

# Drugs as Creation and Destruction to Ginsberg: Focusing on His Poetry and Life

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**Abstract.** Drugs both heal and destroy the human body and mind. Illegal drugs such as heroin, LSD, cocaine and marijuana were often celebrated as means to literary insight. In the 1960s drugs were used by the Beat writers, notably Allen Ginsberg, who referred to them in his poetry as a means to both political and spiritual insight. However, drugs also proved to be a dangerous and destructive addiction. This paper traces the awareness of the power of drugs in Ginsberg's poetry creation, political stance and spiritual transcendence as well as the introspection of drugs in his late years.

**Keywords:** Allen Ginsberg; Drug; The Beat Generation; Howl.

## 1. Introduction

Drugs, in literature, are not new comings of the 1960s. Instead, we can see how drugs have served in literature since Homer, "Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit, lost all desire to send a message back, much less return, their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters, grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home dissolved forever." (Homer, p.139) Another drug-functioned substance in literature is soma proposed by Huxley in *Brave New World*, saying, "There is always soma, delicious soma, half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a weekend, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon." (Huxley, p.145) In science fiction, drugs are everywhere to be seen, such as Melange in *Dune*. "The spice, it's in everything here-the air, the soil, the food, the geriatric spice. It's like the Truthsayer drug. It's a poison! A poison-so subtle, so insidious...so irreversible. It won't even kill you unless you stop taking it." (Herbert, p.198-199) Another well-known example is the Substance D in *A Scanner Darkly*. "D" of course refers to death, dumbness, despair and desertion. "In many of those taking Substance D, a split between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere of the brain occurs. There is a loss of proper gestalting, which is a defect within both the percept and cognitive systems." (Dick, p.89) Additionally, Baudelaire who threw himself in alcohol was noted in Ginsberg's work for several times. In "Marijuana Notation", he wrote "Baudelaire-yet he had great joyful moments staring into space, looking into the middle distance, contemplating his image in eternity." (Ginsberg, p.99).

Drugs are of unnamed magical power in the above literary works. However, in America in the 1960s, many drugs that were taken for pleasure were criminalised, notably marijuana, but also heroin, cocaine and LSD. As Camille Paglia observes, "At its mildest, the sixties cult of sex and drugs led to a frivolous dilettantism...At its worst, however, there was permanent damage that has never been systematically assessed. In retrospect, it is clear that the meteoric literary careers of Allen Ginsberg and Ken Kesey were sadly truncated by drug abuse." (Paglia, p.90) The Beat Movement originated in the 1950s, during which writers were intended to break rules and traditions both in literature and in life. Three writers are of leading influence on the movement, namely Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs who focused on the degenerating lives of sex and drug uses, composing shocking autobiographical works. This group was not a fan of what they saw as traditional power structures, including those relating to art. They favoured personal freedom and expression in their lives and writing. They did not obey the three tenets of sonnet (rhyme, metre and conceit) but followed Whitman to untuck the shirt (as Ginsberg once argued); they blurred the border of races and went to Harlem to drink and listen to Jazz; they tore classical books into pieces and reformed them into abnormal texts. In the whole process, drugs supplied both physical and spiritual support.

## 2. Allen Ginsberg

Just as Whitman, Ginsberg held the belief that men's thoughts and experience must resonate in the crowds. "It occurs to me that I am America", Ginsberg said. Although Ginsberg attempted to be humorous, his statement displayed the view that democracy lay in the raising of a single voice. At his most influential period, Ginsberg was the symbol of America.

Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 and died in 1997. He was celebrated as one of the most important characters of the Beat Generation. Allen's father, Louis Ginsberg was a respected lyric poet who wrote classical sonnets. Allen Ginsberg's mother, Naomi Ginsberg was confined for decades in an institution of her husband's affairs. Later, Ginsberg created his long poem "Kaddish" to mourn his mother. "The experience of watching the decline of his mother's mental health made Ginsberg very sensitive to and uniquely qualified to deal throughout his life with people of varying mental states." (Dinsmore, 2000) Ginsberg used to describe his parents in an interview that "they are old-fashioned delicatessen philosophers" (Hampton, 1997). His mother was a notable communist and took Allen and his brother Eugene to a variety of party meetings, which later affected Ginsberg's political view substantially (Jones, 2005).

