Howl

SUMMARY

I

The speaker says that he watched as the greatest thinkers of his lifetime were driven to insanity. They were terribly hungry, distraught, and naked, staggering through Black neighborhoods at sunrise, furiously searching for drugs.

They were angelic-looking bohemian men, craving an ancient sense of sacred communion with the night sky and the powerful force that seems to propel its stars.

Poor, ragged, sunken-eyed, and stoned, they sat smoking in the mystical-seeming darkness of cheap apartments, feeling like they were floating above their cities while thinking about jazz music.

They opened their minds to Heaven under the elevated subway train, and they had a vision of glowing Islamic angels moving slowly across apartment rooftops.

They went through college with calm, shining eyes, experiencing visions of the state of Arkansas and William Blake's dazzling, tragic poetry while surrounded by academics who studied war.

They were kicked out of their universities for being mentally ill, and for publishing dirty poetry about holes in skulls (or writing dirty poetry on the windows of skull-like campus buildings).

They huddled in their underwear in unkempt rooms, setting their money on fire in wastebaskets while believing they heard a terrifying presence on the other side of the wall.

They got arrested in Laredo, Texas with facial hair that looked like pubic hair (or with drugs hidden in their crotch area) while smuggling marijuana in their belts from Mexico to New York.

They performed fire-eating stunts (or drank lots of firewater, a.k.a. alcohol) in cheap hotels. Or they drank turpentine in a rundown New York City apartment complex nicknamed Paradise Alley, either killing themselves or purging their bodies nightly through dreams, drug use, nightmarish hallucinations, drinking, and endless sex with men.

They saw amazing dark streets full of thunder and imaginary lightning that flashed from Canada to Paterson, New Jersey, lighting up all the quiet space and time in between.

They got high on the drug called peyote in hallways; experienced mornings that felt like death in green, tree-lined backyards; nights partying on rooftops while drunk on wine; storefronts, neon, and blinking traffic lights on stoned joyrides through New York City boroughs; cosmic vibrations from the sun, moon, and trees in the windy winter twilight of Brooklyn; rants around garbage cans (or rants as worthless as garbage); and the gentle, powerful illumination of their own minds.

They gripped and rode subway trains for what seemed like forever, traveling from New York City's Battery Park to the New York borough of the Bronx (which was sacred to them) while high on amphetamines, until the sounds of train wheels and children brought them down from their high. They shook, vomited, and felt beaten-up and empty-headed in the sad light of the Bronx Zoo.

They spent all night in the dim light of a cafeteria called Bickford's, feeling as if they were sinking underwater, then left and drank bad beer in the afternoon in a lonely bar called Fugazzi's, listening to a jukebox whose sounds shook them like a hydrogen bomb.

They talked without stopping for seventy hours, roaming in New York City from parks to apartments to bars to Bellevue Hospital to museums to the Brooklyn Bridge.

They're a lost group of philosophical talkers who (literally or figuratively) leapt off city stoops, fire escapes, windowsills, the Empire State Building, or the moon.

They babbled, yelled, and whispered facts, recollections, and stories, such as memories of being visually stimulated (or kicked in the eyes) and being shocked (receiving shock treatment, feeling shell-shocked, etc.) in mental hospitals, prisons, and wars.

They word-vomited everything they knew for a week straight, their eyes shining, as if vomiting kosher meat onto the sidewalk.

They disappeared into the Zen Buddhism-like emptiness of New Jersey, leaving behind only some mysterious postcards of the convention hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

They went through withdrawal from heroin (a drug sourced from Asia and associated by the poet with Tangier, Morocco, where an addicted friend lived) in a sad furnished room in Newark, New Jersey. They sweated, ground their teeth (or writhed their bony limbs), and suffered migraine headaches.

They roamed rail yards at midnight, unsure where to go. They went somewhere, and no one was especially sad that they left.

They smoked in freight trains that barreled through snowy landscapes toward remote farms in the ancient night.

They studied the ancient philosopher Plotinus, the writer Edgar Allan Poe, and the Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, as well as telepathic communication and a mix of bebop jazz and Jewish mysticism, in order to understand the mystical cosmic vibrations they felt on the ground in Kansas.

They walked alone through Idaho streets, hoping to find mystical American Indian angels—angels in a literal, not metaphorical, sense.

They thought Baltimore's magical, rapturous glow was only a product of their insane imaginations.

They climbed impulsively into limousines with Chinese men, on small-town Oklahoma roads with streetlights, because they were cold and wet on a rainy winter midnight.

They traveled slowly through Houston, Texas, alone and hungry, searching for jazz music, sex, or cheap food. They accompanied an extremely smart Spanish person for a while, talking about America and eternity, but these subjects proved impossibly difficult, so they sailed to Africa instead.

They vanished around Mexican volcanoes (possibly jumping into the craters on purpose). The only remaining traces of them were the shadowy memory of their blue jeans and the poetry they left behind, like volcanic dust and lava, in the fire-damaged city of Chicago.

They turned up again on the west coast of the U.S., conducting investigations into the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They had beards, shorts, wide peaceful eyes, and attractive dark (or tanned) skin, and they handed out political pamphlets that made no sense.

They burned their arms with cigarettes as a gesture of protest against capitalism, which they felt was as dangerous and addictive as tobacco (and clouded people's judgment like cloudy tobacco smoke).

They handed out radical Communist literature in Union Square in New York City. They cried and tore their clothes off as approaching police sirens wailed like sirens at Los Alamos (an atomic bomb testing site), and wailed down Wall Street as the Staten Island Ferry made similar sounds.

They collapsed in tears in large, blank-walled rooms (e.g., in mental asylums), nude and fearful of the other gaunt, nude bodies around them.

When arrested, they bit the necks of police detectives and yelled joyfully in squad cars, feeling they were innocent of everything except wild sex with young men and wild drunkenness.

They knelt and screamed in subway stations, and they were arrested on rooftops while flaunting their naked bodies and pages of their writing.

They let male bikers perform anal sex on them, and they cried out ecstatically.

They gave and received oral sex with angel-like sailors, making love around the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea.

They had sex in the morning, at night, in rose gardens, in parks, and in graveyards, orgasming with whoever, whenever.

They kept hiccuping (possibly from drinking) while trying to laugh, and ended up crying (or gasping) behind a wall in a bathhouse for gay men when a nude, blond, beautiful man came to penetrate them.

They lost their young male lovers to three old, unpleasant, one-eyed goddesses who controlled their destinies (like the three Fates in Greek mythology). The first represented American capitalism, a patriarchal system dominated by heterosexuals. The second represented sex with women, or heterosexuality itself. The third destroyed the works of artists and intellectuals (as if snipping threads on a loom, the way the third, deadly Fate snipped the thread of life).

These bohemians had joyful, insatiable sex with their lovers, surrounded by beer, cigarettes, and candles, falling off the bed and making love on the floor and in the hall. Finally, they collapsed against the wall, experiencing a vision of perfect sexual bliss before they passed out.

They sexually satisfied countless girls in the evening; they looked haggard in the morning, but they were still vigorous enough to sexually satisfy the sunrise itself. Their naked bodies could be seen having sex in barns and lakes.

They had casual sex (or prostituted themselves) as they traveled through Colorado in various cars they stole at night. Praise be to N.C. (Neal Cassady)—the secret hero of my poetry, the studly male god of Denver, Colorado—and the memory of his countless hookups with young women in vacant lots, the yards behind diners, the creaky rows of movie theaters, and mountain caves. And his lonely roadside hookups with skinny waitresses he knew, and especially private hookups in gas-station men's rooms and the backstreets of his hometown.

These bohemians vanished (or passed out) as if fading out in an epic dirty movie. Their dreams were like a scene change, and they awoke suddenly in Manhattan. They lurched out of basement dwellings, feeling hungover from harsh Tokay wine and cruel nightmares about (or on) Third Avenue, and lurched toward unemployment offices.

They walked all night on snowy docks by the East River in New York City, bleeding in their shoes and waiting for the door of a steam-filled opium den (drug users' hangout) to open.

They wrote dramas about suicide while living in (and/or imagined suicidally jumping from) the cliff-like apartment buildings on the Hudson River, as the moon shone on them like the searchlights used in World War II. They'll be awarded a crown of laurel flowers (a traditional prize for great poets) after death.

They feasted on their own imaginations as if on a hearty lamb stew, or ate crab fished from the muddy rivers near the Bowery neighborhood of New York City.

They cried at how romantic the city streets seemed, including the vendors selling (or passersby pushing) cartfuls of onions and playing bad music.

They lived in boxes under the bridge, inhaling the night air, then moved up to loft apartments to build harpsichords (piano-like instruments).

They coughed in a sixth-floor room of New York's Harlem neighborhood, amid orange crates full of books on theology, feeling crowned with holy fire under an unhealthy-looking (or blood-colored) sky.

They spent nights rocking back and forth while writing soaring poems and chants, which in the bright light of day turned out to be incoherent.

They cooked rotten meat (including animals' organs and tails), beet soup, and tortillas, while dreaming of a pure vegetarian lifestyle (or a heaven full of delicious vegetables).

They threw themselves under the wheels of meat trucks while searching for an egg (or, figuratively, got destroyed by powerful forces while trying to save something fragile).

They tossed their watches off their roofs to show, symbolically, that they cared more about eternal, spiritual matters than temporal, worldly things. But in a harsh reality check, alarm clocks woke them for work for the next ten years.

They tried and failed, three times straight, to commit suicide by slitting their wrists. Finally, they had to give up and open antique shops, which made them cry because they felt old (antique).

They went into the New York advertising business, which was so torturous that they felt burned alive in their nice work suits. They felt attacked by bad poetry; the aggressive, army-like conformity imposed by popular fashion; the explosive screaming of queer men in the advertising business; and the toxic attitudes of clever, creepy editors. Or else reality itself crushed them like a drunken taxi driver.

They leapt off the Brooklyn Bridge—this is a true story—survived, and disappeared anonymously into New York's Chinatown neighborhood, with its ghostly atmosphere, soup, alleys, and fire trucks. They didn't even get one free beer for the amazing thing they'd done.

They sang hopelessly out of their apartment windows, tumbled out of subway windows, jumped into the disgusting Passaic River, jumped onto Black people, wept in the streets, danced on shattered wine glasses in their bare feet, broke analog records of wistful German jazz music from the 1930s, drank the last of their whiskey, and moaned and puked up blood in bathrooms while hearing groaning noises and blaring steam whistles.

They zoomed down old familiar highways, traveling to each other's car wrecks or lonely prisons, or to be at each other's revelatory jazz performances in Birmingham, Alabama.

They drove for three days across the U.S. to find out if one of them had experienced a spiritual insight and to glimpse eternity.

They traveled to Denver, Colorado and died there; they returned and hopelessly waited there; they kept watch over the city, meditated and spent time alone there, and eventually left that timeless place for the ordinary world. Now the city misses the legends who used to visit her.

They knelt despairingly in cathedrals and prayed for the salvation of each other's souls and bodies, till they caught a brief, visionary glimpse of the soul.

They went out of their minds while imprisoned, waiting for legendary, golden-haired crooks who seemed charmingly authentic. They sang sweet, sad songs to the Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary.

They withdrew to Mexico to take up a drug habit; or to Rocky Mount, North Carolina to practice Buddhism; or to Tangier, Morocco to be with young men; or to work on the black trains of the Southern Pacific Railroad; or to Harvard University to be narcissists; or to Woodlawn Cemetery (in New York City) to make daisy chains or visit graves.

They demanded sanity hearings, insisting that the radio was trying to hypnotize them, and wound up with mental health problems, empty hands, and an uncertain outcome.

They threw potato salad at professors of absurdist art at the City College of New York. Then they showed up on the stone steps of insane asylums, shaved bald, talking dramatically about suicide, and requesting immediate brain surgery for their mental illness.

Instead, they were subjected to treatments that left them feeling stony and hollow: insulin shock therapy, convulsions induced by the drug metrazol, electroshock therapy, hydrotherapy, psychotherapy, and occupational therapy. They played ping-pong for exercise in the asylum and suffered memory loss (from the treatments).

The only protest they could manage was to somberly topple a ping-pong table, as if toppling the establishment, then sit still and zone out for a while.

Years later, they came back—really bald this time, except for the blood, tears, and fingers on their heads as they clawed at themselves in distress—to the ominous wards of mental institutions in the Eastern U.S.

These included the stinking wards of New York's Pilgrim State Hospital, New York's Rockland State Hospital, and New Jersey's Greystone Park State Hospital. There, the bohemians argued with their inner voices, rocking back and forth in solitary, lovesick, late-night settings that resembled ancient stone tombs (dolmens). Their lives were like dreams turned to nightmares, and they felt weighed down as if they were made of rocks the size of the moon.

They'd finally done some equivalent of sleeping with their mothers (as in the Oedipus myth/Oedipus complex). They'd finally thrown the last trippy book out of their apartments, shut a final late-night door, hung up angrily on a last phone call, and cleared out their last room except for one small, imaginary item: a rose folded out of yellow paper and attached to a closet coat hanger. Even that was just an optimistic vision.

Oh, Carl Solomon, as long as you're in danger, I'm in danger, and now you're really "in the soup" (in trouble) in a cosmic sense.

For all these reasons, the bohemians ran through icy winter streets, excited about a new, magical -seeming mix of literary devices: the ellipsis, the poetic list (catalog), and irregular meter, combined with a mystical realm of cosmic vibrations.

Their dreamlike writing made revelatory disruptions in the space-time continuum through the juxtaposition of images. They paired visual images to capture the angelic nature of the soul. They combined verbs, nouns, and dashes in ways that seemed primal and sacred, evoking an all-powerful, eternal God.

Their poetic writing captured the rhythm and flow of humble human speech. They could address you, sounding tongue-tied, smart, fearfully ashamed, and scorned, but still pouring out an inner truth that corresponded to the flow of thoughts inside their bald heads and expansive minds.

They were poor, crazy, angelic Beats (bohemians) beaten down by life—anonymous, yet trying to write down what might still need to be said in the afterlife.

They were reincarnated as ghostly musicians at the shadowy edges of jazz bands. They played saxophones, turning America's lovesick suffering into a wail like Christ's cry from the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), which made every radio in the city tremble.

They were like ritual sacrifices whose hearts had been cut out and could sustain people (in the form of poetry/art) for a thousand years.

II

What monster made of industrial materials (i.e., created by industrial society) destroyed these bohemians, as if breaking their heads open and devouring their intellects and imaginations?

The monster's name is Moloch! He consists of loneliness, dirt, ugliness, trash, and American greed! He makes children hide and scream, young soldiers cry, and old men sob in public parks!

Moloch, Moloch—the nightmarish, heartless, calculating, cruelly judgmental monster!

Moloch consists of bewildering prisons, deadly and inhumane jails, and American politicians who cause grief! It consists of buildings that are as harsh as divine judgment, the raw materials of huge wars, and paralyzed governments!

This monster is as calculating and cold as a machine! It's as greedy as if its blood were made of money! It's as violent as if its hands were made of armies! It seems to be driven by a bloodthirsty internal engine! It kills rather than listening, so that its ear is like a fiery grave!

The monster's eyes are a thousand dark, unseeing city windows! Its tall buildings are like countless biblical Gods! Its factories groan, emit fog, and seem to dream! It fills the city skyline with huge, smoking chimneys and broadcast antennas!

This monster's only love is for industrial minerals! Its only soul lies in power companies and financial institutions! The poverty it creates is like the ghost of the genius it's destroyed! It will cause nuclear war and mass sterility! It stands for pure mind (minus heart and soul)!

This monster (industrial capitalism) is the world in which I feel alone and dream of a divine presence! It's the world in which I feel insane, have sex with other men, and am starved for male companionship!

This monstrous presence became part of me in my youth! In it, I'm like a mind cut off from physical sensations! It scared me away from my innate sense of happiness! I flee from it, then wake up in it as light fills the sky!

Moloch, Moloch—this monster consists of inhumane, identical-looking city dwellings; ghostly suburban towns; government treasuries spent on deadly policies; great cities that lack foresight or understanding; hellishly cruel industries; countries that seem ghostly or demonic; inescapable mental hospitals; buildings like huge stone penises; and barbaric weapons of war!

The bohemians destroyed themselves trying to make this monster holy, as if raising its heavy cities—sidewalks, trees, radios, and all—toward Heaven, which already exists all around us anyway!

The bohemians' spiritual visions, superstitions, miraculous experiences, and raptures have all been lost to mainstream American culture! So have their dreams, loves, spiritual insights, faiths, and all that other poetic nonsense!

Their spiritual breakthroughs, changes and crucifixion-like agonies, drug highs, revelations, moments of hopelessness, raw howls, suicides, ideas, and new romances—the craziness of their generation—have all been lost over time, as if washed away in a flooding river and smashed against rocks!

They laughed sacred laughter in this "river" of mainstream culture! They saw and understood all of it, with their mad eyes and sacred screams! They said goodbye to it, leaping off rooftops, going off to be alone (possibly in death), waving and holding flowers, heading down the river or into the streets!

III

Carl Solomon, my friend! I'm with you (literally visiting you and/or figuratively supporting you) in the Rockland State Hospital, where you've been committed and are even more insane than I am.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you must be having a bizarre experience.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you're just like my ghostly mother (who's also been institutionalized).

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you've killed

all twelve of your secretaries.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you appreciate this ghostly (or obscure or unseen) joke.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where we use the same terrible typewriter and feel that we're both brilliant authors.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where the radio is announcing how seriously ill you've become.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where the intellect and senses are disconnected (the body's sensations can't worm their way into the mind anymore).

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you drink tea that seems to come from the breasts of the old ladies of nearby Utica, New York.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you crack jokes about the bodies of your nurses, who are mean women from the Bronx.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you're restrained with a straitjacket and yell that you're losing a back-and-forth (ping-pong-like) struggle against despair.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you play a defunct (comatose-seeming) piano. The human soul is pure and eternal; it should never be destroyed in this unholy way, in an insane asylum with armed guards.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where even fifty more electroshock treatments will never reunite your body with its soul, which is suffering as if crucified into oblivion.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you claim your doctors are the *real* crazy people and plan a Jewish socialist rebellion against the American fascism that torments (crucifies) us all.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where you will burst open the sky of Long Island and escape, rising like a reincarnated Jesus Christ from a supernaturally powerful tomb.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, home of 25,000 crazy socialists, all singing the last verses of the left-wing anthem called "The Internationale."

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where we figuratively make love to America in our bed—the same America whose sickness keeps us up at night.

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital, where we're jolted out of unconsciousness by a vision of our own souls zooming like planes over the hospital roof. They've come to bombard us with holiness; as they do, the hospital lights up with a holy glow, and its walls crumble in the imagination. Oh, all you gaunt patients, escape to the outside! This sudden, blessed American event—a permanent, or permanently decisive, war (like the war in heaven before Judgment Day)—has arrived! Don't bother putting on your underwear (before running outside): we've won, we're free!

I'm with you in the Rockland State Hospital. I dream that you show up one night at my cottage in the Western U.S., drenched from a road trip across America that's like an ocean odyssey.

THEMES

NONCONFORMITY VS. MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

"Howl" celebrates people living at the margins of society, especially those whose sexuality, politics, spiritual beliefs, and/or mental health status placed them far outside mainstream American culture in the mid-20th century. For example, it celebrates gay men at a time when homosexuality was criminalized, socialist sympathizers at a time when such beliefs were often persecuted, and traumatized victims of "hospitals and jails and wars." Through its embrace of nonconformist individuals and identities, the poem proudly defies the values of mainstream American culture and highlights the bravery of those who dare to live freely and authentically in an unjust world.

The poem's heroes are outcasts and rebels living on the fringes of American society. The "minds" it celebrates (and mourns the loss of) include many figures rejected or persecuted by the white, straight, Christian, capitalist American mainstream, including gay men, Jewish Americans, believers in non-Western faith traditions, and socialist and communist sympathizers. The poem especially celebrates a type of figure it calls "hipsters," or "the madman bum and angel beat" (that is, the socially non-conforming artists who came to be called the Beat movement).

The poem's inclusion has limits, largely focusing on white men and seeming to imagine women and Black Americans as existing outside or at the fringes of this movement. Still, it generally celebrates people who have been excluded, belittled, and/or oppressed by mainstream culture. The poem sometimes affectionately teases its nonconformist "hipsters," but for the most part supports them and portrays them as tragic heroes.

And in celebrating these nonconformists, the poem passionately condemns the moral failings of the mainstream society they've rebelled against. It deems this society loveless, "sexless," "Robot[ic]," "demonic," and insatiably greedy for wealth and power. It also links official or mainstream institutions with violent oppression. For example, it associates police sirens with "Los Alamos" (the site of atomic bomb tests) and the advertising industry with "the iron regiments of fashion." In other words, it suggests that this society compels obedience and conformity as if by military force.

Rather than conforming to these terrible mainstream values, the poem suggests, the "rejected" beat figure seeks to follow

his own code, or "conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head." And the poem stands in solidarity with these nonconformists, celebrating their adventures, mourning those who have died, and extending sympathy to those who are alive and suffering. It portrays them as legendary, or even "holy," figures and casts even their suffering in vivid, larger-than-life terms. It claims that those who died "rose reincarnate" in music, suggesting that their legacy lives on through art.

The poet specifically addresses the institutionalized writer Carl Solomon (and, by implication, others like him), offering loving support and the suggestion that their fates are intertwined ("while you are not safe I am not safe"). Through the refrain "I'm with you," the speaker makes it clear that he's not only on the side of these nonconformists but is one of them himself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-78
- Between Lines 78-79
- Lines 79-93
- Between Lines 93-94
- Lines 94-112
- After Line 112

THE OPPRESSIVE VIOLENCE OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM

"Howl" not only celebrates its freethinking heroes but also furiously condemns the American political and economic system that ground them down. The speaker personifies this system—made up of industrial capitalism, the American war machine, and mainstream culture in general—as a monstrous figure called "Moloch." Readers can think of Moloch as something like "the Man" or "the power" (as in the phrase "Fight the Power"), a greedy, heartless, and deeply destructive entity that the poem's heroes tried and failed to escape. The soullessness of the American system, the poem argues, has crushed anything spiritually sustaining or redemptive, turning society into a "Nightmare" full of "screaming," "weeping," and needless suffering.

The America of this poem is a violent, war-hungry monster built on the backs of the poor, where money rules all and where production, profit, and power matter more than human lives. The speaker rejects American capitalism (an economic system in which private, profit-driven entities, rather than the government, control a nation's industry) as a "narcotic tobacco haze"—a dangerous, addictive, and stupor-inducing drug. The country's "fingers are ten armies," meaning America exerts its grip on the world through violence and wars into which "sobbing" young men are conscripted. Cities are made ugly by factories and pollution, and the threat of nuclear annihilation hangs over society. The poor and mentally ill, meanwhile, are left behind or subjected to state-sanctioned violence.

The system's violence and human indifference fell especially hard, the poem suggests, on those artist and rebel figures who sought higher truths and human connection (they experienced "the suffering of America's naked mind for love"). Though they tried to defeat the system with love, imagination, and creativity, there was no room for these things in a society whose soul consists of only "electricity and banks." As such, Moloch "ate up" these rebels' "brains and imagination." And now, "Visions," "miracles," "ecstasies," and the like have disappeared "down the American river."

Nevertheless, in empathizing with one particular victim of this system, the poem continues to offer hope for a future that breaks free of "Moloch." In addressing the writer Carl Solomon directly, the poem acknowledges his suffering "in an armed madhouse" but repeatedly offers sympathy and companionship ("I'm with you"). It also dreams of grandly optimistic scenarios, such as Solomon bursting forth from confinement like a god ("resurrect[ing] your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb"). It imagines a scene of rapturous "victory" and liberation at the mental hospital—symbolically, a victory over broader social repression. Finally, it dreams of a reunion between the poet and Solomon: a redemptive ending to a painful "journey [...] across America," which may symbolize the journey of America itself.

In all these ways, despite its nightmare vision of American (or global) industrialized capitalism, the poem refuses to despair and continues to envision a better world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 31-35
- Line 56
- Lines 66-67
- Line 77
- Lines 79-93
- Lines 107-112

MADNESS AND VISIONARY THINKING

"Howl" is a lament for "the best minds of [Ginsburg's] generation": a set of artists and thinkers whom the poet/speaker believes were "destroyed by madness." The poem doesn't blame such "madness" on random misfortune or the sufferers themselves, however, but rather portrays its heroes as being *driven* mad by their oppressive, violent society. In fact, it suggests that this *society* is what's truly mad and that the only "sane" people in it are those who rebel against it. The poem's heroes attempt to do so through things like drugs, sex, art, and mysticism. Though these attempts are often failed and/or self-destructive, the poem views them as noble—and suggests that they offer greater imaginative and spiritual illumination than a "sane" mainstream lifestyle ever could.

The poem is framed as a "howl" of grief over the "madness" that "destroyed" its rebellious heroes. It suggests that many of these rebels experienced real mental health struggles and, in some cases, died. For those who were treated, it suggests that the treatment was worse than the disease; it portrays the era's "madhouse[s]" as cruel, degrading, and ineffective.

