

# Classical myth in Allen Ginsberg's Howl

A parodic reading of mythical structure and theme as socio-cultural  
commentary in 1950s America

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## 1. Introduction and methodology

When *Howl and other poems* was first published in 1956, it was almost immediately seized by the authorities and the publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, was prosecuted for publishing obscenities. Since that moment, the idea that it were the critical notes in the collection's title poem, rather than its four letter words that sparked the authorities' discontent, has been put forward by fellow writers, critics as well as the author himself.

The social impact and cultural criticism of Ginsberg's debut poem have been alluded to numerous times by contemporary critics, but never has there been a scholarly investigation into the exact mechanism which make it a critical poem. In order to examine the ways in which the poem voices criticism towards American society in the 1950s, I will look at the mythological references which occur throughout the poem in light of their parodic nature.

Firstly, I will provide a brief biography of the author, followed by an overview of the Beat Generation and their political and social stances. The next chapter consists of a summary of the main social and cultural trends in the United States of the fifties. I have discerned Additionally, I will devote a chapter to a particular aspect of American culture: the American Dream. The Dream, which has changed considerably since its incarnation, will be examined

My theoretical framework consists of an investigation of the concept of myth and the theory of parody. I will provide a definition of myth, its functions and examine the ways in which it can be used in more modern poetry. The theories of Lilian Feder and T.S. Eliot with regard to the use of myth in modern contexts will be my main sources in that chapter. As for the theory of parody, I will base myself on Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody. Ms. Hutcheon's concept of parody includes ironic inversion, re-contextualization and repetition with critical difference, all three of which are crucial to my interpretation of the use of myth in *Howl*.

In light of these theories, I will examine four mythical parodies in Ginsberg's poem. Excerpts from the poem will be connected to a myth, followed by a summary of a classical version of that myth. The myth in question will then be related or contrasted to one or more elements of American society in the 1950s. The four mythical parodies in *Howl* are the following; the overall structure of the poem, which has the mythical archetype of the heroic journey as its underlying structure and ordering principle. Finally, *Howl* contains a reference to the mythical figure of Adonis, where the tragic figure is juxtaposed to Neal Cassady, a

lover and friend of the author. A parody of the myth of the three fates or the Moirai is also featured in the first part of the poem, in which the fates which figure as the three “shrews of fate.” Additionally, the poem contains three textual references to the Oedipus myth: the first of which is a reference to Oedipus’ defeat of the sphinx, which is inverted to a defeat of the intellect by Moloch, a modern sphinx. The second reference is to Oedipus’ marrying his mother and the final to his downfall, after he has discovered he has fulfilled the prophecy of the oracle of Delphi. I will argue that the poem call attention to the social and cultural conventions of its time by the parodic use and abuse of these myths.

## 2. Context

### 2.1. The author and the birth of *Howl*

Allen Ginsberg was born June 3, 1926 in Newark, New Jersey as the youngest son of Louis and Naomi Ginsberg. He enrolled in Columbia University at age 17, where he met Lucien Carr, who introduced him to William Burroughs, (Miles 56) Jack Kerouac, (Miles 40) and various other members of the Beat Generation. During his friendship with Carr, the latter developed what he called the “New Vision,” a supposedly revolutionary cultural thesis based on Emersonian transcendentalism and Paris Bohemianism (Maher 117) which had profound influence on the Beat’s creative rebellion. The most important aspect of Carr’s idea being that “1) naked self-expression is the seed of creativity. 2) The artist’s consciousness is expanded by derangement of the senses. 3) Art eludes conventional morality.” (James Campbell 26) In his biography of the poet, *Allen Ginsberg: A Biography*, Barry Miles stresses the contrast between Carr’s and Ginsberg’s personalities: “In the course of their friendship, Ginsberg was mocked for his lack of worldly knowledge, while Allen criticized Lucien’s degeneracy.” (Miles 39) The difference in their characters became all the more clear when, in August 1944, Lucien Carr killed his alleged lover David Kammerer. Ginsberg was simultaneously abhorred and impressed by this event. “Allen had been horrified by Kammerer’s death and was awed to be involved in such momentous events.” (Miles 49)

In 1945, Ginsberg was expelled from Columbia for writing “‘Butler has no balls’ (a reference to Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University) [...] and an eye-catching, ‘Fuck the Jews’” (Miles 57) in the dirt on the windowpanes of his dorm-room. After his expulsion, he started living with Kerouac, Burroughs, and other people associated with the Beat Generation, such as Joan Volmer. In this period, Ginsberg and his friends began experimenting with drugs and psychoanalysis, leading chaotic, drug- and alcohol-fuelled existence, under the guise of self-development: “The Beat Generation began with personal exploration. [...] Ginsberg said ‘Everybody had some form of break in their consciousness, or an experience, or a taste of a larger consciousness, or satori.’ They had all read Spengler’s *Decline of the west* and took it for granted that civilization was collapsing around them.” (Miles 71) In the fall of 1946, he met Neal Cassady (Morgan 81) who would later inspire some of the events described in *Howl*. After his involvement in an accident with a stolen car, Ginsberg was released out on bail by his father, but was later admitted to the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute, where he met Carl Solomon, (Morgan 117) who formed the

primary inspiration for *Howl*. After his release, he moved back with his father to Patterson, where he began corresponding with William Carlos Williams, (Miles 123) who inspired him to use the language of everyday American speech.

In 1952, with the publication of Holmes' piece "This is the Beat Generation" in the New York Times, the Beat Generation knew its "official start." Also in that year, Ginsberg made a change in his writing style: "He found a way to speak naturally in his poems under the influence of Jack Kerouac and William Carlos Williams." (Miles 142) While living in San Francisco, Ginsberg started working on *Howl* in 1954: "He began to write about his life, again using William Carlos Williams' triadic verse form, only with the lines extended out to his own long breath length – each line a single breath, like blowing an extended cadenza on a saxophone." (Miles 184) Originally called *Howl for Carl Solomon*, Ginsberg wrote the poem "using the rhythms of speech from the American street – black speech, phrasings overheard on street corners and in bars – and the rhythms of bebop and jazz, of sports commentators and the cool DJs on the all-night jazz programs. It had a new rhythm and used new language." (Miles 185) *Howl* was introduced to the world, or at least to San Francisco, during the so-called "Six Poets at Six Gallery" reading on 7 October, 1955. Ginsberg himself was responsible for the organization, while Kenneth Rexroth introduced each poet before they began their performance. Poet Michael McClure, who also performed at the reading in Six Gallery said:

Ginsberg read on to the end of the poem, which left us standing in wonder, or cheering and wondering, but knowing at the deepest level that a barrier had been broken, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases. (McClure in Ginsberg and Miles 2006)

Ginsberg's fellow poets were not the only ones who were impressed with the reading. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who, in those days, was a celebrated poet as well as the owner of City Light books, wrote a telegram to Ginsberg after he came home from the reading. It stated: "'I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?'" (Miles 194) paraphrasing the message sent by Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman on receiving *Leaves of Grass* a century before. *Howl and other poems* was published by City Light Books in 1956 with an introduction by William Carlos Williams.

A year later, Shigeyoshi Murao and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were arrested for selling and printing copies of *Howl* and other poems respectively. In October of that year, Judge Clayton W. Horn finds Ferlinghetti not guilty of publishing obscene writings, on the grounds that *Howl and Other Poems* was “not written with lewd intent and was not without redeeming social importance.” (Morgan and Peters 3) City Lights continued to print and publish *Howl and other Poems* and by the time Ginsberg passed away in 1996, it had sold over 800 000 copies.

## 2.2. The Beat Generation and social criticism

The Beat Generation is best described as a postmodern American cultural phenomenon that had its peak during the 1950s and 1960s and had New York and San Francisco as its main bases. The number of writers pertaining to this generation varies from scholar to scholar and even among the writers themselves. Additionally, it is difficult to provide a single definition of what constituted the Beat Generation as even the Beat writers themselves had different views on what their generation, or even the word “beat” meant. In the introduction to her anthology of the Beat Generation *The portable Beat reader*, Ann Charters cites the first article ever written on the Beat Generation, authored by John Clellon Holmes for the New York Times Magazine in 1952:

John Clellon Holmes characterized the Beat Generation as a cultural revolution in progress, made by a post-World War II generation of disaffiliated young people coming of age into a Cold War world without spiritual values they could honor. Instead of obeying authority and conforming to traditional middle-class materialistic aspirations, these young people dealt as best they could with what Holmes called their “will to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms.” (Charters xxvii)

This impossibility to believe in American tradition, middle-class materialism and the protests resulting from it are evident from the works of the Beat Generation writers. The Beat Generation was a profoundly American movement, with local chapters in New York and San Francisco. While the subject matter of the works of the Beat writers is varied, the continent which all of them called their place of birth is always distinctly present. However, the relationship the Beat writers had with the United States and more specifically the attitude they bore towards their own culture and society, was far from uncomplicated. In his book *The Literature of the United States*, Marcus Cunliffe describes the attitude the Beat writers bore towards the America they lived in;

To the extent that contemporary America is, in Alfred Kazin’s phrase, ‘a prig’s paradise’, a prosperous and lifeless civilization, Kerouac and his associates are making a genuine gesture of protest. They can be seen as the latest protesters in a long and worthy American tradition. (Cunliffe 358)



In essence, Cunliffe categorizes the Beat movement as counter-cultural, as a group of protesters contesting the ruling American traditions, values and classes. Nevertheless, the act of protesting is presented as an American tradition and the Beats as simply the latest member of that tradition in the 1950s. When it comes to the cultural and historical position the Beats take in America, matters get even more complicated. In her essay “The Beat Generation and San Francisco’s Culture of Dissent”, Nancy Peters explains that position: “Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and the rest of the Beats really do mark an important moment in American culture, not as one of its achievements, but as a grievous example of its degeneration.” (Peters 209) According to Peters, the degeneration of American culture had reached its climax with the Beat Generation. Whereas the opinion of literary critics on Beat Literature has changed over the last five decades, Cunliffe and Peters do agree on one thing; the Beat movement was deeply rooted in American culture, but its position within that culture was hardly traditional. In his newspaper article “This is the Beat Generation,” author John Clellon Holmes summarizes what made the Beats so different from the protesters that preceded them:

It is the first generation in American history that has grown up since the possibility of the nuclear destruction of the world has become the final answer to all questions. But instead of the cynicism and apathy which accompanies the end of ideals [...], the Beat Generation is altogether too vigorous, too intent, too indefatigable, too curious to suit its elders. (Clellon Holmes 110)

In other words, according to Holmes, the Beat Generation was deeply rooted in a discontent with the state of their culture and society in post-war America. The threat of nuclear destruction that is apparent in Beat fiction (for example in Burroughs’ *Nova*-trilogy and Ginsberg’s poem “America”) is symptomatic of the larger historical context in which they lived: the America of the Cold War. Instead of letting the perceived imminent demise of their society cause apathy or existential fatigue, the Beats took on a different strategy, that of protest and looking elsewhere for new spiritual and other values.

In this context, the original meaning of the word “beat” as it was conceived by the writers themselves is crucial: “To be beat, as Kerouac and Ginsberg glossed the term, was to declare both a condition of mind and a remedy. ‘Beat’ meant exhausted and beaten down, at odds with the system, an unapologetic declaration of unfitness for the workaday world, and defiance of authority.” (McDonald 193) This exhaustion and unfitness for a middle class

working life is not to be equated with an apathetic attitude, but with a conscious decision to convey their views through their life-choices and art:

The affluence of what Lowell called “the tranquilized fifties” only accentuated the commercial and acquisitive values the 1930s Leftists had condemned, and soon there was a fresh movement of social and political protest. Reading Thoreau and Whitman while pursuing the spiritual illuminations of Eastern mysticism, the Beat Generation of Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti followed Jack Kerouac *On the Road* (1957), the road of Dos Passos’ *Vag* that led not only to campus demonstrations against the “military industrial complex” but to affirmations of personal liberation as well – through widespread experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs and rejection of traditional sexual taboos. (Ruland and Bradbury 395)

In other words, the experimentation and breaking of taboos on the part of the Beat Generation stood in stark contrast with the commercial logic of the “tranquilized fifties,” which made their behaviour all the more shocking to the average American. Focusing on the three major members of the Beat Generation, John Tytell makes the following observations about the nature of their protest in his *Naked Angels: the Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation*: “Just as in public the Beats would inevitably offend standard decorum, books like *On The Road*, *Howl*, and *Naked Lunch* were an apparent threat to the established literary as well as cultural order in the fifties.” (Tytell 29) Their break with the established order was such that they did not only turn on societal order, but against the established literary world. Not only in action, but also in form and language, did the Beats upset the established order and standards. As far as their literary style was concerned, “the Beat aesthetic prized spontaneity, orality, protest, improvisation, freedom of movement, an ecstatic present.” (McDonald 194) These characteristics are apparent in, for example, Jack Kerouac’s stream-of-consciousness style in the original version of his novel *On The Road*, and the verse-length of the majority of Ginsberg’s early poetry, which coincided with a hasty breathing rhythm. As for the subjects of their writing, the members of the Beat Generation were preoccupied and discontent with the United States, but they also had their fascination with pain, suffering and the societal outsider in common.

“To be wise is to suffer” Tiresias warns Oedipus, and the biography of the generation portrayed on these pages is often an account of pain. Testing the

limits of personality after the Second World War, the Beats felt the loneliness of cultural exile in a world intent on fulfilling its most disastrous potentials and the anguish of artists struggling with form to convey a vision of apocalypse. [...] Learning to see with the perspective of outsiders, they described the incipient fascism of values induced by corporate structures and the military mentality. (Tytell 105)

These perspectives of outsiders are also crucial. Although most of the Beat writers had a middle class (or even privileged) upbringing, they chose to live their lives in a different way and portrayed the lives of outcasts (Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*), degenerates (Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*) and criminals (Burroughs' *Junky*) in their art. In using the perspectives of social outsiders, these writers succeeded in showing the bleakest and most alienating sides of the industrialized world they lived in.

