



## Study of Spirituality in Allen Ginsberg's selected Poetry

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### **Abstract :**

Allen Ginsberg's (June 3, 1926 – April 5, 1997) "Howl" poem was first seen as largely a social record, but it eventually came to be recognised as a symbol of the avant-garde artist and as the designer of a poetry form for a postwar generation seeking its own voice. However, as Ginsberg's notes demonstrate, it was also the most recent result of a long-running study of formal and structural elements. Several aspects of Ginsberg's life culminated in this seminal poem, written as he neared the age of thirty when he was still aimlessly bouncing from one job to another and from one country to another. There was more to Ginsberg's father's influence than met the eye. Even though Allen Ginsberg found little inspiration in his father Louis's highly conventional, metrical poems, the latter's interest in literary history served as a foundation for Ginsberg's understanding of prosody. The young poet was then guided by a series of other influential figures, such as Williams, whose use of American vernacular and local material served as an inspiration, and great scholars like Meyer Shapiro, an art historian at Columbia, who introduced him to the principles of modernism from an analytical standpoint.

### **Introduction :**

Ginsberg's associations with Kerouac, Cassady, Burroughs, Herbert Hunke, and other notable members of the thriving underground society of dropouts, revolutionaries, drug addicts, jazz musicians, and serious but unusual artists of all stripes had a profound effect on him. Since these "angelheaded hipsters" welcomed and celebrated quirkiness and saw Ginsberg's homosexuality as a virtue rather than a flaw, he immediately felt a connection with them. Even though Ginsberg dove headfirst into the drug culture that was so prevalent in this society, he was not nearly as predisposed to self-destruction as Burroughs or Hunke, and was instead more intrigued by the potential for visionary experience. His first ecstatic experience of transcendence was in 1948, when he had what he calls a "illuminative audition of William Blake's voice simultaneous with Eternity-vision." Since then, he has studied religions as



diverse as Judaism and Buddhism and experimented with chemicals in an effort to gain further spiritual insight.

His eight-month incarceration in a mental facility was the result of his experimentation with various mind-altering substances (including marijuana, peyote, amphetamines, mescaline, and lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD) and his casual acquaintance with some quasi-criminals.

When he was three years old, he had his first disturbing interaction with his mother's mental illness when she was admitted to the hospital. While Ginsberg's mother's battles with the torments of mental ambiguity gravely disrupted his otherwise uneventful youth, he felt tremendous compassion for her anguish and was affected by her warmth, affection, and social consciousness. Although Ginsberg wasn't born in a "red diaper," he developed a strong political conscience in high school and college that led him to study labour law, and he never wavered from his beliefs about the evils of capitalism. His encounters with the "lamblike youngsters" who were "slaughtered" by the demon Moloch, his emblem for the greed and materialism of the United States in the 1950s, inspired his ardent demand for tolerance and fairness as much as his mother's views did. Along with his disappointment in the government's inability to address these problems, he also harboured a romanticised vision of "the lost America of love" gleaned from his exposure to the works of nineteenth-century American authors like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau and fortified by the political and social idealism of his contemporaries like Jack Kerouac, Frank Snyder, and John McClure.

When he started writing "Howl," Ginsberg consolidated all these issues. The poem's social and political underpinnings were obvious, but the poem's sophisticated structural arrangements were missed. Ginsberg wrote several letters and notes to explain his motivations, in which he emphasised his desire to use Whitman's long line "to build up large organic structures" and his realisation that he did not need to satisfy anyone's concept of what a poem should be but could instead follow his "romantic inspiration" and write freely, "without fear." Ginsberg produced a three-part prophetic elegy that he termed a "great sad comedy of wild phrase" using what he dubbed his "Hebraic- Melvillian bardic breath," a rhythmic pattern comparable to the cadences of the Old Testament as exploited by Herman Melville.



