

Imagery in Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California"



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In "A Supermarket in California," Allen Ginsberg uses the American supermarket as an extended metaphor for a poet's mind and experiences. In this supermarket of the mind, the poet can select images and inspirations much as one would search for items on a grocery list. The free-verse form allows for the free association of ideas. The vocabulary and literary techniques, especially the lack of rhyme, are an excellent display of the freedom of the poetry that characterizes the Beat movement. The first half of this poem provides excellent fodder for interpretation and explication. The poem begins with the speaker, presumably Ginsberg as the writer, wandering the streets in frustration, searching for something. He stumbles into a supermarket and finds Walt Whitman, and follows him about, trying to use him for guidance in his own writing. The supermarket at night is the metaphorical location of the poem's action; everything is happening in Ginsberg's mind. Ginsberg is compelled to write this poem for several reasons. He is frustrated with his lack of inspiration and things to write about. He is looking to Whitman, as one of the most important figures in poetry, for guidance. Whitman's presence in the poem speaks volumes. Ginsberg clearly sees him as a predecessor with much to give in terms of inspiration. Whitman was also a revolutionary of sorts, both in his writing and personal life. He is a muse because he wrote in free verse and was a homosexual, like Ginsberg. The speaker even sees another poet from whom to garner inspiration, Garcia Lorca, in his mental supermarket. "A Supermarket in California" falls under the "dramatic" category of poetry. It is written in free-verse, or open form. This allows for the free flow of ideas and words, without the need to adhere to a deliberately pre-structured form. Ginsberg uses this lack of structure to the poem's advantage; it almost

becomes stream of consciousness, with the speaker rambling on as he follows Whitman through the store. Since there is no set form and the poem is essentially a series of sentences, enjambment is constant throughout the poem. This technique enforces the theory that the poem reads as one large train of thought. The first half of the poem can be split into two stanzas, each composed of lines of varying length with no rhyme scheme. The meter is mostly iambic, with slight variations. The reason for the iambic meter is most likely because it is the meter closest to the way people actually speak. The lack of rhyming continues to go along with the open form often taken on by modern poets. It allows for the poem to be written unmodified by the need for words to fit into a certain pattern. As with most writing of the Beat movement, the poem does not follow a "traditional" structure or form. Since the poem is in open form with no rhyme scheme, vocabulary is the most important aspect of the poem. Ginsberg makes uncommon use of everyday words to convey a less ordinary meaning. The verbs "wandered," (14) "walked," (1) "looking," (2) "shopping," (3) and "dreaming" (5) all imply searching for something, which is exactly what the speaker is doing. The verbs "poking," (10) "eyeing," (11) and "asking," (12) which are the verbs used for Whitman's actions, all imply a sense of confusion, as though Whitman is lost in this modern world of poetry. In the first sentence of the poem, the tone is set by word choice. The word "headache" (2) denotes frustration, the fact that the speaker is "self-conscious" (2) shows that he is aware of his problem with his writing choices or lack thereof. The "full moon" (3) in the first sentence could have many meanings. It could be full and therefore completely bright, illuminating everything below and thus making it clear. This clarity could allow more free-flowing creativity, helping

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the speaker find the images he is searching for. The second line furthers the supermarket metaphor and the frustration revealed in the first line of the poem. " Hungry fatigue" (4) is one of the most carefully chosen phrases in the poem. The speaker is hungry for images, hungry for inspiration. He is fatigued because he has been searching for so long, stuck in a writing rut. The experience of shopping in a supermarket is a fairly modern concept. In Whitman's time, for example, one would have to go to many different stores (i. e. bakery, butcher, etc.) to get all the items on a grocery list. The supermarket conveniently has everything neatly organized under one roof – making it easier to " shop" for images. The adjective " neon" (4) advances the modern, commercial environment of the supermarket. The easily observable literary techniques of alliteration, assonance, and consonance can first be seen in the second half of the first stanza. " Peaches" (6) and " penumbras" (6) both start with the letter " p," which is a clear example of alliteration. Consonance is exemplified with the " v" sound in the words " wives" (7) and " avocados" (7). The latter word is also an example of assonance when paired with the word " tomatoes," (8) since they both have an ending " os" sound. This section of the poem is perhaps the most euphonic. In addition to the aforementioned techniques used, the repeating " l" sounds, as found in the phrases " whole families" (6), " aisles full" (7), and " Lorca... watermelons" (8-9) add to the free-flowing tone of the poem, causing it to sound more like everyday speech while still retaining a poetic, almost romantic quality. Ginsberg also uses dissonance, which conflicts with the euphony, and keeps the poem more realistic. For example, the word " grubber" (10) used to describe Whitman is harsh in sound as well as in meaning. The beginning of the second stanza describes Walt Whitman and

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his activities in the supermarket. Once again, Ginsberg's choice of words fits the tone of the poem perfectly. The fact that Whitman is described as "childless, lonely" (10) creates a mental image of an old man lacking any real joy in his face or his demeanor, perhaps feeling out of place in the supermarket full of families. When Whitman is "poking" (10) the meats and asking who killed the pork chops, he displays his age and old ways. Perhaps the reason for his seemingly absurd questioning in a supermarket is because in Whitman's time, one would actually know who killed the pig that the meat is coming from, and one would be able to haggle the price of fruit with a vendor. Although "A Supermarket in California" does not provide much for analysis of form and rhyme, the lack of a formal structure makes it easier to analyze each individual word choice made by the author. One of the most interesting characteristics of this poem is the fact that Whitman is used as an inspiration and as a contrast to the modern American world from which Ginsberg draws his inspiration.