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A Countercultural Vision of America: Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation

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Resumen

El trabajo se basa en una defensa del impacto de la literatura Beat en la cultura americana de los años 50 así como en años posteriores. Para ello, se centra en la figura de Allen Ginsberg y en sus poemas “Howl” y “America”. La publicación de *Howl and Other Poems* hizo mella en la sociedad del momento por su mordiente crítica al sistema de valores americano; el libro fue sujeto a un juicio que sentó precedente en la historia de la censura literaria. El punto final del desarrollo del trabajo será un repaso por dicho juicio.

Abstract

This thesis is based on a defense of the impact that Beat literature made on the culture of the 1950s' America, as well as on later years. For this purpose, the work focuses on the figure of Allen Ginsberg as well as on his poems “Howl” and “America”. The publication of *Howl and Other Poems* caused quite a fuss in the society of its time due to its cutting criticism to American values; the book was subject to a trial that set a precedent in the history of literary censorship. The final section in this thesis will be an overview of that trial.

Palabras clave: América, Generación Beat, Guerra Fría, contracultura, Ginsberg, *Aullido*.

Key words: America, Beat Generation, Cold War, counterculture, Ginsberg, *Howl*.

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1. Introduction

The publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 brought to light a whole movement of writers that moved around an intense cultural atmosphere dominated by jazz music, drug taking, sexual liberty, and long, intense hitchhiking trips across the United States. This group was baptized as the Beat Generation, though this was not a strictly well-formed and organized group as such. Rather, it was a heterogeneous conglomerate of writers that, as Allen Ginsberg himself said, were just “*trying to get published*” (Roy, “The Beat of a Generation”, *The Hindu*).

On the other hand, *Howl* brought an immense headache to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of the publishing house City Lights Books who was either brave or naïve enough to publish Ginsberg's manuscript. In March 1957, a set of copies of the book was seized by San Francisco Customs Collector Chester MacPhee, alleging that the book was “*obscene... you wouldn't want your children to come across it*” (King, “‘Howl’ obscenity prosecution still echoes 50 years later”, *First Amendment Center*). After this, a chain of events led to a trial that was to determine whether *Howl* was obscene or not. More importantly, the trial seemed to divide public opinion into two grounds: those who considered it as a struggle between moral perversion and good values and those who saw in it a struggle between arbitrary censorship and individual freedom.

In *Howl*, Allen talks in his own words about a part of society that opposes the American consumerist society of his time. The author himself was part of a counter culture, and his personal and political stances, shown in *Howl*, were sure to damage the moral sensitivities of the general public. In the present work I aim first to analyze the political and social circumstances of Ginsberg's time, as well as his personal ones. Then I will go on to explain how he creates a countercultural literature, focusing mainly on his poems “Howl” and “America”. The last point of this work will be the trial of *Howl*, which is strictly related to the opposition between the Beat counter culture and the Cold War American culture of the 1950s.

2. The America of the 1950s

The fifties were for a great part of the American people times of comfort, of improving life standards. Nevertheless, they were times of social turmoil even if it cannot be seen at first sight.

Americans were beginning to live better than they had done in the previous decades, especially after the hardships following the Great Depression and the Second World War. The necessities of the war had stimulated industrial economy and economic growth, and after it, the Government set in motion a series of reforms in order to allow for war veterans to access college education, medical care, and even receive loans to purchase homes and utilities¹ The highest unemployment rate of the decade was 6.8 %², and economic prosperity was sustained. People were better accommodated; they had access to automobiles, homes, electric refrigerators, television sets and radios.

All this newfound affluence brought along a new American mindset. Due to better opportunities and wealth, a new era of consumerism began. Americans were more optimistic, and started to rely more on a success mentality. Yet, prosperity had its own drawbacks: as wealth grew, a conformist spirit did as well. It was thought that in order to keep the machine of prosperity going on and to avoid the new dangers of the world, one should live up to fulfill an ‘American’ profile: the laborious, the successful, the hard-working were apt to be ‘real’ Americans, while those who contradicted these conditions or were different in any way would be regarded with suspicion. “*Getting along, conforming to norms and respecting strict gender roles were duties of citizenship.*” (Black 35)

The ‘dangers of the world’, as stated above, included the phenomenon of the anti-communist paranoia. The end of the war set two new power hemispheres in the world, one dominated by communist Russia and the other by the United States. It was General George S. Patton who, shortly after the end of the war, predicted that the United States’ real enemy was not the Nazis, but the soviets. Despite his ‘prophetic’ statement, Patton was not taken really seriously and was finally relegated to desk work. (Orlando, “The foresight of Patton”. *Frontpage Mag*)³

¹ Library of Congress, “The Post War United States, 1945-1968.”

² Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject (Bureau of Labor Statistics Data)

³ His death in December 1945 is seen as an unfortunate accident or a murder depending on the viewpoint of historians. The supporters of the second option claim it could have been a strategy to silence him, and so is discussed in Orlando’s article.

The claims of General Patton proved not to be so misguided. When the power balance shifted, the Soviet Union stopped to be an ally and became the Western World's political antithesis. From then on, the US would launch policies that would seek either to strengthen their presence in the world or to expel communism or potential communism from any country. In 1949, communist leader Mao Zedong takes power in China. Only one year after that, the US got involved in the Korean War and "*repulsed the North Communist invasion*" (Black 34). This was seen as an indirect conflict between the US and Communist Russia, who were supporting South Korea and North Korea, respectively. And just South of the border the Cuban Revolution took place. Its leaders Castro and Guevara were seen by Americans as the vassals of Stalin in Cuba.