The turning point of Ginsberg's life started in Columbia University in which he met Lucien Carr who introduced Rimbaud's poems to Ginsberg and opened a new *Vision* to him; in which he began the friendship with Jack Kerouac, with whom Ginsberg continued correspondences, letters recording long, intense conversations until shortly before Kerouac's death in 1969 (Morgan and Stanford, p.18); in which he became a lifetime friend with William Burroughs who passed away several months after Ginsberg's decease. All of them made lasting influence on Ginsberg who was the youngest among them.

In 1960, he was treated for a tropical disease, and it is speculated that he contracted hepatitis from an unsterilised needle administered by a doctor, which played a role in his death 37 years later (Morgan, p.312). Later in life, he also had constant minor ailments such as high blood pressure. Many of these symptoms were related to stress, but he never slowed down his schedule (P.312). In 1989, Ginsberg appeared in film *Silence=Death* about the fight of gay artists in New York City for AIDS-education and the rights of HIV infected people. After returning home from the hospital for the last time, where he had been unsuccessfully treated for congestive heart failure, Ginsberg continued making phone calls to say goodbye to nearly everyone in his address book. Some of the phone calls, were sad and interrupted by crying, and others were joyous and optimistic (Morgan, p.649). He died April 5, 1997, surrounded by family and friends in his East Village loft in New York City, succumbing to liver cancer via complications of hepatitis. He was 70 years old. Ginsberg continued to write through his final illness, with his last poem, "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgias)", written on March 30. Ginsberg was buried in his family plot in Gomel Chesed Cemetery (Ginsberg, p.7).

## 3. Drugs' Power to Ginsberg

Throughout his life, Ginsberg experimented with a great number of various drugs. He entertained the opinion that under the influence or guidance of drugs, he could create a brand-new type of poetry. The reason for taking LSD, yage, marijuana and other drugs, he said, was to magnify his insight and consciousness and write considerable poems under the influence of them. In most of his early years, Ginsberg's unrestrained use of illegal drugs and promiscuous sexual behavior made him an outstanding figure in the shocking movement in the 1960s. Drugs did have great power over Ginsberg's literary creation, political stance and spiritual transcendence.

### 3.1 Literary Creation

The beginning of Ginsberg's using drugs is related to his seeking for writing materials. Ginsberg first started smoking marijuana in 1945 or 1946 in New Orleans, but ascribed his involvement with the weed to "picking up the story among criminals, prostitutes, musicians, movie people, circus and legit theatre people, 42nd Street, Times Square, 1945." (Boon, p.161) Besides, as Ginsberg

considered, drug itself is a nearly-lost art or knowledge. “For Ginsberg, being high in New York in the 1940s meant being part of a gnostic conspiracy, secretly committing a heretical act in order “to resurrect a lost art or a lost knowledge or a lost consciousness.” (p.161) Therefore, drugs played a paramount role in his creation and Ginsberg himself deemed drug as an important element to boost his intelligence. “Like his friend...Ginsberg advocated the usage of LSD as a means for spiritual and intellectual growth.” (Ginsberg, 1968) His pleasure from drugs became a lasting stamp on him so that even when he was not intoxicated, he could still feel the vibe. “The second half of the essay (“First Manifesto to End the Bringdown”) was written while he was not high, and presents in a forceful and coherent way some of the major arguments in favour of decriminalisation of marijuana...that marijuana can aid perception and was used by most of the poets and artists that Ginsberg knew.” (Boon, p.161)

Ginsberg said that he learned form and discipline from Whitman but derived mysterious disposition from Blake. In “Howl”, Ginsberg depicted the phenomenon of apocalyptic vision of William Blake, recalling that in 1948 he saw Blake reciting poems (“Ah, Sunflower”, “The Sick Rose”, and “Little Girl Lost”) which was the consequence of drugs. The experience lasted several days. Several other intense experiences, each linked to one of Blake’s poems, ensued in the following weeks. All the while Ginsberg was experimenting with drugs-marijuana, peyote, mescaline, later LSD-though no drug-induced experience left as deep an imprint as “The Sunflower” episode (Oldmeadow, p.3). Ginsberg believed that he had witnessed the interconnectedness of the universe. Ginsberg stated: “living blue hand itself existence itself was God” and “felt a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe.” (Ginsberg, p.123) He explained that this hallucination was not inspired by drug use, but said he sought to recapture that feeling later with various drugs. (Miles, 2001) Therefore, to gain more inspiration from the communication with Blake, Ginsberg resorted more to drugs in a bid to again enter the Blake Vision. Still, in the shocking long poem “Howl”, he, in the first part, lamented the degeneration of what he called as “the best minds”, saying “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...” (Ginsberg, p.9) Drugs and drug-related things are frequently mentioned in this part, such as “an angry fix”, “a belt of marijuana”, “Peyote”, “benzedrine”, “narcotic tobacco”, “opium”, “metrazol”. In the second part, he used a metaphor “moloch” to make political points. He reproached the political control of the nation of justice and people’s spirit, saying “Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!” (Ginsberg, p.17) and “Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!” (Ginsberg, p.17) Described in the third part are the lives that he spent with Carl Solomon in the institution. Although “Howl” is dotted with drugs hither and thither, “when he wrote Howl, he did not resort to marijuana, peyote or amphetamines. There were no last-minute vision or hallucinations.” (Raskin, p.163)

