



# JACLR

*Journal of Artistic  
Creation & Literary  
Research*

*JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

---

**Volume 1 Issue 1 (September 2013) Article 7**

**Carmen Pérez Rodríguez**  
**"Howling On the Road: Visions of the Beat Generation Today"**

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Pérez Rodríguez, Carmen. "Howling On the Road: Visions of the Beat Generation Today." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 1.1 (2013): 80-96  
<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>  
©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

This text has been blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

---

**Abstract:** The Beat Generation has had a great impact upon audiences, readers and critics. However, at the time of its birth, its members gained little recognition. The themes presented in their works -sex, drugs, jazz, and social non-conformity- were considered frivolous and lacking in literary quality by many critics. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of the Beat Generation on today's cultural sphere. The paper explores two main texts, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. The Beat Generation continues to inspire contemporary society in a wide range of cultural fields.

**Keywords:** Beat Generation, Culture, Society, Influence and Criticism

---

## Carmen PÉRI Z RODRÍGUEZ

### Howling on the Road: Visions of the Beat Generation Today

#### 0. Introduction: Context of the Beat Generation and Criticism

The Beat Generation was an American literary generation that emerged after World War II, particularly in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Disillusioned with the society of the period, they searched for a "new set of values," (Phillips 23) demonstrated in their attitude against general conformity. They were rejected by mainstream society and considered rebels and even "morally dangerous." (Phillips 23) They did not even have the approval of their intellectual counterparts and academic critics, who condemned them and ignored their contributions. They were also "ridiculed by mass media journalists." (Skerl 1) Despite this, they were able to create literary works that appealed to artistic circles, bohemians and the middle class youth, creating a basis of followers and supporters. With the publication of *Howl* in 1956 by Allen Ginsberg and the subsequent publication of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac in 1957 members of the Beat Generation caught the public eye. However, in the 1960s and '70s, "very little serious criticism appeared, and the Beats were largely excluded from academic discourse." (Skerl 1)

Of course, they were not the first ones to follow an alternative direction. Other famous figures before them became controversial in different periods of history. The Beats were influenced by American literary figures as well as authors from various cultural backgrounds: "Like the dadas and surrealists before them, the Beats sought to erase the boundaries between art and life [...] Like their American precursors, the Transcendentalists, they fashioned a role as poet-prophets who sought a spiritual alternative to the relentless materialist drive of industrial capitalism." (Skerl 2) Nevertheless, the Beats were the ones who probably most clearly confronted the general moral values and the conformity of their time.

Members of the Beat Generation concentrated in urban centers -mostly New York and San Francisco- and in bohemian neighborhoods. They performed and gathered in spaces such as cafés, clubs and galleries. They created their own magazines, alternative newspapers and publishing options. They often shared alternative religious beliefs, as well as unconventional sexual and family values. All these aspects created a different atmosphere, even subculture from the sociological point of view. The group eventually gained more members "perpetuating a multigenerational movement – perhaps the only modern avant-garde movement to do so." (Skerl 2) Despite the negative view that the media offered to the general public about the Beats, their message "achieved mass circulation, which also resulted in new adherents, particularly the youth of the 1960s." (Skerl 2) Bad publicity can also be good, specially to draw attention.

The three pillars of the movement, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, met in 1944 at Columbia University, New York. Although very different in style, these Beat authors shared a series of characteristics; such as the interest in "celebrating life

at the margins" and the focus on protagonists from underprivileged backgrounds, outcasts and junkies. The topics of their works influenced the language they used. The name "beat" was a word used in colloquial contexts: "[t]hey were introduced to the phrase *beat* in the mid 1940s by Herbert Huncke, a Times Square junkie and hipster friend of Burroughs. Kerouac began using it by the end of the decade and it first appeared in print in John Clellon Holmes' 1952 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, 'This is the Beat Generation.'" (Phillips 25) As Allen Ginsberg remembered later, Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes had a conversation about the nature of generations where the phrase "Beat Generation" appeared for the first time. Holmes mentioned the Lost Generation and Kerouac answered "Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation." (Ginsberg 17)

The article "This Is the Beat Generation" attempted to describe and to defend what the author considered a new generation; young people who were seen by many as young delinquents. While he admitted the difficulty of naming an entire generation, there was an appreciation of common qualities that could be described as "beat," meaning "the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness." (Holmes 1) Eventually, "beat" would have other meanings such as "beatitude" and "beatific," giving a sense of spirituality to the term, a quality that was also important for the Beat Generation. Kerouac tried to indicate this sense of the word in numerous interviews and lectures, explaining "the necessary beatness or darkness that precedes opening up to light, egolessness, giving room for religious illumination." (Ginsberg 18)

After describing the term, Holmes continued contextualizing this generation that was the product of a post-war society. Their subversive behavior is an attitude against the status quo, which at first might seem comfortable and secure, but whose homogeneity can be repressive:

Amid the smug optimism of Eisenhower years there was plenty of anxiety and discontent. Comfortable affluence and confidence in American values were compromised by fears about the spread of Communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The Beats detested the arms race, McCarthyism, and the seemingly forced migration to the suburbs. They stood opposed to the predominant climate of corporate values, consumerism and conformity, finding the weight of convention punishing and exhausting. (Phillips 28)

All these factors lead to what John Clellon Holmes calls in his article a "cold peace," that is prosperity with the persistent fear that all could end abruptly.

