A Supermarket in California

SUMMARY

Tonight I've been thinking about you, Walt Whitman. I walked down the tree-lined and moonlit street, feeling self-conscious. In my strange state of longing and exhaustion, I went to the brightly-lit supermarket as much for the visual stimuli as for the food. All the while, I was thinking about your poetry, Walt Whitman. The aisles of the supermarket were full of fruit and shadows. Whole families were shopping—husbands, wives, babies—all moving among the fruits and vegetables. I even saw Federico García Lorca among the watermelons.

I spotted you in the meat section, Walt Whitman, looking like an old childless weirdo. You were looking at the male members of staff and asking questions about the source of the meat, the cost of bananas, and which one of them might have been your angel. I followed you around the store's garish displays of goods, and imagined the suspicious security guard following us. We walked together without a care in the world, trying any and every item we wanted without ever intending to pay.

It's time for us to leave, Walt Whitman, the store closes in an hour—so where are we going go? I suddenly feel embarrassed about this ridiculous daydreaming about our epic supermarket journey. Are we going to walk together through the empty night? The trees make the night even darker and there are no lights on in the houses, so we'll feel quite alone. Will we imagine a better America as we pass identical cars and houses on our way to our silent little home? Oh wise poet, what was America like when you died—when Charon the boatman delivered you to the land of the dead?

THEMES

CONSUMERISM

The poem rejects American consumerism—a way of life that places great importance on buying and owning things, on being a customer with money to spend and endless options to choose from. Feeling that he doesn't fit in with a world of shiny shopping aisles and identical houses and cars, the speaker (generally treated as Ginsberg himself) finds kinship in the figure of Walt Whitman—one of the founding figures in American poetry. Through his vision of Whitman, the speaker senses an alternative America. And though the poem never defines this alternative vision for the country outright, it mourns the "lost America of love"—what the nation once was, or could have become.

The poem takes place in the heart of consumerist culture—in the belly of the beast. California is closely associated with an idea of the American Dream that equates money and happiness: the home of Hollywood and the rich and famous, a place where lives are ostensibly filled with sunshine and joy. The supermarket brimming with food reflects this sense of carefree abundance.

And yet, the poem also implies that none of this is real, that the supposed freedom offered by this way of life is as fake as the movies pumped out by Hollywood. The fruit is "neon," so bright as to seem garish, and the speaker shops for "images" rather than actual nourishment to satiate his "hungry fatigue."

Nevertheless, the poem establishes the extent to which this way of life has a hold on people. "Whole families" parade down the supermarket aisles as if in some kind of trance —"wives" are "in" the "avocados," and there are "babies in the tomatoes." In other words, they are totally immersed in the consumerist way of life that the supermarket represents.

This way of life robs them of their individual humanity, the poem implies, reducing people to the things they buy and instilling a sense of conformity but making people think they all want the same things. This idea is later echoed by the image of "blue automobiles in driveways," which implies a cookie-cutter vision of success. People think they'll be happy if only they can buy this car or have that house, but the speaker doesn't buy in, and that's why he conjures up a vision of Walt Whitman.

For poets of Ginsberg's generation, Whitman stood for a kind of celebration of the common man, the nobility of labor, and people's individuality. Whitman's poetry reflects an idealistic romanticism, which he viewed as inseparable from America itself. Whitman becomes something like the speaker's guide, which the speaker at one point explicitly asking Whitman which "way" to go.

Placing Whitman in this capitalist and commercial wonderland—the supermarket—deliberately clashes these two different Americas together in order to highlight the country's failure to live up to Whitman's ideal. Indeed, the speaker imagines this man from another era trying to make sense of the abundant variety of products, interrogating them and his strange, overwhelming environment. In initially presenting Whitman as lost and confused himself, the poem suggests how far removed modern society has become from the way of life that Whitman imagined.

The speaker then imagines himself and Whitman strolling through the aisles, tasting "fancy" food at their whim without paying for any of it. The speaker and Whitman—in the speaker's minds—thus share in common a rejection of the importance of money, rebelling against what society tells them to do.

In the end, though, the poem suggests that the optimism expressed in Whitman's poetry has failed to become reality and

probably never will—indeed, it probably never existed in the first place. Now, time is running out—the "doors close in an hour"—suggesting that it's too late to change what America has become. That's why both Whitman and the speaker ultimately cut such "lonely" figures. The poem then concludes by intensifying its sense of futility and isolation: Whitman is pictured alone on the shores of the underworld, the speaker walking home from the supermarket—and neither of them in the America they desire.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Line 3
- Lines 4-7
- Lines 8-12

LITERATURE AND IMAGINATION

"A Supermarket in California" is a poem bursting with a love of literature. Indeed, the poem is a great example of what is known as *metapoetry*—poetry that is, in part, about poetry itself. The speaker has a vision in the supermarket of Walt Whitman, one of the great forefathers of American poetry, who then becomes something like a guardian angel figure—a guiding light (or beard in this case!).

In placing poetry front and center, the poem implicitly argues in favor of the value of poetry to society—while also hinting that society has forgotten how to recognize that importance (having been blinded by the supermarket's neon lights). Arguably, literature's place in the poem also stands-in for creativity and the imagination more generally, similarly implying that these have become overlooked in modern America.

The poem clearly marks out Whitman and the speaker as kindred spirits. In fact, they even briefly enjoy what the supermarket has to offer, tasting its "delicac[ies]" without intending to pay for them and thus positioning themselves as on the outside of social norms. In other words—in the speaker's mind at least—artists *challenge* the accepted constructs and norms of the day.

The reference to Lorca also supports this idea. Federico García Lorca was a Spanish playwright and poet who was murdered by his government in 1936. This was in part because of his homosexuality, and in part because, with his leftist sympathies, he presented an idealistic threat to the Fascist, Nationalist forces ruling Spain at the time. He was thus another counter-culture artistic figure whose mere existence challenged the societal status quo.

Though the poem doesn't delve deeply into the specifics of Whitman's poetry, it does show him investigating the 20th-century America that he suddenly finds himself in. His pointed questions in the second stanza subtly suggests how society has lost its way: through mass, thoughtless consumption (the "pork chops" far removed from their butcher), intense globalization (the reference to bananas, which would have to be imported), and the spiritual malnourishment ("Are you my Angel?"). Ultimately, these are similar to the questions the speaker asks in the poem's closing lines—is the "America of love" already "lost," and where is society "going?"

The poem concludes by with another link across literary generations, travelling an even greater span of time. Here, the speaker references the classical underworld, in which Charon, a boatman, transports newly-dead souls to the underworld. The poem mentions Lethe, the waters of which make the people who drink them forget everything. Ending on this doubtful note suggests that society has forgotten something fundamental—and that it is the artist's role to say so, no matter what culture or era they live in.

In reflecting how poets observe and critique America, the poem elevates the cultural importance of art. That is, poets and other artists are in invaluable part of society, the poem implies, because they analyze, question, and imagine alternatives to the dominant way of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Lines 4-7
- Lines 8-9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12

HOMOSEXUALITY AND CONFORMITY

The poem critiques not just the consumerism it sees as endemic to modern society, but also this society's subsequent insistence on conformity. These two ideas are connected in the poem: society tells people that buying things will bring them happiness, and then teaches people to want to buy all the same things—the same "blue automobiles" and "fancy" artichokes.

