

Utrecht University
English Language and Culture
BA Thesis

Howl for Different Times

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

Matthijs van Eijzeren

5554543

Supervisor: Dr. M.M. You

Second Reader: Dr. J. Verheul

July 2019

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	5
1. Allen Ginsberg, the Beat Generation and <i>Howl</i>	6
1.1 The Beat Generation.....	6
1.2 The Birth of <i>Howl</i>	8
1.3 <i>Howl</i> as a Social Commentary and the Obscenity Trial	10
2. <i>Howl</i> and Its Relationship to Blues Music	13
2.1 The Roots of Blues	13
2.2 Kinship to <i>Howl</i>	14
2.3 <i>Howl</i> in Modern Blues	15
3. <i>Howl</i> and Charles Bukowski	20
3.1 Charles Bukowski & <i>Women</i>	20
3.2 Bathos After Whitman.....	21
3.3 Bathos in <i>Women</i> and Parallels to <i>Howl</i>	22
4. <i>Howl</i> and George Carlin.....	25
4.1 “Modern Man” and <i>Howl</i> as Social Commentary	25
4.2 Warnings from the “Modern Man”	25
4.3 Critical Parallels	28
5. Conclusion.....	29
Works Cited.....	31

Abstract

This thesis investigates the cultural impact Beat writer Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* has had on U.S. society. After a short biography of the writer, as well as an introduction to the Beat Generation, this thesis examines how *Howl* came into existence. Its inspiration stemming from the long saxophone lines of jazz, *Howl* can be seen as a descendant of the old blues. This traditionally African-American music style was born out of "negro spirituals" and work songs, thus having its historical roots within the context of slavery. It is traditionally associated with the outsider, the cultural underground, which is also true for *Howl*. After its obscenity trial, *Howl* has paved the way for more underground voices to arise.

Obviously stemming from the old blues, examples of modern blues can be seen as owing to, or at least paralleling, Ginsberg as well. In a close reading of Beth Hart's 2012 song "Ugliest House on the Block," we will see that the song shares several significant characteristics with *Howl*. Affinity can be identified in their choice of themes, as well as with both works being a genuine voice of the cultural outside directed towards the mainstream. Next, a literary affinity is demonstrated on the basis of Charles Bukowski's *Women*, another successful work from the social outside. *Women's* open treatment of the protagonist's relationships with women, alcohol and drugs gives a voice to addicts and a look into life with addiction. *Howl* and *Women* are relatable, as both works attain their function as social critique through bathos and openness. Finally, twenty-first-century social commentary can be seen as akin to *Howl* as well, as demonstrated with George Carlin's poetic stand-up act "Modern Man." Both works comically but firmly warn society of its contemporary dangers.

The Beat Generation, with *Howl* being a key work, helped open up the U.S. cultural climate and paved the way for many new expressions of social commentary and voices from the cultural outside. Through bringing *Howl* into conversation with more recent American music, literature and stand-up comedy, this thesis aims to show how, across genres and media,

the concept of “outside,” or counter-culture, has become a progressively mainstream phenomenon and how this has led to more social change.

Introduction

When America was in the grips of the Cold War and society was lamented by some for its “blandness, conformity and lack of serious social and cultural purpose in middle-class life,” the Beat Generation rose (Halberstam 893). Allen Ginsberg’s landmark poem *Howl* (1956) has gone into history as a key work in Beat Generation literature. The Beat Generation is known for rebelling against conformity, experimentation with drugs, spirituality, sexuality, and its rejection of traditional values. *Howl* treats these issues openly.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the impact *Howl* has had on modern expressions of social dissatisfaction and giving a voice to the social margin. The term social dissatisfaction will be a central theme within the present thesis. We will define it as a general unhappiness with the direction of Cold War-era societal development; relating to industrialization, capitalism and modernization, which was seen, by Ginsberg, as a dangerous social climate that “confounds and suppresses individual experience and forces the individual to consider himself mad if he does not reject his deepest senses” (Schumacher 206). Another central theme will be the voice for the social margin. This thesis will demonstrate how *Howl* has paved the way for the underside of U.S. culture to be heard by the public.

In order to get a good understanding of *Howl* and its social significance, we firstly should see how *Howl* came into existence and what was happening in Ginsberg’s life at the time of writing it. After arguing that Ginsberg had found inspiration for the format he used in *Howl* not only from other writers, but also from the long saxophone lines he heard in jazz clubs (Schumacher 201), I want to explore what parallels can be drawn between the poem and (black) music, the old Delta blues, in voicing the dissatisfactions of the social margin.

In the second chapter, parallels between *Howl* and contemporary blues music will be analyzed. We will see that the blues have developed from a song of the oppressed to the music of the counterculture; a voice for the U.S. counterculture, like *Howl*. We will see Beat

elements in contemporary blues in a close reading of the song “Ugliest House on the Block” by Beth Hart from her album *Bang Bang Boom Boom* (2012).

The third chapter traces the lineage of *Howl* further down the literary genealogy to Charles Bukowski, who is often praised as the literary voice for the down-and-out. His literary career started blooming in the twilight of the Beat Generation and can be seen as owing to the Beats, as we will argue on the basis of his famous 1978 novel *Women*.

Finally, I will analyze another form of modern social criticism in a poetic form and its parallels with Ginsberg’s *Howl*: stand-up comedian and social satirist George Carlin’s rapid-fire social satire “Modern Man” (2006). It will become clear that in the voicing of social dissatisfaction, “Modern Man” can be seen as sharing characteristics with *Howl*.

