

Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/allen-ginsbergs-kaddish>.

Introduction

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was among the best-known and most widely-acclaimed American poets of the twentieth century. His charismatic performances, distinctive appearance, and rule-breaking poems like *Howl* (1956) and *Kaddish* (1961) made him a true literary celebrity in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Born in New Jersey, Ginsberg is closely associated with San Francisco, its City Lights Bookstore, and the Beat movement that emerged there in the 1950s. His father, Louis Ginsberg, was also a poet; his mother, Naomi (the subject of *Kaddish*) was an outspoken Communist who suffered for decades from an undiagnosed mental illness.

Kaddish, which Ginsberg wrote between 1957 and 1959 and published in 1961, is, at its core, a poem about a son learning to grieve for his mother. But Ginsberg's emotional and intellectual rawness make this poem an investigation about what it means to grieve, or even to be a son or mother. A deeply intimate portrait of his family's life, *Kaddish* nonetheless embeds itself in specific historical contexts: of Jewish life in the United States and after the Holocaust, of left-wing political activism before and during the Cold War, of a fiercely independent woman who died as second-wave feminism was only just beginning to be formulated.

The resources in this kit offer students a variety of ways to approach Ginsberg's poem: in the contexts of Jewish history and religion, literary history, genre, family dynamics, performance, and popular culture.

Cover image: Photograph, Allen and Naomi Ginsberg, circa 1935. Courtesy Allen Ginsberg Collection / Stanford University Libraries.

Subjects

Poetry, Religion, Social Commentary, United States

Reading and Background

- The **full text** of *Kaddish* is available online from the Poetry Foundation, which also offers **a biographical sketch and additional poems**. The **American Academy of Poets** offers another brief but informative biography of Ginsberg.
- The University of Illinois's **Modern American Poetry site** contains a variety of contextual resources, including excerpts from scholarship on Ginsberg, reviews of his work, photographs, interviews—even portions of his FBI file, built as he challenged U.S. obscenity laws, foreign policy, drug enforcement, and homophobic practices.
- For recordings of Ginsberg reading and discussing *Kaddish* and a variety of other poems, consider visiting the University of Pennsylvania's **PennSound resource**.
- For scholarship on *Kaddish*, consider Chapter 2 of Maeera Shreiber's *Singing in a Strange Land: Toward a Jewish American Poetics* (Stanford University Press, 2007). The concluding chapter to Hana Wirth-Nesher's *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2005) offers a broad overview of literary kaddishes, including Ginsberg's.

Resources

1: Mourner's Kaddish (Kaddish Yatom), text in Aramaic, in transliteration, and in English translation.



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The title and content of Ginsberg's poem make explicit references to the Mourner's Kaddish. This prayer, written in Aramaic, appears regularly in Jewish liturgy. Traditionally, it is recited daily by the bereaved—in the case of a parent, for eleven months—and again on the anniversary (*yartzeit*) of a death. In its current form, the Mourner's Kaddish most likely entered Jewish liturgy during the time of the Crusades as a reaction to violence against European Jewish communities. These resources will allow students to engage with the text of the poem on the levels of meaning and of sound/rhythm, each of which plays an important role in shaping Ginsberg's *Kaddish*.

You can listen to the Mourner's Kaddish in two different dialects [here](#) and [here](#).

Suggested Activity: Before distributing the texts, ask students if they are familiar with the Mourner's Kaddish. Ask them if they know what it's "about." Some students may expect it to be a prayer explicitly discussing death; their responses can help to guide the discussion that follows. Distribute the text and ask students to follow along as you play the audio. Ask them to identify the most important concepts contained in the prayer. How, if at all, are these concepts deployed in Ginsberg's poem? (You may wish to look specifically at Part II, "Hymmn," and Part V of the poem.)

Source: *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (Daily Prayer Book), translated and annotated by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 137-38.

2: Audio excerpts, Allen Ginsberg reading from "Kaddish," 1959 and 1995.

Part of the phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg's poetry and literary celebrity was the in-person experience of his poetry recitations. However, what his work sounded like out loud wasn't constant over his lifetime. The different styles of his performances point to a number of possible tones and meanings within the poem.

Suggested Activity: Ask students how they would imagine Ginsberg reading *Kaddish* aloud. Would it be slow? Mournful? Fast? Full of nervous energy? Assemble a list of possibilities. Now have students, with a partner, read the first five lines out loud, choosing one of these possible styles. How is the experience of reading the poem out loud different from reading it silently?

Play the recording of Part I of the poem for your students. How would they characterize the sound of this reading? Does it meet their expectations? Does it, as Ginsberg insists, mimic the style of the Mourner's Kaddish?

Play the recording of Part V of the poem for your students. Note that it is from nearly 40 years later. How would they characterize the sound of this reading? Do the different tones and styles change the meaning of the poem for them? Why might Ginsberg have adjusted his performance style?

Sources: Allen Ginsberg, "Kaddish (Reading at the Poetry Center, San Francisco State University)," February 27, 1959, PennSound. Courtesy Allen Ginsberg LLC.

