Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* Andreas Music and Joel Brazel

**Scholarly Perspective:**

In Margaret Randall’s “Can poetry Matter?” she states that after reading Ginsberg’s *Howl*, that it was the first time in years that a poem had “radically changed” her. Randall states that this poem revealed much to her about her own generation of the “passion and longing against [the] backdrop of 1950’s conformity, hypocrisy, ugliness, and lies. What it revealed to [her] about [herself].”

**Themes/Issues:**

**War and its Consequences:** Due to World War I, the poetic speaker spends the entire first section discussing both the war and, mainly, its consequences. He begins by stating, “I saw the best of minds of my generation destroyed / by madness” (1-2). Following this, the speaker leads into a tirade concerning society’s war-induced depression, and as well the consequences of drug use, sex asphyxiation, and a dawn of new endless, hopeless thinking.

**Madness:** In *Howl*, madness is relative. In fact, this poem turns our common notions of sanity on their head. People society typically sees as perfectly normal, the speaker considers insane. People that society generally sees as mentally ill, the speaker considers misunderstood geniuses. Ginsberg spent eight months in the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Hospital, where he met Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated. He thought Solomon was a talented artist whose gifts were stifled by the oppressive psychiatric treatment he received. The poem treats hospitals and doctors with suspicion, while visions and hallucinations are signs of a divine connection. One of the most memorable experiences of Ginsberg's life was a vision in which William Blake read his poetry aloud. However, the line between inspired madness, genuine madness, and drug-induced madness is extremely blurry in this poem. “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? (79) Which the speaker believes that someone or something else mist be responsible for such a dramatic collapse of the sanity of his friends. But he blames a machine-like creature made from” cement and aluminum,” which violently invades their minds.

**Discussion Question**: What is the relationship between drugs and madness in the poem?

**Rules and Order**: No group defied the rules that defined orderly life in 1950s America quite like the Beats. Ginsberg was no anarchist, but he believed that the severity of the justice and health systems stunted the creativity of the nation's most promising individuals. We have to take him at his word when he refers to all the poem's rebels as "the best minds of my generation." What could have caused them to go so awry? *Howl* praises people who stage political protests, smuggle drugs, engage in anonymous public sex, jump off bridges, and plot revolutions.

**Freedom and Confinement**: The second and third sections of the poem deal with confinement. Moloch is the god of prisons, governments, and boring suburbia, while Rockland represents the mental and physical confinement of the mental institutions.

**Visions of America**: Ginsberg works from the opposite direction: from the bottom up. His "best minds" are the people who fall asleep drunk on the subway and travel across the country in stolen cars. That's because, in Ginsberg's view, America *has* been flipped upside down, and democracy and the common man have taken a backseat to profits, politicians, and policemen. This perspective can sometimes seem very narrow and limited. *Howl* is a chronicle of a wide range of American experiences.

**Discussion Question**: Does the speaker believe that America is doomed, or does he merely feel the country has gotten on the wrong track?

**Literary Elements:**

**Repetition**: In the first section, the speaker constantly begins nearly every line with “who,” possibly indicating that, as he speaks of the numerous people within the poem, that these people have become nullified, made obsolete by the war and he does not recognize them by name. In the second section, he repeats “Moncha” in a similar fashion. He is constantly questioning the people without knowing their names and the war saw them as obsolete. And that’s why he refers them to them as whom instead of their names

**Stream of Consciousness**: *Howl* is written in the more modernist style known as stream of consciousness, where the literary work does not necessarily have a specific structure, and nor does it have an easy, linear direction of progression.