"This Is the Beat Generation" compares the Beats with the Lost Generation. "The Lost Generation was discovered in a roadster, laughing hysterically because nothing meant anything anymore." (Holmes 2) However, the beats are not lost. Young people are not concerned with "the ruins" of the lost generation and no longer notice them. "They drink to 'come down' or to 'get high,' not to illustrate anything. Their excursions into drugs or

promiscuity come out of curiosity, not disillusionment." (Holmes 2) The article explains how this attitude creates a sense of community, something they have not found in their society. In a way they feel alienated from it. This was incomprehensible for many who were shocked and wondered what was happening to the younger generation. However, as Holmes noticed, they were in search of new ideas and experiences because they cared about finding a spiritual light or faith: "It is also the first generation in several centuries for which the act of faith has been an obsessive problem, quite aside from the reasons for having a particular faith or not having it." (Holmes 4) What those who were scandalized did not notice was that most of the members of the Beat Generation were searching for a goal that they shared, they believed in something, but they were distracted because of the unconventional way they used to reach that. They tried to demonstrate that there were more alternatives "[t]here is no single philosophy, no single party, no single attitude." (Holmes 4)

The article concluded by giving the two general visions that society had of the Beats. Either they would eventually find a "great new moral idea" or they would simply get wasted by their "self-indulgence" behavior and their "social irresponsibility." What seemed to be clear for the author was that their actions vindicated that "the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem" (5) and therefore their search was worth it, since people who experience the many facets of life are supposedly the ones who become wiser.

As pointed out above, literary criticism, especially during the 60s and 70s, was hard on the Beats. Many scholars thought their work could not be taken into serious consideration. Most of them regarded the Beats as naïve and immature, and were not able to separate and distinguish between the wild youth portrayed and the authors of that generation. Their focus on the outlaws and outsiders as a subject for their works, as well as the language they used, was severely criticized on the grounds of obscenity and nonsense. The Beats were associated with adolescence from the very beginning, even though most of them were in their thirties (and even forties in the case of Burroughs) when they published their works. This is due to the topics of their novels and poems. Nonconformity and rebellion have always been considered as something more appropriate for adolescents: "[i]n other words, the Beat movement represents the first incursion into serious literature of an already well entrenched popular mystique which accords exaggerated significance to the vision and values of adolescence" (Scott 151) and "[t]heir patterns of behavior often reveal regressive adolescent traits, such as the use of special speech and dress as badges of identity and status or the compulsive hostility to authority." (Scott 151)

It was recognized that they attempted to express the situation in which American society was. However, according to critics of their time, those issues were not faced in a serious or acceptable way: "[b]ut though aware of these circumstances, the Beats have brought only the sensibility of an adolescent to bear upon a problem which requires the courage and mental stamina of a man. And they have failed pitifully." (Scott 159) Other contemporary authors were considered dedicated artists with a refined sensuousness, and these were writers who followed the literary tradition, whose works could also include these issues presented in a conventional way.

In this period, the Beat movement was predicted to evaporate rapidly: "early or late it will fizzle out and be remembered only as literary hotrod that blew its gaskets before completing the race." (Scott 158) Critics attributed this assumption to the fact that their works could not be considered respectable; they were made by the "corruption of language," and lacked any beauty or major literary achievement. Although the Beats were already known, they were "destined for a quick eclipse of fame." (Scott 158) With these strong accusations, critics and scholars seemed to be reassured that the Beat movement would probably fail in contributing to literature, but it seems they were hard to ignore:

[a]nd now come the Beats, desperately preaching a new kind of alienation, absolute and unremitting. Perversely extravagant, they are much harder to ignore than the temperate, rational academician, so hard to ignore, in fact, that before passing into oblivion they may shock a few people beyond the universities into re-examining the American dream, or perhaps more accurately, the American somnolence. (Scott 160)

Today it is clear that the Beats did not pass into oblivion. The opinion of critics and scholars has changed with time. It is now more than ever when the Beat Generation is being discussed from a more open approach. One clear indicator is the fact that today the Beat Generation is part of the canon of American literature. Courses about the Beats are being taught in many Universities around the globe, which makes their work an important contribution for literature: "[f]or the past twenty years, the Beats have also been the subject of many scholarly journal articles, which suggests a new appreciation for their role in American literature and culture of the mid-twentieth century." (Skerl 1)

