

ALLEN GINSBERG**Born:** Newark, New Jersey; June 3, 1926**Died:** New York, New York; April 5, 1997

PRINCIPAL POETRY

- Howl, and Other Poems*, 1956, 1996
Empty Mirror: Early Poems, 1961
Kaddish, and Other Poems, 1958-1960, 1961
The Change, 1963
Reality Sandwiches, 1963
Kral Majales, 1965
Wichita Vortex Sutra, 1966
T.V. Baby Poems, 1967
Airplane Dreams: Compositions from Journals, 1968
Ankor Wat, 1968
Planet News, 1961-1967, 1968
The Moments Return, 1970
Ginsberg's Improvised Poetics, 1971
Bixby Canyon Ocean Path Word Breeze, 1972
The Fall of America: Poems of These States, 1965-1971, 1972
The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems, 1948-1952, 1972
Iron Horse, 1972
Open Head, 1972
First Blues: Rags, Ballads, and Harmonium Songs, 1971-1974, 1975
Sad Dust Glories: Poems During Work Summer in Woods, 1975
Mind Breaths: Poems, 1972-1977, 1977
Mostly Sitting Haiku, 1978
Poems All over the Place: Mostly Seventies, 1978
Plutonian Ode: Poems, 1977-1980, 1982
Collected Poems, 1947-1980, 1984
White Shroud: Poems, 1980-1985, 1986
Hydrogen Jukebox, 1990 (music by Philip Glass)
Collected Poems, 1992
Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems, 1986-1992, 1994
Making It Up: Poetry Composed at St. Marks Church on May 9, 1979, 1994 (with Kenneth Koch)
Selected Poems, 1947-1995, 1996

Death and Fame: Poems, 1993-1997, 1999*Collected Poems, 1947-1997*, 2006

OTHER LITERARY FORMS

Allen Ginsberg recognized early in his career that he would have to explain his intentions, because most critics and reviewers of the time did not have the interest or experience to understand what he was trying to accomplish. Consequently, he published books that include interviews, lectures, essays, photographs, and letters to friends as means of conveying his theories about composition and poetics.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The publication of "Howl" in 1956 drew such enthusiastic comments from Allen Ginsberg's supporters, and such vituperative condemnation from conservative cultural commentators, that a rift of immense proportions developed, which has made a balanced critical assessment very difficult. Nevertheless, partisan response has gradually given way to an acknowledgment by most critics that Ginsberg's work is significant, if not always entirely successful by familiar standards of literary excellence. Such recognition was underscored in 1974, when *The Fall of America* shared the National Book Award in Poetry. Ginsberg was awarded a Los Angeles Times Book Prize (1982) and the Frost Medal by the Poetry Society of America (1986). Included among the many honors he garnered during his lifetime were an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1969, the Woodbury Poetry Prize, Guggenheim fellowships, the National Arts Club Medal of Honor, the Before Columbus Foundation award for lifetime achievement, the University of Chicago's Harriet Monroe Poetry Award, an American Academy of Arts and Sciences fellowship, and the Medal of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Letters.

The voice Ginsberg employed in "Howl" not only has influenced the style of several generations of poets, but also has combined the rhythms and language of common speech with some of the deepest, most enduring traditions in American literature. In both his life and his work, Ginsberg set an example of moral seriousness, artistic commitment, and humane decency that

made him one of the most popular figures in American culture. The best of his visionary and innovative creations earned for him recognition as one of the major figures of the twentieth century.

BIOGRAPHY

Allen Ginsberg was born Irwin Allen Ginsberg, the second son of Naomi Levy Ginsberg, a Russian-born political activist and communist sympathizer, and Louis Ginsberg, a traditional lyric poet and high school English teacher. He attended primary school in the middle-class town of Paterson, New Jersey. He grew up in a conventional and uneventful household, with the exception of his mother's repeated hospitalizations for mental stress. He entered Columbia University in 1943, intending to pursue a career in labor law, but the influence of such well-known literary scholars as Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren, combined with the excitement of the Columbia community, which included fellow student Jack Kerouac and such singular people as William Burroughs and Neal Cassady, led



Allen Ginsberg (George Holmes/Courtesy, Harper & Row)

him toward literature as a vocation. He was temporarily suspended from Columbia in 1945 and worked as a welder and apprentice seaman before finishing his degree in 1948. Living a “subterranean” life (to use Kerouac’s term) that incorporated drug use, a bohemian lifestyle, and occasional antisocial acts of youthful ebullience, Ginsberg was counseled to commit himself for several months to Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute to avoid criminal charges associated with the possession of stolen goods; there, in 1949, he met Carl W. Solomon, to whom “Howl” is dedicated. During the early 1950’s, he began a correspondence with William Carlos Williams, who guided and encouraged his early writing, and Ginsberg traveled in Mexico and Europe.

In 1954, Ginsberg moved to San Francisco to be at the center of the burgeoning Beat movement. He was living there when he wrote “Howl,” and he read the poem for the first time at a landmark Six Gallery performance that included Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure. His mother died in 1956, the year *Howl, and Other Poems* was published, and he spent the next few years traveling, defending *Howl* against charges of obscenity, working on “Kaddish”—his celebration of his mother’s life, based on a Hebrew prayer for the dead—and reading on college campuses and in Beatnik venues on both coasts.

The growing notoriety of the Beat generation drew Ginsberg into the media spotlight in the early 1960’s, and he was active in the promotion of work by his friends. He continued to travel extensively, visiting Europe, India, and Japan; he read in bars and coffeehouses, and published widely in many of the prominent literary journals of the counterculture. His involvement with various hallucinatory substances led to the formation of LeMar (Organization to Legalize Marijuana) in 1964 with the poet, songwriter, and publisher Ed Sanders, and his continuing disaffection with governmental policies took him toward active political protest. In 1965, he was invited to Cuba and Czechoslovakia by Communist officials, who mistakenly assumed that his criticism of American society would make him sympathetic to their regimes, but Ginsberg’s outspoken criticism of all forms of tyranny and suppression led to his expulsion from both countries.