

Name

Professor

Course

Date

## Poetry Analysis Essay

*Introduction*

When one poet chooses as his subject another, an interesting and complex poetic scenario is provided. In plain terms, the poetry relies on, not an idea of a thing, but of the totality of another, specific human being and artist. This then allows for what may be called poetry as criticism; the one is in some way reflecting on the ideas of the other, and revealing aspects of their own ideas in the process. This is very much the case with Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California." As the following will examine, Ginsberg both emulates and pays tribute to Whitman here, questioning the latter's essence while finding it within himself. Consequently, Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" achieves the unique quality of bringing two poetic visions together, which in itself presents a theme of shared humanity.

*Analysis*

In terms of structure and style, the first thing to be noted about "A Supermarket in California" is how it defies poetic form. There are three stanzas, and the poet spaces lines in ways suggesting meter. At the same time, there is no escaping that it "reads" like prose, and this is due to both the conversational quality and the questioning running throughout it. There is no sense of reflection as is usually found in poetry; it is more direct, and even pragmatic in its structural approach. It may be argued that this is a journal entry or letter, rather than a poem, as the opening indicates: "What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked/ down the

sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking/ at the full moon” (Ginsberg 1-3). The appeal is immediate and focused, as the poet makes it clear he is addressing Whitman alone. It is the format he follows throughout the work, and there is nothing of traditional poetic imagery or tone expressed. As the title suggests, this is very much about a real place in real life, and how it conjures Whitman to Ginsberg's mind. Traditional, and even modern, poetic form then gives way to statement and question.

Along these lines, Ginsberg then takes the modern path of translating the ordinary into poetic imagery. More exactly, by writing of ordinary things in the poem's context, he amplifies their existence and meaning, and clearly in a way intended to emulate, or adopt, Whitman's own famous glorification of the common. For example, “Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!” (7), is “pure Whitman”. The exclamation marks gently mock and/or admire Whitman's own enthusiasm for the ordinary, and his legendary talent for attaching nearly mystical associations to the most mundane items. Stacks of cans are “brilliant” (13), and pork chops are murdered. This is not poetic effusion, but it is poetic imagery of a very specific and Whitman-esque kind. Then, if Ginsberg is unconcerned with rhyme and actual meter, he nonetheless supplies poetic rhythms in the form of his series of questions. Each stanza asks questions, broken up by reasons for the need for them: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in a hour” (18). This gives the poem a pace and an urgency, which in turn is emphasized by the poem's ending with another question. Consequently, while Ginsberg's poem defies traditional poetic form and resembles prose in structure, it nonetheless has a musicality all its own.

With regard to meaning, a variety of ideas are presented here, and all center on an idea of Whitman himself. Certainly, Ginsberg makes no distinction between Whitman the poet and

Whitman the man; he addresses, in fact, only the man as a kind of poetic viewpoint himself. There is a direct reference to Whitman on a more strictly human level, as Ginsberg imagines the two of them, “eyeing the grocery boys” (10), but even this goes more to Ginsberg's intent to share, or imagine sharing, the supermarket experience with him. In a very real sense, the poem is a brief journey through a part of the world in which the two may better understand, or at least appreciate, the wider world. This may occur, then, only when Ginsberg “walks” with Whitman, and not through employing his poetry. Simply, Ginsberg needs Whitman because there is an urgency to his being that is necessary, and Whitman's own poetry is incidental to this: “We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy” (15). The key here is the “our solitary,” affirming and denying the loneliness of one so common in Whitman.

It in the third stanza, however, that Ginsberg and Whitman “leave” the supermarket, and the meaning of it is reinforced in the leaving. In a very real sense, Ginsberg captures what is often noted as the defining quality of Whitman's work and actual being, in that he viewed life and everything in it in terms of an endless flow (McDonald 122). Everything has meaning, and these meanings collide and reveal more in the interactions, or they more simply demand further investigation because the flow is undeniable. This is what Ginsberg is asking Whitman, needing to discover the truth of the flow through the direction offered by the Whitman spirit: “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automo-/ biles in driveways” (24-25). If there is no answer for Ginsberg – and the poem's ending in a question clearly suggests this – there is at least the satisfaction of being with one who has a sense of the totality of life, and specifically in terms of the American experience. The poem is then about searching, just as it is about the value of searching with a kindred soul.

*Conclusion*

“A Supermarket in California” is a unique poem in that it sets aside poetic form itself, and presents something of an inquisitive prose piece. Then, it has the distinction of evoking and relying upon a legendary poet as its subject. This subject, however, is nonetheless only an instrument, because he is basically required to affirm the poet's own desires and needs. The poem is then an expression of poetic solidarity of vision, and of a vision made famous by Whitman as an intense focus on the ordinary, which in turn points to the innate connection between all things. All this being the case, Allen Ginsberg's “A Supermarket in California” then achieves the unique quality of bringing together two similar poetic visions, which in itself presents a theme of shared humanity.

Works Cited

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