



The Blend of Fact and Fiction in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “Underwear” and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive research paper examines the technique of blending fact and fiction in the poetry of prominent Beat poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg. The study focuses on Ferlinghetti’s “Underwear” and Ginsberg’s “Howl” to understand how poetry became a significant device of revolt before the upheaval of American postmodernism. Ginsberg’s passionate outcry against political oppression and social alienation juxtaposes fact with mythological and spiritual elements, advocating for unconditional freedom and sexual liberation. Compared to Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti adopts a more playful yet insightful tone. He humorously criticizes political hypocrisy while highlighting gender issues and proposes poetry as a vehicle for revolution. This article explores how both poets employ a blend of fact and fiction to convey their dissent—Ginsberg with passionate intensity and Ferlinghetti with satirical wit. Furthermore, this discussion reveals how these two Beat poets interwove fact, fiction, myth, and spirituality into a unified thread as an ultimate tool of poetic protest and artistic revolution.

Key Words: Allen Ginsberg, Fact in Fiction, Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Introduction

Before the prominent rise of postmodernism, some American groups of artists started to challenge social and political norms in their artistic ventures. In post-World War II



America, during the late 1940s and 1950s, these artistic groups rose, and they explored American social aspects with a reactionary point of view in their literary works. These bohemian and socially alienated groups of artists, known as the Beats, challenged the established literary forms. Key figures of the Beat Generation are William S. Burroughs (1914–1997), known for his postmodern prose and the cut-up technique; Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919–2021), a poet and publisher who played an essential part in promoting Beat literature; Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), whose *On the Road* portrayed the movement’s restless energy; and Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), whose revolutionary poem “Howl” became a defining work of Beat poetry. Notably, drug abuse and the urge for sexual liberation were prominent features in their literary works. Spirituality was differently defined by them. Before the prominent arrival of postmodernism, the Beat Generation started challenging institutions and ideologies like politics and religion. Moreover, they experimented with the established forms of literature, where fact and fiction are blended; that is how sometimes their works contain a multitude of meanings. Sometimes, the blend of fact in fiction carries the significance of meaning, but often this blend makes the meaning blur as well, where the interpretation of meaning becomes challenging, thus calling for an open-ended explanation. This discussion takes into account two poets from the generation, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ginsberg (3 June 1926 – 5 April 1997) was an American poet whose poem “Howl” is part of this study. He is one of the pioneers of the Beat Generation. “Howl” was published in 1956, and this poem is connected with another poet in this discussion, Ferlinghetti. Black (2012) writes about the incident of Ferlinghetti’s arrest in 1957; Ferlinghetti was the owner of City Lights Bookstore, and he was charged with publishing obscene material like Ginsberg’s book *Howl and Other Poems* (p. 27). Lawrence Ferlinghetti (24 March 1919 – 22 February 2021) was also an American poet. This discussion takes into consideration a poem by Ferlinghetti titled “Underwear,” which is from the collection named *Starting from San Francisco* (1961). This is a qualitative study based on close reading and analysis of these two poems, “Howl” and “Underwear.” In both poems, the readers will find a blend of fact and fiction. What are the probable reasons behind this tendency to blend fact into fiction? These two poems reveal a tendency of the Beats to experiment with forms and mix fact and fiction, but the two poems are way too different from each other in the fashion



of expression. Nevertheless, the poems challenge authority figures like politics, bring the theme of sexuality and gender, challenge the imposed restrictions by society, come forth with suggestions on protest and revolution, and so on. This study aims to show how Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti treat fact and fiction in their respective poems to express their desires and points of view.

Ginsberg's poem "Howl" and Ferlinghetti's poem "Underwear" both are written in free verse, and none of these poems contain any traditional meter or rhyme. "Howl" is written in a style where some lines look like paragraphs, thus it is challenging to understand where a line starts and where it ends. However, "Howl" has a quality of performance, and the title itself is self-explanatory. It means an outcry, a feeling of rage or anger, an expression that demands the rights one deserves, from which the person is deprived by the authority because the expression directly interrogates the authority and its power. "Underwear" is also, in a sense, self-explanatory; the title itself is unusual as a literary topic that covers the seriousness of the subject matter at first glance. This poem has a conversational quality, but it is not an outcry like "Howl." Instead, in a comic manner, it criticizes the authorities like politics. Unlike the other forms of literature, like novels, drama, or short stories, we find a more alive presence of the poet in poetry. This statement is true for Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. Both of these poets bring in their personal feelings, experiences of oppression, and insights in their respective poems, and both of them tend to blend fact and fiction but in a different manner. Ginsberg's manner is more aggressive in tone, while Ferlinghetti's manner is more humorous.