1. Allen Ginsberg, the Beat Generation and *Howl*

1.1 The Beat Generation

The Beat Generation, as America’s first major Cold War literary movement, referred to “a group of friends who had worked together on poetry, prose, and cultural conscience from the mid-forties until the term became popular nationally in the late fifties” (Belletto 3). One of these friends and at their forefront was Ginsberg. Other big names within the Beat Generation are: Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, William S. Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Peter Orlovsky.

The Beats’ work treated themes surrounding American culture and politics in the post-war era, as well as themes like sexuality or psychedelic experience (Carlisle). The term ‘Beat’ was supposedly coined by Kerouac in November 1948. Referring to writer and drug addict Herbert Huncke, Kerouac wrote in his journal that Huncke was “still alive, and strange, and wise, and beat” (Lawlor 24). Gradually, the term “Beat” has come to be associated with the following:

According to [writer John Clellon, ed.] Holmes, for Kerouac Beat referred to “furtiveness” and “a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world.” [...] Holmes assesses the factors that formed the Beats: “Brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war,” the Beats had no faith in “collectivity” [...]. Even with the war over, the Beats [...] found that the “peace they inherited was only as secure as the next headline” (Lawlor, 24).

The Beats were essentially a group of idealists who had problems of their own with the American culture of their time and the direction it was headed in. “They [The Beat Generation, ed.] were the first to protest what they considered to be the blandness, conformity, and lack of serious social and cultural purpose in middle-class life in America” (Halberstam 893). Their crusade against the “prison” they considered suburbia to be (Halberstam 894), led them to explore their freedom and discontent through travelling and their writing. Most of this discontent was, in essence, with the capitalist and industrialized 1950’s American society, against which they rebelled furiously (Schumacher 206). *Howl* is no exception.

The emergence of the Beat movement meant that American counterculture suddenly had a voice of its own. The societal margins were able to be heard by the mainstream thanks to the widespread coverage of the obscenity trial surrounding *Howl*. The counterculture’s problems, experiences and delights were now written about comprehensively and allowed to be published.

1.2 The Birth of *Howl*

The time preceding the writing of *Howl* was a dark one for Ginsberg. He had moved to San Francisco in 1954 and his newfound occupation as a fulltime poet was at a low, as he suffered from a severe writer's block and depression (Schumacher 199). This formed a vicious cycle. Combined with money problems that came along due to his lack of work, Ginsberg had a very challenging time, both professionally and personally. Writing *Howl* was actually a cathartic experience for Ginsberg; he wrote free of inhibition by fears, embarrassment and expectations (Schumacher 203). He opened up his soul to the paper and simply wrote what was on his idealistic mind at the time when he felt America needed to wake up:

I thought I wouldn't write a poem, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. (Ginsberg, "Notes" 415).

Thus, in 1956, Ginsberg's famous poem *Howl* was born. This lengthy and open-hearted poem relayed experiences and stories from his Beat friends and at the same time, explicitly placed Ginsberg very much in their midst. The opening, "*I saw the best minds of my generation...*" clearly places Ginsberg directly among his 'outlaw' friends, as the subject and actively involved witness. By opening in this way, Ginsberg discards a safe writers' distance from the events – a rebellious statement on its own.

Although he used only the first-person singular twice in the first draft of the eighty-seven-line poem [...], Ginsberg's sympathetic treatment of the details of his friends' lives placed him squarely in their midst, rather than off to the side as an impartial

observer. Given the literary traditions of the day, it was a courageous stance for him to take, especially when he made his eventual decision to publish the work. It was one matter for poets of the Academy to look upon their subjects with a lofty or detached sense of pity, quite another to identify openly with them. [...], in *Howl*, by placing himself among his characters, Ginsberg did not afford himself convenient removal from the more troubling aspects of his characters. (Schumacher 202).

As becomes clear from the passage above, most writers at the time would have been hesitant to express their own involvement with the edgy themes of such a blatant counterculture the way Ginsberg had done in *Howl*. He did not shy away from explicitly treating drugs, poverty, (his) homosexuality and mental illness, which were mostly taboo themes rarely touched upon in such openness by other writers at the time.

Simultaneously, *Howl* was a heartening poem addressed to his friend Carl Solomon, whose stay in the Pilgrim State Psychiatric Center had Ginsberg deeply worried (Schumacher 196). Mental illness and psychiatric hospitals were familiar themes for Ginsberg, as his mother, tormented by mental illness for most of her life, had been institutionalized in psychiatric centers (Schumacher 113) and lobotomized (89). He had himself been admitted into a mental hospital, where he and Carl Solomon met and became friends. Solomon's lobotomy caused Ginsberg great fear and stress, as he had never quite overcome his sense of guilt from signing the documents allowing the doctors to lobotomize his mother (Schumacher 89).

Equally, *Howl* was a celebration of freedom of thought and speech. It shed a light on matters that were often left undiscussed or simply unknown. In its totality of three sizeable parts, *Howl* exudes social dissatisfaction, but also has undertones of hope and shows a deep love for Ginsberg's consorts and their "Beat" lifestyle. *Howl* gives them a direct and honest

voice towards the public: “[i]t eschewed the metaphorical, refused to side-step the unsayable, and confronted in a direct, not to say courageous, fashion the crisis facing the outsider in America” (Warner 182).