### **Social commentary in *Howl***

As a Beat Writer, Ginsberg was preoccupied with American identity and this is evident in his poetry. In his literary debut, *Howl and Other poems*, roughly half of the poems explicitly mention the United States, the rest of the poem make references to it. Ginsberg described the state of his contemporary America as "the Syndrome of Shutdown": "What Allen Ginsberg has called the Syndrome of Shutdown began in the late forties: the move toward a closed society where all decisions would be secret, [...] the paralysis caused by the use of technological devices that invade privacy." (Tytell 5) It is not surprising that his poetry reflects the author's pessimistic, bleak view of society. In a letter to Richard Eberhart, Ginsberg describes his own poem as follows:

*Howl* is an 'affirmation' of individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity etc. Part I deals sympathetically with individual cases. Part II describes and rejects the Moloch of society which confounds and suppresses individual experience and forces the individuals to consider himself mad if he does not reject his own deepest senses. Part III is an expression of sympathy and identification with Carl Solomon who is in the madhouse – saying that his madness basically is rebellion against Moloch and I am with him, and extending my hand in union. (Peters and Morgan 40)

Comments on the social importance of *Howl* already appeared during the obscenity trial. The possible social impact of the poem was stressed numerous times by the witnesses for the defense, including UC Berkeley English professor Mark Schorer, novelist Vincent McHugh and poet Kenneth Rexroth, who called it “a genuine work of literature, which is very characteristic for a period of unrest and tension as the one we have been living through the last decade.” (Peters and Morgan 163) Additionally, the owner of City Lights Books, which published *Howl and Other Poems*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, defended the publication, stating that the collection was:

In some sense it is a gestalt, an archetypal configuration of the mass culture which produced it. If it is also a condemnation of our official culture, if it is an unseemingly voice of dissent, perhaps this is really why officials object to it. In condemning it, however, they are condemning their own American world. For it is not the poet, but what he observes which is revealed as obscene. The great obscene wastes of *Howl* are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalisms, billboards and TV antennae. (Peters and Morgan 108)

Already in 1956, *Howl* was lauded for criticizing its contemporary world of mechanization, warfare and consumerism. Ferlinghetti suggests here that it were not especially the four-letter words which made the authorities seize Ginsberg’s debut, but rather, that its transgressions and obscenities were also political and social. In the “tranquilized fifties,” as poet Robert Lowell described the decade, the nation, comfortable, conformist and fulfilled of the ideology of progress as it was, became shocked by the breakage of so many conventions, whether they were literary, sexual, aesthetic, social, political or religious. Additionally, the outcome of the trial was also of great importance, because it represented a more or less official verification of Ginsberg’s poetry. Even though Judge Clayton in a sense confirmed the poem was obscene, (though not written with that intent) the social importance was deemed greater. The ruling affirmed the idea that a poet reflects part of his or her social, political and cultural circumstances.

Focusing on the taboo aspects of *Howl*, Jeffrey Gray discerns the different levels on which the poem breaks the social, political and cultural conventions of its time:

The taboos Ginsberg violated with such force in *Howl* were those most entrenched in society: 1. The taboo against the unrestrained sociopathic speech

of madness and irrationality; 2. The taboo against sexuality outside of marriage and other moral constraints; and, chiefly, 3. The taboo against mocking and destabilizing the traditional partition between the sacred and the profane, against treating all phenomena, high and low, spiritual and physical, as simultaneous and on an equal plane. Every society is structured upon a division between the sacred and the profane. Indeed, that division can be said to *define* a society. (Gray 39)

Gray, not unlike many other Beat scholars and critics, characterizes *Howl* as critical of social and political structures. To explain the wave of shock *Howl* sent through the nation, Gray uses three different societal taboos. In describing sometimes graphic scenes of homosexuality and promiscuity, *Howl* already breaks two of Gray's taboos. In the "Footnote to *Howl*," the taboo against negating the traditional divide between the sacred and the profane is broken when the poem declares all things between heaven and earth holy. The last one is broken throughout the poem, which, with its racy, breathless tempo and unbridled expression of sexuality and drug abuse, reminds one of the monologues of madmen.

This thesis will attempt an examination of how exactly the poem can be interpreted as critical of several aspects of 1950s American society and culture. In order to perform such an investigation, it is necessary to examine the social, cultural and political aspects of American society in the 1950s.

## 2.3. America in the 1950s

In his pioneering study on the Beat Generation, *Naked Angels*, John Tytell sketches an image of the United States in the early fifties:

In the late forties and early fifties, the axioms of the upright in America were belief in God, family and the manifestly benevolent international ambitions of the nation. Americans still conceived of themselves as innocent democratic warriors, protectors of a holy chalice that contained a magic elixir of progress in technology, cleanliness and order. (Tytell 6)

It is these characteristic, to which I would like to add consumerism and the homogeneity of mainstream culture, which to a large extent defined the 1950s middle-class American society that Howl takes a stand against. It is, therefore, useful to discuss them in some more detail.

Since 1947, the country had been in the grip of The Cold War, a prolonged state of political and military tension between, on the one hand, the United States and its allies in the NATO and, on the other hand, the Soviet Union and its allies from the Warsaw Pact. In the fifties, international tensions calmed somewhat, but the arms-race continued, especially with the threat of nuclear weaponry on both sides of the Atlantic. After the explosion of America's atom bomb in 1945 and Russia's demonstration of similar nuclear power, the U.S. could not risk letting the USSR develop a monopoly on such dangerous weaponry and in January 1950, president Truman authorized the development of the Hydrogen bomb. (Halberstam 46) After the testing of America's first H-bomb in 1952, the Americans, along with the Russians, British and French would continue to experiment with ever more sophisticated weaponry throughout the rest of the decade. However, there were also upsides to the practically constant state of military readiness the United States found itself in. Research spurred by military purposes often brought advances that directly improved the daily lives of ordinary people, for example, the development of the H-bomb brought with it the prospect of cheap energy. Overall, The Cold War had a nourishing effect on the United States' economy: "Anyone could see how affluent the country had become since the advent of World War II. The continuing postwar military habit helped even more. In the fifties, the country grew richer as business and government became increasingly intertwined." (Miller

and Nowak 44) This spirit of growth and progress can be connected to the notion of the American Dream:

Ideas of the ever-receding frontier and the special mission of Americans to settle the continent were designed to spur development and keep the American Dream of continual progress alive. [...] Progress, a key word for both America and the twentieth century, presupposed a certain kind of narrative, wherein the situation at the beginning is inferior to that at the end. (McDonald 43)

Fuelled by the nation's increasing wealth and the ideological fight against communism, American capitalism and consumerism rose to unprecedented heights in the fifties. Both consumerism and capitalism, had, for that matter, been present long before Eisenhower took office, as Gail McDonald points out in her *American Culture and Literature*:

By 1839, Tocqueville could confidently declare the "love of wealth" as foundational to all American Behavior. His assessment has had wide acceptance now for well over a century: the overfed, overdressed, overloud American with a big wad of cash is a staple of satire. [...] America both produces and consumes more than any other country in the world, though its people represent only 5 percent of the world's population. (McDonald 62)

In the twentieth century, America's materialism only grew. McDonald adds that spending or even over-spending was acceptable, even patriotic, that waste could be useful, insofar as what was thrown out made place for innovation and "that physical, social, and spiritual ills are curable by generous application of the salve of more things." (McDonald 109). In the 1950s, prominent examples of the spirit of progress and the acquisition of more and more stuff to numb the pain of various ills were so-called Automobile revolution and the popularity of shopping malls and fast-food.

The United States were well on their way to becoming a motorized society before 1950, but the war and the depression halted the growth of its car culture. During the fifties, the number of cars in the U.S. nearly doubled from 39 million to 74 million. By 1960, 80% of American families had at least one car and 15% had two or more. (Oakley 239) Many Americans wanted to escape the cities, and the resulting increase in mobility allowed them to do so. Areas once considered too far from jobs in urban centers became not only desirable, but also reachable and middle- and upper-class Americans began to flee the poverty and

congestion of the cities for suburbia, which offered clean, homogeneous, and safe surroundings. By 1960, a third of the country's population lived in the suburbs. (Dunar 102) Contemporary critics were hard on the suburbs. They saw them as the center of conformity, with their tacky-tacky houses, filled with housewives addicted to tranquilizers. McDonald argues that "[a]t bottom, critiques of 1950s culture, whether emphasizing the common good or the exceptional individual, shared a similar motivating perception: surely there had to be something more to the American Dream than a brand-new car." (McDonald 190)

As a result of people living further away from urban centers, shopping malls began to appear all over the country. "[D]esigned to get the shopper out of the harsh weather," the mall "introduced the world to shopping complexes as worlds unto themselves--free from bad weather, life, crime, dirt and troubles. It is somehow fitting that the largest mall in the United States [is] called 'The Mall of America.'" (Feinberg 437) By the end of the decade, there were 4500 malls spread across the United States, accounting for 14% of retail sales. (437) A final, cliché, example of American consumerism is its fast-food industry. In 1954, businessman Ray Kroc purchased the franchise rights to an assembly-line hamburger operation that was to become one of the most iconic and widely distributed American product: McDonald's. He standardized the concept, and by 1959, Kroc had opened his 100th McDonald's restaurant. By then, he had sold 50 million burgers for 15 cents each. (McDonald's history) Despite the fact that overall, the American standard of living rose considerably, those less fortunate did not disappear: more than one-fifth of the nation lived below the poverty line (Miller and Nowak 122). Some migrant workers resided in bleak rural circumstances, others in the slums of American cities.

In addition to seeking comfort in consumerism, during the Fifties, religion made a big resurgence in America. In 1950, 49% of Americans were church members; by 1960, the figure had jumped to 69%. (Whitfield 87) As a reaction to the "godless" communism of the United States' enemies, President Eisenhower took a public stance in favor of religion: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." Eisenhower was worried about citizens "deadened in mind and soul by a materialistic philosophy of life." (Whitfield 88) The president put his proverbial money where his mouth was, by adding "one nation under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 and making "In God We Trust" the national motto two years later.



The increasing popularity brought with it a preference for the traditional, nuclear family as the ideal way of life, or, as Miller and Nowak put it: "Marriage was seen as the natural state in adults." (151) Anyone wanting to deviate from the standard, be it the single, emancipated woman or the homosexual, was regarded with suspicion. "Under such violent pressure from many sides toward a homogenized, pasteurized sex behavior, the undomesticated person, whether straight or gay, had to wear a mask of propriety. One aspect of the mask was the way self-aware homosexuals kept their sexuality hidden, closeted." (Miller and Nowak 170) The fear and persecution of homosexuals went as far as to be paralleled to that of hidden communists in what came to be called the "Lavender Scare." In spite of Dr. Kinsey's reports, the psychiatric community still regarded homosexuality as a mental illness. Together with Roy Cohn senator McCarthy was responsible for firing scores of homosexuals from government employment and in 1952 Sen. Everett Dirksen said that a Republican victory in the November elections would mean the removal of "the lavender lads" from the State Department. (Whitfield 44) Additionally, it took until 1962 for the first U.S. state to decriminalize homosexuality.

As in the rest of society, the cultural arena was not free of paradox. In the cinema, for example, both *Rebel without a Cause*, a film about teenagers fighting with switchblades and driving cars off cliffs and *The Ten Commandments*, a grand retelling of one of the Bible's most famous stories, were box office hits. During the Fifties, mass culture began to dominate in the United States, its ultimate purveyor being television. Television had already been invented in the 1930s, but it took until the late forties for the television to gain popularity. By the end of the Fifties, however, televisions were present in 90% of homes and watching television was the favorite leisure activity of nearly half the population. (Abramson 40) What was shown on these television screens was in great part determined by the advertisers. Advertisers preferred the kind of mild entertainment that would attract the most viewers. Programs featuring African Americans, ethnic minorities, or, with a few exceptions, working class characters, were rare. This, in part, contributed to a growing homogeneity in American culture. Television became dominated by what was called "middle-brow" entertainment, which appealed mostly to the growing middle class whose tastes were rather conventional. They tended to like entertainment that depicted what they were already familiar and comfortable with. Because of what they saw on television, their accepted notions were rarely challenged, nor were they confronted with any radical ideas. Additionally, even nightly news shows in the Fifties only lasted fifteen minutes. (Conway 270)

The fact that so many Americans were watching the same, rather homogeneous brand of television, was not without consequences. With television networks feeding the population cookie-cutter idealizations of American life, riddled with racial and gender stereotypes, critical voices soon emerged. In 1961, Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, said that television had become a "vast wasteland." (Oakley 110) He was referring to the endless stream of soap operas, low-brow comedies, and Westerns that appeared on television. However, the homogeneity of television certainly had an upside; people across the country had something in common. Everyone watched *I Love Lucy* and *Ed Sullivan*. Americans could watch political conventions, follow sports and watch presidential speeches, all without leaving their houses. Some would argue that this helped bring the country together. The homogenized fare of television also stirred something else in the cultural arena, especially with those who saw middle-brow entertainment in books, TV and movies as vapid. This mindless entertainment, combined with the threat of a nuclear holocaust, made some lash out at the meaninglessness of it all. This sense of alienation from the mainstream was expressed, for example, in movies like *Rebel without a Cause*, *The Wild One*, and *Blackboard Jungle*, which, ironically, were mainstream Hollywood productions. These films depicted aimless, lost and unhappy youngsters. It's worth noting that, as far as one can derive from the above mentioned feature films, this alienated sector of culture was largely passive. For example, in *The Wild One*, a girl asks the protagonist, "What are you rebelling against?" He answers, "Whaddaya got?" (Benedek, *The Wild One*) These "rebels" really had no cause. Outside of Hollywood, the Beat Generation formed an artistic movement that pushed the boundaries of the dominant culture.

The term "teenager" was rarely used before the 1950s, but during the Eisenhower administration, young people began to self-identify as a distinct group. The change was connected to the nation's growing affluence, making it no longer necessary for young people to work full time jobs to help support their families. Instead, they were given the time and money to spend on non-essentials. This new, erratic behavior the teenagers displayed worried some parents and critics. By 1955, *Time* magazine put out a special issue called "Teenagers on the Rampage." Psychologist Robert Linder claimed in 1954, "The youth of the world today is touched with madness, literally sick with an aberrant condition of mind." (Oakley, 270) However, this youth movement did not overturn society, as some experts feared it would. This youthful disobedience was directed towards parents and the confines of daily life, not at society as a whole. Most of these rebels (with the exception of the African American youths

who participated in protests against injustice) did not concern themselves with social issues. Like many in the Fifties, they were restless, as they grew up, however, they tended to adapt to societal norms. According to McDonald, the rebellious teenager, together with the beat aesthetic and the “shift from the impersonal to the personal in American poetry, and the paintings of Abstract Expressionism chronicle that discomfort with comfort.” (McDonald 190)

Another index of this increasing discomfort with comfort, was the sudden popularity of psychopharmaceuticals. Meproamate, the first tranquilizer, began to be marketed in 1955 under the names Miltown and Equinil, kicking off a deluge of mind-altering pharmaceuticals. (Tone 53) The invention of the first tranquilizer brings to mind poet Robert Lowell’s idea of the “tranquilized fifties”:

Lowell’s metaphor of the tranquilizer [...] suggests that the complacency, normalcy, and domestic contentment portrayed in the narratives of the 1950s conceal a psychological upheaval as potent as the social upheavals of more radical decades, a need for psychopharmaceutical tranquility when genuine tranquility is elusive. (McDonald 188)

In other words, McDonald implies that Lowell’s use of the metaphor and the fact that there was need for such psychopharmaceuticals and that they were so hugely successful (sales of Miltown exceeded 2 million dollars by 1955 (Tone 54)) indicated growing problems on a psychological front, which stood in great contrast with the social tranquility. “The use of sleeping pills and, for those who could afford it, psychiatric help also skyrocketed. Thus, in all too typical American fashion, problems were not solved, people simply found artificial ways to bear them.” (Miller and Nowak 138)

In conclusion, the United States of the 1950s was a place and time of contrasts. Many people were content and comfortable, but others were less fortunate or felt ill at ease and searching for new ways of coping, they embraced religion and visited psychiatrists in unprecedented numbers. The most dominant element of the decade was the homogenized society, with its white, male, heterosexual, middle class and Eurocentric ideals. This brand of culture was propagated through the increasingly popular medium of television. Ideals of progress, freedom and fighting for democracy and consumerism were also important. In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at one particular aspect of that spirit of progress: the American Dream.