But this "madness," the speaker insists, is actually the consequence of living in a society (personified as a monster called Moloch) that is itself truly, violently insane. The poem accuses this society, with its fixation on money and war, of "bash[ing] open their skulls and [eating] up their brains and imagination." In other words, society's greed and lust for power crushed these heroes psychologically, intellectually, and creatively.

The speaker suggests both that this society drives people mad *and* that it deems nonconforming rebels crazy. One of these rebels is the poet's friend Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated and whose confinement in a mental hospital it describes. The speaker expresses solidarity with the "mad" Solomon as he "accuse[s his] doctors of insanity," favoring his fellow *writer's* definition of insanity (i.e., Solomon's) over his *society's*.

At the same time, the poem celebrates the imaginative and spiritual visions of these doomed rebels. It suggests that these "mad" people have actually experienced powerful revelations while defying their society's definition of "sanity." The poem depicts these people as chasing—and often achieving—lofty "visions" and "ecstasies" through sex, drugs ("Highs! Epiphanies!"), art and music ("jazz incarnation"), etc. It sometimes affectionately depicts their attempts as failed or resulting in "gibberish." Fundamentally, though, it casts them as spiritual questers, eager "to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision [...] to find out Eternity."

Generally, then, the poem acknowledges the actual mental health problems of its heroes while implying that they're actually saner than the society they inhabit. In fact, it frames the terrible flaws of that society as largely responsible for their desperation, alienation, and breakdowns, and argues that these rebels have access to a higher, more visionary form of knowledge than those who would call them crazy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-78
- Between Lines 78-79
- Lines 79-93
- Between Lines 93-94
- Lines 94-112
- After Line 112

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I saw the ... starving hysterical naked,

The opening line of "Howl" establishes the poem's main idea and its basic style. This poem will be about a group of brilliant people—"the best minds of [the speaker's] generation"—who were "destroyed by madness," driven insane to the point where they found themselves desperate and degraded ("starving hysterical naked").

The phrase "best minds" refers primarily to the circle of experimental, anti-establishment writers and artists known as the Beat Generation (a term coined by Allen Ginsberg's friend, the novelist and poet Jack Kerouac, in the 1940s). The poem will go on to recount the adventures and hardships of these rebellious figures (whom the poem also calls "hipsters").

"Madness" refers partly to their real-life mental health problems, but also to what Ginsberg views as the insanity of their repressive society. The poem will suggest that this society either drives its "best minds" crazy as they struggle against it, defines their higher intellectual/spiritual understanding as irrational, or both.

This opening line is long and rhythmically loose, almost like prose, but its line break marks it as verse. Although "Howl" is a free verse poem (i.e., it has no rhyme scheme or meter), it incorporates a number of literary devices—such as alliteration, assonance, and anaphora—that give it an intensely musical quality. That quality first appears in the alliteration and assonance of "minds"/"my"/"madness." Meanwhile, the phrase "starving hysterical naked" omits a connecting "and" (an example of asyndeton) as well as commas. The poem's unorthodox grammar and punctuation, along with its rejection of rhyme and meter, reflect its free-spirited rebellion against social and literary conventions of all kinds.

LINES 2-3

dragging themselves through ...
... machinery of night,

Lines 2-3 begin to illustrate the complexities and internal conflicts of the poem's main characters.

The speaker portrays these "hipsters" (that is, the writers/artists of the Beat Generation) as desperate addicts, lurching through predominantly Black neighborhoods at dawn in search of drugs (a "fix"):

- At the time the poem was published (1956), the word "Negro" was used much as "Black" and "African-American" are today; that is, it was generally considered a polite or neutral term. In subsequent decades, however, Black Americans widely rejected "Negro" as outdated. Ginsberg's

lowercase spelling here ("negro") was unusual. Ginsberg specified that "negro streets" referred to the "Harlem and Times Square areas [of New York City]" in the late 1940s, where his white friend Herbert Huncke bought heroin.
- In context, the phrase may be meant to link the experience of the poem's protagonists—their marginalization, suffering, etc.—with the experience of Black Americans in heavily segregated 1950s America. However, the phrase also suggests that none of these protagonists ("the best minds of my generation") are Black themselves. (See line 58 as well.)

Also note how the speaker personifies these drugs as "angry," as if they punish their users. But the adjective seems to apply to the addicts *themselves* as well. Perhaps the speaker is implying that their rage fuels their addiction or vice versa.

At the same time there's something holy about these hipsters: they're "angelheaded" figures, "burning for [an] ancient heavenly connection" to the night sky. Specifically, they want to connect with "the starry dynamo in the machinery of night":

- The word "dynamo" can refer to an energetic and outgoing person, or to an electrical generator.
- Here, "starry dynamo" is a metaphor for the power source (perhaps God or the laws of nature) that propels the stars.

In other words, these people are craving a chemical high, but they're also on a *spiritual* quest to escape or defy the conformist hell that is mainstream American society. Whether they try to do this through drugs, alcohol, art, religion, mysticism, sex, music, travel, or all of the above, they refuse to conform to their society's definition of "sane" and "normal." However, their rebellion and spiritual seeking come at a cost to their physical and mental health (as the phrase "angry fix" suggests).

LINES 4-5

who poverty and ...
... tenement roofs illuminated,

Lines 4-5 begin depicting the protagonists' surreal, hallucinatory experiences. Here, the speaker links their drug "high[s]" with intense artistic and religious visions. The poem also starts a pattern of anaphora—the repetition of "who" at the beginnings of lines—that will continue throughout most of the poem's first section, lending rhythm, momentum, and emphasis to the poem.

Line 4 depicts these characters as down-and-out bohemian types, more devoted to art and spirituality than to chasing money. They live in "poverty," have "tatter[ed]" clothing, seem "hollow-eyed" from hunger as well as drug use, and rent "cold-water flats" (that is, cheap apartments without hot running water). Still, they seem to enjoy themselves: being "high" makes the darkness of their apartments seem "supernatural" and seems to send them "floating across the tops of cities" as they ponder the "jazz" they listen to.

In line 5, they "bare[] their brains to Heaven under the El" (i.e., under the elevated subway train). "Bar[ing] their brains" may also refer to a drug high—possibly these hipsters are getting stoned under the subway tracks—or simply a visionary psychological experience. Either way, the hipsters see, or hallucinate, "Mohammedan" (Islamic) angels on the roofs of cheap apartment buildings ("tenements"), "illuminated" by a holy glow. The word "staggering" may be a pun, meaning both "stumbling" and "astonishing." (Ginsberg noted that his imagery here was inspired by a vision the poet Philip Lamantia experienced while reading the Koran.)

Alliteration and assonance give these lines a richly musical texture, reflecting the protagonists' intense experience of drugs, music, and spirituality. Notice, for example, the persistent alliteration in line 4:

> who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high
> sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-
> water flats floating across the tops of cities
> contemplating jazz,

This effect continues in line 5, though less persistently ("bared"/"brains," "saw"/"staggering"). Assonance, too, peppers line 4 ("poverty"/"hollow-eyed", "hollow-eyed"/"high," "supernatural"/flats," "tops"/"contemplating") a bit more heavily than line 5 ("Heaven"/"El," "roofs"/"illuminated"). Again, the intensity of all these sounds evokes the intensity of the experiences being described.

LINES 6-7

who passed through ...
... of the skull,

Lines 6-7 describe the protagonists' time in "universities" and "academies" (and were in fact inspired by Ginsberg's own experiences at Columbia University).

The phrase "passed through universities" suggests that while these hipsters went to school, they weren't deeply engaged in college life; they floated through it in a detached way. Their "radiant cool eyes" and "hallucinati[ons]" also imply that they were stoned and/or "mad" a lot of the time.

They had visions of "Arkansas," a rural U.S. state perhaps representing dreams of travel or escape from the city life detailed in so much of the poem. "Blake-light tragedy," meanwhile, alludes to the British Romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827). Blake was a major influence on Ginsberg, who even reported experiencing an actual auditory hallucination of Blake's poetry around the end of his college years. The words "light" and "tragedy" here suggest that whatever these hipsters

are experiencing is both illuminating and tragic (or that they're experiencing tragedy that seems luminous in the same way Blake's visionary poetry and paintings do).

The hipsters hallucinated these things "among the scholars of war"—that is, among professors who studied war or whose research assisted the military (as was the case with some Columbia scientists during WWII). Basically, they experienced gentle, poetic visions while surrounded by a culture of violence.

Line 7 adds that they "were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes"—that is, kicked out of their colleges because they had mental health problems and wrote dirty poetry. Ginsberg was once suspended from Columbia for tracing obscenities and sexual pictures on a dirty window of his dorm (i.e., "on the windows of the skull," a phrase that metaphorically associates the dorm with death and doom). The phrase "obscene odes on the windows of the skull" could also imply that the students wrote dirty poetry about the orifices of the head ("windows" might also simply refer to "eyes" here).

Notice that line 7 contains the poem's first ampersand (&), a punctuation mark that Ginsberg sometimes uses instead of "and" for the sake of concision.

LINES 8-9

who cowered in ...
... for New York,

Having been kicked out of "the academies," the poem's heroes went on to "cower[] in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall."

One would expect the *hipsters* to be described as "unshaven," but instead, it's their *rooms*. There's a funny, surreal quality to this phrasing, which turns the description into a metaphor (the speaker is saying that the rooms are grungy and unkempt) nd helps convey the bizarre, chaotic nature of these characters' experience. After all, they're behaving pretty strangely: stripping down, burning money, and "cowering" away from some horrifying presence ("the Terror") they believe they hear through the wall.

Perhaps they're suffering from paranoid delusions—an example of the "madness" mentioned in line 1—or perhaps they're burning money as a symbolic rejection of a system that terrifies them. Or maybe both! (Ginsberg based this line on an experience recounted by Carl Solomon, who said that he "burned money while upset about the evils of materialism" before he was institutionalized at Pilgrim State Hospital.)

Line 9 then describes the hipsters getting arrested for smuggling marijuana from Mexico into the U.S. According to the speaker, they were "busted" by the authorities while re-entering the country through Laredo, Texas, en route to New York. They were smuggling the drugs in their "belt," so the reference to "pubic beards" might suggest that their pubic hair was exposed while they were strip-searched; more likely, it suggests that their scraggly, bohemian facial hair *looked* like pubic hair.

If it seems unlikely that *all* "the best minds of [the speaker's] generation" (line 1) went through these specific ordeals, that's because the poem attributes a variety of individual experiences—some true to life, some exaggerated or fictionalized—to a *collective*. In other words, it sums up the experiences of a generation without necessarily implying that each individual member shared them.

LINES 10-11

who ate fire ...
... and endless balls,

Lines 10-11 describe a mix of intense pleasure and pain, especially self-inflicted pain. In their wild nightly escapades, the poem's protagonists seek out "drugs," "alcohol," "dreams," sex, and possibly even "death," as if desperately trying to escape from normal life. They experience a mix of ecstasy and agony that seems to go beyond standard youthful partying.

According to the speaker, these hipsters "ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley"—pretty extreme behaviors:

- "Ate fire" could mean drinking a lot of "firewater" (that is, alcohol), or it might refer to the literal, dangerous circus trick called fire-eating (it also might just reference more drugs). "Turpentine," meanwhile, is a toxic chemical used to thin paint; drinking it would either be a risky stunt or an outright suicide attempt. It could cause a painful "death"—or just vomiting, which is part of what "purgatoried their torsos" implies.
- The hipsters are doing these things in "paint hotels" (Ginsberg explained that some artists in his area lived in "cheap hotels" whose rooms smelled like turpentine) or in "Paradise Alley," an ironic nickname for a rundown tenement complex in New York City. Ginsberg's friend Jack Kerouac lived for a time in this complex, which is now demolished.

"Paradise Alley," along with "purgatoried," bring religion into the poem once again (so does "ate fire" for that matter, since fire-eating is linked with some Eastern spiritual traditions and fire itself is associated with Hell). Here and throughout the poem, the characters' debauchery thus seems to have religious or spiritual undertones. Though they're constantly seeking pleasure and escape, they can't seem to attain the heavenly bliss they desire (their "Paradise" is just an "Alley").

In fact, they seem trapped in a "purgator[y]"-like state—a middle ground between Heaven and Hell. It's as if they're trapped, condemned to experience the same mix of "dreams"

and "nightmares," pain and pleasure, "night after night." Although the phrase "alcohol and cock and endless balls" seems to imply limitless pleasure, "endless" might also hint that the sex and partying get repetitive.

This frank sexual reference, coming shortly after the gendered reference to "beards" (line 9), is the first indication that most, if not all, of the poem's heroes are queer men. Later details (e.g., lines 36-37) will make this fact even more explicit. At the time "Howl" was written, homosexuality was both criminalized and pathologized (treated as a mental illness) in the U.S., so the poem's celebrations of gay sex caused enormous controversy. The queerness of the poem's heroes—who are based on Ginsberg and his friends—also provides important context for their rebellion against mainstream American society. Their constant (even addictive) search for pain, pleasure, transcendence, and escape may be a complex response to a culture that doesn't accept them.

LINES 12-13

incomparable blind streets ...
... light of mind,

Along with line 11 (with dreams [...] endless balls"), lines 12-13 depart from the pattern of "who" anaphora that runs throughout most of Part I. By switching up the pattern here and there, the poet prevents things from becoming too repetitive.

Lines 12-13 might describe more experiences the hipsters had "night after night," or they might be an independent, free-associative string of images. Either way, they're packed with information about these characters and their world. In fact, line 13 (one of the longer lines in the poem, starting with "Peyote solidities of halls") serves almost as a montage of their experiences.

Line 12 evokes a thunderstorm with its mention of "shuddering cloud and lightning" over a dark city (those "blind streets" might also refer to dead ends). This is likely happening only in the hipsters; minds, however, and that lightning leaps between two important "poles" on the hipsters' mental map: "Canada & Paterson." (Ginsberg was from Paterson, New Jersey, and his fellow Beat writer Jack Kerouac was from Canada.) Perhaps this storm is really a metaphor for mental turmoil that generates inspiration (a.k.a. "lightning in the mind"). If so, the flashes of inspiration seem to connect these two locations. They also light up "all the motionless world of Time," an ambiguous phrase that might suggest how these lightning bolts stop time (lighting up a "motionless world").

Line 13 then piles up a series of parallel, plural noun phrases, suggesting a swift accumulation of intense experience—perhaps other places where these people "purgatoried their torsos night after night." Some of the references here are elliptical or vague, in keeping with the jumbled, chaotic lifestyle they describe, but most can be explained at least partially:

- "Peyote solidities of halls": peyote is a psychoactive drug, so this may refer to halls that felt solid to peyote users while other things didn't, or to halls that were reduced to vague solid shapes while the users were hallucinating.
- "backyard green tree cemetery dawns": backyards near cemeteries where the poem's characters saw the sunrise, perhaps after a night of adventures. Ginsberg noted that this line referred to a friend's (Bill Keck's) New York City residence, which overlooked a cemetery. Notice the mixed images of death ("cemetery") and life/renewal ("green tree," "dawns").
- "storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light": refers to joyrides (rides in stolen cars) taken by stoners ("teaheads") through New York City, with its "boroughs," stores, neons, traffic lights, etc.
- "sun and moon and tree vibrations" suggests mystical, cosmic vibrations of the kind also referred to in lines 24 ("the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas") and 73 ("the vibrating plane").
- "ashcan rantings": these are rants delivered near (or, somewhat hilariously, about) trash cans of the kind you might find on city streets. This line may allude to the Ashcan School, an early 20th-century art movement focused on scenes of New York City life.
- "kind king light of mind": suggests a gentle, elevated state of mental illumination or inner peace. Ginsberg noted that this line was partly inspired by a phrase of Jack Kerouac's, "Kind King Mind," from the poetry collection *Mexico City Blues*.

LINES 14-15

who chained themselves ...
... the hydrogen jukebox,

Lines 14 and 15 describe more of the hipsters' wanderings about town—specifically, New York City.

First, line 14 depicts them riding the subway from Battery Park (a.k.a. the Battery) at the southern end of Manhattan all the way up to the borough of the Bronx, just north of Manhattan:

- In the speaker's telling, the hipsters "chained themselves" to the subways and rode them while high "on benzedrine," a type of amphetamine (a stimulant). This "chain[ing]" might refer to some literal stunt, or it might metaphorically suggest that the hipsters felt locked into their wild ride.
- "The noise of wheels and children" (that is, hearing people getting on and off the train) bothered them in their altered state and "brought them down" from their high.
- The phrase "shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain," etc. suggests that they felt

ill (experienced convulsions, nausea/vomiting, headaches, etc.) as they sobered up.
- "The drear light of Zoo" refers to dreary (perhaps early morning) light around the Bronx Zoo, their final destination.

Basically, they rode the subway while high on stimulants, were snapped out of their high by the screech of the subway and other people (perhaps commuters and kids going to school), and subsequently felt groggy and sick.

Line 15 then describes a less dramatic scene of hanging around restaurants and bars—specifically, "the submarine light of Bickford's" by night and "desolate Fugazzi's" by day:

- "Bickford's" was a chain of cafeteria-style restaurants; Ginsberg once worked at one on 42nd Street in Manhattan. "Submarine light" suggests that these late-night joints were murky and dim, as if sunken underwater.
- Fugazzi's was, according to Ginsberg, a bar in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan in the early 1950s. Ginsberg explained that "the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" referred to "Some end-of-the-world or apocalyptic vibration" that the hipsters believed they heard in "the roaring of the jukebox" in the bar. This vibration reminded them of the "hydrogen" bomb (a devastating nuclear weapon), and perhaps stoked their fears of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War that began in the '40s and '50s.

Vivid hyperbole ("endless ride," "crack of doom") gives these lines about fairly mundane activities—taking a train while high, sitting in diners and restaurants—disturbing and ominous overtones. Relentless /b/ alliteration in line 14 ("Battery"/"Bronx"/"benzedrine"/"brought"/"battered"/"bleak"/"brain"/"brilliance") underscores the harsh intensity of the experience described; the plosive consonant sounds almost seem to be "battering" the protagonists. By contrast, line 15 contains softer /s/ alliteration, or sibilance ("sank"/"submarine"/"sat"/"stale"), corresponding to an experience that's comparatively mellow (except for that "crack of doom").

LINES 16-19

who talked continuously ...
... on the pavement,

Lines 16-19 describe the poem's characters talking—a lot. They talk "continuously," for a whopping "seventy hours," in fact—another bit of hyperbole meant to evoke their uncontrolled, possibly manic flow of conversation. These talks take place all over New York City—moving "from park to pad" (a "pad" is just another word for an apartment), to museums, to "Bellevue" (a large, well-known hospital), to the famous "the Brooklyn Bridge."

- According to Ginsberg, this line was based on the real-life experience of a friend: a young woman named Ruth, who "one day began a flight of talk in Washington Square that continued through the day and night for 72 hours until she was finally committed to Bellevue [for mental health reasons]."
- Line 19 alludes to Ruth's Jewish heritage, as the poet/speaker compares a stream of word-vomit to kosher meat ("meat for the Synagogue") that's been "disgorged" (thrown up) all over the sidewalk.

This passage also seems to describe the Beat circle as a whole: what line 17 calls "a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists."

- *Battalion* means a unit of soldiers, so the word captures the camaraderie of this circle and perhaps the aggressive intensity of their chatter.
- *Platonic* probably alludes to the dialogues of the philosopher Plato, suggesting that many of their conversations were philosophical and intellectual in nature. (The word can also mean "intimate but not sexual," as some—but not all—of the Beats' friendships were.)

According to the poet/speaker, these lively talkers "jump[ed] down" from an escalating series of heights: urban stoops, fire escapes, windows, the Empire State Building in New York City—and the moon (another hyperbolic detail)! These details suggest that the hipsters were daredevils and risk-takers; that some were suicides who jumped from buildings; and that they had an unearthly or lunatic quality about them, such that they seemed to descend from lunar heights.

According to line 18, these characters did more than just talk excitedly: they were given to "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars." Those last few details gesture toward various traumas they suffered: shock therapy, jail sentences, military combat. (Ginsberg suggested that "eyeball kicks" metaphorically referred to the visual stimulation of art, but in context, it also suggests literal kicks in the face—perhaps from brutal authority figures.) Line 19 says these characters spewed out their "whole intellects [...] in total recall": in other words, manically recounted everything they knew or had experienced.

Asyndeton (the omission of coordinating conjunctions such as "and"), along with the omission of commas, lends a rapid-fire rhythm to the lists in this passage. For example, there's no "and" between "off Empire State" and "out of the moon" in line 17, or between "vomiting" and "whispering" in line 18. Line 18 also uses the opposite technique, polysyndeton: the insertion of

conjunctions where they're not strictly needed. The phrase beginning "facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks" includes far more "and"s than necessary, but their inclusion evokes a sense of overwhelming excess. (The characters recounted facts *and* memories *and* anecdotes, etc.)

LINES 20-22

who vanished into ...
... no broken hearts,

The poem describes its heroes leaving New York City for a while. They're heading to New Jersey (located just outside the city) or departing on lonely adventures elsewhere.

Some "vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey." New Jersey is located just outside the city, while Zen is a school of Buddhism that emphasizes meditation and the contemplation of reality and emptiness. This description thus evokes a quiet "nowhere" removed from the craziness of city life.

These characters disappeared with no clues about their whereabouts except for "a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall" (a reference to the historic convention hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey).

It's possible that they were leaving for general rest and recuperation. (Ginsberg noted that this line was inspired by his post-college years in his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey, and by his childhood summers on the Jersey shore.) But they also might have been deliberately misleading others about their plans: line 21 hints that they were going on a relaxing pleasure trip while really going into drug withdrawal:

> suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark's bleak furnished room,

This line more specifically describes heroin withdrawal ("junk" is slang for heroin) in a "bleak furnished room" in Newark, New Jersey. (Metaphorically, "Newark's bleak furnished room" might also suggest that Newark itself is dull and confining.) The hipsters' period of detoxing causes "sweats," "bone-grindings" (gnashing of teeth and/or writhing of limbs), and "migraines." Ginsberg associates these symptoms with the "Eastern" hemisphere and "China," since most heroin is sourced from Asia, as well as with Tangier, Morocco ("Tangerian"), where his friend William Burroughs went through multiple heroin withdrawals.

The next line also describes a kind of disappearance or withdrawal. At their loneliest, the hipsters "wandered" train yards late at night with no particular place to go. Ultimately, they "went" nowhere in particular, "leaving no broken hearts"—no close friends or family who particularly missed them.

Together with the previous lines, this detail portrays the hipsters as rootless and troubled, suggesting that their various kinds of "madness" may have turned off or worn out others in their lives.

LINES 23-26

who lit cigarettes ...
... in supernatural ecstasy,

Lines 23-26 describe various travels and adventures that follow the characters' departure from the New York/New Jersey area. Notice that the poem sometimes contains hints of a narrative structure, even though its details seem to be presented in random order. Thus, after wandering the "railroad yard" and "wondering where to go" in line 22, the characters ride freight trains through the countryside in line 23.

As the speaker puts it, they ride in "boxcars boxcars boxcars"—with the repetition (specifically, epizeuxis) suggesting that they hopped multiple trains and/or suggesting the noisy forward motion ("racketing") of the trains themselves. The hipsters are probably stowaways, since boxcars are meant to carry freight and not passengers, and they smoke "cigarettes" (which might refer to tobacco, marijuana, or both) as they ride.

After many urban scenes, the poem here presents its first rural imagery, describing "lonesome farms" under an ancient-seeming darkness ("grandfather night"). These farms seem to reflect the hipsters' own loneliness, but they also offer a peaceful interlude in the poem's "madness."

The following lines follow the hipsters through the rural U.S. states of "Idaho" and "Kansas," then back to the metropolitan northeast ("Baltimore," Maryland). Their experiences in these places have a mystical, visionary, supernatural quality:

- In Kansas, they feel "the cosmos instinctively vibrat[ing] at their feet," prompting them to "stud[y]" mystical and visionary writers in order to understand what they've felt. These include the ancient philosopher Plotinus, the 19th-century American poet and fiction writer Edgar Allan Poe, and the 16th-century Spanish priest St. John of the Cross. (More information on these writers can be found in the Literary Devices section of this guide, under Allusions.) They also study the pseudoscience of "telepathy" (direct communication between minds), plus an invented fusion of bebop jazz ("bop") and the Jewish mystical tradition called "kabbalah."
- In Idaho, they go on a "lone[ly]" search for "visionary indian angels" who, the poet assures us, really were "visionary indian angels." (Ginsberg noted that this line referred to "American Indian old ways, which included 'vision quest[s]' as [a] mark of maturation, or resolution of life crisis," adding that "Some among the postwar generation of white Americans initiated themselves into this tradition.") The repetition of "visionary indian angels" in close succession, with

just a few intervening words, is an example of diacope.

- The city of Baltimore seems to "gleam[] in supernatural ecstasy," leading the hipsters to assume "they were only mad"—that is, they were hallucinating the unnatural glow—until they discovered otherwise. As in the previous line, the implication is that the supernatural is real; something others might dismiss as fake really is what it seems to be. There's also a gentle irony in that word "only": for the poem's heroes, who are used to being "mad," their own abnormality is the normal, unsurprising explanation!

