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Howl: The Tip Of The Obscene Iceberg

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Howl: The Tip Of The Obscene Iceberg by: Luis Mendez

Introduction

On October 8, 1955, author Allen Ginsberg received a telegram from a fellow beat poet named Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He requested that Ginsberg send him a manuscript of a poem he was writing. After reading it, Ferlinghetti was so impressed by Ginsberg's poem that he requested to publish it. Ferlinghetti requested Ginsberg to create some additional pieces of poetry to publish a book containing his poems. *Howl And Other Poems* was published and made available in Ferlinghetti's bookstore: *City Lights*. Flash forward to May of 1957, and U.S. customs officials take the book off the shelves (Raskin 215). Ferlinghetti is later tried in court for publishing this book (Morgan and Peters 125).

Howl has become one of the most famous instances of censorship due to its use of vulgar language and obscenity. It even caused its publisher to stand trial, but why? Various authorities in San Francisco stated that the poem is riddled with inappropriate language, references to sexual content, and even references to homosexuality. Evidently, in the 1950s, these topics were controversial in U.S. culture. Thus, could these individuals not have analyzed why this content was used?

Many scholars have thoroughly documented the poem and subsequent trials. They seek to explain various aspects of why the poem was written as it was and why it received the reaction it did. Bill Morgan and Nancy J. Peters have written a compendium surrounding the poems and court case titled: *Howl on Trial*. An interesting analysis of *Howl's* author comes from Jonah Raskin, the author of *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. *American Scream* is primarily a biography of Ginsberg's background and, more importantly, his beliefs. Raskin's analysis of Ginsberg's experiences is intriguing as it connects

his personal beliefs and the poem's content. By establishing a connection, Raskin seeks to explain why this poem was deemed controversial at the time. Raskin asserts that Ginsberg's statements in *Howl* are driven by his experiences and beliefs regarding American culture, politics, and prevalent issues. This is meant to explain why Ginsberg employs themes of homosexuality, drug use, and anarchist rhetoric, as they reflect Ginsberg's life experiences. However, while Raskin primarily discusses Ginsberg himself, he establishes some implications for why the authorities pushed to remove the book from public viewing. He implies that the authorities chose not to analyze the poem for its artistic or literary choices. The individuals who pushed for the banning of *Howl* only do so due to only viewing the obscene content and vulgar language as is. They did not analyze the author's background and, thus, his reasoning for including this content. Thus, they did not understand that the obscenities had a thematic purpose within *Howl*.

The Birth Of Beat Literature

During its initial release, *Howl* was very unconventional in not just its obscene content but its literary choices. The poem is told from the first-person point of view. The poem's structure is very abstract, using a series of short sentences. Repetition is an intensely used literary device in this poem. The first third of the poem features sentences that begin with the word "Who," which establishes that Ginsberg is using *Howl* to address a specific group of people. The first line of this poem states that "...my generation destroyed by madness " and "looking for an angry fix" and even "angel-headed hipsters." These statements are attractive for two reasons. First, the author refers to himself as part of this generation, implying that multiple individuals share his beliefs. Second, he establishes a paradoxical statement. He refers to this generation as "destroyed by madness, " implying that they have gone crazy. This is not helped by the statement that

explicitly states that they use drugs. However, why then call them “Angel headed” as well? Is Ginsberg critiquing these individuals, or is he supporting them? With all this in mind, it is possible to theorize what the “who” of this poem is supposed to represent. While it describes someone naturally chaotic, it also establishes them as pure.

Additionally, the use of the word generation implies a grander scope. One that can encompass an entire group of people in the United States. Could it be that the madness was caused by the society they live in? While Ginsberg is referring to a specific group of individuals, at this point, they have yet to be given a proper name. For clarity, they will be referred to under the name given to them in the future: The Beat Generation.

While not explicitly stated, it is implied that Ginsberg is writing for individuals who share similar beliefs as him. This generation comprises authors and poets who gained prevalence during the late 1940s and 1950 in post-World War II America. Ginsberg himself is hailed as a critical poet within this movement, as *Howl* helped establish the genre-defying features used within Beat literature. According to the editors of the *Poetry Foundation*: “Beat poets sought to write in an authentic, unfettered style” (*The Beat Poets*). “First thought, best thought” was how central Beat poet Allen Ginsberg described their method of spontaneous writing. The Beat poets expanded their consciousnesses through explorations of hallucinogenic drugs, sexual freedom, Eastern religion, and the natural world”. With this, it’s evident to see that Beat poets, or “Beatniks,” sought to break away from the cultural conventions of literature, and the more incredible American culture. They sought to use controversial topics within their works to speak their truth. Thus, drugs, vulgar language, and obscenity are not placed in *Howl* for a specific purpose. It is meant to make critiques about the United States as an entity. Thus, it can be

established that *Howl* has value as a literary work. Something that the detractors of *Howl* did not pick up.