The usage of drug stamped passionate emotion on the poet and audience as all drugs fundamentally concern speeds, and modifications of speed (Guattari, Deleuze, p.282), you and the poet are experiencing “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, Csikszentmihalyi, p.24). If you witnessed Allen Ginsberg reciting his poem, “Howl”, you may have associated emotions from this experience to the poem, just as ceremonial music can elicit your extra-musical but associated emotions (Johnson-Laird, Oatley, p.2). When you encounter a poem for the first time-you hear Ginsberg recite “Howl”, or you read Auden’s “Mus’ee des Beaux Arts”, it may grip you in an intense excitement. Your attention is rapt in the words and in the images they inspire. Poets themselves report similar experiences in writing poems (Spender, p.125).

### 3.2 Political Stance

In the 1950s and 1960s, Ginsberg added complicated political reasons for his use of drugs. The assumption that he was apolitical was not truth-based. “What we (the Beats) were proposing was some new senses of spiritual consciousness. We were interested in non-violence, sexual freedom, the exploration of psychedelic drugs and sensitivity. We were aware that the entire government...was corrupt.” said Ginsberg in an interview.

Mainstream fifties values promoted duty and uniformity, as if to recover the reassurance of known limits (Paglia, p.93). Notwithstanding, Ginsberg spearheaded his attack on the government and capitalism, accusing its laws against drugs, its biased policies against pigmented people, its distortion of justice and its control of people's spirit. Ginsberg's persona and his place in the collective American psyche probably has as much to do with his role as a political gadfly as poet and indeed he would not have separated the two. From the early Columbia days right down to his death, Ginsberg was a burr under the saddle of conservative America, constantly mocking bourgeois values and scandalising the burghers, puncturing uncomfortable hypocrisies and exposing corruption in the body politic (Oldmeadow, p.5-6). Thus, he wrote in "Howl" that "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism." (Ginsberg, p.11) and "Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals!" (Ginsberg, p.18)

He blamed the deteriorating world situation on American capitalism. He believed that future generations will have to rely on new faculties of awareness, rather than on new versions of old idea-systems, to cope with the increasing godlike complexity of our planetary civilisation, with its overpopulation, its threat of atomic annihilation, its centralised network of abstract word-image communication, its power to leave the earth. A new consciousness, or new awareness, would evolve to meet a changed ecological environment (Ginsberg, p.101). He championed causes such as the protection of free expression, gay rights, the ending of the Vietnam War, ecological awareness, the unmasking of American imperialism (Oldmeadow, p.6).

Besides, he strongly castigated the law against drugs. In his mind, the prohibition on drug and law against it were all politicians' plot. And it is significant that, as marijuana was once monopolised by a small rabid bureaucracy in the Treasury Department, the psychedelic drugs have this year in America been officially monopolised by the FDA. Within months a large amateur police force has mushroomed. I've heard it rumoured that the precise group of citizens least equipped for "responsibility" in this area-the least "mature" pressure group in the States already acts in an advisory capacity on licensing. This group is the Chemical Warfare Division of the Pentagon (Ginsberg, p.101). Ginsberg worked closely with Alfred W. McCoy on the latter's book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, which claimed that the CIA was knowingly involved in the production of heroin in the Golden Triangle of Burma, Thailand, and Laos (McCoy, p.98).