1.3 *Howl* as a Social Commentary and the Obscenity Trial

Such literary freedom was not self-evident at that time, however. Before finding its way to the public eye, *Howl* was subject to a grand, nationally covered obscenity trial in August 1957 (Schumacher 254). The buildup to this trial began on 21 May 1957, with the police looking to arrest Lawrence Ferlinghetti, founder of the publishing company City Lights Bookstore, which published Ginsberg’s poetry collection *Howl and Other Poems*. At that time, however, Ferlinghetti was not present at the bookstore. Instead, they arrested the bookstore clerk, Shigeyoshi Murao, and issued the warrant for Ferlinghetti’s arrest, stating he did “willfully and lewdly print, publish, and sell obscene and indecent writings, papers, and books, to wit: *Howl and Other Poems*” (Schumacher 254).

The subsequent obscenity trial mainly focused on the explicitly (homo)sexual nature of *Howl* (Schumacher 261). A key example of such a “taboo” passage is the following: “[...] who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy.” In this passage, Ginsberg parallels religious vocabulary – “*saintly* motorcyclists” – with homosexuality, something that was considered unconstitutional and highly offensive in 1950’s America. *Howl*’s controversy only bolstered its notoriety and sales (Schumacher 255). With *Howl* came a possibility to set an important cultural precedent (Schumacher 255). Eventually, the trial was ruled in favor of *Howl* (263-4), which led to the Judge offering a twelve-point guideline for the prosecution in future trials, in which he outlines the conditions which do or do not make a work obscene (263-4). This victory was an important moment in Beat and ultimately U.S. history.

The poem [...] gave the Beat writers an opportunity to present and explain their philosophies nationally and globally. The impact of those ideas on cultural and sub-cultural life in the next 15 years were huge, informing the growing folk revival and Civil Rights movement, the rock revolution of the mid-1960s, the rise of the hippies and the anti-Vietnam War struggles. Ginsberg's ideologies and his active presence formed a cornerstone to the counterculture in the U.S. and in Europe. (Warner 198-99).

Howl's explicit treatment of taboo subjects and unprecedented embrace of a previously unspoken and controversial part of U.S. society, as well as its rebellious free-verse-structure intrinsically make it a piece of social commentary. The reason the court case was ruled in favor of *Howl* is that the nine defense witnesses, all well-respected literary authorities, testified in favor of the literary value of *Howl* (Schumacher 262) and underlined its value as a social commentary. They placed it within its social and historical context (262) and concluded that it did have redeeming social value (263-4).

Howl is [...] a celebration of that listless, anxious, wandering America which seeks new truths, fresh hope, through music, drugs, spirituality and travel, away from the threat of arrest, of surveillance, of banishment. The work is an eclectic gathering of the ancient and the modern, which gives a poem that was the height of contemporary commentary in 1955, a timeless durability.' (Warner 189-190)

In a time when *Playboy* magazine was still in its infancy and battling obscenity charges as well (Schumacher 259), *Howl's* initial reception was – expectably – mixed, due to its

language and tone (258). However, a few influential literary reviewers praised *Howl* in large outlets such as *The Saturday Review*, *The Nation*, and *Life* (262) and predicted Ginsberg “would be one of the poetry forces of the future” (258).

Being brazenly explicit about the use of drugs, the practice of homosexuality, Eastern religions, and psychedelic experience, as well as life inside psychiatric hospitals and the social underground, *Howl* was a push towards modernization in an America that was, perhaps unbeknownst to itself, on the verge of cultural renewal. It paved the way for many more voices to speak up freely about their place in and problems with U.S. society, culture and their hopes and dreams. The following chapter analyzes how *Howl* can be considered as offspring of the old blues and jazz in that respect.

2. *Howl* and Its Relationship to Blues Music

Literary inspiration did not always come from other writing. Music had always played a significant part in Ginsberg's life. As he grew up, he would often hear his mother sing, accompanying herself with the piano or the mandolin (Schumacher 4). The social group that Ginsberg was with frequented music venues to listen to jazz. Through this music, African-American culture was a key source of inspiration behind Ginsberg's approach to writing *Howl*; listening to jazz, Ginsberg would be carried away by the long lines of saxophone, which eventually inspired him to let go of short forms in his poetry and let his imagination wander equally freely all the way across the page (Schumacher 201). In this chapter, we will explore the link between the old blues music, as a song of the counterculture, and *Howl*, as a poetic social commentary central to a new counterculture in U.S. history.

2.1 The Roots of Blues

Musicmap (Crauwels), a comprehensive, chronological genealogy and history of many different music genres and styles, shows us the roots of blues and jazz music. The old "negro spirituals" and work songs are direct ancestors of the country or folk blues, the oldest and most basic but essential variety of the blues, which influenced the emergence of early New Orleans and Dixieland jazz (Crauwels). Jazz is highly influenced by the blues; they share the same structures and cultural background, ultimately tracing back to the musical escape from the plights of slavery in the South.

For the enslaved people, music provided a source for a much-needed relief and an outlet for their sorrow and pain, as illustrated by formerly enslaved Frederick Douglass in his autobiography *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: "[s]laves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears" (Douglass 19). The

inhumane conditions under which they were forced to live and work on a daily basis were the foundation of their 'blue' music, originally work songs and "negro spirituals". In line with this, we can reason that the blues were born on the fields out of a sheer necessity to escape and bring awareness to serious issues, and not just a simple need for entertainment. However, white America first associated the blues with "anything vice;" they saw it as the "song of outlaws and criminals" (Crauwels). It was, in fact, an outlet; a release for the bitter emotions, the pain and the hardship endured by those who were enslaved. The blues have to be regarded as a voice for people in the social margin: "the poor, blind, unfortunate and particularly, the black" (Crauwels). We can thus argue that the blues have inherently always emphasized a core message, rather than solely the auditory and emotional experience of listening; shedding light on problematic matters, with an intention to resolve them, through their medium: music, similar to what the Beats did with their literature.