Allen Ginsberg, "Kaddish – V (Recorded Lived at the Knitting Factory, NYC)," May 5, 1995, PennSound. Courtesy Allen Ginsberg LLC.

3: Photograph, Allen and Naomi Ginsberg, circa 1935.

While students may have an easy time picturing the middle-aged Ginsberg with his Whitmanesque beard, Naomi can easily remain lost in the swirl of details in the poem. So, too, can the idea of Ginsberg as a child, as someone's son. This photo offers a seemingly objective snapshot of their relationship, one that can help to ground students in the poem and to highlight its emotional details.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to look at this photograph of a young Allen Ginsberg and his mother, Naomi. Describe the relationship the photograph presents between mother and son and the emotions seemingly present for each. (Direct students to pay close attention to body language and facial expressions.) Does seeing this image add resonance to the poem? Have students construct a rough timeline of the events described in the poem. Where would this photograph fit on the timeline? Does this context change the meaning they take away from the picture?

Source: Courtesy Allen Ginsberg Collection / Stanford University Libraries.

4: Song, Ray Charles's "Drown in My Own Tears," 1956, and poetry excerpt, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais," 1821.

Early in *Kaddish*, Ginsberg names two important intertexts: the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" (1821), a long elegy for John Keats, a fellow poet, and a recording of Ray Charles singing a blues song. Elegy and the blues are two important genres responding to grief, each with a distinct history. In the 1950s, elegy would have been seen as "high culture," deriving from the English literary canon and, before this, classical literature. Blues, on the other hand, might have been seen as "low" or popular culture, emerging from African American musical traditions.

(Note: while it's not certain that "Drown in My Own Tears" is the song referenced in *Kaddish*, it was released as a single in early 1956, the year Naomi Ginsberg died, and topped the charts. If nothing else, it's representative of Ray Charles's style of this period.)

Suggested Activity: Have students read the first and final stanzas of "Adonais" aloud and listen to the recording of Ray Charles. Based on these examples, ask students to describe and distinguish the ways that elegy and blues respond to loss and grief (e.g., in terms of tone, rhythm, and attitude). If you have already discussed (or wish to introduce) the Mourner's Kaddish, ask students to compare this traditional Jewish approach to mourning alongside blues and elegy. Finally, ask them to consider which approach(es) Ginsberg uses in his poem, looking at the first several lines of *Kaddish* or at other excerpts of the poem.

For an additional activity, play the recording of Ray Charles and the recordings of Ginsberg reading the poem (see resource 2) sequentially. Ask students to compare the rhythm and style of these recordings.

Sources: Ray Charles, "Drown in My Own Tears," Atlantic Records, 1956. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ekn9dAYfz0.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais," *Poems selected from Percy Bysshe Shelley*, preface by Richard Garnett (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1880).

5: Text excerpt from "Mahzor Vitry," 11th Century CE.

The text of the Mourner's Kaddish prayer is not clearly related to death. Yet its recitation has long been part of Jewish customs for mourning one's parents. Rabbinic sources have sought to explain this connection. One of the most frequently recounted is a midrash (commentary) concerning the important Talmudic figure Rabbi Akiva (c. 50-135 CE). This version comes from the *Mahzor Vitry*, an 11th century volume of Jewish law and liturgy.

Suggested Activity: Introduce the passage and its background. Read it as a class, in partners, or as individuals. Ask your students to consider and discuss questions about one or both of the following themes:

1) Sanctification: The "dead" man's son redeems his father by reciting a prayer of sanctification and blessing. Why might such a prayer have redemptive qualities? What does this story tell us about the relationship between parents and children, or between generations more generally, in traditional Jewish texts? In what ways are these relationships reflected—or not reflected—in Ginsberg's poem?

2) The Fear of Recurrence: The man Rabbi Akiva encounters shares his name. Do you think that this story is partially about Rabbi Akiva's fear of a shared fate or the way he sees his own reflection in the dead man? To what extent is this fear present in the relationship between Allen and Naomi in *Kaddish*?

Source: Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 41-3.

6: Text excerpt, Philip Roth's "The Human Stain," 2000.

In this passage Nathan Zuckerman, the narrator of Philip Roth's novel, is attending the funeral of a friend. His meditation on the Mourner's Kaddish places it in the context of Jewish history and in fact places every Jewish death in a wider historical context.

Suggested Activity: This passage highlights a tension between the context of personal history and communal history. Have students reflect upon the historical and communal events that may have informed the Ginsberg's personal family history and Naomi's mental illness? (Possible examples to consider include: the Holocaust, the Soviet Union, the McCarthy hearings, and the history of sexism and women's oppression.)

Why might Roth's character Zuckerman feel the kaddish announces not that an individual is dead, but that "a Jew is dead"? What is the difference between saying "Naomi Ginsberg is dead" and "Another Jew is dead"? In what ways is *Kaddish* a poem about a specifically Jewish death? In what ways is it not? Ask students to reflect for a moment on what the kaddish (or comparable prayers/rituals from their faith traditions) means to them. What does it seem to mean for Nathan Zuckerman and Mark Silk in the passage above? For Ginsberg?

Source: Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 313-14.