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Cover Page Footnote

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The “Ugly” Imageries in “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg: How the Poet Makes the Readers Love Them?

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Abstract

“Howl” by Allen Ginsberg is no longer controversial in American Literature. It would be seen the amazing ode to the pioneering of the counterculture by stepping into the position of the social and literary taboos (Levine, 485.) But, how does it pioneer in American Lit and how to learn the crafts to create the imageries handled by one of the greatest American poets in the 20th Century would still be quite attractive to today’s readers, especially because those imageries pair with the ideas that are taboo or they are taboo themselves. Reckoning the frequencies of the author-stylized common syntaxes employed in “Howl,” the author of this article aims to describe the ways Allen Ginsberg makes his readers feel familiar about and like the ugly, taboo imageries. Those special syntaxes, in the synthesizing with the playful onomatopoeias, are used by Ginsberg to create the meaningful metonymies that represent the “ugly” imageries as the familiar beauties. However, the questions, “Why does he create those ugly imageries? Are they really ugly? For what he does do that?” will be answered.

Keywords: relative clause, participial phrase, metonymy, onomatopoeia, non binary sexuality

The First Section

Each time reading “Howl” by Ginsberg, I visualize that I stand under the foot of a waterfall of the words, sounds, and imageries with the cold, tiny bubbles of the water surrounding me. I let the fresh, white streamline bring my mind to the landscapes that are both strange and familiar, with “the starry dynamo,” the “cold-water flats” or the people “who... floating across the tops of cities,” the “ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall,” or “the wartime blue floodlight of the moon.” Those imageries are familiar to me, despite the proper name named for the places I’ve never come to, such as “Atlantic City Hall,” or “Peyote” (City.) I can come there, riding my imagination, because Ginsberg links the imageries that are very familiar to the human visual memories to replicate the emotion-fulfilled reality. With those imageries, he also wakes up the readers’ positive emotions and lovely feelings in his poem. The others, the taboo, ugly imageries, linking to the familiar imageries/ emotions, become more familiar with their new roles in Ginsberg’s lines.

Taking a glance at the structure of “Howl” and some beloved syntaxes in the lines of Ginsberg is the first step I employ to learn about the ugly imageries in “Howl.”

The poem includes the 3 main parts

Part I: Ginsberg depicts the self-portrait of his generation who experience mental destructions and suffering from industrial life in New York City. This part stretches on the 77 stanzas of the only one long line (Ginsberg, 487-492.)

Part II: Ginsberg exclaims against the absolute authority of "Moloch," the symbol of destruction against the humanized values in the industrial society. This part stretches on from stanza 78 to stanza 93 (16 stanzas.) (Ginsberg, 492-493.)

Part III and footnote: Ginsberg eulogizes the friendship and the common ideal sharing with Carl Salomon. In the "footnote to Howl," Ginsberg emphasizes human nature such as love, kindness, diversity, survival, etc., as the "holy" qualities that humans need to keep for themselves.

Ginsberg, in the letter to poet Richard Eberhart of The New York Times, dated 05/18/1956 affirms the structured content of "Howl," "Howl is an "affirmation" of individual experiences of God, sex, drugs, absurdity, etc. (The juxtaposed appositive nouns such as "God, sex, drugs, absurdity" appear to represent the equal values in Ginsberg's literary universe.)

Part I deals sympathetically with individual cases.

Part II describes and rejects the Moloch of society which confounds and suppresses individual experience and forces the individual to consider himself mad if he does not reject his own deepest senses.

Part III is an expression of sympathy and identification with C.S [Carl Salomon] who is in the madhouse- saying that his madness basically is rebellion against Moloch and I am with him and extending my hand in union." (Palattella, 10.)

This article focuses on part I of the poem to formularize and explain the way Ginsberg depicts the mental portrait of his generation.

The Second Section

English that Ginsberg employs in “Howl” is very complicated. The whole of part I of the poem is only one long sentence with 60 relative clauses or participial phrases that are placed after the 60 relative pronouns “who.” Each relative clause that is added after “who” can be seen as a series of metonymies reversing the quality of this thing by that thing.

In comparison to the model of Morenberg modeled on a relative clause/ participial phrase that is used as a restrictive modifier embedded after a noun it describes, a relative phrase employed by Ginsberg is far more complicated and disordered, with many subordinate participial phrases and adverb phrases that are weaved together.

