

A Manifesto of the Counterculture Movement: Interpretation of “Howl” from the Perspective of New Historicism

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DOI: [10.36348/sjhss.2024.v09i06.003](https://doi.org/10.36348/sjhss.2024.v09i06.003)

| Received: 08.05.2024 | Accepted: 11.06.2024 | Published: 20.06.2024

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Abstract

In “Howl”, Allen Ginsberg described the alternative life of a group of bohemian young people, criticizing the technological rationality in post-World War II American society and the mainstream culture. The poem has both rebellious and prophetic images. On the one hand, it rebels against tradition and gives vent to the author’s anger both in form and content; on the other hand, it sets a model for the counterculture movement of the hippies in the 1960s, heralding the arrival of a new and turbulent era.

Keywords: Rebellion, “Howl”, Counterculture, New Historicism.

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INTRODUCTION

As a symbolic figure of American Beat Generation, Allen Ginsberg shows a rebellion against traditional poetry both in form and content in his well-known poem “Howl”. Ginsberg breaks the conventional poetic form, depicts about the bohemian life of a group of alienated young people, and criticizes the inhuman society and political system of the United States. The poem has a far reaching impact on traditional poetry. What’s more, after World War II, the United States entered the “affluent society” (Galbraith, 1958), and the publication of “Howl” foreshadowed the arrival of counterculture movement launched by the middle classes, provided an ideological basis for the upsurge of the hippies and created the vivid images for hippies in American history. This article attempts to interpret “Howl” from the perspective of new historicism, and analyzes Ginsberg’s influence on hippies’ counterculture movement while he was giving vent to his personal emotions and composing literary works.

1. New Historicism

New historicism was originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is a backlash against formalism, structuralism and other literary ontological criticism, emphasizing “the textual history and the historical text” (Greenblatt & Gunn, 1992:410). It not only advocates bringing historical perspective into literary analysis, but also points out that there is no so-called “foreground” and “background” relationship

between literature and history, but rather they interact and influence with each other. That is to say, new historicism gives priority to the context of its historical background while analyzing a text. New historicism emphasizes the connection between literature and culture, and believes that literature is an indispensable part of a large cultural network (Zhao, 2006:670).

New historicism also focuses on the complex relationship between literature and power politics, believing that literature is the embodiment of ideological influence, and also of significance in shaping ideology. New historicists regard literature as an effective component of the cultural system. In their eyes, literature is not only the embodiment of the author’s personal desires, but also an artwork that gives people aesthetic feelings. Literary creation itself is a cultural product and also shaping the culture and society. In literary texts, multiple cultural forces compete with each other, and literature becomes a place where different ideologies and concepts converge.

Inspired by Foucault’s micro-power view and rights production theory, new historicists propose that the operation of social power is not the result of high pressure from the ruling class, and it is not a top-down process. On the contrary, all members in the society participate in the circulation of social and cultural energy, and all levels of cultures are deeply involved in the network of social power operation. Power is not only embodied in courts, churches, colonial systems,

patriarchal families, etc., but also in the discourse of the ideological system, specific expressions, and repeatedly used narrative structures. As a kind of discourse, literature inevitably becomes one of the places where power operates, opinions are disputed and interests change, and orthodox forces and subversive forces collide. In literary works, we can find personal resistance, and also see the process of this resistance being exploited or recruited by the power mechanism.

2. The Manifestation of Counterculture in “Howl”

After World War II, the United States was in trapped in the Cold War. Anti-communist McCarthyism prevailed and infiltrated American politics and education. Individual rights were ruthlessly trampled, and the guise of freedom and democracy that the United States had always boasted of was completely torn apart. What followed was the ups and downs of a series of social movements such as the civil rights movement, the women’s liberation movement, the new left movement, and the anti-war movement. In this atmosphere, the cultural field was also greatly affected. Literary creation was either polluted by McCarthyism or criticized by conservative critics and became lifeless, confined to a narrow range of conservatism.

Against this background, the Beat Generation represented by Ginsberg and others showed a strong rebellious passion. They abandoned traditional ethical and moral concepts and chose a different way to resist, thereby expressing their inner depression and emptiness. They wore strange clothes, had long hair, and were full of swear words, and lived a bohemian life. They despise everything and deny everything. They hate stable jobs, traditional marriage and family life, and advocate returning to primitive life. Drug abuse, alcoholism and homosexuality are their important ways to show their anger and hatred to American society. Therefore, in the eyes of ordinary people, they are extremely decadent. However, in this decadence, they oppose the rule of monopoly capitalism, resist foreign aggression, and hate technological rationality.

