



# Allen Ginsberg's Howl as A Postmodern Poetry: A Close Reading of Postmodernist Qualities

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## Abstract

"Howl" by Allen Ginsberg is widely recognized as one of the most significant poems of the Beat Generation. It is also considered a prominent example of postmodern poetry due to its innovative use of language, structure, and themes. This paper examines "Howl" as a postmodern work of poetry, analyzing how it challenges traditional literary forms and conventions, questions authority and established norms, and employs a fragmented, non-linear style to reflect the fragmented nature of modern society. Through a close reading of the poem and an exploration of its historical and cultural context, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of "Howl" as a groundbreaking work of postmodern literature examining its themes, structure, and style, and considering its place in the broader context of American literature and culture.

**Key terms-** Postmodern, Allen Ginsberg, Postmodernist Qualities, Language, Structure, Literary forms and Conventions, Authority, Norms, Fragmented, Non-linear, Close reading, Historical and Cultural context.

## Introduction

Postmodernism is a philosophical movement in art, literature and culture that originated in the latter half of the 20th century, influencing critical thinking in the Western world. It emerged as a response to the rapidly changing social, political and technological landscape of the time. The prefix "post" in postmodernism refers to a determination about what should be done after modernism, a reaction against the long-held intellectual pretenses, values, and objective reality of the modern era. Postmodernists attempted to rethink these concepts, suggesting that living in a constantly changing world requires a fresh perspective. However, defining postmodernism can be challenging. While some critics view the Second World War as a radical break from modernity, others suggest that modernism continued into the 1970s with a different view. The term "postmodernism" was first used in the 1950s by literary critics who perceived literary experiments as moving beyond modernism.

Postmodernism can be understood in relation to modernism. Modernism was based on idealism and reason, while postmodernism was born out of skepticism and suspicion of reason. Postmodernism questioned the notion of universal truth and was a departure from the utopian visions of modernism, which focused on clarity and simplicity. Modernists sought to open a window onto a new world, whereas postmodernism's fundamental principles were complexity and contradiction. While modernist objects suggested utopia, progress, and machine-like perfection, postmodern objects were viewed as coming from a dystopian and far-from-perfect future. Nevertheless, both modernists and postmodernists experimented with their works, using self-consciousness, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression as an experiment. Postmodern artistic forms can thus be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation. Some critics consider these experiments in postmodernism a more radical break that provided new ways of representing the world. Unlike modernism, postmodernism rejects science without viewing it as a tragedy or seeking to reform the system to create order out of chaos. Rather, it presents the chaos as it is. Postmodern works often rejects traditional forms and structures, and they frequently engage with themes of fragmentation, alienation and the deconstruction of established narratives.

One of the most famous postmodern works of American poetry is Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." It is a controversial and revolutionary poem written by Allen Ginsberg between 1955 and 1966, was initially composed to perform on stage. It was introduced at a poetry reading in 1955, which caught the attention of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the operator of City Lights Books, who later published it in 1956. The government declared the poem obscene due to its content and use of vernacular language, but the obscenity trial only made it more popular. Ginsberg's innovative form, language experimentation, and use of allusions and symbols successfully merged private with public. The poem's rambling speech style and animalistic title set up a specific environment during its first public reading. Narrated in the first person, Ginsberg symbolically makes a raw and desperate call that arises from deep inside him.

## **Methodology**

Methodology is a chain of approaches and techniques used in the research process. It offers guidance during the research by providing principles and rules to conduct the research in a proper way. This research is about the qualities of postmodernism found in the poem "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg. This is analytical as well as descriptive type of research. I have analysed different articles related to Postmodernism and made a critical evaluation based on the study and concluded how "Howl" is a postmodernist poem.

## **Howl Summary**

"Howl" is a long and intense poem by Allen Ginsberg, written in 1955 and first published in 1956. It is considered one of the most important works of the Beat generation, a group of writers and poets who rebelled against mainstream American culture in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The poem is structured in three parts, each one representing a different aspect of the speaker's vision of the world. The first part is a long and frantic monologue that introduces the themes of the poem: madness, corruption, and rebellion. The speaker starts by addressing the audience with the iconic line "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness". He then goes on to describe a series of vivid and hallucinatory scenes, depicting the lives of people who have been marginalized and oppressed by society, such as drug addicts, prostitutes, and criminals.

