



Howl, by Allen Ginsberg

In A Nutshell

Note: Before getting into the details of Howl, we believe it is important to provide the following disclaimer. We here at Shmoop agree with one of Howl's earliest advocates, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, that the poem is a work of "redeeming social importance." In this guide, we do not sidestep or gloss over the most controversial parts of Howl, as that would detract from the experience of learning about it. If you find so-called "foul language" and frank discussions of sexuality and drug use to be offensive, this might not be the poem for you.

The story of the first public reading and publication of *Howl* has acquired mythic importance and may count as one of the major events in 20th century literary history. In 1955, Allen Ginsberg was living in Berkeley, California, having moved from New York. He had recently quit his job as a market research assistant. One of his major accomplishments in this field was the writing of a killer jingle for Ipana toothpaste (source). By this point in his life, Ginsberg had already traveled widely, been kicked out of school for writing obscenities on a window, taken many drugs, been arrested, graduated from Columbia University with a literature degree, come out as gay, had a visionary experience involving the British poet William Blake, undergone therapy at a psychiatric institute, lived with a mentally unstable mother, mingled with the most famous poets of the day, and much more. *Howl* is intensely influenced by all of these events.

Ginsberg dedicated *Howl* to Carl Solomon, a writer he met during the eight months he spent at

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the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute. Ginsberg had been deeply disturbed to learn that Solomon had undergone shock therapy to treat his depression (source). Ginsberg believed that madness was often mistakenly used by middle class society to explain genius or brilliance. The third section of the poem is addressed directly to Solomon.

Ginsberg recited *Howl* aloud for the first time at an informal event at Gallery Six, a small art gallery in San Francisco. The reception was overwhelming. More than 150 people showed up and drank out of jugs of wine distributed by fellow Beat writer Jack Kerouac (source). (You can listen to Ginsberg read *Howl* on Poets.org.)

The buzz surrounding the event caught the attention of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a poet who founded the now-famous City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. Ferlinghetti published *Howl* in 1956, but it was declared obscene by the government, particularly for its depiction of gay men. Ferlinghetti won the trial, as the poem was declared to be of "redeeming social importance" (source). The controversy surrounding *Howl* launched the Beat movement into the public consciousness, and it was a major inspiration for the 1960s sub-culture. Along with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, it is the most famous literary work to come out of this movement. Ginsberg also wrote a "Footnote to Howl" in 1955 that is worth reading.

In terms of subject matter, *Howl* is exactly what the title suggests. It's a raw, aggressive, painful, sad shout directed at the culture that Ginsberg believed had destroyed many of his best friends. Chances are you have never read anything like it. The poem was never meant to be the kind of work that would be picked apart by scholars in universities. It was meant to be a shot of adrenaline straight into the listener's bloodstream. Many of the cultural issues it discusses remain controversial even today. For example, in 2007 a New York radio station was prevented from airing a reading of the poem because of worries that it would receive huge fines for each of the poem's "dirty words." What's even more ironic: the reading was set to

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mark the 50th anniversary of the *Howl* censorship trial, in which *Howl* was declared to be not obscene (source).

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Why was this poem censored?
- 2 Is there a point to Ginsberg's outrage, or is he just letting off steam?
- 3 What is the poem's attitude toward religion? Would you consider this to be a "religious poem"?

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