Why is discussing the intended audience important to the censorship of *Howl*? It is important to understand that the authorities were unaware of this movement because it needed to be established. Raskin says, "A reading would provide an occasion both for his birth as a poet and for the birth of the Beat Generation, which had been slowly germinating for years" (Raskin 12). Thus, the authorities couldn't have known about using obscenities as a thematic choice for the poem. *Howl* was one of the first pieces of Beat literature, so the authorities decided that *Howl* was simply meant to be pornographic or offensive.

Consequently, publisher Ferlinghetti felt the need to express this sentiment in an article he wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle: "For it is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed to be obscene" (Morgan and Peters 107). Beat literature gave rise to new and strange thematic choices. Obscenity, seen as taboo during that period, became a key feature within the genre thanks to *Howl*. Thus, one must assume that the authorities assumed the poem was obscene due to insufficient knowledge of this budding genre.

Escaping the Closet

An important point to stress about *Howl* is that it references many aspects of Ginsberg's experiences. Consider the line "Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy" (Ginsberg, Morgan, and Peters 23). One might wonder what the point of this line is. Many people at the time thought this was simply pushing a homosexual agenda, but Beat literature is much more intricate. This line in his poem has a particular purpose: To discuss Ginsberg's experiences with his sexual orientation.

Homosexuality is a relatively discreet theme throughout the poem. Yet as implied by Raskin, it is a theme that has literary value within *Howl*. How? It's because the theme is used to decry the hatred against queerness in the United States during the 1950s. For instance, the following stanza discreetly discusses this theme: "Who lost their love boys to the three old shrews of fate the one-eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar" (Ginsberg, Morgan, Peters 23). This line implies that the speaker lost a lover, who is presumed to be male. Whether literally or figuratively, the blame is placed upon a capitalist society. Raskin adds to this discussion by expressing that Ginsberg and other Beat authors had: "...A deep discontent with the militarism and materialism of American civilization" (Raskin 16). Capitalism is a very materialistic system within the United States. One that does not advocate for "spiritualism," as Ginsberg supports. This spiritualism includes sexual orientation. Thus, Ginsberg's inclusion of the line supports the notion that homosexuality has a purpose within *Howl* and is not simply pornographic. Sadly, this would be the main piece of damning evidence when the authorities initially contested *Howl*.

Consider the following quote from Chester MacPhee, the Collector of U.S. Customs: "The words and the of the writing is obscene. You wouldn't want your children to come across it" (Morgan and Peters 103). This statement indicates the main problem of the individuals who sought to censor *Howl*: They generalized the theme of homosexuality. The authorities were basing their judgment on what was seen on the page. They did not analyze the theme for literary value. Why? Because homosexuality was taboo in U.S. culture. This is a point that Raskin perpetuates in his book when discussing this topic. He supplements this issue in the following quote: "Throughout the mid-1950s, the San Francisco Police Department waged a relentless—and inevitably futile—war against the city's burgeoning homosexual subculture. Now, despite all that intense police repression, homosexuality reared its head in *Howl*, and that

was intolerable” (Raskin 211). The authorities seemed very biased in their assessment of this poem, so where does *Howl* stand with its use of homosexuality? While it is evident that Ginsberg had a purpose for implementing this theme, it is also essential to consider that Ginsberg used *Howl* to present his sexual orientation. First, Raskin quotes Ginsberg as stating: “*Howl* was a literal “coming out of the closet” and an “acknowledgment of the basic reality of homosexual joy” (Raskin XX). This explicitly states that Ginsberg used *Howl* to assert his sexual orientation. This gives more evidence that these homosexual acts could represent the author’s need to come out and accept his orientation. While Ginsberg’s society shunned homosexuality, so much so that the authorities ignored any literary or artistic value when used in *Howl*, it’s fascinating how the theme is employed as a literal howl. An admittance towards one’s true self regardless of the society one lives in.

The Madman? Or the Manipulator?

While previously, the authority figures referred to the police officers who removed *Howl*, it is time to shift to a different kind of authority figure: The Lawyer—specifically, the prosecutor of the obscenity case and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Ralph McIntosh. As the prosecutor of this case, it’s evident that Ferlinghetti would not want to analyze *Howl*. Since he is contesting the poem, he does not try to analyze the work to explain the vulgar language and obscenity. Little did McIntosh know, this would spell disaster for his case.

