

The Nexus of Matter and Manner: A Poetic of Postmodern Ethos in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*

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Abstract

Poetics refers to the principles of literary interpretation. Such principles may be found in treatises, essays and critical theories. The formulation of principles of literary interpretation may be traced to the Greco-Classical scholars, specifically, Aristotle, in his treatise entitled *Poetics*. This was followed subsequently by similar treatises, essays and theories by scholars from the Greco-Classical period up until the twentieth century. Postmodernism is the contemporary literary critical tool of analysis and its tenets constitute the basic principles for the interpretation of modern-day poetry. Existing studies on Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* have addressed the work from different angles of interpretation including new historicism, archetypal criticism, and structuralism. Not much has been done in examining the work from a postmodernist standpoint. This is the thrust of this study which examines Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* from a postmodernist perspective. The research is a qualitative one, and adopts the interpretive design. The paper finds that Ginsberg's poetry is a quintessence of a postmodernist art which succinctly captures the realities of the contemporary world such as uncertainty, chaos, absurdity, restlessness, and the meaninglessness of life. The work is replete with eclecticism, pornography, scatology, absence of a single dominant style, indeterminacy, and iconoclasm which constitute the basic tenets and indeed the hallmarks of postmodern poetry.

Key words: Poetics, Postmodern poetry, Pornography, Indeterminacy

Introduction:

As a genre of literature, poetry has evolved over time, with various forms and styles emerging in different cultures. It is a unique and powerful way to explore the human experience, capture moments in time and express the seemingly inexpressible. It is, perhaps, the oldest of the three genres of literature which dates back to the oral story-telling and songs traditions, religious and spiritual practices as well as cultural and social rituals of very many societies around the world. Some of the earliest recorded forms of poetry include the ancient Sumerian hymns and epic poems from Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), dating back to around 4500 BCE; the ancient Egyptian poetry found in tomb inscriptions and papyri, and dates back to around 2500 BCE; the VEDAS, an ancient Indian scriptures which contain poetry and hymns, dating back to around 1500 BCE, and the Epic of Gilgamesh, from ancient Mesopotamia, which is considered one of the earliest surviving works of literature, dating back to around 2100 BCE, among others (<http://www.superprof.co.uk>; <http://www.academicworks.cuny.edu>). Initially, poetry was mainly oral, performance-driven and public. Because it was not authored, it belonged to the community. It used to be a tool for supplication, communal celebration and for celebration of the supernatural and appreciating the gift of nature. From these early beginnings developed the personal and impersonal forms of poetry such as the lyric, traditional epic, and the ballad. The first set of written poetry however derives from the oral or early ones (Asukwo, 159)

Traditionally, poetry is characterised by some fundamental elements such as imagery, sound and rhythm. Other features include economic use of words, which words must be presented in stanzas/verses in addition to diction, which requires that a poet carefully chooses words to suit their purpose. Up until the Romantic and later the Victorian Periods, poetry was written in a way and manner that took into consideration all the aforementioned elements. For example, sonnets

written by poets during the Renaissance or Elizabethan Period would be observed as taking cognisance of virtually all the features stated above. Maduka and Eyoh (99) identify two basic forms of sonnets to include the Italian/patriarchan sonnet, and the English/Shakespearean sonnet, each of which has its definite rhyme scheme based on the structure, and of course, the social purpose of the poem. Romantic and Victorian poets were not left out in this convention and order that characterised the writing of poetry. Prominent poets of these epochs such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, Chistina Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, among others, also presented their poetic artistry in a way that showed no marked deviation from the earlier traditions.

A time, however, came in the history of the development of poetry when there was a revolt against order. That was the Modern Period. Poetry written during this period was influenced essentially by the experience of the First World War (1914-1918), which brought unprecedented desolation and ruin to the human race. A typical example of the poetry of this period is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* whose artistry made some remarkable comments about the modern situation, which, according to Dasylyva and Jegede, carries a picture of "desolation, waste, spiritual aridity and waste land of the ruin brought about by so-called modern civilisation, of evils of a technological world where God seems to be dead and His place taken over by machines" (Dasylyva and Jegede, 97). Another prominent poet whose artistry also exemplified this revolt against the conventional is E. E. Cummings whose free verse structure, for example, *I carry your heart with me*, represents a rebellion against the conventional rhyming rules of the previous traditions (98). Thus, there was a radical break with some of the outstanding features that characterised the poetry of the earlier periods (Abrams & Harpham, 167). Rather than remaining "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity" (Maduka and Eyoh, 65), poetry became subjected

and reduced to experimentations characterised by fragmentation. Abrams and Harpham expatiate on the basis of the drastic change thus:

The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence and durability of Western civilisation and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of postwar world. (167)

Accordingly, experimentation, fragmentation, pessimism, symbolism, absurdism and disillusionment became the key approaches and leitmotifs in modernist poetry, reflecting the chaos and uncertainty of the 20th century even as it served as a response to the changing world where the old social rules no longer seemed to apply.