Heavy assonance ("lit cigarettes," "snow"/"lonesome," "Plotinus Poe," "bop kabbalah," "visionary indian," etc.) heightens the musicality of these lines. This effect is especially fitting in the phrase "bop kabbalah," which refers directly to music and suggests the jazzy sound the poem is aiming for.

LINES 27-29

who jumped in ...
... in fireplace Chicago,

Lines 27-29 recount more of the hipsters' travels, which take them through the U.S. state of Oklahoma; the city of Houston, Texas; the continent of Africa; and the country of Mexico. By this point, the poem's heroes seem to be wandering on a kind of spiritual odyssey. (Though "Howl" is generally a long lyric poem, its themes of postwar travel and wandering—it's set in the decade after World War II—also subtly echo Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*.)

The heroes' experiences in this passage are particularly ambiguous and mysterious, leaving much to the reader's imagination. In fact, part of the point is that their experiences *don't* completely make sense; their travels are surreal or dreamlike.

Traveling through the midwestern U.S., for example, they "jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma." This phrase (which includes an ethnic term now considered offensive) doesn't refer to a specific person; instead, this man seems more like a legendary figure who's inexplicably cruising in a fancy car through small-town Oklahoma late at night. (It's also possible that he's just *from* Oklahoma, and this limousine is showing up somewhere else.) Presumably, the heroes "impuls[ively]" hopped into his vehicle because they welcomed the ride: they'd been wandering "smalltown" streets on a cold, rainy "winter midnight." But the speaker omits key details—where this limousine came from, why this man was driving or riding in it, and where it was headed—in order to make the event more mysterious.

The poem's protagonists also "lounged hungry and lonesome" through the city of Houston, Texas. The word "lounged" suggests that they were basically slacking or bumming around, looking for good music, sexual adventure, or cheap food ("jazz or sex or soup"). In another largely unexplained adventure (inspired, according to Ginsberg, by a handsome man he once saw in the street), the protagonists tagged along after a "brilliant Spaniard" (a highly intelligent and/or dazzling-looking Spanish person), talking about "America and Eternity." When these subjects proved "hopeless" or impossible to grasp, the protagonists impulsively set sail for Africa—possibly to the city of Tangier, Morocco, referenced elsewhere in the poem.

The poem's protagonists (or, at least, one member of their group) then vanished south of the U.S. border—"disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico." This detail sounds legendary and fantastical: did they *really* fall, or jump, into a volcanic crater? The rest of the line implies that they actually were incinerated, leaving only the remnants or memory of their blue jeans ("the shadow of dungarees") and a legacy of poetry, which they had "scattered" like "lava and ash [...] in fireplace Chicago." Metaphorically, this description suggests that their poetry itself had a fiery or volcanic quality; "fireplace" also alludes to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, one of the city's most infamous historical events.

In his notes on "Howl," Ginsberg revealed that the "Mexico" anecdote referred specifically to John Hoffman, a poet-friend of his and Carl Solomon's, who "Died of mononucleosis while in Mexico" and whose "Poems [were] highly regarded by avant-garde connoisseurs." In other words, the detail about disappearing into volcanoes is a hyperbolic, surreal version of real-life events.

LINES 30-32

who reappeared on ...
... ferry also wailed,

After the "disappear[ance]" into those volcanoes, the speaker says that the hipsters "reappeared" and started engaging in political protests. The reappearance is never explained: it's casually presented as a kind of magical resurrection, perhaps a phoenix-like rising from the ashes of "the volcanoes of Mexico." (Again, the poem is a composite portrayal of Ginsberg and his artistic/social group, so while one of his friends really *did* die in Mexico, others kept having adventures. By attributing the experiences of individual members to the group as a whole, the poem makes these hipsters' lives seem all the more legendary and eventful.)

The hipsters protested on behalf of leftist causes, including pacifism (anti-war/anti-violence), anti-"Capitalism," and "Supercommunism." They did so in unusual or eccentric ways. For example, they "investigat[ed] the FBI," thereby turning the tables on the same organization that often investigated, surveilled, and cracked down on left-wing protest movements.

Yet their effort seems somewhat amateurish (they conducted these investigations in "shorts"), and the speaker seems to treat

them with affectionate irony, calling them "sexy in their dark skin" (which may have darkened in the "West Coast" sun) but noting that their protest "leaflets" don't make any sense—they're "incomprehensible." Even for someone who might be sympathetic to their cause (Ginsberg himself was involved in leftist activism for many years), their protest seems a bit paranoid and incoherent.

These bohemian protesters also "burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (line 31), harming themselves in order to make a metaphorical statement about the capitalist system (which is itself presented as a drug here). And they "distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square" (a plaza in New York City).

- During the 1950s, when the poem was written, any allegiance to or promotion of communism was not only frowned on but illegal. The American government, including the FBI and other intelligence agencies, targeted known or suspected communists for surveillance, harassment, and in some cases, prosecution. This period of Cold War-driven, anti-communist paranoia is now known as McCarthyism (after Senator Joseph McCarthy) or the Second Red Scare.
- In other words, the protest activities described in these lines carried serious risks and were considered highly radical by mainstream Americans. Even so, these protesters support what the poet humorously calls "Supercommunism," as if regular communism were too tame for them!

They then wound up "weeping and undressing" as police sirens approached. Some of these sirens approached down "Wall," or Wall Street in lower Manhattan. Their "wail[ing]" merged with the sound of the "Staten Island ferry," the ferryboat service that connects the NYC boroughs of Manhattan and Staten Island. Though the wailing is ominous—so much so that the speaker metaphorically links it with "Los Alamos," the New Mexico atomic bomb testing site—it also seems to echo the mournful "weeping" of the protesters themselves. Through a kind of personification, the very sirens that threaten the protesters also seem to grieve for them.

In all these instances, the poet/speaker implies that the protesters' mental state was as extreme as their politics. In fact, their "incomprehensible" writing, self-harming behavior, and public breakdowns seem to be expressions of mental imbalance or personal desperation—symptoms of the "madness" that "destroyed" them (line 1). Then again, perhaps the system they're protesting drove them to this state. Or perhaps the poet is suggesting that both things are true at once.

LINES 33-35

who broke down ...

... genitals and manuscripts,

After the arrests foreshadowed in line 32, lines 33-35 show the poem's protagonists behaving in various anguished or extreme ways when taken into custody:

- In line 33, they "broke down crying in white gymnasiums," apparently a reference to large bare rooms in mental hospitals or detention facilities. In these rooms, they were surrounded by "the machinery of other skeletons" (they were partly or completely stripped down and detained along with other skeletally thin people).
- In line 34, they "bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars." Ironically, while assaulting a police officer (a crime), they delighted in having "committed no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication." In some contexts, "pederasty" refers in a fairly broad way to sex between gay men, all forms of which were criminalized in the U.S. during the era of the poem. In most contexts, however, it refers to sex between an adult male and a male minor, still a crime under statutory rape laws. Public "intoxication" was also a crime then as now. The arrestees view their offenses as insignificant, and their "shriek[ing]" indicates their high level of intoxication.
- In line 35, the poem's protagonists "howled on their knees in the subway"—perhaps while intoxicated, mentally unwell, and/or under arrest—"and were dragged off the roof" by police while "waving genitals and manuscripts." (By implication, they had been naked on rooftops and reading their writing to people below—perhaps as part of a protest, experimental art practice, mental breakdown, or some combination of the three.)

Notice that line 35 contains the only mention of "howl[ing]" in "Howl"! However, the poem also contains many similar words, including "shrieked" in the previous line, "screamed" in the next line, and "wailed" in line 32. These outbursts convey a wide range of emotion over the course of the poem, including rage, despair, excitement, frustration, joy, and grief.

LINES 36-39

who let themselves ...

... with a sword,

Lines 36-39 describe various sexual exploits and adventures. This passage is notable for its explicit references to gay sex, a highly taboo subject in American culture at the time. (Prior to the modern LGBTQ rights movement, homosexuality was both criminalized and pathologized—that is, treated as a form of mental illness.) Partly as a result of these references, the poem's publishers were prosecuted under obscenity laws (see more in the Context section of this guide).

Line 36 describes anal sex between male bikers and the poem's protagonists. As Ginsberg noted, the phrase "saintly motorcyclists" alludes to Marlon Brando's iconic film *The Wild One* (1954), which had turned bikers into pop-culture symbols of youthful rebellion and angst. Ginsberg noted that this line was "For its time the iconoclastic 'shocker' of the poem," not only for frankly describing anal sex between men but for depicting it as pleasurable ("joy[ful]") rather than painful.

Line 37 describes oral sex between the poem's heroes and various sailors of the "Atlantic" Ocean and "Caribbean" Sea. It metaphorically describes these sailors as "human seraphim," or men of angelic beauty (the word "seraphim" means *angels*).

The following line then recounts freewheeling sexual adventures ("ball[ing]") in public places: in "rosegardens," "public parks," and "cemeteries." (This last location is a reminder of mortality amid all the sexual thrills.) The protagonists "scatter[ed] their semen freely to whomever come who may," engaging in casual sex with anyone who came along looking for it. In context, it's implied that most or all of this sex is between gay men cruising public hookup spots.

Line 39 depicts the protagonists "hiccup[ing] endlessly trying to giggle"—a suggestion that they were drunk—before "sob[bing] behind a partition in a Turkish Bath." The term *Turkish Bath* refers to a gay bathhouse, or commercial establishment where men meet for sex. At a time when homosexual acts were illegal in the U.S., these establishments offered a relatively safe alternative to other public hookup spots. The protagonists' "sob[bing]" when "the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword" (a metaphor for sexual penetration) may be another sign of drunkenness, or a sign of sexual confusion or shame. This detail adds a darker emotional note to a passage that's mostly a celebration of male intimacy, wild nights, and free love.

LINE 40

who lost their ... the craftsman's loom,

Line 40 alludes to the Moirai, or the three Fates of Greek mythology. (Versions of the three Fates appear in other mythological traditions as well.) According to the traditional myth, the first of these goddesses spun the "thread of life," the second measured out its length, and the third snipped (ended) it. Thus, they determined a person's birth, lifespan, and time and manner of death.

In the poem's twist on this myth, the Fates are "shrews"—a derogatory word meaning unpleasant women—and the poem's heroes "lost their loveboys" (their gay partners) to these "three old shrews of fate."

- The first of these "shrew[s]" represents the "heterosexual dollar," or a capitalist system dominated by heterosexuals (in other words, straight, patriarchal, mainstream American culture). The poem might be saying that they lost their lovers to their careers—that they couldn't be openly gay and get ahead professionally.
- The second "shrew" is "one eyed" and "winks out of the womb," meaning that she represents the female anatomy or heterosexuality itself (as opposed to homosexuality). Perhaps some of these lovers were lost to heterosexual relationships when they got their female partners pregnant.
- The third, who "does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom," seems to represent social forces stacked against artists and thinkers. (More specifically, the "square," anti-intellectual America that had no patience for the creative, intellectual, predominantly queer Beat circle.)

Overall, then, line 40 presents an extended metaphor for the repressed, homophobic, greed-driven society that (in the speaker's view) dooms many queer relationships—and threatens the culture queer artists forge outside the mainstream. By comparing these social forces to the Fates, the poet/speaker suggests that the relationships he's mourning never really stood a chance in America.

LINES 41-43

who copulated ecstatic ...
... hometown alleys too,

Lines 41-43 celebrate more of the hipster protagonists' sexual adventures. Here, the sex depicted is mostly heterosexual, in part because this passage spotlights "N.C.": the poet's friend and lover Neal Cassady. Cassady was a charismatic Beat Generation figure remembered for his drug experimentation, criminal mischief, and wild bisexual love life, including his frequent seduction of women. Although "Howl" is dedicated to another friend, Carl Solomon, this passage salutes Cassady as the "secret hero of these poems" (line 43).

The language of this passage is vividly hyperbolic as it celebrates the protagonists' sexual stamina and number of sexual partners. Line 41 describes nights of marathon sex ("copulat[ion]") progressing from bed to floor to hallway, ending in a graphic vision of total sexual bliss as the protagonists pass out against a wall. This vision "elud[es] the last gyzym of consciousness" ("gyzym" meaning "jism" or "ejaculation"), suggesting that it may be a vision of some unattainable satisfaction, experienced during or after orgasm.

Line 41 claims that the protagonists slept with a million young women ("sweetened the snatches of a million girls"; "snatches" is slang for "vaginas"). This claim is (obviously!) exaggerated, part of the sexual boasting that characterizes lines 36-43 in general. It's also an expression of the "free love" spirit that would become a central part of 1960s hippie culture. The boast segues into a metaphor for morning sex, as the speaker

compares the "sunrise" itself to the female anatomy and claims the protagonists were "prepared" to satisfy it. (Even though they were "red eyed"—tired and/or hungover.) Again as in line 38, this sex takes place outdoors or in public places: "under barns and [...] in the lake."

Line 43 acts as a montage-like summary of other sexual adventures—Cassady's in particular. It refers to Cassady's work as a sex worker ("went out whoring") and record of auto theft ("myriad stolen night-cars"), and hails him as a great, even mythical lover ("cocksman and Adonis of Denver"; "Adonis" alludes to the Greek male god of love and desire). Using further hyperbole, it toasts his "innumerable" sexual conquests in a variety of locations: "empty lots & diner backyards," movie theaters, mountain caves, "roadside" restaurants, gas-station men's rooms ("johns"), and the "alleys" of his "hometown." Although most of these encounters are heterosexual ("lays of girls"), there's the suggestion that the encounters in men's rooms may have been homosexual and therefore "especially secret."

There's also a suggestion that some of these encounters were bittersweet or unfulfilling. For example, "familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings" suggests that the protagonists hooked up with these partners ("gaunt waitresses") mainly for a brief feeling of companionship during road trips, while "solipsisms of johns" metaphorically conveys intense isolation. (*Solipsism* is the philosophical theory that one can be certain only of one's own existence; i.e., there might not be a universe outside one's own mind.)

These lines are richly lyrical, featuring a great deal of alliteration (from "bottle of beer" in line 41 to "rickety rows" in line 43) and assonance (from "copulated"/"insatiate" to "solipsisms of johns"). This heightened musicality helps convey the sexual rhythms and ecstasies of the characters.

LINES 44-46

who faded out ...
... laurel in oblivion,

Lines 44-46 mark a shift in tone and subject, as if the characters are awakening from a period of sensual bliss to a harsher, colder reality. After the intense sexual imagery of the previous lines, the poet/speaker describes the hipsters "fad[ing] out in vast sordid movies," being "shifted in dreams," and "[waking] on a sudden Manhattan," where they were "hung-over" and "unemploy[ed]."

The detail about fading out might mean that their lives seemed like "sordid" (dirty) movies transitioning from one scene to another. Or maybe they literally fell asleep at the movies! Regardless, "[they] were shifted in dreams" seems to mark a kind of scene shift, as if their nighttime dreams have transported them from the locations of the previous lines ("Colorado," etc.) back to the poem's main setting, New York City. These dreams may be the same as the "Third Avenue iron dreams" mentioned in the same line, which appear to be nightmares about, or nightmares as harsh as, the "iron" cityscape on the east side of Manhattan.

Plagued by these "horrors" and by hangovers from the "heartless Tokay" wine they drank the night before, the characters "stumbled" off to collect government assistance at "unemployment offices." (This term could also refer to employment agencies, i.e., the characters might be seeking work.)

This hard-luck pattern continues in the following lines. Line 45 describes the characters "walk[ing] all night" along the East River docks in New York City, braving winter snow, bleeding in their shoes, and seeking drugs. Specifically, they were "waiting for a door [...] to open to a room full of steam-heat and opium," implying that they were waiting to enter an *opium den* or heroin users' hangout.

The next line is set on the "Hudson" River, the other major river in New York City, where the characters "created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks [...] under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon." This seems to mean that they considered committing, or actually did commit, suicide by jumping from apartment buildings (though it could also refer to literary "dramas" that they created). The image of the moon as a "wartime [...] floodlight" evokes violence, paranoia, and possibly wartime trauma. The poet/speaker adds that "their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion": an allusion to the laurel wreaths that were traditional prizes for poets in ancient Greece. Perhaps, then, these artists *were* creating poetic "dramas," or perhaps they actually jumped to their deaths ("oblivion")—or both.

LINES 47-52

who ate the ...
... pure vegetable kingdom,

Lines 47-52 cover a range of details about the protagonists' lives as starving artists. In general, this passage shows how these bohemians settled for cheap food and shelter—or no shelter at all—while trying (and often failing) to create their art.

For example, they survived on the metaphorical food of their own minds ("the lamb stew of the imagination") or ate cheap shellfish from New York City's dirty ("muddy") rivers. ("Bowery" is a neighborhood on New York's Lower East Side; it was once associated with poverty and homelessness.)

They also cried over the "romance" of the city "streets" while pushing around shopping carts filled with "onions" and "bad music." Presumably, their love of this street life is part of what draws them to stay in the city and create art. The fact that the street music is "bad," yet makes them cry anyway, is a gently ironic detail.

Some of these bohemians were homeless for a time (they "sat in boxes" at night "under the bridge"); some could afford "loft[]

apartments," where they "rose up to build harpsichords" (i.e., make piano-like keyboard instruments). The phrase "rose up" might suggest that they transitioned from homelessness to housing when their circumstances improved a little.

They "coughed," perhaps while ill, in buildings in "Harlem," a neighborhood in New York City. (Ginsberg stayed in a Harlem apartment with his friend Russell Dargin in 1948.) The phrase "crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology" seems trippy and surreal, but makes more sense on close inspection. The sky may be "tubercular" as in pale, like a tuberculosis patient, or red, like the blood coughed up by some tuberculosis sufferers. The adjective "tubercular" is also connected to the "cough[ing]" image. (Ginsberg received tuberculosis treatments the same year he stayed with Dargin.) The red sunrise or sunset may be what's "crown[ing]" the protagonists "with flame." Ginsberg's friend Dargin was a theology student; "orange crates of theology" refers to the books he kept on cheap shelves made from stacked orange crates.

The poem's protagonists also tried to write poetry, like the poet himself. But they sometimes found that the "lofty incantations" (holy chants or verses) they "scribbled all night," while "rocking and rolling" (listening to rock music, or swaying with intoxication or inspiration), turned out to be "stanzas of gibberish" (sheer nonsense) in the light of day. In other words, they were no good.

Line 52 returns to food imagery, showing the impoverished hipsters cooking "rotten animals" ("lung heart feet tail" and all—they couldn't afford to waste any meat), as well as "borsht" (a.k.a. *borscht*, an Eastern European beet soup) and "tortillas." Even as they ate cheap meat, they "dream[ed] of the pure vegetable kingdom": that is, dreamed of going vegetarian. (Ginsberg noted that this line was inspired by the cooking and diet of his mother.)

LINES 53-56

who plunged themselves ...
... of Absolute Reality,

Lines 53-56 present images of failure and disappointment, as the poem's heroes reluctantly seek some form of stable income. The relatively short line 53 sets the tone for this passage:

> who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking
> for an egg,

Ginsberg explained this as a dark bit of "Chaplinesque" slapstick, but it also seems to be a metaphor for getting crushed by something powerful (meat trucks) while seeking something fragile (an egg). In other words, it might represent the way powerful social forces destroyed these characters while they were chasing fragile artistic dreams. (Notice that the *meat* truck appears right after line 52, in which the bohemians cooked "rotten meat" while "dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom.")

In line 54, the bohemians make a symbolic gesture that ironically comes back to bite them:

> who threw their watches off the roof to cast their
> ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell
> on their heads every day for the next decade,

In other words, they threw their watches away to show that they cared more about immortal art, eternal truths, etc. than temporary, worldly things. But the mainstream world of clocks and calendars forced them to walk back that stance: "alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade," as the speaker hyperbolically puts it. Basically, they had to go to work and earn money for something besides art.

Line 55 presents a more extreme version of the same scenario. According to the speaker, these bohemians tried three times, "unsuccessfully," to kill themselves by slitting their wrists. When these suicide attempts failed, they were "forced" to find some way to live. They "open[ed] antique stores" where they themselves felt antique—"thought they were growing old"—and "cried" because their youths were over.

Line 56 amps up the hyperbole, portraying the square, conformist, mainstream culture as a kind of hellish war zone. This culture, according to the speaker:

- "burned [the bohemians] alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue" (the former home of New York's advertising industry). The phrase "flannel suits" likely alludes to Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a bestseller in 1955 (the year Ginsberg finished writing "Howl"). The novel dramatizes post-World War II trauma and the conflict between individualism and conformity in postwar America—themes that "Howl" wrestles with also. The allusion suggests that the poem's characters tried to adopt the flannel business suits of the mainstream, conformist world (maybe by taking advertising jobs), but got "burned" by the experience.
- This mainstream culture also "blast[ed]" the poem's heroes with "leaden verse" (i.e., bad poetry—another reference to the advertising industry, with its jingles and slogans).
- And it assaulted them with "the iron regiments of fashion" (relentless fashion trends, imagined here as a sort of conformity machine that "clatter[ed]" like a "tank").

While trying to do creative work in the business world, they also encountered "the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising" (basically, the loud talk or violent screams of men

in the advertising industry; "nitroglycerine" is a component of dynamite, while "fairies" is a derogatory term for queer men) and the "mustard gas [i.e., toxic attitudes or behavior] of sinister intelligent editors." If they survived all that, they were simply flattened by a massive reality check: figuratively, "run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality"—that is, the way things really are.

LINES 57-58

who jumped off ...
... of colossal steamwhistles,

Lines 57-58 depict another series of extreme and outlandish experiences, involving a mix of wild ecstasy and "despair" (including suicidal or self-destructive behavior). Again, the poem shows that its heroes are free-spirited but troubled; they live hard and play hard, but sometimes die hard as well—or come close.

Line 57 depicts a failed suicide attempt. According to the speaker, the characters (or a member of their group) "jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge [...] and walked away unknown and forgotten" into the "soup alleyways & firetrucks" of New York City's Chinatown neighborhood.

The speaker assures the reader that "this actually happened," implying that some of the poem's other details may be hyperbolic or fictitious, and marvels that that the jumper(s) didn't even get "one free beer" for their extraordinary feat of survival. Ginsberg based this anecdote on the experience of counterculture poet and musician Tuli Kupferberg (1923-2010), who survived a suicidal jump off the Manhattan (not Brooklyn) Bridge in 1945. (Kupferberg later became known as the co-founder of the counterculture band The Fugs, so he wasn't actually "forgotten"; even when claiming to report real events, the poem takes poetic license.)

Line 58 then presents another montage-style series of images and incidents. According to the speaker, the bohemians "sang out of their windows in despair," making a kind of art or celebration out of their distress. They "fell out of the subway window" (a detail based on Beat Generation figure William Cannastra, who died while drunkenly trying to climb out a subway window in 1950). They "jumped in the filthy Passaic" River in New Jersey—whether for fun or to kill themselves isn't clear. They "leaped on negroes," most likely meaning that they had sex with Black partners (at a time when interracial relationships were still taboo in America, and queer interracial relationships were doubly taboo).

They also wept, danced, broke things, bled, and vomited, all apparently while drunk:

> [...] cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles,

Overall, their actions combine wild partying with emotional turmoil and self-harm. In fact, their frenzied partying itself verges on a form of self-harm, as if they're seeking pleasure by punishing their bodies. Even when dancing, for example, they dance on broken glass. (This mix of pain and pleasure occurs elsewhere in the poem, too, as in lines 10-11: "purgatoried their torsos night after night / with dreams, with drugs," etc.) The vivid imagery in this line seems to assault all the senses at once, from touch (those shards of glass) to taste ("finished the whiskey and threw up") to hearing ("moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles").

LINES 59-61

who barreled down ...
... for her heroes,

Lines 59-61 describe road trips and journeys all over America. For the poem's heroes, these journeys have a spiritual aspect: they seem to be quests for meaning and truth as well as pleasure, companionship, etc.

Line 59 describes the bohemians "barrel[ing] down the highways of the past," suggesting that these trips have a nostalgic flavor, and "journeying to each other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation." In other words, they traveled to help each other in hard times or share fun experiences:

- "hotrod-Golgotha" may be a poetic description of a car wreck, with a "hotrod" being a souped-up car (the kind these rebellious, speed-loving Beats might drive) and "Golgotha" alluding to the site of Christ's crucifixion.
- "jail-solitude watch" suggests a visit to a lonely friend in prison.
- "Birmingham jazz incarnation" implies some kind of revelatory jazz performance in Birmingham, Alabama. (Ginsberg noted that this line alludes to lyrics by the jazz musician Lead Belly: "Send me a letter, send it by mail / Send it in care of the Birmingham Jail.")

Line 60 describes the bohemians taking long cross-country road trips to discuss recent spiritual experiences (something that Ginsberg's friend Neal Cassady—the "N.C." of the poem—actually did). As spiritual questers, they wanted to experience illuminating "vision[s]" and understand "Eternity."

Line 61 describes travels to, from, and within Denver, Colorado, a frequent hangout spot for the Beats. Notice how the poem's protagonists seem to die and return to life there: "who died in Denver, who came back to Denver." Similar death-defying resurrections occur in line 57 ("jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge

[...] and walked away unknown") and line 77 ("rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz").

