

From a whitman song
to a ginsberg howl:
homophobia creates
a forum for biased
cri...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Generations of readers and critics alike have denigrated the works of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, both equally brilliant poets, separated by a century, yet sharing a poetic vision of both political and sexual freedom, simply because the language and lifestyle represented in their work happens to conflict with the “moral norms” of society. Both Whitman and Ginsberg faced charges of obscenity upon publication of their most famous works. Public outcry began the first moment these two poets appeared on the literary scene, and continues, even today, when textbooks and library books containing Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and Ginsberg’s “Howl” are pulled from the classrooms and library shelves after parents and administrators label them “inappropriate” (often without having read the work in question) due to the explicit language and homoeroticism expressed in the poems. Legislators have gone so far as to file criminal charges against those who published the works. Such blatant censorship merely proves these poems are being suppressed or reviled due to the rampant homophobia (often concealed under the cloak of religious respectability) in our society rather than any real, justifiable claims of obscenity in the works. On July 4, 1855, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* first appeared, eliciting mixed critical reviews because “the poems shocked America Puritanism and English Victorianism, although Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to the *New York Times*, calling the book ‘the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.’ The Library Company of Philadelphia was the only American library known to have bought a copy of the publication” (Haight and Grannis). Other reviews claimed, “His poems are not really poems, and whatever they are, they are dirty” (Street). A subsequent edition of the

collection in 1881 provoked the district attorney in Boston, Massachusetts, a leader of the Society for Suppression of Vice, to “ threaten criminal charges unless the volume was expurgated. The book was immediately withdrawn from the public venue in Boston” after Whitman refused to allow its publication there, saying, “ Damn all expurgated books. The dirtiest book of all is the expurgated book” (Ellison). John Greenleaf Whittier, in rage of indignation, threw his first edition into the fire, although he himself had suffered persecution for his abolitionist poems. Wendell Phillips, another abolitionist orator, said of Whitman’s book, “ Here be all sorts of leaves except fig leaves”(Haight and Grannis). Similarly, a century later, Collector of Customs Chester McPhee confiscated 520 copies of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* printed by Villiers in England, as they came through customs. His intention was to “ keep what he considers obscene literature away from the children of the Bay Area” (Ginsberg 169). On May 29, Captain Hanrahan of the San Francisco Juvenile Department arrested bookseller Lawrence Ferlinghetti and his clerk, Shigeyoshi Murao, for distributing obscene literature by offering *Howl and Other Poems* for sale in their City Lights bookstore. They were charged with knowingly distributing literature that contained “ coarse and vulgar language . . . and mentions of explicit homosexual acts” (Ginsberg 173). This action served to make the poem “ *Howl*” even more famous after news of the arrests and subsequent trial appeared in the national newspapers. Multitudes of self-righteous people secretly examined the poem for obscene details and publicly castigated the author for his vulgarity and “ queer” lifestyle. Few critics read the poem in the way Ginsberg intended, as “ one of the symbols of the liberation of

American culture in the 1950s from an academic formalism and political conservatism" (Weir 7). Whitman and His Critics From Whitman to Ginsberg, the critics have had a hard time separating their personal prejudices from their professional critiques when it comes to the homosexual lifestyles of the two poets, explicitly detailed in the poetic works. In the case of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the critics have had much longer to try and find an acceptable method for critically evaluating what they see as "problematic" subjects in his poetry, including homosexuality, homoeroticism, and "outright masturbatory descriptions of the male body" included in "Song of Myself." This claim is in sharp contradiction to the outrage Whitman displayed when confronted about these messages, praising chastity and denouncing onanism. However, the modern scholarly opinion tends to be that these poems reflected Whitman's true feelings towards his sex and that he merely tried to cover up his feelings. (Walt) Many critics felt the safest way to deal with the homosexuality in Whitman's poetry was to ignore or deny it completely, which started a "critical tradition that has insisted on silencing, spiritualizing, heterosexualizing, or marginalizing Whitman's sexual feelings for men" (Street 2). Whitman was always an outspoken man, and a staunch abolitionist. He fired from his job at *The Brooklyn Eagle* when he used his position as editor to make a strong statement for abolishing slavery. His outspoken nature cost him a job at *The Brooklyn Times* as well, when religious leaders became offended by what they considered sexually inappropriate statements attributed to the poet (Binns 47-48). Whitman felt no need to apologize, stating his poems celebrated the body as well as the mind, and he spoke of the love of men for each other as a foundation of the

American democracy he dreamed of. Ralph Waldo Emerson read Whitman's portrayal of "the parting of two men on a pier with a lingering description of their passionate kiss" and other "descriptions of relationships between men, men he (Whitman) called comrades and lovers" and presumed that when Whitman wrote about "boatsmen and other roughs walking hand in hand" that Whitman was talking about the chaste love of friendship between men. This kind of friendship was common in the nineteenth century, and "the idea that some men are exclusively homosexual would not appear in America until about 1900, so deep emotional attachments between men weren't stigmatized as they are today." The Emerson thought the emotional bonds of male friendship in Whitman's work were akin to the "Boston Marriage" between women in the nineteenth century. This term was used to describe "households where two women lived together, independent of any male support. Whether these were lesbian relationships — in the sexual sense — is debatable and debated" (Lewis). Of course, those deep attachments Emerson referred to never crossed a moral line, obviously Emerson viewed Whitman's love of comrades as platonic friendship. He wrote to Whitman, praising his earthy and sensual poetry, calling the collections "an extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom" that marked "the beginning of a great career" (qtd. in Rotundo 56). Seizing the opportunity for some good promotional press for his book, Whitman had the letter printed in the New York Herald Tribune without consulting Emerson. Emerson responded by writing to Whitman that the letter had been written as encouragement for a promising writer, not to promote the sale of Whitman's work. The Emerson letter prompted one reviewer, Rufus Griswold, to publish his own vitriolic