As if the above stated experience and its effects on poetry was not enough, there came another World War – the Second World War – that lasted between 1939 and 1945, and which ushered in an era whose uncommon effects on poetry and the arts in general may be described as monumental. That was the Postmodern Period – the contemporary period. Here, the fragmentation (in poetry) of the Modern Period was taken to a new level, to the extent that, while fragmentation as a structural poetic feature was deployed by modernist poets to lament the condition of the post-World War I period, postmodernist writers simply celebrate it. Some other features of the poetry of the Postmodern Period include formlessness, groundlessness, iconoclasm, and populism occasioned by copious employment of flat media-like images that have no reference beyond themselves (Hamilton, 2). In America alone, there sprung up a number of poets whose creative works could no longer be appraised from a modernist angle, but from a postmodernist perspective. Some of these poets include Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Duncan, James Lauphlin, Denise Levertov, Jack Kerouac, John Ashery, and Allen Ginsberg, to mention just a few (Hoover, vii-xv). This study focuses on Allen Ginsberg's collection entitled *Howl and Other Poems*.

Since its publication in 1956, Ginsberg's work has enjoyed enormous critical reactions. Many scholars have critiqued the work from different hermeneutic angles and dimensions. Julie Albrecht examined the work from the standpoint of classical mythology resulting in her parodic interpretation of the work, noting its socio-mythical relevance in the American society of the post-World War II period (<http://www.web.mit.edu>). In "Moloch and Destruction in Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*", Claytone Jannise critiques the poem as an offshoot of the activities of the Beat Generation, an avant-garde movement of young people in the United States of America in the 1950s and 1960s who rejected conventional society valuing self-expression and favouring modern jazz, of which Allen Ginsberg, the author of the work under study, was a prominent member (<http://www.illinois.edu.maps/poets>). In "The Nexus of Hermeneutics and Aesthetics: A Structuralist Reading of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*", Micah Asukwo examined the work from a structuralist perspective using Roland Barthes' codal approach to structuralism (*AKSU Journal of English*, Volume 1, No. 1, 2017). Others include Gregory Stephenson, David Perkins, Michael McClure, and Mark Doty, whose hermeneutic endeavours focussed on the relevance of the poet's work to the realities of the post-World War II American society. This study undertakes a postmodernist reading of Ginsberg's work with a view to bringing to the fore, the contemporariness of the work which finds expression in the avalanche of the tenets of postmodernism inherent in the work.

Postmodern Poetry

In a work entitled *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, Hoover traces the term "postmodern" to the poet Charles Olson, who used the word (postmodern) as early as 1951 in a letter he wrote to Creeley from Black Mountain, North Carolina. The letter reads in part: "And we ourselves (I mean postmodern man), better just leave such things behind us – and not so much

trash of discourse, and gods” (xxv). According to Hoover, Olson’s letter to Creely sprang from the latter’s “growing scepticism over the value of historical relics when compared with the process of living” (xxv). In this letter, Olson saw his “postmodern man” as one whose existence has no bearing with his mythical past. Soon after then, Hoover, believes, the word postmodern began to receive increasing acceptance in all areas of culture and the arts, to the extent that it even came to be considered a “reigning style” (xxv).

In “Understanding Postmodern Poetry” Hamilton traces the term postmodern poetry to the aftermath of the Second World War which lasted between 1939 and 1945, and very specifically, its devastating effect on the psyche of humanity even as the cohesive centre would no longer hold for Americans and indeed the world.

Following World War II, with the bombing of Japan, the cohesive centre disappeared for Americans. People began to move outward from the cities into newly created suburbs. Women did not wish to return to the world of housekeeping after tasting the freedom of war-time employment. Minorities also felt the impact of a newly found freedom (1).

On the specific effect of this experience on poetry, Hamilton opines: “We split the atom, the centre of everything, and in so doing we created chaos. The contemporary poet reflects this” (1). Scientists define an atom as the smallest indivisible particle of an element. Thus, from Hamilton’s enunciation, the world, prior to the bombing of Japan, was like an atom – indivisible – but soon after the war, the “cohesive centre” of America and indeed the world as a whole disappeared, resulting in unprecedented fragmentation and chaos which the postmodern poet tries to reflect. This chaotic era seems to suit Monica Udoette’s classification of literary generational markers into “generic models” (36).