In these moments, the poem seems to portray its protagonists not only as spiritual seekers but as almost supernatural figures: beings with multiple lives, or dying and reviving gods. Line 61 reinforces this idea in other ways, too: it claims that these bohemians "watched over" Denver (like a benevolent deity), left Denver "to find out the Time" (as opposed to "find[ing] out Eternity" in the previous line; in other words, they returned from lofty spiritual pursuits to ordinary, worldly ones), and left the city "lonesome for her heroes" (i.e., awaiting the return of some larger-than-life presence). At the same time, they themselves "brooded & loned in Denver" and "waited in vain"—either for each other or for some momentous event—so they also experience human feelings and frustrations.

LINES 62-64

who fell on ...
... daisychain or grave,

In lines 62-64, the poem's heroes are separated in various ways: "praying" or "waiting" for friends, or scattering to different parts of the world.

Line 62 describes them "praying for each other's salvation and light and breasts"—a humorous way of saying "for each other's souls and bodies." (Notice how the idea of praying for someone's breasts combines the sacred and the profane: a combination that runs throughout the poem as a whole.) They pray in "cathedrals" that feel "hopeless," suggesting that they pray in spite of their own despair. Even so, their prayer seems to be answered with a brief, fragile spiritual vision: "the soul illuminated its hair for a second."

Line 63 describes them "crash[ing] through their minds in jail," another apparent reference to their mental health struggles. Perhaps they went "stir crazy" while incarcerated, or suffered some other kind of mental "crash," as during drug withdrawal. They also awaited an encounter or reunion with other colorful outlaws: "impossible criminals with golden heads and the charm of reality in their hearts." (These seem to be beautiful, blond, charming men to whom they were attracted.) Either they or the other criminals "sang sweet blues to Alcatraz"—a notorious former prison off the coast of San Francisco, California—ironically expressing their emotions to the indifferent prison that caged them. (Ginsberg noted that this line was based on his friend Neal Cassady's incarceration in San Quentin State Prison, another penitentiary near San Francisco.)

Line 64 depicts members of the Beat circle "retir[ing]" to various activities and places:

- They went "to Mexico to cultivate a habit" (i.e., to take up prolonged drug use);
- or to Rocky Mount, North Carolina "to tender Buddha" (i.e., to practice Buddhism);
- or to Tangier, Morocco to be with "boys"(i.e., have sexual involvements with young males);
- or to work for "the black locomotive[s]" of the Southern Pacific Railroad (a former railroad network in the Western U.S.);
- or to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts to be with "Narcissus" (i.e., narcissistically focus on themselves);
- or to Woodlawn Cemetery in New York City to make "daisychain[s]," visit "grave[s]," and/or go to the "grave" themselves.

Ginsberg noted that all these details allude to the real-life activities of various members of the Beat circle: William Burroughs went for a time to Mexico and Tangier; Bill Garver went to Mexico; Jack Kerouac went to Rocky Mount (where his sister lived); Neal Cassady took a job at the South Pacific Railroad; John Hollander and others attended Harvard; and Ginsberg's mother, Naomi, was institutionalized in a facility with a view of Woodlawn.

LINES 65-68

who demanded sanity ...
... briefly in catatonia,

Lines 65-68 focus more closely on the characters' mental health struggles, particularly their institutionalization in mental hospitals.

Line 65 is again based on the experiences of the poet's mother, Naomi, a paranoid schizophrenic who came to believe that she was receiving private radio broadcasts from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Accusing the radio of hypnotism," then, suggests that the poem's characters were suffering paranoid delusions. They "demanded sanity trials" (something like sanity hearings to determine a defendant's mental competence), perhaps wishing to prove that they were merely victims of "the radio."

In the end, they "were left with their insanity [...] and a hung jury"—a suggestion that their demands went nowhere, leaving their mental state officially undecided, even though, ironically, they were clearly delusional. They were also left with "their hands," which they perhaps stared at dejectedly. (Ginsberg suggested that this phrase also meant, metaphorically, that they still had their insanity *on* their hands, i.e, still had to deal with it.)

Lines 66-69 are then based on the experiences of Carl Solomon, the writer to whom "Howl" is dedicated, as well as Ginsberg himself:

- Solomon really did throw potato salad at a "lecturer[] on Dadaism"—though at Brooklyn College, not "CCNY" (the City College of New York). Dadaism is a subversive, prankish art movement from the early 20th century; the potato salad

throwing, as Solomon explained it, was supposed to be an *example* of Dadaism.
- Solomon then reported to a mental institution ("presented [himself] on the granite steps of the madhouse") and "demanded instantaneous lobotomy"—that is, requested immediate, drastic brain surgery to treat his insanity. He showed up with his head "shaven," as if he were already a mental patient forced to go bald, and raved in the "harlequin speech of suicide": that is, talked in outlandish, suicidal terms. (*Harlequin* refers to an outlandish jester character from the Italian performance tradition of commedia dell'arte.)
- Solomon claimed that these acts were "absurd humor"—basically, that they were all part of the prank—but he really did get hospitalized.

He wasn't lobotomized, however. Line 67 is based on some of the treatments he and Ginsberg received during their time in mental hospitals:

- "insulin": insulin shock therapy, which induces a series of comas via insulin injections as treatment for schizophrenia.
- "Metrazol": a convulsion-inducing medication for sufferers of schizophrenia and other psychoses.
- "electricity": electroconvulsive therapy, which administers convulsion-inducing electric shocks as a treatment for major depression and other disorders.
- "hydrotherapy": an alternative medicine practice also called the "water cure," which involves immersing patients in baths, hot springs, etc.
- "psychotherapy": therapy involving discussions with a mental health professional, such as a psychoanalyst.
- "occupational therapy": therapy that helps patients learn or resume various everyday activities (occupations).
- "pingpong & amnesia": a reference to recreational ping-pong in the mental hospital, as well as the temporary or permanent amnesia that often results from shock treatments.

The poem conveys thesense of anger and exhaustion resulting from these treatments. It implies that the patients wanted to overtake the hospital—or overturn the whole system that put them there—but instead "overturned only one symbolic pingpong table" as a "humorless protest" before "resting briefly in catatonia" (i.e., in a stupor). In other words, they managed only to flip one table before they zoned out. (This detail alludes to the biblical story in which Jesus flips the tables of money-changers in the Temple of Jerusalem—another protest against a corrupt system.)

LINES 69-72

returning years later ...
... soup of time—

Lines 69-72 continue to portray the characters' institutionalization and mental health struggles.

They "return[ed] years later"—years after their first hospitalization—to mental hospitals in northeastern U.S. cities ("the madtowns of the East"). This time, they hadn't shaved their heads on purpose (as in line 66); they'd grown older and "truly bald," except for the metaphorical "wig of blood, and tears and fingers" they wore as they clutched and scratched their heads in distress. Upon returning, they felt a sense of overwhelming despair, described hyperbolically as "visible madman doom."

They were committed to "Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls": the stinking wards of mental institutions such as Pilgrim State Hospital and Rockland State Hospital (both in New York) and Greystone Park State Hospital in New Jersey. (Carl Solomon and Ginsberg's mother both spent time at Pilgrim State, and Ginsberg's mother at Greystone.)

They "bicker[ed] with the echoes of the soul"—had intense arguments with themselves—and swayed ("rock[ed] and roll[ed]") on the benches of the lonely facilities, a.k.a. "the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love." *Dolmen* refers to ancient tombs made of giant slabs of rock, forming table-like structures like those at Stonehenge. The speaker connects this image with the names Grey*stone* and *Rock*land, suggesting that the atmosphere in these places feels dull, ancient, and dead. (Ginsberg noted: "Dolmens mark a vanished civilization, as Stonehenge or Greystone and Rockland monoliths.") In this environment, the "dream of life" seems to have turned into an agonizing "nightmare," and the depressed patients' bodies seem to have "turned to stone as heavy as the moon."

Line 71 suggests the state of the characters' lives around the time they were committed. Basically, everything's fallen apart: for example, "mother" is finally "******."

- Ginsberg acknowledged that the self-censored word here is "fucked," and that the line refers in a complex way to his own mother. When he wrote the poem, she was soon to die in an institution, and thus metaphorically done for, screwed over by the system, etc.
- Since these lines deal with psychiatric issues, there may also be a sexual pun here related to the "Oedipus complex": psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's idea that boys sexually desire their mothers.)

Meanwhile, the bohemians have "flung" their "last fantastic book"—last outlandish reading material—out of their apartment

windows, as if giving up on intellectual life. They've apparently cut off or alienated everyone in their lives: "the last door [has] closed at 4 A.M. and the last telephone [has been] slammed at the wall in reply."

They've moved out of their homes, too: "the last furnished room [has been] emptied down to the last piece of mental furniture." All that's left is one "hopeful little bit of hallucination"—"a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet"—which seems to symbolize a fragile dream of romance. Even at their lowest, these characters preserve a tiny bit of hope, even if it's "imaginary."

After all these bleak images, the speaker suddenly breaks into apostrophe in line 72. Addressing Solomon directly, he tells his friend that "while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time." In other words, the society that considers Solomon insane, or that drives him insane, could do the same to the poet himself (after all, in real life, the two met in a mental hospital). The phrase "you're really in the total animal soup of time" plays on the old expression "in the soup," meaning "in trouble." This hyperbolic version suggests that Solomon is in some broader, cosmic trouble; he's entered a "total" state of chaos.

LINES 73-75

and who therefore ...
... and endless head,

Lines 73-75 offer a partial sense of renewal after the "nightmar[ish]" sickness, isolation, and despair of the previous eight lines. They describe a kind of creative epiphany, as the poem's heroes discover new ways to convert their experience into art—perhaps including "Howl" itself.

According to line 73, they had "a sudden flash of" inspiration:

> and who therefore ran through the icy streets
> obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the
> use of the ellipsis catalogue a variable measure and
> the vibrating plane,

"Therefore" links this inspiration with the poet's realization in the previous line: "ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe." This line marked the return of the poet's "I," which hadn't appeared since line 1 of the poem. In other words, the character, or at least one of the characters, experiencing this "sudden flash" might be the poet himself! Having realized that he isn't "safe" in this society, the poet may be trying to save himself or others through his art. Or, maybe, the sense of danger has simply gotten his creative juices flowing.

His flash of inspiration involves the way particular literary devices might work like "alchemy," transforming ordinary material into something rare and valuable. These devices include:

- "ellipsis" (intentionally omitted material, often indicated by three dots);
- the "catalogue" (poetic list);
- and "variable measure" (essentially, free verse);
- as well as "the vibrating plane" (not a literary device but a reference to mystical ideas: cosmic vibrations, different "planes" or levels of reality, etc.).

Since "Howl" incorporates versions of these techniques, the poet may be describing the kind of creative breakthrough that led to the poem itself.

Line 74 reinforces this theme of renewed poetic power. According to the speaker, the poem's heroes "dreamt" up "images" whose juxtaposition "made incarnate gaps in Time & Space"—that is, changed the fabric of reality.

Their "visual" imagery also "trapped the archangel of the soul"—expressed their truest, highest, most divine self. They combined grammar, punctuation, and thought ("elemental," or primal-seeming, verbs; "the noun and dash of consciousness") in ways that made language seem like a religious revelation, "jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus." (Ginsberg found this Latin phrase, which means "God the All-Powerful, Eternal Father," in the writings of the painter Paul Cézanne and included it as a subtle allusion to Cézanne's visionary ideas.)

All in all, according to the speaker, these writers sought "to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose"; in other words, Ginsberg and the other Beats sought new ways to represent natural human speech in their literary art. The Beat, then, is a classic kind of outcast artist: "intelligent" (in fact, one of "the best minds of my generation," as in line 1) yet "shame[d]" and "rejected" by society as he tries to communicate his deepest thoughts:

> [...] stand[ing] before you speechless and intelligent
> and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out
> the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his
> naked and endless head,

Notice that this Beat figure "conform[s]" to the ideas in his own head; he doesn't conform to *society*. The word "naked" here means bald (see "returning years later truly bald," line 69), but it also suggests a sense of vulnerability (compare the phrase "naked mind for love," line 77). His head is "endless," too: it's a limitless source of ideas.

LINES 76-78

the madman bum ...
... a thousand years.

Part I of the poem concludes by presenting its heroes, the artists of the Beat Generation, as sacrificial and almost saintly figures. In the poet/speaker's view, they were not only

"destroyed by madness" (as in line 1) but martyred by a mainstream culture that didn't understand their love or art.

Line 76 describes these martyrs as:

> the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown,
> yet putting down here what might be left to say in
> time come after death,

The typical "beat" (or Beat) figure, then, is as erratic as a "madman," as poor as a "bum," and as holy as an "angel." The word "beat" could also function as an adjective here, meaning "beaten down" or worn out (i.e., by "Time"). This figure is "unknown"—anonymous or underappreciated by his society—but he's trying to write words that might resonate with posterity, or might need saying in the afterlife.

Line 77 then describes a kind of mystical "reincarnat[ion]," in which this figure came back to life ("rose" like a Christ or messiah figure) as a "ghostly" member of a jazz band. He (or they) converted the "suffering of America's naked mind for love"—the love, pain, and vulnerability at the heart of the American experience—"into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry," or a saxophone wail as agonizing as Christ's cry from the cross. (The Aramaic phrase "eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani" is often translated: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")

According to the speaker, this sound resonated all across the country: "shivered the cities down to the last radio." Since jazz was a very popular genre at the time, this line suggests that the kind of pain and love America ignores or excludes—the kind the poem has been describing—lives on in American art.

There's a great cost to the artists, however, who had "the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years." Again, the poem presents them as sacrificial victims, Christlike figures martyred to a culture that "butcher[s]" them—then nourishes itself for ages on the poetry and art they made.

As one might expect in these lines about poetry and music, the poem's language itself is highly musical. It's full of alliteration ("bum"/"beat," "rose reincarnate," etc.) and assonance ("ghostly clothes," "shivered"/"cities," etc.), and it contains some noticeable rhythmic effects. For example, though "Howl" is a free verse poem, the phrase "the madman bum and angel beat in Time" (line 76) falls into the rhythm of perfect iambic pentameter (da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM):

> the mad- | man bum | and an- | gel beat | in Time [...]

LINES 79-82

What sphinx of ...
... the stunned governments!

Part II of the poem begins with a rhetorical question, as the speaker asks what, exactly, brought down the "heroes" or "hipsters" described in Part I:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open
> their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

In the first line of Part I, the poet/speaker said that these heroes—"the best minds of [his] generation"—were "destroyed by madness." Now, however, the speaker claims that a monstrous "sphinx of cement and aluminum" destroyed their "brains and imagination."

As Part II goes, it becomes clear how these two claims fit together. The "sphinx" symbolizes the industrial, capitalist, American society the heroes live in (that's why it's made of "cement and aluminum": industrial materials). That society, in turn, represents a kind of "madness" that crushes people who don't conform to it—and wrecks their sanity in the process.

Sphinxes are mythical creatures with a human head, lion's body, and wings. The poem's bloodthirsty sphinx is an allusion to the Sphinx of Thebes from ancient Greek myth and literature, who posed a riddle to travelers and devoured them if they answered incorrectly. The poem also identifies its sphinx-like creature as "Moloch": a pagan god denounced in the Bible (Leviticus) and associated with child sacrifice. (Ginsberg is alluding to versions of Moloch in other literature as well; see the Symbols section of this guide for more.)

Again, it soon becomes clear that, within the poem, this mythical/biblical monster stands for American society or "the system" as a whole.

- From line 80 on, "Moloch" is associated with just about every negative quality under the sun: "Solitude," "Filth," "Ugliness," and more.
- It's also associated specifically with the *American* economic and political system ("dollars," "Congress," etc.), although it extends to cover global, military-industrial society as a whole ("Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!").
- It's framed as a heartless ("Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch!"), merciless ("Moloch the heavy judger of men! [...] Moloch whose buildings are judgment!"), repressive, and deadly force, linked with "armies," "incomprehensible prison[s]," and "crossbone soulless jailhouse[s]."
- It causes the "screaming," "sobbing," and "weeping" of "Children," "Boys," and "Old men," respectively.
- In short, it's a total "Nightmare."

After the long single sentence of Part I, the speaker delivers these lines as a series of terse exclamations, conveying outrage, fear, and disgust. Basically, the speaker condemns American society as if cursing out a hideous monster.

LINES 83-85

Moloch whose mind ...
... is the Mind!

Lines 83-85 continue to curse "Moloch," or the American/capitalist system. According to the speaker, this system runs on cold calculation (its "mind is pure machinery"), capitalist greed (its "blood is running money"), and militaristic violence (its "fingers are ten armies"). It's like a predatory machine (its "breast is a cannibal dynamo"), incapable of listening or seeing as it causes destruction ("Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!" / "Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!").

The system seems to wield divine power: its "skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs," or versions of the Judeo-Christian god. (Recall, too, that "Moloch" is an allusion to a Canaanite god from the Old Testament.) It blights the urban landscape with factories (which "croak" as they "dream," almost like the suffering artists of the poem), and it "crowns" the cities with pollution-spewing "smoke-stacks" and broadcast "antennae." Basically, it rules the world like a destructive god or king.

With scathing irony, the poet/speaker says that its "love is endless oil and stone" and its "soul is electricity and banks." In other words, this system has no human feelings; it cares only about things like drilling, mining, energy, and finance.

Ambiguously, the speaker adds that its "poverty is the specter of genius," which might mean that the poverty it creates is like the ghost, or specter, of the geniuses it's ruined (like "the best minds of [the speaker's] generation," mentioned in line 1).

The speaker further warns that the "fate" of the American system is "a cloud of sexless hydrogen": in other words, it's propelling humanity toward a nuclear war (waged with hydrogen bombs) that will destroy and sterilize the planet. The "name" of this system "is the Mind!"—in other words, it's all mind and no heart; it stands for sheer calculation without any feeling behind it.

As in the previous lines, alliteration and assonance add extra punch to the speaker's vehement curses. In line 83, for example, /m/ alliteration and /uh/ assonance make the language seem to drip with disgust:

> Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! [...]

LINES 86-88

Moloch in whom ...
... cocks! monstrous bombs!

Lines 86-88 continue to curse "Moloch," the evil system that oppresses the poem's characters. For the first time in Part II, the pronoun "I" appears, indicating how this system personally affects the poet/speaker.

Under this system, the speaker, writing from a queer male viewpoint, feels "lonely" and "Crazy." He calls himself a "Cocksucker," an expletive often used to deride gay men, and he says he's "Lacklove and manless" (starved for love and sex). He says that he "dream[s] Angels," a possible sign of his artistic or visionary "Craz[iness]"—as well as a possible reference to beautiful men (whom the poem repeatedly compares to angels; see lines 37 and 39).

The speaker also suggests that the system has damaged him psychologically, in part by surrounding his sexuality with a sense of shame. He says that Moloch "entered my soul early" (first affected him while he was young); that Moloch turns him into "a consciousness without a body" (places a barrier between his mind and body, or intellect and sexuality); and that Moloch "frightened me out of my natural ecstasy" (scared him away from what naturally thrilled him).

The speaker claims he's renouncing Moloch, as if purging a demon, but it's not clear that he can:

> Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

No sooner does he "abandon" Moloch than he "Wake[s] up" under the same system. However, the joyous image of "light streaming out of the sky" suggests that maybe something *has* changed for him, at least psychologically.

The speaker then cries out against various features of the system, using a rapid series of metaphors involving robots, skeletons, demons, and other sinister creatures:

> [...] Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

These metaphors paint a portrait of a global society that's inhuman and conformist ("Robot apartments"), out of touch with reality ("invisible suburbs [...] blind capitals [...] spectral nations"), full of patriarchal swagger (the "granite" skyscrapers look like giant phalluses), and generally violent and deadly ("skeleton treasuries [...] demonic industries [...] monstrous bombs"). The phrase "invincible madhouses" reinforces a key theme of the poem: the way this society ruthlessly imposes its (false) definition of sanity and insanity.

Ginsberg noted that these lines refer to some specific features of Cold War-era global society, such as skyscrapers in the financial district of New York City, plants that manufactured military weapons, the "ghostly bureaucracies" of the Soviet Union, the Western military powers "covering [various nations] with war," and the atomic and hydrogen bombs.

LINES 89-93

They broke their ...
... into the street!

Lines 89-93 mark a shift in Part II, as the speaker turns from cursing Moloch to lamenting the poem's heroes.

Line 89, for example, laments that "They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven!" This seems to mean that the bohemians damaged or destroyed themselves in the effort to redeem their unholy society. Metaphorically, they tried to raise the "city"—the whole urban and social landscape, "Pavements, trees, radios, tons" and all—up toward heaven. The speaker believes that, ironically, this noble effort was wasted, since Heaven already "exists and is everywhere about us!" The exact spiritual meaning of this statement is open to interpretation, but it suggests that the bohemians were striving toward some higher, divine state that doesn't actually exist. Whatever redemption can be found has to be found in everyday surroundings, not in some remote heaven.

The speaker then sums up what was lost during this failed effort:

> Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies!
> gone down the American river!
> Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the
> whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

In other words, all the bohemians' dreams, poetic visions, spiritual experiences, etc. came to nothing: they "[went] down the American river." This phrase plays on the idiom "sell down the river," meaning to betray or sell out someone or something. Building on this metaphor, the speaker suggests that the "river" of mainstream American culture swept all these dreams and revelations away, as if they were no more than a "boatload of sensitive bullshit!"

The speaker then adds to this list of losses, suggesting that the bohemians' sufferings were wasted, too:

> Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions!
> gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs!
> Ten years' animal screams and suicides! Minds! New
> loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!

In other words, their "Despairs" as well as their "Highs," their torments and painful contortions ("flips and crucifixions") as well as their creative "Breakthroughs," their "animal screams and suicides" as well as their "New loves," got carried away by the same metaphorical "flood" and smashed on "the rocks of Time." Returning to the theme established in the poem's first line ("I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness"), this passage suggests that America ruined an entire "Mad generation" in the "ten years" following World War II.

Part II then closes with a surreal burst of imagery, which serves as both an elegy for and tribute to this "generation." It describes their "Real holy laughter in the river"—their saintly humor amid the "river" of mainstream America, or else their laughter in the literal rivers they jumped in (see line 58)—and exclaims that "They saw it all!"

Like a group of prophets, they witnessed and understood everything their society was. With their "wild eyes" and "holy yells," they seem to exit the poem in a kind of mad parade: saying "farewell," "jump[ing] off the roof," heading off "to solitude," "waving," and "carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!" The speaker may be implying that some of these bohemians left the world entirely (died by suicide), or else went off to "solitude," ended up on the "street[s]," etc. The flowers they carried may symbolize some romantic idealism that survived everything they went through.

LINES 94-99

Carl Solomon! I'm ...
... same dreadful typewriter

Part III of "Howl" addresses Ginsberg's friend Carl Solomon directly, in the poem's first use of apostrophe since line 72 ("ah, Carl [...]"). It assures Solomon that "I'm with you in Rockland," meaning Rockland State Hospital in Orangeburg, New York (a mental health facility now known as Rockland Psychiatric Center).

"I'm with you" suggests slightly different meanings:

- It might mean that the poet/speaker (Ginsberg) is imagining himself institutionalized along with Solomon. (Neither man was ever committed to "Rockland"—Ginsberg used that name for its sound and ominous symbolism—but Ginsberg and Solomon did meet as patients in a different mental hospital in 1948.)
- Alternatively, it could just be an expression of sympathy and support.
- As the phrase repeats in the form of anaphora throughout Part III, it seems to fluctuate between these two meanings. For example, Ginsberg noted that line 99 ("where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter") draws on his actual experience with Solomon in the hospital, whereas the poem's last line (line 112) acknowledges that Ginsberg is now living far from Solomon, in a "cottage in the Western" U.S.

Part III begins with the speaker's claim that Solomon is "madder than I am" (line 94): a statement that might be teasing, rueful, sympathetic, defensive, or a mix of these things. The speaker empathetically acknowledges that Solomon "must feel very strange" (line 95), both in his current mental state and in the harsh hospital environment. The speaker also compares

Solomon to "the shade of my mother" (line 96)—that is, Naomi Ginsberg, who was also in a mental hospital during this period. Naomi may have already seemed like a "shade," or ghost, while her son was writing "Howl," as she died shortly after he finished it.

The following three lines have a grimly joking quality. The speaker claims that Solomon has "murdered [his] twelve secretaries" in the hospital (line 97), then imagines him "laugh[ing] at this invisible humor" (line 98). This joke may have had some private meaning for the two friends, but it's basically an ironic suggestion that Solomon is a serial killer who truly poses a danger to society, as opposed to a troubled artist who doesn't. (It's also clearly absurd to imagine a mental patient having a secretarial staff.) The humor is "invisible" because Solomon can't really see the words the speaker is writing—so the claim that he's laughing is ironic, too.

The speaker then pokes fun at himself and Solomon, claiming that "we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter." This claim sounds especially ironic and self-deprecating after the speaker's awkward joke. Again, the line alludes to real events as well: in the institution where they first met, Ginsberg and Solomon typed out letters to famous authors. (Perhaps, while doing so, they dreamed of achieving their own literary "great[ness].")