## 2.4. The American Dream

The American Dream, as an important part of American society in the 1950s America, merits some further investigation. In order to assess the role of the concept of the American Dream in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, it is necessary to examine not only the origin of the concept, but especially the different meanings of the concept at the time of composition of the poem. This chapter will discuss the various ways in which the American Dream was conceived in the decades leading up to the composition of *Howl* <sup>1</sup>

Although the term “the American Dream” was not coined until the 1930s, the hope of a better life which it embodies has been a part of North American culture since its earliest beginnings. In *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen claims that, ironically, the spirit of the American Dream was already present in the venture of the earliest American immigrants, the Pilgrims: “One of the greatest ironies [...] of the American Dream is that its foundations were laid by people who specifically rejected a belief that they did have control over their destinies. [...] people who denied their efforts could affect their fates.” (Cullen 10) While, as protestants, the Pilgrims believed their destinies to be controlled by a higher power, their journey from Europe to the New World demonstrated a spirit of self-advancement and a wish to control their lives. Lawrence R Samuel, whose book *The American Dream: A cultural history*, discusses the evolution of the representation of the American Dream in popular culture from the 1930s onwards, equally identifies this endeavor to exert control over one's destiny as the earliest form of the American Dream, stemming from the colonial history of the United States: “From pioneer days the American Dream has always been of a nation whose members decide their own fates and who are subject to no arbitrary power that stands higher than the law or public opinion.” (Samuel 59) Unlike Cullen, Samuel does not point at the inherent contradiction that lies at the heart of the American dream but; focuses instead on the concept of free will. The idea he puts forward is of a nation of people who decide on their own fate and future, independently from any higher power or predestination.

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<sup>1</sup> . For reasons of clarity and continuity, the concept of the American Dream will be capitalized, as it has been in the works of scholars who have addressed the issue in more depth. (Cullen and Samuel)

In 1776, the Dream made its way into the American Declaration of Independence under the form of the rights to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and in 1832, another significant addition to the lexicon surrounding the Dream was made, when Henry Clay uttered the following phrase in a speech: “We are a nation of self-made men.” The term ‘self-made man’ has remained part of the nation’s lexicon and strengthened the idea of equality of opportunity for self-fulfillment as an essential part of the national ideology of the American Dream. This equality of opportunity is defined by the *Stanford Encyclopedia* as

A political ideal that is opposed to caste hierarchy but not to hierarchy per se. The background assumption is that a society contains a hierarchy of more and less desirable, superior and inferior positions. [...] when equality of opportunity prevails, the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms. (Arneson, 2008)

Equality of opportunity became central to the concept of the American Dream, which would eventually become increasingly centered on upward social mobility. James Truslow Adams, who coined the phrase “the American Dream” in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931, puts it thus:

That American dream of a better, richer and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it. (Adams)

While his definition of the Dream as the hope for a ‘better, richer and happier life’ suggests upward mobility, Adams does not specify what “better” and “richer” mean. This ambiguity is right at the center of the Dream and the reason for its changing meaning throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The American Dream in the 1950s**

In post-war America, the living circumstances of the average American citizen were shaped by a number of economic, social and political factors: the Cold War and the ensuing competition between the western capitalist system and the communist totalitarian regime in

the USSR, a rise in incomes and the spread of mass consumer society (Bradbury, 1992). As life in the United States changed, so did the conception of the American Dream.

In the second chapter of his book, titled “The Status Seekers,” Samuel examines the way in which the American Dream was regarded in Cold War America of the 1950s and 1960s. After Adams named the Dream as the greatest contribution America made to the world (1931), it had, as the cold war escalated in the earlier 1950s, become a secret weapon of sorts and “[...] without a doubt, a way to distance [the United States] from Soviet communism.” (Samuel, 2012, 43) As political structures changed, western socio-economic culture did too and the American Dream, in its turn, evolved. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it took on the shape of what Cullen calls the “the Dream of Upward Mobility” and “the Dream of Home Ownership.” In this version of the American Dream and its promise of a “better, richer and happier life”, equality of opportunity is given a materialist spin. With the rise of capitalist consumerism, the house and the automobile became “emblems of democracy.” (Cullen 149) Much like the other forms of the Dream, its power lay in a sense of collective ownership: anyone could get ahead. (Cullen 60) Not merely the wish of owning one’s own home or a strip of land was central to this version of the Dream, but a new phenomenon called ‘suburban lifestyle’, which became its main incarnation and the center of the “Good Life”. (Samuel 56 and Cullen 9) This Suburban Dream, however, came to a cost. The rising standard of living for the white middle class and wide availability of consumer goods during the post-war economic boom gave rise to an increasing emphasis on ownership. In brief, the American Dream in the 1950s had evolved from a focus on equality of opportunity to equality of possession. This equality of possession may be taken very literally at this stage of the Dream:

Some social critics were not happy to see the American Dream turned into a tacky-tacky house filled with the latest appliances. Everybody seemed to want to own the same things, they carped, this common desire for “the good life” creating a more homogeneous, less individualistic society. (Samuel 57)

In the two decades after World War II, the interpretation of the American Dream was changed by consumerism. Additionally, the Dream was challenged by phenomena such as persisting racism which made true equality of opportunity impossible.

Critics characterized this phase of the Dream as a form of “conformity that was at best bland and at worst deeply hostile to pluralist traditions of democracy,” (Cullen 153) as “universal leveling” (Samuel, 2012) when it comes to the equality of possession and as an “ideological divide,” (Warner) between those who considered patriotism protecting American

values by any means necessary and those who felt that their freedom was being compromised. In conclusion, in the 1950s, the “better, richer and happier” life had taken on the shape of suburban life and the “pursuit of happiness” was increasingly interpreted as the pursuit of material goods and social conformity. Interestingly, the social conformity and decreasing individualism that characterize this phase of American society and the matching incarnation of the Dream stand in stark contrast with the sense of self one would assume is required for the actual fulfillment of the American Dream. It would seem that this bland, hegemonious brand of the Dream forms a new restriction, rather than merely a new definition.

### ***Howl* and the American Dream**

Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl* in the course of the 1950s and the poem was published in 1956. It can be assumed that the poem was, at least in part, shaped by its socio-cultural environment. In his essay, “Sifting the shifting sands – ‘*Howl*’ and the American landscape in the 1950s,” Simon Warner contemplates the social, political and artistic setting into which *Howl* appeared in the heart of 1950s America. A sense of dramatic change is implied in the title of Warner’s essay and he argues that *Howl* was “symptomatic of an America that was undergoing a period of dramatic transition.” (Warner)

Throughout his essay, Warner paints a picture of fear-fuelled capitalism and a nation divided by ideological and racial differences. *Howl*, in this scenario, is mostly concerned with the social outsider and presents

A universal appeal on behalf of the marginalized, disenfranchised, the dispossessed, the lost American, black or white, clinging by broken fingernails to the last carriages of the affluence express. Yet *Howl* is also a celebration of that listless, anxious, wandering America which seeks new truths, fresh hopes.  
(Warner)

Since *Howl for now*, the critical collection in which Warner’s essay featured, is centered on the influence and social and political power of the poem, and on the dynamic and thematically as well as formally radical nature of the literature of the Beat Generation, it would be quite logical that Warner would focus on the socio-economic outsider which is, on a certain level, the subject of the poem. Cullen, suggests a connection between the youth movements, as parts of that listless, wandering America, that existed in the post-war period and their middle class backgrounds. He calls the American youth movement, to which the members of the Beat Generation were predecessors or even founders, “nothing so much as a sustained rejection of

the “Little Boxes” [...] and everything they stood for. [...] They drew their power from the degree in which they effectively negated suburban values of moderation, conformity and the pursuit of happiness via plot of land.” (Cullen 154)

One might argue that, the first and third part of *Howl* are, indeed, centered on the outsider, but that the second part of *Howl*, entitled Moloch, largely, if not entirely, deals with the mechanisms, both social and psychological, which shape the lives of the aforementioned middle class. When one reads *Howl* with the classical myths which it parodies in mind, it is possible for the reader to discern commentary on the American middle class way of life, its cultural homogeneity and the idea of the American dream.



### 3. Myth

Myth, in all its incarnations and forms, has been a source of inspiration for all art forms throughout the ages, from ancient Greek plays and Roman poems, to medieval epics, romantic musings and contemporary fiction. In order to interpret the use of myth in one particular contemporary poem, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, it is necessary to look at some definitions of what actually constitutes a myth and examine the way in which writers and theorists have perceived the relationship between myth and literature.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines myth as "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events." (OED) This dictionary presents a rather straightforward definition, foregrounding the etiological function (to explain certain phenomena and practices) and the function of presenting an image of the cosmos. When looking at definitions of scholars, however, matters get more complicated. In his *Pathways to bliss*, Joseph Campbell discerns four functions of myth. Similar to the dictionary, he discusses the image of the cosmos as its first function and a social-etiological function as the second (Joseph Campbell 6). Additionally, he sees two more functions:

[T]o evoke in the individual a sense of grateful, affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence. [...] The fourth function of myth is psychological. That myth must carry the individual through the stages of his life, from birth through maturity through senility to death. The mythology must do so in accords with the social order of his group, the cosmos as understood by his group, and the monstrous mystery. (Joseph Campbell 6)

In his *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams shapes his definition along the lines of explaining the world and nature of mankind (the etiological function), and he elaborates on the psychological function. However, Williams' view of the psychological function does not imply support and an explanation of the stages of life, but rather:

Myth has been held to be a truer (deeper) version of reality than (secular) history or realistic description or scientific explanation. This view ranges from simple irrationalism and (often post-Christian) supernaturalism to more

sophisticated accounts in which myths are held to be fundamental expressions of certain properties of the human mind, and even of basic mental or psychological human organization. These expressions are ‘timeless’ (permanent) or fundamental to particular periods or cultures. Related attempts have been made to assimilate this mythic function to the more general CREATIVE (q.v.) functions of art and literature, or in one school, to assimilate art and literature to this view of myth. (Williams 212)

Distinguishing myth from legend, which draws on history and allegory, which draws on reality, and aside from connecting it to the history or folklore of a particular people, Williams sees myth as containing something universal, an expression of timelessness, something fundamentally truthful about humanity. With his “psychological organization”, Williams alludes to the early twentieth century approaches to myth which saw them in the light of the then recently new discipline of psychoanalysis. Notable figures in this approach are Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung (see *infra*).

It is equally important to note that myth is an aggregate of stories and that no single myth exists separately or on its own: “Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories, some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe of human life.” (Watts) Watts’ definition mentions that myth is a complex of stories, denoting the different stories as parts of a dense network of interconnected characters. Aside from multitude (i.e. the enormous complex) of myth, there is also the multiplicity of myth which plays a crucial role in establishing a definition:

A Greek myth is a set of multiforms or variants of the same story, which exist either as written texts, prose or verse, or in oral form, or in both written and oral form, or in vase painting or plastic art as well or independently. The story concerns the divine or the supernatural or the heroic or animals or paradigmatic humans living in a time undefinable by human chronology. Each retelling or application produces a new variant, which stands in some degree of antagonistic relation to other variants or other myths and thus takes its place in a system constituted by the proliferation of such relations. (Edmunds 15)

The plurality of myth is important when it comes to interpretation. When examining a myth, it might sometimes be useful to look at different variants (or at different incarnations throughout the arts) of a single myth and how these stand in relation to one another. Combined with the multiple functions of myth, the multiplicity of its forms leads to many different possibilities when it comes to interpreting the use of myth in literature.

Reiterating three of Campbell's functions (omitting the psychological), Northrop Frye explains the connection between myth and literature in his *Fables of Identity*:

In the first place, mythology as a total structure, defining as it does a society's religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations – in short, the whole range of its verbal expressiveness – is the matrix of literature, and major poetry keeps returning to it. In every age poets who are thinkers [...] and are deeply concerned with the origin or destiny or desires of mankind – with anything that belongs to the larger outlines of what literature can express – can hardly find a literary theme that does not coincide with a myth. Hence the imposing body of explicitly mythopoeic poetry in the epic and encyclopedic forms which so many of the greatest poets use. A poet who accepts a mythology as valid for belief, as Dante and Milton accepted Christianity, will naturally use it; poets outside such a tradition turn to other mythologies as suggestive or symbolic of what might be believed, as in the adaptations of Classical or occult mythological systems made by Goethe, Victor Hugo, Shelly, or Yeats. (Frye 33)

For Frye, the reason poets and writers employ myth lies in theme. In seeing myth as a total structure which defines a society's beliefs, traditions and spiritual speculations, Frye makes the use of myth almost inevitable for those poets wishing to express the origins, desires or destiny of humanity. Any wide commentary on society as a whole would, in this view, almost naturally be expressed with the use of mythological poetics. Additionally, Frye makes a distinction between those who employ a mythological system which they themselves see as valid (i.e. a system which coincides with their own persuasions) and those who employ systems outside of their own framework to symbolically convey what is believed by others. William Richter points out what the latter means in a postmodern context:

First, whatever his purpose, point of view or whatever his historical source, of any [postmodern] writer his myth is inevitably chosen in response to the

spiritual condition of modern man, to the very fact of existence in a post-mythological age. Second, it is a characteristic feature of such an age that no particular body of myth comes to hand naturally; so the modern writer chooses something which is inevitably in some degree alien even if it forms a part of an accepted literary tradition. (Righter 38)

Not only does Righter reiterate the relationship between the general condition of man and myth, he, in contrast with Frye, who makes a distinction between those writing from within a mythological framework and those who are mere onlookers, Righter states that in this post-mythological (i.e. postmodern) era, any and all use of myth is at least in some degree inevitably alien to the writer's own beliefs. Whether one decides to interpret the stance of the writer on mythology in one or another way, Righter adds that the use of myth itself may have meaning when it comes to modern poetry: "The belief that through myth one touches upon primitive energies, captures elements of the unconscious and subrational qualities of the human situation, mingles strangely with the antiquity of the inherited form." (Righter 43) Especially in a post-mythological, postmodern age, dominated by rationality and technology, myth and the peoples from which they originate evokes primitiveness, but also deeper psychological truths about humanity. In other words, now that mythology has lost its power to explain the cosmos (this function has been taken over by science) or to reinforce societal rules (this function resides in lawmaking), it serves to deal with the unconscious. Myth can be used to explain or exemplify what lies within, rather than what lies beyond man.

