEAT WRITING

The sense of non-conformity with American values made these young writers adopt a rather unusual lifestyle. Their writings and their styles reflect their rejection of social values and norms. The Beats, being conscious of the impending inequality and discrimination in American society – how blacks were treated, how homosexuality was perceived, and the status of women, adhered to the idea of liberation, the most important characteristic of the Beats. Liberation implies sexual liberation, acceptance of homosexuality, end of racial discrimination, and women’s liberation, among others. The “liberation of the word from censorship” (Ginsberg, 2018, p.4) and free expression are other interesting concepts of liberation. Rejecting the idea of work to have a decent life, their language, lifestyle, fashion and philosophy made them stand unique and different from the mainstream values. They called themselves “hipsters.” Norman Mailer in “The White Negro” originates “hipsters” as:

...being marginalized African-Americans who were usually jazz musicians and often lived a bohemian and sometimes violent lifestyle. They were promiscuous, smoked marijuana and spoke their own language. These Black hipsters were constantly in fear of arrest or even sudden death, usually at the hands of white supremacists...the Beat poets tried to emulate that unencumbered, free lifestyle, “spirit,” and attitude of Black jazz musicians of the 1930s and 1940s. (Huddleston, 2012, p.5)

Another important characteristic is writing under the influence of drugs. The use of drugs for the Beats is associated with spiritual liberation, a path to be one

with the cosmos. They experimented with LSD, Benzedrine, Amphetamine, Magic Mushroom, heroin, and morphine, drank alcohol, and smoked marijuana, believing that boosted their mental faculties and enhanced their creativity. For Ginsberg, drugs give the ability to think and rebel as “Marijuana is revolutionary, but the imperialists have invented all kinds of stories about it just so no one will smoke it and rebel” (Miles, 2010, p. 272).

The overuse of drugs, however, had a negative effect as many of them got addicted and struggled for life. For instance, notable beats like Peter Orlovsky struggled with hallucination throughout his life, while Jack Kerouac died of stomach haemorrhage due to heavy drinking. About the perception of drugs by the Beats and Ginsberg in particular, Barry Mile writes:

Drugs seemed to be a method of achieving an approximation of the expanded consciousness...that drugs were a possible means of altering public consciousness, a way of introducing ideas of lifestyle closer to the Beat ideals of spontaneity, sexual openness, candour, literary honesty and spiritual liberation. He lobbied extensively for the legalisation of marijuana and gave much thought to methods of introducing psychedelics to the general population. (2010, p.271)

While the general public conceived of the Beats as “The know-nothing Bohemians”, good-for-nothing, lazy lads out there to destroy the fabric of society. Norman Podhoretz dubbed them as “the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of the soul—young men who can’t think straight and so hate anyone who can” (Podhoretz 316). But Podhoretz’s conception was marked by his one-sided view. Podhoretz, like many others, could not see how critical the Beats were of America’s foreign policy and military activities in foreign lands. They mobilised ecological consciousness and respect for the indigenous people and their values among the people.

One of the most important features of Beat writing and philosophy is Spontaneity. Liberation of the mind is possible only through an uncontrolled flow of expression. Invented by Jack Kerouac “spontaneous prose” is an interesting technique of uncontrolled flow of writing. He believed that this new technique would give “intuitive honesty” in writing. Kerouac suggested that writing should not have a set of preconceived ideas or format. It should come in an undisturbed flow of images of objects from the memory. Ginsberg quotes in the “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”:

The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image. (Ginsberg, 2018, p. 219)

The Beats employed non-conformity, disillusionment, spontaneity, and uncontrolled expression, among others, as thematic treatment. The critique of the socio-political issues prevailing in the 1950s may not be apparent in their writings, yet they found the dominant social and political systems as suffocating. For instance, the Second World War came to an end when an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. It was a matter of pride and a sense of triumph for the nation. But many felt helpless with the horror of the mass destruction and killing of millions of innocent people. The Beats took spontaneity in literature and lifestyle as they professed non-conformity.