For the average middle-class white American, the 'reds', as they came to be pejoratively called, were now a living threat that at least equaled the Nazi one. All this, of course, had a lot to do with that new mindset, whose main features were intolerance, conventionalism, conformity and an anti-all attitude against every form of political thought or lifestyle that differed from the ideal American citizen. A Cold War attitude developed during those years, affecting not only self-declared communists, but thousands of people who at some moment were suspected to have dangerous attitudes or ideas.

The 50s were the times of McCarthyism⁴. This period lasted until the first half of the decade and it was named after Senator Joseph McCarthy, who promoted political persecution and repression against communists. His policy eventually led to a general fear and to the persecution of thousands of American citizens, sometimes following mere suspicions with no physical evidence. Some of the repressed suffered harsh investigations and interrogations. Not only citizens with overt political opinions, but also public workers and teachers were accused of anti-American activities. Sadly, even the world of artists underwent accusations:

"In the 1950's censorship concerns gave authorities the means to identify dissent and the grounds to investigate and regulate cultural trespassers. Because Cold War culture perceived difference as a lack of patriotism, or a flaunting of conformity, artistic expression was often sanctioned or curtailed" (Black 33)

One of the most prominent examples of anti-communist persecution in the arts industry was the elaboration by the Government of the 'Hollywood Ten' blacklist⁵. The list was at first formed by ten writers and directors who refused to testify to the House Committee of Un-American Activities. These ten artists were blacklisted and banned from their jobs by

⁴ US History, "McCarthyism" *US History Online Textbook*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

their employers. The list was enforced until the late 50s, damaging the reputations and careers of about three hundred artists, among whom were Charlie Chaplin or Orson Welles. Most commonly artists were accused of belonging to the Communist Party USA. Most of these Hollywood artists could not repeat their previous successes. Others left the country for good: Chaplin⁶ went to the UK and when trying to come back he was denied entrance into the US⁷. He would still have a successful career, but it was not until 1972 that he regained recognition in America when he was awarded the Honorary Oscar.

The morality of the average American did not go unopposed, though. There were explosions of inconformity in different cultural areas. In cinema⁸, Ray Nicholas's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) helped the figure of James Dean shoot to fame in his incarnation of a young man who rebels against all social values around him and defies his own family. In the music industry, Elvis Presley became a teen idol and contributed to the fame of rock and roll and rockabilly music, both genres becoming associated with greasers.⁹

Woody Guthrie's socialist anthem "This land was made for you and me" had been going around since the previous decade and it curiously became one of America's favourite songs, even amongst conservatives. Probably its success came from the fact that it expressed a true patriotic feeling at the same time it supported the collectivization of the land.¹⁰

The subculture of the Beats was not as visible, or at least it was not before the polemic trial of *Howl and Other Poems*. But the group of artists under the label 'Beat' was already acting before 1956. Beat writers were against American imposed values of success and conformity, and they idolized people with less conventional lives: artists, jazz musicians, political and anti-war activists and even bums were the Beat 'heroes' or 'angels'. Allen Ginsberg often talked in his poetry of figures characterized by loneliness, voracious sexual appetites (and often, great passion for music and for drugs, and especially an insatiable anger for self-knowledge and self-discovery). To sum it up into few words, Beats sought to embrace their deepest desires. For this purpose it was important to reject imposed values, more so when it came to the conservative values of the fifties. They rejected materialism and went after enriching spiritual visions; they initiated long trips often equipped only with their clothes and few dollars. Allen Ginsberg travelled across the country, and he was an experienced traveler, visiting Europe, Latin America and Africa. His friend and fellow writer, Jack

⁶ BBC News, "US Immigration slams door on Chaplin."

⁷ Though British by birth, by that time Chaplin was well-established in Hollywood.

⁸ US History, "Voices Against Conformity", *US History Online Textbook*.

⁹ This generic term was used by conservatives in the fifties as a pejorative way to refer to youths of the working class who used hair wax to comb their hair back.

¹⁰ Smith, "Top 20 Political Songs: This Land is your Land (Woodie Guthrie, 1940)", *New Statesman*.

Kerouac, was keen on travelling as well and he reflected his passion for travelling and self-knowledge in his *On the Road*, the most representative prose work of the Beat group. Meanwhile, Ginsberg would write and publish his most memorable poem, the longish “Howl” which became itself the most prominent Beat poem.

In *Howl*, Ginsberg talks of his innumerable experiences as a traveller, his vision of an oppressing moral and his admiration to some saintly figures. But before diving into his opera prima, let us analyze some of the personal circumstances that led him to the writing of “Howl”.

3. Life and influences

In the introduction to the City Lights edition of *Howl and Other Poems*, poet William Carlos Williams writes: “*Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell*” (Ginsberg 8). Williams remarks the vital experiences that influence Ginsberg, which were clearly reflected on “Howl”. Actually, a great part of his production contains a high amount of biographical content.

Ginsberg¹¹ was born on June 3, 1926 in Newark, New Jersey, but was raised mostly in Paterson, where his father, Louis Ginsberg, taught in a high school and was a published poet himself. His mother, Naomi Ginsberg, was a Communist Russian émigré who had serious psychological disorders and who took her child Allen as her favorite one. She would take little Allen and his brother Eugene to Communist Party meetings, of which Ginsberg had quite merry memories: “*America when I was seven momma took me to/ Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a/ handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the/ speeches were free everybody was angelic*”. (Ginsberg 42, lines 85-88)

From his father, Ginsberg inherited a love for poetry that impelled him to read and enjoy the works of Walt Whitman, one of his greatest heroes. In the beginning he went for a kind of poetry which was imitative of his father’s writing¹², using regular metrics and iambic pentameter, rather than the non-traditional form he would adopt afterwards.

