

Observation of Religion and Drug Aspects in Ginsberg Literature: Focusing On *Howl* and *Kaddish*

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As an important figure of the Beat Generation, the literature works of Allen Ginsberg have a huge influence on contemporary literature. Ever since the sensational publishing of *Howl* in the mid-1950s, the poetry of Ginsberg has been recognized for the language use which expresses violence, lusts, taboos; as well as the combination of large numbers of imaginaries that seem unrelated. In Ginsberg's works, the components of religions and drugs are considered as large and important parts and help to express the theme or emotions of the poems. The interpretation of those elements is related to Ginsberg's personal memory and emotions, hence, in many of his works, Ginsberg had different attitudes towards them, and used them as different methods of expression.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg, the Beat Generation, religion, drug

Introduction

Ginsberg lived in the mid-20th century, which is also called the Beat Generation. From this derogatory name, the characteristic of the era can be revealed: people got drunk, took drugs, and had fun. Unlike the earlier generation represented by Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell, whose literatures focused on the end of the American dream and the concerns about the future in a more pessimistic and gloomy style, their works focused more on the madness at that very moment, venting their desire for resistance and liberation in a more intense way (Raskin, 2004, p. 4). Those works do not only show the release of individuals, but also complain about the political condition. Literature works of the Beat Generation are often filled with elements of drugs and violence, and even the authors' own life experiences are infected by those: Burroughs shot his wife in an accident; Ginsberg witnessed his mother's suffering from mental illness when he was a child, in later life he entered a mental hospital; Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac were all involved in the murder in 1944 about two other people in their small circle, in which Kammerer was murdered by Carr, who has been Ginsberg's boyfriend at that time (though none of them claimed to others about their sexuality), because Carr felt enough of him pestering over years; not to mention drugs that they all have been addicted to.

One manifestation of the taboo elements in Ginsberg's works is that the publication of *Howl* almost immediately aroused a long-standing controversy about the description of "obscenity" in it. In 1956, Ginsberg had to revise it because the British company refused to print to poem word by word due to the use of its words, although Ginsberg himself believed that "the first thoughts are the best thoughts": in some extent, his first

thoughts expressed himself in a freer and more direct way. *Howl* even caused an examination of obscenity by ACLU a few years after it was published (Raskin, 2004, pp. 212-213).

The obvious factors that influenced Ginsberg's works were the World War II, the cold war as well as the events about atomic bomb at that time. This era was once called the atomic age, which shows the deep influence of atom bomb. During the Korean War in 1950, the United State suffered a great loss including tens of thousands deaths and injuries, the war ended with the threats of nuclear weapons, but none of the countries dared to truly conduct atomic assault, people lived under fear and pressure, with their society deeply affected, which brought craziness and rebellion. Kerouac with epic lyric, Burroughs with his conspiracy and paranoia, to view and describe this era. Ginsberg described himself as a communist, and he expressed his dissatisfaction with the political structure of America (Raskin, 2004, p. 170). About the element of atomic bombs, he once expressed his opinion directly in his poem: "Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" (Ginsberg, 2007, America).

Although often been considered together with Whitman, Rimbaud's influence on Ginsberg's works is also worth noticing. Before Ginsberg entered Columbia University, he had no great interest in the concept of a poet (Raskin, 2004, p. 56). The turning point was his acquaintance with several other people of the Beat Generation. Carr, who had a stronger emotional connection with Ginsberg, introduced the poems of Rimbaud to him. After that, the idea of becoming a famous poet became his pursuit. In other words, Rimbaud is an important part of influences on Ginsberg's life, and one of the initial influences that Ginsberg received as a poet: being rebellious to his country and religion, Rimbaud enlarged Ginsberg's thoughts on "crime, madness, and youth" (Raskin, 2004, p. 64) ("D'eux, j'ai: l'idolâtrie et l'amour du sacrilège; — oh! tous les vices, colère, luxure") (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 124), and became his pursuit at that time. Rimbaud even appeared in his poems many times as some kind of image: for example, in *Pertussin*, he was associated with drugs and nostalgia, while in *Car Crash*, it is likely that the figure referred to Ginsberg's old love, Carr (Ginsberg, 2007).

