UNIT 35  ALLEN GINSBERG

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35.0  OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you will be able to:
• discuss Allen Ginsberg’s life and poetics
• analyse the poem “A Supermarket in California”
• appreciate the poem “Sunflower Sutra”

35.1  INTRODUCTION

The attempt in this Unit is to give a general introduction to Allen Ginsberg—the poet, his life, poetics and important works. It helps you understand his characteristics as a man and poet. You will discover that Ginsberg’s life has a bearing on his poetry and that his career as a poet is shaped by other poets and movements. The Unit has also analysed two of this well-known poems selected from one of his earliest collections, Howl and Other Poems.

The first poem, “A supermarket in California”, gives a rather bleak picture of America. The speaker’s imaginary encounter with Walt Whitman in a supermarket is an event in the poem that enables him to make a critique of America and its values. The introduction of Whitman enables the speaker to think about and comment on an America that was more humane and value-based.

“Sunflower Sutra”, the second poem, gives a better vision of America and you will see in it the poet expressing his optimism about the inherent power and beauty of American society and culture. Indeed in the first half of the poem we come across the frightening vision of a thoroughly industrialized and polluted America but the horror of that vision is reversed in the latter half with a sermon of the speaker that is encouraging and edifying.
You may go through each section carefully and try to assimilate the ideas presented in it. This will help you do the exercises/tasks correctly.

### 35.2 Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997): Biography

Irwin Allen Ginsberg was born on 3rd June 1926 in Paterson, New Jersey. His father, Louis Ginsberg, was a high school teacher and an old fashioned and modestly successful poet. Very early in his life Ginsberg’s father instructed him in writing poetry which was mostly old-fashioned. It took quite some time for Allen to get out of his father’s poetic influence and start experimenting with techniques and themes. According to John Tytell, under Louis’ influence, Ginsberg “was imitating Renaissance forms with an ornate, overstylized language that was often woodenly lifeless. When Louis Ginsberg criticized the inadequacies of these early attempts, he also discouraged any tendencies toward experimentation.” The poetic qualities that Louis upheld included caution, reserve, moderation and pragmatic realism.

Right from her early adulthood, Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi, was mentally unstable and had to be in psychiatric asylums frequently. She was a Russian émigré and a communist. Because of her frequent mental illness Ginsberg had to remain with her when he was supposed to be at school. She feared assassination and believed that her mother-in-law would poison her. Her schizophrenia drove her into such desperate hallucinations that she believed that President Roosevelt placed wires in the ceilings and even in her brain to spy her. There were occasions when she could not recognize her own son, Ginsberg. She died at the Pilgrim State Mental Hospital on Long Island in 1956. Paraphrasing John Clellon Holmes’ opinion, Tytell says: “... Ginsberg’s relationship with his mother was the source of his wound, the axis around which his madness, homosexuality, and poet-nature all revolved.” Ginsberg’s poem “Kaddish” is an elegy on the suffering of his mother as a mad woman and it was a bold thematic experiment in that it was not a complete eulogy; it revealed “Naomi’s negative qualities” as well.

After his schooling in Paterson Ginsberg moved on to Columbia University to study law but was expelled for writing obscene lines on the dust accumulated on the window of his dormitory room. He was readmitted to Columbia University after a few months on producing a letter from a psychiatrist. He returned as an English Major student and graduated from the university in 1948. During this time at Columbia, Ginsberg was also making friends with people like Lucien Carr, Herbert Huncke, David Krammerer, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady and many others. After graduating from Columbia, Ginsberg did many jobs – dishwasher at Bickford’s Cafeteria, Book reviewer for Newsweek Market research Consultant, reporter for a labour newspaper in New Ark.

As a young man who had lived through World War II, Ginsberg had his own ideas about history. He felt that till 1948 it was possible for his generation to think about God, country, war against Hitler, etc. But the terribly destructive War brought with it disillusionment and despair. America represented the ‘System’ where anarchy was the law. For young people like Ginsberg, Louis Simpson quotes him, the country was

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in arms! Old men weeping in the parks.

