

As I struggled to understand the message and imagery of Alan Ginsberg's "Howl", I could not help but be reminded of my own work on the relations between power, gender and language. This poem dwells on issues of suppression, on the suicidal results of resistance, and the cold, mechanical brutality with which the institutions of the powerful operate. These themes, however seemingly enormous and political, are subject to similar digestion through the analysis of language as those of gender, and result from comparable interactional contexts between differently influential, yet less fundamentally divided groups. Ginsberg's monumental work explores numerous voices, each with their own particular genre, from the mute, calculating cruelty of society's Moloch, to the range of insanity that made up his fellow Beat writers, to the oppressed wisdom of Carl Solomon. Even the poem itself constitutes a bold and extraordinary proclamation of resistance against the institutions that he deems criminal.

Thus, even as "the authority of some male linguistic forms and their dominance of social institutions' remain mysterious without a theory of gender," so must we examine popular conceptions of sanity and normality in order to understand the linguistic forms and dominance of the military-industrial-academic complex that viciously maintained control of American cold-war culture. Therefore, in this paper my aim is to demonstrate that not only amongst the genders does cultural hegemony arise; but also that among white American males in the 1950's, certain authoritative forms used their linguistic force to "impose on others their group's definition of events, people, and actions.

Toward this end I will first seek to identify the numerous power groups explored by Ginsberg and discuss and exemplify the ways in which the various groups interacted.

I will then elaborate on their individual verbal strategies and how these contributed to the inter-group dynamic.

## **POWER GROUPS OF HOWL**

"Howl" begins with the phrase "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," and proceeds to describe their individual downfalls. Descriptions of this group of fallen intellectuals certainly draws the majority of the poem's attention, yet their significance as a linguistic group in the power strata of "Howl's" reality cannot be fully understood without a careful reading of the poem's second part, in which the author explains the source of their minds' destruction. "What sphinx... bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? / Moloch!"

In "Moloch," Ginsberg is referring to the Canaanite fire god to whose worship required the sacrifice of children. As invoked in "Howl", Moloch is the personification of "money," "governments," "prisons," "madhouses," "oil and stone," "electricity and banks." From the nature of these references and the cultural context of the time, Moloch can only mean the American institutions of government, commerce and academia that were responsible for the anticommunist, hyper-patriotic frenzy of the 1950s and '60s. Also included in the idea of Moloch are the people who supported the aforementioned institutions "broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven" and the cultural devices that maintained that support.

Those with unauthorized views developed genres of resistance of varying effectiveness, sometimes empowering the user but more often achieving nothing but the destruction of their ability to resist.

## **STRATEGIES OF POWER**

“Social institutions... are organized to define, demonstrate, and enforce the legitimacy and authority of linguistic strategies used by [the dominant group]... while denying the power of others .”

Throughout "Howl", there are repeated references to the restraint and persecution of activists, communists, pacifists, and other thinkers representing concepts known to be controversial and discouraged in the mid nineteen hundreds. By openly defining political and intellectual opposition to be illegal and insane, the government and other aspects of Moloch could maintain the dominance of its ideas. As Ginsberg explains, this definition of accepted discourse was accomplished in part by segregating the studies and students in the public institutions of learning, as when the great minds he speaks of “passed through universities... among the scholars of war” and he himself was “expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes.”

Ginsberg's reference to sanity is also important in understanding their means of dominance, as the integration of the mental health profession into the governmental, academic, and commercial structure allowed the powerful to manipulate the definition of normality. The political dissidents who “burned cigarette holes in their arms” or “threw potato salad” were viewed by the public as crazy not simply because the metaphorical nature of their protests was beyond the popular language, but because being a ‘health nut’ against smoking or a communist against free trade had been deemed inexcusably abnormal. In this way, through the media and schools, Moloch was able to establish its language and world view as normal and electrify society with a hyper intolerance for

anything unconventional, which could then immediately be redefined as dangerously abnormal, subversive or insane. By then providing a mental health system that seeks to pacify and restrain patients rather than cure them, the dominant groups were quite effectively able to mute opposition.

This nearly allergic response to abnormality was made possible through Moloch's influence over the people's discourse and view of reality. The institutional control of school systems meant early indoctrination and training of individuals to resist their natural impulses and opinions ("Moloch who entered my soul early... who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy"). By teaching language skills that discouraged philosophical debate and the propagation of original ideas, the isolation of potential dissidents was possible ("Moloch in whom I sit lonely... in whom I am a consciousness without a body"). Another strong influence is revealed in lines 90 and 91, where Ginsberg describes Moloch's substitution of more manipulatable "adorations" and "religions" for the true "miracles" and "ecstasies."

Another broad group, that of intellectuals mounting resistance to Moloch, is described primarily in the first three quarters of "Howl". These are the philosophers and artists who, in frustration with the structure and power of our society, turn to crime, narcotics, and sexual deviation. Their efforts constituted quite unsuccessful opposition; however, as by engaging in behavior and language that resisted all aspects of the heavily enforced public definition of right and wrong, they lost all chance of their message being heard or respected. Disturbing public order, peace, and safety, for instance, only offended the people who felt those faculties of the powerful to be highly beneficial.

Even those that had more positive, acceptable positions, and might normally have

been capable of more successful opposition, were destroyed by the language instilled in the populace by Moloch. For example, the thinkers came to accept society's definition of insanity without being capable of divorcing themselves of their own ideas.

Unknowingly, they then "presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse" in search of answers and cures, but instead were rendered "sane", that is, incapable of dissent, through medicine. Ginsberg describes the resistant group above, guilty of disturbing the public order, peace and safety, as "retiring to Mexico to cultivate a habit... or Tangiers to boys," and the politically dissident are left "bickering with the echoes of the soul" and their "bodies turned to stone."

Ginsberg himself, then, represents another group most successful in their subversion and opposition to the social, political, and lingual domination of cold-war culture. Having witnessed and experienced the institutionalization of brilliant, rebellious minds such as Carl Solomon, he realized that less direct strategies of resistance are necessary in order to overcome the power of Moloch over society. His experience described in lines 72 - 78 and in fact the very purpose of "Howl", involved the recording of subversive ideas in art, in order to veil their intent and preserve them regardless of the retaliation against the originator ("putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death").

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While the above explanation is by no means complete, I hope to have demonstrated that understanding the necessary and complex relationships between power and language can lead to a more complete interpretation of this poem and what it might

tell us about America. Considering the historical context and ultimate outcome from the place and time in which Alan Ginsberg wrote, "Howl" was both an expansive force for change in his world and a remarkably accurate prediction of developments yet to come.