Albeit almost all of his poems are full of taboo elements, Ginsberg did not show a rigid madness. After the publication of *Howl*, Ginsberg tried not to be trapped in his former poems or to repeat what he has written before, but to explore something new. He tried to express differently (Raskin, 2004). These taboo elements can be regarded as a special expression and image of Ginsberg, rather than the same content with a high frequency of appearance, because in his different poems, Ginsberg expresses different emotions and main points with the elements (Ginsberg, 2007). In *Iron Horse* and *Siesta in Xbalba*, hallucination and nostalgia were superimposed on them with some kind of tranquility; in *Howl*, they released madness; in *Kaddish*, Ginsberg showed the memory of his mother; in *Many Loves*, love was expressed; in *Ballade of Poisons*, there mingled some satire towards politics and society; in *Lack Love*, these elements more indirectly and implicitly expressed the nostalgia and sadness of thinking of his old love. It is also worth noting that these taboo elements are not indispensable parts of Ginsberg's poems, but just a tendency of expression. This is shown by the fact that those poems which do not contain such elements can also express Ginsberg's feelings smoothly: for example, the scene described in *A Dream* (Ginsberg, 2007) could be drawn out with drugs as in his previous poems, but Ginsberg chose to use dreams, which better expressed his feelings of confusion and fear, nostalgia, and finally sublimation.

Ginsberg himself liked to add a large portion of description to images into his poems, he used those seemingly unrelated phrases to form a new concept, such as "hydrogen jukebox" (Raskin, 2004, p. xvi), and to express himself with it. This explains the religious and drug images which take a large part of his poems. But in

the meanwhile it should be noted that the combination of these images is not single gorgeous rhetoric, instead, each one of them implied a point to support the theme or emotion expressed by his poems.

Religious Elements

Ginsberg was not religious. However, religious elements, whether metaphors or direct allusions to mythical plots or characters, were not uncommon in his poems. One explanation for this is that Ginsberg wanted his poems to have a wider readership in society, whilst at that time poets tended to write poems that could only be understood by other poets (Raskin, 2004, pp. 86-87). In this way, some more widely known concepts such as religious concepts could make his works more resonant. However, Ginsberg did not want to be easily understood. He created *Howl* (Ginsberg, 2007), which was meant to appeal to the “secret or hermetic tradition of art” (Raskin, 2004, p. xii), thus those which he added into his poems were all somehow coded.

In accordance with Ginsberg’s usual style of writing, the appearance of these religious elements was often accompanied by descriptions of craziness. The image of the sacred ones collided with the madness of hedonism, showing the release and desecration. These often appear in Ginsberg’s poems as nouns or allusions. His attitude towards these mythical characters seems to have no difference with towards common and ordinary people, he used some insulting adjectives or associated them with some rather obscene behaviors or scenes that were not widely accepted by society. There are two main reasons for this: one is that Ginsberg was not religious, so there was no respect or admiration; while the other is that he was influenced by the other members of the Beat Generation after entering Columbia University. Another possible reason for his intense rebellion and disdain for religion is that Ginsberg has realized his homosexuality at a young age. At first, he was confused and even somehow self-loathing, but after the several years he spent at Columbia University, he gradually accepted it (Raskin, 2004, pp. 48-49). This conflict inside him was caused by the discrimination against heterosexuals of the society at that time: a typical case is the concept of “honor slaying”, it is quite telling, since it existed as a legal concept, which means that such discrimination was actually led by the government, and these unequal treatments of human rights in law have intensified the social discrimination against homosexuality. In a deeper perspective, the fundamental source of this social discrimination came from its culture. The opposition to homosexuality was explicitly mentioned in Bible: “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination... Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things” (Bible, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 18:24). To some extent, such repression caused the rather rebellious idea of Ginsberg, which collided with and was also promoted by the era called the “American adolescent” (Raskin, 2004, p. 225), and aroused his disdain for religion.

This intense rebellion and desecration to religion were shown incisively and vividly in *Howl*. In the beginning, it is relatively mild: “meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*), a rather indirect description is used, which reflected the disdain and trampling on those religious rituals. However, as the poem went more and more to the core, Ginsberg’s depiction gradually changed from people’s idleness and wandering in confusion into madness and enjoyment. The religious elements became the symbol of those ‘sacred’, and was surrounded by madness, just as he wrote in the beginning that people were “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*). They became those being desecrated: “who blew and were blown by those human seraphim” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*), the behavior that was considered taboo combined with angels from heaven. At the same time, it is worth noting the phrase “human” before “Seraphim”.