Those who couldn’t be one with the system turned “into hipsters, hopheads, and poets.”
As mentioned earlier, Ginsberg had started writing poems very early in his life under his father’s influence. His study of the New Critics at Columbia, however, did not help him evolve his own poetics. It took a long time for him to break away from influences and imitations and to discover his own poetic style. There were a couple of poets who influenced him in positive ways.

One of the earliest poetic influences on William Ginsberg was William Blake. In fact in 1948, he had a “Blake vision”, says Thomas Merrill, “that oriented the spiritual and vocational direction of his life for the next fifteen years.” The vision occurred when he was going through a sense of isolation and worthlessness. Tytell describes the experience thus:

One day he was relaxing in bed, reading Blake . . . and as he came he experienced a sweepingly blissful revelation. He saw “Ah-Sunflower” [Blake’s poem], the poem over which he had been musing, as a manifestation of the universe freed from body, that is, as a psychospiritual transportation, a departure from corporeal awareness that allowed ineffably ecstatic energies to pervade his consciousness—something between what Buddhists might call Nirvana and the “terrible beauty” of Yeats’ “Easter 1916”. Simultaneously, he heard a deep, grave voice sounding like “tender rock” reciting “Ah!Sun-Flower,” and a few moments later “The Sick Rose.” Hearing these lyrics of mutability rendered through no apparent physical agency that Ginsberg could perceive shocked him out of his torpor, the lethargy caused by refusing to end a phase of his life. Catalyzed to the vitality of the universe, he would now see his own poetic attempts as part of a tradition of magic prophecy.

Ginsberg was careful enough to lead a normal life after this vision lest he should be branded as a mad man. Eventually, he understood the revelation in psychological terms. Tytell believes that Ginsberg’s social concern in his life and poetry is an outcome of the Blake vision. As it was for Blake, for Ginsberg too poetry was a transforming power. In a poem like “September On Jessore Road” Ginsberg has used Blake’s early metrical devices.

Another writer who strongly influenced Ginsberg was the American poet William Carlos Williams. Williams “had a long and abiding prosodic influence on Ginsberg”, says Merrill. Some of the earlier poems of Ginsberg was corrected by Williams, especially those included in The Gates of Wrath and Empty Mirror. While still a student at Columbia, Ginsberg attended a poetry reading session of the poet at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. As a student Ginsberg had been imitating Marvel and the English Romantic poets. In New York he heard Williams ending his poem “The Clouds” in mid-sentence. That was a revealing experience for Ginsberg, for Williams was writing poems the way he [Williams] talked. For Ginsberg, Simpson quotes, Williams’ reading of the poem “was like a revelation of absolute common sense in my entire universe of complete bullshit!” Later, Ginsberg sent some of his early poems (like “Ode to the Setting Sun”, “Ode to Judgement”, etc), to Williams which were all imitations of Marvel, Blake, etc. When he returned the poems, Williams made a comment: “In this mode, perfection is basic, and these are not perfect.”

In the days to come, Ginsberg and Williams discussed metre and rhythm of poetry. According to Simpson, these discussions worked. Ginsberg now realized
that anything can be the subject of poetry. In “Paterson” (1949), we notice the emergence of the original Ginsberg:

What do I want in these rooms papered with vision of money?  
How much can I make by cutting my hair? If I put new heels on my shoes . . .  
what war I enter and for what a prize! The dead prick of commonplace obsession  
harridan vision of electricity at night and daylight misery of thumb-sucking rage. . . rage

The long lines clearly indicate that Ginsberg was not simply imitating Williams, who preferred short lines. The lines further show their affinity to those of Walt Whitman, who had been an early influence on Ginsberg. It was his high school teacher Francis Durbin who had introduced Whitman to him. At that point of time, Ginsberg says, “I . . . was lonesome; but I first read Whitman there.” For Ginsberg, Whitman was “a vast mountain so big . . .”

In his poetry collections Planet news (1968) and The Fall of America (1972) Ginsberg uses a travelogue style even as they contained descriptions of the American Continent. According to Helen Vendler, the collections constitute “the largest attempt since Whitman to encompass the enormous geographical and political reality of United States.”

Ginsberg and the Beat movement: Ginsberg’s name is often associated with the Beat movement, of which he too was a founder member, the others being Jack Kerouac, Lucien Carr, David Kammerer, William S. Burroughs, Hal Chase and Herbert Huncke. The origins of the Beat movement may be traced to Columbia University where it took shape in the meetings of the people mentioned above. It was in the summer of 1948 that Ginsberg, who was then living in an apartment in Harlem, was introduced to the word ‘beat’ by Huncke. The word meant “exhausted, out of it and therefore blessed.” The phrase ‘Beat Generation’ was coined by Kerouac. The beatniks became popular poets in the 1950’s and the common features that characterized them include rejection of commonly accepted standards, innovations in style, use of drugs, homosexual relationship, interest in Eastern religions, scorn for materialism and a direct treatment of the human condition.

The beatniks did not acknowledge any external social authority but obeyed an inner authority. The so-called ‘civilized’ life that modern society promoted, according to them, was an immense lie because of the gap existed in it between the self and neighbor. Dissociating themselves from such a society they tried to maintain an interpersonal fidelity.

Zen Buddhism was of particular interest to them because of the concept of holiness in it: “Every impulse of the soul, the psyche, and the heart was one of holiness. Everything was holy if understood as such. . . .” In Zen Buddhism, evil is not antithetical to good; they are two sides of the same coin. One has to accept both, rather than accepting one and denouncing the other. Human beings are called so because of the presence of good and evil in them. Zen supports ‘natural humanity’ which is often suppressed by an artificial ideal. What the Beat writers attempted in their works was to deal with this natural humanity. What society branded as immoral and vulgar were the true and intimate aspects of a human being’s life: “Many beat writers, especially Ginsberg, flaunt their most intimate acts and feelings—masturbation, sodomy, drug addiction, erotic dreams—in
aggressively explicit street language. . . . To the beats such expression is the denial of shame itself, a manifesto that nothing human or personal can be degrading.” Some of them, like Ginsberg and Kerouac, have claimed religious illumination.

A close study of Ginsberg’s life and poetic career will show that he was a typical member of the Beat group. He questioned accepted ideals; his poetic style, as we will see shortly, was different from that of the other writers of his time; he experimented with drugs because he felt drugs helped him get out of stereotype feelings and to closely identify with other human beings and with nature. Quoting Tytell, Louis Simpson says: “Generally . . . Ginsberg used drugs as an aid to ‘releasing blocked aspects of his consciousness which are expressed in his poetry, like the Moloch vision in “Howl”, which was induced by peyote, or “Kaddish”, written while using amphetamines.’” As we have already seen, Ginsberg was a homosexual and was deeply interested in Eastern religions (in the following section we will see more about this); he was not materialistic, for as late as 1980’s, Merrill says, he lived “in modest style in his $260-a-month tenement apartment on the lower East Side of Manhattan.” He did not use flowery or highly figurative language in his poetry; rather, one finds themes being treated in a direct, raw manner. We shall see that, too, in another section.

Ginsberg and India: By 1961, Ginsberg’s reputation — notoriety, too, with the publication of Howl — as a poet had grown internationally and that year he visited many European and Eastern countries like India and Japan. His Buddhist belief became firmer during this visit to India and the visit has been documented in his Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963. During his sojourn in India (with his homosexual friend Peter Orlovsky ) he visited the sadhus in Benares and the Krittibas, young rebel poets of Calcutta led by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and funeral ghats where he meditated on life and death. Krittibas poets attracted Ginsberg’s attention because he found his own past in their outrageousness and genius. Ginsberg visited India again in 1971, especially West Bengal in the aftermath of a flood and famine there, which resulted in the writing of the long poem “September on Jessore Road.”

According to Thomas Merrill, the stay in India in 1961 “was a decisive point in Ginsberg’s spiritual development, for it marked his abandonment of the gods, devils and angels that had haunted his visions since the Harlem Blake Experience fifteen years before.” This giving up of the divine was indeed a great change because the conversion was from his theistic Judaeo-Christian belief to non-theistic Buddhism. About the effect of this spiritual conversion, Ginsberg said: “at present as Buddhist I see an awakened emptiness (shunyata) as the crucial term. No God, no Self, not even Whitman’s universal Self.” Ginsberg became a Buddhist formally in 1972.