The reasons for his change in poetic forms and rhythms have their origin in the early 40s, when an Allen aged 16 was accepted as an undergraduate at Columbia University. He started his college period with good results, though he was expelled from Columbia University in 1945 for indecent acts¹³. Although he went on with studies and finished his BA

¹¹ Ginsberg’s biographical events are extracted from Asher, Levi. “Allen Ginsberg”. *Literary Kicks*.

¹² Bawer, Bruce. “The Phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg.” *The New Criterion*

¹³ Columbia University Library Archival Collections, “Allen Ginsberg papers, 1943-1991”

in 1948, young Ginsberg took a delight in public scandal that probably helped him to bolster his image as a poet. Bruce Bawer remembers an anecdote that took place in a conference, where upon the speaker's comment on his surprise to walk amongst proudly naked women in Nigeria, Ginsberg stood up and took off his clothes. (Bawer, Bruce, "The Phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg". *The New Criterion*)

During his period in college, Ginsberg developed an increasing curiosity about his sexual orientation. He had been normally embarrassed to tell anybody that he was a homosexual, but in Columbia he met a series of new characters with whom he felt free enough to express his feelings. During his first years in Columbia he befriended Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, a writer older than him and an outspoken homosexual himself. After going out in New York with his new friends, he became more comfortable with his homosexuality. These new people had adventurous lives, though. For example, Burroughs was at the time in a period of drug experimentation, and it was just a matter of time before Ginsberg started taking drugs as well: Benzedrine (affectionately called "benny" by Beats), marijuana, LSD, aether, mescaline, peyote and ayahuasca were all tried by Ginsberg at some moment in his life, and he wrote poetry under the influence of some of them and as a form of experimentation. He even used drug names as titles for some of his poems, such as "Laughing Gas", "Mescaline" and "Lysergic Acid".

Anyway, his new gang was formed mostly by outcasts, people who were not willing to accept the American values and had more dissolute lives. One of the members of the group, Lucien Carr (responsible of introducing Kerouac and Ginsberg to Burroughs), murdered David Kammerer. He testified on court that he was defending himself from Kammerer's ongoing obsessive harassment¹⁴. A key figure in the group those years was Herbert Huncke, a drug addict and criminal. The group usually met in Ginsberg's apartment, and Huncke had some stolen items there. By the time the place was registered by the police¹⁵, Huncke was condemned to jail and Ginsberg was tried as an implicated. His two options: to go to jail or to spend some time at the Columbia Psychiatric Institute. He chose the second option, but he had to accept to be treated for his homosexuality, which by the time was still considered a psychological disorder. It was in the mental institution that he met Carl Solomon, his friend and poetic inspiration, to whom "Howl" is dedicated. Both experienced closely some of the horrors suffered by patients at psychiatric institutions. These happenings, together with his mother's insanity, created in him an obsession about the topic. Besides, after leaving the

¹⁴ Elola, Joseba, "El crimen escrito de Kerouac y Burroughs". *El País*.

¹⁵ Asher, Levi, "Herbert Huncke". *Literary Kicks*.

institution he was not sure anymore whether his homosexuality was a real disorder or not, which made him feel alienated for a long time.

Anyway, the soon-to-be Beat group kept meeting, adding the figure of Neal Cassady, the quint-essential Beat hero. The group took the habit of going to jazz concerts which were common in New York. They deeply admired the music and virtuosity of jazz artists such as Miles Davies and Charlie Parker. Their styles were deeply influenced by *bebop*, a variety of jazz characterized by having a rhythmic base over which a virtuous musician would improvise solitarily with his instrument, often in long frenetic spontaneous blasts of energy. Ginsberg and the Beats used this style as a source of inspiration:

“Not only did the Beats foolhardily try to emulate the ways of life of bebop greats, they used the principal ideas of bebop playing and applied it to prose and poetry writing, creating a style sometimes called "bop prosody." Beat prose, especially that of Jack Kerouac, is characterized by a style submerged in the stream of consciousness, words blurted out in vigorous bursts, rarely revised and often sparsely punctuated for lines and lines.” (Mike Janssen, “Jazz” *Literary Kicks*)

Beats took this further and coined the expression ‘first thought best thought’¹⁶, which summed up their claim that writing must be totally spontaneous, without any correcting, thinking or editing process, since any of these elements would corrupt the pure material created by the first instinctive impulse of the mind. It is said that Jack Kerouac wrote his *On the Road* (1957) in one session when he was high on ‘benny’, and parts of Ginsberg’s “Howl” were written with the same method. Whereas the effectiveness of such technique (as to literary quality) can be questionable, it is a fact that Beat writers did not follow it blindly: during the composition of *Naked Lunch* (1959), both Kerouac and Ginsberg helped Burroughs edit and revise all the material he had written, because altogether it was quite incomprehensible.

While music and hipster drugs were very influential, Ginsberg had his own literary heroes. He and the Beats admired romantic poets. Ginsberg particularly liked the poetry of William Blake: actually, in one of his earliest compositions “On Reading William Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ ”¹⁷ he manifested a mystic revelation he had over such reading. In William Blake, Ginsberg could see the image of a concerned poet that looked around himself and, upon the injustice he saw, could not but reveal and cry out in protest. While Blake protested against the dehumanizing effects of an increasingly industrialized England, Allen Ginsberg did so against the dehumanizing witch hunt that McCarthyism was, the conformity and the

¹⁶ Deresiewicz, “First Thought, Best Thought” *The New York Times*.

¹⁷ This poem is part of his early production and in it we cannot see his later conversational tone yet.

intolerance present in American soil.