This focus on the psychological function of myth is also central in Lilian Feder's work on the re-appropriation of myth in modern poetry. The use of myth in the modern, post-mythological era, Feder argues, is nearly always referential because it has been re-contextualized. Feder deals not with the myth *an sich*, that is to say, her subject is not that of the myth itself but the myth as it is used in modern works, so mythical functions that are tied to the religious contexts in which they originally featured, have no use in the study of modern poetry. In her *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*, she attributes modern perspectives on mythology to Freudian psycho-analysis: "Two pervading changes produced in twentieth-century approaches to myth directly traceable to the writings of Freud and the widespread response to psycho-analysis are the acceptance of myth as an expression of unconscious wish, fear, and instinctual drives, and the use of myth as an analytical device, which can reveal truth

through its unique illusions and distortions." (Feder 35) Feder's assessment of Freud's influence on the interpretation of myth informs her definition:

Myth is a narrative structure of two basic areas of unconscious experience which are, of course, related. First, it expresses instinctual drives and the repressed wishes, fears and conflicts that they motivate. These appear in the themes of myth. Second, myth also conveys the remnants within the individual consciousness of the early stage of phylogenetic development in which myths were created. This characteristic is evident mainly in its plots. Myth is a story involving human limitation and superhuman strivings and accomplishments, which suggests through action (...) man's attempt to express and thus control his own anxiety about those features of his physiological and psychological make-up and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept, or master. (Feder 11)

Feder's definition emphasizes the unconscious, in myth, which is twofold. Firstly, they convey the wishes and drives which define us as humans. Additionally, she denotes that myths serve as reminders of the earlier stages of sociological development. Feder focusses on plot and theme, rather than on structural or formal characteristics to define myth. In Feder's definition of myth, man's superhuman ambitions take the place of the divine in the earlier definitions. With this definition and its application to modern poetry in mind, myth can be said to appeal to the instinctual and the societal. Almost in passing, Feder suggests another reason for the renaissance of mythology in modern poetry: "The revival of myth in the present time indicates, of course, that in his desire for order, for belief in some standard beyond his individual reaction, man turns back to traditional symbols, which evoke and emotional, if not spiritual, sense of permanence, recurrence, and stability." (Feder 27) This statement seems, at first sight, to contradict the way Righter construes myth in his work. If man moves away from a genuine belief in myth in the modern age, how could the use of myth evoke a sense of stability? Unless, of course, reverting to traditional and older symbols in order to convey stability is indicative of the perceived disorder in modern times. A return to what is perceived as primitive and touching upon unconscious qualities which are associated with myth can be construed as criticism of contemporary "order" – "order" both meaning "opposed to chaos" and "administration." In the context of Lowell's tranquilized fifties, this form of criticism,

together with the previously mentioned primitive and instinctual connotations, forms a first indication of the ways in which the mythological references in *Howl* are to be interpreted.

Additionally, Feder specifies the fears and helplessness which may influence a writer in his or her work:

Many poets of the twentieth century, in expressing their fears about both the instruments man has perfected and the instincts he has just begun to understand, have employed traditional myth thus transformed into a modern language which can depict both the continuous struggle of the instincts for mastery and the threat of an ancient dream of omnipotence fulfilled. (Feder 33)

In other words, by telling ancient tales in modern poetry, the poet living in the twentieth century transforms these traditional tales into a modern language, used to express their own struggles, specific to the world which surrounds them. The excerpt above mentions the use of myth as a reminder of man's helplessness, exposing our weaknesses, which often originates in primitive and instinctual drives. Here, Feder shows another face of myth: man's desire to overcome his weakness, his natural instinct to master his surroundings. In other words, apart from expressing drives and desires, myth also paradoxically reveals man's yearning for omnipotence (or, at the very least, control over their surroundings) and an eternal fear of that yearning being fulfilled. The fear of and yearning for control and the instruments man employs, can be found in Ginsberg's *Howl*, more specifically in the second part of the poem entitled "Moloch."

Myth, of course, rarely appears in its original form in modern works. Instead, Feder goes on to suggest that it adapts to the poet. "An evolving form, myth adapts to the inner voice of the poet, revealing many levels of feeling and perception at once. It adapts to his environment also, incorporating its changing approaches to reality, its assumptions about nature and man." (Feder 34) I would add that, apart from adapting to the poet, the myth must also accommodate the modern world. It is my belief that in *Howl* the myths are adapted to Ginsberg's contemporary world to universalize otherwise anecdotal, biographical or personal events and properties. One way in which the manipulation of ancient form to fit the contemporary world has been discussed, is through T.S. Eliot's "mythic method." When Auden and Eliot discussed James Joyce's work, they discussed the importance of the "mythic method." Regarding Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot says:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and ad significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (T.S. Eliot, 1923, 483)

According to Eliot, Joyce's use of myth (in his case, the adaptation of the *Odyssey* in a modern, urban setting) functions as an ordering principle in the vast and confusing landscape of the modern world. By deriving meaning from the past, the mythic method can be used to emphasize the similarities or contrasts between different ages. This mythical method Joyce implements can be extrapolated to other literature. Gerald Lucas outlines the implications of mythic method in his essay "Eliot and the Mythic Method":

By stressing the mythical, anthropological, historical and the literary, this method becomes at once (1) satirical by showing how much the present has fallen; (2) comparative to highlight similarities structurally; (3) historically neutral to escape the present to a revived future; (4) confused in its fusion of the realistic and the phantasmagoric; (5) ordering in its approach to morality and imaginative passion. The mythic method does not offer and escape to a better past, but an entry into a confusing present. (Lucas)

The satirical element Lucas presents as a first effect of the mythic method is explained further along in this paper as the ironic element in parody, which also serves as the ground for the second effect of the method. Rather than render the work completely historically neutral, I would argue that the mythic method could serve to universalize certain aspects by rendering them in some part independently from their immediate historical context, but at the same time, they must remain innate to the present, in order to use myth to make sense of the contemporary, which is Lucas' fifth effect. The fifth effect, entails, in other words, that the myth functions as an ordering principle. Lastly, the fourth effect is that of the mixing of the realistic and fantastic. It is my belief that Ginsberg's work used the superposition of a mythological framework to at once parody, universalize and make sense of his surroundings in his masterpiece, much like Joyce did in his.

In conclusion, there is no clear-cut or uniform way in which to define mythology, though scholars usually agree on two or more functions, which stress the etiological and psychological functions of myth, and the narrative aspect of myth. When it comes to modern literature, ancient myth can serve many purposes. The use of myth or a mythological framework in modern poetry is usually alien to the writer's world and functions either as a symbol for a psychological state, or as a means of social commentary. Myth is adapted or manipulated to fit the modern world and in this regard, Eliot's concept of the mythic method serves to show how the myth is used to contrast, universalize and mix reality with fantasy. Myth can serve as an ordering principle in a chaotic modern world. In my interpretation of *Howl* projecting back onto Eliot's idea of the mythical method, not only can the myths be construed as a unifying principle throughout the poem, but they can also be interpreted as a means of universalizing the poet's own fears of and experience with man's technological and other advancements as well as suggest the primitive and the subconscious which the use of myth evokes.



## 4. Parody

The mythological elements in *Howl*, whether they are structural or thematic, do not appear as myths in their own right within the poem. They are changed, manipulated and exist outside of their “original” context. More particularly, I want to argue that the use of myth in Ginsberg’s poem is parodic. In order to investigate the implications this has on the interpretation of the poem, it is necessary to examine and define the concept of parody.

In her book *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, (1985) Linda Hutcheon presents parody as a phenomenon with a long history. Although parody has not always been as valued as much as is in postmodern times – in the romantic age, for example it was seen as the “enemy of creative genius”(Hutcheon 1985, 4) - there has been a revalorization of parody since Eliot and the formalists: “[S]ince Eliot’s valorization of the “Historical sense” and the formalist (New critical, structuralist) complementary, if very different, turning to the text, we have witnessed a renewed interest in questions of textual appropriation and even influence.” (Hutcheon 1985, 4) In the twentieth century, parody not only has been re-valORIZED, it also requires a new framework with which to study it. Hutcheon begins her definition of parody with its etymology, going back to its Greek root *parodia*:

The textual or discursive nature of parody (as opposed to satire) is clear from the *odos* part of the word, meaning song. The prefix *para* has two meanings, only one of which is usually mentioned – that of “counter” or “against.” Thus parody becomes an opposition or contrast between texts. [...] However, *para* in Greek can also mean “beside,” and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast. (Hutcheon 1985, 32)

In this way, rather than focus on the contrast provided by a parody, Hutcheon stresses the intimacy or accord between the parody and the parodied text. That is not to say that its similarity to the “original” is a parody’s distinguishing feature. Hutcheon makes this clear in the rest of her definition:

By this definition, then, parody is repetition, but repetition that includes difference (Deleuze 1968); it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of “trans-contextualization” and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage. (Hutcheon 1985, 37)

According to Hutcheon, then, parody's three main formal mechanisms are: repetition with critical difference, irony and trans-contextualization. With respect to the first mechanism, parody is defined not as a mere imitation, but it provides a critical difference and distance from its "source" text. This distance can be formally marked or foregrounded by irony: Hutcheon distinguishes irony as "the main rhetorical mechanism for activating the reader's awareness of this dramatization. Irony participates in parodic discourse as a strategy." (1985, 31) On a pragmatic level, irony signals evaluation: "[T]he Greek root, *eironeia*, which suggests dissimulation and interrogation: there is both a division or contrast of meanings, and also a questioning, a judging. Irony functions, therefore, as both antiphrasis and as an evaluative strategy that implies an attitude of the encoding agent towards the text itself." (Hutcheon 1985, 53) In her definition, Hutcheon also employs her own neologism "trans-contextualization," as a formal marker of parody, which can take the shape of literal reproduction or reworking in the new work. (Hutcheon 1985, 8) It means, as the term itself suggests, that an older text, in parody, is taken away from its "original" context and is used anew. This seems obvious, because parody constitutes a re-appropriation of older texts, but this trans-contextualization has implications for the interpretation of the parody.

In *Howl*, the trans-contextualization of myths exists on different levels. First there is the broader, historical level: classical myths are used in (post-) modern times, thousands of years after they were first conceived. Secondly, they are no longer used in a religious or ritual context, but rather as myths pertaining to Williams' ideas of "fundamental expressions of certain properties of the human mind." (212) Lastly, and specifically to Ginsberg's poetry, they are often trans-contextualized in the sense that they are juxtaposed to ideas, events or people which are not timeless or universal in any sense, but rather, personal, anecdotal and often vulgar. This last manner of re-contextualization may also be construed as ironic. Although Hutcheon's definition of parody includes irony, she is very emphatic in her denial of the comic or ridiculing aspect of parody, which is prominent in definitions of parody in dictionaries:

There is nothing in parodia that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule, as there is, for instance, in the joke or *burla* of burlesque. Parody, then, in its ironic "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. (Hutcheon 1985, 32)

In this respect, she disagrees with Margaret Rose, who pays a great deal of attention to the comic aspect of parody in her study of parody. (Rose, 20) Hutcheon instead agrees with Gerard Genette, who also emphasizes the relationship between the two texts: “My own theoretical perspective here will be dual: both formal and pragmatic. Like Genette, I see parody as a formal or structural relation between two texts. In Bakhtin’s terms, it is a form of textual dialogism.” (Hutcheon 1985, 22) In the my analysis of Ginsberg’s *Howl*, I will focus on Hutcheon’s view of parody, that is, disregard the comic as an aspect of parody.

Because of the possible confusion and ambiguity concerning parody and other forms of textual re-appropriation, Hutcheon proceeds to define parody by what it is not. She contrasts parody with plagiarism because of its intent, stating that parody is necessarily acknowledged, while plagiarism cannot be acknowledged. (1985, 38) The question of intent is also crucial in discerning parody from burlesque and travesty, which always entail ridicule. (1985, 40) The difference between parody and quotation lies elsewhere: “Parody has a stronger bitextual determination than does simple quotation or even allusion: it partakes of both the core of a particular text parodied, and also of the parodic generic code in general.” (Hutcheon 1985, 42) It is also in this bitextuality that parody differs from pastiche. (1985, 33) Finally, Hutcheon makes a distinction between parody and satire with satire being distinguished as extra-mural (i.e. it concerns itself with the situation outside of the text, typically the political or social context), which differs from parody, which is typically intra-mural, meaning it focusses on previous texts from which it derives part of its meaning. Additionally, there is a difference in “target”; satire has an ameliorative aim in pointing out and ridiculing mankind’s corruption and foolishness. (1985, 43)

As for interpreting the meaning of parody, Hutcheon compares it to a metaphor: “In some ways, parody might be said to resemble metaphor. Both require that the decoder construct a second meaning through inferences about surface statements and supplement the foreground with acknowledgement and knowledge of a backgrounded context.” (Hutcheon 1985, 34) In other words, the metaphorical function of the vehicle is fulfilled by the parodied text. Although Hutcheon does not literally touch upon this, she implies that parody has an effect on the meaning of a text: “Parody involves more than just textual comparison; the entire enunciative context is involved in the production and reception of the kind of parody that uses irony as the major means of accentuating, even establishing, parodic contrast.” (Hutcheon 1985, 34) The parody of a different text adds a second meaning to the parodying text.

In light of Hutcheon's definition, the textural and structural reference to the myths in *Howl* can be seen as parodic, because they are repetitions of ancient themes and structures, but these are subverted so as to differ critically. Furthermore, by process of elimination they cannot be construed as plagiarism or quotation (because of their difference in intent), allusion (because of *Howl*'s bitextual nature) or satire (because of the difference in target, there is an absence of ridicule of man's faults). Additionally, as my analysis will show, the thematic and structural parodies of mythology add different levels of meaning to the poem.

Though Hutcheon initially defines parody as intra-mural (as opposed to satire) in the last chapter of her book, entitled "The world, the parodic text and the theorist," explains that this does not necessarily entail that parody is without social or ideological potential:

The title of this next chapter is obviously a (parodic) reworking of that of Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). In that book, Said argues for a literary theory that would take account of what he calls "the text's situation in the world" (151). Given his belief that all art is discourse-specific – that is, that it cannot escape its historical, social and ideological context – his position is that all texts, even parodic ones, are "worldly, to some degree that they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it [as in self-reflexive parodic texts], they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course, the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted(4) (Hutcheon 1985, 100)

Based on Said's text, Hutcheon does not need to re-insert parody in the realm of the "extra-mural" text, but rather, makes it possible for the parody to have "worldly" implications or connotations without resembling satire. Through this interpretation of parody, it is possible to examine the socio-ideological connotations of the parodic rewriting of myth in Ginsberg's *Howl*.