review of *Leaves of Grass*. He called the work “ a mass of stupid filth . . . muck . . . that detailed the horrible sin not to be named among Christians” (Allen Readers Guide 56). Even the few reviewers who liked Whitman’s work and “ admired his simplest, truest, and often most nervous English” had to warn readers that the poems were “ indelicate” (Kaplan 87). Of course, considering the Victorian audience Whitman was writing for, it is not hard to see how poems such as “ Spontaneous Me” filled with earthy phrases like “ love-thought, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers, and the climbing sap,” could have shocked the delicate sensibilities of his readers. Even Emerson tried to convince Whitman to drop the phrase “ the limpid liquid within the young man” from his poem. Whitman refused to change a word. These were the very phrases that led the Boston district attorney to file his obscenity charges (Weir 10). A more recent biographer, Jerome Loving, noted that in the Victorian era, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* would most definitely have been considered a dirty book. “ Remember,” Loving says, “ It was a time when they even draped piano legs” (Hartman 146). More vicious critical attacks on Whitman came from Secretary of the Interior James Harlan and the Boston district attorney, Oliver Stevens, who violently objected to Whitman’s subject matter and dismissed him as “ simply a libertine or pervert” (Reynolds 455). Perhaps one of the reasons the critics attacked his subject matter so brutally was because according to Robert K. Martin, before Whitman’s frank discussion of homosexuality and his poetic celebration of that lifestyle there were “ homosexual acts, but no homosexuals” (Martin 51). In Whitman’s time, homosexuality was becoming a distinct identity rather than a behavior. As Foucault says, “ Where the

sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species," and someone to be feared by society (Reynolds 396). Societal pressures may have forced Whitman to lie about his sexual preferences. He wrote a letter to John Addington Symonds in response to pointed questions as to the nature of his (Whitman's) "adhesiveness" My life, young manhood, mid-age, times south, (sic) etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Tho' unmarried I have had six children—two are dead—one living, southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally—circumstances (connected to their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations. (Holloway xvii-xviii) Later critics, uncomfortable with the idea of Whitman's expressed homosexuality, used this letter not only to heterosexualize Whitman, but to make him an advocate of the family as well. In the first Whitman biography, *A Life of Walt Whitman*, Henry Bryan Binns tried to prove that Whitman had at one time been in love with a high-ranking socialite in New Orleans, who gave birth to Whitman's child. Binns claimed "that he was prevented by some obstacle, presumably prejudice, from marriage or the acknowledgment of his paternity" (51). Binns also pointed to Whitman's poem "Children of Adam" and stated that the attitudes toward having children were "only possible to a man who has known true love, and has lived a chaste and temperate life" (159). Binns shared Emerson's belief that the love of man Whitman celebrated so explicitly in his writing was merely that of close comradeship, the kind of friendship shared by great Americans with a strong love of man and country (149). Another Whitman biographer, Basil De Selincourt, author of *Walt Whitman: A Critical Study* (1914), uncomfortable with the idea that his subject was a "deviant,"

defended Whitman against the charges of perversity, yet refused even to name the deviant behavior Whitman was being accused of. Instead, he explained away the “Calamus” poems by saying that Whitman advocates and to a certain extent himself practiced an affectionate demonstrativeness which is uncongenial to the Anglo-Saxon temperament and which those Englishmen who forget that there are two sides to the Channel find even shocking. The result . . . is that he is quite generally suspected of a particularly unpleasant kind of abnormality.” (204) De Selincourt addressed the issue of Whitman’s suspected homosexuality by carefully examining the poems, searching for allusions to such behavior. He concluded that only one poem, “Earth My Likeness,” contained any passage that could remotely be considered an allusion to homosexuality—“For an athlete is enamour’d of me, and I of him . . .”(ln 6)—but he interprets the poem as a condemnation of “that particular impulse” and asserts his notion that Whitman’s expressions of love in the poem are “the celebration of the ideal relationship of soul to soul . . . equally of course the relation of woman to woman, or of man to woman” (207). He also goes on to claim Whitman’s poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is really just an expression from a husband mourning for the death of someone who was his wife in all but name. De Selincourt insisted that Whitman focused on the procreative function of men and women in his poetry and that that alone should prove Whitman’s devotion to the idea of his being a family man (23). Betsy Erkkila, professor at Northwestern University, abhors the continued efforts of modern critics to preserve a distinction between Whitman as a private, gay poet, and Whitman, the poet of Democracy. In her opinion, his view of adhesiveness is

an integral part of his conception of democracy, a means by which, in Whitman's words, the United States of the future ... are to be most effectively welded together. Consequently, Whitman's sexuality is not, as many recent critics say, a 'single, transhistorical monolith' but instead a "complex, multiply located, and historically imbedded sexual, social, and discursive phenomenon." Thus, the usual distinction between private gay poet and public democratic poet is false: "the homosexual poet and the American republic refuse any neat division; they intersect, flow into each other, and continually break bounds" (155-168). Clearly, the hide-bound critics of Whitman's time were distressed and offended when confronted with the truth of what the author's work revealed—the clear depiction of homosexual love—in addition to his celebrations of life, nature, and his country. The homophobia that greeted the distribution of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* would unquestionably have impaired the abilities of the critics to render a fair appraisal of the poet's work. Perhaps because they understood the impossibility of discussing such themes in a public forum, the critics felt it necessary to re-invent a heterosexual or even a non-sexual Whitman. Or perhaps it was just that the general tendency of Transcendentalism was away from materialist interpretations of anything. Regardless, without such avoidance tactics, there could have been no discussion of the works at all. The next generation of critics, while acknowledging Whitman's obvious homosexuality, downplayed the fact, choosing to focus on the ideas of comradeship, love of country, and nature that permeated the poetry. Newton Arvin, who published his biography *Whitman* in 1938, was himself a homosexual, and he had no doubts where Whitman's tendencies lay: "The

