# The Nexus of Hermeneutics and Aesthetics: A Structuralist Reading of Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems

*By*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems from Roland Barthes's structuralist perspective. Structuralism is a text-centred school of criticism which looks at the general laws and conventions that govern the various structures of a text especially as they relate to each other. The basis of structuralism is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation, but in the context of the larger structures they are made of, hence, the term, structuralism. Essentially, this concern with structures cuts across disciplines such as Physics, Biology, Mathematics and Psychology, but what structuralism (in literature) has in common with these other areas of structural concern is an interest in whole rather than in the parts. This is in tandem with Claude Levi-Strauss's structural analysis of myths as a system of relations. The study adopts the Barthesian codal approach in the analysis and interpretation of the poems. From the analysis, the paper finds a yearning for rehabilitation, reintegration, transcendence and order on the part of the members of the Beat Generation which the entire poems centre on as opposed to damnation, rejection and excommunication as well as disbandment which ordinarily remain their ultimate lot even as it upholds structuralism as one of the invaluable tools of literary critical analysis, whose methodology shows the process of decoding a text in relationship to the codes provided by the structure of language itself.*

## Introduction

Literary exponents, scholars and theorists have evolved an avalanche of critical tools and frameworks for the evaluation, interrogation, interpretation and appreciation of literature. Thus, from the mimetic theory of the Plato/Aristotelian conceptions to the Medieval, Renaissance, Neoclassical, Romantic and the Victorian poetics up to the contemporary (modernist/postmodernist) analytical tools, literary criticism has advanced by leaps and bounds to the status of a profession. Unarguably, interpretation is the hallmark of the literary art, hence, the rather invaluable status or role of critical theories or tools in the literary analytical enterprise. Of course, without interpretation, a literary text would not be better than a stagnant pool of water that flows nowhere nor does any other body of water flow into. In fact, literature would be an insipid enterprise thriving in despondency and buried in inscrutability and incomprehensibility. Expectedly, every literary text, be it poetry, drama or prose, must lend itself to critical examination or analysis through the focal lens of one critical tool or the other even as it would be difficult to undertake a categorical taxonomy of a literary text that yields not itself to critical interpretation. One of these critical frameworks that have advanced the course of the enterprise of literary critical interpretation is structuralism - a framework that examines cultural codes and conventions in a work of art with a view to suggesting meaning.

Since its publication in 1956, Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems has received enormous critical reactions; a good number of critics have appraised the postmodern work from different and varied dimensions. Julie Albrecht examined the collection 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 11 period (5). In a study entitled "Moloch and Destruction in Allen Ginsberg's Howl", Claytone Jannise appraised the work 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, aling self-expression and favouring modern jazz, of which the poet himself (Allen Ginsberg) was a prominent member (8). Others include Michael McClure, Gregory Stephenson, David Perkins and Mark Doty, whose works centre, essentially, on the contemporariness of Ginsberg's artistry given the America of the poet's time. This paper undertakes a structuralist reading of Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems with a view to bringing to the fore, the various codes inherent in the work, which codes are bound to give an easy entrance into the heart of the poem, with the sole aim of making its hermeneutic task a bit easier.

## Meaning of and Background to Structuralism

In *A Structuralist Discourse on African Literature,* Frank Mowah defines structuralism as a method of looking at the general laws that govern the working of the various structures of a text especially as they relate to each other (3). Essentially, the basis of structuralism is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation, but in the context of the larger structures they are made of, hence, the term, structuralism. It must however be mentioned, as upheld by Habib (632), that structuralism is not simply characterised by a concern with structures. The concern with structures cuts across disciplines such as Physics, Biology, Mathematics and Psychology. What structuralism (in literature) has in common with these other areas of structural concern is an interest in whole rather than in the parts. In Structuralismin Literature, Robert Scholes (56) puts it clearly when he states that structuralism is a way of looking for reality not in individual things but in the relationship among them (4). Charles Bressler (84) the structures in question as those imposed by our way of perceiving the world and organising experience, rather than objective entities already existing in the world (85). It follows from this that meaning or significance isn't a kind of core or essence inside things: rather, meaning is always outside. Precisely, meaning becomes an attribute of things, in the literary sense that meaning is attributed to things by the human mind, "not contoured within them"(86).

