Salahaddin University-Erbil

College of Languages

English Department

**The Poetry of the Beat Generation: Allen Ginsbergs Impact**

A Research Project

Submitted to the Department of English as a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the BA Degree in English Language & Literaure

Prepared By:

**Ayub Khalil Ali**

Supervised by:

**Sherzad Shafie Babo**

2022-2023

**Abstract**

The American literature is a rich and distinct literature that is sometimes regarded as richer than the English one especially its modern and postmodern branch. This paper tries to study one of the postmodern American poetic movements which called (The Beat Generation). The current research deals with the concept of the poetry of The Beat Generation and the impact of Allen Ginsberg on it. It sheds light on the history of the concept and attempts to view it from different approaches. The first section is about the concept in general, linking it with postmodern literature and give a thorough introduction of it. Furthermore, the second section deals more of Allen Ginsberg and how his poetry impacted the era of literature and taking the Beat Generation to another level. The paper ends with the conclusions and the list of the sources.

**Keywords:**

**Allen Ginsberg, Beat Generation, Postmoderinism, American Poetry**

**Section one:Post Modern American and Beat Poetry**

**1.1 An introduction to the Postmodern and American Poetry:**

American poetry in late 1950s and early 1960s was divided between two different conception. On the one hand, american poetry was stil dominated by the mainstream lyric as represemted ny the work of some poets like James Merril and Robert Lowell. the term "mainstream poetry" to describe the works of some contemporary poets. It is usually a mild pejorative, suggesting the poets aren't particularly original and perhaps not to be taken as seriously as poets belonging to this or that poetic movement or school. On the other hand, the work of some poets who defined themselves as a new poetic counterculture. A counterculture is a culture whose values and norms of behavior differ substantially from those of mainstream society, sometimes diametrically opposed to mainstream cultural mores. Countercultures can trigger dramatic cultural changes. Prominent examples of countercultures in the Western world the more fragmentary counterculture of the Beat Generation (1944–1964). Where Eliot and Auden were still seen as the key poetic role models by the poetic mainstream, the new avant-garde took inspiration from an experimental tradition of poets whose work was difficult to understand by using the New Critics' approaches such as: William and Pound. By the end of the 1950s, readers and publishers had only just started to acknowledge this postwar avant-garde. (Beach.2003. p.189)

The publication of the anthology The New American Poetry was the major literary development in 1960. The anthology, which was edited by Donald Allen and published by Grove Press, will for the first time bring together many of the creative young authors who would later make up the next important generation of avant-garde poetry.

The most significant collection of American poetry to be published in the second half of the 20th century *was The New American Poetry*. The poets included had a wide range of backgrounds, attitudes, and styles, but they shared a commitment to experimentation and a rejection of the academic poetry form embodied by the New Criticism.The collection was unusuall mid century anthologies becouse its something new, the poets whom Allen identified as “our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry” were not only young (few of them were over forty and several were still in their twenties). In terms of the significance these poets would have over the following three to four decades, Allen was incredibly foresighted. A number of them – including Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov was to play a central role in the development of late-twentieth-century poetry. (ibid. p.18)

**1.2 The Beat Poetry:**

The phenomenon known as the Beat Generation was a large group of intellectuals who were successful in transforming American literature and culture. At university centers, coffee shops, clubs, and other reading areas across America in the 1940s and 1950s, the beat authors grew to fame and popularity, and several of their works made lists of top sellers in local bookstores.

It is evident that American literature was marked by originality from a quick study of the earliest days of American literature and the very beginning of the exploration of the continent. Looking at the history of the new globe reveals that the first attempts at poetry were documented as early as the seventeenth century, when the puritans who were migrating began recording their recollections and penning their religious works. (Gair.2019. p.1)

Beat generation didn't become known nationally or globally until on the *on the Road's* triumph in 1957–1958; nonetheless, the group had already convened and created a vague creative manifesto more than a decade earlier. The original "Beat" circle, which included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Lucien Carr, Joan Vollmer, Edie Parker, and Céline Young first met on the Columbia campus in 1944 and their visions of the future of literature helped to create the foundations of a "movement". Neal Cassady, the inspiration for Dean Moriarty of On the Road, first arrived in New York in December 1946 and was introduced to Ginsberg and Kerouac by Hal Chase. Go, the first Beat novel, was written by John Clellon Holmes, who is also credited with coining the term "Beat Generation" with Jack Kerouac. The poem that made Ginsberg famous, "Howl for Carl Solomon," was inspired by a meeting he had with Carl Solomon at the Psychiatric Institution in 1949. In 1950, Ginsberg met Gregory Corso, the young rebel poet and delinquent, at a Greenwich Village bar, bringing together the most important members of the first generation of East Coast Beats. (ibid.2008. p.25)