Furthermore, the Beats have become icons of American culture. Their influence can be found almost everywhere in the actual society and culture. There are many references in other arts, music and film "[r]eferences to the Beat writers in popular songs, movies, and television shows constitute a further tribute to their cultural relevance and to the popularity they maintain with the public at large." (Theado 747) When talking about the beat legacy, its effects can be seen in contemporary culture. Many different cultural and social groups acknowledge their influence. According to Ginsberg, they contributed to the counterculture of the sixties, and therefore to the sexual revolution, and gay liberation, as well as the liberation of the word from censorship. They also influenced many musicians and contributed to the evolution of rhythm and blues into rock and roll. The spread of ecological consciousness and the opposition to the military-industrial machine are other effects that the Beat Generation had on culture. (Ginsberg 19)

Recent criticism about the Beats is centered on new perspectives and different points of view. Many academic critics have expressed the importance of analyzing these works from many angles: "future critics reinterpret the Beats with new postcolonial, minority, and feminist critical theories." (Bennett 179) They try to get away from the general view of the Beats as just a movement of rebellion and counterculture. In fact, from the perspective of the minorities, the Beat Generation was not as liberating: "the Beats might have

masqueraded as countercultural revolutionaries, but underneath their hip masks they embraced patriarchal, racist, and colonialist values that were essentially square." (Bennett 179) This is a relevant departure from the early criticism that the Beats received; first they were accused of being too radical; today, for many, they were not enough. The importance of this recent criticism relies in the focus and the study of minority and female writers of the Beat Generation, and the exploration of their works.

The view of the Beat Generation today is different from the '50s and 60's. Today they are recognized authors and even cultural icons. The question is why the Beats entered the canon of American literature, why they contributed to the actual culture, and why still today they generate interest in people, particularly the young. The answer of this cultural phenomenon may be found in the two most prominent works of the Beat Generation; Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*.

### 1. *On the Road*

"With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road." (Kerouac 4)

Considered one of the most prominent authors of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road*, which became the best example of the Beat Generation production. What made *On the Road* so famous? Or, in other words, "Of how many books can it be said that their contribution to a time transformed a time into a period, or turned a particular national habit of mind – in our case, our American rootlessness – into an emblem of national consciousness?" (Barbarese 591) The novel is based on Jack Kerouac's experiences in a series of trips he made around America during the late 1940's. One of the features that make this novel remarkable is that some of the characters included in the novel were in fact friends and people Kerouac knew himself. He claimed to have written the novel in three weeks; the truth is that he made two attempts before writing the final version of the novel (published in 1957). It is written in spontaneous prose,

[i]nspired by the stream-of-consciousness methods of Joyce, the anarchic extremes of Melville's most experimental prose, and the great Bop pioneer Charlie Parker. (...) Kerouac practiced 'spontaneous prose' as a barely punctuated flood of images and words designed to capture on the printed page the actual body tones and talk of real people. (Douglas xi)

This spontaneous prose is not only influenced by a line of thought, it is also the result of the rhythm and dynamics of jazz improvisation, a musical style in which Kerouac found inspiration. Thus, it is "characterized by a lack of arbitrary pauses, an attempt to capture speed and spontaneity itself." (Haslam 453)

People portrayed in the novel come from different backgrounds, middle class, native-americans, junkies, future writers and poets. All of them can be found on the lines of *On the*

*Road*, "[i]n other words, the road serves as a site where people from a variety of backgrounds meet and journey together." (Haslam 447) It seems that when these characters are on the road they no longer belong to a given social class, all of them are in the same place, and sometimes with a common destiny. In the following fragment of the novel, Sal talks about the best ride of his life:

The greatest ride of my life was about to come up, a truck, with a flatboard at the back, with about six or seven boys sprawled out on it, and the drivers, two young blond farmers from Minnesota, were picking up every single soul they found on that road – the most smiling, cheerful couple of handsome bumpkins you could ever wish to see, both wearing cotton shirts and overalls, nothing else; both thick-wristed and earnest, with broad howareyou smiles for anybody and anything that came across their path. I ran up, said "Is there any room?" They said, "Sure, hop on, 'sroom for everybody." (17)

The following lines of this fragment describe other "passengers" along Sal. In normal situations it is difficult to find all these kinds of people in the same place, but they do not mind sharing the space with different people, actually their attitude is tolerant and they are in high spirits; the road "allows Sal to break through socio-historical conditions of class and communicate with a variety of people." (Haslam 448) This could be considered as an act of rebellion towards the moral and ethical values of the middle and upper classes of American society.