The foundations of structuralism were laid in the work of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose insights were developed by the French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, and later by others such as Roland Barthes, Northrop Frye, Robert Scholes, Vladimir Propp, Tzevetan Todorov, Gerard Genette, Julia Kristeva and Jonathan Culler (Abrams 382; Habib 631). In his Course in General Linguistics (1916). Saussure distinguished langue, the system and rules of language, from parole or speech. It was the former, according to Saussure, which lent itself to synchronic structural analysis: the system of language that could be analysed at a given point in time as a set of interdependent elements as opposed to a diachronic study which looked at developments of language over time (63). Moreover, Saussure came strongly against the conventional correspondence theory of meaning whereby language was viewed as a naming process, each word corresponding to the things it named. Saussure urged that "the sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept (signified) and sound image (signifier)",

arguing that the bond between the signifier and the signified is sebitary (and not natural) in that a concept is not intrinsically linked to a particular signifier. Meaning is determined by collective behaviour or convention and is fixed by rules. Hence, langage is a system of sig and meaning itself relational, produced by the interaction of various signifiers and signifieds within the system (64). In addition to these insights, what Claude Levi-Strauss and others took from Saussure was an emphasis on linguistic features described as structures underlying the phenomena and sometimes referred these structures to basic characteristics of the human mind.

This phenomenal work of Ferdinand de Saussure on language enabled Claude Levi-Strauss to much later, arrive at some influential insights into the nature of myth. He observed that despite their contingent character, myths throughout the world exhibited "an outstanding similarity" (632). Drawing on Saussure's seminal idea. Levi-Strauss suggested that myth was a specific form and use of language. What is specific to myth, according to Levi-Strauss, is that, in addition to fangue, and parole, it uses a third referent and combines the properties of the first two" (Bressler. 78). On the one hand, a myth refers to events that had taken place long ago; but what gives myth an enduring value, according to Levi-Strauss, is that the specific pattern described is timeless: it explains the present and past as well as the future-indeed a system of relations. It is this system of relations which informs Levi-Strauss's explanation of meaningful relations of contrasts or combination in a system. The relation which has appealed to Levi-Strauss most is the binary system of opposition (genetic binary coding drawn from Saussure's linguistic models). Of course, structuralism presupposes that much of our Imaginative world is structured by binary oppositions (male/female, hot/cold, life/death. being/nothingness, chaos/order). Essentially, these oppositions structure meaning and one can describe the fields of cultural thought quite easily by describing the binary sets which compose them. Presently, the structuralist interpretation of Howl and Other Poems shall the work from this perspective of binary opposition, apart from other approaches.

**Roland Barthes and the Structuralist Model**
This paper has so far traced the evolution of the structuralist school of criticism to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who based his seminal linguistic exposition upon three assumptions, namely, the systematic nature of language where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; the relational conception of the elements of language, where linguistic entities are defined in relationships of combination and contrast to one another; and lastly, the arbitrary nature of linguistic elements, which elements are defined in terms of the function and purpose they serve rather than in terms of their inherent qualities. Years later, Claude Levi- Strauss applied these structuralist postulations to the interpretation of myth. He suggested that the individual tale (parole) from a cycle of myths did not have a separate and inherent meaning but could only be understood by considering its position in the whole (emphasis mine) cycle (the langue) and the similarities and differences between the tale and others in the sequence. Perhaps, the next most significant contributor to the structuralist model is Roland Barthes.

Known mostly for the notion of "the death of the author, Roland Barthes advanced the frontiers of the structuralist model by extending it to broad cultural phenomena, pointing the way to freer and more realistic assessments of texts and their role in culture. As far as structuralism is concerned, it is Barthes's belief that what had been called a literary "work" becomes a "text", a mode of writing constituted by a play of internal elements "according to

specifically literary conventions and codes"(Habib, 632), Barthes thus identifies the various codes a critic should watch out for in a text while attempting a structuralist explication of a literary text. Frank Mowah lists these codes to include, the proairetic code or code of actions which governs the reader's construction of plot; the hermeneutic code, which involves a logic of question and answer, enigma and solution, suspense and peripetein; the semic code which provides models that enable the reader to collect semantic features that relate to characters; the e code which guides extrapolation from text to symbolic and thematic readings. The th, termed the referential code is constituted by the cultural background to which the text refers (9) Charles Bressler upholds that it is only when a critic recognises the codes or binary operations within the text can the message encoded within the text be adequately explained. He further opines:

> By finding other binary oppositions within the text and showing how these oppositions interrelate, the structuralist can then decode the text, thereby explaining its meaning. Such a process abandons or dismisses the Importance of the author, any historical or literary period, or particular textual elements or genres...this methodology shows the process of decoding a text in relationship to the codes provided by the structure of language itself (86).

