

Allen Ginsberg's a supermarket in california



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Presented much like a spontaneous journal or diary entry, Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" is a complex and multifaceted poem that stands as an indictment against American government and culture. The opening lines of the poem forward the aforementioned journal-like quality and also present the central focal point of tension in the poem as a whole. The opening line specifically expresses a tone of wistfulness or even sadness: "What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman" (Ginsberg, 1). The evocation of Whitman's name is an obvious symbol of optimism or even idealism.

Due to the wide-ranging nature of Whitman's own writings, the sense of idealization is meant to extend to philosophy and politics as well as poetry. The opening line sets up the poem's central tension by contrasting idealization with cynical reality. The tone is established even before the first line due to the brilliant title which evokes both the optimistic westward expansion of America's history (California) and the practical demand of the American political and cultural systems to adequately provide for the American people (Supermarket).

It is important to recognize, that throughout the poem, Ginsberg intends the symbolic nature of the poem's setting of a supermarket to stand for much more than physical food. A close inspection of the poem indicates that Ginsberg meant that the promise of America, as envisioned by Whitman included moral, psychic, and spiritual "food" as well. Therefore, the specific word "supermarket" must be understood as ironic in nature. This assertion is confirmed early in the poem.

The speaker of the poem imagines he see Whitman himself in the supermarket: " I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, /poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery/ boys. " (Ginsberg, 10-12). The irony of the scene becomes clear: an idealized vision of Whitman contrasted with the urban reality of a lonely supermarket. The motifs of loneliness and hunger are closely aligned in the poem. This close connection between the sense of isolation and the sense of hunger is meant to reinforce the notion of emotional, psychic, and spiritual nourishment.

The second stanza of the poem begins: " In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images" (Ginsberg, 4) which indicates another layer of irony in the poem. That irony is the fact that the speaker of the poem is aware of his loneliness and " malnourished" emotional and psychic states. He enters the supermarket to find spiritual nourishment. What he finds instead is, of course, merely meat and produce and a vision of Whitman who appears to be just as lost and lonely as the speaker of the poem himself. The irony of the poem is where the tension of the poem begins and gains a degree of disturbing power.

Although the poem is written in a prosaic fashion and is meant to sound like a quickly dashed-off journal entry, the actual resonance of the poem is quite deep. The shallow " false front" of the poem is also evocative of the poem's theme of loneliness and isolation. There is a layer of ordinariness and pedestrianism connected even to a " spiritual" vision of Walt Whitman in a grocery store. Beneath this irony lies the rather cynical idea that something about American culture as embodied in the " supermarket" is reducing the remarkable to the mundane.

The following lines verify this idea: " What peaches and what penumbras!
Whole families/ shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the/
avocados, babies in the tomatoes! -and you, Garcia Lorca, what/ were you
doing down by the watermelons? (Ginsberg, 6-10). The exclamatory diction
in these lines is contrasted with ironic effect with the vision of a well-ordered
supermarket, with everything placed in convenient aisles. The subtle idea in
these lines is the connection, again, between the supermarket and spiritual
food.

In these lines, the theme becomes far more obvious. Within the " grocery-
list" of items: " peaches and penumbra" or avocados and tomatoes,
Ginsberg places husbands, wives, and babies, but he also places and names
the poet Garcia Lorca. This inclusion forthrightly states that poetry is to be
regarded as " food. " Obviously, given the poem's theme of isolation and
loneliness, it is natural to assume that poetry and art are intended to be the
food that relieves that kind of hunger, the hunger for images.

Despite the presence of so much abundance and edible food, the speaker of
the poem continues to follow his vision of Whitman: " I wandered in and out
of the brilliant stacks of cans/ following you," (Ginsberg, 14). The urgency of
spiritual need is greater than that of physical need. By following Whitman
and his poetic vision, the narrator succeeds in finding spiritual nourishment.
The nature of this spiritual food is shown in the following lines " We strode
down the open corridors together in our/ solitary fancy tasting artichokes,
possessing every frozen/delicacy, and never passing the cashier. (Ginsberg
18-20).