Ginsberg built a close connection between the mythical creature and human beings, which reduced its inaccessible holiness, and at a deeper level, it mingled the reality with those unreal, to show the chaos, disorder, and madness, which is exactly what *Howl* was to express. In the ending of the first section, Ginsberg called the three goddesses of fate “three old shrews” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*), it is not abrupt: firstly, it is because of Ginsberg’s consistent disdain to the concepts from Greek mythology; secondly, the female images in *Howl* were almost all “shrews” (Raskin, 2004, p. 148). In addition, his irreverent evaluation of the goddesses of fate may also contain something personal. He mentioned the three goddesses to explain how had people lost their “love boys”, and with his previous sentence “blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*), these details are consistent with the murder he was involved in six years before. It is likely that when he was writing, he remembered his former lover, Carr, and their separation, and he linked this to fate. In the paragraph (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*), “the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb” was obviously referring to Clotho, who weaves the thread of life, creates human life, and takes charge of the future; the clue is the word “womb”, where life begins. “The one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman’s loom” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*) seems more explicitly and directly referring to Atropos, who cuts off the loom of life, takes charge past and death. Among the three goddesses described, the intensity of Ginsberg’s emotions and hostility towards Atropos was particularly strong. One reason is that it was mentioned at the end of the sentence and presented a gradual release of the emotional description; the other possible reason is that Ginsberg was thinking of the murder in 1944, as well as in 1950 when his close friend Joan Adams (Burroughs) had been killed by her husband Burroughs, and the death of several his other friends (Phil White, William Cannastra) (Raskin, 2004, p. 144). He might be writing in memory of those he lamented the ruthlessness and suddenness of death and the drastic change of fate. After determining the meaning of the two above, the goddess who was mentioned first and is also the most obscurely was can also be determined: “the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*) refers to Lachesis, who maintains the loom of life and controls people’s life. The description linking two unrelated words together, namely “heterosexual” and “dollar”, is one of the embodiments of Ginsberg’s style of adding irrelevant images to his poems. The link also reflects the release and the satire of the discrimination against homosexuals. In the second section, which is also the climax of the whole poem, Ginsberg’s release of madness became crazier and more passionate. He used a whole section of exclamations to express the madness of the city with the reputation of the name “Moloch” (Ginsberg, 2007, *Howl*). Moloch was recorded in the Bible as a god who was worshipped by ancient Canaanites, recognized by the characteristics of that parents burn their children to sacrifice them to Moloch (Bible, Jeremiah 32:35): “to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech” (“Molech” is another way of spelling for Moloch), it is obvious that this was recognized as some abomination by Bible: “that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin” (Bible, Jeremiah 32:35), “thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire unto Molech” (Bible, Leviticus 18:21). The word later gave rise to another meaning of it: something that requires terrible and appalling sacrifice. Using the concept of “Moloch”, Ginsberg was describing his generation, the beat generation, which has been distorted and changed by the era like the victims of a war, they fell into craziness and pain, enjoyment, and confusion. In addition, the reason why Ginsberg chose the image of “Moloch” to help him express was probably related to his mother, Naomi Ginsberg was Jewish, and a sect that believes in Moloch came from the Jewish area. It was likely that such a connection made Ginsberg once heard of Moloch,

and this connection with his mother is very likely to be the cause, since Ginsberg wrote about his mother in the first section of *Howl* (Ginsberg, 2007): “madhouse”, “Harlequin speech of suicide”, “demanding instantaneous lobotomy” and so forth.

