

Robert Graves and the Beats: Poets of Unrest

Jonahs Kneitly

Abstract: Robert Graves and the Beats were uncompromising in their art. The mid-twentieth century was a dynamic time for art as self-expression and as social commentary. During this time of social unrest, society's restrictive sexual mores often became the battleground chosen by Graves, Allen Ginsberg, and the other Beats. All engaged directly with the unrest of their time by provoking and challenging society with their art. Despite their focus on art as political, social, and sexual imperative, they were guided by their artistic sensibilities in relation to a poetic muse or source of inspiration. This paper examines the importance of gender and sexuality in representative works of Graves and the Beats to reveal commonalities in their aesthetics and their views on the source and power of art in society.

Keywords: poetry, gender, sexuality, Cold War, Divine Female, muses

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Gender, as we call it today, was important to the Beats and to Robert Graves. Though his relationships with actual women were sometimes rocky, Graves venerated the Divine Female. Some of the Beat poets, Allan Ginsberg in particular, were sometimes considered disrespectful in their treatment of women. While The Beats' style – their vocabulary, formal looseness, explicit sexual references – may not have conformed to Graves's standards, their goals were similar: they were seeking what Graves termed 'The Return of the Goddess', which for this paper will be characterized as connection to and appreciation of the female principle.

Graves was a few decades older than most of the Beat poets, but during the 50s and 60s, their writings exhibit a similar interest in women as real-world persons and as muses. My paper will discuss similarities in their forceful subversion of prevailing cultural

representations of women, drawing on Allen Ginsberg's 'Kaddish', with references to Graves's *The White Goddess*, and various poems of his that relate to myth, goddesses, and female imagery.

The Cold War conditioned American culture during this period. The USA, and to a lesser extent, its allies, were engaged in an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union, and in many respects the cultural production of 'real Americans' was expected to support this undeclared war effort. Conformity was therefore imperative. However, Anglo-American culture saw undercurrents of opposition to the vision of uniformity that tended to advantage white male Christian people. Many cultural 'battles' were fought around female empowerment. Elaine May notes that 'fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change'.¹ Sexuality became an important battleground. Sexuality, to put it simply, was dangerous and Society was watching.

Women, especially mothers, were frequently targeted as critical points of social weakness. In *The White Goddess*, Graves notes:

It is true that woman has of late become virtual head of the household in most parts of the Western world, and holds the purse-strings, and can take up almost any career or position she pleases; but she is unlikely to repudiate the present system, despite its patriarchal framework.²

Graves had no problem with the reversal of gender-power hierarchies. In the USA, however, this power shift was intolerable. For the American public 'only a specific type of heterosexual relationship had become acceptable, namely, one in which women either played a subservient role to men or risked emasculating them'.³ Thus, wives, mothers, and women in general were the cause of Cold War ills and normative patriarchy was the cure. Existing outside of gender norms, feminized men and masculinized women were dangerous to the body politic since both were considered susceptible to Communist violation and indoctrination. This repressed, gyno-phobic society birthed the Beat Generation and its poets.

Queering for this article designates any act outside of society's normative boundaries and The Beat poets willingly queered society and its sexual norms. The term *Beat*, according to John Clellon Holmes, signified an individual alienated by the authoritarian moralities of 'straight' society, who were thus forced up against the immovable wall of their own consciousness.⁴ To remain true to themselves and to voice their dissatisfaction, the Beats rebelled and their art, their chosen mode of rebellion, cried out for uninhibited expression. In other words, the Beats' aggressive style was oppositional to the dogma of straight patriarchal society. True art, for the Beats, expressed the writer's inalienable truth, not social norms.

The Beats were at times heterosexually promiscuous, at times aggressively homosocial, and at other times openly homosexual. While many individuals of that time were criticized for their sexual mores, the Beat poets' aggressive styles gained particular attention. Allen Ginsberg, for example, developed a provoking style that was meant to, and *did*, garner passionate reactions and outrage. The Beats were aggressive and unapologetic, but they were also enigmatic and contradictory. So was Robert Graves. Graves defied easy categorization or classification. While he may not have been intentionally offensive, Graves's writing was meant to provoke. Graves, like the Beats, was a 'poet of unrest'.⁵

Conventional wisdom during the Cold War stated, 'Strong families required two essential ingredients: sexual restraint outside marriage and traditional gender roles in marriage' (May, p. 86). Notably, sex and sexuality were central to both requirements. Graves, the Beats, and many individuals during the Cold War did not live up to these two standards. In Graves's poem, 'Cry Faugh!', published in 1953, his attitude toward sexuality seems to agree with that of the Beats.