The poem critiques the insistence on one uniform image of success and happiness, implying that, in such an environment, people *themselves* become products—yet more things to buy and sell. That's why there are "Aisles full of husbands," for instance; husbands, "Wives," and "babies" are more things to be desired in order to project the image of a perfect American life.

The poem ultimately suggests that capitalist consumerist society pressures people to stick to one image of success and happiness, and then persecutes those who refuse to conform. And one major example of this in the poem can be seen with homosexuality.

Homosexuality is a subtle but important part in "A Supermarket in California." Allen Ginsberg was gay and Whitman is believed to have been gay or bisexual as well. The Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, depicted as "down by the watermelons" in the first stanza, was also gay—and this was part of the reason he was murdered by Spanish military authorities.

These three men, then, are connected not just by the fact that they are poets, but also by their experiences living during times when homosexuality was still taboo, if not an outright crime. The poem thus suggests that there exists not just a shared cultural and artistic legacy across these generations of men, but also one of secrecy and pain.

As if to acknowledge the secrecy which homosexuality has often had to exist under, the poem doesn't spell this link out too clearly. The closest it gets to a direct reference is in the innuendo in the second stanza, when Whitman "pok[es] among the meats in the refrigerator" and eyes up the grocery boys. The subsequent mention of meat (pork chops) could be in image of carnal desire.

Behind this playfulness, though, lurks a serious point about persecution and nonconformity. When the speaker imagines the "store detective" following him and Whitman, it's not just because they are trying food without paying for it—it's because they're outsiders, in large part due to their sexuality.

The poets are contrasted with nuclear families presented in the first stanza, those "Whole families" made up of husbands, wives, and babies. These represent what a family was *supposed* to look like at the time—a man, a woman, and their offspring. Again, this moral conformity goes hand-in-hand with the consumerist culture on display in the supermarket—at least that's how the poem presents it.

In other words, the speaker suggests that people have been fed images of what a family is supposed to look like, just as they have been told what products to buy. The poem suggests that this supposedly moral family dynamic is really just another aspect of the shallow consumerist, materialist culture that has taken over America. If this poem, then, is about an alternative America—one less beholden to materialism—then the poem implies that this depends upon the freedom for people to be who they want to be and to love who they want to love.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 4-6
- Line 10
- Line 11

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

What thoughts I ...
... of your enumerations!

Before getting started, it should be noted that Ginsberg wrote "A Supermarket in California" as a prose poem without specific line breaks. The poem thus often appears in different layouts depending on font and page size, and so the reader should be aware that any reference to line numbers here is simply to aid with comprehension and understanding.

"A Supermarket in California" opens by immediately establishing the connection between the speaker—generally treated as Ginsberg himself—and the poem's addressee, Walt Whitman. Whitman was one of the most important American poets of the 19th century, a major innovator in both form and subject, and is considered by many to be the father of American poetry. Throughout the poem, the speaker will treat Whitman as a kind of guide, and addresses Whitman through apostrophe. Though the poem is set in a public space—a supermarket—this direct address creates a sense of intimacy between speaker and addressee. This makes the reader into a kind of voyeur of the speaker's innermost thoughts and searching questions.

It's also worth noting that this poet-as-guide figure is a common literary tradition. It's presented somewhat ironically by Ginsberg (in the sense that Whitman, a man who lived in the 1800s, would have no guidance to give the speaker in a 20th-century supermarket!). Still, the role of Whitman as the speaker's guide is similar to the way that Virgil, a poet from the days of ancient Rome, instructs Dante (the foremost Italian poet of the Middle Ages) in the *Inferno*. It's also worth noting that Whitman himself used long, flowing sentences without strict meter (known as free verse)—an approach mirrored by Ginsberg here.

The poem's first sentence places the reader directly in the speaker's mind with the mention of "thoughts," a "headache," and "self-conscious[ness]." The last of these is important, showing that the speaker is aware of his place—or lack of place—within American society. He can sense that he doesn't fit in, which is in part why he conjures up a more kindred spirit in the form of Walt Whitman.

The opening sentence also focuses on the act of walking, which is how the poem ends too. It's a lonely walk, with the "full moon" suggesting something supernatural or visionary in the atmosphere. In the second sentence, the speaker describes his state as one of "hungry fatigue." He goes to what seems like the right place to fix that: the supermarket. But, of course, this is not just a food-related hunger, but a metaphor for spiritual and intellectual longing as well.

The speaker goes "shopping for images," another metaphor.

This suggests the way that society and media (things like television and magazine advertisements) have filled the speaker's mind with the longing for mere "images" rather than actual nourishment; for the *appearance* of fulfillment rather than actual fulfillment.

The image of "neon fruit" reflects the way that the produce seems *too* perfect, *too* shiny, even hyper-real. This represents the superficiality of the supermarket—and the type of so-called freedom that it represents—that is, the supposed freedom offered by consumer choice and spending power; people think they are exercising their freedom when they buy things, the poem implies, when really they are just buying *into* a system that makes them essentially slaves to money.

The speaker then dreams of Whitman's "enumerations"—his poetry. Whitman's work often cataloged the life he saw around him, especially in New York, in all its vibrancy and variation. There is an implied contrast, then, between the "enumeration"—the counting and cataloging—of the supermarket versus Whitman's poetry. Finally, it's worth noting that the exclamation mark—found throughout the poem—signals an ecstatic state, the speaker overcome by his vision of Whitman.

LINE 3

What peaches and ... by the watermelons?

The third sentence (line 3) of the poem marks the speaker's entry into the supermarket itself. Here, the speaker conveys the sensory overload he finds inside. Consonance is packed into this section to convey the way the store is full of both produce and people. Note, for instance, the alliteration of "peaches" and "penumbras"; the latter basically means shadows, suggesting a darkness or hidden reality lurking beneath these seemingly wholesome, enticing fruits.

Abundant consonance and assonance reflect the supermarket's role as a site of plentiful food, drink, and other consumer goods. Note the /l/ sounds of "Whole families" and "Aisles full "; the /v/ sounds of "Wives in the avocados"; the long /ay/ assonance of babies in the tomatoes!" These sounds merge the human beings and the products in the supermarket, suggesting that in such a consumerist society people themselves become yet more products, things to buy and sell.

By specifically mentioning husbands and wives, the speaker also describes a scene that is typically heteronormative—a society that implicitly or explicitly favors heterosexual relationships. If the speaker is understood to be Ginsberg himself, then this develops the speaker's outsider status—something he shares with Whitman too.

Ginsberg was homosexual, and most critics believe that Whitman was either the same or bisexual. The poem then alludes to another homosexual poet, Federico Garcia Lorca. Lorca was assassinated by the Spanish fascist authorities in 1936 because he was seen as a cultural and political threat with "homosexualist and abnormal practices." All three poets, then, represent outsiders who transgress the sexual and social norms of their era.

The speaker's rhetorical question to Lorca—which asks him what he's "doing down by the watermelons"—is comical and absurd, but also highlights the way that the Spanish poet (and the other two) doesn't seem to fit with the supermarket environment. That is, like Ginsberg and Whitman, there's something fundamentally opposed between the values of poetry and those of consumerist society.

LINES 4-5

I saw you, ...
... you my Angel?