In 1961, Allen wrote to Kennett Love that "one further problem is, research and spread of use of the really great useful non-habit-forming chemicals like peyote and lysergic acid and mushrooms will be balked as long as government bureaucracy controls national psyche on subject of drugs, doctors and analysts are bad enough without getting politicians on top of that. Government control of benevolent drugs like marijuana means government control of perception. Means government control of state of awareness. (I think this is the significance of the whole problem.)" (Morgan, p.316)

With respect to the war, compared with atomic bombs and ammunition, Ginsberg anchored more hope on LSD, stating that "Nobody really wanted violence...LSD helped break down the fear barrier." (Ginsberg, p.73) The law is racist, constructed by people who have no first-hand experience of the drug as a way of justifying their own bureaucratic existence...that public interest in marijuana signalled boredom and a turning away from the ideological frenzy of the Cold War to other levels of experience (Boon, p.161). To defend drug, Ginsberg celebrated it as the only way to shake off the shadow brought by war. "And now so many people have experienced some new sense of openness, and lessening of prejudice and hostility to new experience through LSD, that I think we may expect the new generation to push for an environment less rigid, mechanical, less dominated by Cold War habits." (Ginsberg, p.73)

Ginsberg also pinned the hope to address ethnic issues on drugs. He first proposed that the law against drugs deepened ethnic conflicts. "No one has yet remarked that the suppression of Negro rights, culture, and sensibility in America has been complicated by the marijuana laws. African sects have used pot for divine worship...Use of marijuana has always been widespread among the Negro population in this country, and suppression of its use, with constant friction and bludgeoning of the law, has been one of the major unconscious, or unmentionable, methods of suppression of Negro

rights.” (Ginsberg, p.97) He went so far as to suggest that it was not the blacks themselves who were taking drugs. They were passive consumers of drugs, enslaved to consumerism and were taking drugs in an attempt to protest in an extreme way against the government where the drugs came from (Zhang, Peng, p.51). To state his mind more powerfully, he suggested, “Heroin addicts’ status (somewhat as Jews in Nazi society) as monster criminals is a glaring example of an extraordinary viciousness inherent in our post-McCarthyite society.” (Ginsberg, p.82)

In 1960, Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary launched the Psychedelic Revolution and turned on the hippie generation. He organised the New York City chapter of LeMar (Legalise Marijuana) (Fisher, 2014). Throughout the 1960s he took an active role in the demystification of LSD, and, with Timothy Leary, worked to promote its common use. He remained for many decades an advocate of marijuana legalisation, and, at the same time, warned his audiences against the hazards of tobacco in his “Put Down Your Cigarette Rag” (Don't Smoke): “Don't Smoke Don't Smoke Nicotine Nicotine No/No don't smoke the official Dope Smoke Dope Dope.” (Palmer, p.26) In accordance with the above dissatisfaction with drug issues resulted from state law, war and ethnic problems, this psychedelic revolution later expanded into a political campaign which was the platform Ginsberg resorted to clear his political stance.

### 3.3 Spiritual Transcendence

Every era has to reinvent the project of “spirituality” for itself. In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is “art” (Sontag, p.181). In terms of the reason of taking drugs, Huxley provided a direct and persuasive answer that “The urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood is, as I have said, a principal appetite of the soul. When, for whatever reason, men and women fail to transcend themselves by means of worship, good works and spiritual exercises, they are apt to resort to religion’s chemical surrogates-alcohol and “goof pills” in the modern West, alcohol and opium in the East, hashish in the Mohammedan world, alcohol and marijuana in Central America, alcohol and coca in the Andes, alcohol and the barbiturates in the more up-to-date regions of South America.” (Huxley, p.31) That is to say, the 1960s was the time when faith and worship were ineffective so that people had got to turn to chemical accesses to release themselves, which was the explanation why they commenced with drugs. The 1960s was the age of spirit explosion and nevertheless, it was drugs, abused until they turned on their takers, that helped trigger the spiritual explosion of the sixties (Paglia, p.84). Drugs triggered the surge of spiritual development in the 1960s and in the late 1960s, Ginsberg assumed a more influential cultural and political role, becoming a father figure for the much larger countercultural audiences that during that time adopted many of the Beat Generation’s values and styles, from more daring expressions in literature to explorations of new spiritual paths (Ariel, p.58).