Also, Ginsberg identified with the American Walt Whitman. In 1955, in the centennial anniversary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Allen Ginsberg wrote his poem “A Supermarket in California”, where he directly addresses the long-bearded poet. Using a long-line style made popular by Whitman, the persona (Ginsberg) walks along the corridors of the supermarket with Whitman and finally asks him “*what America did you have when Charon quit/ poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank/ and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?*” (Ginsberg, 30), that is, wondering about the kind of country that was left after the poet’s death. The setting of the poem is quite symbolic: a country where all is artificial, in the era of electric household appliances and commodities.

William Carlos Williams was a notable model for Ginsberg’s writing. Williams, a general practitioner and imagist poet, lived in Paterson, New Jersey, where Ginsberg had grown up and where they met each other (as Williams himself declares in his introduction to *Howl and Other Poems*¹⁸). Williams was recognized for his imagist poems, which conceived pictures with a rather simple language, rejecting traditional stanza patterns and rhyme structures and many times using a casual tone of everyday conversation. This tone is seen for instance in “This is just to say” a poem that could be perfectly read as a note left on the fridge door.

For Ginsberg, the conversational style was a revelation. He even spent some time under the tutelage of Williams. Allen Ginsberg understood that poetry should not be seen as an academic labor, but as the art of talking with one’s own voice, in one’s own words, as if talking to a friend or a relative. This, together with the spontaneous writing techniques he learnt from Kerouac, the explosive bursts of creativity he admired in jazz musicians and his own protesting anti-capitalistic voice, were the main signatures of “Howl” and his later productions.

4. A Howl for a fallen America

"Howl" was, as many other poems from Ginsberg, initiated as a result of a hallucination kindly provided by peyote. By 1955 he was living with Peter Orlovsky, his lifelong partner, and they once decided to go out into the San Francisco night having taken each a dose of the drug. As they walked around the city they found themselves in front of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, which looked like a monster to Allen. The hotel had taken the

¹⁸ Ginsberg 7

horrible image of Moloch¹⁹, the Phoenician god of fire to whom people sacrificed their own newborn children. The image made such an impression on him that soon after he wrote much of the second part of "Howl" in one sitting.

But how was the image of Moloch significant for Ginsberg's poetry and for his concept of America? To approach this theme better, it could be useful to turn to a movie from 1927: Fritz Lang, the Austrian director, set a precedent in the history of cinema with his *Metropolis*²⁰. In the film, based upon the homonymous novel by his wife Thea von Harbou, Lang recreates a city divided into privileged people (who practice sports, go to theatres and so forth) and the workers, who live in apartments under the main city and keep its machinery working in long shifts. In one of the first scenes the protagonist (the city ruler's son) walks down into the machinery of the city after chasing a working class woman he loves. Curiously, he has a very similar vision to the one Ginsberg had in San Francisco: the workers are in a big machine that for a short while takes the shape of a statue of Moloch. The workers start walking –eyes looking down– into the god's mouth and into its fire, as the statue erects over them with a horrifying look.

Whether Ginsberg's vision was unconsciously influenced by such scene or not, it seems clear that he brought the image of Moloch to an actualized version, to the America of those days. "*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! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!*" is what Allen exclaims in an outraged voice (Ginsberg 21, lines 315-319). The American Moloch, however, is not literally that "*sphinx of cement and aluminium [that] bashed open/ their skulls*" (pg 21, lines 300-301). Moloch is a mental system, Moloch is American history, American institutions, the Government, conventions and a social machinery that keeps Americans dreaming of "*unobtainable dollars*" (pg 21, line 303). The society against which he stands up is one that keeps people's deepest desires constraint. It holds their impulses back by the promise of a life of wealth and, upon obtaining it, they become more docile.

All those who do not live up to certain moral values are rotten apples. Maybe the main difference between Ginsberg's and Mr. Lang's views is that, while Lang focused on class differences, Ginsberg focused on a kind of discrimination that did not isolate individuals because of their origins, but because of their difference or their dissidence. For instance, his

¹⁹ Kaeufer, "'Howl', How the Poem Came to Be and How it Made Allen Ginsberg Famous", *Plosin*

²⁰ *Metropolis*. Dir Fritz Lang. Perf. Brigitte Helm, Alfred Abel and Gustav Fröhlich. Universum Film. 1927.

friend William Burroughs belonged to an affluent family²¹, but he still received strong criticism after publishing *Naked Lunch*, a novel where he exposed political control.

As a homosexual, Allen had his own deal of discrimination. Homosexuality was an important issue for him in his youth, so much that he even had to visit a psychotherapist. With homosexuality treated as a mental disorder, Ginsberg felt as an outcast. This is reflected in lines 330 to 335:

*“Moloch in whom I sit lonely!
Moloch in whom I dream
Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in
Moloch, Lacklove and Manless in Moloch!
Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom
I am consciousness without a body! Moloch
who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy!
Moloch whom I abandon!”*

(pg 22)

In these lines he carefully chooses his words: he depicts himself as crazy (because he is homosexual) and manless (because he is too much afraid of admitting his orientation and finding a partner). He calls himself a ‘cocksucker’ in the insulting, deprecating and somehow mocking way a bigot would do. It is no strange thing that he felt lonely and that he sought the company of others outcasts as him: Kerouac was a hedonist and alcoholic, Burroughs was homosexual and into a deep drug addiction, and Cassady lived hand to mouth, profiting from every one of the lovers he had across the continent, plus his sexual orientation was never clearly defined.²²

From line 142 until the very end of section II, Ginsberg breaks with the ‘Moloch’ chorus and cries on the tragedy of the ‘*American river*’ (pg 22, line 347). The river is the devastating intolerance of America, which has left to memory and thrown “*into the street*” (pg 23, line 358) all trace of diversity and ‘blessed madness’. All is left is a sort of slavery of the mind:

*“Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs!
Skeleton treasuries! Blind capitals! Demonic
Industries! Spectral nations! Invincible mad
Houses! Granite cocks! Monstrous bombs!
They broke their backs lifting Moloch to heaven!”*

²¹ His grandfather was the founder of Burroughs Corporation, a large manufacturer of equipment for business.