The second part of the poem is more meditative and introspective, focusing on the speaker's own experiences and emotions. Here, Ginsberg explores his own homosexuality, his relationships with other men, and his feelings of alienation and despair. He also introduces the figure of Carl Solomon, a friend and fellow patient in a mental institution, whom he describes as a "saint" and a "hero". Solomon's story becomes a symbol of the suffering and persecution experienced by those who do not conform to society's norms.

The third and final part of the poem is a call to action, a defiant and exultant declaration of the speaker's refusal to be silenced or suppressed. The language becomes more incantatory and ecstatic, with the repeated refrain "I'm with you in Rockland", a reference to a mental hospital where Carl Solomon was confined. The speaker addresses various historical and cultural figures, including William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Neal Cassady, as well as his contemporaries in the Beat generation. He celebrates their creativity and their rebellion against conformity, and urges them to continue to resist and create.

Throughout the poem, Ginsberg uses a free-flowing, stream-of-consciousness style, filled with vivid and often shocking imagery, as well as slang and profanity. He draws on a wide range of literary, cultural, and historical references, including jazz music, Buddhist philosophy, and the Bible. He also incorporates various rhetorical techniques, such as repetition, alliteration, and assonance, to create a powerful and hypnotic effect.

The poem is a howl of rage and protest against the conformity and oppression of American society in the 1950s, and it reflects the fragmented, disjointed nature of modern life. Ginsberg's use of personal experience, unconventional syntax, and non-linear narrative structure create a work that defies easy categorization and it has continued to captivate readers with its raw, confessional style and its powerful political and social commentary.

"Howl" was initially greeted with controversy and censorship, due to its explicit language and themes of homosexuality and drug use. However, it soon became a rallying cry for the counterculture and a landmark in American poetry. It has been widely studied, analyzed, and celebrated as a masterpiece of postmodern literature.

## **Literature Review**

Irena's article, "The Representation of Madness and Chaos in Allen Ginsberg's Poem Howl" (2020), explores the theme of madness and chaos in Ginsberg's influential poem. Irena examines the ways in which Ginsberg's use of language and poetic techniques serve to create a sense of disorientation and fragmentation, reflecting the poet's

critique of American society and its values. Throughout her paper, Irena draws on a range of critical sources to support her argument, including works by literary scholars, cultural historians, and psychologists. She situates Ginsberg's work within the broader context of postwar American culture, examining the ways in which the poet's critique of conformity and materialism resonated with the broader countercultural movements of the time. Through her close reading of the text and her engagement with critical scholarship, Irena sheds light on the ways in which Ginsberg's use of language and poetic techniques serve to challenge conventional notions of sanity and madness, and to critique the conformity and homogeneity of American society.

In his 2006 book *Modernity and Postmodern Culture* published by Open University Press, (McGuigan) defines postmodernism as a set of philosophical ideas that stem from poststructuralist theory and cultural formation, which are associated with global popular culture. The term "postmodernism" was first used in relation to literature after the Second World War, and while it has limited application to poetry and drama, it is widely used in reference to fiction.

The subject of this study is *Life of Pi*, a novel written by Canadian author Yann Martel, which follows the story of Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel's survival after the Japanese cargo ship carrying him, his family, and a collection of zoo animals from India to Canada sinks in the Pacific Ocean. There are two versions of Pi's survival story presented in the novel: one in which he survives with wild animals, and the other in which he survives with Mother, a Taiwanese Sailor, and The Frenchman Cook. While recounting the second version of his survival story, Pi erases the events narrated in the first version, abolishes details and explanations, erases the existence of characters, objects, and settings, and ultimately leaves the story without an ending.

