

Allen Ginsberg



A Supermarket in California

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

A Supermarket in California

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

A Supermarket in California

- 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

A Supermarket in California

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

A Supermarket in California

- 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.

A Supermarket in California

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

A Supermarket in California

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?*