3. ALLEN GINSBERG: A PROMINENT FIGURE OF THE BEAT GENERATION

Born on June 3, 1926, in Paterson, New Jersey, Allen Ginsberg is one of the most important defining figures of the Beat Generation. Born to an educated Russian-Jewish background, his father, Louis and mother, Naomi, were both politically active. They considered literature as an important component of intellectual growth and development. Ginsberg was shy and sensitive as a young boy, attributed to his childhood experiences in a chaotic household. Despite being shy, his interest in creative writing grew stronger, a trait which he took from his father. Throughout his life he struggled for the cause of literature. As a young student, he had an interest in the school magazine, the *Spectator*, where he published his early writings.

Allen was an excellent student, and his achievement, along with the look of intellectualism that accompanied the purchase of his first pair of eyeglasses, earned him the nickname of “The Professor”—a nomer that would stay with him through his high school years. (Schumacher, 1994, p.11)

After graduating from school in 1943, he joined Columbia University, where he met other important Beats like Lucien Carr, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac. They had extensive discussions on the questions of art and its contribution, slowly building an awareness and understanding among their friends. These discussions resulted in a rebellious thought of a “New Vision”, which was soon put into practice by Jack and Allen.

The visions of the Romantic poets had a strong influence on Jack and Allen, and the concept of “The New Vision” could be attributed to the Romantic ideals. As such, the term is taken from W.B. Yeats’ *A Vision*. Ginsberg opined that the purpose of art is self-expression which is individual and not limited by influence, repression or inhibition. He described this vision as:

...a matter of seeing everybody lost in dream world of their own making. That was the basis of the Beat Generation. That was the primary perception. The idea of transience of phenomenon – the poignant Kewpie-doll dearness of personages vanishing in time. Not a morbid interest in death but the realisation of the mortal turn... (Miles, 2010, p.63)

Ginsberg’s popularity as a poet took a turn with the ‘Six Gallery Reading’. He contemplated on organising a poetry reading and asked Michael McClure to organise the same. The event ‘Six Poets at the Six Gallery’ took place on 7 October 1955. Ginsberg listed Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia and himself as the readers while Kenneth Rexroth was chosen to be the master of ceremonies. Ginsberg wrote “Six Poets at the Six Gallery. Kenneth Rexroth, M.C. Remarkable collection of angels all gathered at once in the same spot. Wine, music, dancing girls, serious poetry, free satori. A small collection of wine and postcards. Charming event” (Miles, 2010, p.192). This first public reading of these young poets also saw the gathering of the ‘bohemian poetry intelligentsia’ of the Bay Area. In the second half of the event, Ginsberg presented his famous poem “Howl”, which shook the gallery with his performance.

4. HOWL

Written in 1955 and published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1956 in the collection of poetry *Howl and Other Poems*, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* marked the beginning of a new era in the history of American literature in general and Beat

literature in particular. The poem is written in a style to be performed and read aloud rather than read silently. "Howl" attained its notoriety with its first performance at Six Gallery in San Francisco by Ginsberg himself in front of some 150 audiences before its publication. Ginsberg read the poem with an intense voice and the audience present in the hall encouraged him. Soon the emotion of the poem took over him and read it swaying in rhythm, full of energy (Miles, 2010, p.193). Howl grieves the injustices and injuries suffered by the youths whose aspirations and compassions were put at odds by the materialistic values of the middle class American of the 1950s. The poem represents the alienation from the American life and the "loss of national significance".

"Howl" is supposedly the most important and the most discussed poem of the twentieth century. The title indicates a protest, a sense of cry against repression and exploitation. It is a lamentation, frustration and the failed visions of the American Dream. With 112 lines in elegiac tone, the poem is written in free verse. The poem is divided into three parts and a footnote. In a letter to John Hollander, Ginsberg writes about the writing style of his poems:

After sick & tired of shortline free verse as not expressionistic enough, not swinging enough, can't develop a powerful enough rhythm, I simply turned aside, accidentally to writing part I of "Howl," in solitude, diddling around with the form, thinking it couldn't be published anyway (queer content my parents shouldn't see etc) also it was out of my short-line line. (Ginsberg, 1956, p.163)

