
Ginsberg's Howl: A Barbaric Yawp

It is not a surprise that Allen Ginsberg aligned himself with Walt Whitman in his poem "Howl," as the title page to his book of the same name reads, "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (Ginsberg 1). However, the use of these lines as a preface to his poetry opens up the question: is Ginsberg trying to contribute to the Transcendentalist movement that Whitman helped to define, or is he trying to challenge it? Although Ginsberg's heavy narrative seems a stark contrast to Whitman's mostly-joyous "Song of Myself," his title is a dead giveaway of his intentions. One of the most famous lines of "Song of Myself" reads, "I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," (Whitman 87). When read through the lens of Transcendentalism, it becomes clear that Ginsberg's "Howl" is actually Ginsberg's 'barbaric yawp.'

Structurally, Whitman's and Ginsberg's poem are very similar. Both rely on couplets with the second line nearly always indented, and intensity builds throughout the poems in moments where the structure is broken and the lines increase in size. They create settings in the poetry through seemingly endless lists of descriptions, using an often repetitive and parallel syntax. However, while emphasizing the similarities between the two works, the mirrored structures also function to highlight the differences. For example, on one hand Whitman admires the environment with stanzas like, "The smoke of my own breath, / Echos, ripples, and buzzed whispers . . . loveroot, / silkthread, crotch and vine, / My respiration and inspiration . . . the beating of my heart / . . . the passing of blood and air through my lungs," (Whitman 27). On the other hand, Ginsberg opens his poem up with descriptions that focus on tragedy and deterioration: "who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money / in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall, / who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo / with a belt of marijuana for New York," (Ginsberg 9). While both intend to describe life as they see it, Ginsberg paints a much dimmer picture.

Ginsberg's pessimism in relation to Whitman's optimism does not entirely separate it from all Transcendentalist ideology, though. Despite the fact that Ginsberg is finding despair in mankind, which Whitman finds beauty in, he is not directly critiquing the human beings themselves, specifically those that he refers to as the "best minds" of his generation (Ginsberg 9). Instead, he is attacked the societal forces "capitalism, mental institutions, disciplinary machinery" that he believes destroy these people. In this way, Ginsberg's ideas about life are not too far off from Whitman's, or even Ralph Waldo Emerson's. In Emerson's Transcendentalist manifesto, "The Poet," he writes, "it is the dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly," (Emerson 245). Ginsberg's poetry finds beauty in the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

“best minds,” those otherwise condemned by society as a whole, while pointing out the man-made forces that taint them, or turn them ‘ugly’ in Emerson’s words. Whitman acts similarly when he aligns himself with socially-villainized groups of people: “Through me many long dumb voices, / Voices of the interminable generations of slaves, / Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons, / Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and / dwarfs,” (Whitman 50). Neither poet blames man himself for his position as the Other, but rather the social mechanisms that allow this Othering and separation of people to happen.

Another theme of Whitman’s that Ginsberg employs in “Howl” is identification. The Beat poem is a dedication to Carl Solomon, and the relationship between Solomon and Ginsberg becomes the primary focus of section III of the poem. While Whitman uses his poetry to align himself with every possible person, Ginsberg speaks to just one. He tells Solomon, “I’m with you in Rockland / where you’re madder than I am / I’m with you in Rockland / where you must feel very strange / I’m with you in Rockland / where you imitate the shade of my mother” (Ginsberg 19). In this way, he differentiates himself with Whitman, while also using his basic methods.

With “Howl,” Ginsberg becomes the spitting image of the Transcendentalist movement’s Walt Whitman, but in the context of the Beat generation. In his poem, he is expressing his own ‘barbaric yawp’ (or his ‘howl’) of pain, of pleasure, of relief. Like Whitman, he travels all over the world, calling out all the indecencies he sees along his path (for Ginsberg, they are based in the treatment of the mentally ill, while for Whitman they are related to the Civil War and the treatment of the black man.) However, these lists of grievances do not come without glimpses of hope and release. Both men convey these moments through explicit references towards sex and sexuality (it was not by coincidence that *Leaves of Grass* was referenced multiple times throughout the infamous obscenity trial for *Howl*.) Perhaps the “Footnote to *Howl*” reads the most like a Whitman poem, as the entire section sounds like Ginsberg’s breath of relief. He ends the poem by reminding his audience, and himself, that there is something beautiful and “holy” (Ginsberg 21) to be found in every experience, whether or not it is visible to the eye.

Works Cited

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, and Jeffrey S. Cramer. *The Portable Emerson*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2014. Print.

Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl: And Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2010. Print.

Whitman, Walt, and David S. Reynolds. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP