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Double Major BA Study Programme in Hungarian Language and Literature and English Language and Literature

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Associate Professor

Osijek, 2018

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and presents a survey of American mainstream culture of the 1950s, the Beat Generation, and the counterculture of the 1960s. Both the 1950s Beat movement and the hippie movement of the 1960s were a reaction to the affluent and materialistic capitalist society of the 1950s and 1960s. They emphasized uniqueness and beauty of the individual, and attacked the dehumanizing effects of materialism and industrialism. These movements were critical of the mainstream culture and its ideology, and attempted to overthrow mainstream society by promoting the values of love, peace, humanity, and respect for the individual and society. The main ideas of the Beat movement and the 1960s counterculture, whose influence is discernible even today, will be discussed from a socio-historical perspective and through an in-depth analysis of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl" (1956).

Keywords: The Beat Generation, the hippie culture, drugs, sexual liberation, spiritual exploration, 1950s, 1960s, Allen Ginsberg.

Introduction

The Beat Generation was a social and literary movement that started in the 1950s and had a huge impact on the society and literature in general. Essential features of the Beat culture are experimentation with drugs, sexual liberation, spiritual exploration, rejection of traditional values and conformity, rebelliousness, spontaneous creativity, and exploration of Eastern philosophies.

Since the Beat Generation was a very strong and influential cultural force, some of these features, like experimentation with drugs and spiritual exploration, were implemented within the hippie culture in the 1960s. However, unlike the Beatniks, who tended to stay apolitical, the hippie movement had a strong political edge. The most important people who connected these movements were Neal Cassady and Ken Kesey. The events that bridged these movements were Ken Kesey's Acid Tests and magic trip, which is depicted in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.* These events were a series of LSD-fueled parties which symbolized spontaneity and creativity, which were the emblems of both the Beat Generation and the hippie movement.

Both movements developed as a reaction against the traditional, uniform, and conformist mainstream society of the 1950s and the 1960s, which was based upon materialism, industrialism, and capitalism, and did not leave much room for unconventional people and ideas that did not conform to the traditional values. As a result, both the Beat generation and the hippie movement rebelled against the traditional values and shifted the focus from the materialistic worldview to the spiritual one.

The aim of this paper is to depict the 1950s society, the Beat generation, and its influence on the hippie movement, and to analyze the life-celebrating aspects of Allen Ginsberg's poem, "Howl" (1956), and its critique of society.

1. American Mainstream Society in the 1950s

The 1950s American society, which encapsulates the period from 1950 to 1959, is generally seen as a time of great contradiction. During this period, American society was traumatized by the atrocities of World War II and consequences of the Great Depression. In the 1950s, two different cultures coexisted – the generally accepted conservative culture of an everyday man who was "Keeping up with the Joneses," i.e. who was acquisitive in a materialistic and consumeristic manner, and the counterculture, which was mainly composed of various artists, like the Beatniks and the jazz artists, who were rebelling against the great machine, uniformity, and social conventions. The features of the conventional culture were in line with the traditional Puritan values, favoring hard-work and community, materialism and consumerism, and technological advancement. On the other hand, the counterculture was characterized by rebellion, nonconformity, an innovative and creative impulse, and a tendency to experiment with both life and art. Even though both of these cultures developed simultaneously, and were mutually influential and interdependent, challenging each other in order to grow and reinforce themselves, they were fundamentally different, and were in a constant disagreement about the philosophy of life. The traditional culture focused on the community and materialistic advancement, whereas the counterculture focused on an individual and spiritual growth.

The mainstream American culture was based on traditional Puritan values. Like the Puritan society, the 1950s society was very conventional regarding sexual practices, and frowned upon unconventional practices, such as homosexuality. Even though women got the right to vote in 1920, and got the opportunity to pursue higher education, an average woman in the 1950s chose to be a housewife looking after children and doing housework. Consequently, traditionalism within American society of the 1950s resulted in uniformity and the creation of a common "good American family" pattern that allowed no exceptions. According to Halberstam, the popular 1950s family sitcoms perfectly "reflected—and reinforced—much of the social conformity of the period. There was no divorce. There was no serious sickness, particularly mental illness. Families *liked* each other, and they tolerated each other's idiosyncrasies" (509).