2.1 Rebellion in Forms

During Ginsberg’s writing of “Howl”, the first part was typed on a typewriter frantically in one afternoon. He freely expressed his thoughts, emotions, and experiences, and wrote out his most utmost resentments towards the U.S. system from his heart at will. Ginsberg believes that poetry is a discourse in which people can express their original thoughts and mentalities. It is the outlet for people to say in public what is known in private. On the surface, this poem is composed of many Whitman-style long sentences. Ginsberg is Whitman’s follower, but in terms of rhythm and breathing, he is influenced by Williams. The first sentence of the poem says “I see”, and the beginning is so grand, like God overlooking the world: “I see...”. Then a series of “who...” follow, and leave a tremendous

punch to the readers. The series of parallel sentences are a series of attributive clauses. This long section is just a complete sentence, and the main sentence “I saw” is followed by a series of attributive clauses. Ginsberg uses the word “who” to keep the rhythm, uses it as a beginning to keep the pace, return to a series of ideas and then uses it as a starting point. The effect of this poem is powerful, so he continues to be faithful to the eternal idea in his imagination, because he was inspired by the bliss in his previous years. During this time, he listened to Blake’s ancient voice, saw the universe unfold in his mind, and continued to reconstruct the sacred experience in his memory.

Ginsberg broke the rhythm of traditional English poetry and controlled the lines of poetry according to his own emotions and breathing. He doesn’t pay much attention to the rhetoric, and he has nothing to do with the traditional poetic elegance, but his poem is undoubtedly of great shock and influence to his readers. In addition, the poet’s skillful use of spoken language allows modern poetry to ignite the fire of life in the friction with spoken language, and makes spoken language an excellent presentation in Western modern poetry. Therefore, Ginsberg’s poetry isn’t compatible with traditional Western modern poetry. This is a reform of the complex, delicate, obscure, mysterious, and symbolic poetry, and it is also a challenge to the broad and wise symbolist and academic poets represented by Eliot. His poems may seem a bit rough and not beautiful and exquisite, but they are strong in emotion, magnificent, and inspiring, especially suitable for recitation.

2.2 Rebellion in Contents

The poem could be divided into three parts and a footnote at the end. The first part is the longest, and is an elegy for the Beat Generation. In fact, the Beat Generation is a generation of young people, greatly impacted by the high-pressure rule of the United States after World War II. “The best minds of my generation” in the poem allude to Kerouac, Burroughs, Cassady, Solomon and Ginsberg, and then shows the deeds of these young people with personality one by one. The second part directly speaks of the spiritual consciousness (cannibalism) monster that preys on these young people. Actually, this cannibalistic monster is the god Moloch described by the poet. The prayer in the third part praises the glorious lambs: “O skinny legions run outside; O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here; O victory forget your underwear we’re free.” Carl Solomon, as a representative of the Beat Generation, is both a victim of Moloch’s rule and a brave rebel. The insane asylum is an important tool for Moloch to control people’s spirit and body. Ginsberg’s mother died here, and he and Solomon also met here. At the beginning of the footnote section, the poet first uses 15 “sacred” in a row to express the joy of the final victory over Moloch in spirit. Then it points out that everything in the world

is sacred. Like Whitman, Ginsberg praises the sacred soul of man, and also praises the sacred body of man. Skin, nose, tongue and even genitals are all sacred. Finally, the poem ends with "Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!" It expresses the poet's longing for the religious paradise, and also makes the tone of the whole poem move from the gloomy pain in the first part to the final optimism.