fact of Whitman's homosexuality is one that cannot be denied by any informed and candid reader of his "Calamus" poems, of his published letters, and of accounts by unbiased acquaintances: after a certain point, the fact stares one unanswerably in the face" (274). However, Arvin claimed the poems only expressed a tendency of Whitman's and demonstrated no proof that he had ever acted upon his impulses. Other critics of this era took a similar tack, dismissing Whitman's attachment to Peter Doyle, meticulously detailed in Whitman's personal journals, as "the outpourings of a thwarted paternalism" and theorized that Whitman held a deep "fatherly love of innumerable sons," which he wrote about in his "magnificent poems of the comradeship of true democracy" (Canby 201). Even critics in the post-war period avoided the issue of Whitman's obvious dedication to homoerotic love. One of Whitman's better biographers, Gay Wilson Allen, who published *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* in 1955, tempered his admission of Whitman's homosexuality with careful study of the dates of the correspondence between Whitman and his supposed lover, Peter Doyle. Allen concluded, "Whatever the psychologist may think of this abnormally strong affection of the two men for each other, these dates make actual perversion seem unlikely" (226). Apparently, Allen believed readers were not ready to accept a fully homosexual poet, and so constructed one who, though he might have had homosexual tendencies, remained mostly unaffected by it. Critics, in the age of gay liberation and gay pride have chosen to center their readings on the fact that after Whitman was admitted to "the American canon . . . he was then subject to a homophobic critical examination that diluted or frankly eliminated the homosexual content of his

work" (Martin xix). This group refused to make a neat distinction between Whitman the private gay poet and Whitman the public democratic poet. In *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, Robert Martin explains the necessity of reading Whitman's poetry as a whole, claiming his separate personas "intersect, flow into each other, and continually break bounds" (168). David S. Reynolds's book *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, published in 1995, presents a much more detailed critique of Whitman's work, made possible by the growing public acceptance of homosexuality. Reynolds points out Whitman's need to deny his sexuality during his lifetime and claims the letter to Symonds was merely an attempt to deflect public scrutiny of his sexual preferences. He also points out that the work must be read, as Whitman suggested, "within its own atmosphere and essential character" (198). During the Victorian era, there were no publicly accepted sexual distinctions—homo, hetero, or bi—and same-sex affection was widespread and regarded as comradeship. Only the modern era has made close same-sex relationships into something salacious and sexual (391). Reynolds further argues that in Whitman's day the 1882 obscenity charges that were brought against *Leaves of Grass* resulted in the deletion of several poems about heterosexual love, including "A Dalliance of Eagles," while only one of the homosexual *Calamus* poems was removed. According to Reynolds, "Whitman's America was far more prudish about heterosexuality than same-sex eros" (540). Around the turn of the century, audiences began to turn away from the idea of same-sex relationships when they realized that these relationships often included genital contact. Once the idea of a purely homosexual relationship became a red flag, critics

returned to the literature of the previous era and subjected it to severe homophobic scrutiny (391). The trend toward acceptance of Whitman's homosexuality in the critical evaluation of his work has produced a plethora of critical reviews focusing on homosexuality as a basis for the work. Just as previous critics attempted to ignore or minimize Whitman's sexuality, the early reviews of later critics often "read like catalogs of sex acts" (Reynolds 490). Current approaches appear to reflect the social consciousness with regard to homosexuality. With the advent of gay pride and queer studies, the critics have come to consider Whitman's sexuality as part of the work. If the current trend continues, Whitman may eventually be viewed as "a poet who was a homosexual, not a homosexual who wrote poems" (Street 12).

Ginsberg's Turn to "Howl" The honesty and openness of Whitman's poetry and his public celebration of love for all, be they women or men, inspired future poets to express their own uninhibited views on life. Allen Ginsberg, in particular, took Whitman's advice in "Song of Myself" to "get outside and become undisguised and naked: 'Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!'" (lms 5-6). One hundred years after the first appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, Allen Ginsberg, recognized as the "prophet of cultural revolution," used Whitman's phrase as an epigraph to "Howl," the poem made famous after charges of obscenity resulted in public castigation of both the work and the vociferous poet (Nineteenth Century Precursors). Ginsberg, who held Whitman in high esteem, explained his connection to the poet in sexual terms, saying he "once slept with Neal Cassady, who slept with Gavin Arthur (grandson of President Chester A. Arthur), who slept with the Victorian gay-lifestyle

advocate Edward Carpenter, who once slept with Walt Whitman” (Sullivan). Ginsberg offered the Western world a gift—the naked truth, or full disclosure—when he published his deeply confessional poetry. At the beginning of “Ego Confession” he says, “I want to be known as the most brilliant man in America.” Unfortunately, most people in society at the time Ginsberg made his grand appearance at the Six Gallery reading, where he performed the first part of “Howl” for the first time, in October, 1955, were simply outraged at what they considered crude vulgarity and moral decadence (Sullivan). In *Allen Ginsberg in America*, Jane Kramer said that Ginsberg has been the “subject of more argument between the generations than any American poet since Whitman” but that Ginsberg’s impact on society has been even stronger, because whether people are reacting to his beatnik appearance or the content of his poetry, they are reacting in more energetic and sometimes violent ways (14). Polite society in the era of McCarthyism disdained the work of Ginsberg, offended at his outspokenness about those social issues he felt most strongly about—drug use, being a Jew, “civil rights, gay liberation, pacifism, the environment, and of course, freedom of personal expression.” Throughout the nineteen fifties and sixties, Ginsberg frequently found himself tossed roughly in a paddy wagon and hauled to jail along with the likes of Abbe Hoffman and others who dared to protest what they saw as the restrictiveness of American society. Ginsberg is credited by many as the driving force behind the “uncovering of the gay lifestyle for straight America” through his poems “Howl” and “America” (Sullivan). Although Ginsberg acknowledged homosexual leanings very early in his life, he still experienced a great deal of traumatic difficulty—depression, uncertainty,