Linda Hutcheon's second text on parody, an essay entitled "The Politics of Postmodernism," (1986) elaborates on the link between parody and sociological or ideological commentary. Seeing parody as more than just a form of inter-art discourse, Hutcheon connects parody to ideology: "The pluralist, provisional, contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise challenges not just aesthetic unities, but also homogenizing social notions of the monolithic (male, Anglo, white, Western) in our culture. And parody is one of its mechanisms for doing so." (Hutcheon 1986, 184) And, while parody may look like it is an

“aesthetic turning-inward” (1986, 184) reflecting on the text rather than on the world, by ironically inverting or trans-contextualizing texts of the past, the text automatically becomes pluralist. In this way, parody does not only challenge the texts themselves, but it has the potential to challenge the monolithic (male, white, western and hetero-sexual) notions that past represents. As Hutcheon states in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: history, theory and fiction* (1988):

[O]ne of the effects of this discursive pluralizing is that the (perhaps illusory but once perceived as firm and single) center of both historical and fictive narrative is dispersed. Margins and edges gain new value. The "ex-centric" - as both off-center and de-centered- gets attention. That which is "different" is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated "otherness" and also the unifying impulse of mass culture. And in American postmodernism, the different comes to be defined in particularizing terms such as those of nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating - with significant change - the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-centric culture. It does not reject it, for it cannot. Postmodernism signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon, but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it. (Hutcheon 1988, 130)

The use and abuse of canonical forms and themes is, however, a paradoxical one. In reverting to an older form or theme, the use of parody is incidentally authorized by the very text that is parodied: “Nevertheless, parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized – authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert. Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence.” (Hutcheon 1985, 75) In other words, there can hardly be a case of parody (or its implied challenge) if there is no norm. The paradox of parody lies in the double implication of the use of parody. This, according to Hutcheon, can potentially result in two very different outcomes: reverence and mockery. It can suggest complicity with so-called high culture or parody can, like the carnival, challenge the norm in order to subvert and renew. (Hutcheon 1985, 76) Even in this renewal, parody, as it necessarily employs thematic and structural elements from past (literary) forms, has strong ties with the past. “Parody, by this definition, becomes an ultimate act of co-opting, a making sense of the unintelligible by the imposition of the code of parody.” (Hutcheon 1985, 108) In *Howl*, the superposition of a code of parody goes together

with the superposition of a mythical framework. Both serve to make sense of the unintelligible. With *Howl's* parodic use of the myth, this socio-political view of parody provides another framework in which to interpret the poem.

In conclusion, parody is characterized as repetition with critical difference, marked by ironic inversion and trans-contextualization and need not include ridicule. As a postmodern parody, *Howl*, in the light of Hutcheon's theory can be seen as constituting a break with past literary forms, but at the same time reaffirming a connection with that past. By using and abusing canonical forms, *Howl* can be interpreted as critical of the monolithic notions of the author's contemporary society. The parodic nature of the mythological references in *Howl* has ideological implications.

## **5. Analysis of the mythological references in *Howl* on a structural level:**

### ***Howl* as a heroic journey**

As a whole, *Howl* does not refer to a specific myth, but rather, to a type of myth: the heroic journey into the underworld and back. In his essay: “*Howl*: a Reading,” Gregory Stephenson discerns a so-called Night-Sea Journey in the structure of the poem. (Stephenson 51) The Night-Sea Journey is an archetypal myth, a form of the nekylia or katabasis, which is a descent of some type, such as a literal moving downhill, the sinking of the sun, a military retreat, but most notably, a trip to the underworld (Leeming 98). A katabasis mostly takes place in a supernatural underworld, such as in *Nekylia*, the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, which describes the descent of Odysseus to the underworld. However, katabasis can also refer to a voyage through other gruesome areas, like those Odysseus encounters on his lengthy journey from Troy to Ithaca or Christ’s 40 day stay in the desert. The Night-Sea Journey specifically, is a voyage overseas. Carl Gustav Jung, used the concept of the Nekylia as a part of his analytical psychology. For Jung, “the Nekylia is no aimless or destructive fall into the abyss, but a meaningful katabasis ... its object the restoration of the whole man.” (Jung, 1976, 41) He interprets the katabasis as a descent into the depths of the unconscious, rather than into an after-life type of underworld. In his 1932 article on Picasso, Jung also used the concept to describe a type of depression common among young men. In *Howl*, I will argue, this night-sea journey simultaneously presents itself as a descent into the underworld and into the unconscious of the poet-speaker.

*Howl* progresses from the anonymous sufferings of the “who”-character, towards a description and denunciation of modern society as Moloch, and the personal suffering of Carl Solomon is described. Stephenson describes the progress of the poem as follows:

The movement of *Howl* (including “Footnote to *Howl*”) is from protest, pain, outrage, attack and lamentation to acceptance, affirmation, love and vision; from alienation to communion. The poet descends into an underworld of darkness, suffering and isolation, then ascends into spiritual knowledge, a sense of union with Man and God, blessedness and achieved vision. The poem is unified with and the movement carried forward by recurring images of falling and rising, destruction and regeneration, starvation and nourishment, sleeping and waking, darkness and illumination, blindness and sight, death and resurrection. (Stephenson 51)

The protest, pain and outrage are situated mostly in Part I, whereas part II constitutes the attack on Ginsberg's contemporary society and Part III moves from lamentation of the situation in Rockland to affirmation and hope, until hope becomes the main emotional undertone in the "Footnote to Howl." Starting with the total alienation of the "best minds" in Part I, the poem spirals downward to the most alienated in contemporary society, the madman in Part III, until the elements that are lamented, protested and denounced in earlier parts of the poem, are declared holy in the "Footnote."

An initial descent into the underworld is carried out in the first part of the poem. Contrary to what Stephenson believes, I would argue that it is not the poet himself who descends, but the (initially unnamed) protagonists of the poem; the "who" characters, who are referred to as "the best minds of my generation" in the first line of the poem, it is these "who" that undergo the falling and rising motions Stephenson refers to. Part I of *Howl* is, at a first glance, a celebration of the Beat lifestyle. However, there seems to be much more going on than a mere glamorizing of the alternative "beat" lifestyle:

The "angelheaded hipster," in the nomenclature of *Howl* staggered on the night journey of the Beat soul, answering a mysterious call from the dark, dragging "through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." The tortures of his damnation were like Orphic ordeals, sending him into an ecstatic song of destruction which ended in the radiance of secret knowledge. (Tytell 21)

Riddled with imagery alluding to drugs, sexual exploits academic and other rebellion and long nights out on the town, *Howl* seems to give an almost exhaustive overview of the bohemian lifestyle Ginsberg and his comrades lived in 1950s America. However, when one takes a closer look at the descriptions of these adventures, the drug fueled dream quickly assumes the air of a nightmare, as Stephenson has argued. (Stephenson 53) The poem pertains to the "best minds" of Ginsberg's generation, but these minds are, already in the first lines of the poem, destroyed by madness. In what Tytell calls the poem's "Orphic ordeals," Ginsberg's "best minds" are sent on a journey of desperation, suffering, destruction and persecution in the first section of the poem. For example in the following verse:

Who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wrecked and battered bleak of brain all drained from brilliance in the drear light of Zoo. (Ginsberg 10)



Whereas Orpheus undertook his journey through a Hades' underworld, Ginsberg's outcasts are, in this verse, sent on a subway ride, which literally takes them underground. This verse is exemplary of the first part; the protagonist seems to be doing something heroic and cool by taking endless rides on the subway and getting high on amphetamines, but the ride to the Bronx, the holy place, seems endless and finally, they are brought down from their high by children, they are battered ("beat"), deprived of their intelligence and brilliance as they arrive at the Bronx Zoo. It is in a Zoo, the most mundane of places, where the average American might take their children on a week-end day, in which the "best minds" suffer. Alternatively, one could interpret the arrival in the Zoo as a deterioration of the protagonists; they are reduced from the "best minds" to mere animals. The nightmarish "underworld of darkness" that the first part of the poem descends into is a modern and urban hell in which those representing "the best mind of my generation," are wandering like damned souls. The author achieves this through a succession of simultaneously surreal and realistic-biographic imagery.

The unnamed protagonists of the poem seem to be spiraling downwards, until the last lines of Part I, where they suffer a death by religious sacrifice, similar to that of Jesus Christ "With the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years." (Ginsberg 20) It does not become clear who it was precisely that did the butchering and eating until the second part. Instead, the emphasis lies on what is butchered: the "absolute heart of the poem of life." Once again, the poem alludes to a loss of creativity and intelligence on the part of the "best minds." In my opinion, the downward spiral reaches a first low point at the end of part I, where a messianic, redemptive figure is introduced, but merely dies and is not resurrected, in contrast to the biblical story.

In the second part of the poem, the focus shifts from the adventures, exploits and suffering of Ginsberg's colleagues, to a description of a nightmarish society. In "*Howl*: a reading," Gregory Stephenson continues his analysis of the Night-Sea Journey in *Howl* in the following manner:

The second section of the poem continues and expands the image of pagan sacrifice with which the first section concludes. To what merciless, cold, blind idol were the "angelheaded" of section one given in sacrifice, Ginsberg asks. And he answers: "Moloch!" Moloch, god of abominations, to whom children were sacrificed, against whom the Bible warns repeatedly, is the ruling principle of our age. (Stephenson 54)

In these first verses of the second section, the last lines of the previous part are elaborated on and clarified; the “who” that is butchered and eaten, now has a killer: Moloch. “Moloch, the ancient Middle Eastern deity to which children were sacrificed, seen as the technological evil of instrumental reason.” (Gray 40) The figure of Moloch had been used as a political and social allegory in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Russell’s *A free man’s worship* and Ginsberg follows suit. In *Howl*, Moloch is used as an allegory for capitalism and industrialized civilization, for example in the following stanza:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running  
money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a  
cannibal dynamo Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! (Ginsberg 21)

All of these elements constituted the advanced industrialized, capitalist society of the United States of the 1950s: the industrial complex (“machinery,”) capitalism (“money,”) and America’s increasing militarization (“armies”) that characterized that stage of the Cold War. Tytell summarizes the terror of the rationalized, modern world, increasingly governed by (military) technology, in which the Beat poets lived:

The postwar era was a time of extraordinary insecurity, of profound  
powerlessness as far as individual effort was concerned, when personal  
responsibility was being abdicated in favor of corporate largeness [...] The  
nuclear blasts in Japan had created new sources of terror, and the ideology of  
technology became paramount; science was seen as capable of totally  
dominating man and his environment. And the prospects of total annihilation  
through nuclear explosion, of mass conditioning through the media, only  
increased the awesome respect for scientific powers. (Tytell 5)

This awe and respect for scientific, military and technological powers is present in the poem in the sense that these powers are being worshipped as a God, Moloch. In the view of the average American, in line with the consumerist phase of the American Dream, which included a spirit of progress and advocated consumerism, these technologies and the money might have been perceived as a good thing. However Ginsberg’s God of technology is not a kind God. Rather, the technology and progress are embodied by a God that demands sacrifice. Additionally, the militarization that is present in the stanza was a large part of life in the 1950s, with defense spending being very high and the country being in a practically constant state of war. The stanza is concluded with an image of death. In this manner, the images of

modern society are twice associated with death in a single stanza: first through the figure of Moloch (a god that demands sacrifice) and secondly, through the imagery of the tomb. In other words, in the second section of the poem, the poet explores the aforementioned nightmarish image of contemporary society. In the form of Moloch, the poet-speaker formulates an indictment against those elements in modern society that are regarded as destructive to these “best minds of my generation.”

Towards the end of the second section, the tone of the poem changes; the emphasis on the nightmarish figure of Moloch, destruction and all that is wrong with American society is replaced by a series of exclamations. While “Moloch” dominates the beginning of Part II, where his name appears in all but the first and last five stanzas and is repeated numerous times, at the end of the section, he is no longer mentioned:

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! The wild eyes! The holy yells!  
They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! To solitude! Waving! Carrying  
flowers! Down to the river! Into the street! (Ginsberg 23)

The image of the pagan god of sacrifice is replaced by a series of holy things, foreshadowing the exclamations in the “Footnote to Howl.” In this stanza, the “best minds of my generation” flee, they abandon Moloch and leave behind all that he represents. However, they do not leave behind their urban hell completely, as they still find themselves in the streets.

At the beginning of the third section, the poem reaches its ultimate low-point in a description of a madman’s condition in Rockland Psychiatric Center (formerly known as Rockland State Hospital), one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in the world. According to Kenneth Rexroth, Part III of *Howl* constitutes a picture of “the utter demoralization of an individual.” (Morgan and Peters 165) In “Rockland,” the protagonist undergoes humiliations as well as physical and intellectual suffering. Incidentally, the protagonist of this section, Carl Solomon, was a poet himself. Carl Solomon, who was Ginsberg’s fellow inmate when he resided in Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey in 1949 (Miles 116) is, at first sight, the protagonist of the section. What is more, the original title of the poem was *Howl for Carl Solomon* but acting on the advice of Jack Kerouac, the latter part of the title was changed into a dedication when it was published in 1956. “*Howl for Carl Solomon* did contain many images taken from Carl’s life story, though most of them were transformed or universalized.” (Miles, 117) Apart from these transformations, the obtrusive repetition of “I’m with you in Rockland,” which forms the refrain of the section, indicates a bond between the poet-speaker

and the inmate that is much stronger than merely friendship. In my opinion, this refrain indicates a potent self-identification of the poet-speaker with this madman. This impression is reinforced by lines such as: “where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter” (Ginsberg 24) and “where you imitate the shade of my mother.” (24)

More than just a personal address to a friend, this third section is the portrait of a madman in a madhouse, who can be seen as just one representative of what Ginsberg regards as the general condition in his contemporary society. In this section, Carl Solomon experiences grief, pain and suffering at the hands of his doctors and nurses, but also because of his own insanity: “I’m with you in Rockland / Where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses”(Ginsberg 24) This verse constitutes another manifestation of the returning motif of the loss of intelligence. One might argue that after the loss of the imagination, the loss of his faculties is the worst thing that could happen to a poet such as Solomon. While Rexroth was accurate in his assessment that this part of the poem is indicative of demoralization, towards the end of this section, there is a sense of hopefulness and resistance. It is not until the last part of the poem that resistance becomes part of the poem’s rhetoric. Protest appears in the poetic discourse for the first time in the following verse:

I’m with you in Rockland  
Where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist  
revolution against the fascist national Golgotha (Ginsberg 25)

Here, there is an inversion of traditional roles; the madman accuses his doctors of being insane; interestingly, this stanza could reflect on the poem’s message itself; in much the same way as Solomon, the patient, accuses his doctors of madness, Ginsberg, the madman-poet, the homosexual, accuses the society he lives in of being inhumane. Secondly, this verse constitutes a second reference to the figure of the messiah. Mount Golgotha was where that other Hebrew revolutionary, Jesus Christ, suffered death by crucifixion. Both themes of resistance and the messiah are continued in the next stanza:

I’m with you in Rockland  
Where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living  
human Jesus from the superhuman tomb (Ginsberg 25)

This is the first instance in which the protagonist shows actual active participation, instead of merely undergoing the atrocities of Rockland State Hospital. Additionally, this is the poem's third reference to the messiah. The first two references deal only with the death of the messiah, in his desperate cry directed towards God and the second one with the revolutionary nature of his thoughts. This last reference, however, concerns the resurrection of that messiah. And what is more, the Christ figure will be resurrected from the "superhuman tomb," which can be seen as an echo of an earlier description of Moloch in the second part of the poem (21). This line suggests the cathartic experience of the katabasis, with its stint in hell (or Moloch,) concluded with a resurrection from that hell. The overall feeling of resistance builds up towards the end of the poem, where the image of resurrection is reiterated in the penultimate stanza:

I'm with you in Rockland  
Where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes  
roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital  
illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O  
starry spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your  
underwear we're free (Ginsberg 26)

Imagery of light follows the darkness which prevails in the second and third part of the poem and for the first time, there is a sense of freedom in addition to the rebellion. Interestingly, the collapsing walls are imaginary, this alludes to the fact that the hospital itself is imaginary, or, alternatively, that the walls which the protagonist has constructed in his mind, are far more restricting than the physical walls of the hospital.