In the second stanza, the speaker's vision of Walt Whitman starts to become clearer. The speaker presents Whitman as a kind of alien visitor who has just landed in a world he doesn't really understand. In the first sentence of the stanza, the speaker assesses—"enumerates"—Whitman according to the social norms of the day:

> ... childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

So, Whitman—or this vision of Whitman—is marked off as *different* from normal society because he is "childless." That is, he doesn't fit in with the "Whole families" described in the first stanza. The poem takes this further, the speaker describing Whitman as a "lonely old grubber." He's lonely because he doesn't make sense in the supermarket environment, and "old grubber" marks him out as a kind of weirdo or misfit.

This is then linked to sexuality, because Whitman is not only "eyeing the grocery boys," but he is "poking among the meats," a phrase playfully laced with sexual innuendo. But though this is a lighthearted moment, it's worth remembering that homosexuality was still illegal in America at the time the poem was composed. Also worth noting that the specific mention of meat might well be an allusion to Whitman's "Song of Myself," in which the poet observes a butcher (and a blacksmith):

> The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or
> sharpens his knife
> at the stall in the market,
> I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and
> break-down.

Notice how this chimes with the image of the "lonely old grubber," which plays with an idea of what people in modern American society find suspicious. That is, because neither Whitman nor Ginsberg are in the supermarket merely to buy

stuff, their lingering and loitering makes people think they're strange.

The next line then zooms in on Whitman trying to make sense of his new surroundings. He asks three rhetorical questions, each one with different implications. The first—"Who killed the pork chops?"—speaks to the fundamental way in which life has changed over the course of a hundred years or so. Whitman observes a 20th-century world from a 19th-century point of view, and accordingly it is strange to him for meat to be completely removed from its point of production; in his day, he'd likely know where his food was coming from because the supply chain wasn't as extensive and convoluted. The mention of killing is also close enough to the reference to Lorca as to become an unsettling echo of the Spanish poet's brutal murder.

The second question—"What price bananas?"—seems pretty normal for someone in a supermarket, but this normality makes the third question all the more surprising: "Are you my angel?" Whitman, who has been set up as the speaker's poet-guide (like Virgil was for Dante in *The Inferno*), is essentially lost too—looking for someone to watch over him, save him, show him the way.

This shows how far removed this supermarket society is from Whitman's idealistic vision of American freedom (which was based on a strong relationship between being your own self and part of a community). In other words, the speaker's guide doesn't know the way. But the question also relates to a lack of spiritual nourishment, with Whitman looking for an angel in a place more likely to stock angel's hair (a thin type of pasta).

LINES 6-7

I wandered in ...
... passing the cashier.

In the second half of the second stanza, the speaker follows and then joins Walt Whitman as he walks through the supermarket. The speaker points to a kind of aesthetic pleasure that he derives from the supermarket's "brilliant stacks of cans," consonance again being used to portray a sensation of abundance.

Like some kind of cartoon caper, the two men are also followed (in the speaker's imagination) by the suspicious store detective, the poem having already established Whitman and the speaker as outsiders. In this line, the poem makes clever use of polyptoton in the way "following" becomes "followed," establishing a chain of espionage and intrigue.

The atmosphere of suspicion here is not without foundation in reality: Ginsberg is writing during the era of McCarthyism (discussed further in the Context section of the guide), when American citizens could be accused and interrogated for being subversive or treasonous without solid evidence (apart, perhaps, from not conforming precisely to the norms of society). To be homosexual was also a transgression of authority—so the store detective can be interpreted fairly as a symbol of the American government.

The speaker and Whitman then join forces. In the ultimate act of supermarket rebellion, they wander through the aisles tasting whatever they want, indulging in the abundance and variety of food while refusing to pay for any of it. This is an imagined act of transgression that highlights American society's reliance on money and capitalism.

This section is brimming with consonance, used throughout the poem to reflect the fully-stocked shelves:

> We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Also note the assonance of long /o/sounds throughout, further adding to this overwhelming sense of abundance.

LINES 8-9

Where are we ...
... and feel absurd.)

In the third stanza, it's the speaker's turn to ask the rhetorical questions. These mirror Whitman's interrogations of the supermarket in the previous stanza. Alliteration links "where" with "we" and the poet himself, reflecting how Whitman is meant to be the speaker's guide:

> Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

The speaker idolizes Whitman and looks to him for spiritual and intellectual wisdom, presented in terms of trying to find the right direction to walk. But the question "Where are we going?" need not apply only to the two poets themselves—it neatly sums up what the poem *itself* is asking of American society in general. It asks the reader if this is the America that they want, and if it is evolving in a way that they think is good.

While the second stanza was a moment of lightness, the two poets naughtily taking their pick of the supermarket's produce, the tone is now more somber and serious. Indeed, there is a sense of urgency—"The doors close in an hour." This might be the poem's metaphorical way of saying to its readers that America will soon be too far gone down the path of consumerist capitalism to return to its ideals—that, soon enough, any other "way" based on alternative values will no longer be possible. An hour is usually plenty of time in a supermarket, of course—but not if the purpose of being in there is a total re-evaluation and perhaps overall of everything the supermarket represents!

The speaker wants Whitman's beard, a symbol of sage-like wisdom, to show him the direction to go, with the beard acting

as a kind of metaphorical compass. The speaker is self-conscious, though, and seems to feel that this metaphor is a little embarrassing—or that his general thinking is becoming too far-fetched. That's why here he utters an aside, hidden in parentheses:

> (I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

This is an internal thought, perhaps the speaker sensing his own strangeness as viewed through the eyes of the other shoppers. The mention of "touch" keeps the poem grounded in sensuousness and sexuality—a kind of freedom at odds with the conformist society shopping at the supermarket.

With the word "odyssey," this moment also represents a literary allusion to Homer's *The Odyssey*, one of the foundational works of literature in Western society. Homer's epic poem was about a great journey on the seas, an idea which playfully interacts with the rather downbeat walk around a supermarket presented here (perhaps even suggesting that this kind of adventure and/or literature isn't even possible in 20th century America).

Finally, this moment also reminds the reader that the whole poem is a kind of "dream" inspired by Whitman's words in the first place, which themselves *do* present a radically different America based on an alternative type of freedom (one not so tied to money and buying things).

LINES 10-11

> *Will we walk ...*
> *... our silent cottage?*

These lines continue the speaker's rhetorical questioning and envision a world outside the supermarket. Unfortunately, this world doesn't seem any better; where the supermarket was filled with bright, overwhelming, and superficial abundance, the streets are empty and dark. But much like the supermarket shelves, this America still has a discomforting uniformity to it—think of similar suburbs in similar towns, with the same "blue automobile[]" waiting to be driven to work by a man wearing a suit. It was very much this kind of conformity that Ginsberg's generation defined themselves *against*.

The speaker thus imagines walking with Walt Whitman "all night through solitary streets," in itself an act of rebellion (when most other people are in bed so that they can get up and go to work the next morning). The America that the two poets stroll through is conformist, one in which no one stays up too late and nobody indulges in behavior that isn't seen as the norm.

The poem builds a picture of the isolation that comes with being so out of step with the majority of society, with the speaker acknowledging "we'll both be lonely." The trees cast darkness on the already dark night, with the diacope of "shade to shade" reflecting the speaker's pessimistic state of mind. The asydenton (the lack of "and") perhaps even adds a feeling of panic, as the poem's pace quickens here:

> The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

In the next rhetorical question, the speaker imagines walking with Whitman and "dreaming of the lost America of love"—an earlier vision of America captured in Whitman's poetry guided by love rather than consumerism and greed. This America is what the speaker implicitly desires, and what he feels Whitman believed in too.