Socrates and Plato burked the issue
(Namely, how man-and-woman love should be
With homosexual ideology).⁶

‘Burked’ in this context means to murder, possibly by suffocation. Graves’s speaker notes that man-and-woman love *may* have been suffocating – but it was undeniably suffocated. Graves’s speaker notes the social impetus toward chastity:

Curious, various, amoral, moral –
Confess, what elegant square or lumpish hamlet
Lives free from nymphological disquiet?⁷

Graves’s speaker points out sex and sexuality are everywhere, whether acknowledged or not. The speaker continues and notes the pursuit of sexual pleasure is not an abstraction for ‘Scientists to ponder’ but, instead, a human reality. ‘Cry Faugh!’ ends with a request for the speaker’s beloved to walk with him among the ‘proud remnants of a visionary race’. However, it is unclear if the visionary race expired from lack of sex or from too much. Cold War wardens would argue it was from too much, the Beats might argue there is never too much. While Graves’s poem ends on a romantic note, The Beats were more aggressive and often less romantic.

According to Anne Mounic, Graves believed that the Muse was elusive and could only be experienced directly during ‘periods of trance, inspiration, or ecstasy’ (Mounic, p. 4). Allen Ginsberg was known to embrace ecstasy as a path to poetic inspiration – talking openly about this practice in public and even during interviews.⁸ Ginsberg’s and Graves’s works exhibit some commonalities. For a representative example, I will look at Allen Ginsberg and his ‘Kaddish’ (for Naomi Ginsberg, 1894–1956).⁹

‘Kaddish’, dedicated to Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi, and written after her death in 1956, exhibits a search for connection with the Feminine. Graves believed that the poet meets the female Muse within ‘the paradise he has built with his own words’ (Mounic, p. 4). In ‘Kaddish’, Ginsberg writes: ‘In the world which He has created according to his will Blessed Praised’. This phrase reflects Graves’s idea that a poet is building or creating a world, possibly a paradise, since Ginsberg’s *he* is the poet, or more specifically, the Poet as God. Graves suggests building a paradise, Ginsberg, in his

own style, creates a reality. Graves believed in women's inherent divinity and that this divinity eventually leads to male envy (Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 476). This idea of positive associations becoming negative emotions underlies 'Kaddish'.

A lifetime of negative feelings is directed from Ginsberg's speaker toward his mother in a mixing of contemporary moments, personal memories, Jewish mysticism, and Old Testament references. This mix of myth and reality is reminiscent of Graves's style in many poems, such as 'The Jackals' Address to Iris', 'Return of the Goddess', and 'Hercules at Nemea'. In 'Kaddish', Ginsberg produces a truly poetic piece according to Graves's definition:

True poetic practice implies a mind so miraculously attuned and illuminated that it can form words, by a chain of more-than-coincidences, into a living entity – a poem that goes about on its own [...] affecting readers with its stored magic. (*White Goddess*, p. 481)

Ginsberg's power to create a stored magic in text is visible in Canto IV of 'Kaddish'. This section contains very little punctuation. The poet states, 'what have I left out' and 'what have I forgotten'. Ginsberg omitted punctuation to add ambiguity to this stream of declarations. Without clarifying punctuation, these short lines may be questions, or they may be statements of fact. Either way, the phrasing reveals the poet is looking for something. Specifically, he wishes to comprehend and memorialize his mother by building a reality around her, or more correctly, around his memories of her. By building a world of words, the poet seeks to understand the real mother, Naomi, and, also, perhaps, The Ideal Mother. Again, Ginsberg's absent punctuation opens this section to broader interpretation:

O mother
what have I left out
O mother
what have I forgotten
O mother

farewell
with a long black shoe
farewell
with Communist Party and a broken stocking
farewell
with six dark hairs on the wen of your breast
farewell
with your old dress and a long black beard around the vagina
farewell