LINES 100-105

I'm with you ...
... an armed madhouse

Lines 100-105 add more details about Carl Solomon's experience in the mental hospital. There's an uneasy mixture of irony and sincerity in this passage, as the poet/speaker gently makes light of Solomon's situation while genuinely sympathizing with his suffering.

The speaker claims that Solomon's mental "condition has become serious and is reported on the radio" (line 100)—most likely a dark joke, because Solomon wasn't a high-profile figure, nor are mental patients' conditions usually reported as news. The joke ironically hints at the *lack* of attention paid to people like Solomon, whose suffering the poet does consider "serious."

The speaker then states that, for Solomon, "the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses" (line 101): metaphorically, his mind feels cut off from his bodily sensations. Notice how this image ties back to Part II, which accused "Moloch," or the American system, of imposing a wall between the intellect and the senses (as in line 87: "Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body!"). In the speaker's view, both social repression and poor mental health treatments can cause people to lose touch with the authentic feelings and needs of their bodies.

Lines 101-102 make fun of the women in the hospital and surrounding area:

> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you drink the tea of the breasts of the
> spinsters of Utica
> I'm with you in Rockland
> where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the
> harpies of the Bronx

Utica is a city in upstate New York, so it's in the same state as, though not especially close to, "Rockland." The humor here is a bit obscure; the speaker may be imagining that the "tea" available to Solomon in the hospital is as unpleasant as if it came from the breasts of elderly ladies ("spinsters") in the region.

The speaker also describes Solomon making "puns" (probably sexual jokes or putdowns) about the "bodies of [his] nurses the harpies of the Bronx." Both "spinsters" and "harpies" are derogatory words for women, so the humor the speaker is sharing with Solomon here—perhaps to cheer him up—has misogynistic undertones.

The next lines (104-105) turn more serious, as they focus on Solomon's psychological anguish. According to the speaker, Solomon "scream[s] in a straightjacket that [he's] losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss." A straitjacket is a restraining device for mental patients in danger of harming themselves; Ping-Pong was provided as recreation in at least one of Solomon's hospitals (recall the earlier reference in lines 67-68).

Here, "pingpong" becomes a metaphor for Solomon's back-and-forth struggle with despair, which feels like a contest against, or within, "the abyss." The speaker then imagines Solomon turning to another not-so-fun amusement: "bang[ing] on a catatonic piano," or a broken piano that's as non-responsive as a zoned-out fellow patient. (See the earlier reference to "catatonia" in line 68, which is also based on Solomon's hospital experience.)

Erupting with indignation, the speaker adds that "the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse." In other words, these prison-like mental hospitals (with their "armed" guards) are soul-crushing and obscene ("ungodly"). They're inhumane places to live in, and they're especially cruel places to "die" in.

LINES 106-109

I'm with you ...
... of the Internationale

Lines 106-109 veer between despair and hope, especially with regard to Carl Solomon's situation.

Line 106 refers to shock therapy for psychiatric patients. This involved administering insulin injections (which sent the patient into a series of comas); drugs such as metrazol (which induced seizures; see line 67); or electric shocks (which also induced seizures). Of these treatments, only the last, electroconvulsive

therapy, is still in use. As practiced in the era of "Howl," all carried significant risks and side effects, such as short-term or long-term memory loss. Solomon noted that he received "50 insulin comas" at one hospital and "21 electroshocks" at another.

Thus, the speaker suggests that even a course of "fifty more shocks" will never cure Solomon or make him feel whole: it "will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void."

Like line 101 ("the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses"), this phrase imagines Solomon's mental illness as a kind of separation, or derangement, of the mind or soul from the body. Metaphorically, Solomon's soul seems to be on a "pilgrimage to a cross in the void": drifting through the abyss as if spiritually lost and seeking answers. This line offers no hope for Solomon's full recovery, though it does portray him as a kind of martyr or spiritual figure.

The next line (line 107) portrays him as a rebel and potential revolutionary:

> [...] where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha

In "accus[ing his] doctors of insanity," Solomon turns the tables, defining himself as sane in an insane society. According to the speaker, he's also "plot[ting] the Hebrew socialist revolution," or a left-wing political rebellion with ties to Jewish culture. (Ginsberg and Solomon were both from Jewish backgrounds, and Ginsberg is invoking historical ties between socialist thought and a progressive intellectual tradition within European and American Jewish culture of the 19th and 20th centuries.)

The speaker portrays Solomon as rebelling against a "fascist" America, thus comparing the U.S. to the fascist countries it had recently fought in World War II—countries that persecuted both Jewish people and socialists. ("Howl" was published at a time of anti-communist and anti-socialist fervor in the U.S., a period now known as the Second Red Scare.) The speaker also alludes to "Golgotha," the site of Christ's crucifixion in the Bible, implying that all of America is a place of torment.

Having invoked the Crucifixion, the speaker then compares Solomon to a "living human Jesus" (line 108) and implies that he will escape, Christ-like, from "the superhuman tomb" of the mental hospital. Hyperbolically, he imagines Solomon "split[ting] the heavens of Long Island" and being "resurrect[ed]" like a modern messiah.

Line 109 again links this fantasy of spiritual renewal with a dream of political revolution, as the speaker claims that "Rockland" hospital contains "twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale." (Ginsberg noted that 25,000 was actually the patient population of Pilgrim State Hospital.)

The word "comrades" implies a fellowship of socialist or communist believers; the "Internationale" is a socialist anthem dating to the 19th century. Thus, after portraying Solomon as lonely and helpless in the mental institution, the speaker suddenly imagines him as divinely powerful: a godlike figure who will return at any moment, possibly with an army of "comrades" prepared to overthrow the oppressive American system. Again, these lines were deliberately provocative during a time when socialist and communist beliefs were taboo in the U.S.

LINES 110-112

> *I'm with you ...*
> *... the Western night*

Lines 110-112 close the poem with several ambiguous fantasies of reunion and redemption.

In line 110, the speaker imagines that he and Solomon are in bed together. Their coupling seems to be metaphorical or allegorical, since "the United States" is in bed with them:

> [...] we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep

Metaphorically, this suggests that Ginsberg and Solomon want to love their country, just as they want their (repressed, repressive) country to love and accept them. Yet it's too sick to do so; its "cough[ing]" kills the romantic spirit and figuratively keeps them up at night. Ironically, the society that considers *them* sick—as gay men, political nonconformists, etc.—is actually sick while they are well. (The sickness is metaphorical, of course: the coughing stands for a deeper moral, intellectual, and spiritual malady that plagues the United States. Ginsberg also suggested that this imagery was inspired by his own time in a mental hospital, where "Certain patients [...] remained agitated, talking to themselves, coughing all night.")

Line 111 again dreams of a sudden redemption, or "victory" over repressive forces. Playing on the image of electroshock therapy (the kind administered to Solomon), the speaker imagines himself and Solomon "wak[ing] up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof." This sight is "electrify[ing]" as in exciting, because these "airplanes" seem to be on a spiritual mission to set everyone free:

> [...] they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free

This holy event seems to represent the salvation of Ginsberg's and Solomon's "own souls," the liberation of the mental hospital, and the liberation of society as a whole. The hospital "illuminates itself" (as if spiritually illuminated) and "collapse[s]"; the "skinny" patients "run outside"; the "victory" is so "free[ing]" that there's no need even for the restriction of "underwear." Rather than the apocalyptic nuclear war that the speaker has previously dreaded, this is a "starry-spangled shock of mercy," a blessed "eternal war." (Ginsberg may be alluding, ironically or otherwise, to the war in heaven that precedes the biblical Day of Judgment and ushers in the final salvation of humankind.)

After this giddy fantasy, the poem ends on a somewhat more muted note. As a closing message to Solomon, the speaker reports seeing him "in my dreams":

> [...] you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night

This line acknowledges that Ginsberg and Solomon were, in fact, far apart when the poem was written: Solomon was institutionalized in New York, while Ginsberg was living in a "cottage" in the "Western" U.S. (Berkeley, California). Still, the speaker dreams of Solomon showing up "in tears" at his cottage, "dripping" wet after "a sea-journey on the highway across America." It's not clear whether these are tears of joy, despair, or something in between.

The cross-country road trip is the kind of journey closely associated with the Beat Generation (as in lines 59-60 of "Howl," or Jack Kerouac's famous novel *On the Road*, which was already in progress when Ginsberg wrote "Howl"). In a final surreal touch, this road trip is somehow also a "sea-journey," as if Solomon is Odysseus returning home after his postwar ordeal in Homer's *Odyssey*. This subtle allusion to the epic tradition marks a fitting close to "Howl," which casts the private battles of post-WWII artists as an epic struggle against American society.

SYMBOLS

MOLOCH/SPHINX

"Moloch," the monster in part II of "Howl," symbolizes the heartless society or system the poem's heroes inhabit. It's the equivalent of a concept like "the Man," "the system," or "the power" (as in "Fight the Power"). The poem links this system with the politics, mainstream culture, and capitalist economy of America in particular. More broadly, Moloch represents modern, capitalist, militarized, industrial society the world over.

The name "Moloch" alludes to a Canaanite god who is denounced in the Bible (mainly the Book of Leviticus) and associated with child sacrifice. A version of this mythical figure appears in other works as well:

- For example, Moloch is one of Satan's warrior-angels in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a hideous, mechanical monster/god in Fritz Lang's urban-dystopia film *Metropolis* (1927).
- In *Theories of Surplus Value* (1862-'63), Karl Marx—the economist, philosopher, and founder of the socialist/communist theory known as Marxism—referred to finance capital as "a Moloch demanding the whole world as a sacrifice belonging to it of right."

Ginsberg's version of Moloch seems inspired by Lang and Marx, especially. He described the Moloch section of the poem as "the monster vision" and "naturalistic observation of the industrial landscape [condensed] into hyperbolic images of metropolitan apocalypse."

Moloch is traditionally depicted with the head of a bull, but the poem imagines Moloch as more like a "sphinx" (a hybrid lion/human/bird from Egyptian and Greek mythology). In any case, the Moloch of the poem is more of a concept than a creature. It has a godlike presence (it's a "heavy judger of men," creates skyscrapers "like endless Jehovahs," etc.), but rather than a force of goodness, wisdom, or mercy, it's a crushing, "loveless" force of violence and greed. It seems to demand the sacrifice of "genius," condemning rebellious thinkers to "poverty," "suicides," "animal screams," and other kinds of suffering and death. It also destroys the creations, insights, and spiritual experiences of these rebels, selling their "Visions," "miracles," "Dreams," "illuminations," and so on "down the American river" as if they were no more than "a boatload of sensitive bullshit."

Basically, Moloch stands for everything that "destroyed" the poem's heroes: the rebellious bohemians who collapsed into "madness." In the poem's view, these sensitive, intelligent, artistic souls were victims of an evil society that effectively "ate up their brains and imagination."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 79-93:** "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? / Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! / Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men! / Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment!

Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! / Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! / Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities! / Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind! / Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch! / Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! / Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs! / They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us! / Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river! / Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit! / Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years' animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time! / Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is a hugely important part of "Howl"—the device that lends this free verse poem some structure by tying together the long, loose, wildly varying lines in each of the poem's three sections. The poem contains no meter or rhyme scheme, but anaphora gives it a sense of organization that helps readers follow its surreal twists and turns. In fact, the repeated words/phrases at the beginnings of lines help establish the theme of each section:

- Most lines in Part I begin with "who" followed by a verb, so that the section becomes an extended lament for (and celebration of) the poem's heroes, their adventures, and their sufferings.
- Most lines in Part II begin with "Moloch," so that the section becomes a long tirade against this monster and the society it symbolizes.
- Most lines in Part III begin with "I'm with you in Rockland" (usually followed by some version of "where you [...]"), so that the section becomes an extended message of sympathy, support, and comfort for Carl Solomon.

Some anaphora also occurs within lines, in sequences of parallel phrases or clauses. Notice, for example, the repeated "with"s in line 11:

> **with** dreams, **with** drugs, **with** waking nightmares [...]

And the repeated "& the"s in line 56:

> [...] & **the** tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & **the** nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & **the** mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors

In addition to lending the poem structure, anaphora also adds rhythm to the poem. As the repeated words/phrases pile up, the poem can sound like a spiritual chant, an angry rant, or a soothing reassurance (depending on context!).

The way these repetitions provide a baseline for free-flowing improvisations also resembles the structure of jazz, a genre that the poem repeatedly mentions and that Ginsberg cited as an inspiration. Each section contains at least *some* variation at the beginning of lines, which prevents the anaphora from becoming too predictable or boring.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "who"
- **Line 5:** "who"
- **Line 6:** "who"
- **Line 7:** "who"
- **Line 8:** "who"
- **Line 9:** "who"
- **Line 10:** "who"
- **Line 11:** "with," "with," "with"
- **Line 14:** "who"
- **Line 15:** "who"
- **Line 16:** "who"
- **Line 20:** "who"
- **Line 22:** "who"
- **Line 23:** "who"
- **Line 24:** "who"

- **Line 25:** “who”
- **Line 26:** “who”
- **Line 27:** “who”
- **Line 28:** “who”
- **Line 29:** “who”
- **Line 30:** “who”
- **Line 31:** “who”
- **Line 32:** “who”
- **Line 33:** “who”
- **Line 34:** “who”
- **Line 35:** “who ”
- **Line 36:** “who”
- **Line 38:** “who”
- **Line 39:** “who”
- **Line 40:** “who”
- **Line 41:** “who”
- **Line 42:** “who”
- **Line 43:** “who”
- **Line 44:** “who”
- **Line 45:** “who”
- **Line 46:** “who”
- **Line 47:** “who”
- **Line 48:** “who”
- **Line 49:** “who”
- **Line 50:** “who”
- **Line 51:** “who”
- **Line 52:** “who”
- **Line 53:** “who”
- **Line 54:** “who”
- **Line 55:** “who”
- **Line 56:** “who,” “& the,” “& the,” “& the”
- **Line 57:** “who”
- **Line 58:** “who”
- **Line 59:** “who”
- **Line 60:** “who”
- **Line 61:** “who,” “who,” “who,” “who”
- **Line 62:** “who”
- **Line 63:** “who,” “who”
- **Line 64:** “who”
- **Line 65:** “who”
- **Line 66:** “who”
- **Line 67:** “who”
- **Line 68:** “who”
- **Line 71:** “and,” “and,” “and,” “and,” “and”
- **Line 73:** “who”
- **Line 74:** “who”
- **Line 80:** “Moloch”
- **Line 81:** “Moloch,” “Moloch,” “Moloch the”
- **Line 82:** “Moloch the,” “Moloch the,” “Moloch,” “Moloch the,” “Moloch the”
- **Line 83:** “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose”
- **Line 84:** “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose”
- **Line 85:** “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose,” “Moloch whose”
- **Line 86:** “Moloch in whom,” “Moloch in whom”
- **Line 87:** “Moloch,” “Moloch,” “Moloch,” “Moloch”
- **Line 88:** “Moloch,” “Moloch”
- **Line 93:** “They,” “the,” “the,” “They,” “They”
- **Lines 94-94:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you’re”
- **Lines 95-95:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 96-96:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 97-97:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you’ve”
- **Lines 98-98:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 99-99:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Lines 100-100:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where your”
- **Lines 101-101:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Lines 102-102:** “I'm with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 103-103:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 104-104:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 105-105:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 106-106:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Lines 107-107:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 108-108:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where you”
- **Lines 109-109:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Lines 110-110:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Lines 111-111:** “I’m with you in Rockland / where”
- **Line 111:** “O,” “O,” “O”
- **Line 112:** “I’m with you in Rockland”

REPETITION

Anaphora is far from the only kind of repetition in "Howl." The poem contains numerous examples of words/phrases repeated in immediate succession (a.k.a. epizeuxis) or very close succession (diacope). These repetitions serve a variety of purposes, from evoking repetitive action or sound to highlighting important concepts, places, and themes.

Take line 10, for example:

> who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night

The diacope of "night after night" (along with the invented verb "purgatoried") conveys the sense that the poem's heroes are trapped in a cyclical lifestyle—a kind of purgatory state before death that goes on and on, repeating itself. In line 22, "around and around" works similarly, conveying a sense of repetitive, cyclical activity. And in the very next line, the quick epizeuxis of "boxcars boxcars boxcars" might evoke the repetitive sound of moving trains (and the rotation of their wheels).

The repeated "wailed" in line 32, meanwhile, captures the insistent sound of sirens. It's as though the word itself is "wailing" across the poem:

> who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos **wailed** them down, and **wailed** down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also **wailed**,

Similarly, the many repetitions of "Denver" (as both diacope and epistrophe, or repetition at the end of multiple phrases in a row) in line 61 emphasize just how *much* those being discussed valued this city as a hangout spot—and how *much* of their lives were spent there:

> who journeyed to **Denver**, who died in **Denver**, who came back to **Denver** & waited in vain, who watched over **Denver** & brooded & loned in **Denver** and finally went away to find out the Time, & now **Denver** is lonesome for her heroes,

In this way, repetition can also convey a sense of emphatic insistence and relentlessness. Readers can see this again with the several forms of "therapy" mentioned in line 67, which suggest that the course of treatment in the "madhouse" (line 66) is excessive and overwhelming:

> and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydro**therapy** psycho**therapy** occupational **therapy** pingpong & amnesia,

And later, the various close repetitions of "Moloch" in Part II of the poem suggest both the thematic *importance* of this monster (a symbol of American/industrial society) and the *persistence* of its aggression. The word appears again and again in the poem, mirroring the idea that the aggression of American/industrial society can't be avoided. Likewise, the repetition of "the United States" in line 110 mimics the persistent distractions, or harassment, of the country that "won't let us sleep."

Other specific kinds of repetition, such as anaphora and polysyndeton, are discussed in other sections of this guide.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "night after night"
- **Line 22:** "around and around"
- **Line 23:** "boxcars boxcars boxcars"
- **Line 25:** "visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels"
- **Line 32:** "wailed," "wailed," "wailed"
- **Line 40:** "shrews," "the one eyed shrew," "the one eyed shrew," "the one eyed shrew"
- **Line 60:** "had a vision," "had a vision," "had a vision"
- **Line 61:** "Denver," "Denver," "Denver," "Denver," "Denver," "Denver"
- **Line 67:** "therapy," "therapy," "therapy"
- **Line 72:** "not safe," "not safe"
- **Line 77:** "eli eli lamma lamma"
- **Line 81:** "Moloch! Moloch!," "Moloch! Moloch," "Moloch! Moloch"
- **Line 86:** "in Moloch," "in Moloch," "in Moloch"
- **Line 88:** "Moloch! Moloch!"
- **Line 110:** "the United States," "the United States"

APOSTROPHE

"Howl" is dedicated to the writer Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg had met while they were both institutionalized in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in 1949-'50. Parts of the poem are also framed as a direct address to Solomon, who is not literally supposed to be present and able to respond. These parts of the poem are thus an example of apostrophe.

The first instance of apostrophe comes in line 72, where the poet/speaker breaks from third-person descriptions ("they," "them," etc.) to address Solomon ("you") directly:

> ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time—

(This is also the speaker's first use of "I" since the very first word of the poem!)

Later, the entire third section of "Howl" addresses Solomon as well. Although the poet/speaker claims to be "with [him] in Rockland," this is a poetic fiction, a metaphorical, rather than a *literal*, expression of support. Solomon was never actually institutionalized in Rockland State Hospital, and, in real life, he was surprised to learn that Ginsberg had dedicated the poem to him—while also taking some creative liberties with his story!

In other words, the apostrophe shouldn't be mistaken for an actual message to a friend in a mental hospital. It's a literary device that adds some personal intimacy to the poem, which is otherwise about collective experiences and large-scale social problems.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 72:** "ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time—"
- **Lines 94-112:** "Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland / where you're madder than I am / I'm with you in Rockland / where you must feel very strange / I'm with you in Rockland / where you imitate the shade of my mother / I'm with you in Rockland / where you've murdered your twelve secretaries / I'm with you in Rockland / where you laugh at this invisible humor / I'm with you in Rockland / where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter / I'm with you in Rockland / where your condition has become serious and is

reported on the radio / I'm with you in Rockland / where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses / I'm with you in Rockland / where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica / I'm with you in Rockland / where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx / I'm with you in Rockland / where you scream in a straightjacket that you're losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss / I'm with you in Rockland / where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse / I'm with you in Rockland / where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void / I'm with you in Rockland / where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha / I'm with you in Rockland / where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb / I'm with you in Rockland / where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale / I'm with you in Rockland / where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep / I'm with you in Rockland / where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free / I'm with you in Rockland / in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night"

PERSONIFICATION

"Howl" contains a fair amount of personification that brings its world to vivid life. In several lines, it imbues geographical locations with human feelings and agency:

- Line 26 describes the city of Baltimore as feeling "ecstasy."
- Line 61 describes the city of Denver as feeling "lonesome for her heroes" (that is, the heroes of the poem).
- Line 110 imagines the United States as a lover whom Ginsberg and Carl Solomon "hug and kiss," and who "coughs all night and won't let us sleep."

The poem also accuses Tokay wine of being "heartless"; imagines fate as "three old shrews" (i.e., spiteful women—an image that alludes to Greek mythology); and manages to personify both taxis and reality itself in the phrase "drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality."

Arguably, the phrase "an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio" (line 77) also represents a complex kind of personification. Here, the speaker attributes Christ's cry from the cross (*eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani*: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?") to a wailing saxophone. Perhaps this doesn't so much personify the instrument as deify it!

Finally, the portrayal of "Moloch" in Part II of the poem could be described as personification. Of course, Moloch is more inhuman monster than human being (it's described as a "sphinx," or human/lion/bird hybrid, made out of "cement and aluminum"). But it's still a representation of something inanimate or abstract—industrial capitalism, American culture, etc.—as something alive and vaguely human-like. For example, Moloch has a "mind," casts "judgment," etc. In fact, if Moloch were described as *purely* mechanistic or animalistic, with no human-like features at all, it wouldn't be nearly as frightening!

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,"
- **Line 40:** "who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom,"
- **Line 44:** "hung-over with heartless Tokay"
- **Line 56:** "or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,"
- **Line 61:** "& now Denver is lonesome for her heroes,"
- **Line 77:** "an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio"
- **Lines 79-89:** "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? / Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! / Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men! / Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! / Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! / Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and

> antennae crown the cities! / Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind! / Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch! / Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! / Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs! / They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!"

- **Line 110:** " where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep"

IMAGERY

"Howl" is full of vivid, and often surreal or hallucinatory, imagery. From the opening line, with its depiction of "starving hysterical naked" madmen, to the dream vision of the final line, in which Carl Solomon shows up "dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears," the poem uses dramatic, disturbing images to convey the raw intensity of its heroes' experience. It even proclaims the power of imagery itself in line 74, as its writer-heroes "ma[k]e incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed."

Over the course of its 112 lines, the poem engages with all five senses. For example, it uses striking visual imagery to capture the New York City (and various other settings) of Part I, the nightmarish urban-industrial landscape of Part II, and the lonely mental hospital of Part III. This imagery is colorful (e.g., "the wartime blue floodlight of the moon," line 46), dynamic (e.g., "who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg," line 53), often provocative (e.g., "flashing buttocks under barns," line 42), and sometimes just plain bizarre (e.g., "cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets," line 8). Some of the poem's visuals are framed as the product of dreams, drug visions, "mad" reveries, etc. (for example, the "hopeful little bit of hallucination" in line 71).

The poem is full of sound as well, from the "crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" (line 15) and the "saxophone cry that shivered the city" (line 77) to the "twentyfive thousand mad comrades [...] singing the final stanzas of the Internationale" (line 109). Many of these images relate to music, an important source of inspiration for Ginsberg (who said that he based the poem's form partly on jazz). In keeping with its title—and its themes of mental anguish and physical pleasure-seeking—the poem also contains many cries of agony and ecstasy, including "screams," "shrieks," "wails," "yells," "groans," "moans," and, of course, "howls."

The poem's tactile (that is, touch-related) imagery helps convey its heroes' extreme pain (e.g., "Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China," line 21) and pleasure (e.g., the "joy[ful]" and "ecstatic" sex in lines 26 and 41), as well as the violence they cause (e.g., "bit detectives in the neck," line 34) and suffer (e.g., "bashed open their skulls," line 79). Its smell imagery ("foetid halls," line 70) and taste imagery ("ate fire [...] or drank turpentine," line 10; "stale beer afternoon," line 15; and so on) tends to emphasize unpleasant, painful, or degrading experiences.

Oftentimes, an especially complex image will incorporate several—or all five!—senses. Take line 58, for example:

> who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles,

The line simultaneously engages the senses of sight (the "windows," "street," etc.), hearing ("sang," "groaning," "moans," "blast of colossal steamwhistles"), touch ("danced on broken wineglasses barefoot"); taste ("finished the whiskey and threw up"), and sight, smell, and touch together ("jumped in the filthy Passaic").

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23
- Lines 24-43
- Lines 43-59
- Lines 62-71
- Lines 72-74
- Line 75
- Lines 77-78
- Lines 79-80
- Lines 82-85
- Line 85
- Line 86
- Line 87
- Lines 88-89
- Line 90
- Line 91
- Line 92
- Lines 92-93

- Lines 97-97
- Lines 99-106
- Lines 108-112

ALLITERATION

"Howl" has no rhyme scheme or meter, yet it's a very musical poem. It relies frequently on alliteration (along with other sonic devices, such as assonance) to enhance the rhythm and musicality of its language and to call readers' attention to certain images.