This novel comprises a general frame of the America of that time, and criticizes primarily the conformity of the social middle class. Its protagonists are young men in search for something new, for alternative lifestyles: "American eagerly returned to the relative stability of middle-class life, now reaching outward to the newly emerging suburbs. The Beats were the first wave of rebellion against this large trend." (Reno 29) They were driven into what others may call dangerous, strange or weird. These characters and their actions were seen by many critics as "direct attacks on the values and morals of post-war America." (Haslam 446) Ultimately Kerouac's intention, as well as other authors of the Beat Generation, was to show to readers that other America was possible, despite the general values of their society. To this day, all these ideas can be found in almost every young mind, and also in the not so young, transcending the boundaries of time. It might not be through the same itinerary or the same medium (music, fashion, style, literature... all these things develop and change) but the basics are identical. It is the same idea of freedom, the search for one's individual destiny, without a goal or destination in mind; because "destinations are less important than is the act of going itself." (Haslam 446) For many more reasons, *On the Road* still resonates in our times as a mythical journey into our true self: therefore any young individual can find themselves in those lines and feel identified with it.

The search for something new is very revealing. One searches for new things and experiences when s/he is not satisfied with the way things are around him/her. It is the

feeling of "What if...?" it is the feeling of possibilities. And that is exactly what the Beat Generation brought to the literature, culture and to the American society of the fifties: the feeling that there is always another alternative. Before the protagonist of the novel, Sal Paradise, embarks himself on this journey he felt everything to be dead, therefore he needed to escape. His trips on the road with Dean Moriarty will change this conception:

Yes, and it wasn't only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more, and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow, in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother ; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic. (7)

In this fragment, Sal Paradise explains his reasons behind deciding to go on the road. This idea can be very attractive when someone is feeling trapped in the routine of the everyday life: "On the road, you leave behind all the ordinary routines and demands." (Reno 29) He was a writer who felt depressed and had the general feeling of not accomplishing anything. Then he met Dean Moriarty, the hero of this story. "Sal is primarily on the road because his hero is; and it is Dean—his personal American hero, a shabby but dynamic figure—whom he imitates in his peripateticism. Dean simply seeks 'kicks,' not land or money. By seeking as Dean does, Sal mimics his very idea of Americanness—a mobile (but not socially or economically mobile) and pure pursuit of happiness." (Skinazi 88) Dean was something new and fresh for the people of the New York circle. In a way, he was famous even before he arrived to New York City. Many of them had felt curious about this young man from the West, who had a strange family background, and who acted instinctively and without giving second thoughts, with some sort of wild naivety. Without knowing it, he became a hero and a rebel for this group of people.

Dean Moriarty stands as the opposite of alienation, "Dean, who seems to find a new sense of authenticity and identity beyond tradition and beyond the structures of the dominant society." (Haslam 454) Therefore Dean fulfills a really important role in the novel; according to critics, *On the Road* is about discovering America, and Moriarty would be the perfect representation of America: "The book unfolds as a poem in prose to the cowboys of the West and the intellectuals of the East and, of course, to the romance of the road in between. It is in America that is repeatedly made manifest in the figure of Dean Moriarty [...] an outsider to most Americans." (Skinazi 91)

In the following fragment of the novel, Sal is describing his thoughts after witnessing Dean and Carlo celebrating and behaving wildly in the streets after a night out. Observing them, he states:



The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (6)

Sal Paradise is describing his interest in what he calls "the mad ones"; he does not refer to the first meaning or description of said word, a mentally ill person who needs medication and to be locked up. He means "people who are mad to live" that is, people who live life with intensity, who are excited to live. In the eyes of the general public, this is a mad, even a dangerous way to live. Sal is an observer of this kind of life, and he will be a participant too. This attitude towards life makes it exciting and enjoyable. With this statement, Kerouac is describing the members of the Beat Generation, who are "desirous of everything" or "never say a commonplace thing." At this point in the novel, the reader realizes that the focus of the novel and the real protagonists of it are homeless, drunks, drug addicts, delinquents. In those lines, Kerouac describes them as extraordinary; with different qualities that make them unique in contrast with the views of the public opinion. These people are not heroes. But in his eyes, they are closer to the authenticity and to the light of spirituality.

In one part of the novel, Sal is walking in the streets of Denver, in a part of the city where most of his inhabitants are colored people. Here the narrator makes observations about his own identity as a white man, and wonders and wishes to be different, since he finds it hard to identify with the white majority, and he disagrees with the pressures and expectations that a white young man would have:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27<sup>th</sup> and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night . . . I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. (105)

He dislikes his life and what is expected of him. In these colored people he sees some kind of liberation, "Sal and Dean's desire to transcend time is ultimately a desire to escape the ideological structures around them and to escape their own 'dreary' life as white men." (Haslam 455)

At the end of the novel one of the most famous and well-known fragments of the book can be found. Sal Paradise has finished the narration of his adventures on the road with Dean Moriarty, he has already explained to the readers how his relationship with Dean ended, and writes the following lines:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty. (178)