Furthermore, the 1950s mainstream culture embraced the Puritan belief in hard work and the importance of community. The Puritans believed that through hard work God would reward them with great material goods to be enjoyed. According to Markey, "Hard work and

industriousness were stressed as pillars of the Puritans' faith. Puritans believed that when believers worked hard, it brought glory to God." In the same vein, the mainstream culture promoted hard work as one of its greatest values, whose ultimate goal was the accumulation of wealth. The concept of the American Dream, which emphasizes the reciprocity between great wealth and hard-work, gave way to the rise of capitalism, which allowed a great number of people to enter the money race. Furthermore, a greater production of and demand for goods created a need to economize the manufacturing process, which gave rise to industrialism. Moreover, the rise of mechanized work granted the production of more products in a shorter time period. Consequently, with more products on the market, man found himself buying more and more items for personal use and in order to "Keep up with the Joneses." As a result, even though the 1950s mainstream society's philosophy is very similar to the Puritan ethics, unlike the Puritans, whose orientation and motivation was primarily spiritual, modern American man is mostly oriented towards acquiring material goods as a "businessman."

The 1950s society regarded the great industrial and technological advancement as a stepping stone for the modernization and further development of man. The 1950s era gave birth to the first commercial computer and the pacemaker, which are nowadays indispensable and widely used. Yet, even though capitalism and industrialism allowed for great progress of human kind during this period, everything has its price, and so did the technological advancement. As Fromm contends, "In the last one hundred years we, in the Western world, have created a greater material wealth than any other society in the history of the human race. Yet we have managed to kill off millions of our population in an arrangement which we call 'war'" (3–4).

Lastly, during the 1950s, new technologies, such as television, became available to the public. The television replaced the radio as a news medium, and has had a massive impact on society ever since. Not only did this allow for the news to spread more easily but also the quantity of information increased:

> Suppose that in our Western culture movies, radios, television, sports events and newspapers ceased to function for only four weeks. With these main avenues of escape closed, what would be the consequences for people thrown back upon their own resources? I have no doubt that even in this short time thousands of nervous breakdowns would occur, and many more thousands of people would be thrown into a state of acute anxiety, not different from the

> picture which is diagnosed clinically as “neurosis.” If the opiate against the socially patterned defect were withdrawn, the manifest illness would make its appearance. (Fromm 17)

However, even though the television was considered to be a valuable device, it also became an instrument for manipulating the masses and their points of view, proving to be both a benefit and yet another price of progress: “It was in the fifties that the nation became wired for television, a new medium experimented with by various politicians and social groups. Ten years later television had begun to alter the political and social fabric of the country, with stunning consequences” (Halberstam ix).

2. The Beat Generation

The Beat Generation was American social and literary movement which was started in the 1950s. The key people of the Beat Generation were Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. The movement developed as a reaction to the conformist and bland mainstream society of the 1950s. The new counterculture contradicted the status quo of the generally accepted traditional values. It not only absolutely refused to conform to the social norms but also dealt with controversial issues, such as homosexuality and drug abuse. The phrase "Beat Generation" was coined by Jack Kerouac with writer John Clellon Holmes in 1948. The term referred to the ''movement of young people in the 1950s who rejected conventional society and favored Zen Buddhism, modern jazz, free sexuality, and recreational drugs'' (Coe). According to Charters,

> With an emphasis on spontaneity and a desire to dismantle control and conformity, the key themes of the Beat spirit came to the fore. Candor, confession, and honesty—especially about sexuality (including homosexuality)—made the revelation of "secret scatological thought" (Kerouac, Pull My Daisy, 23) not only permissible but also desirable. (xiv)

The members of the Beat Generation were notable for being the new bohemian hedonists, who enjoyed worldly goods, celebrated spotaneity and nonconformity, and experimented with sex, drugs, and literature.

In contrast to the mainstream culture, the Beat Generation focused on spirituality and emphasized the uniqueness of an individual. They were promoting Eastern philosophies as a way of life and drug experimentation as a means of exploring oneself. Instead of the material and consumeristic reality, they emphasized the unique development of man. Furthermore, the Beatniks were influenced by African American jazz musicians, who not only inspired them with the spontaneity but also shaped their attitude on drug experimentation as a way of expanding one's consciousness: "More than any other community of American writers, the Beats used various drugs to attain spiritual enlightenment and to gain aesthetic inspiration. Their receptiveness to drug experimentation derived from their interest in African American jazz culture and the hipster culture of underground, urban America" (Hemmer 89).

