

An analysis and interpretation of allen ginsberg's america



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Through a careful interpretation of *A Defense of Poetry* by Percy Bysshe Shelley and *Democratic Vistas* by Walt Whitman, one can gain a holistic sense of poetry, what it is and what it does, that can be applied to literary texts of all times. One can better understand Allen Ginsberg's "America" through an examination of the aforementioned texts as well. The literary merit of the poem is best recognized through Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, although Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry* also contributes some very critical parallels to the poem and its characteristics. Ginsberg's "America" was written in 1956, a time when beatniks and beat poetry were popular. The poem is indeed a reflection of the beat style; it feels like a conversation with its spontaneity and honest tone. It reads like a monologue, incorporating a stream of consciousness feel, which results in confusion on the part of the reader, " You should have seen me reading Marx./My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right./I won't say the Lord's Prayer./I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations" (Norton 136). The confusion that Ginsberg evokes in his poem is necessary to give the reader a sense of how the poem came to Ginsberg in thought. When reading the poem, the reader feels as though he or she is inside the mind of the author. The content of the poem focuses on what America is doing to itself and its people through the decisions that it makes. Ginsberg speaks the mind of Americans who were at the time isolated from the mainstream society. He expresses the collective fear of the (then) imminent threat of nuclear war. He also elaborates on the feeling that the entire country was run by the media, " Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?/ I'm obsessed by Time Magazine./ I read it every week./" (137). Ginsberg found his inspiration for both his poem's content and its style in the writings of Walt Whitman. " So <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-and-interpretation-of-allen-ginsbergs-america/>

these poems are a series of experiments with the formal organization of the long line... I realized at the time that Whitman's form had rarely been further explored..." (636). Therefore Allen Ginsberg went on to attempt this form that so inspired him and it is of no coincidence that Ginsberg's style is often analogous with Whitman's. With reference to Ginsberg's emulation of Walt Whitman's content, the Norton Anthology, Postmodern American Poetry, states that, "Ginsberg proposed a return to the immediacy, egalitarianism and visionary ambitions of Blake and Whitman." (130). His poem "America" caters toward themes of democracy, something Whitman's poetry also does. Yet unlike Whitman, Ginsberg takes a more questioning stance on America and does not use his poem to praise the nation. The anthology also notes that, "Walt Whitman had called for 'large conscious American Persons'. Ginsberg responded by writing himself large on the American landscape while retaining an appealing modesty." (130). Allen Ginsberg not only responded to Whitman's "call" but also to his six line poem "America" with one of his own. Walt Whitman's call for 'large conscious American Persons' appeared in essence in his unconventional essay, Democratic Vistas. In this essay, Whitman invites such attempts as Ginsberg's through the statement, "Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern." (675). The want for such a modern poet in the United States stems from Whitman's belief that the arts, and namely poetry, are the basis of growth and self-discovery, and a necessity to democracy. "Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American democracy." (675). He viewed

Democracy not only as a political theory, but also as a cultural idea. From <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-and-interpretation-of-allen-ginsbergs-america/>

this cultural view of Democracy, came his belief, much like that of Percy Bysshe Shelley's, that the role of the poet is not simply to act as the "unacknowledged legislator" of mankind, but to act as the "essential formative influence for shaping the future of democracy." (673). Democratic Vistas repeatedly mentions the idea of individualism within the aggregate (676). Whitman says that the mission of government is, "to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves..." (677). This concept of democracy, which implies self-governance and autonomy, reflects Whitman's egalitarian beliefs and his attempts to focus on the identity and potential of individuals (673). Ginsberg agreed with Whitman on many levels, but especially with his focus on equality and the potential of the individual. Like Whitman, Allen Ginsberg valued democracy and its perpetuation. His work grew out of the notion that the thoughts and experiences of the individual resonated among the masses, "It occurs to me that I am America" (137). After that line in the poem, Ginsberg's tone shifts temporarily into that of America, "Asia is rising against me...I'd better consider my national resources...I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns." (137). He places so much emphasis on being the voice of America, that for awhile in this poem, he becomes America. This idea reflects Ginsberg's belief that prose is personal and that it comes directly from the writer's own person (130). Ginsberg's feelings toward America in his personal life come through in his poem as he transforms himself into America. Allen Ginsberg personifies America in the poem and this is obvious to the reader in the way the narrator either speaks to or about America. The reader must acknowledge that America can be <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-and-interpretation-of-allen-ginsbergs-america/>