Jean-François Lyotard's 1984 work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, is a seminal text in the field of postmodern theory. In this book, Lyotard argues that postmodernism is characterized by the collapse of grand narratives and the emergence of a fragmented, pluralistic worldview. Lyotard highlights the modernist concepts of progress, reason, and truth, and emphasizes on the importance of difference and heterogeneity in postmodern thought. Lyotard's concept of the "incredulity toward metanarratives" is also discussed, referring to the skepticism toward grand narratives or totalizing explanations of reality. Lyotard's ideas challenge traditional notions of knowledge and representation, providing a new perspective on the relationship between language, power, and society.

## **Postmodernist Qualities**

"Howl" by Allen Ginsberg is considered a postmodernist work due to its qualities that challenge traditional literary conventions. Ginsberg experiments with language and form, incorporating multiple voices, fragmented narratives, and a mix of high and low culture references. The poem blurs the boundaries between the personal and political, the private and public, and the literal and metaphorical. The use of allusions and symbols adds to the complexity and ambiguity of the work, allowing for multiple interpretations. The poem also critiques modern society, particularly the conformity and materialism of the post-war era.

"Howl" exemplifies several postmodernist qualities such as:

- **Metanarrative**

Beat poetry expresses itself against monolithic views of diverse dimensions of existence. 'Howl' is exemplary of this. The entire poem is an outcry against the decaying conventional assumptions of middle-class America - personified as the God Moloch. In one sense, Moloch becomes an illustration of the metanarratives on which Western society is constructed. Moloch is "the Mind", which destroys "brains and imagination", in which the self is "a consciousness without a body" whose fate is "a cloud of sexless hydrogen". Moloch is also the desire for progress, no matter what the consequences. This second section of 'Howl' thus exposes some of the basic metanarratives on which Western society is based, such as the primacy of reason over the body, emotion and spirituality, and the desire for and belief in progress through human technological innovation, regardless of the human cost. While these metanarratives would traditionally have gone unchallenged, and their assumptions tacitly and positively accepted, Ginsberg's poem follows the postmodernist tendency of questioning and undermining these assumptions. It exposes the influences and results of these metanarratives as negative and destructive, instead of presenting it as the accepted ideal to be aspired to. It points out that the emphasis on the mind is harmful to other dimensions of human existence which may in fact be more crucial than reason, and simultaneously shows the results of a social ethics based on the associated dominance of reason and progress. Words like "solitude", "filth", "ugliness", "screaming", "sobbing", "weeping" (L 79), "loveless" (L 80), "soulless" (L 81) and "sorrows" (L 81) are used to describe a terrifying society which consists of "Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton

treasures! blind capitals! Demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!"

- **Allusion:**

In "Howl," the speaker makes a lot of allusions to sex, sexuality (in particular, Ginsberg's sexuality), communism, and poetry, but one of his strongest allusions is to Carl Solomon, a patient who Ginsberg had grown close to during his stay at a mental institution, and to whom the poem is dedicated to. Through his defiance and expression of themes such as sexuality, free thought, and art, the speaker becomes not just a possible voice for the Beatnik culture, but also a voice for those Allen Ginsberg knew personally. This especially includes the references and allusions to Carl Solomon, who had taught at a university and had gone into an institution after a presumed protest against said university.

Through these allusions and the speaker's voice, there comes a sense of solidarity and unity through the struggles of censorship and repression, especially later in the poem, when the allusion to Carl Solomon becomes more explicit. Howl contains a reference to the mythical figure of Adonis, where the tragic figure is juxtaposed to Neal Cassady, a lover and friend of the author. A parody of the myth of the three fates or the Moirai is also featured in the first part of the poem, in which the fates which figure as the three "shrews of fate." Additionally, the poem contains three textual references to the Oedipus myth: the first of which is a reference to Oedipus' defeat of the sphinx, which is inverted to a defeat of the intellect by Moloch, a modern sphinx. The second reference is to Oedipus' marrying his mother and the final to his downfall, after he has discovered he has fulfilled the prophecy of the oracle of Delphi.