²² Ginsberg and Cassady had a long-lasting affair that Cassady ended, leaving Allen with a deep depression.

(pg 22, lines 338-342)

Allen partly attributes this enslavement to public institutions. There is a reference to a government building in the lines above, where “*skeleton treasuries*” probably refers to the US treasury building. In line 20, a description of a building as “the skull” is most likely an allusion to the US Capitol Building. Probably these metaphors of death aim at associating the decision-making bodies with factories of death, especially in a time when WWII and the Korean War had taken together the lives of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers.

In lines 304 and 305, Ginsberg writes on characters like “*children screaming under the/ stairways*” and “*boys sobbing in armies*” (pg 21), again pointing out to these very young people who have been sent to war, who have experienced their horrors. Most of them have interrupted their normal lives, their careers, their studies, in order to defend their country against fascism first and then against communism, a threat half-real and half-exaggerated by anti-communist propaganda.

The last line of the extract above provides a powerful image due to its vividness. One can almost experience the crudity of imagining skinny multitudes working on monstrous monuments until extenuation. These lines, together with the image of “demonic industries” contain a resonance of some of Blake’s most celebrated poems. In his poem “Jerusalem”, Blake wonders whether Jerusalem was ever “*buildded here, Among these dark Satanic Mills*”²³. Also, in “Holy Thursday”, he writes “*Is this a holy thing to see,/ In a rich and fruitful land,/ Babes reduced to misery/ Fed with cold and usurious hand?*”²⁴ In both poems Blake criticizes how English industries exploited children to get more profits. Blake’s England was immerse in a profitable industrialization, but still there was no ethics in employers. Just in a like way, Ginsberg sees that America has a growing consumer economy, but only at the expense of individual freedom and opportunities to pursuit one’s authentic happiness.

In previous lines, the figures of the Beat “angel” or the Beat “hero” have been explained. While the second section attacked the values and institutions that create intolerance in the population, section I (which was written later) extensively deals with the many different figures that are socially excluded due to those barriers. Allen describes the myriad characters he has had the chance to meet in his travels across the country. These, of course, are his saints, people with extremely troubled lives, such as Neal Cassady. Cassady was for Ginsberg the archetypal wandering hero who lives everywhere but is from nowhere, the Lord Byron of

²³ Blake, William. “And did Those Feet in Ancient Time”, *Milton: A Poem in Two Books*. 1811.

²⁴ Blake, William. “Holy Thursday”, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. 1789.

the Beat Generation, all energy, intensity, passion. He was a con man too, and he sometimes used Kerouac or Ginsberg when he had no money or no place to sleep. But still, they let themselves be dragged by his powerful magnetism. He was “*idolised for his fast driving, hyperactive energy and voracious reading habits*” (Cochrane. “Neal Cassady: Drug-taker. Bigamist. Family-man.” *The Guardian*). Cassady and his attracting personality are immortalized in “Howl” as the figure of a traveler:

*“Who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad
stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these
poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver –joy
to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls
in empty lots & diner backyards...”*

(pg 14, lines 145-149)

The figure of the traveler is of great importance in Beat literature. It was through travelling that writers gathered experiences and anecdotes they would use in their writing. Denver is mentioned above, and it was not only hometown to Cassady²⁵ but a sort of Mecca for Ginsberg and Kerouac. Ginsberg writes of themselves in lines 220-224:

*“Who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who
came back to Denver & waited in vain, who
watched over Denver & brooded & loned in
Denver and finally went away to find out the
Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her heroes.”*

(pg 17)

The city of Denver was repeatedly visited by them, and they made Larimer Street one of their favored meeting points.

As a matter of fact, not only Denver but the urban landscape in general was so important to Beats that their literature would have never developed the way it did without it. Jazz and hipster culture were mostly developed in downtown clubs and apartment parties; the same vision of Moloch would have never taken place in Ginsberg’s mind had he never lived in San Francisco. Bums, drug addicts, heavy drinkers and artists could be seen in the streets of Denver and New York, two important cities for Beats. In section I Allen’s heroes spend out their nights of decadence “*dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn/ looking for an angry fix*” (pg 9, lines 3-4), sitting “*in the supernatural darkness of/ cold-water flats*” (pg 9, lines 9-10) and chaining “*themselves to subways for the endless/ ride from Battery to holy*

²⁵ Asher, Levi. “Denver”. *Literary Kicks*.

Bronx on Benzedrine.” (pg 10, lines 41-42). All these descriptions are only possible in the kind of urban circles frequented by Ginsberg and company.

Other figures relevant to this section of the poem are political dissenters and libertines. People who strongly criticized the national institutions or who were involved with the Communist Party: “*who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union/ Square weeping and undressing while the sirens/ of Los Alamos wailed them down*” (pg 13, lines 101-103). We find below some lines that were discussed in the “Howl” trial: “*who howled on their knees in the subway and were/ dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts.*” (pg 13, lines 112-113). These lines, which were discussed as rude and obscene, should not be read as a defense of public genital exposure. Rather, they seem to be a vindication of a free unhidden sexuality.