The Beats were undoubtedly the most well-known of the groups featured in Allen's anthology. They gained attention for their poetry readings, particularly the Six Gallery event in San Francisco. The Six Gallery reading brought together West Coast poets like Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia with East Coast writers of the Beat Generation like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, even though the San Francisco Bay area had been a center of significant avant-garde activity since the mid-1940s. The reading achieved two crucial goals. Firstly, it "galvanized media interest in a variety of alternative poetries," as Paul Hoover has argued, which could now challenge the dominant New Critical style. And second, it pioneered the idea of poetry as a type of public performance at a period when poetry was largely thought of as a written form intended to be read or contemplated alone. (Beach.2003. p.190-191)

We must recognize how remarkably different the "Six Poets at the Six Gallery" reading was from the formal, academic readings that were then and still are the standard on college and university campuses if we are to understand the symbolic significance of the performance The most important details in this text are related to the poetry of the Beats. The Beats took on a variety of genres, including inspirations from Surrealism and Buddhist philosophy to the poetry of Whitman, Blake, Pound, and Williams. They were also fans of jazz and blues music, which encouraged them to experiment with unpredictable and spontaneous methods. The Beats responded to America's alienating social and ideological structure during the Cold War in a similar way to the confessionals, but their response was framed in terms that were more external. The work of the Beats, which did not conform to conventional rules of language or social behavior, was more difficult for the mainstream literary establishment to embrace than that of the confessionals. (Ibid.2003. p.190-191)

**1.3 Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Poetry:**

Allen Ginsberg was a poet, founding member of the Beat Generation, and a controversial social and political activist. His breakthrough poem "Howl," which is included in Howl and Other Poems (1956), influenced a generation of poets and musicians and won an infamous obscenity trial. Ginsberg gained recognition for his support for several causes, including free speech, gay liberation, and antiwar, making him well-known for his political views as he was for his writing. He was the son of powerful parents who gave birth to him on June 3, 1926. His mother, Naomi Ginsberg, was a Russian immigrant who passed on her love of the working class and oppressed masses. ( Lawlor.n.d.p.117)

Noami experienced a series of psychological crises that led to her institutionalization, and Allen's poem Kaddish (1959) was his most overt response to her passing. It references the traditional Jewish funeral rites for the dead person:

There, rest. no more suffering for you. I know where you have gone, it's good

No more flowers in the summer fields of New York, no joy now, no more

Fear of Louis.

And no more of his sweetness and glasses, his high school decades,

Debts, loves, frightened telephone calls, conception beds, relatives, hands-(Ginsberg, n.d: 201)

Allen expresses his sadness over his mother's passing and his frustration with the society he lives in. He is also angry with his father for the harsh treatment Noami endured while growing up in the family, and his childhood memories of the political conflict over communism and socialism are brought back by the memorial. Critics claim the debate caused Noam's psychological collapse.

Allen Ginsberg was not an outlier in the Beat Generation, as he met Lucien Carr and introduced him to Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs while they were both students at Columbia University. Kerouac was Ginsberg's lifelong buddy and one of the leading leaders of the group, with Burroughs acting as his adoptive father.Along for inspiring Ginsberg to compose poetry, Burroughs introduced him "to a menagerie of unusual acquaintances, including petty thieves and drug addicts, Times Squares hustlers and small-time mobsters" (Michael Schumacher qtd in Lawlor: 118).

Ginsberg struggled with the conflicting influences of his academic work and teachers and those of his new friends, such as Carr, Burroughs, and Kerouac. He was also fascinated by language used outside of academia, both at home and in outdoor activities. He took eleven years to establish himself as a poet, despite the fact that he composed several poems that he collected in his first book, Empty Mirror. David Kammerer, a newcomer to the group, was smitten with young Lucien Carr and often made moves towards him. This incident had a profound impact on the lives and poems of the key Beats. (Gair.p.107)

**Section two: Allen Ginberg’s Impact on the Poetry of the Beat Generation In Selected Poems**

**2.1 Ginsbergs Impact on Beat Poetry:**

Allen Ginsberg was a visionary poet and leader of the Beat movement who helped shape American counterculture in the second half of the 20th century. American poet whose epic poem Howl (1956) is regarded as one of the most important works of the Beat movement . In Paterson, New Jersey, where his father taught English and was himself a poet, Ginsberg grew up. In his lengthy poem Kaddish from 1961, Allen Ginsberg wrote about his mother, who spent several years in a mental institution. William Carlos Williams, a poet, had an impact on Ginsberg's writing, especially in regards to the utilisation of natural speech rhythms and direct observations of unvarnished reality.