and repressed guilt—over this realization. Struggling with his own identity crisis, Ginsberg also had to deal with his mother's emotional and psychological instability. Naomi Ginsberg was institutionalized for three years during Ginsberg's adolescence, suffering from paranoid delusions, convinced that people were out to assassinate her. She constantly worried that President Roosevelt was responsible for wire-tapping her head and the ceiling in order to hear her most private thoughts. Ginsberg's visits with his mother were troubling to the confused boy. When she returned home after her electric and insulin shock therapy, Naomi was hardly recognizable. When the family couldn't deal with her illness, she went to her sister's house for a short time. After only a few short weeks there, she was again institutionalized in Pilgrim State Hospital on Long Island, where her son continued to visit her. One of the most disturbing aspects of Ginsberg's visits to his mother was Naomi's thoughtless nudity. She continued to view herself as she had been—young, flirtatious, and beautiful—and insisted on showing off her bloated, scarred body at every opportunity, even when her son was present. This disturbed Ginsberg greatly, and he found the visits increasingly hard to endure. Later, in his poem "Kaddish," Ginsberg finally came to terms with his mother's death and his difficult familial background (Tytell 78-79). A friend, John Clellon Holmes, said, "Ginsberg's relationship with his mother was the source of his wound, the axis around which his madness, homosexuality, and poet-nature revolved" (90). Though Ginsberg's visits to his unstable mother were hard to endure, he found life with his school teacher father equally unbearable. Though he was also a poet, Louis Ginsberg represented everything else his son stood against. He was a

moderate liberal who valued culture, appreciated his Jewish heritage, and accepted the role society mapped out for middle-class individuals in America. Louis abhorred his wife's communist leanings. Allen, however, fueled by his mother's early leftist affiliations, became outraged at the injustices he perceived in a society where "different" stood on a par with "bad." His poetry began to shift from the imitation of the more classical forms encouraged by his poet father to the voice of the unheard American, those individuals considered the dregs of society—the homosexuals, the drug addicts, the homeless, and the beatniks (80-81). Ginsberg, seeking the approval withheld by his father, shared some of this early poetry with a few of his professors at Columbia University where, in 1943, at the age of 17, he entered college. However, though several professors saw talent in the young man, they turned away from what they considered deviant writing. Ginsberg, who struggled to find a new form of poetry with which to express his long-repressed confusion, was to devote considerable energy during the following years to finding appropriate psychoanalytic treatment. His most pressing anxiety was due to a sexual confusion that was compounded by his mother's malady, something which made him mistrust women as vessels of failure. His early inclinations were homosexual—originally he had wanted to attend Columbia because of an unrequited infatuation for a former schoolmate who had enrolled there. But the authoritarian culture of the years after the war had categorized homosexuality as a diseased perversion bordering on criminality. Ginsberg was tormented by a repressed yearning for physical contact which could be relieved only through masturbatory fantasy.

(83)Ginsberg's sexual confusion continued, despite several homosexual

affairs which he found unsatisfactory, mostly because of the guilt he experienced when he thought about how society would view him if they found out he was “ queer” (Tytell 84). After his suspension from Columbia in 1945 for writing filthy remarks in the dirt on his dorm windows, Ginsberg attended the Merchant Marine Academy for four months, where he tried to assume the role of “ regular guy;” this attempt failed when his classmates caught him reading Hart Crane’s poems and ostracized him (86). Although the his expulsion from Columbia and his failure at the Merchant Marine Academy was somewhat disturbing, they served to breach the protective walls of academia that had previously surrounded Ginsberg. These incidents precipitated him into the real world, where real people experienced real life. These were the experiences Ginsberg needed to fuel his experimental poetry. Seeking answers to his confusion, he consulted a series of psychiatrists. The first doctor declined to continue treating Ginsberg, who insisted on smoking marijuana and using other illegal drugs against the doctor’s strict orders (Kramer 41). When Ginsberg, “ relaxing in bed, reading Blake while masturbating,” heard a deep voice reciting Blake’s poem “ Ah, Sunflower,” he had an epiphany about what he was supposed to be doing as a poet and a man^{2E} The epiphany occurred after Ginsberg had placed a panicked phone call to his former psychiatrist saying, “ I have to see you! William Blake is in my room!” The doctor shouted back, “ You must be crazy!” and hung up. Ginsberg tried to “ revoke the Blake spirit” to confirm his sense of being a part of a “ shaping intelligence in the universe” (Tytell 89). This visionary experience was the first step toward full acceptance of himself as a poet and a homosexual. It was also the catalyst for an

experience that would end with his incarceration in a psychiatric facility for eight months. Ginsberg knew that before he could fully express his poetic aspirations he would have to “demolish his old self of defensive arrogance and superiority, and attempted (sic) to obviate his ego through drugs, sex, and friends” of a similar nature (91). Much of the distaste for his poetry developed in response to his public persona; Ginsberg became very outspoken about his homosexuality and his belief in the right and duty of every individual to say exactly what was on his mind. Ginsberg’s associations with certain disreputable people made him seem bizarre, at best; at worst, many people thought he was “crazy” like his mother and believed he needed to be institutionalized. Some of his antics were deliberate—his way of demonstrating to his father that insanity was preferable to blind acceptance of the social norms^{2E} But some instances were the results of his misguided attempts to befriend individuals he thought worthy of study, people like Herbert Huncke, who introduced Ginsberg to “the world of morphine and the underworld of New York” (89). In 1949, Ginsberg allowed Huncke and several of his petty criminal friends to crash in his York Avenue apartment. They brought with them a number of stolen items that they stashed in the apartment, waiting for the opportunity to fence them. Ordinarily, Ginsberg would not have allowed this to take place, but he was fascinated with the poetry of Huncke whose “directness of language or . . . naked city man speech, clear and magnanimous as personal conversation” captured exactly the voice Ginsberg was looking for in his own poetry (Tytell 93-94). While riding in a stolen car with his new “friend,” Ginsberg was injured when the driver crashed during a presumed police chase. The “

