
American Dystopia; American Spaces and Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl'

In his 1956 poem 'Howl' Allen Ginsberg portrays a vision of America that is simultaneously both apocalyptic and somewhat hopeful of the future. Ginsberg, one of the primary figures of the counterculture of Beat Writers during the 1940s and 50s, presents America as a land in the grip of a capitalistic conglomerate which smothers the individual spiritually, artistically and economically. For Ginsberg, the spaces of America are ones full of disillusion, malcontent and dystopian ideals. There is, however, a sense, that Ginsberg provides, that this could change under the right conditions and thus deliver America into a state far kinder and sympathetic than the one it is in currently.

The poem, separated into three sections and a footnote, mixes autobiography with philosophy and an illusion of prophetic insight. The first section, for example, acts as a form of record of the exploits of Ginsberg and his friends, mostly other Beat Writers, in New York during the early post-war years. These personal descriptions, often deeply sensitive and at times even going as far as confessing to criminality, are a contrast to the highly apocalyptic and prophetic second section where Ginsberg attempts to explore the level of capitalistic greed and oppression within America. The third section once again moves towards the confessional and it is in this section that Ginsberg provides some form of deliverance from the apocalyptic vision of America. This makes the spaces of America, though nearly always far from professing a positive ideal, always full of meaning for Ginsberg. This is essential to reading the poem as one realizes that every action, person, and space described has some form of importance. This provides the sense that Ginsberg can find philosophic value in the most mundane of activities or places. A subway ride, for example, from Battery Park to the Bronx becomes an individual having "chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx".^[1] A subway ride becomes to Ginsberg's imagination a symbol of the "endless" cycle of capitalist oppression, even going as far as to compare the cycle to slavery, much in the same way that Henry David Thoreau does in *Walden*. The Bronx, however, is described as "holy", alluding to the fascination that Ginsberg and the other Beats found in the culture of African-Americans. Space, for Ginsberg, is therefore something which is full of meaning and significance.

One of the key reasons that the spaces of America are presented in 'Howl' as anything but utopian is that they played a key part in the repression and annihilation of individuality for Ginsberg's circle of friends and, as a whole, the people of America. The first two lines of 'Howl' are:

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“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”. [Lines 1 -2]

These “best minds” could be interpreted as other Beat Writers, such as Jack Kerouac or William Burroughs, that Ginsberg held in great esteem, or, quite simply, a praising outlook on the general population of America. By presenting the destruction of these “great minds” within the past tense Ginsberg immediately delivers a tone of despair and mourning, the “starving hysterical naked” even inducing pity. Allusions to black culture are once again made in the “negro streets”, referring to many of the Beats living in areas such as Harlem and the Bronx. It is these pitiful forward-thinking “great minds” that are the central focus of the first section of the poem, the word “who” [Line 4], a reference to these “great minds”, is repeated at the beginning every line from line 4 onwards in Section I. By keeping the focus on the “who” in Section I, the largest and most expansive section of the poem, Ginsberg keeps a constant relation between space and the individual, therefore making every line significant for the people who inhabit the space of America.

By keeping the focus of the poem on the individual and mixing prophecy with autobiography Ginsberg allows himself a far closer subjective reading of American space and its post-war dystopian ideals. Instances such as witnessing the “horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices” [Line 44] and throwing “their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade”. [Ginsberg, Line 54] This presentation of being victimized by the capitalist system is, as Ginsberg writes in his essay ‘Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*’, “a lament for the Lamb in America”.^[1] This idea that America has sacrificed itself to the capitalist system is further emphasised by the segments in Section I where references outside of American borders are made. The sexual freedom outside of repressive American society, for example, is mentioned in the line “who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love”. [Line 37] This shows how, outside of America, the “best minds” are able to fulfill their potential as, Ann Charters states, “spokesmen for people rejected by the mainstream, whether drug addicts, homosexuals, the emotionally dispossessed, or the mentally ill.”^[2] It is America itself, Ginsberg suggests, and all spaces encompassed under its banner that can be viewed as modern dystopias.

If Section I is, as Ginsberg describes it, the lamb, Part II is “the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb”.^[1] In this section the focus switches from the anaphoric use of “who” to the Canaanite demi-god “Moloch”. [Line 80] Moloch, in the Old Testament, is a demi-god who traditionally is worshiped through the sacrifice of children through fire, but is used in this section of the poem it is a representation of the capitalist system or, rather, America as a whole. Ginsberg used this figure following taking the hallucinogenic peyote in San Francisco in 1954 and witnessing Moloch in the form of a hotel. Bill Morgan describes this moment, in his

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book *The Typewriter is Holy*, as “a horrible, terrifying vision, but one that gave Ginsberg a new insight into the greed of man”.^[2] I believe that it is in Section II that Ginsberg makes the starkest and hardest hitting impression on the reader with this vision of America being the one farthest from a utopia. Ginsberg epitomizes Moloch as the Twentieth Century American city in the line:

“Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!” [Line 84]

This image of an American city, suggested to be New York, presents Moloch, the capitalist system, as something of a religious deity. Skyscrapers become signs of his glory and power while the people of America live their lives behind “a thousand blind windows”, ignoring the cycle that they are a part of. The image of the city being crowned with smokestack and antennae shows the power Moloch has over America, thus encompassing the roles of church, state and economy. This idea that capitalism has become a religion to the disillusioned people of America is carried on in the line “They broke their back lifting Moloch to heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! Lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!” [Line 89] The people of America have followed the example of many ancient civilizations, furthering references to the Biblical figure of Moloch, by building great idols and temples, in the form of office buildings and skyscrapers, in the name of capitalism. Deluding themselves, Ginsberg believes, with the idea that they have created a heavenly utopia, the people of America have become blind to the apathetic and shallow world in which they live.

