

# **Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation**

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## **Abstract**

This study deals with the modern American poet Allan Ginsberg who lived between the years 1926 and 1997 . He belongs to a group of poets who became known after the second world war as " The Beat Generation " The group included the poet Jack Kerouac who was the first to use the term " The Beat Generation " in 1948 . This group of poets called for going back to essential sources in addition to the use of spoken language and shocking imagery , Moreover , they showed concern in subjects related to sex , drugs and hallucination as it is clear in Ginsberg's poetry . These poets show a common concern in spiritual and political subjects which came as a reaction to the fatal conditions under which people lived after the second world war and American's involvement in it and in Vietnam.

## **Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation**

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) is one of the modern American poets who belongs to the group of poets who became known after the second world war as "*The Beats*" or "*the Beat Generation*" The group of these poets included, in addition to Ginsberg , such poets as Jack Kerouac, William Everson, Gregory Corso, and others. It was Jack Kerouac who used the term "The Beat Generation" for the first time in 1948. John Clellon Holmes " article in *New York Times* entitled " This is the Beat Generation " <sup>(1)</sup> came four years later.

In that article Holmes states "Beat implies the feeling of having been used , of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind and ultimately , of soul; a feeling of being reduced to bed-rock of consciousness" <sup>(2)</sup> . He emphasizes the fact that these poets share some common attitudes and interests that bind them together stating that they share the common feature of going back to "essential sources – in our national experience and in our earlier literature to be renewed. " <sup>(3)</sup> In addition to this Americanness of spirit that those poets shared they emphasized the use of spoken rhythm of American language, the use of open , vulgar

language, shocking imagery and diction in addition to showing a special interest in sexual ( and homosexual ) subjects, drugs, and hallucination as it is clear in Ginsberg's poetry. Geoffery Thurly refers to the attempts of various poets since the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* " to return poetry to a so-called conversational tone or speech-tone " <sup>(4)</sup> and he ascribes this to the probable reason that " America had no tradition of cultivated poetic speech" <sup>(5)</sup> like the British. M.L. Rosenthal, on the other hand tries to relate the use of such kind of diction by the generations during and after the Second World War to "an increasingly open acceptance of sexual relationships, including homosexual ones, that are not only frank and easy but inimical to the cultivation of intellectual and moral vigor or fastidiousness" <sup>(6)</sup> .

In addition to this concern with creating a new poetic language these poets have other common concerns : spiritual and political. <sup>(7)</sup> No doubt, the reactions of these poets, which ranged from mystical attitude to Buddhism and Hinduism in spiritual attitudes and from anarchism to conservatism and communism in politics, came as a result of the fatal condition of people after such a great an event as the Second World War and America's direct involvement in it and in Vietnam. So drug addictism and homosexuality were thought to constitute both a ran away and a source of inspiration for a different kind of feeling of frustration opposed to the spirit and feeling of prosperity and hope expressed in the nineteenth century by Whitman. At any rate , with the Beat Generation, as well as by other groups like the Black Mountain Group, and San Francisco Group , a new sort of American literature or perhaps it is better to say poetry-emerged characterised by its Americanism in spirit as different from British. American provincialism , as Geoffrey Thurley calls it, <sup>(8)</sup> was established by the mid – twentieth century and thanks to these movements and poets, American literature established the example of literature which was no more an imitator or follower of British or European literatures. On the contrary it set the example to be followed by those literatures. It established its own distinctive features which were purely American coming as a result of , not following other literatures, but as a reflection of the American life itself.

Back to Ginsberg, we find him a representative of the new kind of poetry which developed after the Second World War. In him one can witness Whitman's influence on his poetry especially in what concerns the use of colloquial language, although Whitman's aim was different in that it aimed at glorifying the common man. With Ginsberg, as with the other poets of the Beats, the aim was to shock. "Ginsberg's first poetry to come to public notice" Rosenthal affirms " did rely on rhetorical shock". <sup>(9)</sup> The source of the shock was definitely the use of the gross vocabulary of vulgar speech" <sup>(10)</sup> .

The best example of his poetry in which he achieved this effect is his poem entitled 'HOWL' which appeared in his book *Howl and Other Poems (1956)*. In the opening line of the poem the theme is stated in a direct and striking way :

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked .....