Ginsberg was close friends with William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac while they were both attending Columbia University, where his anarchistic tendencies infuriated the authorities. These persons would subsequently be included among the Beats. He travelled extensively and had a variety of jobs, from cafeteria floor mopper to market researcher, after graduating from Columbia in 1948.

In Howl, Ginsberg laments what he perceives to have been the insanity's destruction of the "best minds of his generation." Dithyrambic and prophetic, with influences from Walt Whitman's lyrical bohemianism, it also focuses on Buddhism, drug abuse, homosexuality, and Ginsberg's disgust with what he perceived to be the materialism and insensitivity of post-World War II America.

Kaddish and Other Poems and Empty Mirror, a compilation of older poems, were published in 1961. Reality Sandwiches followed in 1963. One of Ginsberg's most significant works, Kaddish, is a lengthy confessional poem in which the poet laments the madness of his mother and seeks to reconcile his feelings towards both her and her passing. Ginsberg started travelling constantly in the early 1960s, giving poetry readings at colleges and coffee shops, going on trips, and getting involved in left-wing politics. In the late 1960s, he rose to prominence as a guru of the American teenage counterculture. As his understanding of Buddhism developed, a religious element of love for all sentient beings crept into his writing. (www.britannica.com)

Allen Ginsberg and other artists praised unexpected creativity. His way of life and artwork broke through barriers and embodied the Beat Generation. Several aspects of Beat Generation culture were then incorporated into the wider hippie movement in the 1960s. It's impossible to ignore the parallels between the two countercultures. The Beat generation is sometimes referred to as the "fathers of the hippies." Allen Ginsberg, a poet, later played a significant role in the 1960s hippie movement and served as a link between the two groups.

Ginsberg's poetry appeared unplanned and unprofessional to many of the established poets of the day because of his use of a gritty vernacular and an improvised rhythmical style. Allen Ginsberg's poetry about his youth, curiosity, conflict, freedom of thinking, and other people captured the abstract ideals of this period. Allen Ginsberg has been able to convey the ideas and ideals of the Beat Generation via his ideal individuality.

**2.2 “Howl”**

Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) is one of the most famous poems written by the Beat Generation. It is an elegy for "the brightest brains of [Ginsberg's] generation" and is dedicated to Carl Solomon, who had been separated in a mental hospital. It also serves as an homage to dissident thinkers, artists, and hipsters as well as a critique of western society's oppressiveness. It was censored for its sexual themes and violent language, but due to its success in a 1957 obscenity case, more contentious works of literature were published in the 1950s and 1960s. (wwww.Litchart.com).

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, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, (Gisnberg, 1973. P.9)

In order to gather his instances of madness, Ginsberg went to the street, where the true kind of madness may be observed in action. This type of madness is nothing more than a rejection of Eisenhower's America's dominant way of life. As the "greatest brains" of the poem, in addition to his mother and Carl, are his close friends and fellow members of the Beat Generation, along with their companions, the issue of lunacy for Ginsberg became a personal one. In the poem's opening and most well-known line, "I saw the best mind of my generation destroyed by madnes, famished hysterical naked," (Ginsberg, 1973. 9), Ginsberg is shown as an observer of those minds, but as part one of the poem progresses, it becomes clear that he is one of them. The first part is, in effect, a long grievance for the mind state of the 'best minds' in and outside the psychiatric institutions and culminates (Alimurad.2003.p.138)

Ginsberg sets a strong tone by describing the individuals and their actions using profane language. He explains how society is mostly to blame for the demise of these great intellectuals. Also, these people were not regarded as members of the social elite like physicians, attorneys, politicians, or scientists. Ginsberg instead speaks of the imaginative faculties of poets, musicians, painters, and travellers. He makes reference to politics, religion, drug usage, and promiscuity as some of the various social pressures that caused people's minds to fall apart. The passage has a powerful rhythm and forceful words, yet it seems like an interminable run-on phrase. One of the greatest minds is described differently each time:

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz, who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated, who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war, who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull. (Ginsberg.1973. p9).