## Howl

The opening section of "Howl" is a detailed account of the goings-on among his "angelheaded hipsters" peers. Ginsberg presented picture after image of the antics of "amazing lamblike youngsters" in quest of cosmic enlightenment, "the old celestial link to the starry dynamo in the mechanism of the night," a description of the bohemian underground that still irks many social critics. Ginsberg summed up their efforts by saying they had been "destroyed by craziness" since they had received so little backing from mainstream American culture. Most of the lengthy lines begin with "who," which was utilised as "a basis to maintain measure, return to, and take off from again," to build a composite image that is alive with excitement and energy. The great flights of imagination, euphoric illuminations, and glorious experiences of Ginsberg's friends and acquaintances are celebrated with his grief for their demise or self-destruction. A typical statement from him conveys both the awe-inspiring strength and the potentially life-threatening nature of the incidents he relates. By the conclusion of the first segment, Ginsberg was satisfied that he had reconstructed "the facts of heavenly experience" and presented his beliefs "true to eternity."

The second section of the poem "calls the monster of mental awareness that preys" on the individuals he admires. Ginsberg likens the anxiety and tension of the Cold War to Moloch, the Canaanite deity whose worship demanded human sacrifice, symbolising the influence of materialism and a "lacklove" that he subsequently defined. In the second half of the poem, an anarchic picture of fury and disruption envelops the globe as the word Moloch functions as a form of "base repetition" and destructive traits are portrayed in a series of lines starting with "whose."

Thirdly, "a litany of affirmation," Ginsberg writes to a poet he knew at the Psychiatric Institute named Solomon, using Solomon as a symbol for the victim-heroes he has been portraying. Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* (1939; as *Rejoice in the Lamb*, 1954) provided the inspiration for this design; Ginsberg saw it as a pyramid "with a progressively lengthier response to the fixed base." Each breath unit begins with Ginsberg declaring his allegiance to Solomon (and others like him) with the words "I'm with you in Rockland," followed by the question "where..." and an explanation of some form of unconventional behaviour that has been labelled "madness" but is, according to Ginsberg, a form of creative sanity. At the poem's



conclusion, Ginsberg and Solomon are seen embarking on a voyage to a utopian America where love and "real mental regularity" are possible despite the presence of Moloch and lunacy.

### **Crawling Majales**

In 1965, Ginsberg was banned from both Cuba and the Czechoslovakia for publicly criticising the governments' policies after being invited there. In Prague, he was crowned Kral Majales (king of May) by his fellow students, a centuries-old European tradition that included a teenage Václav Havel. He contrasted the worst aspects of communist and capitalist societies with the best qualities of the symbolic May King, a figure of life, love, art, and enlightenment, in the poem "Kral Majales," which was published alongside positive and negative silhouettes of the smiling poet, naked except for tennis shoes and sporting three hands bearing finger cymbals, against a phallic symbol. The first section of the poem demonstrates the hopelessness of governments ruled by a tiny clique of rulers via a combination of comedic resignation, wrath, and sadness. The poem's core, however, is an ecstatic eruption of pleasure, merriment, and confidence in the emerging youth of the mid-1960s; it is a list of all the traits that he brings to the position of Kral Majales. This poem by Allen Ginsberg celebrates the rise of what he believed to be a revolutionary movement toward a utopian society before the full weight of the catastrophe in Vietnam had been felt and before the succession of killings that shook the United States. The ecumenical spirit of religious pluralism that he embodies is celebrated in his chant of praise for the countercultural foundations: "the power of sexual youth," productive, fulfilling work ("industry in eloquence"), honest acceptance of the body ("long hair of Adam"), the vitality of art ("old Human poesy"), and so on. The rhythmic intensity of the poem rises until it describes the poet's real plummet from the aircraft he flew to London following his expulsion. He flies to "Albion's airstrip," where he proudly gives (to the reader or listener) the poetry he has just composed while sitting "on a jet seat in mid Heaven." The abrupt conclusion ensures that the event will remain vivid in the poet's mind and in the tempos and pictures of his work for all time.