criminals" fled the scene, leaving Ginsberg wandering around, dazed, and searching without his glasses for his scattered papers. The police showed up next morning with some of those papers that contained Ginsberg's address. He was arrested and threatened with jail on a felony charge. Faculty friends at Columbia University interceded and arranged for him to have an evaluation and therapy at the Columbia Psychiatric Institute, free of charge. Almost immediately, Ginsberg met another man who would be a powerful influence on his writing: in fact he dedicated his poem "Howl" to this man, Carl Solomon. To Ginsberg, Solomon was "an instance of the artist as outrage" because he did things like "throwing potato salad at Wallace Markfield, who was lecturing on Mallarmé, or pretending to be W. H. Auden at an exhibition, gleefully signing Auden's autograph" for those who asked (94-96). Many of Solomon's outrageous antics are immortalized in the lines of "Howl." Another poet influenced the voice of Ginsberg's poetry, perhaps even more than Whitman; Ginsberg met William Carlos Williams in Paterson, New Jersey when he returned home to live with his father after his release from the psychiatric facility. Williams read Ginsberg's early work and though he found potential in the lines, he told Ginsberg the literary language made them stilted and unfeeling. He introduced Ginsberg to what he called "speak-talk-thinking," language filled with the sounds and rhythms of natural speech" rather than a preconceived literary pattern. Williams also told Ginsberg that the "best poetry resulted from the original impulse of the mind . . . or the first wild draft of a poem (97-98). This germ of an idea stayed with Ginsberg until the day he wrote "Howl," his own "wild impulse poem," for which Williams wrote the preface: "Hold back the edges of your

gowns, Ladies, we are going through Hell!" Although several of his poems had been accepted for publication by 1952, Ginsberg was still unhappy with his progress as a poet, and told friends, "I must stop playing with my life in a disappointed gray world." He believed the only way to get out of the "rut of his existence" was to get out of New York and experience life. To write about life, one had to experience life, Ginsberg thought. So he prepared to move on (99). In 1953, after abruptly ending his love affair with William Burroughs, author of *Junkie*, Ginsberg left for Mexico where he stayed for six months before traveling to California via Florida, Cuba, and the Yucatan the following spring. He spent a few months traveling through these places on his way to San Jose, where his friend Jack Kerouac had moved to seriously study Buddhism. Ginsberg moved in first with his buddy Neal Cassady and Cassady's wife, Carolyn, but found himself less welcome there when Carolyn walked in on him and Neal in bed together. He then moved to a "\$6 a week room in a North Beach transients' hotel" around the corner from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore, where all the local poets hung out. Ginsberg took a stack of his poems to the bookstore to share with the other poets, who for the most part were still unimpressed. Shortly after his arrival, Ginsberg found himself a job at a small market research firm, as well as a girlfriend. They moved into an "executive apartment" on Nob Hill (Kramer 40), perhaps Ginsberg's last attempt to try to fit into a society where homosexuals were considered degenerates. This abortive attempt at "normalcy" lasted barely a year, until Ginsberg decided it was time to consult a psychiatrist about his dissatisfaction with both his job and his sex life. He wanted to find a psychiatrist who wouldn't shut the door in his face when he

tried to express his thoughts and feelings or confessed his drug use habits. Phillip Hicks, a San Francisco doctor, gave Ginsberg what he termed the “authority, so to speak, to be myself” During one of their long conversations, in which Ginsberg ranted about his dissatisfaction with life in general, Dr. Hicks asked, “What would you like to do? What is your desire, really?” Ginsberg, sure that Dr. Hicks would be amused or disgusted or irritated by the answer to his question, answered a bit uncertainly: Doctor, I don’t think you’re going to find this very healthy and clear, but I really would like to stop working forever—never work again, never do anything like the kind of work I’m doing now—and do nothing but write poetry and have leisure to spend the day outdoors and go to museums and see friends. And I’d like to keep living with someone—maybe even a man—and explore relationships that way. And cultivate my perceptions (sic) cultivate the visionary thing in me. Just a literary and quiet city-hermit existence. Then he said, ‘Well, why don’t you?’ (Breslin 69). Ginsberg took the advice and faced his unconventional desires head on. As he later told friends, it was the end of trying to please his father and the beginning of a new life. Ginsberg later told the story of how he wrote a report demonstrating to his firm how they could save money and eliminate his position by replacing him with a computer. When his bosses obligingly fired him, Ginsberg began to live his “city-hermit existence,” associating with others who had the same zest for life and freedom that he did. A chance meeting with a San Francisco painter named Robert LaVigne led to an introduction that would change Ginsberg’s life forever, putting to rest any residual guilt feelings concerning his homosexual attractions. After an all-night conversation with LaVigne in Foster’s Cafeteria,

Ginsberg agreed to accompany the artist to his apartment to look at his paintings. There, Ginsberg found himself mesmerized by a “ seven by seven portrait of a naked boy, legs spread, with some onions at his feet. The lyrical power of the painting was epiphanous, triggering much of the homoeroticism” that would later appear in “ Howl” (Tytell 102). While Ginsberg was admiring the painting, the subject of the portrait walked into the room, forever changing the ambivalence Ginsberg felt about his sexuality. He fell in love with Peter Orlovsky on sight, feeling a “ frankness and open responsiveness he had never shared with another man” (102). Within a year, each had declared his full commitment to the other. By the fall of 1955, they were happily ensconced in an apartment not far from the City Lights bookstore. Ginsberg’s writing came to full fruition with Orlovsky’s inspiration. He organized a poetry reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, and two weeks before the event, he sat down to write what he later called his “ original blow for freedom, and the germinating public seed of the beat movement” (104). The concept of “ Howl came to Ginsberg as he sat at a window in his apartment, watching the traffic on Montgomery Street, pondering a dream he had had about Joan Burroughs, who had been killed when her husband, Ginsberg’s former lover, William Burroughs, attempted a William Tell-like shot at a glass on her head. Ginsberg said he wrote about the dream with no real intention of it’s being a poem: I sat idly at my desk by the first-floor window facing Montgomery Street’s slope to gay Broadway— only a few blocks from City Lights literary paperback bookshop. I had a secondhand typewriter, some cheap scratch paper. I began typing, not with the idea of writing a formal poem, but stating my imaginative sympathies,

whatever they were worth. As my loves were impractical, and my thoughts relatively unworldly, I had nothing to gain and only the pleasure of enjoying on paper those sympathies most intimate to myself and most awkward in the great world of family, formal education, business, and current literature.