seen as the country, the place in which people live, but also America can be viewed as a living being, because it is comprised of them. Here, however, Ginsberg seems to portray a living body with one voice and one mind. The voice being that of the masses and the mind being controlled by the media, Ginsberg's role in the poem is to speak up for those who are unheard and to get away from the media dominated "mind" of America. Considering the value that Whitman placed upon literature as a mode of reaching the masses and conveying a message of self-expression, one should have no trouble admitting that Whitman would greatly admire Allen Ginsberg's literary expression. Whitman believed that great writers would bring about a cultural revolution, and that the literature of the past would be insufficient at accomplishing this task (Lecture 9/13/04). Therefore, Ginsberg's confrontational voice in "America" which represented the voice of the oppressed, was effective in achieving a cultural revolution through literary expression. Were Percy Bysshe Shelley to be confronted with "America", he would first suggest that it is the expression of Allen Ginsberg's imagination (538). Shelley said that language itself is poetry, therefore, "America", which is certainly comprised of language, would, by Shelley's own definition, be poetry. He says, "to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." (539). According to this definition, Shelley may find that it is difficult to categorize "America" as poetry. It does not apprehend the beautiful; instead it encapsulates the wrongdoings and ugliness of this country, "America when will we end the human war?... America you don't really want to go to war... America this is quite serious." (136 -137).

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Ginsberg's words do agree with Shelley's definition of how a poem exists; Ginsberg existed and perceived these wrongdoings of the American society and government and then he expressed them. Shelley claims that "poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." (550). Were Ginsberg to be confronted with this "truth" he might suggest otherwise. "America" is not a record of Ginsberg's best and happiest moments, instead, it is a record of his ill experiences and miserable observations of his homeland. Shelley believed that it was impossible for a man to say, "I will compose poetry." He says that "the mind in creation is like a fading coal" and that from an invisible influence, a brightness is awoken within. From this brightness and inspiration, comes poetry, which Shelley argues, "but when this composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet." (549). Perhaps hearing this echo from his late influences, Ginsberg attempted to follow Shelley's advice. "I thought I wouldn't write a poem, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind -sum up my life-something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, write for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears." (635). Although this strategy worked for Allen Ginsberg, as it was the method he used to begin writing his best-known work, "Howl", Shelley may not have intended for the poet to use the free-flowing, stream of consciousness as the main mode of communication in the poem. This use of stream of consciousness is also obvious in "America" in a line where Ginsberg says, "I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind." (136). The irony of this statement is that the author was writing his poem, <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-and-interpretation-of-allen-ginsbergs-america/>

whether he was in the right mind or not. Shelley perhaps intended for Ginsberg's strategy to be used as a method of brainstorming, not to yield the final results in a streaming, abstract chain of words. Ginsberg suggests however, "Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image and gets to Last Thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly Academics in Limbo screeching about form." (635). Allen Ginsberg referred here to his predecessors, including Shelley, and was aware of the stylistic and formulaic changes in his poetry that would make it subject to interpretation and defense. Although Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* does in many ways support and defend Allen Ginsberg's attempts to self-express and create beauty through writing, Walt Whitman's essay, *Democratic Vistas* celebrates Ginsberg's work with lesser contradiction. It would seem obvious that Ginsberg believed that Whitman was speaking directly to him through his essay, "I feel, with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorb'd the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpress'd." (679). Therefore, Ginsberg took it upon himself and made his life's work into a mission of satisfying this request of Whitman's. "America" is a model and an image-making work for its readers; it does speak to the people and in a sense, speaks for them. The work addresses issues of cultural acceptance, war and peace and the powerlessness of the people, the dominance and control of the media and the motivation of Americans toward self-action. Allen Ginsberg's "America" was certainly very different from <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-and-interpretation-of-allen-ginsbergs-america/>

Walt Whitman's "America", but not only in a literary sense. As America shifted further and further from the nation that Whitman knew, even greater was the need for the writer or speaker to represent the unheard, oppressed, and the masses. Allen Ginsberg, a true descendent of Whitman, did represent those individuals and allowed their voice to be heard in his poem, a postmodern American masterpiece, "America". Works Cited Ginsberg, Allen. "America". Hoover, Paul. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1994: (130, 136-137, 635-637). Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defense of Poetry*. *Critical Theory Since Plato: Third Edition*. Adams, Hazard and Searle, Leroy. Boston, Massachusetts: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005: (537-551). Whitman, Walt. *Democratic Vistas*. *Critical Theory Since Plato: Third Edition*. Adams, Hazard and Searle, Leroy. Boston, Massachusetts: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005: (673-685).