Part I has 78 lines, and it represents a new America reeling in a nightmarish situation. Ginsberg dedicates this part to Carl Solomon and describes it as "a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamb-like youths" (Ginsberg, 2000, p.230). Part one is both aggressive and emotional in tone and begins with one of the most powerful opening lines:

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, (Ginsberg, 2020, p.1)

The opening is not pleasant; rather, it is of destruction, madness, starvation, and anger, a feeling which recurs throughout the poem. The first line begins with the personal 'I', which could be equated with the poet himself. Thus, it becomes an expression of his resentment. People of his league, sharing similar feelings like him, are the ones referred to as the 'best minds of my generation'. They are the outcast, underrepresented section of society; they are the 'Beats'.

Ginsberg addresses varied subjects and themes in "Howl". It is an unconventional poem full of pictures of people, places, homosexuals, sex, drugs, hallucinations, madness and unusual style and language. The sufferings of these people are epitomized in Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg identifies with himself. Thus, Solomon's problems are the problems of most of the disillusioned Americans who are oppressed by the capitalistic system. These are the "best minds". Their opinions differed from the majority general public, who accepted and endorsed conformity, "who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating" (Ginsberg, 2020, p.1) in a state of vision. The Beats' style and creativity are taboo for the conformist society. These are the poets "who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations" (Ginsberg, 2020, p.6). Then, the drug addicts "who ate fire in paint hotels...with dreams, with drugs" (Ginsberg, 2020, p.2). Ginsberg also mentions the homosexuals "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists and screamed with joy" (Ginsberg, 2020, p.4), celebrating their act

openly. Then, those “who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully” (Ginsberg, 2020, p.6) in an attempt to commit suicide.

In America, Whitman was the first poet to talk about free love and homosexuality. Ginsberg was not only inspired by his style but also the subject matter of homosexuality. He took this to another level, where it seemed undeniably acceptable and worth celebrating. Whitman suggestively writes about his ‘manly love’ in the poem “When I Heard at the Close of the Day”:

And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,.../For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,/ In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,/And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was happy. (Whitman, 2007, p.126)

Whitman expressed his feelings suggestively, but Ginsberg used Whitman as an example and a pattern of his writing to express his experience and homosexual frustrations. As a form of protest and disagreement with the established social norms, the Beats and Ginsberg, in particular, freely expressed homosexuality, drug addiction, and jazz music.

Ginsberg describes Part II of “Howl” as “the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb” (Ginsberg, 2000, p.230). Ginsberg rejected the state of industrial development and social mores in America. This situation is depicted as the monster in the second section. Since the ‘best minds’ are sacrificed as lamb, the monster feeds on these sacrificial lambs. Part II may be seen as an answer to the questions raised in Part I. The answer is Moloch, ‘monster of mental consciousness’. He is the source of all the suffering and oppression. Ginsberg’s idea of ‘Moloch’ came while he, “...got high on peyote, and saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window; got high weeks later again...I wandered down Powell Street muttering, “Moloch Moloch” all night and wrote Howl II nearly intact...” (Ginsberg, 2000, p.230).

In Howl II Ginsberg uses metaphors, images and symbols representing social and political menaces that are wasting the ‘best minds. The fixed base ‘who’, in Part I, is replaced with ‘Moloch’. It begins with an introduction to the monster, “what sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” (Ginsberg, 1956, p.10). “Moloch whose mind is pure machinery” (Ginsberg, 1956, p.10) further highlights the idea of industrial development, materialism and obsession for wealth. Moloch is the machines, the ‘demonic industries’, the ‘soulless jailhouse’, and emotionless human values which have destroyed the naturalness:

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgement! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! (Ginsberg, 1956, p.138)

Ginsberg was horrified by the image of Moloch. It lingered in his mind for a long time and haunted him whenever he was on drugs. He identified this image with the dominant culture of his society. Ginsberg believed that the materialistic mindset of America had victimised the ‘lamb-like youths’, and for this reason, they went either mad or resorted to drug use.