Inanition, throughout this poem, the poet engages with themes of madness, contemporary society, religion, rules, and more. He challenges the standards of his time, promotes rebellion against capitalism, and elevates his “mad” friends who suffer from drug use and unfulfilled artistic desires. Famously, Ginsberg composed the line lengths with specific intentions to be read in one breath. The first line is a great example. Readers can handle the first line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” before taking a breath and moving to the next line. The poem is filled to the brim with imagery and a variety of rhyme scheme.

**2.3 “ASupermarket in California*”***

In 'A Supermarket in California', the speaker, possibly Ginsberg, is speaking directly to American poet Walt Whitman, who died in 1892, but who inspired many poets’ generations after his death. One of the greatest American poets of the middle of the 20th century, Allen Ginsberg, wrote a poem titled "A Supermarket in California." The poem's speaker, who is typically identified as Allen Ginsberg, enters the brightly illuminated supermarket and sees Walt Whitman, an American poet of the 19th century, whose work he has been reading. Whitman, on the other hand, behaves almost as if he were an alien dropped on Earth from space; from his 19th-century viewpoint, the supermarket setting makes little sense. Before asking his poet guide further in-depth and philosophical questions, the speaker imagines playfully eating the produce without paying for any of it. The poem concludes with a picture of Whitman in the afterlife, implying that his romantic and idealistic view of America is probably already dead. ([www.litchart.com](http://www.litchart.com))

He intended the poem to highlight the contrast between Ginsberg's 1950s and Whitman's optimistic, natural, and emotional nineteenth century; between Ginsberg's boring, gloomy, and ennui-filled post-war America and Whitman's cheerful, natural, and emotional nineteenth century. As the main purpose of the poet in creating the poem might be inferred from its scene, the poem's opening scene is particularly significant. (Alimurad.2019. p.161)

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the streets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations! (Ginsberg.1973.23).

Ginsberg seeks temporary relief from his idol, Walt Whitman, as he is going through a difficult time marked by ennui and pessimism. He goes for a nighttime stroll because his "headache" should have been brought on by the dull lifestyle he was leading in that mechanical age of war and industry. The words "tonight" and "the full moon" in the poem give the reader a sense of the poet's present state of loneliness, alienation, and desolation. He can only find some comfort in the silent, empty streets and the lonely moon in the sky. The only escape method available in such a situation is the imagination, which turned to Walt Whitman for help. In a ' hungry fatigue', Ginsberg looks for a ' shopping for images' and so looking forward to see in the supermarket what Whitman spoke of in his poetry. (Alimurad.2019. p.162)

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night!

Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! --- and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down

by the watermelons? (Ginsberg. 1973.p27).

He had these ideas as he walks inside the super market, searching for anything to free him from the psychological entanglement he perceives in society and daily life. ‘What Peaches and What Penumbras’ is a fascinating example of Ginsberg misusing a phrase since it strongly suggests that the two terms belong to different types of fruit. Yet, Ginsberg hopes to refer to the somewhat hidden beauty of nature with the use of the word "penumbras." The fact that the families are out shopping at night is a reference to the heavy darkness that lies over America's industrial culture. The people interact with one other while shopping, but they don't really sense a connection.

Next Ginsberg thinks back to Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936), a Spanish poet from the early 20th century who, like Whitman, he admired, and who "was assassinated by the Rightists (www.wikipedia.org). The phrase "watermelon" refers to the reality that non-conformists like Whitman, Lorca, and Ginsberg himself are rejected by American culture in the late 1950s. (Alimurad.2019. p.163.)

In addition, Ginsberg uses oppositional binaries to express the contrast between Whitman's America and his own time, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, American culture, and Un-American culture in this poem. He hoped for a better America, writing about issues in his society and trying to change them.