The blindness towards the level of capitalistic worship, Ginsberg suggests, is in spite of the overt horror and suffering that the system forces on the individual. The line ending with “Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!” [Line 80] shows the evolution of the male individual under the rule of Moloch. The “screaming under stairways” is an allusion to sheltering from bombs, while both “sobbing in armies” and “weeping in the parks” could be said to represent the psychological trauma induced from taking part in conflict. Blind worship towards capitalism, Ginsberg believes, is directly linked with an involvement with warfare. “Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels!” [Line 86] further emphasizes the desolation, seclusion and lack of genuine spirituality within a capitalist society. The relation that this individual repression has with space is that it solidifies the purpose and effects of the capitalist cycle. If these are the people of America, Ginsberg asks, what is America like?

In Section III Ginsberg once again utilizes anaphora, this time using the refrain “I’m with you in Rockland”, an allusion to the time Ginsberg spent with Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated to, in a psychiatric center, mental illness also being a key motif in the poem. Through

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the poem being directed at Solomon, with the first line of Section III reading “Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland”, [Line 94] the reader becomes one with Solomon as the same figure. Solomon, for Ginsberg, symbolizes the individual defeated by the overbearing hand of the capitalist bourgeois American ideal and thus can also be seen as a representation of the common American individual. It is in this section that Ginsberg provides the greatest sense of hope and salvation from his dystopian vision of America. Through the refrain “I’m with you in Rockland” Ginsberg presents a feeling of unity and empathy with the reader, Rockland coming to signify a more personal version of what Moloch represented earlier. This sense of unity and togetherness is further emphasized by the references Ginsberg makes to Marxist ideology, a dangerous thing to do in America during the height of McCarthyism. “I’m with you in Rockland where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha” [Line 107] suggests a sense of rebellion, using religious references to further emphasize these ideas. The juxtaposition of socialism and fascism is, for Ginsberg, a standoff between his ideas of what good and evil are, while the contrast of Judaism and Christianity represents not an idea of religious superiority but rather simply personal faith and belief, with Ginsberg and Solomon both coming from Jewish backgrounds. The reference to Hebraism does, however, provide a sense of Exodus, emphasizing the idea of being freed from slavery. The use of the word Golgotha also adds to the idea that capitalism has become something of a religious deity for America. Ginsberg, by providing parallels to the American norm, gives the reader hope that deliverance from the grasp of Moloch is coming soon, thus ending the cycle of capitalist repression and the dystopian state American space has found itself in.

Despite this provision of hope Ginsberg concludes, in the final line of the poem, that this deliverance is, if not an impossibility, something that is far from being achieved. “I’m with you in Rockland in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night”. [Line 112] This line shatters the illusion of Ginsberg providing salvation by revealing to the reader that he is not “with you in Rockland” but rather the connection between him and Solomon, and thus also the reader, is simply something of a dream and therefore beyond reality. This presents Ginsberg’s conclusion that the capitalist systems of American space are something that cannot be overcome besides than in the imagination. He does, however, present a last chance of hope in the use of the “Western night”. Ginsberg, who throughout the poem suggests himself as beyond the grasp of Moloch and the cycles eating away at America, presents the West of America as the countries last hope. This aura of safety surrounding the West Coast is also due to a personal attachment that Ginsberg and the other East Coast Beats had with cities such as San Francisco and Berkeley. The first reading of ‘Howl’, for example, was in San Francisco. It could be said, therefore, that the exodus suggested through “the Hebrew socialist revolution” could be followed westward towards California. Ginsberg is providing the allusion that American space is home to a spectrum with the East Coast, specifically New York, being far more dystopian than the freer

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West Coast.

In his introduction to 'Howl' William Carlos Williams, something of a mentor to the young Ginsberg, wrote "This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poem. He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt. He contains it." [1] This idea that Ginsberg "contains" the horrors he describes in 'Howl' can be seen as one concerning the personal space of Ginsberg as the poet. In 'Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*' Ginsberg writes that "Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit." [2] By limiting the lines of his poems to the space of a single breath Ginsberg creates a rhythm that restricts the amount of space that the "horrors" of his poem take up. Ginsberg, therefore, presents himself as a martyr of sorts towards ending the besiegement of America and her spaces.

The spaces presented in 'Howl' are, quite possibly, some of the farthest from a utopian ideal in American poetry. Ginsberg presents America as under the complete control of a cyclical capitalist system that has reached the level of nearly religious proportions. Not only does he put forward an image of America that is under the influence of a demonic and dystopian state but he also suggests that, at the current time, there is no hope that salvation is possible. Ginsberg does not, however, do this to scare his readership or for the sake of being rebellious. He does so with a sincere belief that by describing and containing this version of America in a poem he is contributing to some form of resistance in the hope of delivering his country to a better place. He also, however, does provide a sense that he realizes his efforts are made in vain and that he may be too late to save America from this dystopia. Instead, then, 'Howl' can be read simply as a record of the failures American society made after World War II and how the demons of the Twentieth Century can drastically alter the spaces of a great country for the worst.

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