In the words of Morenberg, in a relative clause, after the subordinate pronoun such as “That, Who, What, Which, When, etc.,” that may be seen as a subject pronoun, there may be the main verb and then a direct or indirect object, and then an adverb. In a participial phrase, a past or present participle can be embedded after the noun it describes. (Morenberg, 160 -75.) The relative clauses and participial phrases employed by Ginsberg contain those main elements but vary in other ways. For example, Ginsberg writes: “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,” (Ginsberg, 488.) The adjectives “poverty,” “hollow-eyed” and the plural noun “tatters” replace the verbs. The three present participle phrases “smoking in...” “floating across...” and “contemplating jazz” describe “who,” but are embedded freely after “who.”

In another stanza, Ginsberg uses a similar syntax, “who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebasket and listening to the Terror through the wall”

(Ginsberg, 488.) Here, the past tense verb, "cowered" is placed normally but the wordings are reversed from the normal order that might be "who cowered in underwear in unshaven room." In another stanza, the poet modifies that model, "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 decades," (Ginsberg, 491.) It displays that the series of the relative clauses or participial phrases are broken. (This kind of syntax will be studied in the other article.)

The series of the adjectives, or verbs in the past tense, or the past/present participles phrases are placed in the line freely, surprisingly. They are common syntaxes in part I of "Howl," the main structures in which the metonymies are placed.

The Third Section

"Howl" provides to me the huge image of New York City, the largest center of civilized America, one city of adulthood where Ginsberg chose to live. The city of Ginsberg's adulthood is not associated with abundant materials or the pride of rising America. Ginsberg depicts New York City the city of suffering, misunderstanding, and loss that his generation has experienced.

"Howl" is filled with imageries of suffering. At the beginning of the poem, he writes, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro street at dawn looking for an angry fix, angel-headed hipsters" (Ginsberg, 487.) "The best minds" of his generation are confined and abused by drug addiction.

Therefore, their lives tightly associate with drugs, hallucinations, illegal acts, and poverty. Their rooms are the "cool-water flats," they "got busted in their pubic beards returning from Laredo" (488.) The best minds of Ginsberg's generation experience the life of the real

bums in New York, who “ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torso night after night” (488.)

The sufferings they experience become their daily life and pair with the proper nouns of New York City, in these lines: “who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine...” or “who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford’s floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,” (488.) The appearances of N.Y City’s neighborhoods such as Battery, Bronx, Bickford, Fugazzi make the descriptions credible. That way helps make sense each moment described in the poem.

Being misunderstood and mistreated by most of society, the best minds of Ginsberg’s generation become more lonely: “who hiccupped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blonde & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword, who lost their love boys 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 on the craftsman’s loom” (489.) The three one-eyed shrews symbolize the social preconception that Ginsberg sarcastically criticizes with the imagery of “heterosexual dollar.”

Ginsberg does not self-portrait his generation the passive victims of adversity or social preconception. Like Aristotle points out in his “Poetics,” a poet does not write to weep for his age. He/she aims to katharsis through human pity or fault. (Aristotle, xxv-xxvii.) The characters in his poems may not be the perfect people but mostly good. (Aristotle, 35-6.) The youths, in Ginsberg’s description, should be seen the heroes who tremendously fight for freedom of their

minds and acts, and their ideal, then they accept punishments, "who were expelled from academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the window of the skull," (Ginsberg, 488.) They may not be "obeyed students" but experience many realistic lessons from the prior generations: "who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kaballah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas," (489.)

Traveling is one of the best ways those youths choose to heal the loss that sufferingly occupies in their souls. Ginsberg describes the ethereal happiness of the travel, "who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen nightcars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver-joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots and diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat uplifting & especially secret gas-station solipsism of johns, & hometown alleys too," (490.) Somehow, the "secret hero of these poems," N.C of Denver looks like a racketing guy who satisfies himself with "innumerable lays of girls." Like the heroes/tricksters in the around - world myths, Ginsberg's secret hero can't be seen as a person who violates moral standards. (Thury, Devinney, 214-5.) His huge sexual desire should be seen as a symbol of youth and a tremendous desire to solve the adversity around.

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines "metonymy" "a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associate," and "often confused with a synecdoche, where a part of a whole represents the whole, a metonymy represents a thing by using another closely related thing." Ginsberg creates a series of metonymies, with the alliterations to help his readers feel familiar about the "taboos" when depicting his generation's portrait.

For example, Ginsberg writes, “who ate fire in paint hotels or drain turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torso night after night with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls” (10.) “Dreams,” “drugs,” “waking nightmares,” “alcohol,” “cock,” and “endless balls” don’t relate to each other, except the homophones of the vowels “dr,” and the syllable “co.” Those things are ranged to be meant as the suffering the youths experience “night after night.” Therefore, the images “endless balls”/ “drug” can exchange its taboo/ bad meaning to the ordinary, romantic meaning of “dream.”