- **Rejection of traditional Forms**

"Howl" is written in a free-flowing style that rejects conventional forms and structures. The poem is divided into three sections that are not organized in a linear or chronological fashion, and the language is often fragmented and disjointed. In the poem, Ginsberg eschews the conventions of meter, rhyme, and other formal elements of poetry, opting instead for a free-flowing, organic style that emphasizes spontaneity and emotion over traditional craftsmanship. One of the most striking examples of this rejection of traditional forms can be found in the poem's structure itself. The three sections are structured around the themes and ideas that Ginsberg wishes to explore, and are connected through a series of recurring images and symbols. The lines of the poem are very long and almost looks like prose paragraphs. Ginsberg borrowed the technique of writing with long lines from Walt Whitman. Howl is also a classic example of free verse. It doesn't have a regular meter. Instead, it uses a lot of different kinds of rhythmic patterns, which are repeated over and over again. Section II of the poem includes many uses of the phrase "Moloch" or "Moloch whose," which structure the general rhythm of this part of the poem. Howl also features a lot of anaphora, lines beginning with the same word. For example, first stanza of the poem begins with "who" repeatedly.

Ginsberg's use of imagery is often vivid and intense, and includes references to drug use, sexuality, and other taboo subjects. His language is deliberately unconventional and experimental, often breaking with traditional rules of grammar and syntax in order to create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity. The following lines from the opening of the poem are a good example of this rejection of traditional forms:

"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,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night . . ."  
(Lines- 1-4)

These lines are not structured around a strict meter or rhyme scheme, but instead use a free-flowing, stream-of-consciousness style that emphasizes the intensity and immediacy of the poet's emotions. By breaking with established forms and structures, the poem is able to explore new ideas and express emotions that might not be possible within more traditional frameworks.

- **Blurring of boundaries**

The poem blurs the boundaries between different genres and forms of writing. For example, it includes elements of both poetry and prose, as well as references to mythology, history, and popular culture. Ginsberg blurs the boundaries between different categories, such as high and low culture, art and life, and personal and political. This blurring of boundaries reflects the postmodern rejection of fixed categories and traditional hierarchies, and allows for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of the world.

One example of this can be seen in the way that the poem combines elements of high and low culture. On the one hand, the poem draws on a range of literary and philosophical sources, including William Blake, Walt Whitman, and the Beats themselves. On the other hand, the poem also incorporates elements of popular culture, such as references to jazz music, drug culture, and other aspects of contemporary life. For instance, in the opening lines of the poem, Ginsberg juxtaposes the image of the "best minds" with a series of references to popular culture:

"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, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night..." (Lines 1-4) Here, the use of the phrase "angelheaded hipsters" reflects a blending of high and low culture, as the term "angelheaded" suggests a reference to William Blake's poetry, while "hipsters" is a slang term associated with the counterculture of the time.

Throughout the poem, Ginsberg continues to blur the boundaries between different categories, creating a complex and dynamic vision of the world that is not limited by fixed categories or traditional hierarchies. One way that Ginsberg blurs boundaries is through his use of language, which often combines formal and informal, academic and slang, and sacred and profane vocabularies. For example, in the second section of the poem, he writes:

"who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts, who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night..."

In this passage, Ginsberg combines the formal phrase "grandfather night" with the informal and repeated use of "boxcars," creating a sense of dissonance and ambiguity.

Another example of boundary-blurring in the poem is its treatment of personal and political themes. Throughout the poem, Ginsberg describes his own experiences and those of his friends, but also addresses larger social and political issues of his time, such as the conformity of the "Moloch" of modern society. In this way, he creates a sense of personal and political interconnection, blurring the boundaries between the individual and the collective. Finally, the structure of the poem itself blurs boundaries, with its long, unbroken lines that move between different subjects, themes, and images. This creates a sense of a continuous flow of consciousness that resists traditional narrative structures and linear time. In this way, the poem reflects the postmodern rejection of fixed categories and hierarchies, and offers a more fluid and dynamic vision of the world.