As Rosenthal indicates "this poetry is not 'rational discourse' like that we find in almost all other American literature of dissent". <sup>(11)</sup> It is a cry of disgust against a whole culture. In fact the title of the poem was intended to give the impression of a very strong cry resulting from dissatisfaction. It is a criticism, both political and social, of the modern American culture or civilisation which is seen as a mad civilisation destroying the people, especially the intellectuals, and the values and beliefs under the guise of commercial prosperity and success and technological and military development and power. The persons who are destroyed are listed in the poem. The list includes a wide number of various person and all the lines of the poem are related to one another by the word "who" .

Who were burned alive in their innocent flannel  
suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the  
tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the  
nitroglycerin shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the  
mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down  
by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,

Who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually  
happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the  
ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not  
even one free beer,

Here we have a real scene of practising what is normally taken to be inhibited or unaccepted open behaviour. It is displayed in the most open manner.

Who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of  
beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell  
off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall  
and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cant  
and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,

Who sweetened the snatches of a million girls

trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning  
but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing  
buttocks under barns and naked in the lake.

Who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad  
stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems....

Moreover, all those people who represent or are related to the ideas of drug addictism (narcotism), homosexuality, hallucination, political protest, police authority, and fear of various things including the war and the atomic experiments are all gathered in the poem. Ginsberg wants to show that these are the people who live in America; they are victims who have no power to change the conditions under which they are living. So the only outlet left for them is to destroy themselves Those people.

Who lounged hungry and lonesome through  
Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the  
brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a  
hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa.

Who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico  
leaving behind nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the  
lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago.

Who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the  
F.B.I in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their  
dark skin passing out.

Who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting  
the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism...

The poem was published first in three parts and later a fourth part was added to it. It remains to ask if thus poem is a representation of Ginsberg and the poets of The Beat Generation, what is the aim behind it ?

To say that Ginsberg was expressing his personal voice is to overlook the fact, because, although there is a certain amount of personal feeling in the poem, yet mostly it is a reflection of the feelings of a whole generation. Ginsberg suffered from personal problems especially mental health problem, and from family problems seen in his disagreement with his father and the madness of his mother and he reflected some of these in

his poems, yet in general he was the voice of his generation. The aim behind the poem was perhaps to make the world hear the cry of protest.

### Notes

- 1- Lee Bartlett, ed., 'Introduction' to *The Beats : Essays in Criticism*, N.C. : Mc Farland, 1981), P.2.
- 2- Ibid., P.3.
- 3- John Clellon Holmes, 'Unscrewing the Locks: The Beat Poets' in *The Beats : Essays in Criticism*, P.6.
- 4- Geoffrey Thurly, *The American Moment : American Poetry in the Mid\_Century*, (London : Edward Arnold, 1977), P.172.
- 5- Ibid., P.173.
- 6- M.L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), P91.
- 7- See Bartlett , Ibid., P.3.
- 8- See Thurly, *The American Moment*, PP.3-34.
- 9- Rosenthal, *the New Poets*, P.91.
- 10- Ibid.
- 11-M.L. Roesnthal, *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction*, (New York : Oxford University Press, 1969)., P.267.

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#### ملخص البحث :

ان هذا البحث يتناول الشاعر الامريكي الحديث ( ألان غينسبرغ ) الذي عاش بين ١٩٢٦ ، ١٩٩٧ والذي ينتمي الى مجموعة من الشعراء الذين عرفوا بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية باسم " جيل البيت " قد ضمت المجموعة اضافة الى الشاعر غينسبرغ الشاعر جاك كيرونوك الذي كان اول من استخدم تسمية جيل البيت في العام ١٩٤٨ وقد دعا هؤلاء الشعراء الى العودة الى الجذور فضلا عن استخدام اللغة اليومية غير المنمقة والصور الشعرية غير المألوفة . بجانب اضهارهم اهتماما بالمواضيع ذات العلاقة بالجنس والهوسه وامور اخرى كما يبدو من شعر غينسبرغ . كما ويشترك شعراء هذه المجموعة في الاهتمام بالمواضيع السياسية والروحية كرد فعل طبيعي للظروف القاتلة التي عاش الناس في ظلها بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية وتورط امريكا فيها وفي فيتنام .