Listen to all the alliteration in line 4 alone:

> who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high
> sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-
> water flats floating across the tops of cities
> contemplating jazz,

These repeated consonant sounds create an emphatic rhythm that propels the poem forward—which, combined with the long, breathless line, sounds a bit like the "jazz" being described. (Ginsberg acknowledged that he modeled the sound of "Howl" partly on bebop jazz.)

Alliteration also often intensifies the poem's descriptions of extreme experiences, making them stand out more clearly to readers' ears. For example, the strong /b/ alliteration in line 5 ("bared their brains") makes the description of a religious vision sound all the more intense; the /b/ words in line 14 ("Battery"/"Bronx"/"benzedrine") heighten the description of a long, drug-addled subway ride; and the alliterative phrase "wailed down Wall" (line 32) intensifies the scene of police cars converging on distressed protesters. By evoking sexual rhythms, alliteration helps convey the sexual ecstasy described in lines 41-42 (e.g., "prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns"). And the sputtering /p/, /sh/, and /s/ sounds of line 75 evokes the "shaking" sensation of overwhelming emotion:

> to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human
> prose and stand before you speechless and
> intelligent and shaking with shame [...]

In Part II of the poem, alliteration adds extra punch to the speaker's furious exclamations about "Moloch." Notice how the /m/ words in line 83 sound like sputtering indignation:

> Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch
> whose blood is running money! Moloch whose
> fingers are ten armies!

Alliteration is more sparse in Part III, but it still shows up here and there to intensify moments of agony ("scream in a straightjacket"), optimism ("singing the final stanzas of the Internationale"), and visionary intensity ("in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey").

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "minds," "my"
- **Line 3:** "angelheaded," "hipsters," "ancient," "heavenly"
- **Line 4:** "hollow-eyed," "high," "sat," "smoking," "supernatural," "flats floating"
- **Line 5:** "bared," "brains"
- **Line 8:** "unshaven," "underwear"
- **Line 9:** "busted," "beards"
- **Line 11:** "dreams," "drugs," "with waking"
- **Line 13:** "kind king"
- **Line 14:** "Battery," "Bronx," "benzedrine," "battered bleak," "brain," "drained," "brilliance," "drear"
- **Line 15:** "sank," "submarine," "sat," "stale"
- **Line 16:** "park," "pad," "bar," "Bellevue," "Brooklyn Bridge"
- **Line 20:** "nowhere," "New," "picture postcards"
- **Line 21:** "suffering," "sweats"
- **Line 22:** "wondering where"
- **Line 24:** "Plotinus Poe"
- **Line 25:** "streets," "seeking"
- **Line 27:** "streetlight smalltown"
- **Line 28:** "lounged," "hungry," "lonesome," "Houston," "sex," "soup," "task," "took"
- **Line 32:** "wailed," "Wall"
- **Line 34:** "committing," "crime"
- **Line 37:** "blew," "blown by," "seraphim," "sailors"
- **Line 38:** "public parks," "cemeteries scattering," "semen," "whomever," "who"
- **Line 40:** "lost," "loveboys," "winks," "womb"
- **Line 41:** "bottle," "beer," "cunt," "come"
- **Line 42:** "sweetened," "snatches," "sweeten," "snatch," "sunrise," "buttocks," "barns"
- **Line 43:** "who," "whoring," "rickety rows"
- **Line 44:** "hung-over," "heartless," "horrors"
- **Line 49:** "boxes breathing"
- **Line 51:** "rocking," "rolling"
- **Line 54:** "day," "decade"
- **Line 57:** "Brooklyn Bridge"
- **Line 58:** "broken," "barefoot"
- **Line 61:** "Denver," "died," "Denver"
- **Line 63:** "sang sweet"
- **Line 65:** "hands," "hung"
- **Line 66:** "heads," "harlequin," "speech," "suicide"
- **Line 68:** "who," "humorless," "overturned only"
- **Line 70:** "rocking," "rolling"
- **Line 71:** "fantastic," "flung," "hopeful," "hallucination"
- **Line 72:** "total," "time"
- **Line 73:** "variable," "vibrating"
- **Line 75:** "poor," "prose," "stand," "speechless," "shaking," "shame"

- **Line 76:** “bum,” “beat”
- **Line 77:** “rose reincarnate,” “sabacthani saxophone”
- **Line 78:** “butchered,” “bodies”
- **Line 79:** “sphinx,” “cement”
- **Line 81:** “Mental Moloch”
- **Line 82:** “crossbone,” “soulless,” “Congress,” “sorrows”
- **Line 83:** “Moloch,” “mind,” “machinery! Moloch,” “money! Moloch”
- **Line 84:** “skyscrapers stand,” “streets”
- **Line 85:** “Moloch,” “Mind”
- **Line 86:** “Moloch,” “Crazy,” “Cocksucker,” “manless,” “Moloch”
- **Line 88:** “suburbs! skeleton”
- **Line 89:** “broke,” “backs,” “trees,” “tons”
- **Line 91:** “boatload,” “bullshit”
- **Line 92:** “screams,” “suicides”
- **Line 100:** “reported,” “radio”
- **Line 104:** “scream,” “straightjacket”
- **Line 105:** “innocent,” “immortal”
- **Line 109:** “singing,” “stanzas”
- **Line 111:** “where,” “wake,” “skinny,” “starry-spangled”
- **Line 112:** “dreams,” “dripping”

ASSONANCE

"Howl" contains a great deal of assonance and internal rhyme. Like alliteration, these sonic devices add to the poem's musical quality, accentuating the shifting rhythms of its free verse. Sonic devices also draw readers' ears to certain images and ideas.

In line 16, for example, notice how the shared vowel sounds help evoke the rat-a-tat rhythm of the bohemians "who talked continuously":

> from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,

And in line 24, with its reference to "bop" (bebop jazz), assonance adds a jazzy musicality:

> who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas,

The line, like many in the poem, is also filled with crisp alliteration and consonance that add yet more musicality ("Plotinus Poe," "telepathy," "bop," "Cross"/kabbalah because"/"cosmos"/"Kansas").

For another example, listen to the /eh/ assonance in line 54, which makes a percussive sound that matches the image being described: "alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade."

As with alliteration, the poem also uses assonance to emphasize dramatic or emotionally intense moments. A few examples from Part I include "crying in white gymnasiums" (line 33), "bit detectives in the neck" (line 34), "shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul" (line 75), and "shivered the cities down to the last radio" (line 77).

Finally, in Part II, assonance adds a reverberating, almost thunderous quality to the speaker's condemnation of Moloch, as in phrases like "Moloch the stunned governments!" (line 82) or "Moloch whose blood is running money!" In Part III, assonance and internal rhyme are less frequent, but they add some vividness to colorful phrases such as "the fascist national Golgotha" (line 107), "superhuman tomb" (line 108), and "mad comrades" (line 109).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “minds,” “my”
- **Line 2:** “negro streets”
- **Line 3:** “heavenly connection”
- **Line 5:** “Heaven,” “El,” “roofs illuminated”
- **Line 6:** “cool,” “hallucinating”
- **Line 10:** “Paradise Alley”
- **Line 12:** “lightning,” “mind”
- **Line 13:** “green tree,” “teahead,” “neon,” “ashcan rantings,” “kind,” “light,” “mind”
- **Line 14:** “down,” “mouth-wracked,” “battered,” “brain,” “drained”
- **Line 15:** “night,” “light”
- **Line 16:** “park,” “bar,” “Bellevue,” “museum,” “Brooklyn Bridge”
- **Line 17:** “platonic conversationalists”
- **Line 18:** “yacketayakking,” “facts,” “shocks,” “hospitals”
- **Line 21:** “bone-grindings,” “migraines,” “China”
- **Line 23:** “snow,” “lonesome”
- **Line 24:** “Plotinus Poe,” “bop kabbalah,” “cosmos”
- **Line 27:** “winter midnight streetlight”
- **Line 28:** “through Houston”
- **Line 30:** “West,” “investigating,” “FBI”
- **Line 32:** “Los Alamos”
- **Line 33:** “crying,” “white”
- **Line 34:** “detectives,” “neck”
- **Line 38:** “morning,” “evenings,” “semen freely,” “whomever,” “who”
- **Line 40:** “snip,” “intellectual”
- **Line 41:** “hall,” “wall,” “ultimate cunt,” “come”
- **Line 42:** “buttocks under,” “naked,” “lake”
- **Line 43:** “secret hero,” “cocksman,” “Adonis,” “caves,” “waitresses,” “roadside lonely petticoat,” “solipsisms,” “johns”
- **Line 44:** “stumbled,” “unemployment”
- **Line 45:** “walked all”
- **Line 46:** “created great,” “blue,” “moon”

- **Line 52:** “borsht,” “tortillas”
- **Line 53:** “plunged,” “under,” “trucks”
- **Line 54:** “cast,” “ballot,” “fell,” “heads every,” “day,” “next decade”
- **Line 55:** “successively unsuccessfully,” “forced,” “stores”
- **Line 56:** “Madison Avenue,” “blasts,” “sinister intelligent editors,” “taxicabs,” “Absolute”
- **Line 57:** “Brooklyn Bridge,” “actually happened,” “even,” “free beer”
- **Line 58:** “leaped,” “negroes,” “finished,” “whiskey,” “groaning,” “moans”
- **Line 59:** “hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch”
- **Line 60:** “hours,” “out”
- **Line 61:** “waited,” “vain,” “over Denver”
- **Line 62:** “knees,” “cathedrals”
- **Line 63:** “charm,” “hearts”
- **Line 64:** “Harvard,” “Narcissus,” “daisychain,” “grave”
- **Line 65:** “insanity,” “hands”
- **Line 66:** “CCNY lecturers,” “subsequently presented themselves”
- **Line 67:** “hydrotherapy psychotherapy”
- **Line 68:** “symbolic pingpong”
- **Line 70:** “soul,” “rolling,” “solitude-bench dolmen-realms,” “life,” “nightmare”
- **Line 73:** “flash,” “alchemy”
- **Line 74:** “made incarnate,” “Space,” “sensation,” “Pater,” “Aeterna Deus”
- **Line 75:** “shaking,” “shame,” “rejected yet confessing,” “endless head”
- **Line 77:** “ghostly clothes,” “lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone,” “shivered,” “cities”
- **Line 79:** “ate,” “brains”
- **Line 81:** “heavy,” “men”
- **Line 82:** “Congress,” “sorrows,” “stunned governments”
- **Line 83:** “blood,” “running money”
- **Line 84:** “croak,” “smoke-stacks”
- **Line 86:** “Cocksucker,” “Moloch,” “Lacklove”
- **Line 88:** “skeleton treasuries,” “cocks! monstrous bombs!”
- **Line 89:** “lifting,” “city”
- **Line 90:** “Visions! omens! hallucinations!”
- **Line 91:** “adorations! illuminations! religions!”
- **Line 92:** “flips,” “crucifixions”
- **Line 93:** “yells,” “They bade,” “farewell,” “flowers! Down”
- **Line 94:** “Solomon,” “Rockland”
- **Line 96:** “imitate,” “shade”
- **Line 97:** “twelve secretaries”
- **Line 104:** “pingpong,” “abyss”
- **Line 106:** “Rockland,” “shocks”
- **Line 107:** “fascist national”
- **Line 108:** “superhuman tomb”
- **Line 109:** “mad comrades”
- **Line 111:** “coma,” “own,” “bombs,” “hospital,” “mercy,” “eternal”

ASYNDETON

Many lines in the poem use asyndeton as a way of compressing details, evoking rapid activity, or making strange events (such as drug highs) seem less orderly and logical.

The very first line, for example, describes the poem's heroes as "destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked," rather than "destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, and naked." By omitting a coordinating conjunction—as well as standard punctuation—the poet/speaker compresses this disturbing image into one powerful, rapid burst. The unusual syntax also signals that the poem as a whole will rebel against convention (and will itself be "mad" or frenetic in its style).

Similarly, the speaker omits commas and a connecting "and" from the phrase "smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz" (line 4). Rather than occurring in a clear, logical order, the "smoking," "floating," and "contemplating" seem to happen all at once. In this way, the line reflects the characters' fractured sense of time as they sit "hollow-eyed and high."

Line 17 depicts the poem's heroes "jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon"—a dramatically escalating series of heights to jump from! The lack of conjunctions (and, again, commas) makes this escalation more rapid and surreal.

Interestingly, "Howl" also makes frequent use of polysyndeton—the opposite of asyndeton. That is, the poem often inserts "and"s and other conjunctions where they're not strictly needed. This, too, is done for rhythmic and dramatic effect, as in the phrase "facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars" (line 18). This phrase could be more concisely written as "facts, memories, anecdotes, eyeball kicks, and shocks of hospitals, jails, and wars," but the extra "and"s give the line a relentless, overwhelming quality that suits its description of violent, jarring events.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,”
- **Line 4:** “smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,”
- **Line 17:** “jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon,”
- **Line 18:** “yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering”
- **Line 38:** “who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and

cemeteries"
- **Line 41:** "with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle"
- **Line 89:** "Pavements, trees, radios, tons!"

METAPHOR

"Howl" is full of lively metaphors that help illustrate the agonies and ecstasies of its heroes. Many of these metaphors have a surreal or dreamlike quality that evokes their intoxication, "mad" derangement, and/or intense spiritual experiences. The use of so much figurative language also adds to the poem's grand, epic feel.

In Part I, for example, "the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (line 3) metaphorically suggests some awesome power driving the night sky—a higher power to which the poem's "hipsters" want to connect. Later, night is compared to a "grandfather" (ancient, perhaps kindly and caring), "the moon" to a "wartime blue floodlight" (perhaps a sign of the characters' paranoia), "sunrise" after a night of sex to the female anatomy, and the "sky" over New York City to a "tubercular" patient (perhaps suggesting that it's sickly pale, or else red as the blood coughed up by tuberculosis sufferers). These metaphors project the moods and feelings of the poem's mercurial characters—calm, fear, desire, illness, etc.—onto the surrounding atmosphere.

Other metaphors sum up broader elements of the characters' experience and worldview. For example:

- "the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" (line 15) suggests that Cold War-era nuclear paranoia (fear of the hydrogen bomb) has affected their perception of everyday sounds;
- "the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (line 31) compares the economic system they live under to a toxic drug;
- "alarm clocks fell on their heads every day" (line 54) suggests that they're spiritually crushed by the conformity of a regular work schedule;
- "dream of life a nightmare" indicates that their lives seem terrifying and unreal;
- and "you're really in the total animal soup of time" (line 72) suggests that Carl Solomon's whole reality feels mixed-up and brutal. ("In the soup" is an old expression for "in trouble.")

In Part II, "Moloch" serves as a giant metaphor or symbol, representing the entire system (American mainstream culture, industrial-capitalist society, etc.) that has destroyed the poem's heroes. This overarching metaphor also contains numerous smaller metaphors, such as "the vast stone of war" in line 82 (which depicts war as huge, cold, harsh, etc.) and "Robot apartments!" in line 88 (which depicts urban living spaces as rigidly similar and inhumane).

In Part III, startling metaphors help evoke Carl Solomon's jarring experience in a mental institution. For example, "the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses" (line 101) suggests that abusive treatments have cut off Solomon's intellect from the sensations of his body, and "you're losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss" suggests that Solomon is losing a back-and-forth struggle with despair. The speaker also compares "the United States" to a lover "under our bedsheets" who "coughs all night and won't let us sleep": in other words, the American society these men want to embrace constantly inhibits their love and friendship.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the starry dynamo in the machinery of night"
- **Line 5:** "who bared their brains to Heaven"
- **Line 7:** "the windows of the skull"
- **Line 8:** "unshaven rooms"
- **Line 9:** "pubic beards"
- **Line 10:** "purgatoried their torsos"
- **Line 13:** "kind king light of mind"
- **Line 15:** "submarine light of Bickford's," "the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox"
- **Line 17:** "a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists"
- **Line 18:** "eyeball kicks"
- **Line 19:** "whole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement,"
- **Line 20:** "nowhere Zen New Jersey"
- **Line 23:** "grandfather night"
- **Line 31:** "the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism"
- **Line 32:** "while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down"
- **Line 33:** "the machinery of other skeletons"
- **Line 34:** "wild cooking pederasty and intoxication"
- **Line 37:** "those human seraphim, the sailors"
- **Line 39:** "when the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword"
- **Line 40:** "the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom"
- **Line 41:** "the last gyzym of consciousness"
- **Line 42:** "prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise"
- **Line 43:** "especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns"
- **Line 46:** "the wartime blue floodlight of the moon," "their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion"
- **Line 47:** "who ate the lamb stew of the imagination"
- **Line 50:** "under the tubercular sky"
- **Line 52:** "dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom"
- **Line 54:** "& alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for

the next decade"
- **Line 56:** "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 nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,"
- **Line 59:** "hotrod-Golgotha," "Birmingham jazz incarnation"
- **Line 61:** "and finally went away to find out the Time"
- **Line 62:** "the soul illuminated its hair for a second"
- **Line 63:** "who crashed through their minds in jail"
- **Line 66:** "harlequin speech of suicide"
- **Line 67:** "the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia"
- **Line 69:** "a wig of blood, and tears and fingers"
- **Line 70:** "bickering with the echoes of the soul," "the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love," "dream of life a nightmare," "bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon"
- **Line 72:** "and now you're really in the total animal soup of time"
- **Line 73:** "the alchemy of the use of the ellipsis catalogue a variable measure and the vibrating plane"
- **Line 74:** "trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images," "set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus"
- **Line 75:** "in his naked and endless head"
- **Line 77:** "the ghostly clothes of jazz," "the suffering of America's naked mind for love," "an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry"
- **Line 78:** "with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years."
- **Lines 79-80:** "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? / Moloch!"
- **Line 82:** "Moloch the vast stone of war!"
- **Line 83:** "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!"
- **Line 84:** "Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!," "Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!"
- **Line 85:** "Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius!," "a cloud of sexless hydrogen"
- **Line 88:** "Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations!," "granite cocks!"
- **Lines 90-91:** "Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river! / Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!"
- **Line 92:** "crucifixions," "down on the rocks of Time!"
- **Line 101:** "where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses"
- **Line 102:** "where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica"
- **Line 104:** "you're losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss"
- **Line 105:** "where you bang on the catatonic piano"
- **Line 106:** "where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void"
- **Line 107:** "the fascist national Golgotha"
- **Line 108:** "resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb"
- **Line 110:** "where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep"

IRONY

"Howl" includes some clearly ironic phrases and details, as well as some details that seem to hover ambiguously between irony and sincerity.

Line 51, for example, presents a clear situational irony:

> who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,

The "lofty incantations" of the late-night "scribble[rs]" turn out to be nothing but "stanzas of gibberish" in the light of day. In other words, these bohemians who were *convinced* they were writing great poetry—possibly while drunk or high—woke up to find that they'd written complete nonsense. Another ironic situation pops up in line 54:

> who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,

At first, the bohemians symbolically reject "Time": the mainstream world of calendars, meetings, etc. But that world seems to have its revenge on them, as they're forced to adopt a normal daily schedule; metaphorically speaking, "alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade."

There's also some irony evident in line 65, in which the characters "demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism"—a plainly irrational, if not insane, thing to do. (This

line was based partly on the delusions of Ginsberg's mother, who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and believed she was receiving personal radio broadcasts from the President.) Yet the "sanity trials" (which may be *sanity hearings* to determine a defendant's mental competence, or else a delusional fantasy in themselves) somehow result in an undecided outcome ("hung jury"), even as the characters are left with their clear "insanity."

Other details are ironic in less obvious ways. Line 26 ("who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy") suggests how ironically normal it is for these characters to be mentally abnormal. To them, delusional madness is unremarkable, and they're surprised when there's some *other* reason for the "supernatural" glow of the city. Line 34 claims that these characters have "committ[ed] no crime" besides "pederasty and intoxication," but also that they've "bit[ten] detectives in the neck"—in other words, assaulted the police officers arresting them.

The "protest" of line 68 is ironic as well, in that the rebels who hoped to topple an entire oppressive system "overturned" nothing but a measly game table:

> who in humorless protest overturned only one
> symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia,

Line 91—"Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!"—seems to briefly adopt the view of mainstream society for ironic effect. (This poet/speaker has celebrated dreams, visions, etc. throughout the poem; it's mainstream culture, "Moloch," that considers them "sensitive bullshit.")

Finally, there's some ambiguous irony in lines 97-99, as the speaker shares an inside joke with Carl Solomon about "murder[ing] your twelve secretaries," then imagines him "laugh[ing] at this invisible humor"—which Solomon isn't literally doing, of course, because he can't read the poem at the moment (it's "invisible" to him). The claim, in the next line, that both he and Solomon "are great writers" may also be a touch of self-deprecating irony.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,"
- **Line 34:** "who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,"
- **Line 51:** "who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,"
- **Line 54:** "who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,"
- **Line 63:** "who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz"
- **Line 65:** "who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,"
- **Line 68:** "who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia,"
- **Line 85:** "Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!"
- **Line 91:** "Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!"
- **Lines 97-98:** "I'm with you in Rockland / where you've murdered your twelve secretaries / I'm with you in Rockland / where you laugh at this invisible humor"
- **Lines 99-99:** "I'm with you in Rockland / where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter"

ALLUSION

The poem contains a huge variety of allusions, not only to other poetry and literature but also to music, art, film, philosophy, and religion. Some of these references are explicit; others are very subtle and were explained by Ginsberg himself after he published the poem. In general, these allusions link the joys, sorrows, politics, art, and spirituality of the Beat writers—that is, Ginsberg and his literary friends—with those of artists and thinkers throughout history.

Here are explanations of a few noteworthy references:

1. "Carl Solomon," referred to in the poem's dedication (as well as line 72 and throughout Part III of the poem), was a writer and friend of Ginsberg, whom he met while they were hospitalized for mental illness. According to both men, some of the poem's details describe Solomon's experiences without mentioning him by name. For example: "burning [...] money in wastebaskets" (line 8) and "threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism" (line 66). ("Dadaism" refers to a 20th-century absurdist art movement.)
2. The "best minds of my generation" in line 1 refers mainly to what Ginsberg's friend Jack Kerouac dubbed the Beat Generation: a circle of experimental American writers and artists who rose to prominence in the 1950s. The poem largely chronicles the exploits and sufferings of these writers, including Ginsberg himself, and adapts details from several of Kerouac's books, including *The Subterraneans*, *Visions of Cody*, and *Mexico City Blues*. The phrase "madman bum and angel beat in Time" (line 76) also refers to the Beat phenomenon. The idea that these "best minds" were "destroyed by madness" may echo the opening of "To Elsie," a poem by Beat mentor William Carlos Williams,

which begins, "The pure products of America / go crazy."

3. In line 6, "hallucinating [...] Blake-light tragedy" alludes to the British Romantic poet William Blake (1857-1827), whose experimental free verse, vivid imagery, and radical politics influenced Ginsberg (and "Howl" in particular). Ginsberg experienced a hallucination involving Blake's poetry in 1948, which he called his "Blake vision" and described as a mystical epiphany about the interconnectedness of the universe.
4. The poem incorporates details from a variety of religions and belief traditions, including Islam (e.g., "Mohammedan angels," line 5), Judaism (e.g., "meat for the Synagogue," line 19), Buddhism (e.g., "Zen" in line 20 and "Buddha" in line 64), and Christianity (e.g., "living human Jesus" in line 108). These many references to faith and mysticism help illustrate the Beats' quest for truth and holiness in a society they consider degrading and false.
5. In line 24, "bop kabbalah" (a phrase invented by Ginsberg) fuses bebop jazz, or "bop," with the ancient Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah. Ginsberg felt that jazz held mystical, spiritual, creatively liberating qualities, and he based the free-flowing form of "Howl" in part on bebop improvisations. (Other references to jazz occur in lines 4, 58, 59, and 77.) Line 24 also mentions several other influences on Ginsberg: the ancient mystical philosopher Plotinus, the 19th-century poet and fiction writer Edgar Allan Poe, and the 16th-century Christian mystic St. John of the Cross.
6. "N.C., secret hero of these poems" (line 43) refers to Neal Cassady, a member of the Beat circle known as a charismatic outlaw type.
7. In line 74, "Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus" (Latin for "eternal, all-powerful Father-God") is a phrase borrowed from the writings of Paul Cézanne, a French Post-Impressionist painter whose startling color contrasts and artistic/spiritual outlook helped inspire Ginsberg's experimental style.
8. In Part II of the poem, the monster "Moloch" alludes to a pagan god associated with child sacrifice and denounced in the Book of Leviticus, as well as to derivative figures in later works. For example, Moloch is one of Satan's rebel angels in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) and a nightmarish machine in Fritz Lang's dystopian film *Metropolis* (1927). More information on Moloch can be found in the Symbols section of this guide.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** "For Carl Solomon," "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness"
- **Line 5:** "Mohammedan angels"
- **Line 6:** "hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy"
- **Line 17:** "a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists"
- **Line 19:** "meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement"
- **Line 20:** "who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey"
- **Line 24:** "who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah"
- **Line 29:** "the lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago"
- **Line 40:** "the three old shrews of fate," "the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom"
- **Line 43:** "N.C., secret hero of these poems"
- **Line 46:** "& their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion"
- **Line 58:** "phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz"
- **Line 59:** "Birmingham jazz incarnation"
- **Line 64:** "Rocky Mount to tender Buddha," "Harvard to Narcissus"
- **Line 66:** "who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism"
- **Line 72:** "ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time—"
- **Line 74:** "and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus"
- **Line 76:** "the madman bum and angel beat in Time"
- **Line 77:** "an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry"
- **Lines 79-89:** "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? / Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks! / Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men! / Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! / Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb! / Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities! / Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of

genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind! / Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch! / Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! / Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs! / They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!"