2.2 Kinship to *Howl*

Going back to Ginsberg and the Beats, we can now see how black music found its way into the lives and works of relatively well-off, free, white, twentieth-century writers. This music speaks to the heart, because that is where it is played from with raw honesty (Crauwels). The free and poetic style of this music resonated with Ginsberg and provided direct and deep inspiration for *Howl* (Schumacher 201 & 207).

As the oppressed and poor African-Americans found a voice through the spirituals and work songs and eventually the blues and jazz, so did Ginsberg in his poetry. His *Howl* can be seen as a written descendent of the old blues music: "music for the outlaws and criminals." Both can be perceived as "the sound of the howling underdog" (Crauwels), which can also be said about the Beat generation in general. They all gave a voice to a part of society that was generally looked-down upon and avoided: the social margin, the underside of U.S. society.

After the Beat Generation, there was no longer a veil of innocence that safeguarded the writer – who was in the Beats’ case certainly a central figure in the social margin – from the scrutiny of ‘higher’ society. Thanks to the precedent set by the *Howl* obscenity trial, writers can rely on more leniency when it comes to defining obscenity in choosing their subject matter and treatment of it. Everybody could now read for themselves raw, critical accounts from the underground, which had become more mainstream thanks to the *Beats*, but were not started by them.

2.3 *Howl* in Modern Blues

This section analyzes parallels with *Howl* found in an example of modern blues with L.A. blues artist Beth Hart’s song “the Ugliest House on the Block,” from her album *Bang Bang Boom Boom* (2012). In this song, Hart makes various explicit references to outsider culture and drug use and does not safely distance herself from it, similar to Ginsberg in *Howl*. In this respect, it can be seen as a descendant of not only the old country blues, but also the Beat Generation. It is a song that gives the listener a glimpse into the reality of life on the edge of society and observes no secrecy.

The opening line, “If it’s not one thing, it’s another / flies buzzing around as big as hawks” signifies an environment with many problems: flies as big as hawks. “I’m not just screaming for my supper / I live in the ugliest house on the block” is a clear reference to poverty; to have to scream for one’s supper is definitely not a desirable condition, whereas supper, for most, is the most relaxing and extensive meal of the day. To live in an ugly house is also a sign of poverty. Similar to Ginsberg’s opening “I saw the best minds...,” Hart does not observe a “convenient removal from the more troubling aspects of her characters” (Schumacher 202); her use of the first-person perspective not only places her – a professional

artist – squarely in this countercultural environment, it also makes the story more striking for the listener.

“I’ve been trying to make a little money / if you got [sic] the honey, I got [sic] the pot.” This line, the opening line of the second verse, is clearly set in situation of poverty and dependence on illegal activities of obtaining money. To receive the honey in return for the pot means to receive money for marijuana; in this case “honey” is slang for money, while “pot” is slang for marijuana. “I’m tired of hearing you’re so lonely” states the unwillingness of the writer to hear about other peoples’ problems, as she has enough of her own to worry about. The setting begs a comparison with *Howl’s* perilous poverty-ridden setting. Ginsberg wrote about his peers, for instance, “who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz.” Ginsberg comments on their poor, small and dark housing with cold water and their use of drugs which take them away from their problems for a while – “contemplating jazz.” Another relevant line from *Howl* is “who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,” indicating, yet again, the poor quality of housing for the poor and the fact that they had to burn anything possible for some heat. “[W]ho walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steam-heat and opium” again touches upon the common drug use and the raggedness of such an existence – strolling along with bloody shoes, looking for a fix of opium.

“Bidding on a dead horse for filler” is a reference to the expression “flogging” or “beating a dead horse”, meaning wasting time and effort trying to achieve an impossible goal, signifying the dead-end nature of life on the social margin. This is continued with: “I don’t go well with the livestock,” which likely means to say the writer has trouble with most other

conformed and well-adjusted people in general society. A parallel can be drawn here, with *Howl's* open treatment of mental illness:

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy, and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia (*Howl*).

Ginsberg clearly protests the taboo that covers mental illness and the dubious and dangerous practices of psychiatric centers: lobotomies and other dangerous forms of therapy, which are listed there for all to see.

“These are serious times, there are serial killers / next to the ugliest house on the block” serves to further illustrate the harsh conditions of life on skid row, where people and life can genuinely be dangerous. “Entertainment’s where it’s at / reality reruns on crack” is a colorful illustration of the hopeless, repetitive and drug-fueled search for relief (entertainment, reality reruns) from the dire conditions endured on a daily basis by people who live in criminal and poor environments. Crack is a slang term for the hard drug crack cocaine – a smokable form of cocaine –, which offers an intense and dangerous high to its users. The “reality reruns” illustrate the repetitive nature of the trouble (“reruns”) and the fact that this part of society is second-in-line to the ‘rest’ of society, who are able watch their reality shows on their free evenings on primetime T.V., whereas the poorer fractions of society sit through the endless daytime reruns of reality T.V. – which presents a dream reality for them – for entertainment. “[W]ho wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts” indicates a similarly

mournful reality; one of people repeatedly wandering around, and when they finally leave, no-one misses them, because they are “merely” outcasts.