Towards the end of the section there is one of Ginsberg’s great literary obsessions: mental asylums. During his life he had several encounters with mental illness and institutions, and he was an advocate of anti-asylum movements. When he was a kid, his mother Naomi developed schizophrenia, and was committed to Rockland and Pilgrim State, two institutions of the 1950s. The worst traumatic experience, which made him feel guilty for a long time, came when he had to sign the papers for her mother’s lobotomy²⁶. His mother died in Rockland, and was a victim of such barbaric and radical technique. The procedure, which was used to calm down patients in danger of damaging themselves or other patients, also deteriorated some functions of the brain, and left patients as if they were children with attention and their “*bodies turned to stone*” (pg 19, line 259). But until the beginning of the 1950s it was one of the leading procedures in American psychiatric institutions and it worked as a patch-up alternative to other methods. In “Howl” Ginsberg mentions some other methods that were used in those days to treat mental patients: “*who were given instead the concrete void of insulin/ Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy/ occupational therapy pingpong &/ amnesia.*” (pg 18, lines 245-248). Insulin therapy consisted of a comma inducted in the patient, which would calm him down for a while. The problem of electroconvulsive therapy, apart from the convulsions caused on the patient, was that it was often used to control troublesome patients²⁷.

Ginsberg's second encounter with mental institutions was when some of Huncke’s stolen goods were found in his flat. His only way to avoid prison was to be committed into Greystone psychiatric hospital. There he met Carl Solomon, a Dadaist writer who entered

²⁶ Asher, Levi. “Kaddish”. *Literary Kicks*.

²⁷ Sabbatini, Renato. “The History of Shock Therapy in Psychiatry.” *Cerebro & Mente*

there voluntarily and who became a very close friend of Ginsberg. In Solomon he could see “*the shade of my mother*” (pg 24, line 355), and the similarity of their situation surely encouraged Ginsberg to take him as a friend. To Solomon he writes some words in Section I: “*who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism/ and subsequently presented themselves on the/ granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads/ and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy*” (pg 18, lines 240-244). The whole poem is dedicated to Solomon, and in section III Ginsberg directly addresses him with the refrain “I’m with you in Rockland”.

Section III can actually be seen as a more optimistic way out of the rest of the poem. Ginsberg is very sentimentally tied to Solomon, and their friendship proves to be a way of salvation, a kind of liberation only achieved when they have both had a kind company through the shocking experience of the asylum. The desperation suffered by Ginsberg’s mate is made very vivid in lines 393-396: “*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.*”(pg 25) Solomon’s awful experiences are being compared to those of Jesus Christ. The Dadaist, Ginsberg devoutly writes, is plotting “*against the/ fascist national Golgotha*” (pg 25, lines 399-400) and will eventually “*split the heavens of Long Island/ and resurrect your living human Jesus*” (pg 25, lines 402-403). Here Ginsberg is probably making Solomon a representative of all the madmen in American mental institutions, whom he thinks are suffering a mental torment, who are constantly going through shock therapy, and who leave those institutions with a sense of alienation and social dislocation product of their treatment. Although the whole poem has a decadent atmosphere and it leaves the reader with little sense of hope, the final lines could be the most brilliant in that they are lighter and more hopeful, leaving the poem with an ending open to a better future:

“*...where we wake up electrified out of the coma
By our own souls’ airplanes roaring over the
Roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the
Hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse
O skinny legions run outside o starry-
spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is
here O victory forget your underwear we’re
free*”

(pg 26, lines 414-421)

The ending, which invites to a loud excited reading, suggests that all the intolerance, the

hatred and the suffering described in the poem will be overcome thanks to kindness. Allen added a footnote to “Howl” where he celebrates the holiness of everything related to humanity and to its best values. The footnote puts charity, forgiveness and tolerance as essential tools to end human misery.

5. Mocking the US

“America”, written in January 1956, was a poem included in the collection *Howl and Other Poems*, and though it was not given as much attention as “Howl”, it also provides a clear insight to Ginsberg’s political stances.

Also written in free verse, this one does not have the gloomy tones of “Howl”, but is written instead in an intelligent, satirical and mocking style that makes it a fresh piece.

In the poem Ginsberg addresses concrete facts known to the average American, so as to content it was far more ‘readable’ for the general public, though also more directly insulting. Ginsberg talks to America as if the country was a physical person: “*America why are your libraries full of tears?*” (Ginsberg 39, line 13). The actual significance of this line is closely connected to some of the darkest episodes of American history, some of them directly mentioned (“*Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.*” [pg 39, line 6]) and some others easy to be recalled by the reader: the annihilation of the Native American tribes, the Civil War, slavery, social segregation. He also reacts against political persecution, making a very specific reference to his uncle on the side of his mother (pg 40, lines 45-46), a communist Jew who was persecuted after arriving in America. He inquires when America will be “*worthy of your million Trotskyites*” (pg 39, line 12). Those communists who were repressed by Stalin for their allegiance to Trotsky were now being repressed after leaving their country of origin.

Of course, the anti-Communist Cold War paranoia is a central theme. Just as if he was a rebel teenager soon resisting the authority of a conservative father, he cries out: “*I used to be a communist when I was a kid/ I’m not sorry... You should have seen me reading Marx.*” (pg 40, lines 34-41). Maybe the most comic part comes in lines 95-108, where he talks as an overprotective father reprimanding his little child: “*America, you don’t really want to go to war/ America it’s them bad Russians... The Russia wants to eat us alive... Her make us all work sixteen hours a day.*” (pgs 42-43). In this mocking way he tries to expose the McCarthyist policies that were provoking in the public opinion an irrational fear to everything related to Communism. There is one memorable item of McCarthyist propaganda related to the Hollywood blacklist that reads as follows: “*So remember – if you patronize a film made by red producers, writers, stars and studios you are aiding and abetting communism... every*

time you permit reds to come into your living room via your TV set you are helping Moscow and the Internationalists to destroy America!" (Annex i). This piece of propaganda shows how easily one could be seen as a false patriot on the grounds of absurd accusations.