(Ginsberg xii) Ginsberg succeeded in writing in the rhythms of regional American speech and imitating the talk of the streets, which made the poem even more powerful when he read the first part of it to a dumbfounded audience two weeks later at the Six Gallery reading. "Howl" became a condemnation of American culture—a protest against the injustices inflicted on those individuals polite society refused to recognize as worthy citizens of a great country. The power of Ginsberg's poem is evident in the first few lines: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn, looking for an angry fix . . ." (3). Ginsberg included a condemnation of those who gave up their dreams so easily, conceding defeat and becoming faceless members of a capitalist society when he mentioned those—"who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique / stores where they thought they were growing old and cried . . ." (5). But these sentiments were not the ones that provoked the upheaval that greeted the publication of the poem. Ginsberg's blatant use of "street language," profanity, and crude references to homosexual sex disgusted moralistic people who believed such "obscene" literature belonged in the garbage, and not in the bookstores. Ginsberg's first harsh critic was his own father, who received a copy of his son's poem shortly after its completion. Although outraged at his son's confession to the practices of

the very evils his father had warned him against—drug use and homosexuality—he was able to provide a balanced, if scathing, assessment of the work: Howl is a wild, volcanic, troubled, extravagant, turbulent, boisterous, unbridled outpouring, intermingling gems and flashes of picturesque insight with slag and debris of scoriac matter. It has violence; it has life; it has vitality. In my opinion, it is a one-sided neurotic view of life; it has not enough glad, Whitmanian affirmations. The poem does have emotional force, vitality, BUT its vision of life is, again, off-balance—one-sided, and neurotic in its angry disillusionment. (74) Perhaps it was not so much the homosexuality contained in the poems that so displeased Louis Ginsberg. It must have been the anger behind the lines that disturbed him, for surely, if he spoke in favor of the “ glad, Whitmanian affirmations” (74), he must have recognized that Whitman’s poems contained references to homosexual practices similar to those in his son Allen’s work! Allen Ginsberg felt his father had completely missed the point of the poem. He had been trying to get on paper the emotional breakthrough of an individual as a way of overcoming the intimidation of the fifties. He had intended, with his natural speech patterns, crude language, and long, Whitmanesque lines, to write simple representations of everyday existence. Instead, the work was condemned as obscene by a multitude of critics who declined to set aside their personal prejudices to judge the work solely on its literary merit. Although the poem had been written while Ginsberg was under the influence of “ peyote for visions, amphetamine to speed up and Dexedrine to keep going, he said it was . . . one of his most profound experiences . . . Ginsberg knew he had written not just a new poem, but a new kind of poem” (Cook

64). Ginsberg's delivery of the poem that night at the Six Gallery reading attracted the attention of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who owned City Lights Books. Ferlinghetti, who had read the poem and rejected it a few days earlier, sent Ginsberg a note that night consciously echoing the letter Emerson sent to Walt Whitman when *Leaves of Grass* was published. Ferlinghetti said, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career" (Will A31). Ferlinghetti recognized the "newness" of Ginsberg's poem, and realized that "Howl" demonstrated the voice of a poet who wanted to "strike out on his own" but had an "equally powerful fear of freedom." This voice angrily "asserts the 'real' self of its author, the 'angelheaded hipster' persecuted by social and paternal authority," and Ferlinghetti understood that this type of poem—a release of long-repressed feelings—would strike a chord in the hearts of those people society refused to acknowledge, as well as in society itself. Ferlinghetti made the decision to publish the poem in the United States. The first printing, done in England, came through customs unhampered and was issued by City Lights in the fall of 1956. The book, *Howl and Other Poems*, sold very well—well enough to require a second printing in 1957. When this second printing came through customs on March 25, 1957, however, all 520 copies were confiscated. The San Francisco Chronicle, incensed at this infringement of First Amendment rights, wrote: Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee continued his campaign yesterday to keep what he considers obscene literature away from the children of the Bay area. He confiscated 520 copies of a paperbound volume of poetry entitled *Howl and Other Poems* . . . 'The words and the sense of the writing is obscene,' MacPhee declared. 'You wouldn't want your children to come

across it.' (Ginsberg 169) MacPhee's actions only served to make the work famous (as usually happens) because the minute it was declared obscene and banned, people became anxious to read it, much as they had when Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was labeled obscene and banned. The American Civil Liberties Union immediately became involved in the suit, contesting the charges of obscenity. The desire of the people to read *Howl and Other Poems* was gratified by Ferlinghetti's printing and publishing of the work in the U. S. and publication removed the work from Customs jurisdiction and gave it First Amendment protection. Ferlinghetti said, "It would have taken years for critics to accomplish what the good collector did in a day, merely by calling the book obscene" (169). He went on to defend the poem, saying he did not believe the work to be obscene, and declared "Howl" the most "significant long poem to be published in this country since . . . Eliot's *Four Quartets*." In Ferlinghetti's opinion, the moral judgments made against "Howl" were merely the voices of those objecting to Ginsberg's condemnation of American culture. Perhaps those objectors were frightened by the stark truth Ginsberg laid bare in his poem, and they were unable to accept the representations of themselves in the work. This is, according to Ferlinghetti, most likely the reason they found "Howl" obscene—they didn't like the "archetypal configuration of the mass culture which produced it," and chose instead to try to suppress the painful cry of the author (169). As I said, both Ferlinghetti and Shig Muroa, his clerk, were arrested for distributing obscene materials. The famous ACLU attorney Jake Ehrlich led the defense team, posting bail for both men. A flood of critical support—including letters from poets Robert Duncan and Kenneth Rexroth—accompanied those from