That said, it's hard to define exactly what this "America of love" actually is. The sexual and social revolution that followed in the 1960s might offer some clues, however. Put crudely, in that decade people didn't feel that the restrictions and moral uptightness of their parents represented a good, free way to live. Freedom based only on consumerist choice (that is, freedom related primarily to how people chose to spend their money) was a kind of prison from which some of America wished to escape.

But it's not clear if the "lost America" of which the poem speaks ever existed in reality—perhaps it is a vision of America that was unrealized then that remains unrealized now. The speaker empathizes with the work of Whitman because to Whitman at least a new America "of love" seemed possible—in this poem, the metaphorical "doors" are about to close.

The speaker also imagines living in isolation with Walt Whitman in their "silent cottage." This part of the speaker's vision relates to the affinity he feels with Whitman, which is in part to do with the latter poet's idealism and his sexuality too. In other words, if they have be cast out of society, then the speaker at least wants to be outcast together with his idol. On a more literal level, this could relate to the silence that fills the room when the speaker reads Whitman's book back at home.

LINE 12

> *Ah, dear father, ... waters of Lethe?*

In the last rhetorical question (and sentence of the poem), the speaker offers three different epithets (alternate names that describe someone's character) for Walt Whitman. For the speaker, Whitman is his "dear father" because he is the father of American poetry—especially in terms of making American poetry distinct from British poetry. Whitman was also a poetic innovator whose innovations (such as free verse) are on display Ginsberg's poem, representing a kind of lineage of craftsmanship passed on from one generation to another.

Whitman is also "greybeard," an image that has already been used earlier in the poem to suggest philosophical, spiritual, and intellectual wisdom. Finally, Whitman is also a "lonely old courage-teacher," a phrase which revises the phrase offered in

line 4 ("lonely old grubber"). This redefines the poet not as a misfit, but as a moral guide—he's only "lonely" because the rest of society fails to see the worth of his vision. In other words, the supermarket shoppers are the real "grubber[s]," grabbing greedily at a boring world of conformity, consumerism, and materialism.

After these three epithets, the poem ends with one long, lingering, and unanswerable question. The shift in phrase length releases the poem from the quickened pacing of the three epithets, evoking the image of Whitman suddenly standing completely still on the shore (as opposed to frantically trying to understand 1950s America).

This section of the poem is another allusion, this time to the classical mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. "Charon" is the ferryman of the underworld who transports the souls of those who have recently died into the world of the dead. Here the speaker seems to be asking Whitman what America was like when he died—and whether it satisfied any of his visionary idealism as presented in *Leaves of Grass*.

In this image, Whitman suddenly seems truly lonely, a solitary figure standing in a quiet and unsettling atmosphere completely at odds with the vibrant scenes of his poems—which overflow with all the pulsing energy of human life and activity. Lethe is an underworld river with special properties. Those that drink its waters lose their memories, perhaps intimating that the America of which Whitman dreamed was, ultimately, just in his head—and forgotten when he died.

SYMBOLS

THE STORE DETECTIVE

On two occasions, "A Supermarket in California" plays with sexual innuendo. When the speaker first spots Whitman in the supermarket, he finds him "poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys."

Whitman was either homosexual or bisexual, key common ground between him and Ginsberg. "Poking among the meats" is sexually suggestive of carnal appetite and desire, something which Ginsberg wasn't meant to be too explicit about at the time. Indeed, the collection from which this poem is drawn, *Howl and Other Poems*, was part of an obscenity trial soon after publication because of its references to sex (and drugs). The poem seems to play with the alleged illicitness of homosexuality, never quite making its sexual references *too* clear. (Bananas, then, could also be a phallic symbol—but they could just be bananas too!)

The poem then extends this innuendo through the symbolism of the store detective. The speaker imagines himself and Whitman being followed by the guard, partly because they are eating the produce without pay, but likely, and more significantly, also because they are homosexual. The detective represents the official norms of America, a society which attempts to crack down on the supposedly immoral transgressions of those whose desires are simply different.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "followed in my imagination by the store detective."

THE SUPERMARKET

The supermarket here is more than just a place to buy groceries. It's representative of a whole way of life. Indeed, the supermarket is everything that the speaker wishes America *wasn't*: a place driven by appearances and the desire to buy, buy, buy.

The bright and garish neon lights indicate a way of life that values looks over substance (an idea picked up on by the pictures of suburban conformity in the third stanza, as well as by the fact that the poem takes place in California—the land of Hollywood make-believe). Perhaps that's what the speaker means by "shopping for images"; the supermarket isn't selling genuine nourishment, but rather products that create the appearance of a wholesome American life.

The fruit is "neon" and the "stacks of cans" are "brilliant," suggesting the shocking beauty of the supermarket, but also its sterility; "neon" fruit doesn't sound like it tastes very good, and food must be highly processed before being placed into those "brilliant" cans. The supermarket is thus a place of abundance yet also a place that seems utterly soulless.

Consumers can buy whatever they want, whenever they want—but their relationship to these products has been totally eroded. That's why Whitman can't get his head around "who killed the pork chops"—because it definitely wasn't anyone who works at the supermarket! The fact that the speaker and Whitman walk by "every frozen delicacy" again suggests a sterility and lifelessness to this food, which has been transformed from simple nourishment into something highly processed.

The supermarket thus also symbolizes how removed people have become from the labor that provides them with all this bounty. Whitman's poetry often lauded the common laborer, so it's fair to say that he and the speaker find this supermarket a gross perversion of the American work ethic. People partake in the spoils of labor, endlessly finding new things to buy, without the fulfillment of hard work.

Nevertheless, the shoppers in the store are caught under the supermarket's spell, the speaker finding them among the packed aisles of produce as if they are indulging in some kind of absurd ancient ritual (in turn highlighting how far removed

these people have become from the old ways of life). That the store's "Aisles" are "full of husbands" suggests that men, too, are just items to be bought and sold. The same goes for the "Wives in the avocados" and the "babies in the tomatoes"; in a society driven by money and consumerism, people themselves become products.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket,"
- **Line 3:** "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?"
- **Lines 4-5:** "poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys. / I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas?"
- **Lines 6-7:** " I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective. / We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier."
- **Line 8:** "The doors close in an hour."
- **Line 9:** " (I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)"

BLUE AUTOMOBILES

As the speaker and Whitman walk home (in the speaker's imagination), they walk through suburban America. Each house they pass seems to tell an identical story, with the same driveway occupied by the same "blue automobile." This symbolizes the of realization of a *version* of the American Dream, one based on consumerism and which results in stifling conformity.

These cars represent the supposedly good suburban life that people are told to desire. They're owned by the same families who seem so enraptured by the garish glory of the supermarket. The car is *supposed* to grant its owner freedom—another key concept in the American Dream—but this freedom really amounts to something the speaker sees as the opposite: a kind of mental prison.

These cars, then, come to represent the *delusions* of a society enthralled by consumer power and choice. These people think that they have freedom, yet they are all taught to want the same thing: the same house, the same nuclear family, the same car. Of course, the blue color can also be interpreted as a symbol of the general sadness the speaker feels while observing a society that appears to have lost its way.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** " Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "A Supermarket in California." It begins in the first sentence, linking Walt Whitman's name—which is in itself alliterative—with "walked." As Whitman is functioning as a kind of spiritual guide for the speaker here, it follows that he should be linked with the act of walking—the wandering that creates space for the speaker's reflections.