As a leading pioneer in drug use, Ginsberg was a spiritual guidance for the Beat Generation. At the height of the psychedelic years, after his return from India, Ginsberg became a symbol of the use of drugs as a means for spiritual growth and inner peace (Ariel, p.62). In the 1960s he became associated with LDS ideologue Timothy Leary, a role in which he influenced many spiritual seekers in the 1960s and 1970s. Ginsberg considered drug use as a spiritual experimentation. A series of countercultural religious leaders from Ram Das to Zalman Schachter-Shalomi experimented with drugs as a means of expanding their minds and spirits and gaining new perspectives on themselves and the world in its multiple dimensions (Ariel, p.62). Since drug has the attribute of changing speed, we can feel the poet experienced flow, so did the process of spiritual transcendence-a flow of consciousness. Providing putting oneself in a normal state, his body is in a concrete condition, so is his mind-a physical and realistic spirit. The job of drugs is to drag him out of the normal situation but into a wonderland, in which his body is heaved, his mind opened and spirit intoxicated. In a letter written to his father Louis Ginsberg, Allen introduced a new drug named LSD 25 and stated “It was astounding-I lay back, listening to music, and went into a sort of trance state and in a fantasy much like a Coleridge world of Kubla Khan saw a vision of that part of my consciousness which seemed to be permanent and transcendent and identical with the origin of the universe-a sort of identity common

to everything-but a clear and coherent sight of it. Rather beautiful visual images also, of Hindu-type gods dancing on themselves. This drug seems to automatically produce a mystical experience. Science is getting very hip. It's a very safe drug-you ought to contact someone at Rutgers who's doing experiments with it and try it-like a comic movie." (Ginsberg, p.293-294) And in order to find his new awareness, He had already met both William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac with whom he spent a good deal of time discussing "new consciousness", smoking dope, and experimenting with literary forms which might best capture "the texture of consciousness" (one of Ginsberg's favourite phrases) (Oldmeadow, p.2).

Through experimenting with drug, Ginsberg transcended the physical aspect of world and mind into a spiritual wonderland where he obtained new consciousness, arousing new spirit explosion in the 1960s and became a spiritual leader among myriad.

#### 4. Conclusion

Allen Ginsberg was among the most astonishing writers of the Beat Generation-anti-tradition, anti-state power, obsessed with drugs and sought for spiritual emancipation. He demonstrated tremendous rebellious power on entering Columbia University where he encountered his lifelong influencers, where he commenced with his revolutionary poem creation and where he soaked himself into the dreamland of diverse drugs.

The drug-taking trajectory of Ginsberg was complicated. Ginsberg used recreational drugs before the 1960s, like many of his friends and acquaintances, although he made certain not to become addicted and, as a rule, refrained from long-term usage of hard drugs. (Ariel, p.62). To start with, he threw himself into drugs for the purposes of literary creation, more to find approaches to meet Blake in his half-woken consciousness. Additionally, drugs as the trigger of his magical helicon, the use of which could perfectly arouse the flow of emotion of the poet and the readers. After that, he used drugs as his weapons against war, against the state law, against state monopoly and against ethnic discrimination, launching a psychedelic revolution and turning it up into a political revolution. As the spokesman of drugs, Ginsberg successfully lifted himself out of normal state and became one of the spiritual leaders of this generation.

Ginsberg derived inspiration, displayed his political stance and realised self-transcendence thanks to drugs, but the destructive influence of illegal drugs on human body still cannot be ignored. Ginsberg was guilty about it who later told in 1987 to Steve Silberman that "I've changed my mind about the relationship between acid and neurosis-it seems to me that acid can lead to some kind of breakdowns maybe. So that people should be prepared with meditation, before they take acid." (Silberman, 2016) In 1950, Kerouac began studying Buddhism and shared what he learned with Ginsberg...Ginsberg's spiritual journey began early on with his spontaneous visions, and continued with an early trip to India with Gary Snyder (Ginsberg, 2015). On July 18th, 1963, Allen Ginsberg sat on a train as it rumbled through the Japanese countryside. In that train, he composed "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express" which is not one of his best-known works, but it is surely among the most significant. "This was an important turning point in the poet's life, because he turned from illusions brought about by addiction to drugs to spiritual peace of Buddhism." (Zhang, Peng, p.52)

In 1956, Naomi Ginsberg passed away, leaving a note to his son. It denounced Ginsberg's drug-addiction and earnestly talked him out of his reckless life, she said, "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window-I have the key-Get married Allen don't take drugs-the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window". Ginsberg was substantially bothered by marriage issue and he himself in his later years also confessed that he desired to experience marriage. He even referred to his countenance in "Lysergic Acid", observing that "My face in the mirror, thin hair, blood congested in streaks...I am a Ghost."

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