newspaper editors across the country. When Judge Horn handed down his decision that “Howl” was “social criticism” and stated the prosecution did not “understand the work, much less what its dominant theme was,” literary experts hailed his verdict as a “landmark of law.” Before the decision was handed down, Captain Hanrahan, chief of the department’s Juvenile Bureau, tried to explain what he considered standards for judging obscenity in literature: “When I say filthy I don’t mean suggestive, I mean filthy words that are vulgar.” He also said he and his men were waiting for the judge’s ruling before going out to confiscate other books, most of them at Ferlinghetti’s bookstore. He denied charges that he planned to confiscate the Bible, but did say, in a press conference, “Let me tell you, though, what King Solomon was doing with all those women wouldn’t be tolerated in San Francisco” (170). Once he received the label of an “obscene” writer, Ginsberg found more and more of his critics reviewing his work strictly on the basis of his homosexuality rather than paying attention to his cry for social justice, freedom, and acceptance. The media circus surrounding Ginsberg in the late fifties and early sixties distracted the attention of many literary critics as hordes of flower children came to win some of the battles of the ’60s. Throughout this time, Allen led the way, protesting limitations on drug experimentation, protesting the Vietnam War, getting himself crowned Queen of the May in places like Stalinist Czechoslovakia. He and Peter Orlovsky were the only all-male couple to be listed as man and wife in *Who’s Who*. Allen liked getting naked when words failed him and also when they didn’t. (Gold) Though his “public personality has changed over the years—from the defiant and histrionic angry young man of the fifties to the bearded

and benign patriarch and political activist of the sixties and seventies—the personality has remained one that most literary people find hard to take” (Breslin 66). Ginsberg has been compared to Norman Mailer, a heterosexual misogynist and writer who expounds many of the same ideas Ginsberg puts forth in his poetry, but who has managed to be successful with the public by beginning his public appearances and confessional writings with self-humiliation but ending the sessions with self-promotion. He has been successful because he uses a “kind of intellectualizing most literary people respect,” whereas Ginsberg, who is as intelligent, less brutal, and more self-aware, has managed to alienate his critics: The man who took off his clothes at a Los Angeles poetry reading, who chanted “Om” during the gassings in Grant Park at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, and who has experimented with a wide variety of drugs, strikes those manning the literary armchairs as at best a figure of fun, or more likely a threat to western civilization. Ginsberg’s role as a public figure has been part of his attempt to reassert the romantic role of the poet as prophet; one result of it has been that his genuine literary talents and more admirable personal qualities have been obscured. . . partly because of the distractions of shocking language and matter—drugs, madness, suicide, homosexuality, incest. (66-67) Society’s fear of homosexuals, its false perception of these individuals as depraved or sick, colors much of the literary criticism written by those who were not part of what came to be known as the “Beat Generation.” The “beat” critics, who for the most part, wrote glowing reviews of “Howl,” were personal friends and often lovers of Ginsberg’s. As such, their criticism has been dismissed as of no valid consequence by “objective” critics. John

Tytell, in his book *Naked Angels*, states that Ginsberg's critics had difficulty recognizing the direction of his poetry, which was actually a voyage inside the mind, where what Jack Kerouac, another beat poet and friend of Ginsberg's, called the "unspeakable visions of the individual" lie. In Tytell's opinion, these narrowly focused critics had trouble coping with anything not in the "recognizable formal contours like the sonnet, the dramatic monologue, or the brief lyric." Ginsberg's refusal to focus on one singular topic or situation has resulted in his critics' refusal to recognize any literary merit in his work. (218-219). Some of Ginsberg's main detractors see his work as merely a vehicle for delivering a ranting, apocalyptic prophecy from the mouth of a drug-crazed beatnik. These people left a critical trail throughout the sixties and seventies that demonstrated the accepted public opinion about "Howl." Once, when Ginsberg and Orlovsky invited the Russian Delegation to attend a poetry reading, this group, the "stolid descendents of Mayakovsky stiffly rose and filed out of the room" just as Ginsberg was passionately reading from his *Moloch* section. According to his unsympathetic critics, it was a symbolic lesson in the politics of the world" (106). Thomas Merrill, author of a book on Ginsberg for the Twayne American Writers Series, stated that Ginsberg's poetry may have been therapy for his homosexuality, but he did not recognize the work as art. He consistently accused the poet of "exploiting this or that device, and finds it difficult to digest Ginsberg's excesses" (219). Likewise, poet and Professor John Hollander, also a friend of Ginsberg's, angrily reviewed Ginsberg's "howl," finding an "utter lack of decorum of any kind in his dreadful little volume" (296-298). A *Sewanee Review* article by James Dickey acknowledged

Ginsberg's "confused but believable passion for values," but still found the poem "utterly meaningless" and filled with disgusting, perverted filth (519). Few critics could find enough positive value in the poem to speak on its behalf. Basically, they were telling Ginsberg his words were all wrong, according to the New Critical theories of the day. Even though he practiced it at Columbia, the New Criticism theories incensed Ginsberg, who did not believe a poem could be broken down into separate words, dissected and reassembled for true meaning. For Ginsberg, understanding could only come from taking in the entire poem at once, digesting the "expansive scope and surreal leaps" at once. This would require defining a whole new category of poetry, something the critics were prepared to do—at least not for Ginsberg's work. Michael Rumaker, who reviewed "Howl" for the *Black Mountain Review*, disparaged Ginsberg's work, utilizing the same New Critical concepts Ginsberg so despised. Rumaker said the poem was especially corrupted by "sentimentality, bathos, Buddha, and hollow talk of eternity . . . the poem was uncontained, its language cumbersome and hysterical, but its most unforgivable quality was that it tried to use art to induce spiritual values" (230). The New Criticism had no model with which critics could judge the sincerity of an author's work. The New Critical theorists didn't understand (or care) that these words came from Ginsberg's very soul, pouring forth everything he had hidden from his father and the world, his fears about himself, his political beliefs, his sexuality, and a sharp fear of rejection. With the help of the obscenity trial and the scathing reviews of prejudiced critics, Ginsberg's work became enormously popular, as hundreds rushed to discover what could be so bad as to elicit all the hysteria

in the media and in the courts. Once out, the book found an audience ready and eager for it. The notoriety brought to *Howl and Other Poems* by the trial assured it wide distribution. This was the first national publicity of any sort given the Beats. It offered a foretaste of what was to come and gave a clear indication that the only real interest of the press in Ginsberg's poetry "was and always would be prurient" (Cook 65). The Whitman/Ginsberg Legacy

In many ways, Ginsberg carried on the legacy of Whitman, taking seriously the admonition that "The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it," and he has realized the truth of Whitman's claim that "I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me? I follow you whoever you are from the present hour. My words itch at your ears till you understand then." Ginsberg fully understood what Whitman wanted to convey and what Whitman had done to break down the barriers for future poets (Pettit 47). His open discussion of the body, sexuality, and the conventions of everyday life paved the way for writers like Ginsberg—writers who also wanted the freedom to discuss any and all topics pertinent to the lives of individuals in society, regardless of social status.