A question during the trial was whether the poem could be reworded. Could the mentions of genitalia and other crude words be replaced with ones with similar implications but were not so inappropriate? Raskin’s discussion of Ginsberg implies that this would be an impossibility. According to Raskin: “Ginsberg spent nearly eight months at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, a time that he rarely, if ever, discussed publicly, though it shaped him as profoundly and

as decisively as any other experience in his life. He used it to shape his own persona as a mad poet and to create the mythology of madness that infuses *Howl*" (Raskin 92). This quote presents a powerful assumption: Ginsberg was playing a character for the sake of his writing. This concept is echoed throughout this chapter. However, this also implies that the profanity present had to be in the poem. Because Ginsberg wanted to create the persona of a madman, more supportive evidence can be found within Raskin's justification as to why Ginsberg concocted this elaborate plan: "To be a poet seemed to entail a certain madness. Of course, there was a long tradition of mad poets that went back to the Greeks, then flowered with the nineteenth-century romantics and found expression again in the twentieth century" (Raskin 91). Here, it's evident that Ginsberg intentionally created this character to follow in the footsteps of his contemporaries. While this does confirm that Ginsberg was playing a character, was he explicitly trying to fool a specific group of people?

The following quote details how Ginsberg fooled the psychiatrists at the mental hospital he was in: "In some of his comments to the doctors, he seems to have made honest disclosures and at other times he seems to have tried to lead them on a false trail. He hid behind smoke screens and at the same time he was transparent" (Raskin 98). Considering how Ginsberg manipulated the psychiatrists within the mental hospital, it would not be a stretch to think he would employ these manipulative tactics in his work. As previously stated, *Howl* is a very subversive poem. To such a degree that unless a reader analyzes the poem thoroughly, one might think that a madman wrote this poem. This is how Ginsberg fools the reader. The best way of seeing his trickery is to give an example. Consider the purpose of the following stanza:

"...Presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy, and who were given the concrete void of

insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy ping pong & amnesia” (Ginsberg, Morgan, and Peters 25) instead. This line utilizes irony and even humor. Essentially, the fact that he states that he underwent treatment at the mental hospital but then received various therapy treatments that seem too absurd to be true makes this statement seem almost joke-like. Most importantly, this is not meant to be taken too seriously. Would someone be given ping-pong and amnesia as an effective treatment in a mental hospital?

Since Ginsberg has established himself as a manipulator, it is time to analyze the people he fooled. This is where Ralph McIntosh and the obscenity trial finally come in. The trial is well documented in a chapter within *Howl on Trial* called *How Captain Hanrahan Made Howl A Best-Seller* by David Perlman. As mentioned previously, Macintosh did not specifically analyze the poem before the trial. Thus, his thoughts on the poem were based on what was written on the page rather than what it meant. Perlman explains: “The prosecutor railed at the poem too, and it was sometimes difficult to tell which he objects to more, its dirt or its incomprehensibility” (Perlman, Morgan, and Peters 204). This confirms that McIntosh did not understand what the poem’s use of profanity was supposed to represent. Remember that Ginsberg wrote this poem to trick unsuspecting readers into believing his work is obscene. That meant that McIntosh fell into the trap that Ginsberg set. More supporting evidence can be found within the witness testimonies of the trial. These consisted of various literary experts in academia and other related fields. These individuals were able to find meaning within *Howl*. For instance, Mark Schorer was a professor of English at the University of California. An author himself, he brought his thoughts on whether or not the poem’s obscene language was relevant to the plot and themes of *Howl*. Schorer responded: “Ginsberg uses the rhythms of ordinary speech and also the diction of ordinary speech,” Schorer said. I would say the poem uses the necessarily the language of vulgarity”

(Perlman, Morgan, and Peters 204). This supports the notion that this poem has a level of thought in its writing. If a literal professor of English can decree that this work has meaning behind its words, then it must have value within its strange, comedic lines.

Additionally, the trial judge Clayton W. Horn was able to identify the author's intention with *Howl*: "The author of *Howl* has used those words because he believed that his portrayal required them as being in character" (Horn, Morgan, and Peters 198). It's worth noting the fact that the judge, someone who is not as familiar with this kind of poetry, was able to identify the use of profanity. Thus, the argument that *Howl's* use of profanity is unnecessary is incorrect. Even someone who is not an expert in literary analysis can see that profanity has a purpose in this novel: It is simply created by a genius masquerading as a madman.