**2.4 “Sunflower Sutra*”***

This poem by Allen Ginsberg discusses a variety of issues that the general public faces in modern society. Similar to his earlier works, Ginsberg offers the reader a glimpse of optimism before discussing the effects of the modern day. The sunflower has distinct interpretations, but it mostly represents how American culture, although being damaged by its people, still has the ability to rise with the sun each morning and recover its previous beauty. (Alimurad.2019. p.166-167)

"The Sunflower of America," a poem, serves as a metaphor for the country's damaged and distorted beauty, which may be saved and restored. Ginsberg includes Jack Kerouac, a friend he has known his entire life, in a theatrical exchange that sets the scene. The poem shows Ginsberg's acceptance of the Romantic poet's function, which requires him to show the people the beauty of his nation and explain how this beauty has been destroyed and polluted by the modern day. Ginsberg uses the urban rather than a landscape to convey his idea that nature is being disturbed. The poem's theme is similar to those of earlier poems like "America" and "Supermarket in California," but there is one key distinction: here, the reader may feel a glimpse of optimism towards the poem's conclusion, whereas the other poems are largely depressing and dark. (Alimurad.2019. p.166-167)

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry. Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery. (Ginsberg. 1973.p28)

The poem's setting combines elements of natural beauty, signified by the setting sun, with rising urbanization, represented by the "Southern Pacific locomotive," and Ginsberg's reaction to the contrast between the two views causes him to start crying. Ginsberg discusses his sorrow and sadness with Kerouac, who is sitting on a "busted rusty iron pole." Ginsberg's use of imagery in "gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery" is notable since it is similar to the Romantic poets' style yet fundamentally different. The Romantics used unspoiled natural landscapes to evoke feelings and affection for nature and the natural world in readers.   Yet, Ginsberg's imagery is twisted and deceptive, mixing nature and industry to produce a surrealistic image that the readers have never seen or experienced before. They should be shocked and puzzled after reading such an image. They don't find anything as beautiful and lovely as they had hoped. (Alimurad.2019. p.167-168)

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive? the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive? 30 You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower! And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not! (Ginsberg.1973. p.29-39)

The locomotive was a representation of America's progress towards bringing about a revolution in the fields of transportation and human connections, while the sunflower represents America as it once was, when it was full of dreams for growth and development. Nevertheless, the sunflower and the locomotive are now disappeared, and America no longer enjoys the pure beauty of nature or the previous promises of development. Ginsberg rejects the idea that America was a locomotive, though he isn't quite ready to use that term. He refers to the naturally beautiful America of the previous century, and as a result of this sad image, he takes action.

In brief the poem explores the concepts of industry, modernism, nature, and mankind. It criticizes the materialistic and selfish approach of mankind and its attraction to modern society.  The destruction that man has caused on nature is shown through the usage of the primary picture of a sunflower. For businesspeople, economists, and scientists who don't care about people, it should be viewed as a religious and human sermon.

**Section Three: Conclusion and List of References**

**3.1 Conclusion**

As a result of writing the present paper, the researcher found out the following conclusions: First: The Beat Generation is a purely distinctive American literary movement of interest since such a movement or it’s like cannot be seen in the English literature.

Second: Allen Ginsberg can be regarded, at least, one of the major pioneers of the movement especially due to his two greats masterpieces of the movement, i.e., “Howl” and other poems which are enough in themselves to describe the features and characteristics of the Beat Movement.

Third: The form and content of Ginsberg’s poems that are discussed in this paper were astonishing for the readers in America and the world and even nowadays because of the frankness of the thoughts and feelings that are expressed in them and the themes that they tackle.

**List of References**

Beach, C. (2003). *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gair, C. (2008). *The Beat Generation*. Oxford: Oneworld Publication. Print

Ginsberg, A. (1957). *Howl, and Other Poems / by Allen Ginsberg.* San Francisco: City Lights Books, Print.

Ginsberg, A. (2006). *Collected Poems, 1947-1997*. New York: HarperCollins e-books.

Ali Murad, I. (2019). *The Beat Generation: A Socio-Political Study*. Kermanshah: Kermanshah Publishing Press.

Raskin, J. (2005). *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Allen Ginsberg | American poet*. [online] Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Allen-Ginsberg [Accessed 21 Mar. 2023].

Tysowski, D. (2020). *How Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac Manifested the Values of the Beat Generation*. [online] Youth Time Magazine. Available at: https://youthtimemag.com/how-allen-ginsberg-and-jack-kerouac-manifested-the-values-of-the-beat-generation/.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federico\_García\_Lorca Accessed2023.4.3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federico_García_Lorca%20Accessed2023.4.3)

[https://www.britannica.com/biography/Allen-Ginsberg Accessed2023.4.3](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Allen-Ginsberg%20Accessed2023.4.3)

[https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/allen-ginsberg/a-supermarket-in-california Accessed2023.4](https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/allen-ginsberg/a-supermarket-in-california%20%20%20Accessed2023.4).3

[https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/allen-ginsberg/how Accessed2023.4](https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/allen-ginsberg/how%20Accessed2023.4).3