Hart’s “I would run but I hate the cops / sirens roar and guns go pop” is a further illustration of the tormented life on the edge of society; the relationship with the law (cops) is usually brittle, if it even exists. “Sirens roar and guns go pop” is more than a familiarity on skid row, this line illustrates the ever-looming presence of criminality on skid row. For the mainstream part of society, the police can be seen as keepers of safety and peace, whereas to the people who live on the other side of the societal coin – those to whom the guns and sirens come – see them as potentially dangerous and disruptive to their daily lives. Ginsberg’s Beat friends were not on much better terms with the police: “who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars [sic] for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication.” This, too, shows the troubles between the “outside” and the law, as the police is shown to harass the subjects, who had not committed any substantial crimes.

“You can’t be something that you’re not” signifies the hopelessness felt by many in the social margin. The next line is an admission “When I go lay my head down / I want a man to stay around / who’ll live in this ugly house.” This can be seen as a cry for safety and continuity, as well as an acknowledgement to the dangers of living alone on the edge of society. To have a man around who is willing to live in this ugly house – the dangerous and ugly conditions of life on the social margin – would be a great relief and would seize the sensation of loneliness and hopelessness felt by the speaker. Love and safety, or the lack of these, is also treated by Ginsberg, who had written *Howl* for his friend in the first place: “ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you’re really in the total animal soup of time.” Solidarity and companionship are important for everyone. No passage indicates such loving solidarity more than *Howl*’s ending: “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.”

Hart’s song very directly addresses various issues that face the outsiders of U.S. society. The blues is a vehicle for Hart’s message that life on society’s edge is dangerous, repetitive and sometimes hopeless. Hart, like the old blues players and Ginsberg in *Howl*, protests against a status quo in U.S. society and in doing so draws more attention to the issues at play. Both works can be seen as central to outside culture, and as social commentary, bringing more public awareness to the – otherwise unknown – plights of their peers.

3. *Howl* and Charles Bukowski

3.1 Charles Bukowski & *Women*

Equally, the case can be made for the legacy of Beat writing in later literature, with the example of Los Angeles-based German-American writer Charles Bukowski (16 August 1920 – 9 March 1994). In 1986, *Time* Magazine named Bukowski “the poet laureate of American lowlife.” In this chapter we will look at his most famous novel, *Women* (1978), described on its cover by the *LA Times* as “a riotous and uncompromisingly vivid account of life lived on the edge.” Even though Bukowski is of the same generation as the Beats, Bukowski not classifying himself as a Beat writer; thus, this chapter looks further into what parallels can be found specifically between Bukowski and Ginsberg (Adams). In the introduction to *Women*, Bukowski’s biographer Barry Miles informs us of the relationship, or lack thereof, between Bukowski and the Beat Generation.

Bukowski’s life ran parallel to the Beat Generation: he was of the same age group but came from a very different background and though there were a few Beats in Los Angeles [...], he knew nothing about it. Nonetheless, he is often grouped with the Beats because of his tough, uncompromising attitudes: no subject matter is taboo, no matter how embarrassing, indelicate, or personal. (Miles VI).

Since Bukowski’s literary career hadn’t begun to fully flourish until his later years, he wrote most of his published and better-known works in the wake of the *Howl* obscenity trial.

Despite Bukowski treating “the traditional American male view of women and sex with considerable irony, [...] it wasn’t enough to prevent the book from being criticized by feminists and also by many of the women who are portrayed within it [...]” (Miles IX). This bold approach to writing about such a delicate theme is comparable with a Beat attitude of

writing; being open, honest and relentlessly rebellious. In light of Miles' citation (VI), I think it is worth considering whether such raw and vivid literary work as Bukowski's could have been published without the outcome of *Howl's* obscenity trial, which we saw refined the boundaries of defining "obscenity."

3.2 Bathos After Whitman

Next, there is the use of *bathos*, which is "the laughable result of straining for a sublime ideal but tripping over hard reality into the absurd" (Vogel 389), through that process "couching an abiding disillusionment in unfunny comedy" (Vogel 396). "Such effort will cause the work to glare and thus surprise and delight readers by the 'bringing down of elevated thought to the level of their own ideas'" (Vogel 395). In his article "The Dream and the Dystopia: Bathetic Humor, the Beats, and Walt Whitman's Idealism," Andrew Vogel writes about bathos and how it applies to the works of the Beat Generation in relation to their literary ancestor Walt Whitman. Whitman had a "vision of a loving democracy" (Vogel 391). He "articulated an inspired and compelling vision of a nation defined by honesty and acceptance" (Vogel 393), an ideal the Beats shared with him. Through these shared ideals, the Beats find in their writing, that "against the *Whitmanic* world they desire, the reality of their lives is hellish" (Vogel 397), which is how their bathetic effect is attained.

Bathos can be seen in *Howl* as well as *Women*. It does not only apply to certain passages of both works, but I would argue, to the works as whole. Moreover, the use of bathos is how their function as social critique is attained in the first place. In the shadow of Walt Whitman's idealism, the Beats wrote their crude social criticism. Their absurd, low-culture writings about very real and everyday (social) problems and ideals – both those failed and kept – are the bathos at which they arrived after Whitman's idealistic visions for American society.