Finally, the Beat Generation celebrated and propagated the protection and appreciation of nature. As Cage explains,

> Nature, to the Beat writers, should be appreciated and protected; human beings should not destroy it and should learn to live with it, according to the visions of Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Michael McClure. These writers are advocates for the natural world, celebrate it, express an understanding of it, and feel compassion for it. (98)

While the mainstream accepted culture disregarded nature because of technological advancement, the Beatniks believed that nature should be preserved and praised. Moreover, environmentalism as a movement did not exist until the Beatniks embraced the environmentalist idea and propelled it into the mainstream. For example, they published poems like *Birdbrain!* and *Ballad of Poisons*, which deal with the industrial abuse of natural resources and the destruction of nature in general.

3. The Beat Movement and the Hippie Culture

As an influential trend and a strong force on the social scene, the Beatniks were an inspiration for different cultural and social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement or the Hippie movement: "In particular, the Beats inspired the sixties, when goals included civil rights, peace, free speech, women's liberation, gay liberation, liberalization of drug laws, environmental conservation, and heightened consciousness" (Charters xvi). Some of the essential features of the Beat Generation, like spirituality and the use of psychedelic drugs, were incorporated into the hippie culture, which derived out of the Beat movement. However, the Beat Generation and the hippie movement differed in some ways. Whereas the hippies had a political agenda, the Beatniks tended to stay apolitical, and their movement was social and literary. In contrast, the hippie movement was foremost a cultural movement. The hippies created intentional communities, and their movement was later incorporated into the mainstream culture, whereas the Beat Generation was a closed circle of intellectuals. The most prominent figures that linked the hippie and the Beat movement were Neal Cassady and Ken Kesey. The most important events that connected the two movements and bridged the 1950s and 1960s were Acid Tests, which were a series of parties that involved the consumption of LSD, and magic trip, which is depicted in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.*

Both the hippie movement and the Beat Generation were concerned with spirituality as such. They aimed to reclaim the original shape of man since man in a mechanized world lost touch with his inner being. Both of these movements mainly focused on the Eastern philosophies, and in order to get in touch with their inner "self" they used psychedelic drugs, like mushrooms and LSD. Participants in those movements "were all spiritual seekers of one sort or another, and they all were willing to take personal risks—to experiment not only with poetry but with politics, drugs, and sex" (Raskin 16).

Education was very important to the Beat Generation. However, they were not concerned with formal and academic knowledge, but preferred to educate themselves through reading and critical thinking. Ginsberg, for example, "read everything he could get his hands on—as though driven by an insatiable need for endless ideas and systems of thought, and as though his intelligence would die of hunger unless he went on feeding it books" (Raskin 46). In contrast, the hippies were not so concerned with either formal or informal education as they were more concerned with cultural issues: "As some hippies put it, dope made people

understand the cultural disease on the cellular, as opposed to the intellectual, level" (Miller 10).

The hippie movement was concerned with political issues, like war, and they were actively involved in peace protests. According to Miller, many hippies took part in the October 1967 march on the Pentagon, protesting American involvement in Vietnam (22). On the contrary, the Beat Generation tended to stay apolitical: "The Beats, though pacifist, were essentially apolitical. (Kerouac's hatred of the left at the end of his life seemed most of all to be a revulsion against the New Left's enthusiastic hating)" (Siegel), not a political statement per se.

In spite of those differences, the Beat Generation was a role model and a stepping stone for the 1960s hippie movement. According to Skinner, "The existence of a Beat enclave in North Beach, San Francisco, and a few years later, the large hippie community of Haight-Ashbury, can be constructed as a physical, direct line of influence from the Beats to the hippies – and therefore a demonstration of Beat influence on 1960s culture." Since the hippie movement arose out of the Beat Generation, no wonder that they advocated similar ideas, such as sex liberation, drug experimentation, and spirituality.