- **Line 92:** "flips and crucifixions!"
- **Line 94:** "Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland"
- **Line 103:** "the harpies of the Bronx"
- **Lines 107-109:** "I'm with you in Rockland / where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha / I'm with you in Rockland / where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb / I'm with you in Rockland / where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale"
- **Line 112:** "in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America"

HYPERBOLE

Allen Ginsberg once wrote that the tone of "Howl" included "a humorous hyperbole derived in part from [the poet William] Blake's style in *The French Revolution*." Certainly, many elements of the poem seem exaggerated for comic or dramatic effect. (The aside in line 57—"this actually happened"—is a clue that not everything the speaker narrates is completely, literally true.)

However, since "Howl" also contains plenty of improbable details drawn from real life, it can be hard to tell where the hyperbole begins and ends! It can also be hard to separate the poem's hyperbole from its fantastical, mystical, and hallucinatory elements, such as the "Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated" (line 5). The "visions" the poem describes—including the description of "Moloch" in Part II—may be drug hallucinations, expressions of "madness," or simply complex metaphors and symbols rather than intentional overstatements. In other words, there's room for disagreement as to what counts as hyperbole in "Howl" and what doesn't.

Still, there are some pretty clear instances of intentional exaggeration. The speaker knows, for example, that the subway ride from Battery Park to the Bronx isn't literally "endless" (line 14); it just feels that way to the characters experiencing it. The speaker also knows that the sounds from the "jukebox" (line 15) aren't literally "the crack of doom"; they just seem that way in a world of Cold War nuclear paranoia (i.e., fear of the "hydrogen" bomb). These exaggerations capture *emotional* truths, as do the association of ominous police sirens with the "Los Alamos" bomb testing site (line 32) and the comparison of beautiful sailors to "seraphim" (line 37).

Hyperbole also adds to the larger-than-life aura of the poem's heroes. For example, by claiming that "N.C." (Ginsberg's friend Neal Cassady) slept with "a million girls" and enjoyed "innumerable lays," the speaker builds an almost mythical image of his sex appeal. (Perhaps these outlandish claims also reflect how "N.C." saw or described himself.) At other moments, hyperbole suggests how even "normal" life could feel like torture to the poem's alienated characters. The descriptions of "alarm clocks [falling] on their heads every day for the next decade" (line 54) and of the "advertising" industry that "burned [them] alive" (line 56) aren't literally true, but they express the speaker's contempt for the square, mainstream, workaday world.

Toward the end of the poem, hyperbole also adds romantic intensity to the speaker's visions of freedom and redemption. The speaker may not *literally* believe that Carl Solomon will escape from his mental hospital like a "living human Jesus" bursting from a "superhuman tomb," but this hyperbolic language conveys joyful optimism to the speaker's suffering friend. Likewise, there's no way the hospital really contains "twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale," but this exaggerated image conveys the speaker's hope that society's outcasts will launch a revolution.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities"
- **Lines 10-11:** "or purgatoried their torsos night after night / with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,"
- **Line 12:** "incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world of Time between,"
- **Line 14:** "who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx"
- **Line 15:** "listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,"
- **Line 17:** "a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon,"
- **Lines 19-20:** "whole intellects disgorged in total recall

for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement, / who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey"

- **Line 28:** "and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task,"
- **Line 32:** "who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down,"
- **Line 37:** "those human seraphim, the sailors,"
- **Line 38:** "scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may,"
- **Line 41:** "and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,"
- **Line 42:** "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,"
- **Line 43:** "joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls"
- **Line 54:** "& alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,"
- **Line 56:** "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 nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,"
- **Line 61:** "& now Denver is lonesome for her heroes,"
- **Line 63:** "waiting for impossible criminals with golden heads"
- **Line 70:** "bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon,"
- **Line 74:** "who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus"
- **Line 75:** "the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head,"
- **Line 78:** "with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years."
- **Line 108:** " where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb"
- **Line 109:** " where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem contains only one rhetorical question, but it's a crucial one, as it sets up the entirety of Part II. This section begins by asking:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

"Their" refers to the "best minds of my generation" whose destruction was lamented in Part I. The savage imagery ("bashed open [...] ate up") connects to the image of "butcher[y]" in the previous line.

Because the question is rhetorical, it's not actually seeking information; it's intended to make a point. It lays blame on a huge, symbolic monster—a "sphinx of cement and aluminum"—for killing the intellect and imagination of the artists and thinkers the speaker admires. The rest of Part II will name this monster "Moloch," associate it with the evil system ("the Man," industrial capitalism, etc.) the speaker inhabits, and furiously denounce it.

The question also marks a transition in the structure of the poem. Coming just after the single, 78-line, run-on sentence of Part I, it's a relatively short, self-contained sentence that segues into the punchy exclamations of Part II.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 79:** "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?"

VOCABULARY

Carl Solomon (Before Line 1, Line 72, Line 94) - A writer and friend of Allen Ginsberg, who met him at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Solomon was hospitalized more than once for mental illness (though never at Rockland State Hospital, the "Rockland" in the poem), and he later described some of these experiences in the essay "Report from the Asylum: Afterthoughts of a Shock Patient."

Madness/Mad/Madder (Line 1, Line 26, Line 92, Lines 94-94, Line 109) - "Madness" is mental illness or insanity, whether individual or collective. In the poem, the adjectives "mad" and "madder" refer to mental illness, wild behavior, or extreme eccentricity, not anger.

Hysterical (Line 1) - Suffering from hysteria (extreme emotional agitation, excitement, or distress).

Fix (Line 2) - A dose of, or high from, a drug that one is hooked on.

Negro streets (Line 2) - A now-outdated way of referring to predominantly Black neighborhoods or areas of town. (In the 1950s, when the poem was written, the adjective "negro" was as standard as "Black" or "African-American" today, though it

typically would have been capitalized.) Ginsberg specified that this phrase referred to the "Harlem and Times Square areas" of New York City during the late 1940s.

Angelheaded (Line 3) - Resembling an angel (traditionally depicted as beautiful, youthful, etc.) in one's facial features and/or hairstyle.

Dynamo (Line 3, Line 83) - A generator that produces electrical current. Used metaphorically in line 3 to suggest a source of power that fuels stars and other heavenly objects, and in line 83 to evoke the evil, mechanical heart of the system personified as "Moloch."

Cold-water flats (Line 4) - Apartments without hot running water; in other words, cheap city dwellings. (Apartments in the U.S. are now required to have water-heating systems, but that wasn't the case in the era of the poem.)

The El (Line 5) - Short for "the elevated subway train." Could refer to any of several elevated lines that ran in New York City until the mid-20th century, but Ginsberg indicated that it specifically referred to the Third Avenue El in Manhattan.

Tenement (Line 5, Line 71) - An urban apartment building (or apartment within a tenement house), generally one offering poor living conditions.

Mohammedan (Line 5) - Associated with the Muslim faith.

Illuminated/Illuminating/Illuminations/Illuminates (Line 5, Line 12, Line 62, Line 91, Line 111) - "Illuminate" means "provide light" or "light (something) up." Metaphorically, it can mean "provide intellectual or spiritual insight"; it can also specifically suggest bathing something in a *holy* glow.In the poem, the word is always associated with the spiritual, as in the "illuminated" angels in line 5 or the "illuminated" soul in line 62.

Blake-light (Line 6) - A word coined by the poet. Evokes the spiritual/intellectual "light" offered by the poetry of William Blake (1757-1827), an influence on Ginsberg. Blake's writing tended to be unconventionally religious, prophetic in tone, and concerned with social reform and justice. Ginsberg cited a hallucination involving Blake's poetry as a key episode in his artistic development.

Odes (Line 7) - Poems of praise addressed to someone or something.

Unshaven (Line 8) - Scruffy or stubbly; having hair growing freely on the face or body. Here, the world is used metaphorically to suggest that these rooms are grungy and uncared-for.

The Terror (Line 8) - An unspecified source of fear and horror that the poem's characters (perhaps due to drug hallucinations or paranoid delusions) believe they hear on the other side of walls. (The phrase may or may not allude to "The Terror" of 1793-'94, a period of violent upheaval during the French Revolution.)

Pubic beards (Line 9) - Male pubic hair, or facial hair that resembles public hair.

Busted (Line 9) - Caught and arrested for committing a crime.

Laredo (Line 9) - A city in Texas, located on the Mexican border.

Paradise Alley (Line 10) - An ironic nickname for a then-rundown area of New York City, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Ginsberg's friend and fellow Beat writer Jack Kerouac lived there for a time.

Paint hotels (Line 10) - One of the poem's original coinages. Suggests a hotel that's cheaply painted or smells of paint.

Turpentine (Line 10) - A poisonous chemical sometimes used as a paint thinner or an ingredient in cleaning products.

Purgatoried (Line 10) - A play on words, implying that the poem's characters *purged* their stomachs of (vomited up) whatever dangerous substances they'd ingested, but also that they were stuck in a form of *purgatory* (according to Christian tradition, an intermediate afterlife realm between Heaven and Hell, where souls must be purged of their sins before entry into Heaven).

Paterson (Line 12) - The city in New Jersey where Allen Ginsberg grew up. Also the home of poet William Carlos Williams, an influence on and early supporter of Ginsberg.

Peyote solidities (Line 13) - Peyote is a psychoactive drug derived from a cactus plant. It can cause vivid hallucinations, so this phrase may suggest that the halls were reduced to mere solid shapes, or that they felt solid while other things did not, during a drug trip.

Teahead (Line 13) - Stoner; habitual marijuana smoker ("tea" was slang for marijuana).

Boroughs (Line 13) - Sections of New York City, which has five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island.

Ashcan (Line 13, Line 80) - A garbage can or waste container. Another detail suggestive of an urban setting ("ashcan rantings" may be rants delivered in or around back alleys). The word probably also alludes to the Ashcan School, a late 19th/early 20th-century art movement that focused on scenes of gritty realism in New York City.

Benzedrine (Line 14) - A brand of amphetamine, a drug that acts as a stimulant or "upper."

Battery (Line 14) - Refers to the Battery (a.k.a. Battery Park), a public park at the southern end of Manhattan.

Bronx (Line 14, Line 103) - The Bronx is one of the five boroughs (sections) of New York City. It's north of Manhattan, so "Battery from holy Bronx" indicates a subway trip from the southern to the northern end of Manhattan and beyond.

Mouth-wracked (Line 14) - Suffering painful or unpleasant sensations in the mouth, as when throwing up.

Drear (Line 14) - Dreary, dismal.

Submarine (Line 15) - Here, an adjective meaning "underwater" or "suggestive of an underwater atmosphere" (i.e., the light of Bickford's was murky and dim).

Bickford's (Line 15) - A chain of cafeteria-style restaurants originating in New York City. Ginsberg once held a job mopping floors at a Bickford's on 42nd Street.

Fugazzi's (Line 15) - Fugazzi's Bar and Grill, a former bar in Greenwich Village in New York City.

Hydrogen jukebox (Line 15) - Jukeboxes are the record-playing machines often found in bars and restaurants. "Hydrogen" alludes to the exceptionally destructive hydrogen bomb, then a recently developed technology. Ginsberg explained that "hydrogen juxebox" referred to "Some end-of-the-world or apocalyptic vibration [...] noticed by the 'subterraneans' [i.e., the heroes of the poem] in the roaring of the jukebox."

Bellevue (Line 16) - Bellevue Hospital in New York City, once famous for treating the mentally ill. ("Bellevue" is still sometimes used as a colloquial reference to mental hospitals in general.)

Battalion (Line 17) - A unit of soldiers in an army. (Here used metaphorically.)

Platonic (Line 17) - Can mean "intimate but not romantic" (as in a *platonic friendship*), but here suggests "engaged in philosophical conversation," as in the dialogues of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. (The first meaning might or might not be intended along with the second.)

Empire State (Line 17) - The Empire State Building, a famous skyscraper in New York City.

Yacketayakking (Line 18) - Babbling; talking rapidly, incoherently, and/or at length.

Eyeball kicks (Line 18) - Ginsberg explained that this phrase related to the paintings of the French Post-Impressionist artist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906). When moving across contrasting colors in Cézanne's paintings, according to Ginsberg, the eye would jump or "kick" slightly.(The more literal sense—"kicks to the eyeballs"—might be implied as well, since the heroes of the poem suffer abuse at the hands of police and others.)

Disgorged (Line 19) - Spewed forth or vomited.

Meat for the Synagogue (Line 19) - Kosher meat; meat that is acceptable to eat under Jewish dietary laws. Here used as a metaphor for the contents of the "intellects" that the poem's heroes word-vomited out during manic talking sprees. (Ginsberg said this line referred to a particular Jewish friend, "Ruth G—," who went on such a talking spree before being institutionalized.)

Zen (Line 20) - Zen is a school of Buddhism. It's associated with meditation practices that involve "emptying" the mind and contemplating nothingness, so Ginsberg associates it here with the "nowhere" of New Jersey.

Atlantic City Hall (Line 20) - A reference to the Historic Atlantic City Convention Hall, now known as Boardwalk Hall, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Junk-withdrawal (Line 21) - Withdrawal from heroin, a drug that often causes severe symptoms in addicts who stop using it.

Eastern sweats/Tangerian bone-grindings/Migraines of China (Line 21) - Ginsberg's names for symptoms of heroin withdrawal: specifically, sweating, grinding of teeth (or writhing of bones/limbs), and migraine headaches. Ginsberg associates these symptoms with the "East" and "China" because heroin is often sourced from plants in Asia. "Tangerian" alludes to Ginsberg's friend and fellow Beat writer William Burroughs, who experienced heroin withdrawal while living in Tangier, Morocco.

Newark's (Line 21) - A city in New Jersey, the birthplace of Allen Ginsberg.

Boxcars (Line 23) - Cars on a freight train. (The word is repeated here to suggest the movement of the train.)

Grandfather night (Line 23) - A metaphorical description of the night as ancient and deeply connected to humans, similar to a phrase like "Mother Earth."

Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross (Line 24) - "Plotinus" refers to an ancient Greek philosopher (c. 204-270 CE), raised in Egypt under the Roman Empire, who founded the school of thought known as Neoplatonism. His work is associated with mysticism and influenced later Western religious thought. "Poe" refers to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American poet, short story writer, and literary critic. Popularly associated with Gothic horror, Poe also dabbled in philosophy and mysticism. "St. John of the Cross" refers to a Spanish priest and poet (1524-91, born Juan de Yepes y Álvarez), whose mystical writings are considered classics of Spanish literature.

Bop kabbalah (Line 24) - A concept invented by Ginsberg, combining "bop" or bebop (a style of jazz) and Kabbalah (a school of Jewish mystical thought). One of the poem's repeated descriptions of jazz music as spiritual or holy (see "jazz incarnation" in line 59, etc.).

Loned it (Line 25) - Went alone; spent time in solitude.

Indian angels (Line 25) - American Indians or Indigenous people (not residents of India) who, according to the poem's speaker, were holy beings. Ginsberg explained that this line alluded to the ritual "vision quests" undertaken by members of some Indigenous tribes, adding that "Some among the postwar generation of white Americans initiated themselves into this tradition."

Dungarees (Line 29) - Blue jeans.

Pacifist (Line 30) - Anti-war; committed to peaceful resolution

of conflicts. (Here, the term suggests both that these characters believe in pacifism and that their eyes look peaceful.)

Capitalism (Line 31) - An economic system built around market competition and private, as opposed to government, ownership of capital (goods used to manufacture and ship products). Capitalism is the basic economic system of the U.S. and (now) most of the industrialized world.

Narcotic (Line 31) - Related to drugs, especially soothing or pain-relieving drugs.

Supercommunist (Line 32) - Advocating an extreme form of communism, a political/economic system involving the elimination of private property and state control of the economy. Communist theory advocates an end to class divisions and the equitable distribution of resources within a society. ("Supercommunist" is Ginsberg's coinage, not a specific/recognized form of communism.)

Union Square (Line 32) - A busy plaza south of midtown Manhattan in New York City.

Los Alamos (Line 32) - Los Alamos, New Mexico is best known as the site where the atomic bomb was developed (at Los Alamos National Laboratory). Ginsberg is metaphorically comparing police sirens to sirens at the bomb testing site, to the military power behind the bomb, and/or to the apocalyptic destructiveness of the bomb itself.

Wall (Line 32) - Wall Street is a street in lower Manhattan in New York City. It's the heart of the city's financial district and is often used to refer to that district (or American financial markets) as a whole.

Staten Island ferry (Line 32) - A ferry connecting the boroughs of Manhattan and Staten Island in New York City.

Pederasty (Line 34) - Sex between an older and a younger (often underage) male.

Seraphim (Line 37) - Plural of "seraph," a type of angel in the Christian tradition. The speaker means that these sailors are beautiful and angelic-looking.

Balled (Line 38) - Slang for "had sex."

Turkish Bath (Line 39) - A bathhouse with sauna and showers, known as a popular site for gay hookups during the era of the poem.

Shrews of fate (Line 40) - An allusion to the three Fates, or Moirai, of Greek mythology: female deities who controlled human destiny. The first Fate was said to spin the thread of human life; the second measured it; and the third snipped it (ended it). The Moirai had equivalents in other European mythological traditions as well.

Loveboys (Line 40) - Male romantic partners.

Loom (Line 40) - A frame for weaving. According to Greek mythology, the three Fates spun, measured, and cut the thread of human destiny on a loom.

Copulated (Line 41) - Had sex.

Insatiate (Line 41) - Insatiable; incapable of being fully satisfied.

Gyzym (Line 41) - A male ejaculation; sperm. (A variant spelling of the slang term "jism.")

Snatch (Line 42) - Vulgar slang for "vagina."

Myriad (Line 43) - Numerous; many.

Cocksman and Adonis (Line 43) - A phrase describing "N.C." (Neal Cassady) as a very handsome, very sexually active man. In Greek mythology, Adonis was the male god of beauty and desire, known for his incredible looks.

Solipsisms (Line 43) - "Solipsism" is the belief that one's own mind is the only thing in the universe that's certain to exist (or that there is no world outside one's own mind). Here, it metaphorically describes the extreme solitude of the gas-station men's rooms.

Johns (Line 43) - Slang for men's rooms or toilets.

Sordid (Line 44) - Dirty, vulgar, or immoral.

Tokay (Line 44) - A kind of sweet wine.

Third Avenue (Line 44) - An avenue in New York City, running from the east side of Manhattan through the Bronx. It was formerly the site of the Third Avenue elevated subway line, which may be what "iron" refers to here.

East River (Line 45) - The river dividing the east side of Manhattan from Brooklyn and Queens in New York City.

Opium (Line 45) - An often addictive, widely illegal drug with sedative and tranquilizing properties. Heroin derives from the opium poppy, and Ginsberg indicated that this line referred to a heroin-addict friend.

Hudson (Line 46) - The Hudson River, which runs between New York City and New Jersey.

Floodlight (Line 46) - A large, powerful artificial light; here, a metaphorical description of the moon.

Laurel (Line 46) - A flowering shrub, or the leaves or flowers it produces. Laurel wreaths were awarded as symbols of victory in ancient Greece, including in poetry competitions. "Crowned with laurel" here means "recognized as great poets."

Bowery (Line 47) - A street and neighborhood in southern Manhattan in New York City, once known for high rates of poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse.

Pushcarts (Line 48) - Carts pushed by hand (e.g., by street vendors).

Harpsichords (Line 49) - Piano-like keyboard instruments.

Harlem (Line 50) - A neighborhood in northern Manhattan in New York City, known as a historically Black neighborhood and an arts and cultural center.

Tubercular (Line 50) - Suffering from, or suggestive of, tuberculosis. The description of the sky as "tubercular" may relate to the "cough[ing]" mentioned in the same line (tuberculosis is a lung disease); it may also suggest that the sky is a blood-red color (sufferers of advanced tuberculosis cough up blood).

Orange crates of theology (Line 50) - "Theology" is the study of religious belief. "Orange crates of theology," according to Ginsberg, refers to bookcases assembled from crates and filled with books on theology.

Incantations (Line 51) - Chants, especially of a religious or poetic nature.

Borsht (Line 52) - An alternative spelling of "borscht," a sour beet soup of Eastern European origin.

Leaden verse (Line 56) - Bad poetry. (Ginsberg specifically linked this phrase with the academic poetry of the 1940s and 1950s.)

Regiments (Line 56) - Units of an army.

Tanked-up (Line 56) - Resembling a military tank. (Part of a larger metaphor comparing popular fashion to an aggressive military force.)

Nitroglycerine (Line 56) - A chemical used in dynamite and other explosives.

Fairies of advertising (Line 56) - Gay men in the advertising industry. ("Fairies" is a derogatory term for gay/queer men; Ginsberg noted that his wording alludes to the phrase "shrieks of pansies" in Federico García Lorca's poem "Ode to Walt Whitman.")

Mustard gas (Line 56) - A deadly chemical weapon used in wars since the early 20th century. Here, a metaphor for the toxic attitudes of (or atmosphere created by) "sinister intelligent editors."

Chinatown (Line 57) - A historically Chinese neighborhood located in lower Manhattan in New York City.

Passaic (Line 58) - The Passaic River in northern New Jersey.

Phonograph (Line 58) - An early type of record player, also known as a gramophone.

Steamwhistles (Line 58) - Loud whistles that emit noise by expelling steam. Historically featured on trains, in steam ships, in factories, etc.

Jail-solitude (Line 59) - The loneliness of being incarcerated. "Jail-solitude watch" could refer either to the experience of being in jail or of visiting someone in jail.

Birmingham (Line 59) - A city in Alabama.

Incarnation/Incarnate/Reincarnate (Line 59, Line 74, Line 77) - An "incarnation" is the embodiment of a divine or immaterial presence in human (or animal) form. In Christian theology, "incarnation" refers specifically to Christ's appearance on earth as a human being.In line 59, the term metaphorically means a miraculous or revelatory event (i.e., the incredible jazz being played in Birmingham). In line 74, "incarnate" describes poetic "dream[s]" that have manifested in reality. In line 77, "reincarnate" means *reincarnated* (i.e., returned from death in a new form).

Hotrod-Golgotha (Line 59) - Hot rods are souped-up classic cars; "Golgotha" (Aramaic for "skull") alludes to the site of Christ's crucifixion in the Bible. This compound term suggests some kind of torment related to or taking place in cars—perhaps the scene of a car accident.

In vain (Line 61) - Fruitlessly; without success.

Salvation (Line 62) - Rescue from harm, or redemption in a religious sense (i.e., the deliverance of the soul from sin).

Alcatraz (Line 63) - A former maximum-security prison located on Alcatraz Island off the coast of San Francisco, California.

Rocky Mount (Line 64) - Rocky Mount is a small city in North Carolina, where Ginsberg's fellow Beat writer Jack Kerouac stayed for a time with his sister.

Tangiers (Line 64) - Tangier (spelled *Tangiers* in the poem) is a city in Morocco, where Ginsberg's fellow Beat writer William Burroughs, according to Ginsberg's notes on the poem, "retired [...] to cultivate sex."

Southern Pacific (Line 64) - The Southern Pacific Railroad, a now-defunct railroad in the Western U.S. where Ginsberg's friend Neal Cassady ("N.C." in the poem) was employed for a time.

Narcissus (Line 64) - Narcissus is a figure in Greek mythology who falls in love with his own reflection. His name is the source of the word *narcissism* (obsessive self-love), which the poem here associates with people at Harvard University.

Woodlawn (Line 64) - Woodlawn Cemetery is a graveyard in the Bronx in New York City. According to Ginsberg, his mother, who was committed to a mental institution, had a window overlooking this cemetery.

Daisychain (Line 64) - A chain or garland made by tying the stems of daisies together.

Sanity trials (Line 65) - Ginsberg's alternative phrase for *sanity hearings*, or court hearings to determine whether a defendant is mentally competent to stand trial.

Hung jury (Line 65) - A jury that can't muster enough votes to convict or acquit a defendant. (A hung jury leaves the outcome of a trial undecided.)

CCNY (Line 66) - Short for City College of New York (a public college in New York City).

Dadaism (Line 66) - An early 20th century art (or "anti-art") movement emphasizing absurdity, irrationality, and subversion of traditional artistic and political values.

Harlequin (Line 66) - "Harlequin" originally referred to a mischievous comic character from the Italian performance tradition called commedia dell'arte. The Harlequin wore a multicolored, diamond-pattern costume, so as an adjective, "harlequin" typically means "multicolored" or "gaudy." Here, it suggests that the suicidal speech is florid and outlandish, and possibly a mix of comic and tragic.

