

ALLEN GINSBERG

b. June 3, 1926

d. April 5, 1997

"The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming of the awareness of the world. That's what poetry does."

Allen Ginsberg was a revolutionary poet and committed activist. He was a leader of the Beat movement, which celebrated nonconformity and paved the way for many previously ignored poets. Ginsberg's works captured his antiestablishment spirit and fostered social change.

He was born Irwin Allen Ginsberg and raised in Patterson, New Jersey. His father, Louis, was a successful poet who walked around the house reciting poetry. His mother suffered from paranoia and was in and out of mental hospitals. Three years after her death, Ginsberg wrote "Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg" (1961), which is considered one of his finest works.

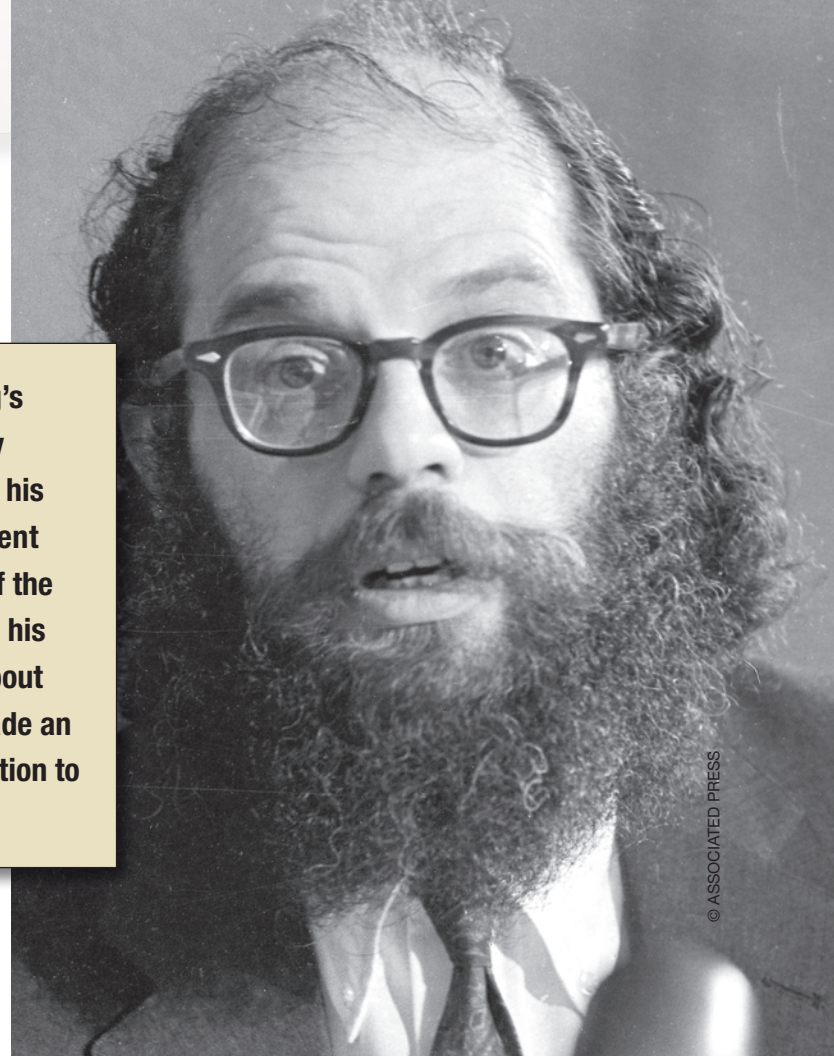
Ginsberg attended Columbia University, where he received a B.A. in 1948. The next year, he met Carl Solomon, whom he credited with "deepening his understanding of poetry and its power as a weapon of political dissent." His most celebrated poem, "Howl!" (1956), was dedicated to Solomon. Ginsberg was tried and acquitted of obscenity charges partially related to the poem's homoerotic content. A judge found that the poem had "redeeming social importance," making "Howl!" a reference case for free-speech advocates.

Ginsberg is credited with coining the term "flower power," which encouraged protesters to engage in nonviolent rebellion. Once kicked out of Cuba for saying Che Guevara was "cute," Ginsberg was dubbed a social bandit. His frank writing about homosexuality made an important contribution to gay rights.

In 1954, Ginsberg met the man who would become his life partner, Peter Orlovsky. Like Ginsberg, Orlovsky was an American poet and experienced the mental illness of a family member. Their 43-year relationship ended with Ginsberg's death in 1997.

Ginsberg's honors include a National Book Award, a Robert Frost Medal for distinguished poetic achievement and an American Book Award for contributions to literary excellence. In 1987, he was named a distinguished professor at Brooklyn College, where he taught English and creative writing. In 1993, the French minister of culture awarded Ginsberg the Order of Arts and Letters.

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