An example from *Howl* that illustrates absurdness-clad social criticism is “[w]ho coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology.” This ominous passage speaks of unhealthy conditions endured by those who have fallen outside of the American Dream, hence the reference to tuberculosis in coughing under a “tubercular sky,” in a sixth-floor apartment in a tough neighborhood. The absurdness of this section automatically draws more of the readers’ attention to the content, thus making readers aware of the actual conditions of life on the fringe of society. “Who faded out in vast sordid movies, were shifted in dreams, woke on a sudden Manhattan and picked themselves up out of basements hungover with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices” (*Howl*). This is another example of the reader being brought along, fading out into deep dreams and then suddenly being brought down to the hungover, basement-based reality of the Beat Generation. Once more, Ginsberg’s subjects are stumbling to the unemployment offices, after their “Third Avenue iron dreams” turned out to be too hard to achieve, leaving the reader disillusioned and disabused. This intense use of Bathos is characteristic of Beat writing, but not exclusive to it.

3.3 Bathos in *Women* and Parallels to *Howl*

Bukowski’s fast paced “‘punk’ novel” (*Miles VIII*) chronicles his alter ego Henry “Hank” Chinaski’s booze-filled escapades with women, horse betting and drugs, as well as his relationship with writing. Like Beat literature, *Women* does not beat around the bush in its countless descriptions of sex and alcohol- and drug (ab)use and is centered around fast conversation and open-hearted soliloquies, in which we can often discern bathos. The novel follows Chinaski’s escapades with many women, most of which are described in detail, and ends with the protagonist being alone, as he was in the beginning, with a strange cat showing up to his door. As he recalls this encounter, the book, quite absurdly, ends with Chinaski

feeding the cat “[...] a can of Star-Kist solid white tuna. Packed in spring water. Net wt. 7 oz.” (Bukowski 304). This is the end of the novel. It can be seen as an arrival at an ultimate point of bathos – a sobering disillusionment and return to the absolute mundanity of everyday life, after an extensive story filled with the ups and downs of a ragged life in the outskirts of LA.

On *Women*, Bukowski himself wrote in a letter to a friend “[i]t’s written as some type of high-low comedy and I look worse than anybody but they’re only going to think about how I painted them.” (Miles IX). Bukowski’s bathos can be identified in this flow of “high-low comedy,” for example:

[...] Tammie picked up a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table and ran out the door. I got out the champagne, uncorked it and poured myself a glass. I was no longer writing love poems. In fact, I wasn’t [sic] writing at all. (Bukowski 124).

Here, the characters had just had a fight, upon which Tammie had left the apartment. Subsequently, Chinaski opens up a bottle of champagne, which is generally a symbol of celebration; an ironic turn after a lovers’ fight. Next, he states that he was not writing anymore; him being a writer, this is the ultimate low – bathetic – point at which he arrives after a tumultuous and subtly comical buildup.

Besides a bathetic undertone of hope for finding some joy and a better life, *Women* shows a great deal of dissatisfaction and has in its whole become a voice for the underside of U.S. culture. *Women* treats issues like poverty and addiction to booze, cigarettes, gambling, women and drugs with severe, first-person honesty. Yet, among all this controversial subject matter, it is laced with keen and critical observations about people and (working) relationships and a clear amount of self-mockery. *Women* is a testimony to the mainstream from a

tormented down-and-out addict, who even voices a wish to stop his behavior and his inability to do so. The ultimately commonplace, unpoetic and highly bathetic ending of the novel could be seen as a cheeky protest by Bukowski against the expectations of readers or literary critics, who would possibly expect a grand and satisfying end, or at least a meaningful one with a message, not the contents of the label on canned tuna fish.

The bathos from the Beats and Bukowski are similar; both arrive at the bathetic literary realization that not many of the old ideals for America or its individual citizens have been fully achieved. Although the writings are “filled with laughter, nothing is ever funny, which is the idea at the root of the bathetic posture” (Vogel 398). In *Howl*, this bathos is achieved by Ginsberg’s style. The litany of absurd descriptions of his friends’ lives and the desperate cries about Moloch unceasingly bring the reader back to reality ultimately point to the harsh reality that U.S. society has failed to live up to ideals like Whitman described, ultimately demonstrating the exclusivity of the American Dream. *Women’s* bathos is achieved by the candid treatment of controversial themes in a very mundane way, as well as its cynical attitude towards U.S. culture, addiction and life on the margin. In their treatment of themes central to the social edge, both works have managed to become a voice for the social margin, as well bring public awareness to its – very real – issues.

4. *Howl* and George Carlin

4.1 “Modern Man” and *Howl* as Social Commentary

While talking about social criticism in poetic form, an interesting example is handed to us by the stand-up comedian George Carlin. In his work, he bases his points on observations in order to point people to problems that face them and society as a whole. In his 2004 work “Modern Man,” Carlin poetically mocks the English language, U.S. consumerism, business and marketing, I.T., drug use and sex.

Although meant for performance “Modern Man” can be viewed as poetry if we read the transcript, which can be found in Carlin’s book *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* (2004). Like *Howl*, Carlin’s text is written in free verse, in the form of a poetic litany with a formal structure. “Modern Man” is not as bathetic as *Howl* and *Women*, or as centrally positioned within underground culture as the blues music. “Modern Man” is, however, clearly a piece of social critique, hidden under a dense layer of poetry and satirical comedy.

Howl, too, became famous, in part, through Ginsberg’s performances of it (Schumacher 217). Because of the long line, poems like *Howl* “were best & [sic.] clearest when read aloud,” Ginsberg wrote (Schumacher 225): “[t]he release of emotion is one with the rhythmical buildup of the long line” (225). Both works, though ostensibly very different, are poetic and performative by nature, thus, spoken word poetry and stand-up comedy provide good grounds for a comparison.

4.2 Warnings from the “Modern Man”

Carlin opens with: “I’m a modern man, a man for the millennium, digital and smoke free.”

