History of American Literature

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**“Howl” by Allen Ginsberg. Analysis.**

1. Language
   1. Form:
      1. The poem is arranged into 122 long lines of free verse in three sections. The sections are not titled but each section follows a specific pattern and has a specific theme.
      2. Ginsberg (AG) said that each line was meant to be read in a single breath, creating the sound that the reader was struggling to say the words.
      3. Figures of Speech: AG uses many different literary devices throughout the poem, including
         1. Anaphor and Catalogue: Anaphor is when the same word over and over at the beginning of a line. A catalogue is a listing technique, often paired stylistically with anaphor.
         2. Hyperbole: Intentional exaggeration. Ex. [4:221-222]
         3. Disrupted Syntax: Intentionally using words incorrectly. Ex. AG says “...*who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear...*” [1:20-21] Obviously, it is the character who is unshaven, not the room. In this case, the poet is using the language to illustrate the confused state of the character’s mind.
         4. Metaphor: AG uses metaphor in very complex ways. Often, the metaphors are layered (they have multiple meanings depending on the context) or ambiguous (they are not always clearly defined). The best example of this is probably the poems central metaphor: madness. Madness is a symbol for the problems of society, the reaction of the individual to those problems, the escape from the problems of society, and the physical condition of mental illness. We don’t always know which definition AG is using (because of course he is using all of them simultaneously).
   2. Meter: Free Verse. There is no organized pattern of rhyme or meter but the words are chosen very carefully to create a sense of music and motion.
   3. Method: Autobiographical
      1. Character: The people and actions in the poem are based on real people AG knew and the things that they actually did.
      2. Setting: The poem is EVERYWHERE, changing places almost every line: all over the United States (Arkansas; Laredo, Texas; Atlantic City, New Jersey; Kansas; Idaho; Birmingham, Alabama; Oklahoma; Los Alamos, New Mexico; Houston; Chicago; Denver, Colorado; Alcatraz Island, San Francisco) and other countries (Canada, Mexico, Tangiers) and seas (Caribbean, Atlantic, South Pacific). However, the two most important places are the various places in New York that are mentioned specifically in the poem (Paradise Alley, Battery Park, the Bronx, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, Union Square, the Staten Island Ferry, Manhattan, Tokay, Third Avenue, the East River, the Bowery, Harlem, Madison Avenue, Chinatown, Passaic, CCNY).
      3. Props: The poem is full of symbolic “things” that take on multiple meanings. Many of the references in the poem are deeply personal, however, and only AG’s closest friends would have known what they mean. That mystery is intentional.
   4. Tone: The poem is a mixture of at least two poetic styles.
      1. Walt Whitman. AG discovered Walt Whitman in high school and fell in love. Both AG and Whitman were homosexual and both celebrated the common man in all his supposed ugliness. AG’s father had written poetry and before this time AG had imitated his father’s rhyming style. After this his poetry more closely resembled Whitman’s: free, verse, catalogues, and, most importantly, an emphasis on movement and energy, are apparent throughout “Howl.” For examples of Whitman’s style see <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm>
      2. William Blake. (British Romantic Poet In July, 1948 Allen had what he called his “Blake Vision Experience.” He heard Blake reciting poems to him and at the same time he had “Eternity-vision.” This experience profoundly affected him and his writing. His poetry is like Blake’s: both poets write in a state of “Spritual Ecstacy.” For more information about Blake’s writing see: <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/indexworks.htm>
2. General Outline
   1. Dedication. *“For Carl Solomon”* The poem is dedicated to Carl Solomon and has references throughout to him. In the third section AG is speaking to him directly. The poem contains many passages that are deeply personal messages between the two men. Notice especially the references to “ping-pong” (table tennis) [4:184; 6:92-94]. The two men played this game together often in the mental hospital.
   2. Section I. “Who?”
      1. This first section might be seen to answer the question implied by the first line: AG saw “...*the best minds of [his] generation...*” destroyed. Who are they?
      2. The form of this section is “I saw some men who ate apples.”
      3. This is a catalogue (list) of the “best minds” of AG’s generation. Some people might be surprised at who is on the list.
   3. Section II. “What?”
      1. The second section seems to answer the question: “What destroyed the best minds of his generation?”
      2. “What creature [destroyed the best minds of his generation]? Moloch.
      3. Moloch is a god from the Christian bible. “According to biblical tradition, Moloch was a Canaanite idol to whom children had been sacrificed as burnt offerings. In Leviticus 18:21: 'You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech, and so profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.' Moloch appears in the poetry of Milton and Coleridge. Ginsberg is cursing the false idols to which human beings are still sacrificed today.”[from *litkicks*]
      4. The “false idols” that human beings are “sacrificed to” today are the “Things” of the industrial/consumerist society. AG really hates this, and believes that the reason that many people go mad is because of it.
   4. Section III. “Where?
      1. The third section is about place. “Where are the best minds of his generation now?” In the insane asylum.
      2. Form: “I’m with you [in the place] where you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
      3. Although he is far away (AG is writing this poem in Berkley, California and Solomon is in the hospital in New York) AG says that he is “with” him there in spirit. [7:127-130]
3. Metaphorical Themes
   1. Madness
      1. Meaning:
         1. Madness is the main theme of the poem. We know that AG’s mother was insane and that this had a powerful affect on him. He spent a lot of time visiting her in various mental hospitals where she stayed.