Ginsberg also complains about the American quest for success. In a sarcastic manner, he writes that he is "*obsessed by Time Magazine*" (pg 41, line 50). Actually, Time Magazine published already by the time its "Person of the Year" supplement, which commonly highlights the successes of some national celebrity²⁸. Ginsberg sees it as a negative influence since it makes Americans become obsessed with the pursuit of success and seriousness. The presence of consumerism is even present in poetry, and Allen Ginsberg tries to make a good sales agent out of himself: "*America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500/ down on your old strophe*" (pg 42, lines 79-80).

In "America", Ginsberg shows his most sarcastic side and proves his ability to make cutting observations on Cold War culture. While he urges American society to stop having a double morality, he also longs, as in "Howl" for an "*angelic*" (pg 39, line 9) America. But it seems as if social pressure was too much for him, and he eventually puts his "*queer shoulder to the wheel*" (pg 43, line 117) with resignation.

6. The "Howl" trial

When Ginsberg was writing "Howl", he could not have possibly imagined all the fuss that his book would cause in public opinion. It was a poem that he never expected to publish, so he wrote it with total freedom, as if to himself, without any worries about the coarse language, the sexual images and the allusions to drug use it contained.

The poem, however, was eventually published. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the writer and owner of City Lights Books, thought Ginsberg's craft was good and in November 1 1956 the book was published as the number four of the City Lights Pocket Poets series. Ferlinghetti's books were not printed in the US, but in in the British house Villiers. At first, Ferlinghetti ordered 1000 copies of the book and then he ordered a second printing of around 1500 copies. When the books arrived to San Francisco, Chester McPhee, the city collector of customs seized 520 copies under the claim that the book was obscene and indecent.

After the seizure, authorities refused to go on with any legal proceedings, so Customs had to release the copies seized. But it was not very long before the book was in the spotlight again. On June 3 1957, Shigeyoshi Murao, the clerk of City Lights bookstore, was arrested by

²⁸ Infoplease. "Time 'Person of the Year'"

two undercover police agents to whom, they said, he tried to sell *Howl and Other Poems*. The Japanese clerk was a close friend of Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the co-founder of the publishing house City Lights Books in San Francisco. This was followed by the arrest of Ferlinghetti, and two months later the “Howl” trial began.

And in all this turmoil, where was Ginsberg? He was by that time travelling with his friends in Europe and Africa, and he kept in tune with the trial via letters and newspapers mainly. In any case, he was not compelled to be present at Court: American laws could not judge him simply because the responsibility fell on the publisher of the material, not on the person who wrote it. Meanwhile, Ferlinghetti needed a strategy for his defense. It was only two months before the trial started that the Roth standard appeared in American law. Samuel Roth was a gentleman devoted to the literary business who was convicted for the distribution of pornographic material. In the process, the US Supreme Court created this new standard, which guaranteed the protection under the First Amendment of literary works with some social redeeming value²⁹. Therefore, Ferlinghetti and his lawyer Jake Ehrlich based their defense upon the claim that the book actually had a message of social relevance. On the other hand, the prosecution’s aim was to prove first that the book was obscene and appealed the reader to indecent interest, and second that the publisher had been selling it with lascivious intentions. Text evidence used in the trial was taken only from “Howl” even though the police had seized copies of the entire book. Two basic reasons, according to Joel Black, were that “Howl” by itself “rallied a group of First Amendment lawyers, established academics, and media people to discuss the merits of counterculture literature” (49) and that “the ACLU³⁰ chapter in Northern California had agreed to support “Howl”” (Black 49).

The judge would have been Byron Arnold, but afterwards the presidency of the trial changed to Judge Clayton W. Horn, very well-known for his conservatism, a man who in a previous case “*had sentenced five lady shoplifters to attend The Ten Commandments and write penitential essays on the supercolossal epic’s moral lesson.*” (Perlman 38). At one point of the trial, both Ehrlich and Ralph McIntosh agreed that Clayton should make a recess in order to read and form a personal opinion of “Howl”, apart from what he could hear from the various literary experts that testified.

The prosecution of “Howl” followed a line that was highly decisive for the final sentence. McIntosh surely read the poem, but from his words it seemed as if he had not understood nor tried to understand what he read, as if he only read the most immediate

²⁹ Margolis, Eric. “Obscenity Case Files: *Roth v. United States*”. *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*.

³⁰ The American Civil Liberties Union was founded in 1920 and remains active.

surface of the text, being simply scandalized to read harsh language. Joel Black believes that “essentially, McIntosh aimed to expand the meaning of obscenity and attempted to demonstrate that because “Howl” did not make sense it could not benefit anyone.” (Black 52). Similarly, the chief of the San Francisco Police Department’s Juvenile Bureau who arrested Murao could not be really specific as to the supposed obscenity in the book: “When I say filthy I don't mean suggestive, I mean filthy words that are very vulgar.” (Perlman 37). If the prosecution’s strategy was to be based on the vulgarity of the words whose underlying meaning they could not grasp, it would be hard for them to win the case.