In "Howl," Ginsberg claims the Beats, who are deprived of their rights, are "the best minds" (line 1) of his generation. This deprivation made these best minds mad and hysterical. According to Ginsberg, these best minds were "expelled from the academies" (line 7) because, according to the authorities, their works were not publishable and obscene. These are some facts he writes about the best minds and the academic authorities. However, the way he idealizes the best minds like they were connected spiritually with El and Mohammedan angels, is not fact; he blends elements from the Hebrew Bible and Islam with the facts. Here, a blend of mythology, religion, and spirituality with real events suggests that Ginsberg is



justifying the madness of the best minds and that they are on the way to spiritual salvation. According to him, they are “scholars of war” (line 6), and Ginsberg creates a self-created version of salvation for them. Perhaps the best minds were victims of politics because their works challenged the authoritative culture, thus leading their works to get censored or rejected. As a result, they were expelled from universities and could not get respectable jobs. These are some facts Ginsberg brings up in the poem, but he conceptualizes their activities of smoking marijuana, taking psychedelic drugs like Benzedrine, and consuming alcohol as “burning for the ancient heavenly connection” (line 3). Thus, Ginsberg mixes (notably makes a mix-up of) their hippy activities with spirituality and religion. This mix of facts, mythological elements, and spirituality also shows the readers the psychological point of view of Ginsberg himself, who justifies hippy acts as spiritual acts. Rejecting the “monolithic views” (Aparna, 2023, p. 982), the best minds were compelled to lead a struggling life in financial poverty and became alienated from society because of hegemonic American politics. Thus, that politics is reexamined by Ginsberg in the poem, where the best minds live in idealized happiness as they are deprived of the real one. That is why a blend of fact in fiction is visible in the poem, where Ginsberg makes a blend of disconnected elements of the Hebrew Bible and Islam together with the real-life miseries of the best minds of his generation, who could not achieve the fame or respect they deserved or were uninterested in achieving fame. Tytell (2015) comments on Ginsberg’s “Howl” that Ginsberg was unknown and was “dejected by his lack of success” in the early 1950s, but he found “an authentic new voice” through the poem “Howl” (p. 637). Thereby, in the poem “Howl,” a reactionary celebration of Ginsberg is visible.

On the other hand, a blend of fact in fiction is more interestingly connected to the political end in Ferlinghetti’s “Underwear.” In Ginsberg’s expression, his anger, madness, and frustration are quite observable; but Ferlinghetti’s expression is quite playful and humorous, where he inserts “his political ideologies” (Mambrol, 2020). At first glance, it seems Ferlinghetti is dealing with a very trivial subject matter—underwear. However, he glorifies underwear, which is a must-needed attire for everyone, according to him. He expresses the universal necessity of underwear. The oral version of the poem is slightly different from the written version. In the oral version, Ferlinghetti says that whether people



are Indians or Cubans, they wear underwear. It is attire for both men and women. In the later lines of the poem, the readers will find that Ferlinghetti is connecting underwear with “three-color pictures” (line 26) and a “two-party system” (line 32) (The Republican Party of the USA and The Democratic Party of the USA). He brings more facts about politics, which promises the citizens freedom but “doesn’t allow much freedom of choice” (line 33). So, politics and underwear are used in a similar manner and interchangeably in this poem. Next, he criticizes the “fascist forms/of underground government” (lines 39-40), which is hypocritical politics. These are some facts in the poems. Another factual reference is the reference to Gandhi. Ferlinghetti shows not only the negative aspects of politics but also brings in the non-violent side of politics by referring to Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian anti-colonialist political leader. Thereby, some more facts about the other side, the non-violent politics, are revealed by Ferlinghetti. The blend of fact and fiction in the poem happens when the poet refers to Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. Thus, real politics and fictional politics are blended by the poet. From a comical opening, the readers experience that the poem is taking a serious political turn, and then a blend of allusions from Shakespearean literature takes the poem in another direction. However, this reference also takes us to the aspiration of power that led Macbeth to kill his father figure and patron, King Duncan. By mixing comic elements, fact, and fiction, Ferlinghetti makes the poem more open-ended for interpretation. Perhaps, he masks his anger and does not explode like “an emotional time bomb” (Tytell, 2015, p. 636) like Ginsberg. According to Woods (2017), in “Underwear,” Ferlinghetti’s “slightly peeved narrator” expresses his resentment at political hypocrisy with “a humorous analogy” (p. 1). Like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti also reexamines political authority and shows his reaction. Both poets show resentment toward the hierarchy and authority culture and mix fact with fiction to express their distaste.

