

Article

On the Historical Narrative and Satirical Language in “Wichita Vortex Sutra” by Allen Ginsberg

Xu Wen ^{1,*}¹ College of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

* Correspondence: Xu Wen, College of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

Abstract: Existing scholarship usually situates Allen Ginsberg’s iconic role as a countercultural poet, while few studies have examined him as a historical chronicler of the 1950s onwards, focusing on historical interpretations and irrational narratives that appear in his poems. This study, then, examines the historical interpretive strategies employed in the narrative discourses on irrationalism, counterculture, anti-war, post-industrial civilization and so on involved in “Wichita Vortex Sutra”. Specifically, it investigates satirical language as a kind of interpretive employment function to present Ginsberg’s irrationalism and anti-war narratives, by applying Hayden White “Metahistory” as its theoretical framework. It argues that Ginsberg’s rearrangement, representation, and interpretation of Vietnam War narratives, achieved through poetic motifs and techniques, reveals an encoded satire on the U.S. politics, culture, and society. This part examines the primary level of Ginsberg’s interpretive strategies thus providing the foundation for subsequent analysis on his individual storytelling of 1960s America.

Keywords: historical narrative; Allen Ginsberg; Wichita Vortex Sutra; irrationalism

1. Introduction: Historical Narrative, Interpretive Strategies, and Narrative Discourses

In *Metahistory*, Hayden White delves into the structural components of the 19th-century European historical imagination through a formalist method, considering the historical accounts of this period as “a formal verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” [1]. In this way, he highlights the similarities between history and literature, introducing the linguistic and literary diversion into historical analysis with a focus on the figurative language and discursive structures involved.

Moreover, he identifies the “preconceptual (precritical) and poetic nature” of historical narrative as a mechanism that historians employ when presenting traces of the past [1]. Usually, the past is narrated in order to provide meaningful interpretation for “explanatory affects” [2]. He argues that narrators would “encode the process of construction” presenting their narratives as “self-evident, natural and true” to earn the power of expression with “prefigurative stances” and ideological concerns [1]. It means they are concerned with “facts about the true” (subjective judgments), instead of “events about the real” (objective presentation).

According to White, in the process of historical narrative, events are first organized into a chronicle, then structured into a story with plots, and eventually encoded motifically into a multi-layered narrative. In this process, historians would apply historical interpretive strategies to construct and explain the facts (stories) they present, addressing “cognitive, aesthetic, and moral (or ideological) levels of effects” [3]. White outlines three interpretive strategies: employment, formal argument, and ideological implication.

Specifically, employment, addressing cognitive levels, “provides the meaning of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told”. Based on [4], White identifies four different modes of employment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire. Concerning

Received: 24 February 2025

Revised: 28 February 2025

Accepted: 09 March 2025

Published: 11 March 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

aesthetic aspects, formal argument explains “what happens in the story and why it happens, with formal, explicit, or discursive argument” [4]. Four paradigms of historical explanation are considered as Formism, Organicism, Mechanism, and Contextualism [4]. Dealing with “the particular moral position” of historians in conducting relevant historical narrative, four ideological positions “are postulated as Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism. To summarize, interpretive strategies are a set of models employed in the production of historical narrative which is infinitely rich in suggestion with a blend of representation and interpretation with narrators’ discourses.

2. Narratives Discourse in the Satire on the Vietnam War

This part investigates the narrative discourses on the Vietnam War embedded in the explanation by employment of satire, with a focus on the satirical motif and technique in “Wichita Vortex Sutra” [5]. It should be noted that the controversial significance of the Vietnam War in US 1960s cultural memory, national mood, and Ginsberg’s individual storytelling provide the foundation for the exploration of the historical interpretation of it. Through the analysis on Ginsberg’s interpretation, his “prefigurative” stances on the Vietnam War could be revealed.

According to White, Romance is fundamentally a drama of “self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it” [1]. However, such drama often begins in a historical context marked by skepticism, anxiety, nihilism, and darkness. With hero’s tough fight against the evil, vice, and darkness, consummation and fulfillment are eventually achieved [6]. Therefore, a dramatic twist and tension toward redemption could be seen. Comedy and Tragedy, however, suggest merely the possibility of “partial liberation” and “provisional release” [7]. But the temporary triumph finally occurs to be a fall in the somber reconciliations and resignations.