The first section of the poem shows and denounces the destruction of the so-called elite generation in this era. It looks like a series of biographical collage of poems, which truly reflects the lives of Kerouac, Burroughs, Hang, Cassady, Solomon and Ginsberg. In this section, the poet laments that this group of people are the great minds of his generation, but they are destroyed by a kind of madness and become drug addicts, vagrants, marginal people and Beat Generation. Ginsberg also pointed out that the Beat Generation is completely influenced by the turbulent post-war society in the United States, with weird behavior, spiritual emptiness, confusion, bohemian, and arbitrary life (Allen, 2000:114). Drugs provide them with pleasure, and brothels are their comfort zones. They indulge in cafeterias all night and sit in bars all afternoon. They are a group of Platonic chatters, who enjoy their chatting and discussion. They discuss and talk with each other from parks to brothels, from mental hospitals to museums. The poem here vividly depicts the daily life of the Beat Generation writers. This group of people are alcoholics, homosexuals, lustful and crazy, extremely obscene, and do not obey any constraints. From traditional perspective, they are almost the same as gangsters and ruffians. In post-war America, everything is commercialized and materialistic. The rapid changes in the social status quo have shattered the American dream of the young people. They are addicted to drugs, love rock and roll, express publically their homosexual behaviors, in order to find relief in their hearts.

In the second section, the poet focuses on the oppression of the existing system and the criticism of the cannibalistic nature of reality. This section begins with a question, "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?" He traced the social root of the destruction of a generation in the poem to Moloch. Moloch in the Bible refers to the god of fire worshipped by the ancient Phoenicians, who used children as sacrifices. Here Ginsberg obviously regards Moloch as a symbol of evil, implying a series of specific systems that suppress individuals and vitality in the reality that brings oppression to modern society, including government, banks, factories, lunatic asylums, the army, and modern technology, etc. They have become the specific representatives of swallowing everything and suppressing life together. This crazy and oppressive system has a powerful force. It is everywhere and at all

times in the process of human life. People have completely lost their ability to resist.

Under Moloch's control, all people's struggle and resistance are powerless and useless. "Boys sobbing in armies" refers to the US conscription in 1949 during the peace period after World War II. "Mental Moloch" means that Moloch still controls and dominates the spiritual world of people. "Moloch the heavy judger of men" refers to the US judicial system. Due to the Cold War and anti-communist policies, the U.S. government intensified the persecution of left-wing people in the early 1950s, and McCarthyism prevailed. In 1957, the Luxemburg couple was charged with treason for being Soviet spies and was electrocuted. In the 1960s, Chesman was executed by gas. "The crossbone" means death, terror, and danger. This sign can be seen in public places such as parks, and "soulless jailhouse" in this poem refers to the New York cemetery prison. This part reflects the poet's strong criticism. Ginsberg used anti-traditional language and forms to describe the alienated image of young hippies in the post-war affluent society, and advocated alternative lifestyles such as drug abuse, rock and roll, and homosexuality, which set a model for the hippies' counterculture movement in the 1960s and boosted its development.

3. Manifesto of the Counterculture Movement

Most of the Beat Generation writers came from wealthy middle-class families. They grew up in an affluent society after World War II, but took the path of opposing mainstream culture. Ginsberg's poem "Howl" is regarded as a classic works for hippies, providing a theoretical source for hippies to deconstruct and subvert mainstream culture. They vented their inner anger and protest in self-indulgence through alternative forms that contradict traditional values, such as taking drugs, being obsessed with rock and roll, living in groups, engaging in sexual revolution, wearing strange clothes, etc., in order to pursue their true selves. In this way, they launched an open challenge to the mainstream culture based on Puritanism, rationalism, technological supremacy, democracy and freedom and equality.

3.1 Drug Abuse

Drug abuse was not originated from hippies, but it was developed and promoted by them. Faced with the alienated social reality, hippies believed that the United States was decadent and hopeless. They hoped to use drugs to break away from social reality and open up their inner world. Under the call of "do it, if you feel good" and "do your own thing", they sounded the battle horn of "turn on, turn in, drop out" (Leary, 1998: 177-178). Drugs can excite nerves and relieve psychological pressure, which is a good way to enjoy pleasure. Social alienation and the ghost of war have shattered American dream of young people, making them immersed in a suffocating atmosphere. The magic of drugs is to give people a sense of euphoria and lead them into a magical

world of illusion to achieve spiritual liberation. According to hippies, LSD is the best tool to effectively test consciousness, and illusions can make people open their hearts and walk into an infinitely wonderful life. According to the US News Weekly, in 1969, 31.5% of students in 57 universities in the United States had been addicted to drugs, which shows the wide range of its impact. Also, drug abuse is an effective way for hippies to resist mainstream culture and pursue themselves. Drug abuse is incompatible to American traditions and social morals and are prohibited by law. But hippies regard them as the source of hope, energy and success. The escalation of the Vietnam War led to a sharp increase in the number of conscriptions. Some young people burned their draft cards to escape military service. Some even took drugs to avoid conscription inspections and protest the war. The trick was to take enough drugs before conscription inspection, so they can successfully avoid military service.

