

## Film Review: James Franco as Allen Ginsberg Unleashes a Primal Scream in ‘Howl’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 1, 2010 - 11:40am

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CHICAGO – “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...” So began the reading of Allen Ginsberg’s poem that rattled society, the very title of which is the inspiration for the new film, “Howl,” featuring James Franco, Jon Hamm and Mary Louise-Parker.



The poem Howl is a primal scream, an attempt to wake up a moribund post-WW2 America to the sins of its conquering ways. It is a shot across the bow of the capitalist USA, both prescient and in the moment, a lightning bolt of truth and savagery, the waterfall of words that both cleanses and freezes the soul. The film offers a reading of the piece, illustrated by interpretive animation, and an obscenity trial, focusing on the dirty words in the poem without calculating the rest of the passages, in a 1950s society fearing recognition.

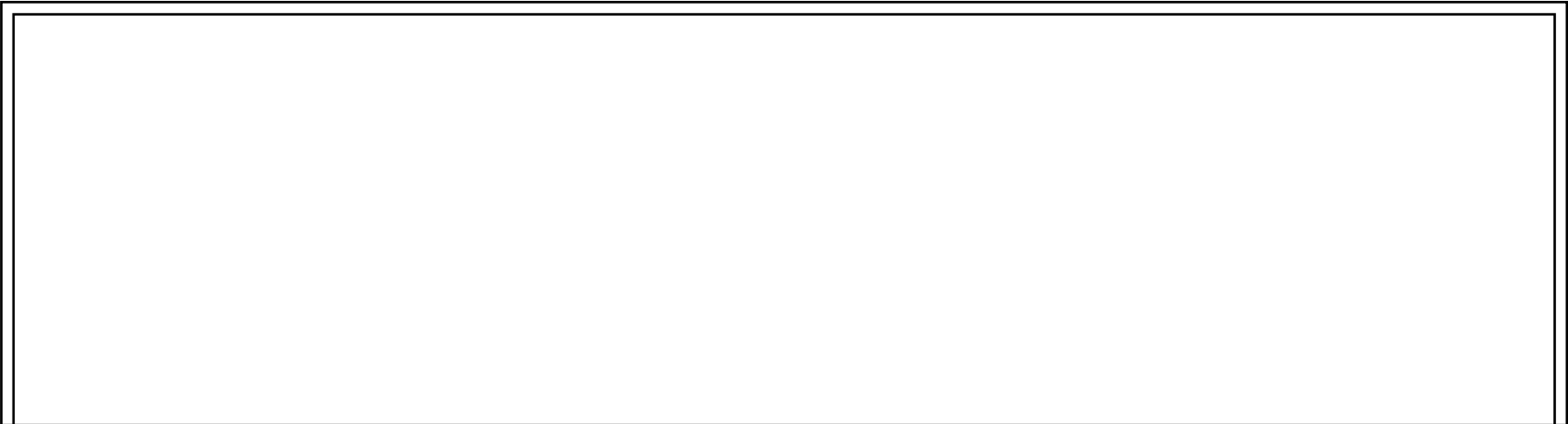
On October 7th, 1955, Allen Ginsberg (James Franco) stood up at the Six Gallery in San Francisco and read in full his poem “Howl.” Like the seed of a flower that defied the social soil that wanted to bury it, the poem blossomed into a full revolutionary credo for the emerging “Beat” society, which included Ginsberg’s friends Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs. It subsequently reverberated into the culture and madness of the 1960s, and has remained present ever since.

In 1950s San Francisco, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Andrew Rogers), was the first to publish the poem out of his famous City Lights Bookstore. The reaction took a while to filter into the establishment, but when it got there it was immediately deemed obscene, for its stark depiction of sexuality, language and theme. Ferlinghetti was put on trial for selling the book, defended by attorney Jake Ehrlich (Jon Hamm).

The 1957 trial was a bellwether for the determination of free speech as the puritan American society began to loosen its grip. Prosecutor Ralph McIntosh (David Strathairn) chose to lessen the poem’s impact by focusing on prurient passages and swear words, but as expert witnesses began to break it down (played by Treat Williams, Mary-Louise Parker and Jeff Daniels), Judge Clayton Horn (Bob Balaban) ultimately made a decision that established a precedent for years to come.

*“Howl” opens on September 24th, consult local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring James Franco, Jon Hamm, Mary-Louise Parker, Jeff Daniels, Treat Williams, David Strathairn, Andrew Rogers and Bob Balaban. Written and directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman. Rated “R”*

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Let Me Tell You Howl it Should Be: James Franco as Allen Ginsberg in 'Howl'

*Photo Credit: © Oscilloscope Pictures*



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