The archetypal theme of Satire is the precise opposite of all hopefulness. It is “a drama of diremption, which is dominated by the apprehension and recognition” of an ultimate failure [6]. It presents a picture that man is the captive of the world rather than the master, and that man’s consciousness is always inadequate to overcome the dark force. It signals a conviction that “the world has grown old, and the ultimate inadequacy of the visions of the world” illustrating the extreme absurdity and irregularity in the way things develop, and preparing for the “repudiation of all sophisticated conceptualizations of the world” [8]. Therefore, satire, out of its skeptical and ironic nature, contents itself with the “suspicious explosion of all formulas and myths, and delights in exposing the paradoxes contained in every attempt to capture experience in language” [9]. To summarize, satirical plot is used to reveal a world without any structural reason, featuring its subversive essence and destructive intention.

3. False Language and Report as a Satirical Motif

This part examines narrative discourses embedded in motifs with Ginsberg’s “prefigurative” attitudes and subversive stances in the Vietnam War. In this context, discourse is concerned with narrative revealed in the satirical motifs of false language and official victory report. Motif is a “recurring structure, contrast, and literary device recurring across a story to develop and inform narrative elements like theme or mood” [9]. It is a distinctive feature or idea in the form of subjects, images or phrases, through which author’s points of view could be inferred [10]. For instance, in “Wichita Vortex Sutra” “language” should be noted as a motif, appearing repeatedly and noticeably for Ginsberg’s subversive and satirical intention.

As it is analyzed previously, Satire is applied to express negative feedback or counter ideals characteristic of skepticism towards judgments. In Ginsberg’s writings, it tends to exhibit a countercultural point of view, which is alienated highly with his subversion and

critiques on the official victory military reports and false language propaganda in the Vietnam War, which glorify warfare and conceal its brutality.

On the macro scale, Ginsberg's Satire addresses the large-scale physical violence of the War, and on the micro scale, it critiques the more cunning violence imposed on individuals through media and journalism, which manipulate public perception and normalize the horrors [11]. The struggle for liberation from this media-driven mental manipulation parallels a crueler fight for liberation in the Vietnam battlefield. By exposing this mechanism, Ginsberg invites readers to reclaim their mental independence and provoke their own voices, advocating for both personal and collective emancipation from the war.

Put it this way on the radio
 Put it this way in television language
 Use the words...
 Put it this way in headlines
 Omaha World Herald—Rusk Says Toughness
 Essential For Peace
 Put it this way
 Lincoln Nebraska morning Star—
 Vietnam War Brings Prosperity [5]

Ginsberg employs satire to challenge official discourse, exposing the falsity of media-generated reports and revealing suppressed truths. He challenges the morality of the War, the government's positive pronouncements as the "bad guess" Through the satirical deployment of terms like "prosperity", "peace" and "toughness" the war's aggressive essence is brought to the fore [12]. Through the poetic strategy of Satire, the negative tone could be interpreted easily in Ginsberg's figurative use of these words as a subversion of official narratives [13]. By incorporating representative fragments of official journalism, Ginsberg reveals the government's rhetoric and its manipulative narrative strategies.

language, language:
 "A bad guess" ...
 The General guessed they'd stop infiltrating the South
 if they bombed the North
 So I guess they bombed! [5]

Arguably, his poetry does more than report; it condemns the language and mechanisms of media propaganda, inviting readers to confront and question the constructed nature of them [14]. This magic can also be understood as performative, aiming to effect change by creating new ways to understand and engage into the field, thereby challenging the deceit and lies embedded in prefigurative discourses.

imaging the throng of Selves
 that make this nation one body of
 Prophecy languaged by Declaration as Pursuit of
 Happiness!
 I call all Powers of imagination
 to my side in this auto to make Prophecy,

all Lords
of human kingdoms to come. [5]

The media are portrayed as consistently distorting the truth, attempting to deceive the American public into trusting that the situation in Vietnam is under control. In response, Control over language as a means of reclaiming his consciousness, aiming to inspire and transform public awareness to resist the war [15]. He directly confronts this manipulation to subvert and lay bare the hidden realities of the conflict. By declaring, "Father I cannot tell a lie" [5]. Ginsberg juxtaposes truth with the media's propaganda, countering its fabricated narratives with his quest for a language of truth. In this process, he integrates fragments of news language, blending them with other voices to create a subversive, multifaceted discourse. This interplay of utterances lays bare its complicity with the war.

