

## SAMPLE OUTLINE

### ***HOWL* by Allen Ginsberg**

Okay, here's an interesting exercise. I frequently get writers coming into the workshop who interpret story structure as a rule or a formula, rather than what it is, which is an immutable paradigm for an inner transformation. (Remember, the purpose of story is to reveal a transformation.) It seems, as human beings, that there are a series of experiences we always pass through in our journey toward this shift in perception.

So just for fun, let's examine Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, an experimental poem from the 1960s. (Just Google *Howl poem* and it will pop up.) While it is not technically a memoir, it is a memory and reflection on the time Ginsberg spent in a mental institution with his friend, Carl Solomon.

In *Howl*, Ginsberg's irreverence merges the sacred with the profane as he takes us on an inner spiritual quest from existential despair to an almost ecstatic freedom. My hope is that if we can identify the key experiences in an experimental poem, then we can disabuse ourselves of the notion that story structure has much to do with the plotting of events, but rather is a way to dramatize a series of internal experiences that leads to a transformed state.

Firstly, notice how this poem is written in *three parts*. This impulse, whether conscious or not, is a useful framing device, a way of codifying experiences into a series of relatable parts. Notice the different *parts* of our human journey: birth, life, death. Story is a circle — it involves the completion of a theme. Or, more accurately,

it is a spiral, and with each consecutive cycle, we are transported and hopefully understand our circumstances in a clearer way. Just look at the change of seasons to see the cycle of life, look at the ocean tides, or the movement of the earth as it revolves around the sun, creating morning, noon, and night. The three-act structure is encoded in our DNA, it is embedded in our psyche. It is a universal tool to understand and make meaning of our existence.

The first section of *Howl* is the longest, more than twice the length of Sections Two and Three. Therefore, in terms of proportion, I would argue that it takes us up to the midpoint.

Let's explore.

## **ACT ONE**

### **Establishing the World**

Here's the opening line: *"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix."*

Notice that the poem begins by establishing the world. In this one line he has set the mood, there's a wild almost feral quality to his words. And it raises a question. What happened? Why did they go mad?

### **Theme/Dilemma**

And following this, Ginsberg begins to answer the question by dramatizing their dilemma: “. . . *who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war.*”

This seems to be a poem about institutions and the dilemma of institutional thinking, i.e., how the desire to be accepted by the former generation’s *scholars of war* could cost them their individuality. In other words: conform or die. These bright minds, alive with curiosity and thoughts of peace and love, are colliding with the academic jingoism of the “Greatest Generation” who hold the keys to the corridors of power. Will their defiance cost them a place at the table?

### **Inciting Incident**

Yes. They are not accepted. The very next line introduces a possible inciting incident: “. . . *who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull.*”

While attempting to express themselves, the best minds have been pathologized, or worse, dismissed — their deepest thoughts have been ridiculed and rejected. They’ve been called crazy.

### **Opposing Argument**

Now the stakes are rising. The problem at the inciting incident, i.e., being thrown out for expressing their truth, has led to disillusionment. The opposing argument is where there’s an antagonistic response to the protagonist’s desire. The antagonist is

the institution, the system that has denied them their truth. And now they're frightened and losing their minds. *"... who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall..."*

Notice that the protagonist(s) are going mad as the result of this rejection. Can they trust themselves? Should they conform or rebel? They are children, unformed. Will they make it in the adult world? Will they survive their rebellion, or will it cost them their souls?

*"... who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned with the laurel of oblivion..."*

How will they respond to this rejection?

## **Decision**

Okay, they will rebel. Ginsberg goes on a long riff here, articulating the response to being rejected by the establishment, by fighting the establishment.

*"... who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism, who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down..."*

*"... who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication..."*

Notice the decision to rebel. And notice the reluctance that comes with this decision. The reluctance comes in the acknowledgement

that there are consequences to this rebellion, ie: self-harm, incarceration.

## **False Hope**

But damn it, it's also fun, at least for a while. It's an escape from the stultifying boredom of the ruling class.

*"... who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword..."*

## **Midpoint/Temptation**

But the protagonist's rebellion is taking a toll. They are lost, directionless, unclear on the nature of their rebellion. It seemed they were fighting a system, but the system has become increasingly abstract. Perhaps their rebellion is more existential than they imagined. Regardless, their restlessness has turned to vice, addiction in a variety of forms. Conformity hasn't worked, nor has rebellion. Now our protagonist(s) are lost and facing a moment of temptation.