The series of the imageries, “dreams,” “drugs,” “waking nightmares” become very important not only because of the exchange of the meanings between the words but also because of the equalization for the values those words refer to. “Waking nightmares” that are often associated with negative feelings such as horrible or improper, may become more normalized, acceptable as well as an appositive noun that pairs with “dreams.”

Some readers may label this description “pornographic” based on the things are recreated, “who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,” (490.) The replacement of “the last gyzym of consciousness” at the end of the relative clause erases all the minglings to “pornography.” The meaning of “consciousness” adjusts the whole meaning of the relative clause. It is an act of human consciousness, not normally sexual doing.

On the other hand, the alliterations are identified everywhere in the stanzas in “Howl,” part I as well as the beloved way to stimulate empathy from the readers. The similar sounds not

only create similar feelings about the appositive words but also create a stronger rhythm for the stanzas. For example, "who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barn and naked in the lake," (490.) The similar sounds, "-ned," "-ches," "red," "eyed," "-red," "-ked," "lake," create the monotonous rhythm linking to the labor and responsibility. The repetitions of "sunset," "sunrise," "snatches," "snatch," are to create the resembled images, and then, the transformative images: "the snatches ... trembling in the sunset" transforms into "the snatch of sunrise."

The exaggerated amount used here represents not a giant erotic desire or sexual satisfaction. Normally, to satisfy the sexual desire of one, there is no need to have uncensored intercourse/ lovers. The situation "prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise" is not only romantic but also links to supernatural capability, and furthermore, "responsibility." This phrase makes change the meaning of all the stanza (if we can call each part in the long line of Ginsberg "a stanza.") It is not a bawdy description of erotic desire/satisfaction, but a "supernatural capability" of love and empathy. The meaning of "to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise" empties and replaces all the ordinary meaning of the remaining taboo images.

Ginsberg creates a series of metonymies, with the alliterations to help his readers feel familiar about the "taboos" when depicting his generation's portrait as the "supernatural power of love."

The Fourth Section

Somewhere in part III, Ginsberg comes back to his beloved metonymies when celebrating the friendship with Carl Salomon, one of “the best minds” of his generation. The refrains repeat an unlimited love and a flaming inspiration:

“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 you drink 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...” (494.)

The absolute empathy and loyalty between the speaker and Carl Salomon are exposed through the monotonous anaphora, “I’m with you in Rockland.” The poetic world that is filled with imaginations, emotions, tremendous love in Part I is replaced with the dreamed reality included excessive pranks, romantic feelings, naïve ideas, and unreasonable illusions. The reality that is reflected in the madmen’s minds.

That playful reality is opened to accept any abnormal events/images. It recreates its law itself, not the laws of the reasonable world outside. It reshapes all things by replicating the model of illusions. Therefore, the imageries “drink tea of the breasts of the spinsters” or “pun on the bodies of your nurses” are the visual illusions, not the sexual obsessions.

Ginsberg recreates the naïve, unreasonable illusions in the madmen’s minds to state that the “deepest senses” of humans, despite that they are chaotic or insane, deserve to exist and be saved.

Conclusion

In the emotion fulfilled writing, "I've Lived with and Enjoyed 'Howl,'" Ginsberg furthermore explains his perspective and "poetic arts" in writing. He recalls how he writes "Howl" as the most free-minded poem and most empathized verse in his writing life. He emphasizes one more time the appeal of his generation/ fellows in writing, to reach the "deepest natural ground" of humans in the industrial society, "love, hopeless yet permanently present in the heart, unalterable." (Ginsberg, 9.) The poet also recalls the main motivation that shapes the poem: love is blocked by the social appearance, then just exposes itself through the free games of imagination. Ginsberg explains, why in "Howl," "original compassionate expansiveness of heart" is showed more than "sentience."

The streamline of the feelings, senses, visual illusions and the chaotic imageries in "Howl" that brings many "ugly" descriptions with it encompasses the great "compassionate expansiveness" to people and the thoughtful questions about human existence in Ginsberg's time. The people in the nowadays still need Ginsberg's great compassion and those questions to light onto each one's inner self, when facing the harder adversity than Ginsberg's times.

The literary/poetic imageries that are recreated to record human minds and feelings about the outside world are immense/unlimited. Labeled them "ugly, ridiculous, or beautiful, noble, etc.," we just exploit one of their variously sided aspects to explain our virtue purpose. Unlike that, Ginsberg refuses to label "bad" on sexual or homosexual capability, or drug addiction, or insane mind, etc., all the things and actions we mostly label "bad." He accepts the shadow-captured side of moral standards and life. Furthermore going to the physical, emotional, and spiritual existence of human beings, Ginsberg provides fresh mental energy and a new world of love and tolerance in which his readers are supported to live and create.

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