The above sounds like a very pessimistic description of America and its society. The reader is surprised at these lines at the end of the novel. One might think that after all those adventures on the road, fast cars, many different people, different experiences, the protagonist of this story finally found what he was looking for. However the answer is negative. Nothing has changed, everything stays the same. After many trips searching for the light, they could not find it. Sal did not find a paternal figure in Dean, or an older brother. So he abandons him on the streets of New York, just as Dean did in Mexico when he was ill. He puts distance between them, recognizing that his period on the road with him is over. "This may be precisely Kerouac's point in Sal's hymn to a vanishing paradise – the loss of innocence is tragic everywhere but in America, where every loss can always be exploited. Either like Dean we embody innocence without knowing it, or we cease to be children." (Barbarese 594) The description of the landscape in the last lines of the book is dark and melancholic, and shows how Sal Paradise is disappointed with his experience. The end of *On the Road* makes the reader "feel the failure and the decay." (Reno 32)

After analyzing the different themes and ideas behind *On the Road*, the impact of Kerouac's work in literature and culture can be assessed. This novel still generates interest in people, after more than fifty years. Many critics agree that his literary work and his artistic achievement "remain underestimated." (Johnson 24) According to Johnson, "This is so in part because his writing has been overshadowed by his mass culture image -- his media-driven fame for Beat nonconformity." (24) While many praise this literary work, others have criticized it, arguing that it did not belong to serious writing. However, today there is a different general view of *On the Road*. The fact that this work is read and studied in Universities around the world reflects "a new consensus about American literature [...] Jack Kerouac's evocation of the rag-tag beatnik culture of his day has entered the canon of Great American Novels." (Reno 29) It has influenced American culture immensely in many aspects. Socially, it was a turning point for the youth. Kerouac created a revolution, sending many young people on the road in search for enlightenment and enjoyment. Burroughs, considered a Beat writer too, said of the role of writers and of Kerouac that "[w]riters are in a way, very powerful indeed. They write the scripts for the reality film. Kerouac opened a

million coffee bars and sold million pair of Levis to both sexes. Woodstock rises from his pages." (Lauriño 109) After its publication, Jack Kerouac became an icon, and today it can be difficult to separate his myth, created by the media and other sources, from his literary persona.

Although *On the Road* can be categorized as immature or even early propaganda for our current culture, (Reno 31) others tend to think that this novel influenced later literature: "I see Kerouac as a seminal figure in postwar literary advances, a pre-postmodernist whose work evinces the turn from modes and ideologies of late high modernism." (Johnson 23) What cannot be denied is that *On the Road* still impacts its readers. There is a resurgence of interest in the novel, and this might be due to the times we are living. People are not satisfied and search for answers in ways they never thought possible. This discontent makes nonconformity appealing. However, the authenticity of these emotions is always in danger of becoming one more product, as "The counterculture of transgression that dominates *On the Road* has thoroughly colonized our middle-class world." (Reno 31) An example of this is the recent adaptation of this novel into film. The decision of making a film from *On the Road* says much about the audience's taste. Previous to the premier of the film, The Guardian published: "Whether it reconciles the duality of Kerouac the legend and Kerouac the man – both of which have been found wanting in many regards – perhaps it does signal that we're on the road to a new and overdue appreciation of Jack Kerouac." (Barnett 2009) Therefore, *On the Road* could be considered as an influential work that inspires the cultural sphere of today.

## **2. Howl**

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by  
 madness, starving hysterical naked." (Ginsberg 1)

*Howl and Other Poems* was first published in 1956, one year after the famous reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, where Allen Ginsberg performed for the first time the poem in front of an audience formed by other literary figures like Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Rexroth, Michael McClure and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who after Ginsberg's performance wrote him a telegram congratulating him and offering the chance of publishing his poem. After its publication, *Howl* became well known, and not just in the academic circles; it gained many curious readers, who were attracted to the poem and the famous obscenity trial: "The assault of *Howl* was one of the last highly publicized obscenity trials, making it a legal, if not a literary successor to Ulysses." (Piafsky 166)

It was not only the controversy over the trial that impressed readers, the content and the form of the poem were very different from the poetic works of the time: "*Howl* violated all the current artistic canons and provoked a literary scandal." (Breslin) The language used was rather colloquial, not refined or elevated, and the form was experimental. Most importantly, like other beat poets, poetry had to be performed and was created with an

oral function. Apart from the reading of the poem in front of an audience, jazz or other kinds of music were an important element in the performance.