The poem returns to this idea in the third and final stanza, linking Whitman's name with "where," "we," "which way," and "will we walk" (from line 8 to line 10). This makes the link even stronger between Whitman and moral authority, summed up in the speaker's asking for the "way" to go. It's worth noting that when Whitman is in the supermarket—an environment that seems to baffle him—his name *doesn't* alliterate with any other words, conveying how alien this world seems to him (in the speaker's imagination).

The third part of the first stanza also uses alliteration. Firstly, it evokes the abundance of choice to be found in the supermarket:

> What peaches and what penumbras!

This almost sounds like an advertising slogan, or the kind of thing that might be put on the side of a product to boost its sales. "Penumbras," however, are not something you can buy in a supermarket—they are shadows. So the alliteration is also linking the bright "neon fruit" with a kind of moral and intellectual darkness too. The alliteration of "what were ... watermelons" and "doing down" in the Lorca section of the first stanza adds a touch of absurdity to the speaker's vision.

In the last sentence of the second stanza (line 7 beginning "We strode ..."), the speaker walks with Whitman and samples the various culinary delights of the supermarket:

> We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

This alliteration plays with the same idea established by the alliteration go "peaches" and "penumbras" earlier. It suggests the abundance and variety on display in the supermarket, while also conveying the playful naughtiness of two men enjoying

produce without any intention of paying for it.

The other key instance of alliteration is in the middle of the third stanza (line 11 starting "will we stroll ..."):

> Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love
> past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our
> silent cottage?

This links loss with love, making it clear what's lacking from 20th-century America according to the speaker. The poem doesn't explore what kind of love society would have to value in order to *find* this ideal America, but it's certainly not the mundane conformism of the hoards of shopping families.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Walt Whitman," "walked"
- **Line 3:** "What peaches," "what penumbras," "what were," "doing down," "watermelons"
- **Line 4:** "Walt Whitman"
- **Line 5:** "pork," "price"
- **Line 7:** "together," "fancy," "tasting," "possessing," "frozen," "passing"
- **Line 8:** "Where," "we," "Walt Whitman," "doors," "Which way," "does"
- **Line 10:** "Will we walk," "solitary streets," "shade," "shade," "lights," "lonely"
- **Line 11:** "Will we," "dreaming," "lost," "love," "driveways"
- **Line 12:** "smoking," "stood," "watching," "boat," "black," "waters"

ALLUSION

Allusion is a key aspect of "A Supermarket in California." In the poem's second sentence, the speaker tells Whitman that he has been "dreaming of [Whitman's] enumerations." To enumerate is to count and catalog things, and is thus quite an appropriate term for the supermarket environment! But it also speaks to Whitman's poetic style, which, especially in *Leaves of Grass*, is all about showcasing the scope, range, and abundance of human life. This is probably the "book" referred to in line 9 as well.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker alludes to the 20th-century Spanish writer Federico García Lorca. Like Ginsberg, Lorca's writing was interested in the definition—and acquisition—of freedom and humanity. He, too, was homosexual in a time in which that was illegal—indeed, he was assassinated in part for his sexuality (as well as his criticism of the fascistic powers ruling Spain at the time). The poem thus creates a kind of triangle of like-minded writers—Ginsberg, Lorca, Whitman—who form a mini-society as a fleeting alternative to the mindless conformism on display in the supermarket.

At the start of stanza 2, the speaker imagine Whitman "poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys." This reference to meat, apart from being a sexual innuendo, could be an allusion to specific passage (section 12) in Whitman's "Song of Myself:"

> The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or
> sharpens his knife at the stall in the market,
> I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and
> break-down.

In both poems, Whitman casts a lingering gaze at the male form. This ties in with the poem's theme of sexuality, and in particular the persecution of homosexuality.

There are two more allusions in the final stanza—three if counting the mention of Whitman's book. Using parenthesis to convey that this a self-conscious—and interior—thought, the speaker embarrassed for dreaming of his supermarket "odyssey" with Whitman. This is an allusion to *fourth* poet, Homer, a legendary author from Ancient Greece (though his work was verbal, not written). His epic poem *The Odyssey* is one of the greatest works of literature of all time, and chronicles the incredible adventures of Odysseus on the seas near surrounding Greece.

There is an ironic incongruity (inappropriateness) to the allusion, given that a supermarket visit hardly comparable to Odysseus's travels. This playfully speaks to the speaker's imaginative power while also wondering whether an "odyssey" is even possible in a world of mass consumerism and capitalism.

The final allusion is another classical one and appears in the poem's closing rhetorical question. Here, the speaker asks Whitman what America he (Whitman) had when he died and was sent to the (classical) underworld, where Charon the boatman was waiting to ferry his soul across to the land of the dead. If drunk, the waters of Lethe make the drinker forget everything—perhaps suggesting that Whitman's vision of an "America of love" has itself been forgotten.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "enumerations"
- **Line 3:** "and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?"
- **Line 4:** "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys."
- **Line 9:** "book," "our odyssey"
- **Line 12:** "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 and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?"

APOSTROPHE

The entirety of "A Supermarket in California" addressed to Walt Whitman. Whitman, long dead, obviously isn't really in the supermarket with speaker. But the speaker addresses his idea—his vision—of Whitman, and this apostrophe forms the basis of the poem.

Whitman is the speaker's poetic hero, and the speaker conjures the vision because he wants guidance. This sets up a sense of intimacy in the poem, the speaker talking to Whitman in a way that is completely unguarded and makes the reader into a kind of voyeur.

Indeed, the reader has to decide whether they relate more to the poets in the poem or the shoppers in the supermarket—whether they value the freedom of consumerist choice or the harder-to-attain spiritual and intellectual freedoms represented by Whitman. The apostrophe also heightens the speaker's sense of isolation—he is on the outside of the supermarket society looking in, sharing more in common with a poet from the previous century than anyone else in the shop.

And though the apostrophe is directed at Whitman, in another sense it's also directed at America more generally. That is, when the speaker asks "Where are we going," it's a searching metaphorical question that is ultimately targeted at 20th-century American society.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 3
- Lines 4-12

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used three times in "A Supermarket in California." The first instance is in the first stanza when the speaker describes the interior of the supermarket:

> Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!

The lack of an "and" here gives the poem a breathless quality, as though the speaker can't keep up with all the visual stimuli of packed produce and countless families of shoppers. It also sounds a bit like ad-speak, as though the speaker is borrowing the phrasing from a television advertisement designed to outline all the great deals that the supermarket has to offer.

Asyndeton is next used halfway through the last stanza, when the speaker imagines a nocturnal walk with Walt Whitman after their trip around the supermarket:

> The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

There is a sense of hurry to this line created by the lack of s. conjunction words like "and." The clauses of the sentence flicker on and then off like light switches going out across America, and this sense of hurry could also be interpreted as a form of panic. That is, with the speaker's vision coming to an end—and the playful happiness of the second stanza seeming a distant memory—the speaker senses his loneliness intensifying. In this line, darkness starts to cover the landscape and, then, the interior landscape of the speaker's mind too. The asydenton helps make this process seem sudden and painfully inevitable.