The ultimate stanza of Part III constitutes a homecoming, the end of the katabasis where the hero comes back on shore after a downward spiraling journey through an urban hell and finding a face for that hell in "Moloch", finding a place that is the depth of that hell in Rockland, the poem concludes the journey at the poet-speaker's doorstep:

I'm with you in Rockland  
In my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across  
America in tears to the door of my cottage in the western night (Ginsberg 26)

In this stanza, the night-sea journey is made explicit and what is more, the journey is situated geographically: it was a journey across America. Although America is the land which stretches out “from sea to shiny sea,” it is the highway which represents the Night Sea Journey. In the poem, Carl Solomon does not physically come home, rather, he comes to the poet-speaker’s home and this only takes place in the dreams of that same poet-speaker. It remains an expression of hope, rather than reality. Here, Ginsberg makes clear his hero does not reach the shore, but is stuck, for now, bound by the shackles of his mental illness in Rockland, his personal, and the Beat Generation’s universal hell. In this light, Stephenson’s calling the poem riddled with orphic ordeals comes to mind. Much like Orpheus’ Nekyia, this journey into hell seems to have been in vain, because nothing physically returns to the land of the living. However, the poem does end on a rather positive, if not ecstatic note.

In the “Footnote to Howl,” there is a strong sense of reflection and change after the hero has experienced the end of his journey. After the struggle in Moloch and Rockland, the poem has completely changed tone. One could argue that, in the strictest sense, the cathartic realizations that come after the hero’s katabasis are not *strictu sensu* part of that journey into the underworld. Because the last part of the poem is called the “footnote,” it can be seen as a separate entity. There is a strong sense of catharsis which is conveyed in the holiness of practically everything. Not only man, the various parts of the body, the poet himself and his friends are declared holy, but also the various elements which constituted “Moloch” in the second part of the poem:

Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the cafeterias filled  
with the millions’ holy the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!  
(Ginsberg 27)

After the condemning of these elements of modernity, they are sacralised. Additionally, there is a stark contrast between things that are conventionally seen as holy (for example the soul) and the things that are holy in the sense that they are part of mankind and of the world. “The sacred and the profane come together: clothes and God and decorum on the one side, nakedness and excrement and howls on the other.” (Gray 47) In this way, the poem can be said to be an affirmation of humanity’s values. In the footnote, humanity, which suffered in general and in specific individuals throughout the whole poem, is exonerated. Additionally, the elements that are declared holy in this last part of the poem are those that constitute the downfall of “the best minds” in the first part, as well as some of the incarnations of Moloch in

the second part and they include imagery of the mental hospital in the last section of the poem. According to Stephenson, Ginsberg transforms his “‘season in hell’ into new resolve and purpose. Like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, he has returned from a journey of wonders and suffering with a new vision of human community, a new reverence for life.” (Stephenson 392) In other words, the hero, upon returning from his journey through the underworld, is filled with new resolve, purpose and joy for life and all its components, including those that previously promised destruction. All this suggests a sense of acceptance and communion.

In conclusion, the underlying mythological structure of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* is a katabasis, or a journey into the underworld. This journey progresses from a destruction and downfall of the “who” and the society the author’s heroes live in, in part I to a graphic denunciation of that society in the form of Moloch in Part II. Moloch is the poet-speaker’s way of denouncing modern capitalist industrialized society. In the final part of the poem, Carl Solomon, the protagonist of this part, is an exemplary figure, indicative of humanity’s condition. In the last part, this condition is first lamented, after which the poet-speaker concludes the katabasis and the poem receives notes of hope, communion and new-found joy in the “Footnote to *Howl*.”

## 6. Analysis of the mythological references in *Howl* on a thematic level

Whereas on a structural level, *Howl* refers to a mythological archetype, on a thematic level, the poem refers to specific myths. The mythological references in *Howl* are numerous and all of them distort or parody their classical or biblical counterpart in some way. Additionally, the mythological figures and motifs which the poem alludes to are decontextualized. The classical myths are, overall, used in a number of ways: to transform ordinary scenes into mythological ones and to cast Ginsberg's characters in the roles of mythological figures. They are used to universalize the personal and anecdotal, and, when examined with Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody in mind, they can be construed as to constitute socio-cultural criticism.

### 6.1. Adonis

In Part I, which, in the author's own words "deals sympathetically with individual cases," (Peters and Morgan 40) the references to Neal Cassady form a prime example of universalizing a personal story. For example in the following verse, where he equates his friend with the mythological figure Adonis:

who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C.,  
secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver – joy to the  
memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards  
(Ginsberg 14)

"N.C." refers to Neal Cassady, a prominent figure of the Beat Generation, more widely known for his extravagance than for his literary gift. Cassady is identified as a "cocksman and Adonis." The myth of Adonis most probably originated east of the Mediterranean and several myths with more or less the same structure and theme can be found throughout different ancient cultures. James George Frazer provides us with a summary of the classical Greek version in his *Golden Bough*:

[In] Greek mythology, the [deity] appears as a comely youth beloved by Aphrodite. In his infancy the goddess hid him in a chest, which she gave in charge to Persephone, queen of the nether world. But when Persephone opened the chest and beheld the beauty of the babe, she refused to give him back to Aphrodite, though the goddess of love went down herself to hell to ransom her dear one from the power of the grave. The dispute between the two goddesses



of love and death was settled by Zeus, who decreed that Adonis should abide with Persephone in the underworld for one part of the year, and with Aphrodite in the upper world for another part. At last the fair youth was killed in hunting by a wild boar, or by the jealous Ares [...] Bitterly did Aphrodite lament her loved and lost Adonis. (Frazer, chapter 32)

In other versions of the myth, the dispute was settled by Calliope of Zeus' behalf and the year was divided differently (Ovid, X 519 – 707), but the essence of the myth remains; it is a story of beauty, love, jealousy and death.

In the verse, the Adonis myth is re-contextualized; that is, "Adonis" is no longer being used in a mythological, ritual or religious context, but rather, in this poem, to describe someone. Secondly, Adonis, a tragic demi-god with extraordinary beauty is used in a series of vulgarities to describe an ordinary, even slightly degenerate man, Neal Cassady. Neal Cassady, who, in the verse, is cast in the role of the tragic figure of Adonis, was a member of the Beat Generation and an author himself, but is mostly known for being immortalized in some of the other writers' fiction. He appears – under various names – in the works of Jack Kerouac (*On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*), Ken Kesey ("The Day After Superman Died") and John Clellon Holmes (*Go.*) Cassady led a fast and short life, fathered five children, married three times and apart from his many relationships with women, Cassady also had a sexual relationship with Ginsberg, which lasted on and off for twenty years. (Young) Their relationship was such that, when Ginsberg came to visit Cassady in Denver, he was married to Carolyn Cassady and carrying on at least one other extramarital affair. (Morgan 176-7) Cassady divided himself between his lovers, as Adonis was divided between his.

Cassady is said to have "went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars." As I have explained above, the automobile was a major emblem of accomplishment, technological progress and owning one was part of the 1950s American Dream. The reference to his stealing cars identifies him as a degenerate; it makes him oppose the "good Americans" who work to afford cars of their own. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the words "cocksman" and "Adonis" is striking, to say the least. The placing together of a vulgar term and a classical name, which calls to mind notions such as timeless beauty and a tragic death is not only it surprising, it can be construed as ironic. Irony is a rhetorical mechanism which often appears in parodic discourse. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, theorist Linda Hutcheon mentions irony as a rhetorical strategy in parodic discourse to signal distance and

difference, where she illustrates the effect of parody in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's woman*:

John Fowles juxtaposes the conventions of the Victorian and the modern novel. The theological and cultural assumptions of both ages - as manifest through their literary forms - are ironically compared by the reader through the medium of formal parody. (...) In the visual arts, the variety of possible modes is greater than in literature, it seems. 'For instance, John Clem Clarke poses his friends as Paris, Hermes, and the three goddesses of Rubens's Judgment of Paris, and changes the posture to suggest more modern seductive poses. George Segal's plaster sculpture version of Matisse's Dance is called The Dancers, but his figures, despite the similarity of pose, appear not at all ecstatic; in fact, they seem distinctly self-conscious and ill at ease. (Hutcheon, 1986, 31)

The juxtaposition of the convention of both ages can be extrapolated to Ginsberg's poem: the Adonis-figure can be interpreted as to represent sexual promiscuity, which was not uncommon in the (albeit fictional) world of the Greek gods. In Ginsberg's contemporary society, however, such (multiple) relationships were frowned upon. In the America of the fifties, the sanctity of the nuclear family was dominant as "marriage was seen as the natural state in adults." (Miller and Nowak 151) Howl's re-appropriation of the Adonis-myth calls attention to the socio-cultural conventions of its age. Much like John Clem Clarke, Ginsberg poses his friends and colleagues as classical figures throughout *Howl* or has them appear in mythological contexts. His "best minds" undergo an orphic journey through urban hell and his fellow poet Solomon, for example, is cast as a messianic figure. In this case, by having Cassady accompanied by the word "Adonis," the poem does not only cast the "cocksman" in the role of a classical mythological figure, but in this way, the poem also calls attention to the associations one might ordinarily have when it comes to the figure of Adonis. Whereas the Greek myth deals with love and jealousy between men and women, it is well known that the author and Cassady were sexually involved. When in the middle of the Lavender Scare, the author calls one of his male friends an "Adonis," this re-contextualization of the myth can take on yet another meaning. Here, Hutcheon's theory of parody is once again crucial:

"Intertextual parody of canonical American and European classics is one mode of appropriating and reformulating - with significant change - the dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-centric culture." (Hutcheon 1988, 130) Re-formulating the Adonis myth by means of distortion of one component of the relationship (one female is replaced by

one male) is a means of re-appropriating the standard heterosexual love-relationship in a new way. The poem moves away from the homogeneous conception of love, and alludes to homosexuality by means of myth. Rather than referring to it in a direct way as elsewhere in *Howl*, (e.g. “who let themselves be fucked in the ass” (Ginsberg 13)) it is alluded to in an indirect way by means of mythological reference.

Secondly, the poem states “joy to the memory of his innumerable lays,” (14) in this respect, *Howl* embraces and celebrates Cassady’s activities and the verse could be interpreted as a reference to the Adonis rites. These were rituals practiced around the Mediterranean to commemorate Adonis’ life and tragic death. According to classical scholars, such as Frazer, they were also rituals to mark the changing of the seasons and bid good fortune and fertility from the gods.

At the festivals of Adonis, which were held in Western Asia and in Greek lands, the death of the god was annually mourned, with a bitter wailing, chiefly by women; images of him, dressed to resemble corpses, were carried out as to burial and then thrown into the sea or into springs; and in some places his revival was celebrated on the following day. The marriage of the lovers was celebrated one day, and on the morrow women attired as mourners, with streaming hair and bared breasts, bore the image of the dead Adonis to the seashore and committed it to the waves. Yet they sorrowed not without hope, for they sang that the lost one would come back again. (Frazer, chapter 34)

Whereas the classical Greek (and West-Asian) feasts of Adonis were celebrated chiefly by women, in the poem, the male poet-speaker takes part in the celebration. The proclamation of “joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls” re-appropriates the right to celebrate love that is unconventional. Even though the poem explicitly states “girls,” the subject’s sexual politics which are evoked through “N.C., Adonis” combination (promiscuity and homosexuality) are unconventional. The idea to celebrate promiscuity or multiple relationships is quite revolutionary in Ginsberg’s age, which was dominated by the ideal of the nuclear family.

Frazer elaborates that Adonis, in his view, is a god of rebirth and that the celebrations held in his name were feasts of natural rebirth (Frazer, chapter 34) In Ginsberg’s adaptation, however, the emphasis lays on the sexual conquests of his Adonis figure, his “innumerable lays.” While the sexual is inextricably connected with fertility and the yearly cycle of nature, Cassady’s ambiguous sexual politics render this connection problematic. The myth’s and

ritual's initial focus on the yearly cycle of nature and procreation is shifted in Ginsberg's re-appropriation of the Adonis story. Instead, the clause following the poem's reference to the myth emphasizes the sexual aspect.

Furthermore, the use of the word "Adonis" to describe Cassady is not merely used to make reference to his sexual politics rather; it is a way of universalizing his story. The abbreviation of Cassady's name to "N.C." is a first step towards abstraction and universalizing, however, for any reader who has read any other work by another Beat Generation author, the reference remains fairly transparent. The adding of "Adonis" to the verse provides further abstraction. The verse does not merely refer to Neal Cassady and his personal sexual and other exploits. By attaching Adonis to it, the story gets re-contextualized. Thus, there exists a double re-contextualization in this case. Neal Cassady's personal story (of seemingly random, vulgar, semi-criminal behaviour) is universalized and, at the same time, there is a universalizing of the celebration of unusual love.

In conclusion, the use of the Adonis myth to describe Ginsberg's friend and lover Neal Cassady re-contextualizes the myth and in this way, makes an ironic contrast. The use of the myth in *Howl* calls attention to the conventions of its age. The promiscuous love-relationships the Adonis myth brings to mind stand in stark contrast with the ideal of the nuclear family that was prevalent in the America of the 1950s. Secondly, the author's homosexual relationship with his "Adonis" is a second inversion of the myth in which the traditional (and mythical) love-relationship between a man and a woman is exchanged for one between two men. In its entirety, the verse attempts to re-appropriate the monolithic, heterosexual, cultural notions of Ginsberg's contemporary society.

## 6.2. The Moiria

In Part I of *Howl*, the lifestyle of the Beat Generation is described and lamented. The homosexual and other exploits of Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and his other colleagues are described in a rather explicit manner. Towards the middle of the poem, the following references to the Moiria, the shrews of fate is made:

Who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of  
the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the  
one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual  
golden threads of the craftsman's loom. (Ginsberg 14)

In this fragment, Ginsberg parodies the myth of the Goddesses of Fate. These 'three old shrews' are a subversion of the Moirai. Ovid describes the Moirai, or Parcae, as the Fates who decide on the length of human life in his *Metamorphosis*. They are the three goddesses who unwind the thread of life and have the subtle power of deciding man's destiny. Their most obvious choice is choosing how long a man lives. (Ovid II 654). Ovid discerns three separate goddesses of fate, as opposed to Homer, who only mentions one goddess of destiny, whom he calls Aisa. (Homer XXIV. 525) There is Clotho, who spins the thread of life with her wheel, Lachesis, the measurer, who chooses one's destiny and how long the thread of life is to be, and Atropos, she who cannot be turned, who cuts the thread of life at death.