This paper shall subject Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems to a structuralist critical interpretation with a particular emphasis on Roland Barthes's codes, with a view to suggesting meaning.

**A Structuralist Reading of Howl and Other Poems: The Barthesian Approach**
In S/Z (271), Roland Barthes distinguishes between the two main types of literature roughly corresponding to nineteenth century realism (such as Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy) and twentieth century experimentation, such as Russian futurism, Anglo-Saxon Modernism and the French nouveauroman. Traditionally, the realist text called by Barthes the readerly text" was thought to have a seemingly unitary meaning immediately accessible to the reader, consisting of unique expression of the writer's individual genius (Waugh, 271). Thus considered, the reader's role vis-a-vis a realist text can only be that of "an important and inert consumer of the author's product" (271). By contrast, however, the experimental text - what Barthes calls "writerly text" - requires the active participation of the reader in the establishment of the text's meaning. While Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems may be considered, to borrow Barthes's terms, both "a readerly" and a "writerly" text, this paper attempts a "writerly" analysis of the poem, deploying the Barthesian codes which cover the syntagmatic aspects of the texts, essentially the parts of the text that relate to one another, and the semantic aspects of the text which relate to the outside world of the text (Scholes, 24). We shall begin with the first code.

**The Proairetic Code or Code of Actions**
According to Barry (46), the proairetic code or code of actions includes all actions. In other words, it provides indication of actions. In English, actions are performed by verbs, whether lexical or auxiliary. In Ginsberg's poem crafted in the form of a narrative, the beginning of the story by the persona is seen using the proairetic code as he relates:
I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked *(9)*

Though written in an avant-gardist manner with sheer or utter disregard for structural organisation. "Howl" which is in three segments, has an indication of the beginning and ending of the actions in the poem. In other words, the poem is action packed, as it begins and with actions. The first part of the poem ends with the following lines:

> …and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhom shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an elielflammasabataethni saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to cat athousand years *(9)*.

Some of the action words as shown above include saw, starving, destroyed, rose, blew, shivered, butchered, and eat. These actions are performed by the persona's friends, colleagues or contemporaries - the Beat Generation, an avant-garde, anti-establishment group, whose dissatisfaction with the mainstream culture results in this rather strange and somewhat postmodern lifestyle. The actions which begin on page nine *(9)* of the poem go on unabated up to the twentieth page. The presence of the full stop as shown above indicates the end of the first part of the poem; not necessarily the actions.

In a syntagmatic chain of narration, the second part of the poem begins with an interrogatory expression to mark off its introduction. The persona questions:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open
> their skulls and ate up their brains and imagi-nation? (21)

In the above lines, the action continues with words of action such as "bashed" and "ate" even as the next lines state:

> ...They saw it all! The
> wild eyes! They bade farewell!
> They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving!
> Carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!(23)

The lines above are inundated with action words which include saw, bade, jumped, waving. and carrying. As stated earlier, these are actions performed by the poet persona's gang members the rebellious members of the Beat Generation whose stock-in-trade is the establishment of a new cultural pattern that runs contrary to the mainstream culture in the America of the 1950s and 1960s (Charters, 4). The numerous action words in the poem emphasise their seriousness.

**The Hermeneutic Code**
According to Barry (48), the hermeneutic code poses questions or enigmas which provide narrative suspense. In the poem, we are drawn to ask questions as we get confronted with a startling ironical declaration by the persona when he says:
"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked *(9)*".