         2. The poem is dedicated to Carl Solomon, who AG met while in a mental hospital in 1949.
         3. Madness in AG’s view has both positive and negative meanings. Throughout the poem he defends people who behave in a self-destructive or sociopathic manner. He doesn’t think it is entirely their fault, but, rather, that society has caused their illness.
      2. Examples.
         1. [1.5] The beginning of the poem states that madness is the main subject.
         2. [1.20] In this line, as we have noted, AG uses the disrupted syntax of the line to point to the confusion in the mind of the character.
         3. [1.26] On of the most important lines of the poem, this lists almost all of the themes: *dreams*: religion or marxism or both; *drugs and alcohol*; *waking nightmares*: madness; *cock and endless balls*: sex.
         4. [1:45; 3:124; 3:143; 3:151] Suicide is a very common occurrence in the poem as it was in this community. Many of AG’s friends killed themselves.
         5. [4:179-194] This passage refers to the hospitals (madhouses) where the author and others were placed, the treatments (many now controversial) that they were given there, and the way that they felt in them.
   2. Drugs (and alcohol)
      1. Meanings: Drugs and alcohol for the beats had three separate and conflicting purposes.
         1. Escape: The Beats viewed reality and the culture that they lived in to be very oppressive. They were looking for a way to escape that, and drugs often provided a way out.
         2. Searching: Drugs, especially hallucinogens like marijuana and peyote, were a way to see into the human subconscious and find truth.
         3. Self-Destruction: Many of the Beats believed that to find their true mind or spirit that they must first destroy their physical existence. This may be the meaning of the term “purgatoried” in 1:25.
      2. Examples
         1. [1:22-23]
         2. [1:31-42]
         3. [1:53-54]
   3. Sex (both heterosexual and homosexual)
      1. Meanings
         1. Sex as a religious experience. The language in the section dealing with sex has many religious terms. The people who AG has sex with are “angels” and “saints.”
         2. Sex as a Drug: Many of the same themes of escape, searching, and self-destruction are apparent in the poem’s treatment of sexuality. (see above)
      2. Examples
         1. [2:88-101] References to homosexual sex. Note the religious language that is assigned to the lovers.
         2. [2:102-3:116] References to heterosexual sex. In line 2:111 AG says that the “secret hero of the poems” is the “cocksman and Adonis of Denver.” This refers to Cassady, who AG followed to Denver. The “three old shrews of fate” (2:98) may refer to the women who “stole” Cassady from AG and also represent money, pregnancy, and marriage.
   4. Marxism (emphasis) Anti-Capitalist and Pacifist thought)
      1. Meaning: AG was active in the socialist and labor movements in the US. This was something that was seen as very un-patriotic. In fact, Kerouac often ridiculed AG for his stance on socialism and called his character in *On the Road* “Carlo Marx.”
      2. Examples
         1. [2:73-80]
         2. [3:146-150]
   5. Religion (of almost every kind)
      1. Meaning: One of the characteristics of the religious perspectives of AG and other Beat poets is that religion is not something to study because it is a duty. Religion is something to use for your own purposes or because they want something from it.
      2. Examples
         1. Christianity (1:59; 2:88-97; 3:161; 3:168-170; 4:206-210; 7:108-110)
         2. Islam (1:14)
         3. Judaism (1:14; 1:50; 1:59; 4:218-219; “Moloch”; 5:24-25; 7:105-106)
         4. Animism (2:61-64)
         5. Buddhism (1:51; 3:174)
         6. Mysticism (3:162-163)
   6. “The Machine” or “Moloch.” (the prison of modern consumer culture)
      1. Meaning: One of the most important ideas in the poem is that the modern consumer culture is a machine that destroys men. It is the job of the poet to be “real” or “natural” and to escape from and oppose this machine.
      2. Examples
         1. [5.3] AG says that the machine is a “sphinx of cement and aluminum” that eats “the brains and imagination” of humans. In 5:20 he says that it is a “cannibal,” a human that eats other humans.
         2. Throughout Section II the poem describes this creature and its actions.
         3. [6:50] AG introduces the idea of the American river, saying that Moloch has taken all of the good things about human experience (dreams, visions, ecstasies, etc.) and sent them “down the American river.”
4. Critical Reception and Obscenity Trial: “On May 21, 1957, the book *Howl and Other Poems* prompted arrests at City Lights Books in San Francisco. Two plain-clothed police officers entered City Lights Books, buy copies “Howl and Other Poems” and leave. They return to arrest the clerk, Shigeyoshi Murao while an absent Lawrence Ferlinghetti is later served a warrant stating he sought to “willfully and lewdly print, publish and sell obscene and indecent writings, papers, and books, to wit: *Howl and Other Poems*.” An August trial is set.” (from AG.org) The publishers were later found innocent of obscenity charges but the trial and its media coverage made the book extremely popular.
5. Additional Resources and Works Cited
   1. <http://www.shmoop.com/howl/>
   2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allen_Ginsberg>
   3. <http://www.allenginsberg.org/>
   4. <http://www.litkicks.com/Poems/Howl.html>