One of the major encounters had occurred when the prosecutor examined Mark Schorer, a reputed writer and literary critic. During his examination, McIntosh insisted on reading aloud assorted excerpts, asking him whether he could understand and explain to the public what the words meant. Schorer, tired of the absurd interrogatory, answered: “Sir, you can't translate poetry into prose. That's why it's poetry” (Black 38). The point McIntosh tried to make was that the regular American public was not able to understand and hence judge the social relevance of “Howl”, if it had any. Surprisingly, it was Judge Horn who settled the argument by saying that “the author could have used another term; whether or not it would have served the same purpose is another thing; that's up to the author.” (Black 39)

The prosecution brought into court its own literary experts in order to defend the case for the obscenity of the book. One of them was David Kirk, professor at the Catholic University of San Francisco. When the defense cross-examined him, the main strategy was to try to make Kirk admit there was social importance in the poem. First, Kirk stated that the work could be valued on the basis of its validity of theme and form. He said the poem lacked form validity because its style was a “weak imitation of a form that was used eighty or ninety years ago by Walt Whitman.” (Black 39) However, Ehrlich counter-argued by asking Kirk whom had Whitman imitated, to which Kirk could not answer. The professor kept on arguing that there was validity in theme in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and in Voltaire’s *Candide*, both censored at the time of their publication. As the cross-examination went on, Kirk finally admitted that some validity of theme could be found in section III. The position of the prosecution was gradually weakening.

Before deliberation, each lawyer made a general conclusion on the process. McIntosh kept his style, concluding that had an ‘average’ man been taken to the stand to testify on the book, he would have surely found it offensive and undecipherable.

Ehrlich’s final speech was perhaps more eloquent and well-made. He declared that the words the author used in his poetry should not be left to choose by the public, since that

would spoil the author's literary purpose. He defended "Howl" as an honest piece. He also made it clear that "*you can't think common, rotten things just because you read something in a book unless it is your purpose to read common, rotten things and apply a common, rotten purpose to what you read.*" (Perlman 39).

Judge Horn's sentence was finally favorable to the defendant. The conservative judge had taken his time to read "Howl" and all the law and precedents concerning the case. In his sentence, he alluded the founding fathers of America: "*The authors of the First Amendment knew that novel and unconventional ideas might disturb the complacent, but they chose to encourage a freedom which they believed essential if vigorous enlightenment was ever to triumph over slothful ignorance.*" (George Mason University "Judge Clayton W. Horn's decision in *The People of California v. Lawrence Ferlinghetti*") He also concluded that the notion of what is obscene depended on an assortment of social and cultural variables, which make it impossible to establish a universal definition of obscenity. On the hypothetical obscene choice of words in the poem, he stated:

"The author of "Howl" has used those words because he believed that his portrayal required them as being in character. The People state that it is not necessary to use such words and that others would be more palatable to good taste. The answer is that life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern... Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words." (George Mason University "Judge Clayton W. Horn's decision in *The People of California v. Lawrence Ferlinghetti*")

Finally, Ferlinghetti was found not guilty of the accusations, and the trial brought the media's attention to Ginsberg and his circles. After the trial, the Beats began to be known all over the country and Ginsberg began to cultivate his image of the poet-rock star. The "Howl" case is nowadays a landmark in the history of literary censorship, and it set a precedent that later contributed to the publishing of other books, including *Naked Lunch*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Lady Chatterley's lover* by Lawrence.

The censorship conflict was not yet ended, however. During the Reagan era (another period of anticommunist conservatism) the Federal Communication Commission set an 'indecenty' standard that "*inhibited even the cutting-edge progressive Pacifica radio stations from broadcasting Allen's reading of his seminal poem*" (Goldberg, "Allen Ginsberg: Poet, Legal Scholar, Rock Star", *Los Angeles Times*). Nevertheless, the main battle had been won.

7. Conclusion

When Ginsberg endeavored to write his “Howl” he had no clue of all the agitation he would bring after himself. There has been discussion³¹ about whether the book would have never been famous without the trial, whether he was a scandal seeker, whether his poetry was imitative. It does not matter at all. Ginsberg’s poetry was made visible by the “Howl” trial, but what really matters is that his poetry and his life proved influential to his and later generations. He and the Beats helped rocket up the San Francisco Renaissance; Ginsberg was followed by advocates of anti-war movements and sexual freedom movements; he worked for the improvement of the conditions of mental patients; he was an spiritual leader of the hippy counterculture; he helped other writers publish and spread their works. Ginsberg was the glue that contributed to tie together a whole generation of artists, activists, writers...

But his influence was not only restricted to the 1950s and 1960s: he has been followed by later musicians like Thurston Moore³² and stand-up comedians such as Bill Hicks, a Texan who laughed at intolerance through his cutting humor.

But most of all, Allen Ginsberg has made legions of readers stop and think about the insanity resulting of a society that values success and commodities over human kindness and solidarity. He would have probably agreed with Chaplin that “more than machinery, we need humanity.” After all, his main goal was that of getting people closer together.

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!

³¹ Bawer, “The Phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg”, *The New Criterion* webpage.

³² Lead vocalist of the noise-rock band *Sonic Youth*.

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Annex I: Anticomunist propaganda against movie producers

AMERICANS

DON'T PATRONIZE REDS!!!!



**YOU CAN DRIVE THE REDS OUT OF
TELEVISION, RADIO AND HOLLY-
WOOD**

THIS TRACT WILL TELL YOU HOW.

WHY WE MUST DRIVE THEM OUT:

1) The REDS have made our Screen, Radio and TV Moscow's most effective Fifth Column in America . . .
2) The REDS of Hollywood and Broadway have always been the chief financial support of Communist propaganda in America . . . 3) OUR OWN FILMS, made by RED Producers, Directors, Writers and STARS, are being used by Moscow in ASIA, Africa, the Balkans and throughout Europe to create hatred of America . . . 4) RIGHT NOW films are being made to craftily glorify MARXISM, UNESCO and ONE-WORLDISM . . . and via your TV Set they are being piped into your Living Room—and are poisoning the minds of your children under your very eyes!!!

So REMEMBER — If you patronize a Film made by RED Producers, Writers, Stars and STUDIOS you are aiding and abetting COMMUNISM . . . every time you permit REDS to come into your Living Room VIA YOUR TV SET you are helping MOSCOW and the INTERNATIONALISTS to destroy America!!!