Corroborating Hamilton's position on the development of postmodern poetry, Hoover also traces it to the aftermath of the Second World War, and asserts that:

“Postmodern” means the historical period following World War II. It also suggests an experimental approach to composition, as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture and the narcissism, sentimentality, and self-expressiveness of its life in writing. Postmodernist poetry is the avant-garde poetry of our time (xxv).

Hoover prefers the term postmodern to other competing terminologies as “experimental” and “avant-garde” because, for him, it is the most encompassing term for the variety of experimental practice since World War II, “one that ranges from the oral poetics of Beat and performance poetics of more “writerly” work of the New York School and language poetry” (xxv). He traces the emergence of formally published postmodern poetry in America to William Carlos Williams in the mid-1950s, whose poetic works, prior to the period, were rebuffed by the authorities and publishing houses and tagged “antipoetic” (xxv). After Williams succeeded in having his avant-garde poems published, “much American poetry since that time has been written on the Williams model” (xxvi).

In “Postmodernism in Poetry”, T.H. Brann identifies four basic characteristic features of postmodernist poetry to include iconoclasm, groundlessness, formlessness, and populism. Expatiating on each of these tenets, Brann notes that iconoclasm decolonises cultural standards, previous works and authorities even as it denies authority to the author, discounting the author's intentions and claims to act as “spokesman for a period” (<http://www.textec.com/modernist/postmodernism.html>). Iconoclasm, Brann further expatiates, contradicts the unexpected and often deliberately alienates the reader, subverting its sources by parody, irony and pastiche; it strips context and reduces content to an austere minimum even as it

“broods on the human condition disclosed by radical literary theory” (<http://www.textec.com/modernist/postmodernism.html>). On groundlessness, postmodernist poetry, Brann asserts, employs flat, media-like images that have no reference beyond themselves, and that regards both art and life as fictions. On the aspect of meaning, Brann categorically notes that postmodern poetry is indeterminate, denying a final or preferred interpretation. On Brann’s third tenet (formlessness), the author states that postmodern poetry fragments texts, and turns them into collages thereby repudiating modernism’s preoccupation with harmony and organic form. On populism, Brann’s fourth tenet of postmodernist poetry, the author believes that this avant-garde poetry employs materials from a wide social spectrum, eschews elitist, literary language, and avoids the serious and responsible, promoting the arbitrary and the playful (<http://www.textec.com/modernist/postmodernism.html>).

Albert Gelpi’s position on what constitutes postmodernist poetry seems to align completely with that of Brann highlighted above. However, Gelpi goes a step further and posits that postmodern poetry is characterised generally by aesthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity where language becomes a self-referential, self-complicating code of arbitrary signs at once “determined in a given social system, yet indeterminate in its signification because of the yawning gap between the word as signifier rather than as signified” (5). Other basic tenets of postmodernist poetry, for Gelpi, include cuttings, fissures, decompositions, plasticisation, non-functionalities, shattered sphericities and marginalities, where the word does not designate an object but “substitutes for its loss” (5). These, among other tenets of postmodern poetry, shall be gleaned and deployed in the analysis of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems*.

Howl and Other Poems: A Contextual Background

In a bid to break with the established traditions and conventions of poetry, and indeed the literature of the earlier period, the Beat Generation – an avant-garde movement of young people in the United States of America who self-styled themselves as Beats, and who expressed alienation from conventional or “square” society by adopting an almost uniform style of seedy dress, manner and hip vocabulary borrowed from jazz music – insisted on poetry whose style or technique, content and thematic preoccupation was exceedingly new, strange, erratic, bohemian or avant-garde in nature. One of the cardinal features of the poetry of this group was an explicit portrayal of the human condition. Accordingly, the group fashioned poetry that was characterised by a rare sense of fecundity and unprecedented audacity. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the “Beats” were tagged “anti-establishments” group. To the Beat Generation which Allen Ginsberg was a prominent member, the taboos against frank discussions of sexuality were unhealthy and possibly damaging to the human psyche, hence, the inundation of “*Howl and Other Poems*” with vulgar and obscene imagery that is capable of offending the morally conscious mind. This is why the poem and indeed the entire collection published by City Lights Books, San Francisco, was banned in the United States of America when it was first published in 1956, and its publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, charged for publishing obscene material. However, after months of litigation, Judge Clayton Horn cleared them (Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti) of the obscenity charges, and the work regained the right to get circulated (www.poemhunter.com/allen-gins). Ginsberg admits that his poetry, especially the collection under study, was influenced greatly by the earlier works of the likes of Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman and Williams Carlos Williams, whose fecundity in the poetic artistry ranged from the introduction of the free verse structure to the use of long lines and other innovative approaches to the writing of poetry (<http://www.parisreview.org>).