Language, language

Ezra Pound the Chinese Written Character for truth

defined as man standing by his word

Word picture: forked creature

Man

standing by a box, birds flying out

representing mouth speech

Ham Steak please waitress, in the warm café. [5]

With an ironical tone throughout the poem, Ginsberg's voice is effective in denouncing the media's distortion by reorganizing and subverting the very language used in the media reports. With the interweaved metaphors, the poet seeks "to expose and demystify the war-makers' attempts to create public support through public media" [15-16]. Most significantly, by exposing the false report of the war situation, he constructs an alternative voice advocating for the end of the War and envisioning a future liberated from oppressive media narratives.

Language, language

Ezra Pound the Chinese Written Character for truth

defined as man standing by his word

Word picture: forked creature

Man

standing by a box, birds flying out

representing mouth speech

Ham Steak please waitress, in the warm café. [5]

In summary, Ginsberg's poems critique official victory reports with biting satire. The descriptions of "victory" are imbued with irony to subvert the brutal and aggressive essence of the war. By rejecting the literal meanings of official rhetoric, Ginsberg equips readers with the critical capacity to discern the absurdity behind such rhetoric, fostering deeper awareness of the truth.

4. Poetic Collage and Word Play as a Satirical Technique

According to White, Satire usually presents chaotic, discontinuous, and absurd plots of history. Since it is stripped of all "illusions" it loses all belief in "essences" and tends in

the end to “turn upon word play, to become a language about language... to dissolve the bewitchment of consciousness caused by language itself”. This part investigates Ginsberg’s satire, critiques and subversion on the Vietnam War and the language power dominated by the US government as well as his use of collage to attack it. The primary focus would be Ginsberg’s poetic collage and word play in the poems.

On the back cover of *Planet News*, Ginsberg refers to his poems as “mind-collage” which serves to cut up and rearrange the institutional structures of power [5]. In this way, collage operates as a wordplay to articulate Ginsberg’s prophetic politics, inspiration, energy and ambition to criticize the American society, centralizing himself as the prophet. The fragmentation inherent in collage serves as a vehicle for social commentary, enabling Ginsberg to subvert the discourses of authority.

Ginsberg’s poetic collage operates a group of poetic techniques, including reference, juxtaposition, fracture, and fusion. It demands readers to make their own connections between fragmented elements, transforming the reading into a process of deconstruction. In this way, Ginsberg attempts to reassert control over language and applies it as a disruptive force to challenge the dominant narratives of power, revealing the subversive and dissident intentions as a dissident.

Some of the
 Language language
 Communist
 Language language soldiers
 charged so desperately
 they were struck with six or seven bullets before they fell...
 they were struck with six or seven bullets before they fell... [5]

As it is shown, a strong and prophetic voice emerges outspokenly throughout the poem through collage, destruction, recreation, and fragmentation. Specifically, his belief in the power of words enables him to charge his “magical” energy and to employ cut-up techniques to build the fragmentation with a disorienting and subversive yet deeply affective effect for his anti-war discourses.

With that, Ginsberg significantly reshapes the reader’s engagement with the text, offering an innovative understanding that operates on both formal and thematic levels [15-16]. More detailed examples and analysis could be seen in following lines from “Wichita Vortex Sutra”, which Ginsberg draws from a deconstructed military news report from Eagle News Services Saigon, incorporating fragments from the original text into his poetic composition.

Eagle News Services Saigon —
 Headline Surrounded Vietcong Charge Into Fire Fight
 the suffering not yet ended for others
 The last spasms of the dragon of pain
 shoot thru the muscles
 a crackling around the eyeballs
 of a sensitive yellow boy by a muddy wall... [5]

These lines provide a headline of the journal, which is “Surrounded Vietcong Charge into Fire Fight” However, it shifts the focus away from the War itself, opting instead to

highlight “a sensitive yellow boy by a muddy wall” The violence of the battlefield is replaced with an image of individual vulnerability and suffering. Strangely enough, the lines continue with “the last spasms of the dragon of pain” which connects the destruction of war with a more mythical vision of suffering [17]. While without an opportunity to talk about that, the original military news report was collaged and fragmented unexpectedly into the abstract, poetic images again, creating a dissonant and disharmonious juxtaposition.

Continued from page one area

after the Marines killed 256 Vietcong captured 31
ten-day operation Harvest Moon last December [5]

But readers are left without any explanation, instead they are prompted to confront the brutal realities of casualties in the War but continues with the a seemingly inharmonious and fragmented lines “Harvest Moon last December”. Seemingly, they are interrelated by the specific moment “December”. But it’s still hard to understand, because “Harvest Moon” traditionally occurs in the Autumn but not December, thus further disturbing the sense of linear time and logical sequence. It may invite readers to question the passage of time, the cyclical nature of violence. However, it shifts again, introducing a series of “languages”, seemingly without a coherency to the primary military report.

