

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Allen Ginsberg** (1926- )

### *Kaddish*

The Kaddish, which means “holy” in Aramaic, refers to any of five different prayers which have been recited in Jewish services for thousands of years. One of these, the Mourner’s Kaddish, is a prayer for the bereaved to recite in honor of their loved ones. Two lines of it—“Yisborach, v’yistabach...b’rich hu”—are quoted in Section II of the poem and then translated in lines 1-2 of the “Hymmn” section. Nevertheless, as this excerpt illustrates, the prayer does not speak of loss, mention the dead, or mention the feelings of the Mourner. It simply praises God as the supreme source of peace, the eternal power and eternal rest.

In the poem “Kaddish,” Allen Ginsberg mixes this Jewish tradition with very intimate, painful memories of his mother Naomi Ginsberg’s death after years of madness, suicide attempts, and confinements in mental hospitals. He also writes frankly and realistically and sometimes humorously about his own life—his homosexuality, his taking drugs, his rivalry with his brother, his restless travels, his visions, and his ambition to be a great visionary poet. It is possibly the most autobiographical poem Ginsberg has written, and all his work has been autobiographical, as a part of his aesthetic of spontaneity, expressiveness, and energy.

However with the exception of Part II, which, as said in the poem, was written in twenty straight hours, after a night without sleep, the poem was not written quickly. According to Ginsberg’s account in “How “Kaddish” Happened,” Part IV was written first; then a year later parts I and II; and still later Part V. (He does not mention Part III.)<sup>1</sup> He also waited a year before making a clean draft of the manuscript, fearful that the poem was too long, disorderly, and private—a rather startling thing for Ginsberg the supposedly wild man to admit. But it has since been recognized as a great poem: both ecstatic and controlled, funny and sad, personal and universal.

The text below is from *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1989) is the latest biography. Jane Kramer’s *Allen Ginsberg in America* (New York: Random House, 1969) is an invaluable study of the man and the myth. *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1984) has a rich collection of reviews, essays, and documents.

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1. In *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove, 1973), pp. 345-47.