Immediately, the tone is set for the rest of this high-paced piece of satire. As a society, we are constantly looking ahead and occupying ourselves with many issues at once, usually centered

around a variety of topics such as politics, the environment, health, I.T. and technology. As indicated, these are some of the topics Carlin aims his criticism at. He is tired of ‘marketing lingo’ gradually developing into the absurd and he laments the high-paced (business) lifestyle that comes with modern technology.

I’ve been uplinked and downloaded.

I’ve been inputted and outsourced.

I know the upside of downsizing.

I know the downsize of upgrading.

I’m a high-tech lowlife.

A cutting edge state-of-the-art bicoastal multitasker,
and I can give you a gigabyte in a nanosecond. (Carlin)

The chiasmi that he uses here draw the readers’ attention to the intricacies of modern-day English, as well as its absurdity. By this, Carlin means to ridicule the lingo of America’s twenty-first century business society by drawing it out of its natural surroundings. The same he does in “I wear power ties; I tell power lies.”

He goes on to mock flagrant consumerism: “I’m a hot-wired heat seeking warm hearted cool customer, voice activated and biodegradable.” “I got [sic] a personal trainer, a personal shopper, a personal assistant and a personal agenda.” His choice of words is very sharp and can be argued to follow a bathetic flow, with the high-society themed buildup containing personal shoppers and trainers and coming down to – the bathetic point of – having to a personal agenda, which is something generally perceived as doubtful. In the context of consumerism, Carlin later warns the listener by a fast litany of advertising terms; all of which symbolize the excessive waste generated by packages containing such terms:

“I’ve been pre-washed, pre-cooked, pre-heated, pre-screened, pre-approved, pre-packaged, post-dated, freeze-dried, double-wrapped, vacuum-packed; and I have an unlimited broadband capacity.”

A parallel can be found here between the two works: Ginsberg also used anaphora to structure *Howl* and give it rhythm: the “who” at the beginning of the lines in the first part, “Moloch (whose)” in part two, and “I’m with you in Rockland” in the third part. This structure, each line being a single breath unit (Ginsberg, “Notes” 416), indicates the extent of the oppression and slighting of the outsiders by mainstream society. Every “who” uttered symbolizes another Beat person, emphasizes the problem; it demonstrates the vastness of the social differentiation lamented by Ginsberg. Next, Ginsberg uses “Moloch,” a Canaanite deity associated with children sacrifice (Schumacher 207 & “Moloch”), repetitively to describe the monstrous industrialization devouring individuals. The intrinsic positivity surfaces most clearly in the final part, where Ginsberg directly addresses Solomon in “I’m with you in Rockland.” For Solomon, a victim from the madness described in earlier in *Howl*, this anaphora underlines the importance of having hope and love and standing together in the face of misfortune.

Carlin also carefully directs our attention to the strain that is exerted onto members of society everywhere in the passage “a raging workaholic, a working rageaholic [sic]. Out of rehab, and in denial.” Carlin aims at modern society’s – Moloch’s – towering work pressures, resulting in too much stress and burnouts and people seeking their salvation in alcohol or drugs. This is most likely what he means by being “out of rehab” and “in denial;” they are two sides of the same coin, especially in this modern social climate, where people more often than not (consciously) overlook their own wellbeing (going into “rehab”) by continuing to go about their business as usual (being “in denial”).

Further, Carlin also criticizes today's sexual climate and internet culture, where everything is available quickly. Again, he uses chiasmi to guide the listener's attention. "I like rough sex; I like tough love. I use the *F*-word in my *email*; and the *software* on my *hard* drive is *hard* core, no *soft* porn." Every conceivable sort of pornography is technically available to anyone, anywhere. This is something Carlin seemed worried about in the context today's digital – more unpersonal – society.

4.3 Critical Parallels

As we have seen in the close-reading, Carlin selects certain aspects of society to criticize, similar to Ginsberg in *Howl*. He mentions aspects of society which worry him or simply make him laugh. He speaks openly about what he thinks society's dangers are and points people directly to them. Like Ginsberg, for instance, warning his readers for the uniformity in their industrializing society, Carlin warns his listeners for their digital lives, which seem to be increasingly involved in today's social- and love climate, as well as for the dangerous global ramifications of today's throwaway society. Both writers use a listed, anaphoric, structure to guide the listeners' or readers' attention and came at a time when society needed warnings. Both Ginsberg and Carlin saw, from an anthropological perspective, the direction their respective societies were headed in and raised alarm, warning people lest they unconsciously wander into the depths of capitalism and consumerism.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has shown where *Howl* was born and where its roots lie. Allen Ginsberg's rebellious Beat Generation owes its status as American literary counterculture to its raw, uncompromising literary works surrounding American politics and (counter)culture in their Cold War era (Carlisle), which came to public awareness through the nationally covered obscenity trial of *Howl* in 1957 (Schumacher 254). This trial, won by *Howl*, was a cultural precedent and led to the definitions of "obscenity" being refined (254). Many future cultural movements followed after the Beats and owe part of their sociocultural success to Ginsberg's leading position within the counterculture (Warner 198-9).

With its inspiration coming from the long lines of jazz, *Howl* can be seen as a poetic descendant of the old blues. The plight of the enslaved African-Americans led to the creation of "negro spirituals" and work songs. These direct roots of blues and jazz music (Crauwels) helped them relieve their sorrows and voice their hardship (Douglass 19). This foundation as song of the underdog carried into the blues and jazz, which made it to the mainstream; to the urban venues where Allen Ginsberg was inspired to write freely and openly about his and his peers' idealistic values and their countercultural lifestyle in what became a key work in U.S. cultural history.