Although it is essential to distinguish between the author and the speaker of the poem, *Howl* contains many references to Ginsberg's life and other members of the Beat Generation: "Holy Peter holly Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cassady holy the unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels!" (12)

The entire poem describes experiences lived by people who seem to have a direct relationship with the speaker: "There is a putative solidarity between all the people described in the first section of *Howl*: they react against what they see as a pernicious status quo, and this is embodied in the figure of Moloch in Section II. The last section of the poem, in the anaphoric phrase *I'm with you in Rockland*, makes the solidarity of the Beat visionaries much more putative." (Quinn 195) This creates a feeling of community within the text. Ginsberg's mother is also mentioned in the poem, and some of his experiences, such as his hospitalization in the Psychiatric Institute of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital as part of a plea bargain, (Hadda 229) constitute an important event for the development of the poem. In the introduction of *Howl*, written by William Carlos Williams he states:

Literally he has, from all the evidence, been through hell (...) It is a howl of defeat. Not defeat at all for he has gone through defeat as if it were an ordinary experience, a trivial experience. Everyone in this life is defeated but a man, if he be a man, is not defeated. It is the poet, Allen Ginsberg, who has gone, in his own body, through the horrifying experiences described from life in these pages. (...) But this is in our own country, our own fondest purlieus. We are blind and live our blind lives out in blindness. Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of the angels. (...) Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell. (vii, viii)

In his words, Williams describes how often society seems to be blind about their own self and are not able to see defects, excepting poets who with their visions are able to express what others cannot see. Poets are in charge of showing this reality to the readers. Williams also warns about the content of the poem to the reader, as if he knew what the reaction may be. His use of the word "defeat" when describing *Howl* expresses other significant meaning of the poem: it represents the generation described with another synonym of "beaten."

The title, *Howl*, makes reference to a scream of anger: "[a] 'howl' is a prolonged animal cry and so an instinctive cry, and Ginsberg's poem still forcefully communicates the sense of a sudden, angry eruption of instincts long thwarted, of the release of excluded human and literary energies" (Breslin n/p), performed by a poet who emerges as a spokesperson for his generation, as we can see in the very first line. The use of the first person makes the speaker a direct witness of the situation. As in Romanticism, the poet here

is a prophet with a vision, a prophet who preaches to us and laments all those intellectuals who have been ignored and marginalized. In a way he is describing a place which looks like hell. The speaker is talking through the experiences of others he knows and he expresses a profound unhappiness and deception. The scream of anger represents an individual who feels repressed by society, who sees his freedom compromised by restrictions of different kinds. It is the eternal debate between society and individuality. People of different generations might feel identified with this idea of exasperation, anger and fear about one's destiny ending in the wrong hands.

In *Howl*, Ginsberg questions American society and its values, and expresses his disillusionment with the American Dream, motivated by a feeling of oppression. In his work he defended different values such as spirituality, the search for alternative lifestyles, individual freedom and new sexual habits. All these features made his poetry transgressive and subversive. Due to this, he was constantly under the surveillance of authorities, who saw in him a threat against the homogeneity of the American society. The use of "improper" words and vocabulary, as well as the mention of taboo themes such as homosexual relations were essential motivators for deciding that *Howl* was not apt for the general public: "Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy." (*Howl*, 4)

In May 21, 1957, police officers entered the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco and seized all the volumes of *Howl and Other Poems*. The publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, was arrested. *Howl* was accused of being "sexually explicit, homoerotic or outspoken and incurs the wrath of moralizing right-wing zealots." (Berger 123) The references to homosexuality and words such as "cock", "fuck" and "balls" provoked the accusation of obscenity. The Collector of Customs, Chester MacPhee, considered this to be offensive and inappropriate for the public. For the trial, which was well covered by the media, the defense "produced an impressive barrage of testimony and letters affirming the social and literary merits of the work." (Berger 124) In the end, Ferlinghetti was found not guilty of the charges. The judge considered that "Ginsberg's message was neither entirely convincing nor civil;" rather, "[i]t was legitimate expression of social protest that merited constitutional protection." (Berger 124) Ironically, this situation would grant *Howl* and Ginsberg fame and publicity, or as expressed in Ferlinghetti words "The San Francisco Collector of Customs deserves a word of thanks for seizing Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* and thereby rendering it famous. Perhaps we could have a medal made." (Morgan 107) One of the achievements of the Beat Generation was making literary censorship visible. This trial was covered in many newspapers and magazines, and it raised the debate of whether any form of art should be subjected to control or, on the contrary, if free expression should be respected. This is still an issue today, with many examples in everyday life that make people question the limits of expression.

Apart from writing about non-conformity and general values, Ginsberg was inspired by other poets, such as William Blake and Walt Whitman. His poetic style was constructed from the basics of these two poets and from suggestions of William Carlos Williams that he used the American contemporary idiom. Also influential was Jack Kerouac and his

spontaneous prose, what Allen Ginsberg called "spontaneous bop prosody" which required "an absolute, almost Zen-like complete absorption, attention to your own consciousness, to the act of writing." (Ginsberg 147) Ginsberg's language talks about American degradation, created by pressure based in competition. The speaker says that all that conformity is leading these best minds into madness. His poetry was also influenced by eastern religions and spirituality, as well as the Christian bible and the Jewish tradition (his father and mother had Jewish origins).