The above is an enigmatic statement which prompts one to ask: What on earth could have or resulted in the madness of the supposed "best minds" of the poet persona's generation? As we seek answers, we are inevitably curious, thereby fuelling the narrative suspense, which is one of the major issues to look out for in the hermeneutic code. As we read

on these "best minds are described as belig in tatters, hollow-eyed and completely struck by poverty Certainty, these descriptions are not fitting for people who are supposedly "the best mists of a society" vation. Again, one is struck with wonder and bewilderment at the theo this arrant anomaly. The persona consistently employs, in a non-conformist fashion, te of subordinate or dependent clauses to describe the best minds of his generation. It is gnificant to note that these subordinate clauses deployed in the description of the "best do not match the image presented to the reader of a people who are supposedly of excellent, first-rate minds. In a chain of syntagmatic subordinate clauses, we are presented with negative qualities and aberrant ways of these "best minds" in virtually every line of the part of the poem. Undoubtedly then, narrative suspense is achieved by the persona, and in this case, the poet

In the second part of the poem, we encounter a fundamental question which helps to provide narrative suspense. The persona, after giving a detailed description of the attitude of the "best minds" which is in sharp contrast to their expected personalities, presents to us an insight into the possible reason for their mental malfunctioning and aberrational lifestyle. Hence, he asks:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open
> their skulls and ate up their brains and imagi-nation (21)

The question which heightens the suspense motif of the poem links what had been mentioned in the first part of the poem with what is to be explained in the second part.

**The Cultural Code:** As Peter Barry explains, the cultural code "contains references out beyond the text to what is regarded as common knowledge" (47). They are, according to Scholes (47), "the whole system of knowledge and values invoked by a text". These appear as nuggets of proverbial wisdom, scientific 'truths, the various stereotypes of understanding which constitute human reality" (47). In lines 12 and 13, the poet persona states: who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering one tene-ment roofs illuminated (9)

"Mohammedan" as used here is a reference to the prophet Mohammed of the Islamic faith. Hence, it is "common knowledge" in religious circles to both Muslims and Christians alike. Also, the following lines evoke a "common knowledge" in Western worldview, of mystics and forms of mysticism: "who studied Plotinus Poe of the Cross telep- athy and bop kabbabah because the cosmos in-stinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas *(12).*

Another cultural code used in the poem which is beyond the text but constitutes "common knowledge" is the phrase "hotrod-Golgotha (17). Golgotha in the Christian parlance is the hill outside Jerusalem where Jesus, whom Christians consider the Son of God, was crucified. "Hotrod", on the other hand, is typically a passenger vehicle built to accelerate faster. Therefore, the phrase "hotrod-Golgotha" paints a picture of the "best minds" pacy movement toward destruction. This is evident in the kind of life they live as hoodlums, brigands, drunk and pool-betters, drug addicts, robbers, rebels, homosexuals, heterosexuals, gays, and so on. Again, we find the use of cultural code in the following lines:

     who threw potato salad at CCNY lecture on Didis and subsequently
     preted themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with seven heads (18)

The word "Dadaism", according to Abrams (391), is a cultural movement that best Switzerland during World War I and peaked from 1916 to 1920, which emerged out of disgust with the brutality and destructiveness of the First World War and set out to engender a negative art and literature that would shock and bewilder observers and serve to destroy the false values of modern bourgeois society, including Its rationality and the kind of art and literature that rationality had fostered (392). Simply put, Dadaism was a cultural movement which stood for "anti-art", meaning that the movement was against everything that art represented. On page 20 of the poem, "Eli elilammabathani" is yet another cultural code which may be located in the Christian circles and generally held as one of the last words of Jesus during his crucifixion. The literal meaning is simply "Oh God, why have you forsaken me"? This outery is one of the numerous ones the "best minds of the poet persona's generation make because, the society has, according to them, persecuted, stripped them naked, and then abandoned them.

**The Semic Code**
The semic code is also known as the connotative code and is linked to theme. As explained by Scholes (48), when organised around a particular proper name, it constitutes a "character". In the poem, the semic code is woven around the character of Moloch. A careful study of the entire poems would reveal that all the negative, aberrational and irrational displays and actions of the supposed "best minds" of the poet persona's generation are a corollary of the role of Moloch. Moloch is the character and the semic code which embodies the dysfunction in the society that becomes glaringly evident in the lives of the "best minds" of the persona's generation. This semic code is seen in the fourth line of the poem. Moloch is portrayed as being responsible for the solitude, filth, ugliness, financial strain and virtually all unfavourable social conditions and vices prevalent in the society, that particularly plague and make life rather uncomfortable for the "best minds" of the persona's generation:

     Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unob-tainable dollars!
     Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing! Old men weeping in
     the parks! (21)

The word "Moloch' is an allusion to the Bible and refers to the Canaanite idol to whom children were sacrificed (2 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 32:35). To the poet persona's "best minds", Moloch represents the oppressive system which cages and refuses them the liberty to behave the way they want. They want to legalise drug use, homosexuality and all forms of socially aberrational behaviour, but 'Moloch' would not grant them the leeway.It is instructive to note the significance of the exclamation marks that follow each of the principal thematic factors behind the dehumanisation of the "best minds" of the poet persona's generation. The poet persona screams with enormous and emotion-laden anger to indicate his avowed hatred, dissatisfaction and disapproval of the status quo as he insists on a drastic change and if possible, the elimination of the spirit and power of Moloch.