The poet eulogizes a real woman with a real body, not a perfect, perpetually virgin mother. In this Canto, the poet goes on to define his mother by what her eyes have seen: America, Ma Rainey, Russia, China, the Bronx, an abortion, an appendix operation, a divorce. By defining his mother in this way, the poet is in fact cataloguing what he imagines he would observe in her place. The actual mother, however, is silent as her counterpart in text vocalizes only what Ginsberg attributes to her from memory and imagination. In reality, the poet knows his mother through his own experiences. Though he may try, he is never privy to her reality – he sees only reflections in her eyes. Graves notes, ‘no Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident’ (*White Goddess*, p. 481). Despite Ginsberg’s provocative language designed to inflame the reader, in this poem, he is, by Graves’s definition, operating as a Muse poet. Ginsberg interacts with *the* Divine Mother as he mourns *his* mother.

I would pair ‘Kaddish’ with Graves’s ‘A Valentine’ since both poems contain multiple women: a woman who remains voiceless as subject, a real woman, and an imagined woman. Each woman, however, is constructed through the poet’s gaze. In ‘A Valentine’, Graves’s speaker, a hunter turned husband, fantasizes about other women while with his love.

The Phantom hunts he meditates
Let me pursue, pursuing you,
Beauty of other shape and hue.¹⁰

Thus, the speaker projects his erotic fantasies of other women onto his lover's body. Though the fantasy is little more than 'candles to [her] sun', in his heart, he has sinned. The speaker ends with 'Yielding your comprehensive pride | A homage, even to suicide'. The speaker's act of betrayal, though only imagined, sits like a suicide note, which can never be unwritten. This wording implies that, though shallow and fleeting, fantasy is a self-murder. Fantasy is the suicide of love, pride, and trust. Though these two poems are not exactly congruent, they show that Graves and Ginsberg realize that the real and ideal cannot be separated, and these disparate states cannot be completely connected either. Similarly, Graves's 'Haunted' posits memories and mental realities that depose and replace real individuals.

These three poems are linked through the balancing of seeing and showing. In all three, the eyes concurrently *see* and *show*, *hide* and *reveal*. Whatever the mind experiences through the eyes is reality. However, in 'A Valentine', the speaker seems to note that the eyes can tell lies, keep secrets, and commit murder. The cursory explication of these poems carried out here reveals that Ginsberg and Graves are looking at similar phenomena and are observing the world in similar ways. Robert Graves and Allan Ginsberg unveiled the mystery of the world around them in works that still challenge readers. Further exploring Graves's and Ginsberg's nuanced understanding of sight and the power of the gaze might prove edifying to the study of both.

I would further offer a list of Beat and Graves poems to be paired together in a longer work: Gregory Corso's 'The American Way' with Graves's 'The Kiss' for their conception of time and loss. I would suggest Diane di Prima's 'Song for Baby-O, Unborn' with Graves's 'The Cupboard' or 'Leda' for their conception of women and the expectations surrounding pregnancy. I would pair Diane Wakoski's 'Picture of a Girl Drawn in Black and White' with Graves's 'Young Witch', or 'The God Called Poetry' to explore mystical and mythic tropes.

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NOTES

¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 81.

² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, ed. by Grevel Lindop (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 473.

³ Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 2013), p. 128.

⁴ Ellen G. Landau, 'Beat Movement', Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online, Oxford University Press
<<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2085639>> [accessed 3 September 2023]

⁵ Anne Mounic, *Counting the Beats: Robert Graves Poetry of Unrest*, Costerus New Series, 192, ed. by C. C. Barfoot, László Sáandor Chardonens, Theo D'haen (Amsterdam, NY: Rodopi, 2021), p. 19.

⁶ Robert Graves, 'Cry Faugh', in *Robert Graves: The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 2000), p. 447.

⁷ The OED online includes the term 'nymphological' but its only source happens to be this poem. The OED places 'nymphological' under the term 'nymphology', 'the study of mythological nymphs'.

⁸ *Queer Beats: How the Beats Turned America on to Sex: selected writings*, ed. by Regina Marler (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004), p. 24.

⁹ Allen Ginsberg, 'Kaddish,' in *Poems & Poets*, Poetry Foundation, 2024, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49313/kaddish>> [accessed 6 December 2023]

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¹⁰ Robert Graves, 'A Valentine', in *Robert Graves: The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 2000), p. 161.