Both the Beat Generation and the hippies experimented with psychedelic drugs. However, their goals differed greatly. While the Beatniks used drugs in order to improve their quality of work and in search of spiritual enlightenment – "More than any other community of American writers, the Beats used various drugs to attain spiritual enlightenment and to gain aesthetic inspiration" (Hemmer 56) – the hippies experimented with drugs in order to attain enlightenment. Moreover, the hippie movement dampened the negative attitude of mainstream culture towards drugs. As Miller confirms, "If the Sixties taught us anything, it is this: Drugs are neither good nor bad. When abused, they can cause great harm. When used properly, they can help us expand our consciousness and enjoy our world" (118).

Further, the hippie movement propagated world peace as well as love, understanding, and communal sharing, which became universal hippie values: "The religious wing of the New Right . . . anathematized free sex, illegal drugs, secular rock music, world peace through love and understanding, communal sharing, and many other cherished hippie values" (Miller 119–20). On the other hand, the Beatniks were not concerned with idealizations but with the

expression of the mere truth. For instance, Allen Ginsberg's main project was "to tell the truth in poetry in his own way—to scream it in a uniquely American way" (Raskin 122).

Next, the mostly predominant music of the Beat Generation was jazz. Not only were they especially enthusiastic about jazz but jazz also inspired them. According to Coupe, "Kerouac's own particular enthusiasm was jazz: in particular, the form which had developed in the previous decade, namely 'bebop,' because it gave him a model of improvisation for his own writing" (70). However, the most popular music of the 1960s was rock and roll, which was considered to be the newest musical form: "Rock and roll was as integral to the counterculture as dope and sex. Rock swayed a generation both physically and emotionally. The hippies lived and breathed it and believed that it was the most important new musical form to come along in centuries" (Miller 8).

Finally, the central figures that bridged these movements were Neal Cassady and Ken Kesey. Neal Cassady is believed to be an important figure for the Beat Generation since he was the model for some important characters, like Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Cody Pomeray in Jack Keruac's *Visions of Cody.* Moreover, Cassady had a great influence due to "His enduring aesthetic legacy . . . an incorrigibly hedonistic life that his friend Kerouac and sometime lover Allen Ginsberg transmuted into art. To them, Cassady was a revelation, the consummate hipster-savant" (Staton). Ken Kesey, however, was not part of the Beat Generation, but his Acid Tests, a series of LSD-fueled parties, and a cross-country road trip that he made with his band, the Merry Pranksters, which they filmed and named "Magic Trip," were the events that bridged the 1950s and the 1960s.

4. The Celebration of Life and the Critique of Society in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

The 1950s were a time of societal, industrial, and cultural novelties for the United States of America. Even though a minor part of World War II was led on the American soil, their contribution to the global war was massive, ranging from weapons and technology to soldiers. Having lost a great number of men in this war, their country would experience a great aftershock. However, as it can be said that each war is partially motivated by profit, the United States also gained a great advantage in the world of economy. Having a society and culture shaken up to its core by the atrocities of war, and having the opportunity for an advantageous start via their war profits, the U.S. became, on the one hand, a hyperconsumeristic and hypermaterialistic society that was incorporated into the great machine, which Allen Ginsberg named Moloch, and on the other hand, it gave birth to the jazzy wandering experimentalists and rebels. As a result, the 1950s was a time of two great and highly contradicting energies – progress and trauma. One of the greatest artists ever to live and to observe this hectic era was Allen Ginsberg, who wrote a great poem, "Howl" (1954–1955), which was dedicated to Carl Solomon, Ginsberg's friend, whom he met in a mental institution. Even though the poem was met with hostility and was subjected to an obscenity trial, as it has many references to illicit drugs and sexual practices, and brings forth controversial topics, like sex, drugs, criticism of capitalism, consumerism and materialism, mental illness, and freedom, nine literary experts testified on its behalf, and it was decided that the poem was of great social and cultural importance. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the life-celebrating aspects of Ginsberg's poem and its critique of society.

First of all, the speeding progress of America did not leave much room for unconventional and rebellious people and ideas that did not conform to traditional values. One of those people who did not meet the criteria was Allen Ginsberg's friend, Carl Solomon. Carl Solomon would be one of the many examples discussed throughout the poem. Other examples, without naming them, would be drug addicts, homosexuals, the mentally ill, as well as thinkers and practitioners of the mystical whom Allen Ginsberg frequented with. Most of these people would end up on the streets or in mental institutions, in jails, or dead. The society of the 1950s had a closed view concerning the habits of these people, and it would not budge. They were seen as troublemakers and enemies of the establishment. However, in the eyes of Allen Ginsberg, these people were romantic heroes and martyrs, "angelheaded

hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" (Ginsberg 3).