The concept of the Fates *an sich*, that is, the idea that man's fate is fixed at birth, or even before that, by a foreign, supernatural entity, is diametrically opposed to the cultural Holy Grail of the United States, the American Dream. Samuel's definition of the pioneer Dream becomes problematic, since in the three Fates render it impossible for human kind to "decide their own fates and who are subject to no arbitrary power that stands higher than the law or public opinion." (Samuel 59) The Dream of a "better, richer and happier life for all our citizens of every rank," as Adams defined it (1931), becomes a virtual impossibility. Similarly, concepts such as a "self-made man" or "equality of opportunity" become uncertain, considering that the course of one's life is predefined. Additionally, when examining the specific transformations the three Moirai undergo in the poem, the other incarnations of the Dream become problematic as well.

The first Fate, Klotho, is transformed into "the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar." The "heterosexual" element can be regarded as an allusion to the male-dominated, heterosexual mainstream American culture of the 1950s. The "dollar" element can be

interpreted as criticism towards the commercial capitalist system that reached, some would say, the height of its success at the time of composition. Alternatively, it can refer to the increasingly affluent middle class of the 1950s, obsessed with material possessions and upward mobility. As a whole, the “heterosexual dollar” represents the increasingly homogenous, less individualistic society characterized by the Dream of “the Good Life.” (Samuel 56) In treating the presence of the Moirai myth in *Howl* as parody, Linda Hutcheon’s text “The Politics of Postmodernism” provides a link between parody and social commentary;

The pluralist, provisional, contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise challenges not just aesthetic unities, but also homogenizing social notions of the monolithic (male, Anglo, white, Western) in our culture. And parody is one of its mechanisms for doing so: what appears to be an aesthetic turning-inward is exactly what reveals the close connections between the social production and reception of art and our ideologically and historically conditioned ways of perceiving and acting.” (Hutcheon, 1986, 184)

In this context (the United States of the 1950s), Hutcheon’s social notions of the monolithic would comprise of the heterosexual and the middle class, as well as the male, Anglo, white and Western. By means of subverting the classical myth, the poem calls attention to the social norms and cultural uniformity of the age and the prevailing definition of the American Dream.

The second fate, Lachesis, the measurer, is transformed into “the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb.” Seeing as Lachesis determines the fate in classical tradition, her winking out of the womb can be seen as a way of re-emphasizing the idea of predestination and negate the possibility of the American Dream as a whole once again. This predestination could, when seen in the light of the “heterosexual dollar” of the first shrew, also be interpreted as a defense of the author’s sexual orientation, which, as part of his destiny, falls beyond his willpower. In the monolithic society of the 1950s, homosexuality was strongly frowned upon and, in some cases, viewed as “unacceptable and loose behaviour” and thus, punishable. As Jonah Raskin puts it in his aptly titled book *American Scream*; “Indeed, as he learned, it was dangerous to be a homosexual, certainly as dangerous as being a communist.” (Raskin 53) In short, the second shrew is another commentary on the first definition of the American Dream in addition to being a defense of the author’s own nature.

The last Moira, Atropos is subverted into “the one eyed shrew who does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden thread of the craftsman’s loom.” Here, it is

interesting to note that the thread which is cut by the last Fate is not the thread of life, but the thread of intellect. Whereas, in the classical tradition, the fates represented limitations in terms of what one could make of one's own life, in Ginsberg's subversion, they limit the intellect. This could imply that the concept of predestination is detrimental to creative or intellectual thought. This excerpt could nevertheless be interpreted in a broader sense; if the Moirai represent the fixed fate of any human being and, as Klotho represents the middle class society, Lachesis re-emphasizes predestination and Atropos does not snip the thread of life, but that of the intellect, they can be said to represent the Suburban Dream itself. They are the shrews of the heterosexual, the dollar, the monolithic male, white middle class society that is the embodiment of the Suburban Dream in the 1950s. Thus, the Moirai can be interpreted as representing that version of the American Dream which was prevalent in the 1950s; the aspiration to a life filled with material possessions in accordance to the prevailing heterosexual norm. Consequently, the fate of the unnamed subject "who", is not determined by fate anymore, but by being born into a society which favors homogeneity, yet nevertheless expects the fulfillment of the American Dream. In this context, the subversion of the last Fate as snipping the *intellectual* thread suggests that this environment is toxic to the intellect and creativity of the craftsman, or the poet.

Lastly, the unnamed protagonist(s) of the poem, "who", is said to lose their loveboys to these three shrews. "Loveboys" is most probably a reference to the homosexual practices of the author and some of his colleagues and friends. In this manner, seeing as the shrews represent the monolithic, middle class suburban life of the 1950s America, Ginsberg's "best minds" have lost their homosexual (and thus, socially deviant) partners to the shrews of money, heterosexuality and general normalcy.

In conclusion, the transformation of the Moirai in Ginsberg's *Howl* can be explained as criticizing the idea that equality of opportunity, embodied by the American dream, in general. Alternatively, the Fates can be seen as representing the homogenous, predominantly heterosexual, capitalist sociocultural circumstances of the 1950s, in which case, they simultaneously constitute a critique on Ginsberg's contemporary society and allude to the impossibility of achieving the American Dream within that society. The parodic nature of the reference here, not only calls to mind, but also criticizes the conventions of Ginsberg's contemporary society.

### 6. 3. Oedipus

Throughout *Howl*, there are three references to the myth of King Oedipus. The first part of Sophocles' trilogy on the subject, *Oedipus Rex*, begins with the people of Thebes begging the king for help to discover the cause of the plague. Oedipus stands before them and swears to find the root of their suffering and to end it. Then, Creon returns to Thebes from a visit to the oracle. Apollo has made it known that Thebes is harboring a terrible abomination and that the plague will only be lifted when the true murderer of old King Laius is discovered and punished. Oedipus swears to do this. The truth is already hinted at when Oedipus bickers with the blind seer Tiresias, who senses the truth, however, Oedipus remains in denial. When Jocasta, his wife, mentions how and where Laius was slain, Oedipus remembers the men that he fought and killed right before he defeated the Sphinx and became king of Thebes. He realizes, horrified, that he might be the man he's seeking. One household servant survived the attack and Oedipus sends for the man. Oedipus is still waiting for the servant to be brought into the city, when a messenger arrives from Corinth to declare the King Polybus is dead. Oedipus is relieved, because he believed that Polybus was his father and consequently, defied the first prediction of the oracle, which said that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He tells this to the messenger, but he happens to be the man who found Oedipus as a baby in the pass of Kithairon and gave him to King Polybus. Meanwhile, the old servant arrives and, at the behest of Oedipus, tells him the truth, after which Oedipus blinds himself and is exiled out of Thebes.

The first reference to the myth occurs in the first part of *Howl*: 'Truly bald except for a rug of blood and tears and fingers to the visible madman doom of the wards of the mountains of the East' (Ginsberg 19) This refers to the end of Sophocles' first part of the Oedipus trilogy, *Oedipus Rex*, where the King, after realizing his own identity and extent of his crimes, goes back into the palace, where he finds his mother (who is also his wife) has committed suicide. Using a pin from her dress, Oedipus blinds himself. Bleeding from the eyes, he begs to be exiled from Thebes. Oedipus begs to hold his two daughters Antigone and Ismene in his hands one more time, so they can cry over him.

The second reference follows only a few lines after that: 'With mother finally \*\*\*\*\*' (Ginsberg 19) In an earlier draft of the poem, this excerpt read 'With mother finally fucked' (Raskin). Although this phrase calls into mind an incident from the life of the author, where his mother Naomi Ginsberg, in an episode of her lifelong struggle with paranoid schizophrenia, beckoned the author to her bed, it can also be read as a reference to the oedipal



myth, where the oracle of Delphi predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother and he did just that.

The third and last reference to the Oedipus myth occurs in Part II of the poem, entitled “Moloch”: “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains an imagination?” (Ginsberg, 1956, 21) While the appearance of a sphinx need not necessarily entail a reference to classical mythology, there is only a single sphinx in Greek mythology and it is the question that is most crucial in interpreting Ginsberg’s subversion of the Oedipus myth. In *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist rose to the throne of Thebes after defeating the Sphinx, a mythological creature that is part bird, part woman and part feline, by solving her riddle. The episode of the Sphinx does not literally occur in Sophocles’ play, but is instead mentioned several times during Oedipus’ quarrel with the blind seer Tiresias, where the King emphasizes that he became King on his own merit by beating the Sphinx using only his mind. In the Oedipus myth, the solving of the sphinx’ riddle can be seen as a pivotal moment; since it is precisely then that Oedipus simultaneously becomes king and assures his own downfall.

The oedipal myth has been subject to many forms of analysis, a great number of which have been psycho-analytic and Freudian in nature. Although it might be tempting to link the references to a possible oedipal complex on the part of the author, this chapter will instead focus on another interpretation of the myth, that of Oedipus as a myth of the deprojection of fate and the prototypical western thinker and self-made man.

### **Oedipus as the first and quintessential “self-made man”**

In his book *Oedipus Philosopher* French literary critic Jean-Joseph Goux sees King Oedipus as an atypical hero, in his story, the normal rite of initiation whereby the hero kills the (female) monster, marries a princess and acquires a kingdom is reversed; instead of killing the mother-monster, he kills the father and takes his place in the kingdom, marrying his mother. Additionally, Oedipus’ life differs from the traditional lifecycle of a classical hero, in the sense that he tries to defy the prophecy that accompanied his birth, instead of trying to live up to it, like for example the hero Theseus:

The Oedipus story is not just one myth among others. It is a myth of passage – of historical passage. If Greek tragedy, considered in general, occupies the transitional position we have claimed for it, it is noteworthy that the tragedy of Oedipus specially occupies an exceptional position as the turning point [...]

For the tragedy of Oedipus is precisely, structurally if not explicitly, the tragedy of the deprojection of the gods. (Goux 199)

In other words, the tragedy of Oedipus is that of the deprojection of Fate. The deprojection of fate in Oedipus lies in the fact that Oedipus is first and foremost, focused on escaping his destiny and secondly, that he accedes to the throne of Thebes not by means of inheritance or a legal right to do so, but because he defeats the Sphinx by using his intelligence. That is, Oedipus' represents the American attempt to alter one's own fate.

In his essay "Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*," Jean-Pierre Vernant analyses the structure of the play, as well as the structure of Oedipus' character and the role his character has in the course of the play: "Oedipus, and Oedipus alone, leads the 'play'. Nothing except his stubborn will to unmask the guilty, the lofty idea he has of his burden, of his capacities, of his judgment (his *gnômé*) [...]." (Vernant 477) Oedipus, as is said, has quite an elevated idea of himself and his capacities, he prides himself on defeating the Sphinx without any help. Oedipus is a man of action, of decision and of conquering intelligence. (Vernant 479) During his confrontation with Tiresias, who, as a clairvoyant, secretly knows Oedipus' true identity, the King is eager to stress that all he has accomplished has been due to his own abilities and his power of intelligence (OR, 390-398) and that he defeated the Sphinx: "At the start Oedipus is the clairvoyant mind, the lucid intelligence, which, without anyone's aid, without the help of a god or an omen, knew how to guess, by the resources of his *gnômé* alone, the riddle of the Sphinx." (Vernant 479) In his confrontation with the Sphinx, Oedipus shows himself a hero of the mind in defeating the Sphinx by solving her riddle. He reduces the images of the monstrous (The riddle is: "What walks on four legs in the morning, 2 in at noon and 3 in the evening?") to one simple, familiar answer: man, after which the Sphinx throws herself in a ravine.

The term "clairvoyant" is used by Vernant in the rational sense of the word, meaning "clear of mind". In other words, finally, Oedipus is a man who ignores royalty, destiny, prophecy, fate and lineage and manufactures his own fate by using his brain. He is, as Vernant puts it, "the son of his deeds" (1978, 486) In *Oedipus Rex*, a new ideal of the self-conscious man is examined, the ideal of a man who believes he can understand and control the world by means of his own intelligence, unimpeded by tradition and religious authority. In other words, Oedipus is the embodiment of meritocracy or the original self-made man. In light of this, Oedipus can be seen as the embodiment of the American Dream. He has, before Sophocles' play starts unraveling, acceded to the throne of a foreign city and married his

queen by merit of his own intelligence. In seeming contrast to the Moirai, the Oedipus myth stresses merit and personal advancement and thus, the possibility of the American Dream. Oedipus escaped death as a young child and proceeded to pursue liberty from his destiny and happiness. Additionally, as Oedipus succeeded to become a successful, self-made man, the use of the Oedipus myth seems to affirm the possibility of that “better, richer and happier life” which Adams considers to be at the core of the American Dream. However, at the end of the play, Oedipus has merely fulfilled his destiny.

A second noteworthy element in Oedipus’ confrontation with the Sphinx is that the solution to the riddle is man himself. The subject of the riddle is represented, much like the Sphinx, as something strange and even monstrous. The fact that Oedipus quickly recognizes man in the riddle and thereby reduces the monstrous riddle (and, as a consequence, the monstrous Sphinx) to something human, a figment of the imagination, is mirrored in the riddle of Oedipus’ own identity. If Oedipus is indeed the quintessential self-made man, there is a striking parallelism between the characteristics that made him into that man and those which ultimately cause his downfall. Vernant characterizes Oedipus’ investigation of Laius’ murderer as “judiciary and scientific.” (Vernant 482) In other words, the investigation which is the main plot of Sophocles’ play is characterized by Oedipus’ rationality and stubbornness. “Nothing except his stubborn will to unmask the guilty, the lofty idea he has of his burden, of his capacities, of his judgment (his *gnômê*), his passionate desire to know the truth at any price – nothing obliges him to push the inquiry to its end.” (Vernant 477) Oedipus’ character is such that it is impossible for him not to find out the truth. The qualities which make him a self-made man or the embodiment of the American Dream are precisely those who lead him to his downfall. The solutions to the two riddles – the riddle of the Sphinx and the riddle of the murderer of Laius – are the same: it is man, it is the familiar, it is Oedipus himself.

In *Howl*, the Sphinx’ riddle is transformed into a riddle about the identity of the Sphinx: “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains an imagination?” (Ginsberg 21) This violence on the part of the sphinx is a reversal of what takes place in the Oedipus myth. Instead of slaying the sphinx by means of intellect or imagination, as Oedipus did, here, the sphinx destroys precisely that imagination. While in the classical myth, the power of his intellect defines Oedipus as a self-made man and causes him to rise to power and overcome his destiny (if only for a short while,) in the poem, the intellectual capacities of Ginsberg’s “best minds” are destroyed by the sphinx.