The aspects of sexuality and gender are expressed totally in different manners in “Howl” and “Underwear.” Ginsberg’s desire, as expressed in “Howl,” is for sexual liberation; on the other hand, Ferlinghetti’s “Underwear” deals with gender inequality and equality issues. In “Howl,” besides noting the drug addiction of the angelheaded hipsters, Ginsberg comes forth with some sexual realities of the Beat Generation. He mentions cock and endless balls, pederasty, waving genitals, fucked in the ass, and so on; these points hint towards the



uncontrolled sexual desires of the Beats. Ginsberg, in the poem, advocates for this kind of liberation, and he claims that their sexual desire is not any kind of crime. This point raises the fact that the Beats are unapologetic for their sexual activity, whether it is homosexuality, bisexuality, or excessive sexual activity. They challenge the social constraint that is imposed on them, and thus they become outcasts. The Beats have vividly depicted “sexuality’s connection to capitalism, religion, and madness” (Kaiissar, 2020, p. 1289). These references bring some facts about Ginsberg and other Beats and their excessive or socially taboo sexual sides. However, he mixes this fact with a mythic character, Adonis of Denver. Ginsberg compares one of his fellows, Neal Cassady, with Adonis. Ginsberg glorifies Cassady by complementing, “N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver” (line 43). Ginsberg exclaims that Cassady is as handsome and desirable as Adonis. Whereas Ginsberg advocates for the sexual liberation of man with a blend of fact in fiction, this poem does not have any significant comment on female sexuality. On the other hand, Ferlinghetti does talk about female sexuality in his poem “Underwear.” Commenting on the universality of underwear, he writes:

Women’s underwear holds things up
Men’s underwear holds things down
Underwear is one thing
Men and women have in common (lines 21-24).

This poem’s open-mindedness makes it difficult to explain whether these lines are about the equality of women or inequality. He brings up the point that underwear is common between men and women. Now, the inequality of women or the desire for gender equality can be considered some factual information in the poem. At this point, the readers may take note of the Shakespearean allusion in the poem. Macbeth, in his desire for power, murders King Duncan, but Lady Macbeth has a vital role in this murder, as she constantly instigates Macbeth to kill Duncan. As we know in William Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Lady Macbeth instigates Macbeth: “Your hand, your tongue — look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5.64-65). By using this allusion to Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, perhaps Ferlinghetti reminds us of some political notes where men and women participated equally. Political ambition and treachery related to it are some facts that Ferlinghetti blends with



fiction. Another factual aspect of women's menstruation is subtly brought to light by Ferlinghetti when he comments on the spot that Lady Macbeth "was always rubbing" (line 50). Unlike Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti concentrates more on gender issues than explicit sexuality, whereas both of them blend factual information with a few fictional elements. Nevertheless, Ginsberg's blend of fact in fiction about sexual urges shows his outcry and explicitly advocates for sexual liberation (Marjan, 2021, p. 90). On the contrary, gender issues in Ferlinghetti's poem are visible but blurred.