3.2 Rock and Roll

The rhythm and melody of rock and roll give hippies pleasure and satisfaction. Sharp and piercing electronic accompaniment, deafening heavy metal reverberation, energetic spinning and jumping, and full-hearted shouting can be said to highlight the significant characteristics of rock and roll music. By modern scientific and technological means, the strong rhythm, hysterical howling, dancing body language, alternative costumes and shocking sound and light effects make rock and roll the best expression of modern life in an authentic and straightforward way. This dynamic caters to the tastes of hippies, allowing them to vent, feel pleasure and satisfaction during rocking and rolling. As avant-garde singers such as the Rolling Stones and the Beatles became popular in the United States, the 1969 Woodstock Rock Festival brought the youth counterculture movement to a climax. Besides, rock and roll music are the voices of hippies. If the rhythm and melody satisfied the hippies' senses, then the pursuit of love, freedom and the search for themselves hidden in the lyrics further expressed the hippies' voices. For example, "Love Me Do", "Money Can't Buy My Love" and "All You Need is Love" directly expressed their pursuit of love; "Masters of War" and "Give Peace a Chance" seriously criticized the war and expressed their desire to love and peace. As Theodore Roszark (1969:291) said: "I recognize that one probably hears the most vivid and timely expression of young dissent not only in the lyrics of the songs but in the whole raucous style of their sound and performance."

3.3 Sex Revolution

Hippies believe that sex is the embodiment of human instinct and the source of motivation. If drugs and rock and roll give hippies pleasure and satisfaction from the senses, then sex as an instinct promotes their pleasure and satisfaction to be further sublimated. In the summer of 1967, hippies held the Summer of Love rally in San

Francisco. About 100,000 young people flocked to Hashbury from all across America to share their fruits of love. In the hallucinations caused by noisy rock and roll music and drugs such as LSD and marijuana, hippies use sexual freedom to release their inner repression. Sexual orientation tends to be diversified. Hippies not only openly advocate heterosexual behavior, but also encourage sexual diversity, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, multiple sexual partners, and other sexual behaviors that are not tolerated by traditional Puritanism. The spiritual leader of hippies, Allen Ginsberg, publicly admitted that he was a homosexual, in order to encourage homosexuals who were deeply discriminated against to come out and freely pursue sexual liberation.

In Ginsberg's poem, there are two images of rebellion and prophecy. Rebellion is easier to understand, and all poets have rebellious personalities, but it is more prominent and stronger among the Beat Generation poets. As for the prophet, it means that Ginsberg's poems carry illusions, foreshadowing the birth of an era, that is, the arrival of the hippie counterculture movement in the 1960s. It is precisely because of Ginsberg's bohemian life and the great influence of "Howl" on hippies' lifestyle that cultural historian Theodore Roszark (1969:129) once commented: "The hair, the beard, the costume, the mischievous grin, the total absence of formality, pretense, or defensive posturing . . . they are enough to make him an exemplification of the counter cultural life".

4. Influence and Significance

"Howl" is undoubtedly the embodiment of rebellion in contents, and it breaks down the strict barriers of the academic school. As a poem, "Howl" not only expresses the author's own resentments and dissatisfactions with society, but also has a strong impact on American society at that time, becoming the manifesto of the counterculture movement in the 1960s. As an outstanding representative of the Beat Generation, Ginsberg advocate freedom, and resisted the alienation of people by the technical rationality brought about by large-scale machine industry. In terms of its form, "Howl" breaks the traditional rhythm, uses spoken language and even dirty words to exaggerate anti-traditionalism, and contributes to the diversification of modern poetry. In terms of its contents, the poem records the life of the Beat Generation, that is, hippies, and describes sexual liberation, drug abuse, homosexuality and other lifestyles that are incompatible with traditional poetry. The bohemian behaviors and lifestyles of the young people in the poem are precisely the embodiment of spiritual depression and repression and the restless rebellious emotions in their hearts, which created a typical image for the hippies' counterculture movement in the 1960s. In short, "Howl" embodies Ginsberg's anti-mainstream cultural spirit both in forms and contents,

and has become the manifesto of hippies' counterculture movement in the 1960s.

Project Fund

This project is financially supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities from Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (Project Number: 2022MS117).

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