Postmodernist Ethos in *Howl and Other Poems*

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* is a quintessence of a postmodern art occasioned by the copious ethos of postmodernism that abound in the work. One of the prominently outstanding tenets of postmodernism in the collection is pornography. In a postmodern work, Hamilton (40) believes that pornography moves from the periphery of discourse to the centre. This is also evident in postmodernist novels like Terry McMillan's *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* and succinctly reviewed by Monica Udoette that the unique choice of language of narration borders on "explicit sexual language usage" (7). Also, in Ginsberg's collection, the use of vulgar language is so prevalent that it assumes the status of a norm even as explicit description of sex and related activity assumes an alarming dimension. The following lines attest to this:

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly
motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,

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 gyzm of consciousness,

(*Howl and Other Poems*, 13&14; henceforth, *Howl*)

Postmodernism works towards the ossification of the cultural essence of the society even as social norms that should ordinarily be regarded as the revitalising force within a society are totally jettisoned, signifying a drift or movement away from societal or cultural mores, and the subsequent institution of negative trends in the society. The unconscionable activities of the members of the Beat Generation, earlier pointed out, suggest the apparent state of rot, not only of the poet personae's world, but also of the American society even as it boldly portrays the amoral state of the society whose level of degeneration and corruption exacerbate the postmodern notion that life is an experience in absurdity and meaninglessness.

Linguistic eclecticism or multi-genericity is another tenet of postmodern poetry (Barry, 81), and is conspicuously prevalent in Ginsberg's work. Here, Ginsberg's poem assumes the status of a prose work even as it is also dramatic. Thus, there is an attempt at blending or fusing the techniques of the three genres of literature – poetry, prose and drama – in one. This is indeed postmodernist. In the following lines, the poet uses the narrative or somewhat expository prose technique in relating the experience of the poet personae:

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, (*Howl*, 9)

This technique predominates almost the whole of the first part of the poem. In the third part of "Howl", prosaic approach gives way to dramatic monologue where the poet keeps consoling Carl Solomon, his friend and poet persona, who is undergoing treatment in the mental home he calls Rockland.

Carl Solomon! I'm with you in Rockland
where you are madder than I am.
I'm with you in Rockland
where you must feel very strange (*Howl*, 24)

With this technique, the poet foregrounds the madness, restlessness and other degrees of instability that characterise the experience and lifestyle of the "best minds" of his generation.

Apart from linguistic eclecticism, Ginsberg's poetry is also scatological. Here, the poet uses obscene and faecal images to paint a gloomy picture of the American health system. In "Howl", the two mental homes in Rockland and Greystone are so extremely crowded that a mixture of varieties of unpleasant air from the inmates' breath, farts and faecal matter makes life highly uncomfortable for the inmates and turns their dreams and prospects of recuperation into a "nightmare". This is the preoccupation of the following lines:

Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid
halls bickering with the echoes of the soul, rock-
ing and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench
dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a night-
mare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon, (*Howl*, 19)

Ginsberg is, of course, deeply concerned about the state of things in these homes most especially because this is where his deranged mother is, apart from his close friend and associate, Carl Solomon.

Postmodern poetry is characterised by formlessness, groundlessness, iconoclasm, and populism (Hamilton, 2). Ginsberg's collection under study is practically formless and iconoclastic even as the poet jettisons all previously known approaches to the composition of poetry. Thus, the poem lacks organic form and harmony, and assumes the shape of a long-winding and seemingly unending sentence. The following lines in "Howl" exemplify this:

Who chained themselves to subways for the endless
ride from Battery to holy Bronze on benzedrine
until the noise of wheels and children brought
them down shuddering mouth-wracked and
battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance
in the drear light of Zoo, (10)

Ginsberg's poem is not written in stanzas neither can the reader be certain about the lines in terms of where one ends, and another begins. This, of course, is in line with Snipp-Walmsey's position that in postmodern writing, there is a mood or condition of "radical indeterminacy, and a tone of self-conscious, parodic scepticism towards previous certainties in personal, intellectual, and political life" (86). The following lines in "A Supermarket in California" further intensify the iconoclastic disposition of the poem:

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors
close in an hour. Which way does your beard point
tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in
the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets?
The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses,
we'll both lonely. (*Howl*, 30)

This is indeed iconoclasm at its heights, foregrounding the topsy-turvy social orientation of the poet personae (the Beats).