Additionally, this urge for rapid growth and advancement established the great machine, which Ginsberg named Moloch after a Canaanite deity that devours children. For Ginsberg, Moloch is a symbol of capitalism, consumerism, and industrialism, which flourished during the 1950s. Since industrialism allowed for mass production of a whole variety of cheap items, to ease the everyday life, it demystified sacred items like dreamcatchers and crystals. Moreover, nothing was sacred anymore because of the high availability and low cost, rendering all items into mere manufactured gadgets. One could finally be fully materialistically satisfied without any need to suffer the rite of passage. Only one payment was necessary, and that was the devotion of one's time to the all-providing Moloch (Ginsberg 82–88). Having everything offered to him or her, one would be able to completely focus on the materialistic side of life, in which one would not miss a thing if he or she was a loyal servant to the great machine.

On the other hand, the poem "Howl" encourages the celebration of life through the liberation from conventions, experimentation, mysticism, irrationality, and love. Not only does it try to break free from the conventions of form and language, using a unique rhythm pattern "that rises and falls, waxes and wanes, as [the author's] emotions lead him" (Steinbach) but it also deals with liberation from conventions, like sexual repression, abuse of drugs, and conservatism in general. Furthermore, it inspires the reader to investigate the limits of truth through experimentation with art, love, and knowledge. As Ginsberg himself explained in "Notes on 'Howl' and Other Poems,"

> By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W.C. Williams' imaginist preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure to follow my romantic inspiration – hebraic-melvillian bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a poem, but just write what I wanted to, without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind – sum up my life – something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. (qtd. in Huisman 63)

Although "Howl" was conceived as an observation and lyrical memoir of the 1950's Zeitgeist, the inevitable effect of its critique and its raw content forced the readers to question the very essence of their average lives. Accordingly, the aim of the poem was not to shock, but to provoke people into action, evoke emotions, and make people wake up from the mundane routine of their everyday life.

Furthermore, in the poem, Allen Ginsberg celebrates the animalistic and irrational side of life based upon instincts and intuition, describing

> the best minds of [his] generation . . . who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity, / 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. (Ginsberg 1, 60–61)

In a way, this passage resonates Carl Jung's belief that "The unconscious wants to flow into consciousness in order to reach the light, but at the same time it continually thwarts itself, because it would rather remain unconscious. That is to say, God wants to become man, but not quite" (102). Moreover, the instinctive and animalistic side of the humans should be equally expressed as the calm, cool, and collected persona, which is presented in society. To negate either side, the instinctive or the rational one, would be life-denying since the expression of human condition is limited and one-sided.

In addition, "Howl" also celebrates life through mysticism and spirituality. Ginsberg wants the people to free themselves from uniformity, so that they can express their uniqueness, echoing Alan Watts' idea that "When a man no longer confuses himself with the definition of himself that others have given him, he is at once universal and unique" (qtd. in Soni 147). Through a close reading of "Howl," it is easy to see that at the time of industrialization, in which Allen Ginsberg wrote the poem, humanity was going through a sort of spiritual crisis: "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!" (Ginsberg 83). In a world devoid of spirit and the possibility of the enlightenment, in which God was exchanged for instantly accessible objects, Ginsberg wrote with ferocity as to create a spiritual narrative of its own that opposes

the bleak, repetitive days of labor, in which mankind found false certainty and lost its individuality.

All in all, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" can be considered as one of the greatest works of art based on its literary and aesthetic merits and social and political commentary. The poem criticizes and scrutinizes the society of the Fifties, during which industrialism and capitalism flourished, but it also glorifies human uniqueness, romantic nature, and the child-like attitude towards reality and ancient knowledge. Moreover, the poem is an attempt to wake up the everyday sleeper from his/her dull routine and to express the frustration of all people in an age of uniformity and convention. Also, Allen Ginsberg breaks the classical form of the poem by using exceptional rhythm and free verse to depict the rebellious attitude of the counterculture. The whole process of taking up such an endeavor and creating such a piece of literature does not only ask for the environment to provide a tension between the furious individual and a numb society drenched in uniformity; it also asks of the individual to embody this energy that is pulsing between him and the foundations of the reality of the 1950s.

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