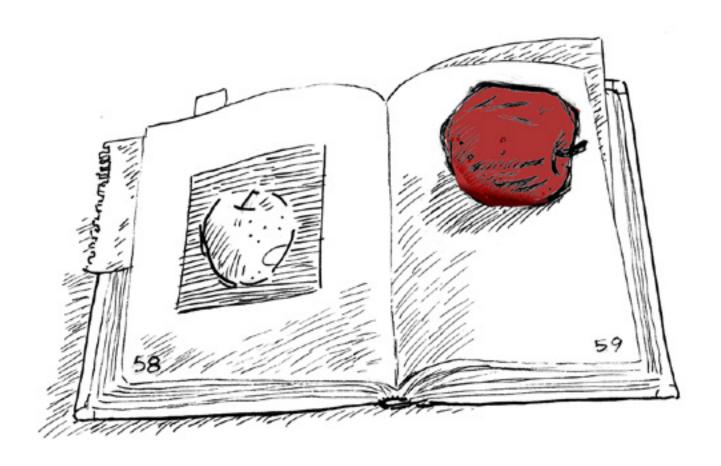
# **Allen Ginsberg**



#### Another example of a poem of witness, a poem of protest.

Allen Ginsberg (June 3, 1926 – April 5, 1997)

Like William Blake's "London" Ginsberg takes the reader on a short journey; in his case, the trip is through the modern landscape of a California grocery store.

- both show a persona existing in the environment which they rebel against,
   acknowledging the various types of people they meet
- the narrators are shown likewise as isolated figures, in the background, as non-participatory characters; they witness but do not act directly—Ginsberg specifically states that he wanders in a "solitary fancy" (19).
- the reader is therefore expected to be an agent of change and reform
- both are critiques of the mainstream culture
- both establish immediately their concerns and issues within opening stanzas

#### Ginsberg's persona is searching for three basic human drives:

- 1. inspiration (for poetry)
- **2.** food
- 3. sex
- poem acts as a journey-quest
- in this manner he connects the notions of hunger with notions of desire
- the store paradoxically and initially is a market for food *and* sex *and* poetry; wandering the supermarket the persona allows his hunger for food to block his initial quest: to find a source for a poem

- by stanza four he realizes his error and feels "absurd" (24);
   true poetry cannot be commercialized nor marketed for possession;
   poetry is an art form meant for spiritual means
- ultimately he realizes that capitalism is not a source of inspiration for poetry
- the irony of the situation is the fact the persona uses the market as a catalyst within a poem, in order to reach this epiphany

#### He utilizes Walt Whitman as a Muse, as an influence.

The opening stanza classically invokes Whitman's spirit in a reflective mode. This is essential to the underlying theme of the poem.

- "A Supermaket—" appeared in 1956, one hundred years after the first publication of Whitman's essential work: *Leaves of Grass*; Ginsberg's poem acts as a tribute to Whitman's work
- in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman celebrates the lives of the working class and the diversity of America, no matter gender, race, creed
- his poetry is widely taught in high school because he promotes
   the American Ideal; he is considered the American Poet, the Soul of America

- Whitman celebrated the Transcendental movement in many poems
- whereas Whitman is presumed to be homosexual, Ginsberg is openly gay without holding back on detailing his personal experiences
- through Whitman and Lorca, Ginsberg shows a persona who is not afraid of public opinion and does not look for general acceptance
- Ginsberg's lines echo Whitman's own style of free verse, emulating his long sentences with irregular line-breaks, celebratory narratives, and invocations of America's spirit; Ginsberg verses emulate paragraphs
- the next slide shows a rather terse poem by Whitman as an example

#### Walt Whitman

"As Adam Early in the Morning"

As Adam early in the morning,

Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,

Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,

Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,

Be not afraid of my body.

#### **Ginsberg's Closing**

As the beginning illustrates a traditional technique of invoking a spirit, the closing classically shows Whitman in Hades, the realm of the Underworld.

#### **Rivers of the Underworld**

Lethe, river of forgetfulness

Akheron, river of sorrow and pain

Kokytus, river of lamentation

Phelgethon, river of fire

Styx, river of hate <the Greek Hero Achilles is dipped into this river as a child

According to the Roman Poet Virgil in his epic *Aeneid*, those who bathe in the waters of the Lethe can erase all memories and therefore be reincarnated.

#### **Items to Consider:**

• What does Ginsberg imply by closing the poem with the figure of Whitman at the River Lethe?

• It has been documented that this poem can be considered a journey poem.

What does the speaker learn from his experience?