### **Disaster in the United States of America**

Even though Ginsberg was returning to the personal with poems like "Bayonne Entering NYC," many of the poems in a book titled *The Fall of America* were about political or social themes.



Ginsberg, trying to find some cosmic transcendence to make up for the unpleasant circumstances on earth, explores the possibility of a personal pantheism in poems like "Wales Visitation," a nature ode composed in the tradition of the English Romantics, and "Bixby Canyon," an American West Coast equivalent. His elegiac bent, which reaches its zenith in *Mind Breaths*, is also expressed in "On Neal's Ashes," a moving memory of the Beat poet Cassady.

### **Mind Breaths**

Ginsberg calls his book *Mind Breaths* "a chain of strong-breath'd poems," and the title poem, "Mind Breaths," is a meditation that collects the lengthy lines of these poems into a series of modulations on the topic of the poet's breath as an element of the wind-spirit of life. Ginsberg has said several times that his ability to master the rhythms of a lengthy line ("My breath is long") is one of his fundamental principles of organisation. From the old notion that the gods spoke through the poet, he expands in "Mind Breaths" on the concept that the poet's voice is a part of the "voice" of the universe. Ginsberg's global scope allows him to progressively incorporate elements from a wide variety of cultural traditions, bringing people from different countries together via shared aesthetic values. The poet perceives "a tranquil breath, a hushed breath, a slow breath" underneath the fracturing and struggle of the world's governments; this is an aspect of the basically human cosmos that the artist seeks to inhabit.

### **Plutonian Ode**

Ginsberg makes another compelling literary case in *Plutonian Ode's* title poem to fortify the "Mind-guard spirit" against the desire for death that motivates some to accept "Radioactive Nemesis." Ginsberg reviews the history of nuclear experiments while thinking back on "Howl," in which Moloch represents the death-driven urges of a society driven insane by greed. The poem is written as a manual for the reader's "spiritual companions and instructors," and the "mountain of Plutonian" represents the black shadow-image of the life energy that has fueled the cosmos from its "birth." Also addressing the "heavy heavy Element woken," Ginsberg portrays a force of "vaunted Mystery" against which he brings, as always, the "verse prophetic" to "wake space" itself. An echo of Blake's injunctions at the start of an age when machinery



has harmed human well-being, the poem is intended to return the power of mind (which is built on spiritual enlightenment) to a society hooked to "horrific arm'd, Satanic enterprises."

### **Collected Poems, 1947-1997**

Almost every poem Ginsberg ever wrote is collected in *Collected Poems, 1947–1997*, from his first published poem, "In Society" (1947), through his last written piece, "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgia)," composed only days before his death. A compilation of the poet's works from 1947 through 1980, including *White Shroud*, *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, and *Death and Fame*. Ginsberg's drawings, photos, sheet music, calligraphy, notes, acknowledgments, introductions, appendices, and more are all gathered here for the first time. Ginsberg's growth as a poet, artist, seeker of truth, spokesperson for his generation, and human being is reflected in his body of work.

*Collected Poems, 1947–1997* captures the spirit of an artist who, like Whitman before him, shattered preconceived notions of what poetry might or should be. Above all else, however, it shows the inner workings of the mind of a master craftsman, someone with fierce intellect and endless curiosity, a human blessed with a childish sense of humour, boundless optimism, unlimited generosity, and boundless charity toward others.

It was as if Ginsberg, in the latter moments of his life, had completed a full circle and was looking back over the course of his life in vivid flashes. These creative bursts, like those in *American Sentences*, have the cadence of pithy epigrams. Other potential last thoughts include the rhyming couplets and quatrains of "Sky Words," "Scatological Observations," "My Team Is Red Hot," "Starry Rhymes," "Thirty State Bummers," and "Bop Sh'bam," which are all so simplistic as to be almost childlike.

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