One of the more interesting turns-of-phrase in the entire poem happens in these lines. The phrase "our/ solitary fancy" evokes the sense of paradox. It is strange to consider a sense of mutual or shared loneliness. The rest of the lines illustrate that the sharing of loneliness with other lone "seekers" is, in fact, the nature of spiritual nourishment. Poetic communication is, therefore, as valuable and as necessary as literal food. Line 20 shows in a most obvious way that Ginsberg intends his reader to begin to consider a non-materialistic vision.

However, this non-materialistic vision keeps the setting of a modern supermarket. In this way, everything that was once seen as physical becomes a symbol of the human soul. The words "never passing the cashier" (Ginsberg, 20) are ordinary enough on the surface, but given the line of association in the poem, the words actually reflect a radical criticism of American society.

Because the whole poem, up to his point, has been setting up a contrast between literal and figurative food, the final belief that true food comes from beyond "cash" is an indictment of the "supermarket. The reader sees now that Ginsberg regards American society to be materialistically rich and diverse, but blind to the diversity of its very soul, or communal identity. It's at this point in the poem that the previously dominant tone of irony starts to change. The ironic contrast of spiritual and literal food reaches a climax in the lines: "I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the/ supermarket and feel absurd." (Ginsberg, 22-24). The self-realization of the ironic nature of the theme brings the speaker of the poem to a different emotional level.

The poem starts to shift from what had first seemed like a diary entry, then like a daydream, and now becomes a vision of sadness. Once the speaker of the poem recognizes himself as “absurd” and trapped in the ironic symbolism of the poem, the speaker of the poem begins to see that his idealized vision is starting to fade. The speaker of the poem has come to an American supermarket in California looking for Whitman's American dream, but he has found, instead, only a fantasy. The supermarket is real.

The vision of Whitman is only an ironic admission that Whitman's dream is truly not fitting for what America has become. When the poet questions Whitman: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in/ an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?” (Ginsberg, 20-21), he is admitting that he will stay in his daydream. Even though he realizes that his vision of Whitman is ironic, the speaker decides to follow a dream over reality. This is for the most part, the last and fullest ironic expression found in the poem.

The central idea that an artist or poet or even an average person finds more solace in the dream of America than in its reality. As the poem moves toward its closing stanza, the sense of irony shifts from playful and thoughtful to nearly disturbing. After the poet's confession that he will follow a dream rather than reality, the ironic tone of the poem has reached its peak and it falls off in a dramatic way. Even though the poem uses irony as a central tone, the overall impact of the poem is not actually ironic.

Instead, it is more like a lament. There is a sharp change in the tone of the poem in the opening of the closing stanza: “Will we stroll dreaming of the

lost America of love/ past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage? " (Ginsberg, 28-29). If someone has been reading the poem without understanding the contrast between idealized reality and the stark American reality shown by the supermarket setting they will not understand the phrase " lost America. "

On the other hand, given the obvious ironic build-up in the poem, the sudden shift to what sounds like a sad prayer in the last stanza will come as no surprise. It is in the final lines of the poem that Ginsberg's sharpest condemnation of American society is shown. The speaker of the poem implores his vision of Whitman for answers: " Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, / what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and/ you got out on a smoking bank" (Ginsberg, 30-31).

The answers he wants and most desperately needs are spiritual answers because America can only feed his material needs. Had Whitman's vision of America in its idealized joy been " true" then the speaker of the poem would not need to ask his spirit for guidance. The speaker of the poem is left knowing that the imagined answer to his loneliness was only a dream and that Whitman's ideal vision of America, along with his own, will " disappear on the black waters of Lethe" (Ginsberg, 32). In this way, Ginsberg's vision of America is one of a fabled society that prioritizes materialism over the human soul.