The question in the first verse of the second section is immediately followed by the answer: “Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money!” (Ginsberg 21) The answer to the question is, in the context of the poem, familiar. The elements which constitute the identity of the Sphinx or Moloch in Part II of *Howl* can be linked to a second embodiment of the American Dream; that of the Suburban Dream as well as to the increasing militarization and consumerism. The threatening and strange elements of the Sphinx: cement and aluminum can be dissolved into parts of the typical suburban home. However, the Sphinx (Moloch), in the question, is not literally lethal, but lethal to the brains and imagination, which coincides with Samuel’s image of a more homogeneous, less individualistic society. (2012, 57) Whereas in the original myth, the monstrous description is dissolved into a familiar one, man, the monstrous description of the Sphinx in *Howl* is followed by an even more threatening image of suburban hell. Here, the image of the Sphinx, which is, in the original myth, connected to the monstrosity of man, is now connected to the monstrosity of Suburbia. In *American Scream*, Jonah Raskin provides insight in Ginsberg’s idea of modern men and society:

What’s more, modern men were ‘a serious menace to society.’ As for society itself, Ginsberg argued, it was ‘one of complete anarchy, violent chaos, sado-masochistic barroom confusion and clinical hysteria.’ It seemed clear that the ‘body politic suffers from creeping death.’ America’s social problems were obvious in suburbia, where one could see the ‘fetishistic accumulation of mechanical knick-knacks.’ (Raskin 67)

The idea the modern American man is a menace to society coincides with the fact that it is Oedipus himself who causes his own downfall. It is Oedipus, with his wit and scientific reasoning, who will uncover the abomination that is the cause of the plague in Thebes. The abomination he uncovers is his own past and identity. Here, the self-made man is juxtaposed to suburban society and through the image of the Sphinx, both are rendered monstrous.

Precisely because of his characteristics, it is shown that even the first of men cannot escape his fate, or in his case, the prediction that was made by the oracle of Delphi before his birth:

Oedipus, he who for all is renowned (8), the first of men (33), noblest of men (46), the man of power, of intelligence, of honors, of wealth, finds himself the last, the most unhappy (1204-6, 1296 ff., 1396 ff.), and the worst of men

(1365), a sinner (1398), a festering foulness (1396), object of horror to his equals (1306), hated by the gods (1345), reduced to beggary and exile (455, 1518). (Vernant 479)

This sudden reversal of Oedipus' fate and image is at the core of the play's ambiguity. Vernant also comments on a Freudian interpretation of the play, which would suggest that the oedipal complex (competition with the father for the mother's love) is an essential part of a man's character. This interpretation becomes problematic after taking into account the issues of free will and fate:

Parricide and incest correspond neither to Oedipus' character [...] for which he might be responsible. If he kills his father, if he sleeps with his mother, it is not because, more or less obscurely, he hates the first of is in love with the second. [...] when he kills Laius, it is in legitimate defense against a stranger who struck him first; when he marries Jocasta, it is a marriage without affection. (Vernant, 1978, 481)

That is to say, the actions which ultimately lead to Oedipus' downfall (parricide and incest) are not the result of his character, thus, are not his responsibility. If they are not his responsibility, these occurrences must be the result of fate, as they coincide with the prediction made by the oracle. Furthermore, when he is asked how he could blind himself, Oedipus answers: "It was Apollo, Apollo, my friends, who has brought about these cruel disasters! And no others than my own miserable hand has blinded me." (OR 1329-1332) This excerpt captures the duality of responsibility in the play; on the one hand, Oedipus blames Apollo for what has happened to him, for his figurative blindness to his own identity. On the other hand, he seems almost eager to take responsibility for his literal blindness.

In other words, Oedipus, who could, at first, be seen as an intelligent, successful, self-made man, the embodiment of a better, happier and richer life, of the American Dream itself, is ultimately completely and utterly at the mercy of his destiny. The Oedipus myth does not contrast that of the Moirai, it complements it. The myth of Oedipus, instead, suggests that humans cannot escape their fate, but can achieve certain things within these limits. Richard Buxton stresses precisely these limits in his essay 'Blindness and Limits: Sophocles and the Logic of Myth', he explains that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* "Expresses the importance of the gulf between men and gods. [...] [But] at the same time as making his audience aware of human limits, Sophocles makes them aware also of what humans can achieve within and in spite of those limits." (Buxton 36) At the end of the tragedy, Oedipus blinds himself,

symbolically expunging the characteristics which led him to become king in the first place; his eyes. In blinding himself, he is no longer “clairvoyant” in the rational sense. His daughters Antigone and Ismene cover him in tears, because they can still see the abomination their father has become. Finally, he is exiled from Thebes, and goes to live in the mountains. In *Howl*, “blind” gets subverted into “bald”, but the subject (the unnamed “who”) is, like Oedipus, covered in blood and tears. (Ginsberg 19) The subject of the poem suffers a downfall similar to Oedipus’ fate and rejects the characteristics which make him a self-made man and, consequently, the American Dream.

The tragic-ironic quality of the myth is alluded to in the verse which states “With mother finally \*\*\*\*\*” (Ginsberg, XX). The wording of this section re-emphasizes not only the finality of the act, but also the inevitability of the prophecy. In other words, it constitutes an extra emphasis on fate. Additionally, the fact that the vulgar word in question is censored here, is another example of Ginsberg’s mix of myth and vulgarity to create a sense of irony. By auto-censoring the profanity, he paradoxically emphasizes the fact that a four letter word is used in a context where it does not belong.

In light of Linda Hutcheon’s theory of parody, the point of critical difference in Ginsberg’s re-adaptation of Oedipus as a whole is the order in which the references occur. The order of the references in the poem is a last point of critical difference in Ginsberg’s parody of the Oedipus myth. Firstly, there is a distortion of Oedipus’ blindness and fleeing, followed by the reference to the mother and lastly there is the sphinx. This is, in terms of the chronology of the story, a complete inversion of the order in which the original myth progresses. By literally putting the outcome of the story first, the poem foregrounds the inevitability of the events. However, the critical difference does, in this case, not go against the perceived meaning of the “original” myth, but re-emphasizes that one cannot escape his destiny.

In conclusion, the reference to Oedipus, the so-called quintessential self-made man, who represents the embodiment of the American Dream in *Howl*, ends up at the mercy of fate. Furthermore, he rejects his rational, clairvoyant nature by blinding himself. The Sphinx, finally, refers to the double nature of the self-made man. The appearance of the Sphinx, the blindness, blood, tears and the incestuous relationship with the mother in *Howl* are indicative of respectively, the downfall of human kind by their own doing, criticism of the homogenous society created by the Suburban Dream and a rejection of the rational and the inevitability of

destiny. Combined, these elements form another negation of the possibility of the American Dream by means of mythological reference.

## 7. Conclusion

The social impact of Ginsberg's debut poem has been discussed from the moment it was introduced to the public at the Six Gallery reading in 1955. The experimentation and breaking of taboos on the part of Ginsberg's Beat Generation stood in stark contrast with the commercial logic of the "tranquillized fifties." As part of the Beat movement, which was a counter-cultural group of protesters contesting the ruling American traditions, values and classes, Ginsberg criticizes his contemporary society by means of mythological parody.

In the 1950s, the socio-cultural circumstances in United States were marked by the imperialism and fight for democracy which characterized the Cold War. It was a time of progress, apparent in military and industrial technology and in increasing capitalism and consumerism. The homogeneity of mainstream culture, which stressed the nuclear family as the ideal way of life and a home in suburbia as the lifestyle one should aspire to, was by television. Most citizens were comfortable and content, and if such feelings were absent, they could always be remedied by means of psychopharmaceuticals and the acquisition of more material goods. An important aspect of that culture was the American Dream and the notion of the self-made man. Present from the age of colonization, the idea that one could and should be in control of one's own destiny was deeply embedded in American society. In the 1950s, however, as Cullen and Samuel note in their respective works on the American Dream, the Dream was given a materialist spin. The equality of opportunity which characterized the American Dream became increasingly interpreted as equality of possession and the pursuit of happiness was transformed into the pursuit of material goods and social conformity. In *Howl*, these developments are criticized by means of the parody of mythological themes and structure.

In his work on myth, Northrop Frye has suggested that the use of myth is almost inevitable for those poets wishing to express the origins, desires or destiny of humanity. Expressing his discontent with the general condition of his country, Ginsberg has employed myth. Focusing on the psychological function of myth, Lilian Feder's work on the re-appropriation of myth in modern poetry makes an interpretation of the use of myth as social commentary possible. Twentieth century transforms classical tales into a modern language, used to express their own struggles, specific to the world which surrounds them. Myth signals a return to what is perceived as primitive and touching upon unconscious qualities which are associated with it. According to T.S. Eliot's theory on the mythic method, the parodic



superposition of a mythical structure in *Howl* can be interpreted as an ordering principle, used to universalize and make sense of the vast and confusing landscape of the modern world.

In *Howl's* parody re-interpretation of these myths, Hutcheon's theory of parody puts forward repetition with critical difference, irony and trans-contextualization as parody's main formal mechanisms. In *Howl*, the trans-contextualization of the myth exists on different levels. Apart from a broader, historical re-contextualization, these myths are no longer used in a religious or ritual context, but rather, are used in the light of Williams' ideas of universal expressions of certain properties of human consciousness. Additionally, the myths are trans-contextualized in the sense that they are juxtaposed to elements which lack universal value, but are personal, anecdotal or even vulgar. In this last way, *Howl's* re-contextualization of myth may be interpreted as ironic. Although intra-mural, parody is not without social or ideological potential and in light of Hutcheon's theory, I have examined the socio-cultural criticism which may be derived from the use of myth in *Howl*.

The pluralist nature of parody can be used to challenge aesthetic notions as well as homogenizing social notions of the monolithic in culture. Constituting a break with past literary forms, using and abusing canonical forms and themes, I have interpreted *Howl* as critical of the monolithic notions of the author's contemporary society. In light of these theories, I have examined four elements in Ginsberg's poem; the overall structure of the poem, which coincides with the mythical archetype of the heroic journey, three textual references to the Oedipus myth, a parody of the myth of the three fates and a reference to the mythical figure of Adonis.

With to the prototype of the heroic journey into the underworld and back as its underlying structure, *Howl* simultaneously presents itself as a descent into the urban underworld and into the unconscious of the poet-speaker. *Howl* progresses from the anonymous sufferings of the "who"-character, towards a description and denunciation of modern society as "Moloch", and the personal suffering of Carl Solomon is described. In part I, Ginsberg's "best minds of my generation" are depicted as alienated in their contemporary society. This part of the poem is characterized by the desperation and suffering of the characters, which undergo Orphic ordeals in their urban hell. In part II, modern society is embodied by Moloch, an ancient Semitic god to whom children are sacrificed. Ginsberg uses the figure of Moloch as a social and political allegory, as others have done so before him. In *Howl*, he is used as an allegory for capitalism and industrialized civilization. The ultimate

low-point of the poem occurs in part III, with the description of Carl Solomon's life in Rockland State Hospital. In this part, there is a strong self-identification of the poet-speaker with Solomon. In the "Footnote to Howl," the cathartic experience of the katabasis is exemplified in the poem's declaring everything "holy." In the footnote, humanity, which suffered in general and in specific individuals throughout the poem, is exonerated.

On a thematic level, the mythological references in *Howl* distort or parody their classical or biblical counterpart. When examined with the theory of parody in mind, they can be construed as to constitute socio-cultural criticism. *Howl*'s first parody of classical myth on a thematic level, is one to the Moirai, the three Goddesses of Fate. As a whole, the parody points to the classical idea of predestination, which is diametrically opposed to America's cultural Holy Grail: the American Dream. Individually, the three shrews are converted into emblems of the monolithic society: heterosexuality and consumerism. Thus, the Moirai can be interpreted as representing that version of the American Dream which was prevalent in the fifties: the aspiration to a life filled with material possessions. And, seeing as the shrews also represent the monolithic, middle class suburban life of the fifties, Ginsberg's best minds have lost their homosexual "loveboys" to the shrews of money, heterosexuality and general normativity. Additionally, I have interpreted these references as indicating that these notions are detrimental to creative and intellectual thought.

Further along in the first part of the poem, a second reference to mythology is made, this time to the myth of Adonis. In the verse, Neal Cassady, a friend and lover of the author's, who is stealing cars and exhibiting loose behavior, is cast in the role of the tragic figure of Adonis. By juxtaposing Cassady, a degenerate figure, with the figure of Adonis, irony is used as a parodic rhetorical strategy. The use and abuse of the myth emphasizes the sexual aspect and thus re-appropriates the right to celebrate love outside of the then prevalent nuclear family. Additionally, the personal connection between the author and Cassady can be seen as a distortion of one component of the Adonis myth; the mythical and traditional heterosexual love-relationship is exchanged for a sexual relationship between two men. In the middle of the Lavender Scare, the poem calls attention to the conventions of its age and moves away from the homogeneous conception of love. In its entirety, the verse attempts to re-appropriate the monolithic, heterosexual notions of Ginsberg's contemporary society by means of mythical parody.

Lastly, there are three references to the myth of King Oedipus throughout Ginsberg's *Howl*: a reference to Oedipus' marriage to his mother, to the sphinx he defeats before he becomes king of Thebes and to his ultimate downfall. In the classical myth, the oracle of Delphi predicted that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, after which Oedipus does everything in his power to avoid his fate. He kills the sphinx and becomes king of Thebes using only his intellect. At the end of the story, however, it becomes tragically clear that Oedipus, in spite of his best efforts, has fulfilled his destiny, after which he blinds himself and flees the city. According to, amongst others, Jean-Pierre Vernant, the myth can be interpreted as a myth of the deprojection of fate and Oedipus, in this case, can be seen as the prototypical western thinker and self-made man.

The first point of critical difference between the parody of the myth in the poem and its classical counterpart, is the reversal of the order of the events. By putting the outcome first, the poem's parody of the Oedipus myth foregrounds the inevitability of the events and the impossibility of escaping one's fate. In this way, the inclusion of the Oedipus myth does not contrast that of the Moirai, it complements it. Additionally, in the reference to the mother, the wording of the verse re-emphasizes not only the finality of the act, but also the inevitability of the prophecy, and thus, the impossibility of the American Dream. Lastly, the reference to the Sphinx inverts Oedipus' intellectual victory over the monster. While in the classical myth, the power of his mind defines Oedipus as a self-made man, in the poem, the intellectual capacities of Ginsberg's "best minds" are destroyed by the Sphinx. In Part II of the *Howl*, the Sphinx is called "Moloch" and represents the embodiment of America's increasing militarization, its consumerism and the monstrosity of Suburbia.

Shaped by its socio-cultural environment, 1950s America, *Howl* touches upon subjects such as homosexuality, America's increasing consumerist spirit and militarization. Through the parodic reinterpretation of myth, the poem provides the reader with criticism of its contemporary society.

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