Finally, the poem uses asyndeton in its description of Whitman as a "dear father, greybeard, lonely old courage-teacher." There's an intimacy to these three phrases, portraying the speaker's unabashed need for guidance and wisdom. Arguably, there's a faint hint of desperation here too.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!"
- **Line 10:** "The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely."
- **Line 12:** "dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a key feature of "A Supermarket in California." Much of this is also alliteration, and covered in a separate entry for that particular device.

One of the first examples of consonance is in the poem's second line/sentence, with the overflow of /n/, /m/, /f/, and /t/ sounds:

> In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

The humming /m/ and /n/ especially make the lines feel almost hypnotic, especially when combined with the assonance here ("fruit" and "supermarket" for example). This abundance of sound draws the reader in, suggesting the allure of the supermarket and the consumerism it symbolizes in the poem.

The next line is again filled with consonance, furthering this sensation of abundance and reflecting just how stocked with food this supermarket is:

> What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!

The sheer abundance and variety of consonance here evokes the overwhelming choice on offer in the supermarket—as though its products are limitless in both quantity and quality (in terms of the different things they can offer, not necessarily how

good or bad they are).

This consonance-as-abundance idea found in the same stanza's final sentence, which yet again overflow with shared sounds:

> We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

The hissing mixture of sibilance here also suggests the way the speaker and Whitman are savoring these "delicacies."

The final key example is towards the poem's end:

> Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.
> Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Notice how hard the /l/ consonance is working this section. It links the "we" (the speaker, and Whitman, but also America more generally) with "walk," "solitar[iness]," the "lights" going out, "lonel[iness]," "los[s]," "love," "blue[ness]," "automobiles" and "silen[ce]." All in all, this /l/ sounds helps build a melancholic and depressing sense of resignation, reinforcing the sense that the speaker is a kind of social, intellectual, and spiritual outcast.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Walt Whitman," "walked," "sidestreets," "trees," "self-conscious," "looking," "full"
- **Line 2:** " In my," "hungry fatigue," "and," "images," "went into," "neon," "fruit supermarket," "dreaming," "enumerations"
- **Line 3:** "What peaches and what penumbras," "Whole families," "shopping at night," "Aisles full," "husbands," "Wives," "avocados," "babies," "tomatoes," "Garcia," "what were," "doing down," "watermelons"
- **Line 4:** "Walt Whitman," "childless," "lonely old," "grubber," "poking," "among," "meats," "refrigerator," "grocery boys"
- **Line 5:** "killed," "pork chops," "price bananas"
- **Line 6:** "wandered in and," "out," "brilliant stacks," "cans," "following," "followed," "store detective"
- **Line 7:** "strode down," "open," "corridors," "together," "in," "solitary," "fancy," "tasting artichokes," "possessing," "frozen delicacy," "and never passing," "cashier"
- **Line 8:** "Where," "we," "Walt Whitman," "Which way," "point tonight"
- **Line 9:** "touch," "dream," "odyssey," "supermarket," "absurd"
- **Line 10:** "Will we walk," "solitary streets," "trees," "add," "shade," "shade," "lights out," "houses," "we'll," "both be," "lonely"
- **Line 11:** "Will we stroll," "dreaming," "lost," "love," "blue," "automobiles," "riveways," "home," "silent cottage"
- **Line 12:** "lonely old," "when Charon," "quit," "got," "out," "smoking," "bank," "stood," "watching," "the," "boat," "the," "black," "waters," "Lethe"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is used subtly throughout "A Supermarket in California." Firstly, it's worth noting that the entire supermarket itself can be read for a metaphor. The supermarket could metaphorically represent American society, with the "whole families" standing in for the accepted—and soon to be contested—norms of 1950s society (rigid morals, heterosexuality, consumerism and so on).

Metaphor is also used on a smaller scale throughout. In line 2, the speaker states that he is "shopping for images." This could be interpreted in two different ways. It could describe the poet's creative process—the imagination's search for the right images and phrase for the poem. Alternatively, it could refer to the way that the supermarket is a kind of facade—it seems to present a kind of freedom, but this is just an illusion conjured up by its "images" (its bright displays and tantalizing produce).

Later in the poem, the speaker asks Walt Whitman this question:

> Which way does your beard point tonight?

This takes Whitman's beard and presents it as a kind of compass, showing the speaker a not only the right way to walk but hopefully also how to recover—or discover—the "lost America of love."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "shopping for images"
- **Line 8:** "Which way does your beard point tonight," "?"

REPETITION

"A Supermarket in California" uses a number of different repetitive devices throughout its three stanzas.

The first device is easy to miss, but look at the way Walt Whitman's name appears at the start of each stanza. It rings out like a kind of bell, reminding the reader that this is a poem addressed *specifically* to Whitman, and pushes the reader to consider just what it is about Whitman's poetry that constitutes an alternative to the world represented by the supermarket in all its pristine and gaudy glory.

Later in the stanza, the speaker repeats (using diacope) "what" as he looks in amazement at the supermarket scene before him: "What peaches and what penumbras!" This helps convey the

breathtaking abundance on display in the supermarket—that is, the speaker is taken aback by the abundance of the produce (and the shopping families).

In line 6 ("I wandered in and out ..."), the poem employs polyptoton in the way that "following" is repeated by the closely related "followed." This helps create a comic image, the speaker following Whitman and both of them in turn being followed by the "store detective" (who perhaps stands in for moral conformity in America).

Finally, the poem uses anaphora in the repeated rhetorical questions of lines 10 and 11 (third stanza):

> **Will we** walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.
> **Will we** stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

This emphasizes the speaker's mood—how he is on a deep and difficult search for intellectual, spiritual, and artistic guidance. This repetition shows that the speaker has many questions, but also demonstrates the difficulty of finding any real answers—each question seems to echo in the silence that follows each question mark.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Walt Whitman"
- **Line 3:** "What," "wha," "t," "Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes"
- **Line 4:** "Walt Whitman"
- **Line 6:** "following," "followed"
- **Line 8:** "Walt Whitman"
- **Line 10:** "Will we," "shade to shade"
- **Line 11:** "Will we"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions are an important feature of "A Supermarket in California," appearing in all three stanzas. Overall, the poem's repeated use of questions lends it a searching and urgent tone, highlighting both the speaker's need to answer fundamental questions about 20th century America and the inherent difficulty of getting those answers—and, indeed, pinning down the questions precisely. In fact, the questions are really more about evoking a sense of spiritual and moral loss and confusion, helping to demonstrate the way in which the speaker is an outsider.

The first rhetorical question comes at the end of stanza three, when the speaker has a vision of Federico García Lorca among the watermelons:

> ... and you, García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

This is quite a playful moment, gently suggesting that Lorca is doing something that he shouldn't. Of course, this is toying with a more serious point, hinting at how Lorca, Whitman, and Ginsberg were somehow doing something wrong merely by having homosexual desires.

The next rhetorical questions come in a packet of three (like a supermarket deal, perhaps!). These questions are attributed to Walt Whitman himself, and show how out of step he, a 19th-century poet, is with the 20th-century American utopia of the supermarket:

> ... Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

The first question relates to the way that supermarkets changed the face of agriculture and retail. Meat and other produce were no longer necessarily sold near their source, severing the relationship between producer, supplier, and consumer. The next question about bananas is similar in the sense that most bananas came from far afield. The final question highlights that Whitman himself is lost and overwhelmed, even though he is meant to be the speaker's guide. He *too* struggles to find spiritual nourishment in the supermarket's world.