To consider the figure of the three goddesses of fate, Ginsberg used their real name Parcae in *Kaddish* (Ginsberg, 2007): “12 riding the bus at nite thru New Jersey, have left Naomi to Parcae in Lakewood’s haunted house”. This difference has a huge connection with the theme of *Kaddish*. At his mother’s funeral, Naomi Ginsberg was denied kaddish, an important part of traditional Jewish funerals, because there were not enough Jewish men to form a minyan (Raskin, 2004, p. 166). So Ginsberg wrote a poetic prayer for her, which was why he used the Jewish term “Kaddish” as the title. Therefore, as a poem that was written in the memory of his mother, Ginsberg expressed his emotion in it sentimentally and nostalgically. But of course, Ginsberg’s unique style of the components of taboos does not disappear in it, instead, its appearance expresses a gloomy madness. Although he was sad about his mother’s death, he did not scold fate and death the way he did in *Howl*: one reason is that he respected his mother’s religions as much as he could; the other reason is that albeit Ginsberg felt sad, he knew that there had to be a closure (he had witnessed his mother’s suffering of the illness and pain many times in his childhood), and he could but only to accept it. It is also worth considering the similarity between Ginsberg and the one who had important enlightenments to him, Rimbaud. While Ginsberg attacked the sacred images, Rimbaud’s description of the similar image was rather to praise. He wrote about the mystery of death, the mercy of these deities and their “protection” of people, which was what was yearned by those who sought the truth: “ô Mort mystérieuse, ô sœur de charité” (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 78). The similarity, especially with *Kaddish*, is the rupture of people’s obsessions (“Le déchirer de leur auguste obsession”) (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 78), people’s pursuits being abandoned, their life being eroded by solitudes (“Il sent marcher sur lui d’atroces solitudes”) (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 78), as well as the weakness and calling of people’s souls (“t’appelle en son âme et ses membres malades”) (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 78). In addition, the second section of *Howl* (Ginsberg, 2007), in which the phrase “Moloch” was repeated, can also be found to be somehow inspired by Rimbaud’s *Une Saison en Enfer*, the emotion and form, as well as the same desecration to sacredness, show the similarity and inheritance (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 129): “J’ensevelis les morts dans mon ventre Faim, soif, cris, danse, danse, danse, danse!” However, Rimbaud preferred to express in a more direct way (“Quelle sainte image attaque-t-on?”) (Rimbaud, 1984, p. 127), while Ginsberg expressed his passion with vivid and metaphorical descriptions but barely clear and conclusive statements.

Moreover, for elements of different religions, Ginsberg tended to use them to express different emotions and themes. The main religion to which Ginsberg showed his rebellion and aggression is Christianity, for example, those in *Howl* which are discussed above; and his attitude towards the religion from the eastern world was rather milder. As for Judaism, the emotions he expressed were irregular. The reason may be that in Ginsberg’s cognition, Judaism and his mother are somehow connected. The relationship between him and his mother was not always harmonious, since they had quarrels, but Ginsberg would still write poems for his mother after her death to commemorate her. Muslim religion often appears in Ginsberg’s expressions of some illusions, and mostly only for the purpose of showing a dreamy and unreal scene but without too much his intense craziness: in *Howl* (Ginsberg, 2007), he wrote of “who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated”, in *Iron Horse* (Ginsberg, 2007) there was “Mohammedans say / Jews

have no painting". Buddhism, like its dogma, often appears with the search for inner peace and detachment. Another influential factor for this is that Ginsberg spent several years in the east studying Buddhism. It can be inferred that Ginsberg's attitude towards Buddhism was almost the most moderate of all: "Buddha save me", "I hope Buddha's been there,/ Then we'll know if his mind appeared/ in all the directions of Space" (Ginsberg, 2007, Angkor Wat); "Needed a Buddha enlightened I be enlightened / a bed to sleep in, a grave to cover my ashes" (Ginsberg, 2007, They're All Phantoms of My Imagining). In these, he sought for peace and some gentle release, even atonement. The tranquility brought about by Buddhism can not be concealed even by the images of the craziness such as drugs: in *Pertussin* (Ginsberg, 2007), although it started with the description of Ginsberg's consistent style which has similar images with the ones in *Howl*, the ending sentence "shines with Brahmanic cool moonshine/ aftertaste, midnight Nostalgia" was short but far enough to give the whole poem a sad and peaceful atmosphere.

Drug Elements

Compared with religion, drugs are much more well known in Ginsberg's poetry as that is one of the factors for which Ginsburg was famous. Drugs are one of the representations of this era. All of the figures of the Beat Generation, in other words, all of those who were close to Ginsberg, have been exposed to drugs, the very act of taking drugs was even one of the ways these people spent time together.

As a concept that contains madness and rebellion itself, drugs can easily express Ginsberg's idea clearly, without too many of those exquisite depictions to show a vivid scene. Therefore, the appearance and meaning of the elements of drugs are more obvious and straightforward in Ginsberg's poems. It can be roughly divided into two categories.