I'm with you in Rockland

Where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution  
 against the fascist national Golgotha. (11)

As seen in the previous stanza, *Howl* includes many references to religion and politics. Curiously, it names different religions and its traditions, as well as different political ideologies, and neither of these seems to be the solution to any problem. Modern civilization provokes them to "search for something beyond it for spiritual illumination," (Breslin n/p) therefore there is a need to try different alternatives despite the negative results. For some people, religion and spirituality could be helpful for bearing reality or obtaining hope. The poem also contains many references to culture and history. This enriches the poem; it describes and represents that particular moment with many details concerning the period. The reader might be overwhelmed by the amount of information, and in each reading he might encounter something new. At the same time, thanks to those details, it is easy to compare that period with the present one, and therefore identify with many of the issues discussed in the poem.

The figure of Moloch, used in the second part of the poem, is a mythological figure from Hebrew tradition. Children had to be sacrificed to Moloch, a fake god, to make him satisfied. In *Howl* there are clear references that indicate that Moloch is a representation of the repressive state. The speaker criticizes the attitude of society that idolizes institutions like a fake god: "Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the cross-bone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned government!" (*Howl*, 8)

As seen in the previous line, Moloch stands for many elements of repression in society like prisons, as well as representing institutional organizations such as the Congress, the Court and the Government. All these elements are responsible for controlling society; this could be considered a criticism of conformity and the power exercised by the institutions to control individuals. It also expresses the discontent that many feel when governments or any other official institution abuse their power. Nonetheless, Moloch represents much more in the text; war and machinery or technology are mentioned ("Robot apartments" and "monstrous bombs"), the speaker describes the alienation human beings suffer when the brutal reality of war crosses their ways, as well as the sense of not being able to control one's own life and the feeling of uselessness when the technology takes over one's domestic

and occupational life. People these days can still relate to these fears, wars and corruption are still an important issue in contemporary society, and technological progress questions the limits of morality in many cases. Through these lines readers see their present society reflected in the story.

*Howl*, despite its popularity, was not a universally loved poem in its time. "Critics, scholars, poets reviled it not only for its vulgarity but for what they deemed to be its amateurishness and its lack of control." (Piasky 167) *Howl* helped to discover a large community of poets who were not accepted by the academics and the mainstream, opening the door for many of them. About reading *Howl and other Poems*, Diane di Prima said she felt "moved and delighted. For several years I had been writing poetry and stories in the "hip" argot of the period – much to the horror of everyone I knew – and now, here it was: that language I loved had broken into print. I felt strong and vindicated." (Di Prima 13) Furthermore, Ginsberg opened new possibilities for younger authors that would come after him. His poetry contributed to an important achievement, bringing literature outside the university and academic circles, to other locations such as bars, coffee places, or even stages. For many academics, it was a serious decline, the beginning of imperfect and impulsive poetry. For others it was a turning moment that changed everything. And it was *Howl* that made this change possible.

Today the poem is still relevant, and a publication celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary appeared in 2006, under the title *Howl: The Poem that Changed America*. Today, it seems that *Howl* remains a significant piece of literary work that will forever mark that period of cultural history. There is still interest in this poem, and it still causes many different reactions. One would think that after all these years people now accept many of the issues discussed in the text, however the truth is that many are surprised and even disgusted when reading these. Tolerance towards homosexuality in the 50's was almost non-existent. Contemporary society is more tolerant about sexual orientation, however there are many issues concerning this subject and in many parts of the world it still generates debate. This is a clear indicator that things have not changed that much. As poet Bob Hass said when talking about *Howl's* criticism today "[i]t still seems like literary sensationalism and bad manners in a repellant way to certain kinds of writers, but my experience of teaching students year after year American poems that interest me is that they mostly respond very powerfully to this poem, in a way that every generation has." (McChesney) In other words, *Howl* hardly ever stays irrelevant to readers, and it probably will remain so.

### 3. Conclusion

The Beat Generation seems to have become one of the most prominent literary movements in contemporary American culture. Although criticized and ignored by contemporary critics and scholars, time has proven that its influence goes beyond literature, reaching fields such as arts, society and religion. "Today the Beats are recognized as icons of America's counterculture and as one of the most influential cultural movements of the century Perhaps

[...] more important, the Beats continue to inspire younger generations of artists with their directness, courage, and intensity of vision." (Phillips 23)

Not only have they inspired new generations of artists. There is still something in them that makes their novels and poems interesting and different. They gain readers generation after generation, and today the Beats can be found in film, television or music: "Beats are experiencing their biggest revival ever . . . There is both nostalgia for the origins of youth culture and for a genuine bohemian community, but also a reawakening of the spirit, a yearning for the utopian freedom found in the Beats' commitment to emotional intensity, exuberance for life, and their determination to avoid spiritual death." (Phillips 39, 40) Nowadays, life's frustrations cause people search for answers or simply seek ways of distraction. It is at times like these that the idea of driving a car towards the West is even more than appealing. The Beats represent the spirit of youth, the spirit of rebellion, and more importantly, the spirit of freedom. People feel identified with the frustration and anger of *Howl*, and they want to experience freedom like the protagonist of *On the Road*.