The last stanza ramps up the questioning tone, arguably portraying the speaker as more and more outcast as the poem unfolds. Indeed, there are five questions here, and these questions strike at the heart of what it means—or doesn't mean—to live in 20th century America. The speaker asks Whitman for guidance in the first two questions, reassurance in the next two (lines 10 and 11), and finally wonders whether the "lost America of love" ever existed—or could exist—in the final question. The last question also examines the relationship between Whitman and America, wondering whether Whitman's beloved country lived up to the way he idealized it.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?"
- **Line 5:** "Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?"
- **Line 8:** " Where are we going, Walt Whitman?," " Which way does your beard point tonight?"
- **Line 10:** "Will we walk all night through solitary streets?"
- **Line 11:** "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?"
- **Line 12:** "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 and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly in "A Supermarket in California." One of the first examples is in the phrase "fruit supermarket." These /oo/ sounds connect the fruit and the supermarket, which makes sense because the market is the place where fruits are sold. But this assonance, combined with the brightness of the popping /t/ and /k/ sounds here, also makes the phrase sound almost like an advertising slogan. It suggests the superficial allure of the supermarket itself.

In the first sentence of the second stanza, the poem uses assonance in its description of Walt Whitman as a "lonely old grubber, poking among the meats." The repeated vowel sounds supports the image of Whitman interrogating the supermarket primarily with his fingers; the assonance itself is like a finger jabbing at the line. The long /o/ vowel is also a rather woeful sound, suggesting the sadness and, indeed, loneliness of Whitman in this moment.

Assonance is used for a different effect in the final stanza. Here, the poem uses vowel patterning to create a slower pace in contrast to overwhelming garishness of the supermarket (the speaker and Whitman are now walking through moonlit suburban streets). Words like "stroll," "automobiles," and "home" make the poem feel as if it is coming to a rest, a kind of come-down after the frantic stimuli of the supermarket.

Long vowel sounds then move the poem into its final image—Whitman on the shores of the underworld—through "ah," "father," and "lonely old," also creating a more intimate sound as though the speaker is whispering in Whitman's/the reader's ear.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sidestreets," "trees"
- **Line 2:** "fruit supermarket"
- **Line 3:** "babies," "tomatoes," "you doing"
- **Line 4:** "lonely old," "poking"
- **Line 7:** "strode," "open," "artichokes," "possessing," "frozen"
- **Line 10:** "out," "houses," "we'll both be lonely"
- **Line 11:** "stroll," "America of love," "automobiles," "home"
- **Line 12:** "Ah," "father," "lonely old"

VOCABULARY

Walt Whitman (Line 1, Line 4, Line 8) - Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is one of the most important poets in American literary history, often described as the father of American poetry. The whole poem is addressed to him.

Enumerations (Line 2) - Cataloguing and counting, but also a reference to Whitman's poetry. Whitman's work often included what were essentially lists of things he loved about America.

Penumbra (Line 3) - The outer region of a shadow.

Garcia Lorca (Line 3) - A reference to Federico García Lorca, a 20th century Spanish poet and playwright who was assassinated by fascist forces.

Grubber (Line 4) - Someone who is digging or who trudges around slowly.

Fancy (Line 7) - Can mean imagination, but here also relates to a kind of carefree whim or desire.

Odyssey (Line 9) - A long, epic adventure—also an allusion to *The Odyssey* by the ancient Greek poet Homer.

Charon/Lethe (Line 12) - An allusion to the classical underworld. Charon is the boatman who ferries the souls of those who have recently died to the land of the dead. Lethe is a river, the waters of which cause forgetfulness/mental oblivion.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Supermarket in California" is a prose poem, which is a piece of poetic writing that doesn't use line breaks. This guide uses line numbers to help with clarity and comprehension, but really there aren't really lines here in the usual poetic sense.

The poem is divided into three stanzas, and each is longer than the last. This builds a sense of momentum, but also perhaps says something about the consumerist society in which the poem is embedded. That is, the increasing size of each stanza perhaps speaks to the consumerist desire to accumulate possessions—to own more and more things.

The poem also plays with two formal literary conventions. Firstly, the poem is a journey, which is well-established literary archetype. Think of Homer's *The Odyssey*, or Dante's *Inferno*—these classic works are completely framed around a voyage of some sort. Ginsberg subverts this archetype ironically and playfully—his speaker doesn't really go anywhere or have any real adventure apart from in the mind, but he's on an "odyssey" nevertheless. Indeed, perhaps the poem is making the point that this kind of journey isn't even really possible in consumerist America.

The other convention is tied in with the above. The poet guide—in which one older poet guides another through some difficult poetic task—is another well-established archetype. In Dante's *Inferno*, for example, Dante is led by the ancient Roman poet, Virgil. In this poem, Ginsberg is led by Whitman. One important thing to note is that while Virgil confidently knows

his way around the underworld, Whitman is more of an alien figure here—that is, he too is puzzled by the mid-20th century America represented by the supermarket.

METER

"A Supermarket in California" does not use a metrical scheme. Instead, it is written in what is known as free verse—which simply means the absence of strict meter. This fits with the speaker's state of mind—he's in deep with his philosophical wondering, a dream-like state. The flowing unpredictability of the free verse lines gives the poem a searching, longing kind of sound—as though the words want to settle, but can't (indeed, that's why there are so many questions).

It's also worth noting that the long, unfurling free verse lines deliberately echo the style of Walt Whitman—Ginsberg's and the poem's hero. Whitman rejected meter and rhyme, feeling them to be unnecessary constraints for the kind of vibrant, pulsating poetry that he wanted to write. Check out "I Sing the Body Electric" to see a similar kind of poetic line, combined with a similar use of rhetorical questioning.

RHYME SCHEME

There isn't any rhyme in "A Supermarket in California," and the same is true of much of Ginsberg's poetry (some of his early work was more formal, in the style of another poetic hero, William Blake). It's worth noting that rhyme would probably feel inappropriate, perhaps too similar to the kind of advertising slogans that might be found in the supermarket—or too organised for such a searching, philosophical tone.

SPEAKER

Most critical discussion of this poem treats the speaker as Allen Ginsberg himself. That's because there is a lot in the poem that chimes with Ginsberg's biography, and also because the other poems from the same collection—*Howl and Other Poems*—are written in an autobiographical style.

Either way, this speaker is deeply engaged with 20th-century America. That doesn't mean to say that he approves of it—quite the opposite—but what "America" means and "where" it is "going" are questions that preoccupy his mind. The speaker wanders through his world, wondering if *another* world is possible. In part, his vision for a different America is made possible by his engagement with poetry. That's why Whitman, a poet who espoused a vibrant and idealistic vision of what America could be, is the speaker's poet-guide—his wise mentor for issues spiritual, moral, and intellectual. (In the second stanza, Whitman himself speaks three questions.)

The speaker feels that he is an outcast—that he is fundamentally different from the typical families doing their shopping the supermarket. He senses that he has an alternative set of values to them, ones defined not by consumerism and material status, but by "love," poetry, and a more spiritual kind of freedom. Ultimately, though, the speaker is lost. He doesn't know the way, literally or metaphorically, and senses that his longing for an alternative America may just be an "absurd" fantasy. Indeed, everyone else in the supermarket just sees some weirdo lost in thought.