In "Howl," Ginsberg shows a reaction against capitalism, militarism, and established norms of American culture. The promotion of counterculture took the Beats into a state of conflict with the dominant culture, and as a result, they became social aliens. Their madness, hallucinations, sexual desires, and suicidal dramas are facts that are noted by Ginsberg, but he has presented these with heroic emphasis. He also notes the travel made by the best minds in Africa and Mexico, and how they were under investigation by authorities like the FBI for promoting counterculture. These are some facts in the poem, but some elements like "seeking visionary Indian angels" (line 25), and "eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani" (line 77) bring some fictional elements to the poem. The poet and the Beats, who do not seem to believe in traditional religion, thus seek a different kind of spiritual peace. More surprisingly, "eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani" is a Biblical reference that means: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22). The spiritual urge of the poet is quite evident here. According to Ginsberg, he or other Beats did not commit any crime. They are protesting against a hegemonic culture that tries to control human freedom. They want to break that control and enjoy their freedom. For these reasons, it can be seen that Ginsberg is justifying the reaction of the Beats, which is fact, but he also realizes that God has forsaken them, though they have created a spiritual imagination that is perhaps the result of drug abuse and hallucination associated with that. By pointing at some facts and then bringing in a Biblical allusion, the poet makes a blend of fact in fiction. Perhaps, the poet has a quest for salvation that makes him do so. On the other hand, this Biblical reference also creates a visual imagery of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who was crucified for preaching peace and justice. Here, with this reference, the poet makes it blur for the readers whether the activities of the Beats are excessive in manner because they are spiritually empty, or they are on the right path of



protest, and this is the reason that they are being tortured as Jesus Christ was tortured in the path of establishing truth.

The protest takes another form in Ferlinghetti's expression in "Underwear." He remarks that poetry is "the underwear of the soul" (line 65); this statement has multiple meanings. In the literal sense, poetry can be a trivial matter like underwear, but more broadly, poetry can cover the nakedness of the soul. Additionally, if we take underwear as a metaphor for politics itself, then we can arrive at a deeper conclusion: poetry can be the politics of the soul. As Ginsberg outcries in "Howl," poetry reaches his audience, so poetry becomes a political tool for Ginsberg in this way. Perhaps, Ferlinghetti sheds light on this political aspect of poetry: poetry as a new form of revolution. This is a fact, as Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and other Beats were flourishing their ideas through their poetry. Ferlinghetti blends fiction into that with the allusion to Dylan Thomas's poem. Thomas's poem is titled "Do not go gentle into that good night," but Ferlinghetti replaces 'gentle' with the word 'naked.' This blend of fiction when talking about poetic revolution as a form of reaction serves a comical purpose, but later the poem contains some aphoristic lines like, "Don't get emotional" (line 79). Additionally, the last two lines are more suggestive: "Are we not still young and easy / Don't shout" (lines 82-83). Poetry can cover the nakedness of the heart; poetry can be the politics of the heart. As we are told, Ferlinghetti was arrested for publishing Ginsberg's "Howl," it is observable that Ferlinghetti is suggesting that poetry can lead to a good night; a good night of revolution, but a wary path needs to be followed. There is no use of premature stirring; poetry will lead to the path of a dignified revolution. So, it is comprehensible how Ferlinghetti, in his poetic venture, blends fact into fiction and creates a multitude of meanings, where the superficial meaning remains comical, but the underlying meaning contains political and artistic significance.

From the above analysis, it is visible how Allen Ginsberg in "Howl" and Lawrence Ferlinghetti in "Underwear" blended fact with fiction in their poems. Both of them show their reactions against political anomalies, Ginsberg, in an outspoken and direct manner, on the other hand, Ferlinghetti in a comic but witty manner. In Ginsberg's poem, the glorification of drug abuse is notable, and he attempts to connect drug abuse with spirituality and blends



religious elements with fact. Ginsberg advocates sexual liberation and seemingly overlooks women's sexuality, but Ferlinghetti brings up gender issues quite notably. The protest against politics, capitalism, militarism, and the promotion of counterculture manifested in "Howl" by Ginsberg shows an uproar, but he and Beats like him remain socially and spiritually alienated. On the other hand, Ferlinghetti shows a new hope with poetic revolution that is not necessarily an outcry but can be effective in the long run. To conclude, it can be said that both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti blended fact in fiction in their respective poems quite effectively; sometimes, this tendency justified their arguments, sometimes it provided some additional information about their emotions, and sometimes, a combination of fact and fiction has made it difficult for the readers to interpret their poetic arguments properly.

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