Language language

U.S. Military Spokesmen

Language language... [5]

Arguably, Ginsberg seeks to liberate readers from forces of language controlled by government. He subverts the power and authority of the mainstream media in the form of collage he deploys in the poems. After repetitive “language”, some real details and intentions come to readers finally.

Language Language

M 60 Machine Guns

Language language in La Drang Valley [5]

After the military report, Ginsberg shifts from abstract linguistic repetitions and juxtaposition to voices emerged with a more lyrical tone:

the terrain is rougher infested with leeches and scorpions

The war was over several hours ago!

Oh at last again the radio opens

blue Invitations! [5]

To sum up, Ginsberg’s employment of collage represents an attempt to transcend traditional boundaries in poetry. As the wordplay and language power employed by both American government and Ginsberg himself, the collage moves beyond language and challenges reality. it works as a form of political practices, “subverting traditional methodologies of reading and interpretation” and “deconstruct the accepted body of meaning

and create a new one" [11]. With the collage, Ginsberg opens up a space for multiple perspectives on the social and political discourses of 1960s America instead of being limited in the official language and expression of meaning from the government.

5. Conclusion

This study primarily focuses on Ginsberg's historical interpretative strategy involved in his anti-war narratives in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" by applying Hayden White's "Metahistory" as its theoretical framework. To be specific, it examines the motifs of false language and official victory report, and the poetic word play in the poems as the satirical emplotment to criticize the Vietnam War. It argues that Ginsberg's application of satirical motifs and collage are operated as the manifest level of narrative "encodation" and "the form of the content" — the figurative use of words with Ginsberg's ideological stances, the interpretative, ideological, and critical concerns. With the historical explanation by emplotment of satire, Ginsberg obscures the process of the construction of anti-war narrative discourses in his poems. Through the mechanism of satirical emplotment, Ginsberg articulates the left-wing criticism on the Vietnam War, revealing the sociopolitical turbulence of the 1960s. Furthermore, it provides foundation for the subsequent analysis on Ginsberg's individual storytelling of the US 1960s cultural memory and national identity.

References

1. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, JHU Press, 1973. ISBN: 978-0801817618.
2. A. De Fina and A. Georgakopoulou, *Analyzing Narrative: Discourse and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780521887168.
3. N. Carroll, "Topology and Narration," *Hist. Theory*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 396-404, 2000, doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00138.
4. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, 1957. ISBN: 978-0691069999.
5. A. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, New York: Harper, 1984. ISBN: 978-0060153410.
6. H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, JHU Press, 1987. ISBN: 9780801841156.
7. M. Bamberg, "Narrative Discourse and Identities," *Narratology Beyond Lit. Crit.*, 2005, pp. 213-237, doi: 10.1515/9783110201840.
8. J. Courtès and M. Rengstorf, "The Cognitive Dimension of Narrative Discourse," *New Lit. Hist.*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 433-447, 1976, doi: 10.2307/468554.
9. J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, SAGE Publications, 1970. ISBN: 9781473994546.
10. J. C. Rowe and R. Berg, *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1991, doi:10.7312/rowe94322-015.
11. R. Cran, "Material Language for Protest: Collage in Allen Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra'," *Text. Pract.*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 669-689, 2020, doi: 0.1080/0950236X.2018.1517105.
12. P. Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, *Oxford Res. Encycl. Amer. Hist.*, 2019. ISBN: 978-1558496934.
13. D. R. Jarraway, "'Standing by His Word': The Politics of Allen Ginsberg's Vietnam 'Vortex,'" *J. Amer. Cult.*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1993, doi: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.1993.00081.x.
14. B. McQuade, "'The Vietnam Syndrome' and the End of the Post-Sixties Era: Tropes and Hegemony in History and Policy," *Amer. J. Cult. Sociol.*, no. 2, pp. 33-65, 2014, doi: 10.1057/ajcs.2013.17.
15. B. Sørensen, "The Vortex and the Line: Performative Gestures in Allen Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra,'" *Life After Lines*, 2020, pp. 123-134. ISBN: 9788772102870.
16. P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, The Texas Christian University Press, 1976. ISBN: 978-0912646596.
17. H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964. ISBN: 978-0415289771.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of GBP and/or the editor(s). GBP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.