## Works Cited

- Barbarese, J.T. "Fifty Years of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*." *The Swewanee Review* 112.4 (2004): 591-594. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 May 2013.
- Barnett, David "Misremembering Jack Kerouac." *Books Blog*. The Guardian. 21 Oct 2009. Web. 2 May 2013.
- Bennett, Robert "Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Beats: New Directions in Beat Studies." *College Literature* 32.2 (2005): 177-184. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 June 2013.
- Berger, Maurice "Libraries Full of Tears: The Beats and the Law." *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. Ed. Lisa Phillips. Paris – New York: Whitney Museum of Art in association with Flamarion, 1996. 123-124. Print.
- Breslin, James E.B. "Essay on Howl." *Modern American Poetry*. University of Chicago Press, 1994. Web. 29 May 2013.
- Di Prima, Diane "Knowing Allen Ginsberg." *Paterson Literary Review* 35 (2006): 13-19. *EBSCO HOST*. Web. 29 May 2013.
- Douglas, Ann. Introduction. *The Subterraneans*. By Jack Kerouac. 1958. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001. ix-xxiv. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*. McGraw-Hill Company, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. p147. 1974. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2009. Print.
- Ginsberg, Allen. Prologue. *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. Ed. Lisa Phillips. Paris – New York: Whitney Museum of Art in association with Flamarion, 1996. 17-19. Print.
- Hadda, Janet. "Ginsberg in Hospital." *American Imago* 65.2 (2008): 229-259. *Project Muse*. Web. 24 May 2013.
- Haslam, Jason. "It Was My Dream That Screwed Up: The Relativity of Transcendence in *On the Road*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39.4 (2009): 443-464. *Project Muse*. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.
- Holmes, John Clellon "This is the Beat Generation." *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 16, 1952. Print.
- Johnson, Ronna C. "You're Putting Me On: Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence." *College Literature* 27.1 (2000): 22-38. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 May 2013.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Viking Press, 1969. Print.



Pérez Rodríguez, Carmen. "Howling On the Road: Visions of the Beat Generation Today." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 1.1 (2013): 80-96  
 <<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>  
 ©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

- Lauriño, Francisco J. "Proyección de la Beat Generation en el s XXI." *Ábaco 2 Epoca* 37/38 (2003): 103-110. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 May 2013.
- McChesney, John. "After 50 years, Ginsberg's 'Howl' still resonates." *npr*. n.d. Web. 25 May 2013 < <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6393328>>.
- Morgan, Bill and Nancy J. Peters. *Howl on Trial*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006. Print.
- Phillips, Lisa. "Beat Culture: America Revisioned." *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*. Ed. Lisa Phillips. Paris – New York: Whitney Museum of Art in association with Flammarion, 1996. 23-40. Print.
- Piafsky, Michael. "The Poem That Changed America: 'Howl' Fifty Years Later (review)." *The Missouri Review* 29.2 (2006): 165-167. *Project Muse*. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.
- Quinn, Justin. "Coteries, Landscape and the Sublime in Allen Ginsberg." *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.1/2 (2003): 193-206. *Project Muse*. Web. 26 Apr. 2013.
- Reno, R.R. "The End of the Road." *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life* 182 (2008): 29-33. *EBSCO HOST*. Web. 26 Apr 2013.
- Scott, James F. "Beat Literature and the American Teen Cult." *American Quarterly* 14.2 (1962): 150-160. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Apr 2013.
- Skerl, Jennie. Introduction. *Reconstructing the Beats*. By Skerl. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 1-6. Print.
- Skinazi, Karen E.H. "Through Roots and Routes: On the Road's Portrayal of an Outsider's Journey into the Meaning of America." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39.1 (2009): 85-103. *Project Muse*. Web. 26 Apr 2013.
- Theado, Matt. "Beat Generation Literary Criticism" *Contemporary Literature* 45.4 (2004): 747-761. *Project Muse*. Web. 1 Jun 2013.
- Williams, William Carlos. "'Howl' for Carl Solomon: Introduction." *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*. By Allen Ginsberg. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2009. vii-viii. Print.

### Bioprofile of the author

Carmen Pérez Rodríguez holds a Grade in English Studies from Complutense University Madrid. Currently, she is doing a MA in Spanish/TESOL at West Virginia University, USA. Her interests focus on American Contemporary Literature, Applied Linguistics and Psycholinguistics. E-mail: <[caperizrodriguez@mix.wvu.edu](mailto:caperizrodriguez@mix.wvu.edu)>