- **Critique of dominant discourses**

One of the central themes in "Howl" is a critique of dominant discourses, or the ideas and values that are widely accepted and reinforced by society including mainstream politics, religion, and popular culture. The poem expresses a sense of alienation from these institutions, and seeks to challenge their authority and power. One example of this critique can be seen in Ginsberg's portrayal of Moloch, a symbol of the destructive and oppressive forces of modern society. In the second section of the poem, Ginsberg writes, "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!" Here, he portrays Moloch as a monstrous and dehumanizing force that dominates and controls the lives of individuals. In this way, he critiques capitalism and consumerism, which values profit and material gain over individual well-being and creativity. He suggests that Moloch represents a pervasive and destructive force in contemporary culture that robs people of their humanity and reduces them to mere machines.

Another example of this critique can be seen in Ginsberg's portrayal of sexuality and the body. Throughout the poem, he celebrates and embraces sexual and bodily experiences that are often marginalized or repressed by dominant discourses. In the third section of the poem, for instance, he writes,

"I'm with you in Rockland 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."

Here, Ginsberg portrays a utopian vision of sexual and bodily liberation, in which individuals are free to express themselves and explore their desires without fear of judgment or repression. In doing so, he challenges dominant discourses that seek to control and regulate sexuality and the body, and offers a radical and alternative vision of human experience.

Overall, "Howl" can be seen as a powerful critique of dominant discourses, challenging the values and ideas that are often taken for granted in contemporary society. Through his use of vivid imagery and language, Ginsberg offers a vision of a more just, free, and creative world, in which individuals are able to fully express themselves and their desires.

- **Deconstruction of meaning**

Deconstruction is a postmodern literary theory that involves breaking down or analyzing language in order to reveal the complex and often contradictory ways in which meaning is created. In "Howl," Allen Ginsberg uses deconstruction to challenge the traditional notions of meaning and representation. One example of deconstruction in "Howl" can be seen in Ginsberg's use of free association and juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated words and images. In the first section of the poem, for instance, he writes:

"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."

Here, Ginsberg combines seemingly disparate elements – the "best minds" of his generation, madness, hunger, nakedness, and drug addiction – to create a powerful and evocative image of urban despair and alienation. By deconstructing the traditional boundaries between different categories of experience, he challenges the reader to think about the complex and often contradictory ways in which meaning is created.

Another example of deconstruction in "Howl" can be seen in Ginsberg's use of repetition and fragmentation to create a sense of disorientation and ambiguity. In the second section of the poem, for instance, he writes:

"The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!"

Here, Ginsberg repeats the word "holy" in association with various parts of the body, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. By deconstructing the traditional dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical, he challenges the reader to think about the complex and often contradictory ways in which meaning is created.

Overall, deconstruction is an important aspect of "Howl," as it challenges the reader to think about the complex and often contradictory ways in which meaning is created through language. By breaking down traditional boundaries and categories of experience, Ginsberg invites the reader to engage with the world in new and unexpected ways, and to question the dominant discourses that shape our understanding of reality.

### **Conclusion**

"Howl" is a postmodern poem that pushes the boundaries of traditional poetic form and content. Allen Ginsberg's use of personal experience, unconventional syntax, and non-linear narrative structure create a work that is deeply confessional, politically charged, and emotionally powerful. At its core, "Howl" is a howl of rage and protest against the conformity and oppression of American society in the 1950s, but it is also a celebration of the counterculture and the outsiders who refuse to be silenced. Ginsberg's poetic language and imagery are both raw and refined, creating a striking juxtaposition that is both unsettling and captivating. By using personal experience as a starting point, Ginsberg was able to connect with a larger movement of artists and thinkers who were also pushing back against the social norms of the time. "Howl" became a rallying cry for the Beat Generation, inspiring others to challenge the status quo and to live more authentic, unconventional lives. As a postmodern work, "Howl" reflects the fragmented, disjointed nature of modern life and the rejection of traditional forms of authority and artistic expression. It is a work that defies easy categorization, and it continues to inspire and challenge readers today. Through "Howl," Allen Ginsberg created a masterpiece of confessional poetry that remains a vital and influential work of American literature.

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