Howl's themes still hold relevance in contemporary American society, which the parallels demonstrated in other works indicate. Themes like poverty, addiction and mental health have been a fixation for decades and are likely to continue being so. These issues, central to most societies, are not easily resolved, and thus, all parts of society will continue needing their critical voices, which enable crucial consideration of society's position. Thanks to the Beat Generation and *Howl*, that path has been freed.

After Walt Whitman's ideals for America, Ginsberg found himself discontented as a U.S. citizen, which he made clear, in part, through his use of bathos (Vogel 397). In the wake of

the disgruntled Beat Generation, Charles Bukowski wrote *Women* (1978). This candid work by a lifelong outsider gives a voice to the U.S. social margins and offers a relentless look into addiction. Bukowski writes bathetically about love, friendship and various destructive habits, following a flow that is fast and comical, while treating sensitive issues in a very mundane and open way. In that, it shows parallels with *Howl*, despite Bukowski not being a Beat writer himself. In more recent socially critical work, both Beth Hart's song "Ugliest House on the Block" (2012) and George Carlin's "Modern Man" (2004) show affinity with *Howl*. Works like these continue to warn society for its dangers and voice issues of the cultural margin to the mainstream. Without such protest, societal development could come to a halt or take undesirable directions.

The counterculture becoming mainstream means that it has public awareness; attention can be brought to the problems which threaten (their fraction of) society. Although there is a certain "forbidden" romanticized appeal in the outsider, which helps bring a work into public awareness, this is not its greatest effect, as has been demonstrated. All works in this thesis have shown redeeming social importance (Schumacher 263-4); they have a significant message towards the rest of society and help safeguard social and individual interests. Thanks to the Beat Generation, new social ferment has been brought about in the conformist and "bland" U.S. society of the 1950's and 1960's, which lacked "social and cultural purpose" (Halberstam 893). As a product from this rebellious generation, *Howl* is more than a poem; it provided a much-needed precedent and a shift towards modernity stemming from the mind of a cultural "outsider."

Works Cited

- Adams, Alexander. "Charles Bukowski: Distortion of a Dissident Poet?" *Spiked*, 7 September 2015, spiked-online.com/2015/09/07/charles-bukowski-distortion-of-a-dissident-poet/. Accessed 20 June 2019.
- Belletto, Steven. "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, edited by Steven Belletto, Cambridge University Press, March 2017, pp. 1–22, doi-
[org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1017/9781316877067](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316877067). *Cambridge Companions to Literature*. Accessed 27 May 2019.
- Bukowski, Charles. *Women*. Virgin Books, 2009.
- Carlin, George. "Modern Man." *Life Is Worth Losing*, Laugh.com, 2016. *Spotify*,
[open.spotify.com/album/4QToCz0BIjEXfG12kz9O9O?si=rocXVqk5QWuNLHGrnd6
ZNw](https://open.spotify.com/album/4QToCz0BIjEXfG12kz9O9O?si=rocXVqk5QWuNLHGrnd6ZNw)
- . "Modern Man." *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?*, e-book, Hyperion, 2004.
- Carlisle, Chuck. "The Beat Movement." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1 January 2005. Oxford Reference, www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/view/10.1093/acref/9780195156539.001.0001/acref-9780195156539-e-0026. Accessed 23 May 2019
- Crauwels, Kwinten. *Musicmap*. 1.0.1, Musicmap, 2016, musicmap.info. Accessed 14 June 2019.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, e-book, Lerner Publishing Group, 1976, Chapter II, pp. 16-19, *ProQuest Ebook Central*,
ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=5446283. Accessed 2 July 2019.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*, e-book, Twenty-fifth printing, City Lights Books, January 1973.

- . "Notes for Howl and Other Poems." *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald Allen, 4th edition, Grove Press, 1960, pp. 414-18, docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxwb2VtdGhhdGNoYW5nZWRhbWVyaWNhfGd4OjQ3ZGU0MDI4MGI5MzNkMGI. Accessed 3 July 2019.
- Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*, e-book, Open Road Media, 2012, pp.893-933.
- Hart, Beth. "The Ugliest House on the Block." *Bang Bang Boom Boom*, Mascot Music Productions and Publishing, 2012. *Spotify*, open.spotify.com/album/6u8a4TkKVfIAp9uOtwxHcj?si=LoZHu6WcRy6lE1bT4HLWgg.
- Iyer, Paco. "Celebrities Who Travel Well," *Time*, 26 June 1986, content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,961603-2,00.html. Accessed 14 June 2019.
- Lawlor, William. "Were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs a Generation?" *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, edited by Steven Belletto, Cambridge University Press, March 2017, pp. 23–35, doi-[org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1017/9781316877067.002](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316877067.002). *Cambridge Companions to Literature*. Accessed 23 May 2019.
- Miles, Barry. Introduction. *Women*, by Charles Bukowski, Virgin Books, 2009, pp. V-IX
- "Moloch." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 2002, www.oed-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/120955#contentWrapper. Accessed 2 July 2019.
- Schumacher, Michael. *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2016, ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed via ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=4392075.

Vogel, Andrew. "The Dream and the Dystopia: Bathetic Humor, the Beats, and Walt Whitman's Idealism." *American Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 2013, pp.389-407, *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/43485897](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43485897). Accessed 17 June 2019.

Warner, Simon. "Sifting the Shifting Sands: 'Howl' and the American Landscape in the 1950's." *Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture*, e-book, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp.162-194.