Absence of coherence or closure apart from copious presence of unexpected jumps and disjunctive placement of thoughts is another succinct feature of postmodern poetry (Hamilton, 5). A casual appraisal of Ginsberg's poem under study proves this. In "Howl", the entire three parts lack artistic coherence and closure as ideas or issues raised in the poem keep scattering from pillar to post. This intensifies the stream of consciousness disposition of postmodern poetry. The following lines of the first part of "Howl" typify this:

who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver,
who came back to Denver and waited in vain, who
watched over Denver & brooded and loned in
Denver and finally went away to find out the
Time, & now Denver is lonesome for heroes, (11)

As the lines above indicate, postmodern poets do not celebrate coherence. Their belief is that coherence is falsehood. It is their conviction that fragments create variety. This position is quite different from that of Etuk and Urujzian, (188), which emphasise the relevance of coherence in linguistic texts. Thus, we find in this poetry an open-ended juxtaposition of concepts, ideas and values, which, to a reasonable extent, do not relate. This is the mainstay of postmodern poetry.

Gelpi (3) harps on a number of features that identify postmodern poetry to include, among others, "a deepening sense of the mind's alienation from nature and the world's alienation from reality". Thus, unlike the poetry of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley,

postmodern poetry tends to de-emphasise nature in favour of the industrial society. This is what is observed in Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California", where the poet persona takes a walk to a supermarket only to find that foodstuffs like fruits can no longer be found in their natural state, and even if they could, buyers no longer prefer them; their preferences revolve around things produced or packaged synthetically by industries. The poet persona exclaims:

What peaches and penumbras! Whole families shopping
at night! Aisle full of husbands! Wives in
the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! - and you,
Garcia Lorca, what were you doing by the
watermelons? (29)

The poet enters the supermarket hoping to look beyond the commodification of modern society, and to find beauty in natural products. He is, however, disappointed in what he finds. Thus, the taking over of the American society by industry and technology has resulted in the gradual eroding away of nature and what it represents. This is what Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" laments.

Another cogent tenet of postmodern poetry is that it has no author-intended, exact or fixed meaning (Brann, 3). Thus, in interpreting the poetry of this sort, it is not necessary to understand or key into the poet's exact or intended meaning. Hence, postmodern poetry is always open for interpretation by the reader. In "Footnote to Howl", Ginsberg sees holiness in everything including those ones the society would view otherwise. The following lines address this:

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and the cock
and hand and asshole holy! (27)

Here, Ginsberg tries to persuade the American society to accept every situation, every thought pattern and indeed every behavioural disposition as not only acceptable but "holy". In this guise, homosexuality, drunkenness, drug addiction, and other aberrational behavioural disposition of the

Beats should not be condemned but accepted as “holy”. This is an indirect way of lobbying the consciences of the people towards accepting them (the Beats) the way they are. On the other hand, one is at liberty to interpret these lines the way they understand them. Thus, since everything - “the world”, “the souls”, “the skin”, “the nose”, “the tongue”, and even “the asshole” (anus) is holy (for the Beats), it is possible for the reader to assume this to mean that since God created all things, and He is holy, everything He created is holy, irrespective of the society’s notion of them, and so, should be treated or regarded as such. This is in sheer disregard for whatever the poet might have conceived to be his own meaning. Of course, in postmodern poetry, “language signals not reference or presence but disjunction and absence”, resulting in a kind of writing that “no longer yearns for a unified sign, but a non-referential writing that emphasises the word as signifier rather than as signified” (5). In essence, postmodern poetry and indeed art in general projects meaning as indeterminate, denying a final or preferred interpretation (Brann, 5).