Instantaneous lobotomy (Line 66) - Lobotomy is a now-discredited surgical procedure once used to treat mental patients. It entailed severing connections within the brain and often left patients severely impaired. Here, the poem's characters are absurdly demanding that the procedure be performed "instantaneous[ly]"—right away.

Insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy (Line 67) - This list refers to various forms of psychiatric treatment:

- "Insulin" is a hormone that regulates the body's blood sugar level. Here, a reference to insulin shock therapy, an outmoded psychiatric treatment in which doctors repeatedly injected patients (mainly schizophrenia sufferers) with insulin to send them into comas.
- "Metrazol" is a stimulant drug that can cause convulsions and was once used in "convulsive therapy" (a.k.a. cardiazol/metrazol therapy) for sufferers of depression, schizophrenia, and other illnesses.
- "Electricity" here refers specifically to "electroshock" or electroconvulsive therapy, a treatment for severe depression and other psychiatric conditions.
- "Hydrotherapy" is form of alternative medicine that treats various conditions through the use of water (baths, water jets, etc.). Sometimes known as the "water cure."
- "Psychotherapy" is An umbrella term for psychological therapy in general, or the use of psychological methods and techniques to treat mental health conditions.
- "Occupational therapy" is a branch of mental healthcare that helps patients adapt to, or improve their functioning in, everyday activities and occupations.

Pingpong (Line 67, Line 68, Line 104) - Table tennis. In context, refers to ping-pong tables provided in mental institutions (including the hospital where Ginsberg met Carl Solomon) as a form of recreation for patients.

Amnesia (Line 67) - Severe memory loss. Electroconvulsive therapy (the "electricity" mentioned in the same line) causes short-term and sometimes long-term amnesia.

Catatonia/Catatonic (Line 68, Line 105) - "Catatonia" is a psychiatric term typically referring to a withdrawn, stupor-like state. "Catatonic" is the adjective, and is used metaphorically in line 105 to suggest that the piano is broken and unresponsive.

Madtowns (Line 69) - Towns that contain mental hospitals. (Could also suggest towns that are insane in a metaphorical sense.)

Pilgrim State, Rockland, Greystone (Line 70, Line 94, Line 95, Line 96, Line 97, Line 98, Line 99, Line 100, Line 101, Line 102, Line 103, Line 104, Line 105, Line 106, Line 107, Line 108, Line 109, Line 110, Line 111, Line 112) - References to three mental institutions: New York's Pilgrim State Hospital and Rockland State Hospital and New Jersey's Greystone Park State Hospital (a.k.a. Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital).Ginsberg's mother, Naomi, was hospitalized at both Pilgrim State and Greystone; Carl Solomon was hospitalized at Pilgrim State, but never at Rockland. Ginsberg noted that he used "Rockland" in Part III of the poem "for rhythmic euphony"—that is, because it sounded better.

Foetid (Line 70) - Foul-smelling. (Also spelled *fetid*.)

Solitude-bench (Line 70) - A bench where one sits and feels lonely (as in the mental institutions this line describes). One of Ginsberg's coinages.

Dolmen-realms (Line 70) - "Dolmens" are ancient stone tombs made by stacking giant rocks in table-like formations. Ginsberg noted that they "mark a vanished civilization" and compared the mental hospitals mentioned in this line to Stonehenge-like dolmens. In other words, people in these hospitals feel as if they've vanished into lost "realms," or died and turned to stone themselves.

****** (Line 71) - Ginsberg acknowledged that the deleted word here is "fucked" (and sometimes read the expletive aloud in live performance).

Fantastic (Line 71) - Fantastical, outlandish, bizarre.

Alchemy (Line 73) - An ancient, pre-scientific discipline that attempted to turn ordinary metals into precious metals (especially gold). Metaphorically, alchemy can refer to any kind of process that transforms something ordinary into something valuable or amazing.

Ellipsis (Line 73) - An omission indicated by three dots (...), or a technique of intentional omission for literary/rhetorical effect.

Vibrating plane (Line 73) - A term combining the mystical concepts of a cosmic "plane" (level of reality) and "vibrations" of cosmic energy.

Variable measure (Line 73) - Poetic rhythm that varies rather than adhering to a fixed meter. In explaining this term, Ginsberg pointed to poet William Carlos Williams's concepts of the "variable foot" and "relative measure," which captured "his own breath's spoken cadences."

Catalogue (Line 73) - A list, especially in a work of poetry or literature. "Catalogue verse" is poetry that uses a list structure.

Juxtaposed (Line 74) - Set (two or more things) in close proximity to highlight their similarities and/or differences, or otherwise combine their effects. Like "images," juxtaposition is a literary device.

Archangel (Line 74) - A high-ranking angel in any of various

religious traditions. Here, the word metaphorically suggests an elusive and important aspect of the soul.

Elemental (Line 74) - Fundamental or primary (or, related to the natural elements). Here, the word suggests that the "verbs" are key elements of the sentence, line, etc., but also that they hold some primal power.

Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus (Line 74) - Latin for "All-Powerful Father, Eternal God." (Ginsberg corrected "Aeterna" to "Aeterne" in later editions of the poem.) Ginsberg found this phrase in the painter Paul Cézanne's writings about his art; Cézanne spoke of capturing "the spectacle that the Pater Omnipotens aeterne Deus spreads before our eyes."

Syntax and measure (Line 75) - Phrase structure and rhythm (of "prose," here meaning ordinary human speech). "Measure" would normally apply to the rhythm of poetry rather than prose.

Beat (Line 76) - In this context (line 76), "beat" might be an adjective, a noun, or a pun encompassing both:

- As an adjective, "beat" was slang for beaten down and worn out (as in the Black American colloquialism "beat to his socks," the source of meaning #2).
- As a noun, "beat" could refer to a member of the Beat Generation, a movement of anti-establishment artists and writers in mid-20th-century America. (Ginsberg's friend Jack Kerouac coined the phrase "Beat Generation.") Near-synonyms are "bohemian" or "hipster" (see line 3).

Goldhorn (Line 77) - Refers to the gold-colored brass instruments, or "horns" (trumpet, saxophone, etc.), in a jazz band.

Eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani (Line 77) - A phrase cried out by Christ during the Crucifixion (according to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew). It's an Aramaic phrase usually translated as: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Here, it suggests that the wail of the band's saxophone sounds like Christ's agony on the cross.

Sphinx (Line 79) - A mythical creature from ancient Egyptian and Greek mythology, typically portrayed as a hybrid of lion, human, and bird. According to some Greek sources, for example, the sphinx has the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle.

Moloch (Line 80, Line 81, Line 82, Line 83, Line 84, Line 85, Line 86, Line 87, Line 88, Line 89) - A Canaanite god denounced in the Bible (Book of Leviticus) and associated with child sacrifice. Later sources associated Moloch with capitalism (Karl Marx) and the modern industrial city (Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*). Ginsberg associates it with both of these things, and particularly with mainstream American society and the American urban landscape. For more on the symbolism behind Moloch, see the Symbols section of this guide.

Crossbone (Line 82) - Deadly. (Specifically, associated with the skull and crossbones, a symbol of death.)

Jehovahs (Line 84) - Gods. (An allusion to Jehovah, the name of God in the Christian tradition and one of the names of God in the Jewish tradition.)

Specter/Spectral (Line 85, Line 88) - A "specter" is a ghost; "spectral" means ghostly.

Sexless hydrogen (Line 85) - A reference to the hydrogen bomb, a weapon in a potential nuclear war. The phrase implies that the society personified as "Moloch" is fated to blow itself up and sterilize the earth.

Treasuries (Line 88) - The collective funds of governments; government coffers.

Invincible (Line 88) - Incapable of being destroyed.

Adorations (Line 91) - Loves or expressions of love (especially the religious/spiritual kind).

Crucifixions (Line 92) - Agonies or torments like that of Christ on the cross. (A biblical allusion.)

Epiphanies (Line 92) - Sudden intellectual insights or spiritual revelations.

Highs (Line 92) - Experiences of ecstasy or intoxication (especially drug intoxication).

Shade (Lines 96-96) - A poetic synonym for "ghost."

Faculties (Lines 101-101) - Powers or capabilities, especially mental capabilities.

Spinsters (Lines 102-102) - A mildly harsh/insulting term for older, unmarried women.

Utica (Lines 102-102) - A city in upstate New York.

Harpies (Lines 103-103) - An insulting slang term for spiteful women (based on the mythical half-bird, half-woman creatures of the same name).

Straightjacket (Line 104) - A restraining garment used to prevent mentally ill patients from harming themselves. (More commonly spelled *straitjacket*.)

The Abyss (Line 104) - Cosmic emptiness; the void.

Ungodly (Line 105) - Can variously mean unholy, outrageous, wicked, or without religion.

Shocks (Line 106) - Could refer to any of the psychiatric treatments known as the "shock therapies" (insulin shock therapy, cardiazol/metrazol therapy, electroconvulsive therapy). Most likely refers to insulin shock therapy, which Solomon had undergone and which, as he noted in *Report from the Asylum: Afterthoughts of a Shock Patient*, "consists of fifty hypoglycemic comas" triggered by insulin injections.

Pilgrimage (Line 106) - A journey made for religious or spiritual reasons.

Fascist national Golgotha (Line 107) - A description of the American political system as both fascistic (extremely right-

wing and tyrannical) and torturous ("Golgotha" alludes to the site of Christ's crucifixion).

Hebrew socialist revolution (Line 107) - The seizure of state power by the working classes, as foreseen under the theory of revolutionary socialism and linked by Ginsberg with Jewish ("Hebrew") culture and political traditions.

The Internationale (Line 109) - A 19th-century anthem adopted by various socialist and communist movements.

Comrades (Line 109) - Companions, friends, or allies. In this context, the word specifically refers to fellow believers in socialism or communism.

Legions (Line 111) - Multitudes of people or things. (Originally referred to large units of soldiers.)

Sea-journey (Line 112) - A trip across the ocean; an odyssey. (Here, the "sea" part is meant to be either surreal or metaphorical, because these "dreams" involve a journey across land, not water.)

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Howl" is a free verse poem whose 112 lines are broken up into three sections. This three-part structure imposes some order and logic on an otherwise sprawling poem about "madness":

- Part I is a lament for doomed bohemians (Ginsberg's friends).
- Part II is an outcry against the society ("Moloch") that "destroyed" these people.
- Part III is an expression of sympathy with one friend in particular (Carl Solomon).

In general, the poem's lines are quite long, packed with details, images, and allusions. Some individual lines contain so much detail that they're almost like short poems or stories in their own right (these ultra-long lines also often look more like paragraphs, depending on what printing of the poem readers are looking at). This free-flowing form does a few important things:

- First, it reinforces the idea that "Howl" is not a tidy work of art but a *howl*—of grief, rage, and sometimes exultation.
- Second, it allows the poet to paint an extensive picture of the poem's characters and their experiences. "Howl" is largely an elegy or lament; by providing so much detail about the dead or suffering bohemians, the poet helps the reader understand and sympathize with them. Imagine trying to squeeze all that detail into a short form, like a sonnet!
- Third, the poem's form mirrors, to some degree, the "madness" of its characters; it's the kind of outpouring of speech described in lines 18-19 ("yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes," etc.).
- Finally, it suggests that the poet/speaker is experiencing a rush of inspiration.

Also note that, rather than a meter or rhyme scheme, the poem uses anaphora—repeated words/phrases at the beginning of lines—to help organize the speaker's thoughts. For example, Part I consists of a single (very) long sentence, broken into lines that mostly begin with the word "who." Most of the lines in Part II then begin with "Moloch," while all of the lines in Part II begin with the phrase "I'm with you in Rockland" (except for line 94, which inserts "Carl Solomon!" before this phrase).

All this repetition adds some more structure to the poem, and it also has a hypnotic effect. It's as though the poet/speaker is speaking out of a trance or visionary state, which is fitting for a poem that includes so many references to visions, dreams, and "illuminations,"

Over the years, Ginsberg named a variety of sources as inspirations for the form of "Howl." He said that the poem's expansive free verse drew from the writings of Walt Whitman (a major 19th-century American poet) and that its "long saxophone-like chorus lines" derived from bebop jazz music. He also claimed to have been inspired by "Hebraic-Melvillean bardic breath," suggesting that both ancient Hebrew scriptures and 19th-century novelist Herman Melville (author of the famously long and poetic *Moby-Dick*) influenced the poem's shape. For good measure, Ginsberg added that "a lot of [the poem's] forms developed out of an extreme rhapsodic wail I once heard in a madhouse."

METER

"Howl" is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, it uses long, unrhymed lines of varying length, structured through other kinds of repetition (especially anaphora).

The "freedom" of the poem's verse reflects its themes of rebellion and escape. The poem's heroes seek liberation from social constraints and oppression, as well as release from the literal "madhouse[s]" to which some of them are confined. They rebel against American society—a supposedly free country that they've found to be anything but—and dream of "revolution" against the system of industrial capitalism in general.

As a way of dramatizing this (imagined or attempted) rebellion, Ginsberg rebels against the conventions of English-language poetry, including standard metrical patterns. This approach was characteristic of his literary movement, the Beat Generation, which typically shunned meter and rhyme in favor of loose, improvisatory, jazz-inspired rhythms.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Howl" has no rhyme scheme. It's structured around anaphora, meaning that it often repeats words and phrases at the beginning of lines, leaving the rest of the line to soar off in unpredictable directions. (The poem does use some internal rhyme, however, as in the phrase "mid**night** street**light**" in line 27 and the slant rhyme "the holy **yells**! They bade fare**well**!" in line 93.)

As with the lack of meter, the lack of rhyme in "Howl" is characteristic of Beat Generation poetry. Beat poets such as Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso took the "free" in "free verse" seriously, seeing their rejection of conventional poetic patterns as aligned with their rejection of social conformity in general. As models for their poetic rhythms, they drew on sources ranging from the free verse of William Blake (1757-1827) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) to the intense, often improvised sounds of bebop jazz.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Howl" represents the poet Allen Ginsberg himself. Many details in the poem make this connection clear. For example:

- The poem is dedicated to Ginsberg's friend and fellow writer Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met in a mental hospital.
- The speaker says that Solomon, in the hospital, "imitate[s] the shade of my mother" (line 96): a reference to Ginsberg's mother Naomi, who was institutionalized for a number of years prior to her death. (Ginsberg explores this topic in depth in other poems.)
- The poem contains numerous details based on the real-life experiences of Ginsberg's friends and associates, as he explained in his author's notes on the poem.

All that said, some of the poem's details are exaggerated or fictionalized (for example, neither Solomon nor Ginsberg spent time in Rockland State Hospital; Ginsberg chose the name "Rockland" for its sonic and symbolic qualities). Thus, while the poem is largely autobiographical, it doesn't confine itself to strict biographical fact. In lamenting "the best minds of [his] generation," Ginsberg often portrays them in mystical or legendary terms—in other words, he takes some poetic license.

The first-person speaker ("I") appears in the first word of the poem but doesn't explicitly reappear until line 72 ("ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time—"). That's because Part I focuses mainly on Ginsberg's friends and fellow bohemians, the "minds [...] destroyed by madness." (However, Ginsberg does weave some of his own real-life experiences into the descriptions of this third-person "they," so "they," at times, is more like "we.") The first-person speaker appears more extensively in Part II of the poem (where "I" is the individual voice railing against society, or "Moloch"), and appears in every line of Part III (which directly addresses Solomon in sympathetic terms). The poem thus becomes more personal as it goes on, narrowing from a portrait of a "generation"—and a condemnation of a whole society—down to a message for a single friend.

The poet/speaker not only sympathizes with Solomon and other "mad" friends; he clearly considers himself one of them. The line "ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe" suggests that the two men are threatened by the same society, while "you're madder than I am" (line 94) indicates that, while not currently institutionalized, the speaker is still insane by that society's standards. The rant in Part II makes clear that this monstrous society—"Moloch," a stand-in for industrial capitalism or 20th-century America—has left him alienated, "lonely," and "Crazy" according to mainstream definitions. He's especially alienated as a gay man in a homophobic culture, and he turns his back on that culture's values ("Moloch whom I abandon!").

Throughout Part III, he expresses solidarity with, and support for, his hospitalized friend ("I'm with you"), while seeming to envision some ultimate liberation from their repressive society. The poem's ending (line 112) takes readers directly into the speaker's "dreams," which reunite Ginsberg—who really did live in a "cottage" at the time—with the long-suffering Solomon.

SETTING

The setting of "Howl" ranges widely, as the poem refers to a variety of locations around New York City, the U.S., and the globe.

This dizzying assortment of place names highlights the restlessness of the poem's heroes, who are constantly journeying in search of spiritual illumination, freedom from their repressive society, or both. In a possible allusion to Homer's *Odyssey*, the final line of "Howl" even imagines Carl Solomon as an Odysseus-like figure, freshly returned from a cross-country trip that is also, somehow, a "sea-journey."

The poem's main setting shifts slightly from section to section:

- Part I is set primarily in and around New York City, whose geography and features it references extensively.
    - For example, it mentions the boroughs of "Brooklyn," the "Bronx," and "Staten Island"; "Battery" Park, "Harlem," and the "Bowery" neighborhood; the "Hudson" River and "East River," etc. Some of these features (such as "the El," "Bickford's,"

and "Fugazzi's") no longer exist, marking the poem as a product of the immediate post-WWII period.
    - Part I also mentions various other places in the U.S. (e.g., "Baltimore," "Birmingham," "Chicago," "Idaho," "Kansas," "Alcatraz," etc.), North America (e.g., "Canada" and "Mexico"), and the world (e.g., "Africa"). The references to "Tangiers" and "Africa" specifically allude to Ginsberg's friend, the Beat writer William Burroughs, who lived in Tangier, Morocco during this period.
- Part II was originally inspired by the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in San Francisco, California, a building Ginsberg envisioned as a many-eyed monster during a drug-fueled hallucination. However, Part II never explicitly mentions the hotel or city, and it seems to encompass the modern urban landscape in general ("Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!") or the modern industrialized world as a whole ("spectral nations!").
- Part III is set "in Rockland," or the Rockland State Hospital (now the Rockland Psychiatric Center), a mental hospital founded in 1926 in Orangeburg, New York, not far from New York City. (Neither Ginsberg nor Solomon was ever actually committed there, though they spent time in other institutions.) The final line also mentions Ginsberg's "cottage in the Western night"; Ginsberg actually lived in a cottage in Berkeley, California during this period.

Along with all these physical locations, the poem takes place during a clear time period. Ginsberg noted that the phrase "Ten years' animal screams and suicides!" (line 92) refers to the years 1945-1955, which also correspond to most of the poem's cultural references. Thus, the poem is primarily a portrait of America, and its "best minds," during the decade just after World War II.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Howl" (1956) is widely regarded as the central poem of the Beat movement of the 1940s and 1950s. The Beats were a close-knit circle of writers and artists drawn to radical politics, sexual exploration, drug experimentation, radical politics, non-traditional forms of spirituality, and art and music (e.g., bebop jazz) produced by artists outside the American mainstream. Much of their work sought to shock, provoke, and rebel against what they viewed as the repressed consumer culture of post-World War II America. The term "Beat" was coined by another leading figure of the movement, the poet/novelist Jack Kerouac, who adapted it from the Black American slang term "beat to his socks" (i.e., beaten down).

Other Beat writers include novelist William Burroughs, poet/publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who first published *Howl and Other Poems*, and Carl Solomon, the dedicatee of "Howl," whose essay *Report from the Asylum: Afterthoughts of a Shock Patient* (1950) influenced Ginsberg's poem. Equally influential were the real-world experiences of the Beats, such as Solomon's and Ginsberg's stints in mental hospitals, Ginsberg's experiments with psychedelic drugs, and the sexual and criminal exploits of Neal Cassady, the counterculture figure memorialized as "N.C." in "Howl."

Ginsberg composed and revised "Howl" over the course of 1954 and 1955. He first performed it publicly on October 7, 1955, at a now-legendary reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, California. The poem caused a sensation among the audience, and Ferlinghetti promptly offered to publish it. Yet along with praise from various literary figures, "Howl" attracted controversy due to its graphic language, radical politics, and frank depiction of homosexuality.

When the book *Howl and Other Poems* debuted in 1956, Ferlinghetti and Shigeyoshi Murao (co-owners of the City Lights bookstore) were arrested for distributing obscene literature. The pair were acquitted the following year, as a judge deemed "Howl" a constitutionally protected work of "redeeming social importance." The incident brought considerable notoriety to the Beat movement, which went on to produce such classics as Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957) and Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* (1959)—the second of which, like "Howl," sparked an obscenity trial.

Besides his Beat peers, Ginsberg named many literary forerunners as influences on "Howl," including:

- The English Romantic poet William Blake (1757-1827; see line 6: "Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war");
- The American novelist Herman Melville (1819-1891);
- And the American poets Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963).

"Howl" also draws inspiration from music, visual art, and film. The poem's loose form was influenced by jazz, especially the experimental sub-genre of jazz called "bebop." As a model of the effect the poem was aiming for, Ginsberg pointed to jazz saxophonist Lester Young "[performing] in Kansas City in 1938, blowing 72 choruses of 'The Man I Love' until everyone in the hall was out of his head."

The poem also contains subtle references to the work of French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), whose sharp color contrasts helped inspire the startling

contrasts of "Howl." As for film, Ginsberg cited "Moloch" in the dystopian classic *Metropolis* (1927) as an influence on his own "Moloch"; he also mentioned Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) as an influence on the "comic realism" of the poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Howl" offers a surreal yet richly detailed portrait of the U.S. during the decade after World War II. As Ginsberg acknowledged, the "Ten years" mentioned in the poem refers to the years between 1945 (when WWII ended) and 1955 (when he finished writing "Howl"). During this period, the U.S. was booming economically but remained deeply repressive for those living outside its dominant (white, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal) culture.

"Howl" debuted just as the 20th-century civil rights movement was getting off the ground, and several years prior to the arrival of second-wave feminism and the modern LGBTQ liberation movement in the 1960s. The poem's rage against the machine it names "Moloch" reflects brewing social conflicts that now seem old-fashioned in some ways—and familiar in others.

During this period, homosexuality was both criminalized and viewed as a psychiatric disorder. Psychiatric treatments were often crude and severely damaging; they included an early form of "electroshock therapy" (see line 106: "[...] where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void") and the drastic brain surgery known as "lobotomy" (see line 66: "[...] demanding instantaneous lobotomy").

Mental hospitals were rife with other abuses as well, and Ginsberg had firsthand knowledge of such institutions:

- His mother, Naomi, suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and had been hospitalized throughout much of Ginsberg's youth. She was lobotomized toward the end of her life and died in an institution shortly after her son completed "Howl."
- Ginsberg, too, had been institutionalized in 1949-'50, as part of a plea deal in connection with a theft to which he was an accessory. During his seven months in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, doctors sought to "cure" his homosexuality with psychotherapy. It was also in this facility that he met Carl Solomon.

The combination of his own experience, his mother's, and Solomon's caused Ginsberg to question how his society defined "madness" and "sanity"—questions that became central to the poem that made his name.

Even as Ginsberg's society viewed him and others like him as "mad," Ginsberg viewed his society itself as irrational in many ways:

- Over the course of two world wars, for example, America's military and private industry had developed a relationship that President Dwight Eisenhower, in a famous warning at the end of the 1950s, would call the "military-industrial complex." This "complex" had developed a series of increasingly deadly weapons of mass destruction, including the atomic and the hydrogen bomb.
- As the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalated in the 1950s, these inventions prompted widespread fears of nuclear annihilation (alluded to by the "cloud of sexless hydrogen" in line 85). Ginsberg saw the American war machine ("the vast stone of war!") as insanely destructive, and "Howl" denounces the "demonic industries" and "monstrous bombs" it spawned.

Raised in a radically left-wing family, Ginsberg also viewed industrial capitalism, and the American culture it produced, as monstrously oppressive. Along with other literary sources, Ginsberg's "Moloch" may allude to the writings of socialist/communist philosopher Karl Marx, who referred to finance capital by that name. "Howl" specifically criticizes the stifling consumer culture of the advertising industry ("Madison Avenue"), the greed of the energy and finance industries ("oil and stone [...] electricity and banks"), and the ugliness of mechanized, industrial civilization as a whole—the "sphinx of cement and aluminum" that it blames for destroying the minds of artists.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Allen Ginsberg reading "Howl" live in 1959. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkNp56UZax4)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Ginsberg at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/allen-ginsberg)
- The Impact of "Howl" — A 2010 retrospective on "How 'Howl' Changed the World." (https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/09/how-howl-changed-the-world.html)
- "Howl" and Censorship — More context on the controversy surrounding the taboo-breaking publication of "Howl." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCGX0OxEUK4)
- An Interview with the Poet — Watch Conan O'Brien interviewing Ginsberg in 1994. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MITgcs_-rHU)

- An Introduction to the Beats — Read "A Brief Guide to the Beat Poets," courtesy of Poets.org. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-beat-poets)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALLEN GINSBERG POEMS

- A Supermarket in California

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*Howl*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Apr 2020. Web. 15 Dec 2021.

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Allen, Austin. "*Howl*." LitCharts LLC, April 13, 2020. Retrieved December 15, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/allen-ginsberg/howl.