*"... to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head, the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death..."*

This is the midpoint, their point of no return. The story moves in a new direction. In an about face, they turn *toward* an institution to save them, thus the dilemma persists. In saving their lives, will it cost them their souls?

*“... ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you’re really in the total animal soup of time ...”*

In an attempt to connect to themselves, it leads to self-disgust, self-abandonment, disconnection and despair.

And we arrive at the final line of Section One: *“... with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.”*

Notice that an event has happened (they are experiencing the possibility of a soul death)

Notice the temptation: submitting to the institution might cost them their soul.

But nonetheless, they enter the asylum.

## **Suffering**

The second half of Act Two begins with Section Two of the poem.  
*“What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?”*

Now we are in the mental institution with a lament to Moloch:  
*Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars!*

In the Hebrew bible, Moloch was a fallen angel, a demonic creature that masqueraded as a pagan fertility god with an appetite

for fire sacrifices of children by the parents of the faithful. In Section Two, virtually every line begins with a cry to Moloch. The best minds of the generation, in an attempt to survive, are now experiencing a new struggle. In order to survive, they have entered the belly of the beast. Moloch is represented in a variety of ways: *“Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! . . . Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows!”*

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the soul is invisible to this institution. This is where the dilemma is becoming apparent. *“They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven!”* It is as if, in their misguided attempts to be free, they are attempting to resurrect a demon, rather than exorcising it. They are waking up to the impossibility of ever achieving their goal, based on their current approach. They are recognizing the impossibility of ever reconciling with their oppressors.

## **Surrender**

The second section is relatively short, and the lament’s tone doesn’t change much, but it leads us to a dark night of the soul. The final line of this section reads: *“They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!”*

They have recognized the impossibility of ever being seen and heard by the establishment. The system is not equipped to process individuals. And so, they let go. And they escape back to the streets.

## **ACT THREE**

## Reality

But something has shifted. While they are still mad, they have let go. They are still lost, but they are beginning to glimpse their North Star. Yes, they have gone mad, but they are not alone, and perhaps madness is getting redefined here. Perhaps it means connection, passion, life!

## Action

As we move into the final section, it begins: *“Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland, where you’re madder than I am.”*

Rockland is the mental institution from which Ginsberg has emerged, but where his friend, Carl Solomon, still remained. Every line in this section begins with, *“I’m with you in Rockland.”*

This is the beating heart of Act Three. Our protagonist(s) appear to have let go of what they want; i.e., acceptance and approval from the establishment – and are finding a connection with each other.

Rather than running in shame from our madness, perhaps it is something to be celebrated. This is the work of Act Three, to integrate the two opposing forces of the dramatic question, which is: the individual versus the institution.

*“I’m with you in Rockland where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse . . .”*

It is as if Ginsberg is fighting for his friend from afar. Having entered the institution, Ginsberg has recognized that the institution



was a paper tiger, and that his desire to be accepted was the very thing that was preventing him from achieving his goal. The external system is broken, and so, he will connect to the internal system within him – his heart, his humanity.

He is waking up to his truth as an artist and a poet, as a free thinker. He is integrating the two aspects of himself that he alluded to from the beginning, the “great mind” and the “madman” and is making room for both of them.

## **Battle Scene**

The penultimate line is where the difficult choice is made.

*“I’m with you in Rockland where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own soul’s airplanes roaring over the roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself – imaginary walls collapse – O skinny legions run outside – O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here – O victory forget your underwear we’re free.”*

The difficult choice is to accept oneself fully, the great mind of a generation, along with the madness, the shame, the confusion, the terrible baggage of having to be a human in a world run by institutions. The struggle continues, but we’re arriving at a new place here where we know there is no going back, where we trust that together these mad minds will prevail because they are united.

They have let go of searching outside of themselves for acceptance and validation. They have rejected the institutions and academies of higher learning in favor of their heart’s desire.

## **New Equilibrium**

And finally, our protagonist returns home. It's interesting that the poem moves from the general to the specific. While it's probably safe to assume that with the line about "*the great minds of my generation*" Ginsberg is including himself, the protagonist here has become singular.

*"I'm with you in Rockland in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to door of my cottage in the Western night."*

The poem ends with tears (the character has been returned to their feelings) as the journey across America comes to an end in what feels like a physical embrace.