Ginsberg refers to Part III as “a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory” which is addressed to Carl Solomon. The structure of this part is visually “pyramidal, with a graduated longer response to the fixed base” (Ginsberg, 2000, p.230).

Schumacher describes Ginsberg's first meeting with Carl, "As he stood in the hall...Allen watched a man being wheeled into his ward.... The man's name was Carl Solomon and the irony of a chance meeting of two highly intelligent men in a madhouse..." (Schumacher, 1994, p.114). This section is the turning point from the gloomy images of Moloch in the second part. Ginsberg seems to have controlled over his fear and calmed his feelings down. The expression of his feelings to Carl Solomon has a healing touch. He sympathises and becomes one with him in, "a litany of affirmation". In a letter to Richard Eberhart written in 1956, Ginsberg writes:

Part III is an expression of sympathy and identification with C.S. who is in the madhouse—saying that his madness basically is rebellion against Moloch and I am with him, and extending my hand in union. (Allen Ginsberg, 1956, p.154)

"Howl" moves from a chaotic scream to a meditative mood in the Footnote to Howl. The theatre for this heavenly grandeur is set in Part III when the minds of the readers have been calmed down and swayed from negativity. With a tone of acceptance "Everything is holy! Everybody's holy! Everywhere is holy! Every day is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!" (Schumacher, 1994, p.15), like the "angel headed hipsters". This sense of holiness is close to the Whitmanic concept of divinity in man:

I believe in the flesh and appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or
am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer... (Whitman, 2007, p.58)

5. OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

"Howl" is an outburst of psychic violence, the spirit of alienation of the post-war period. One of the most prominent representations of rebellion in Ginsberg's works is the style and language of the poem. Ginsberg experiments with language, style and theme in his works. Unlike traditional writers, he uses everyday conversational language in his poems. The use of free verse metaphorically indicates his belief in the natural development of the rhythm by adopting free verse. Unlike the forced rhyme and rhythm, there is spontaneity and composure. Moreover, The Beats, including Ginsberg, experimented with drugs. For them, getting high on drugs is a way of mental and spiritual liberation. The tone is outright open and directly condemns the evils in his society. He does not submit to the conformist American values of the post-war period but rather challenges the established traditions. As Albert Camus says:

He rebels because he categorically refuses to submit to the conditions that he considers intolerable and also because he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified, or rather, because his own mind he thinks that he 'has the right to ...' Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that somewhere, in some way, you are justified. (Camus, 2000, p.19)

The Howl trial in itself is a testament to the rebellious nature of the Beat writers. "Howl" was charged with obscenity when it was first published in 1956. San Francisco police seized copies of Howl and Other Poems and arrested Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The trial that followed these charges made history on the question of censorship. According to Nancy J. Peters in "Milestones of Literary Censorship", "prior to the Howl decision in 1957, freedom of expression in America, with few exceptions, did not extend to any writing that contained overtly sexual references"

(Peters). The reference to America as 'Moloch' was suggestive and obscene to the authorities, who felt that the poem could influence people toward destruction.

The Beat Generation was a literary movement which became a famous cultural movement. It followed the 1920s American group known as the "Lost Generation". It had a long-lasting impact on the modern American social structure. With the publication and popularisation of Howl, the idea of acceptable literature was broadened, and censorship in literature came to an end. The beats amalgamated Western and Eastern philosophy to bring about a change in which there is equality and personal freedom. This somehow led the discussion of ecology and environmentalism into mainstream discourse. The beats also marked the perfect example of postmodern writing with unusual narrative style, use of open and so-called vulgar language, and disregard of rhyme, metre and other conventional forms of poetic language.

The Beat movement did not last long; the anti-war, anti-conformist, anti-materialistic zeal was furthered by other counter-cultural movements that were directly influenced by the Beat Generation. The Beatniks and the Hippy culture, for instance, were influenced by the beats. The counter-cultural movements that followed opposed America's involvement in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the numerous other American ventures in world politics.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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