In some of the more typical poems of his, that is, those of more craziness and hysteria, Ginsberg mostly expressed the madness and release, in which drugs were mentioned to express the pleasure among the intense craziness. Most of the time, he simply mentioned the act of drug abuse, which combined with other images to express the ideas without too many words used. For example, in *Howl* (Ginsberg, 2007), drugs appeared as in a list of items: "with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls", and "their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication". In addition, beyond the poems themselves, their creation was closely related to the connection of Ginsberg and drugs. The experience brought by drugs enlarged his feelings and senses, which promoted the formation of his unique intensity and brought him some materials and experiences to write about. Many works of Ginsberg were written by him after he took drugs (Raskin, 2004).

In the poems in which he expressed himself in a more restrained or sentimental way, the emergence of drugs often has a deeper implication. In this case, the relatively quiet emotional atmosphere was inserted with the image of the rebellious madness such as drugs. The combination and conflict between the serenity and intensity provides his poems a kind of unique style and charm. In some of these situations, drugs were still used as a pronoun for madness. For example, in *Kaddish* (Ginsberg, 2007), Ginsberg imagined the scene of the time when his mother arrived in the United States from Russia for the first time, "eating the first poisonous tomatoes of America". The phrase "poisonous tomatoes" does not only refer to the drugs and tobacco as well as alcohol, which were floods in America at that time. It also has a spiritual metaphor, that is, the chaotic social situation in the United States at that time, including the war which ruined the spirits of a generation of people, and that caused the deprived

diversions of people, as addictive as drugs, but would ultimately destroy people's nerves and made them fall into irresistible madness. In other poems, drugs have become a path to the other world. With the dreamy hallucinations brought by drugs, Ginsberg was able to express his emotions in a symbolic aura but with realistic descriptions which he was good at. For example, *Pertussin* (Ginsberg, 2007), which was mentioned above, is mainly about the experience of taking drugs, there is the emergence of the two figures: "in Montmartre Rousseau daubing or Rimbaud arriving". Though at first sight, they seem to be illogical hallucinations brought about by drugs, to consider it together with the rather vague expression of nostalgia at the end of the poem, it can be inferred that they allude to the events and people from Ginsberg's past. Among them, Rimbaud may refer to the years during which he was in Columbia University, or to Carr, who was closely related to Rimbaud, because Ginsberg once said that there were only a few words to be known to understand Carr, and "Rimbaud" was one of those (Raskin, 2004).

Various kinds of drugs appeared in Ginsberg's works, these often lead to different emotions and expressions. To mention a few, Ginsberg has been taking amphetamines, many of the expression in *Howl* generated from his experience of getting "high on Peyote" albeit he was not taking it when he wrote it (Raskin, 2004, pp. 130-131, 163), and there was the appearance of pertussis and ether in *Pertussin* (Ginsberg, 2007).

It is worth noting that, as mentioned above, albeit an important concept that appeared in Ginsberg's works very often, the elements of drugs were not completely relied upon by Ginsberg. In some poems without drugs or in which drugs did not play a key role, Ginsberg was still capable to express the images of illusions and the madness smoothly. In a typical case, *Siesta in Xbalba* (Ginsberg, 2007), Ginsberg used dreams to achieve this purpose.

Conclusion

The common appearance of religious elements in Ginsberg's literature may be due to his wish for a wider readership. But at the same time, Ginsberg used them as codes to express himself implicitly. The description of craziness and desecration often accompanied religious images. There are three possible reasons for Ginsberg's rebellion against religion: First, Ginsberg himself was not religious; Second, the influence from the rest of the Beat Generation; Third, the homosexual identity. Ginsberg's attitudes towards religious figures were influenced by his personal experience, often his dissatisfaction with fate. Therefore, the same image appears differently in different poems. Ginsberg intended to use each religion to express different emotions, according to the tenets and dogmas of the religion, as well as his personal relationship with it.

The emotions and messages expressed via drugs were more diverse. Drug elements play an important role in Ginsberg's literature in terms of both his writing style and the composition of the poems. In some of the poems, drugs were combined with other similar images to depict the craziness and hysteria of the era. Ginsberg also used drugs to express himself in a restrained and sentimental way, in those poems drugs created a coexistence and conflict between serenity and intensity. In many cases, drugs also had metaphorical meanings. The mental experience of hallucinations and exaggerated sensations after taking drugs created a path for Ginsberg to express the symbolic meaning with realistic descriptions he was good at. Different kinds of drugs tend to express differently in Ginsberg's poems. Although drugs appeared very often in his poems, Ginsberg was not dependent on these elements, he also used conceptions other than drugs to express similar emotions

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