While Whitman wasn't as direct as Ginsberg in describing his intimate thoughts, his depictions were nonetheless graphic for the time period: I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning; You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me, And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart, And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet...(Whitman 12) These lines were received with the same shock and disgust as Ginsberg's line concerning those "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly

motorcyclists, and screamed with joy” (Ginsberg 4). Ginsberg did not see any reason why he should not be allowed the freedom to continue Whitman’s frank discussion of sex and American life in the voice of the modern American: “ I am a citizen,” he said. “ I pay my taxes and I want the opinions, the political and social ideas and emotions of my art to be free from government censorship. I petition for my right to exercise liberty of speech guaranteed by the constitution” (Calman). Whitman might have admired the unabashed stance Ginsberg took by expressing his feelings and beliefs, “ unafraid of his communist leanings, unafraid of jail, unafraid of his homosexuality, unafraid to live his life as he saw fit,” for Whitman, too, chose to live his life on the “ fringes of society” He might have joined Ginsberg in saying, “ America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (Ginsberg 219). Ginsberg continued to carry on what he believed was Whitman’s legacy, writing to his father, Whitman long ago complained that unless the material power of America was leavened by some kind of spiritual infusion, we would wind up among the fabled damned . . . Only way out is individuals taking responsibility and saying what they actually feel—which is an enormous human achievement in any society. That’s just what we [Beat writers] as a group have been trying to do. (Long)Ginsberg believed he had a connection with Whitman; they shared a vision of America as it should be—a place of equal freedom for all, accepting of diversity as well as similarity. Critics today, while beginning to warm to the idea of freedom of thought and expression, still vilify the works of Whitman and Ginsberg on occasion, as do many members of society who, cloaking their homophobia in the respectability of religion, strive to suppress the works of these two poets in

the secondary schools in order to “protect the innocence of their children” (Silvey). These parents approach school boards, librarians, and parent/teacher organizations with requests for censorship of the materials they deem harmful to the minds of school-age children. According to Brian Silvey, a former superintendent of a small-town Missouri high school, there have been several requests for both authors to be removed from the classroom reading lists. Teachers who have attempted to teach the poetry of Whitman and Ginsberg have, without fail, been called to the office for a conference with either parents, or church pastors, or both. Silvey said, “The poem “Howl” has never been taught in this school because of the language and the homosexuality. On two occasions, “Song of Myself” was removed from the course lesson plans after parents learned the poem contained homosexual references. The superintendent said, “We have a large number of devout Christian parents in this community, all of whom are voters, and the school board, when faced with several irate parents, will always choose to pull the work and substitute something else.” He added, “We have no desire to offend the religious morals of our community members, or interfere with the religious upbringing of our students” (Silvey). Librarians in several local schools have admitted using white-out on several poems by Ginsberg, deleting the offensive language and references to homosexuality in order to keep the books on the shelf: “Sometimes, a little censorship is preferable to pulling the entire work,” (Silvey). Fortunately, some noted literary critics have managed to get a strong sense of what is right with the poetry of Whitman and Ginsberg. For instance, Helen Vendler has said, “Ginsberg is responsible for loosening the breath of American poetry at mid-century” (qtd

in Hart). She believes he has earned a respectable place in American poetry by continuing in the same vein as the great Whitman, who invited us to “loose the stop from your throat.” This allusion to Whitman aggravated Jeffrey Hart who disagrees intensely with Vendler. Hart scoffed at Ginsberg’s idea of the “best minds” of his generation. He claimed Ginsberg’s idea of a “best mind” included William Burroughs, “Allen’s friend and mentor, author of the drug-drenched *Naked Lunch*.” He called Burroughs an “emotionally arid homosexual who loathed women and thought them full of smelly secretions” yet married one. Hart goes on to suggest Burroughs may have killed his wife on purpose when he “concocted a party stunt, a ‘William Tell,’ in which he shot a glass of water off her head with a revolver. Of course, he missed and blew her brains out, and the Mexican courts let him off with a firearms accident report” (Hart). Hart did not bother to mention that Burroughs had to flee to Tangiers to avoid prosecution, and that he did not return to the United States for fifteen years. While Hart gives Whitman credit for writing immensely rich technical verses, “full of biblical rhythms and echoes of the Homeric epics, as well as . . . devices such as anaphora, epistrophe, apostrophe, extended metaphor, doubling, and so on,” he finds Ginsberg’s poem is a mere repetition of endless negatives with “assorted escapes from thought and consciousness. He goes on to compare the homosexuality in the two poets’ works. Whitman’s homosexuality is “Greek and athletic” while Ginsberg’s is “literally dirty,” despising the normalcy supporters of “gay rights” sought. For Ginsberg, Hart said, mental instability is holy, rather than a miserable condition. There is nothing in Ginsberg’s poetry of the reverence Whitman felt for his country or his fellow man. Hart apologizes for

disagreeing with Vendler's respected opinion, but adds, "I have to say that I judge Allen's body of work to be very weak, both as vision and as writing, weak to the point of nullity" (Hart). Hart is not alone in his narrow-minded opinions, other critics have continued in the same vein, perpetuating the same homophobic fears that encompassed the poets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps the twenty-first century will be the age of freedom of thought and expression, and the era in which both Whitman and Ginsberg's work will be studied and praised individually for the thoughts, emotions, and personal truths laid bare therein rather than vilified and rejected because of the sexual preference of the author.

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