**The Symbolic Code**
The symbolle code, also called the referential code, is also linked to theme, but on a larger scale. It employs binary polarities or opposites to explain complex recurrent patterns and motifs in a work. Barry (42), lists examples of these binary opposites to include male and female, night and day, good and evil, life and death, and so on (42). In Ginsberg's poems under consideration, when we get the opposites of certain words as used by the poet persona, we are able to glean the symbols represented in the work. We can then go on to show that the units of conflict exist on the same axis, and therefore can substitute for each other. Further, we can relate the units of conflict in the first axis to the units of reconciliation in the second by mbining their elements to form a system of signification for the entire poem, that is, the mph of disorder and anarchy, as canvassed by the Beat Generation, and the need for order, which the society desires. Examples of binary opposites in the poem appear as follows:

destruction/rehabilitation        madness/sanity imprisonment/freedom despair/hope
war/peace sorrow/joy expulsion/admission nakedness/covering/protection
poverty/riches damnation/salvation hunger/satisfaction darkness/light
capitalism/communism dreams/realities night/day    bitterness/sweetness
loneliness/company blues/jazz        sinfulness/holiness    despised/chosen


The binary opposition drawn from Ginsberg's poetry is self explanatory. The negative experiences, actions and activities of the "best minds of the poet persona's generation fuelled by Moloch, results in insanity, poverty, hunger, despair and the likes. Their know-how is manacled or chained even as the society kills their dreams and have their lives damned. Their songs express sadness (blues); their life is full of bitterness, hence, their resort to living socially deviant and aberrational lives. On the other hand, the poet persona's "best minds" yearn for transcendence - a noble life that is capable of bringing out the best in them. They yearn for a classless society, a war-free milieu that protects humanity rather than destroy them. They seek an end to the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor even as they also yearn for an end to all manner of subjugation and oppression. Thus, we can now conveniently relate the units of conflict in the first (left) axis to the units of reconciliation in the second (right) by combining their elements to form a system of signification for the entire poem. which, as aforementioned, is the triumph of lawlessness and anarchy occasioned by the proairetic dispositions of the poet persona's generation and the need for order which is the ultimate yearning or wish of every sane society.

**Conclusion**
This paper attempted a structuralist hermeneutics of Allen Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems, tracing the school of criticism to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who, discrediting the mimetic notion of naming by earlier linguists, coined and as well distinguished between langue and parole, noting that it was langue which lent itself to synchronic structural analysis, and not parole, which looked at language only diachronically. Simply put, while langue emphasises the social aspect of language and an understanding of the overall language system, an individual's actual speech utterances Saussure calls parole. It is therefore possible for a speaker to generate countless examples of individual utterances, but these will all be governed by the language system, its langue. It remains the task of the linguist, from the Saussurean standpoint, to infer a language's langue from the analysis of many instances of parole. In a nutshell, the proper study of linguistics is the system (*langue*), not the individual utterances of its speakers (*parole*). It was this pioneering work of Saussure on language that enabled Claude

Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, to arrive at some insights into the nature of myth as a system of relations, denoting that myths could be used to explain the past, the present and certainly the future of every society. Roland Barthes later advanced the frontiers of the structuralist school of criticism, pointing the way to freer and more relativistic assessments of texts and their role in culture. Barthes posits that a literary work is nothing but a text or a mode of writing constituted by a play of internal elements according to specific literary conventions and codes, identifying the codes to include the proairetic, hermeneutic, cultural, semic and symbolic. The analysis of Ginsberg's Howl and Other Poems, following the Barthesian codal approach, especially the use of binary opposition embedded in the symbolic code reveals an earnest yearning for transcendence on the part of the poet persona's contemporaries as opposed to damnation which keeps staring them in the face. The paper upholds structuralism as one of the invaluable, text-centred critical tools of literary analysis. which, if employed optimally, can help make the hermeneutic undertakings of literary texts a lot easier.

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