SETTING

As the title suggests, this poem is mostly set in a Californian supermarket—it was written in Berkeley, California. California, of course, is the land of sunshine and surfing, the place the rich and famous live, where even a young man or woman from the middle of nowhere might make it big as a movie star. It's thus the perfect setting for Ginsberg's poem, because it in many ways reflects the consumerist and materialist ideas he seeks to reject—an obsession with wealth and appearances, often at the expense of more meaningful work and connection. That it's the home of Hollywood adds heft to the mention of "images" in the poem too, suggesting that the speaker is searching for the "images" of success and happiness fed to him by the media rather than interrogating these things for himself.

The specificity of tyhe supermarket matters too. In Ginsberg's poem, the supermarket is both mundane and profound. On the one hand, it's just where people go to shop for groceries—a pretty dull task that most people have to do most days. On the other, the supermarket environment seems to say so much about 20th-century America. It offers a limited type of freedom—the freedom of consumer choice—that is linked to the capitalist economic model. In order to make money, the supermarket competes with other shops—and accordingly it becomes advantageous to be the biggest, brightest store with the most bargains. At first, the speaker is taken aback by the sheer sensory overload of the supermarket environment, which is packed full of both produce and people—and offers fruits from far-flung locations.

But there is a flip-side to the garish, gaudy brightness of the supermarket, a kind of shadow world (a "penumbra"). The speaker's walk also takes place *outside*, where everything feels unspeakably lonely. The speaker strolls through dark suburban streets, sensing his outsider status (which he feels he shares with Lorca and Whitman), seeing an America in which everything conforms to a very limited notion of what's important. All the homes seem the same, with identical "blue automobiles," and people sleeping in anticipation of their jobs the next day. Through this aspect of the setting, the poem is asking whether this America really embodies the American dream—or if that dream is more of a waking nightmare.

A final shift in the setting occurs in the final sentence. Here, the speaker imagines Whitman in the underworld. Whitman is delivered there by the underworld's boatman, Charon, and the

sense that this *is* a delivery chimes playfully with the earlier supermarket scenes. Whitman seems distinctly alone, standing by the river of Lethe. The waters of Lethe make the drinker lose their mind and forget everything—perhaps suggesting that Whitman's vision for an America based on freedom and love has already been forgotten.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"A Supermarket in California" was written in Berkeley, California in 1955 and was published in Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). This collection is considered to be one of the key works of the Beat Generation, an American literary movement in the post-war era that included writers like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Gary Snyder, and Lucien Carr.

The Beats were critical of America's spiritual, intellectual, and moral direction, and experimented with sexual freedom, psychedelic drugs, and alternative ways of life. This, of course, set them up as outcasts from typical American society—represented in this poem by the shopping families with their identical "blue automobiles."

The name—"Beat"—represents the generation's initial economic exile (because living *outside* of society meant having little money) and *beatitude*—a kind of divine inspiration. Ginsberg here claims Whitman as an honorary Beat—he too is "lonely" and preoccupied with spiritual longing ("Are you my angel?"). The title poem from the same collection, "Howl," caused great controversy in America, with accusations of sexual obscenity (it's worth noting Whitman appears in that poem too!).

Whitman, of course, is key to the poem's literary context. In fact, the whole poem is addressed to the 19th-century American poet, who many consider to be one of the founding influences on American poetry (together with Emily Dickinson). Whitman believed in the common man, but not the *conformist* man on display in the supermarket. His vision of America was one of a community of radically free individuals—people free to be who they wanted to be, and to treat one another with a deep and democratic love of humanity. Take a look at "I Hear America Singing" for an example of this.

All of this seems to sit under the poem's surface, informing the speaker's deep spiritual longing. Whitman's influence is also traceable in the long phrase length and the use of free verse, while his book, *Leaves of Grass*, is directly alluded to in the third stanza. Indeed, such is the book's importance to the speaker that it lives in his pocket, going wherever he goes!

The poem's literary context extends beyond the Beats and Whitman too. In its deep and philosophical critique of society, this could also be compared to the work of another of Ginsberg's literary heroes, William Blake. Blake's poem, "London," takes aim at the poet's contemporary environment while, similarly to the Ginsberg, its speaker walks through town. And in the use of the prose poem format, in which there are no official line breaks, the poem also echoes the work of the 19th-century French poet, Arthur Rimbaud (on whose work Ginsberg delivered a lecture in 1981). Finally, the poem also references the classical era in its closing lines, placing Whitman in the underworld of Ancient Greek and Roman myth.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"A Supermarket in California" was written in 1955, when the post-war rebuilding of America (and much of Europe) was in full swing. America was the strongest economic and military power in the world, but also in the midst of a tense conflict with the other great superpower, Russia. The dominant Russian political ideology, communism, was seen as a direct threat to the American way of life, capitalism. Put crudely, communism is (supposed to be) the equal distribution of resources throughout society as administered by the government). Capitalism encourages people to acquire their own resources, and have the (so-called) freedom to choose how they spend their money.

With this in mind, what it meant to be American was a hotly debated issue—and people with left-leaning political views were generally demonized as communists and, accordingly, anti-American. Ginsberg and the other Beats certainly fell into this latter category. The Beats, of course, were also deeply interested in what it meant to be American—and that question runs throughout this poem right from the title to the last punctuation mark.

Life was changing in post-war America as society tried to regain some semblance of normality. Increasing industrialization brought an increase in mass production, which in turn meant more people could own the same products—the same "blue automobile" for instance. There was also an uptick in the construction of suburbs, with the housing developer William Levitt playing a key role in designing houses that could be built and replicated cheaply.

Many surburbanites shopped in supermarkets, and, combined with the introduction of television to daily life, many Americans lived very similar lives to one another. The poem's speaker implicitly sees that as failure of collective imagination, a kind of prison constructed by the so-called freedoms of consumerism—customer choice and satisfaction guarantees.

The supermarket model originated in California (though there is some debate about this). Ralph's, an early chain, offered a wide range of produce in one location, facilitated by a large parking lot—especially important given that the automobile was becoming such a key part of daily American life. The supermarket thus elbowed out the old way of shopping, in which the shopper would buy bread from the bakery, meat

from the butchers, and so on—a typical of shopping which was much more localized.

As noted in this guides Setting discussion, California was also the home of Hollywood—the place where all those movies and television shows that so captivated the country were made. Ginsberg set his poem in this land of wealth and "images" for a reason.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- In the Poet's Own Voice — Ginsberg reads "A Supermarket in California" and offers a short introduction. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhTh01CO60Y)
- Whitman and America — Ginsberg discusses his literary hero with two fellow poets. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2M5O3_FYB4A)
- Whitman's Life and Poetry — A valuable resource on Ginsberg's literary hero from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- Shopping in 1950s America — Color footage of supermarkets from the time of the poem's composition. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzCVuQgNz4s)
- Ginsberg on Rimbaud — Transcript of a lecture by Ginsberg on another key influence, the 19th-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud (who used the prose poem form to great effect). (https://allenginsberg.org/2014/05/expansive-poetics-65-rimbaud/)
- More Poems and Bio — Further reading of poems by Ginsberg, and useful essays too. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/allen-ginsberg)

HOW TO CITE

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