Ginsberg is truly a master at his craft. He wrote his *Howl* intending to trick his audience into believing there was nothing to infer from it. He created a character, even intentionally sending himself to a mental hospital to support this claim. Yet, he still wrote his poem to have meaning to its madness. Meaning that is lost to those who choose not to indulge in this madness. Meaning shared between astute readers who can see past the manipulation of Allen Ginsberg.

Culture Shock

Howl is an example of a work that uses vulgar language to challenge society. More specifically, it seeks to challenge the idea of "Social importance." Judge Clayton W. Horn explains this concept in the following quote: "While the publishing and distribution of "smut" or "hardcore pornography" are without any social importance and obscene by present-day standards, and should be punished for the good of the community... censorship by Government should be held in tight reign. To act otherwise would destroy our freedoms of free speech and press" (Horn, Morgan, Peters 198). This quote ends up stating the main issue with the efforts to

cancel *Howl*. Many of the detractors, whether police officers or lawyers, end up dismissing *Howl* as a work without “Social Importance.” What exactly does this term mean? While Judge Horn does not explicitly define this term, it is possible to surmise what he means from the previous points.

Social Importance must mean the messaging or statements made from the poem. The authorities and detractors ignored this at the time. They could not look past the profanity because U.S. culture specifically shunned its use in literature. Evidence of this can be found within the Letters To the Editor column responding to the siege of *Howl*. Written in the San Francisco Chronicle, the snippets contain the testimonials of individuals discussing *Howl*: “I think 95 percent of the decent people of this area support Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee, in his efforts to keep cheap, vulgar, pornographic books from entering the U.S.A” (Morgan and Peters 104). This statement might be an explanation for why *Howl* was not analyzed thoroughly. People assumed that it was simply vulgar for the sake of being vulgar. Thus, it’s evident that the United States culture played a significant part in why this book was banned.

Conclusion

It has been around 47 years since Allen Ginsberg published the poem that would challenge U.S. culture. It’s funny to think that one poem could cause such a scandal. Yet, this scandal was necessary for the U.S. to change. It exposed how the typical American was close-minded to sexual identity and profanity. People still thought that vulgar language and obscenity could not be used as valid literary devices. Still, *Howl* and its associated trial serve as a wake-up call to these individuals. Thus, as the United States entered a new age of culture, literature began to challenge the conventions and expectations set by society.

Many years later, Raskin's account of Ginsberg shows evidence that his society was still close-minded. Yet, he asserts that Ginsberg and select authors wanted to make their beliefs known: "What they had in common was a profound love of poetry, a belief in the vitality and integrity of their own work, and a deep discontent with the militarism and materialism of American civilization" (Raskin 16). Raskin's assertion on the Beat Poets implies that they needed to embrace their spiritual ideals and scorn U.S. culture at the time. poets wanted to push the limits of the medium of literature. They wanted to create written work that did not conform to society. Consequently, this would result in *Howl* being contested. It was the first of its kind, so the authorities and detractors did not think to analyze the poem more deeply.

A great example of this negligence is analyzing the theme of sexual identity. It may seem like simple obscenity on the surface, but Raskin surmises that this theme is much more than what it seems. It could be seen as a "coming out" for Ginsberg as he embraces his identity using his poem. Raskin implies using the sexually suggestive present acts within *Howl* to express his identity. The authorities generalizing his work is, once again, an effect of the culture present. This also gives a good insight into how homosexuality has been frowned upon by the greater populous. A sentiment that is sadly still in effect in the present day.

Finally, Raskin makes one of the most significant implications regarding Ginsberg: His fabricated persona. Raskin devises that Ginsberg's persona is based on his beliefs on what a poet should be. This mad, anarchist persona would be made to mock the unsuspecting individuals specifically, Thus, the detractors of *Howl* were intentionally fooled into thinking that Ginsberg was a madman. He could not make a substantial statement due to his madness, but it was a trick. This makes Ginsberg an expert manipulator. He intentionally sought to paint himself as a madman. This represents how individuals in U.S. society easily generalize those who are "mad."

Thus, what kind of impact do *Howl* and its associate trial have after the 1950s? The court case was groundbreaking and paved the way for new manners of thinking. The Beat Generation grew thanks to *Howl*, and their ideals continued to be present in U.S. culture. The hipsters of the 1970s are a standout example, and even today, many individuals subscribe to similar ideas that Ginsberg had. Sadly, censorship is still prevalent, especially for books featuring themes of sexuality. *Howl* itself continues to be contested in the present day. Even the *Poetry Foundation* removed some of the more risque lines when they uploaded the poem onto their website. However, Raskin asserts that Ginsberg inspired people to express their madness. After all, who is to say that the United States is anything but sane?

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