Postmodern poetry sometimes takes the form of poetic diary or journal, where it appears autobiographical in nature. This is what Hoover describes as the “self-reflexiveness of postmodern art” (xxvi). In other words, postmodern poetry is quasi-autobiographical in nature, as postmodern poets retell their lives through the medium of this avant-garde poetry. Part 1 of “Howl” typifies this. As a member of the Beat Generation, Ginsberg, alongside his associates, indulges in alcoholism, drug abuse, homosexuality, and other forms of socially aberrational behaviour. This is recounted in the whole of the first part of “Howl” as projected in the following lines:

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery...
ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,
who chained themselves to subways for the endless
ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine...
who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly
motorcyclists, and screamed with joy... (10,13)

As members of a counter-culture movement, Ginsberg and colleagues engaged in activities, actions and lifestyles that ran contrary to the mainstream American culture. The result was that some of them suffered from different levels of insanity, even as others got arrested and incarcerated, and still, others died. This is what Ginsberg recounts in the whole of the first part of “Howl”, an autobiography of the Beats (www.gradesaver.com).

Postmodern poetry often deals with themes of restlessness, meaninglessness and lack of reality, frequently demonstrating an existentialist point of view (Gelpi, 3). Indeed, this feature aptly defines Ginsberg’s “Howl” where the first part assumes the form of babble. The following lines lend credence to this:

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space
through images juxtaposed, and trapped the
archangel of the soul between two visual images
and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun
and dash of consciousness together jumping
with sensation of Pater Ominopotens Aeterna
Deus (*Howl*, 20)

Apart from the lines above appearing meaningless, one also finds restlessness a recurrent decimal in the lifestyle of the personae of the poem. Let us consider the following lines:

who talked continuously seventy hours from park to
pad to bar to Bellevue to museum, to the
Brooklyn Bridge...

who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston
seeking jazz or sex or group, and followed the
brilliant Spaniard to converse about America
and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took
ship to Africa, (11&12)

The postmodern world appears restive and restless. Life seems to have neither *magnitude nor direction*. This is why the personae in the lines above can engage in meaningless and seemingly endless talks for seventy hours moving from museum to bridge with no definite goal in sight.

Finally, postmodern poetry is characterised by populism wherein it employs material from a wide social spectrum, eschews elitist, literary language, and avoids the serious and responsible, promoting the arbitrary and playful (Waugh, 202). Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* totally fits into this description. Employing material from a wide social spectrum, one finds Ginsberg's poems delving virtually into every sphere of human endeavour including the social, political, economic and religious spectra of the American society. For example, the last part of "Howl" makes copious mention of "Moloch" – a biblical allusion which symbolises destruction or death. More so, socio-economic and political ideologies such as capitalism and communism are elaborately mentioned in Parts 1 and 2 of "Howl". In addition, social inequities, discrimination and marginalisation are brought to the front burner, even as family relationships, comradeship and solidarity also feature prominently in the poem. The language of the poem is neither literary nor elitist, as the entire poem is characterised by unseriousness or "playfulness".

Unarguably, literature reflects not just the milieu but also the moment and crucial developments as (Udoette, 76) puts it. The implication is that all writers and in particular, African writers (Enang and Utin, 173), are influenced by the time in which they live and write (Urujzian and Etuk, 313). For, as Asukwo and Ugwanyi (199) observe, every writer, irrespective of their socio-cultural background, succumbs to the influence and spirit of their age – zeitgeist. Though it may appear as if they are going or have gone against the grain, it would be found that they were/are actually responding to the overriding influence and spirit of the age they happen to find themselves. Certainly, Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* is a quintessence of a contemporary art, influenced, essentially, by the aftermath of the post-World War II zeitgeist.

Conclusion

This paper undertook a postmodernist reading of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*. It examined, albeit fleetingly, the Beat Generation, a counter-cultural movement of the 1950s America, which provided the impetus for the kind of avant-garde poetry that Ginsberg published in 1956. Postmodern ethos such as fragmentation, restlessness, scatology, groundlessness, formlessness, and populism, among others, were appraised and applied in specific instances to prove that Ginsberg's debut – *Howl and Other Poems* – is indisputably a postmodern piece of art. The paper found that the personae depicted in Ginsberg's poetry are those whose immediate world is characterised by absurdity, senselessness, restlessness and meaninglessness. Again, the world of the poet personae is one that runs berserk even as hope appears too far from sight. Indeed, the absurdity and restlessness that is associated with the day-to-day experience of the personae aptly find expression in the way the poem is structured; in fact, the entire poem is an amalgam of fragmentation and eclecticism. The paper rounds off by observing that an artist's literary style derives its influence from a number of factors including the nature of their social vision, the socio-cultural ambience of their operation, and above all, the temporal reality at the point of the composition. Thus, the formless and fragmented poetry of Allen Ginsberg intensifies the postmodernist notion of the world as shapeless, directionless and meaningless. There is therefore an inextricable link or nexus between the art's matter and its manner.

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