Ginsberg’s poetics: When he began writing his poems, Ginsberg’s guide was his father. Then he was under the influence of Blake, William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. Although he liked the three renowned poets, it will be unfair to say that he was blindly imitating them. He might have displayed his interest in Whitman’s prose rhythm, but that has not affected the younger poet’s originality. It took him some time to develop his own writing style and his association with the Beat movement certainly helped him evolve his own poetics.

Unlike many of the poets of his and previous times, Ginsberg was skeptical of reason in poetry. Reason was often referred to as ‘tyrant’ in his writings. What he
has attempted to do in his poetry is to give a balanced view of modern human experience by minimizing the interference of reason. His attempt was to:

live
in the physical world
moment to moment
I must write down
every recurring thought
stop every beating second

The poet is represented here as a divine recorder, capturing with his sensory perceptions what is in front of him at the time of writing. Merrill summarises this process thus: “The physical world is the writer’s sounding board and his heartbeat strikes against it so as to produce recurring thought... what is suggested... is the concept of the poet as diarist...” Let us remember that a diary note is not written according to any particular form. It is the recording of a train of thoughts or events that pass through the mind or before the eyes. Such diary notes are frank, authentic and unpretentious.

For Ginsberg, form is “never more than an extension of content.” When poetry is written in this way it reflects reality itself, it is not a mere description of reality. Being self-conscious while depicting reality in poetry has its drawbacks. According to him, he writes in the Indian Journals, “the problem is to write Poetry... which sounds natural, not self conscious.”

Throughout his life Ginsberg was a champion of free speech and his open discussion of sexual themes in his poetry and elsewhere underlines this fact. He was a spokesperson for gay rights; he was a communist and visited communist countries like Russia and China. He lived dangerously clinging to the ideas he believed in. Ginsberg died on 5 April 1997 in New York. Some of his major works are:

Howl and Other Poems (1956); Kaddish and Other Poems (1961); Empty Mirror: Early Poems (1961); Reality Sandwiches (1963); Planet News (1971); The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems 1948-1951 (1972)

Self-check Exercise I

1) Read the biography of Allen Ginsberg given in Wikipedia and collect more information about his poetic style and technique, his social and political activism and his final years.

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2) Do you think that Ginsberg would have been a more successful poet if he had followed his father’s advice one how to write poetry? Why?
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3) Can you write down the names of some poets (you have studied about) who were influenced by other poets?

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35.3 A SUPERMARKET IN CALIFORNIA

35.3.1 Introduction

Ginsberg wrote this poem in 1955 when he was residing in California. It appeared in his celebrated and controversial collection *Howl and Other Poems*. In this collection we find Ginsberg experimenting with long lines which may be called Whitmanesque. Quite significantly, Walt Whitman appears in this poem as the chief character. This experimentation with line has found its full expression in the title poem “Howl”. The poem manifests Ginsberg’s characteristic style of writing.

“A Supermarket in California” is an ode to Whitman while it also indicates the prospective themes that Ginsberg is to deal with in his poetry. Whitman was unconventional in life as well as in writing. He violated accepted notions of metered lines, structure and themes. Being influenced by the Romantics, Whitman had a special liking for nature and its innocence. Living in the 19th century he had witnessed nature’s slow destruction with the advancement of industrialization in America. He advocated freedom, both physical and spiritual. Consequently, they became two important themes in his poetry. What we find in Ginsberg’s poetry is a more advanced treatment of the themes, for he lived in the 20th century during which period Whitman’s anxieties about the ill-effects of industrialization had attained astounding proportions. False standards of morality also had become disgusting. When he published *Howl and Other Poems* in the 1950’s, he had to face ‘obscenity trial’. The imminent loss of essential American culture and society had been a major concern in Whitman’s poetry and it finds fuller expression in the writings of Ginsberg. In short, Whitman’s thematic and stylistic influence on Ginsberg’s poetry is significant, but this in no way means that the latter was not an original poet.

35.3.2 The Text

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.

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

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?
The American Poets-II

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, 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? Are you my Angel?

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.

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

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

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?

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?

Berkeley, 1955

Glossary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fatigue</td>
<td>a feeling of tiredness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penumbras</td>
<td>areas of light shadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avocados</td>
<td>green pear-shaped fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artichokes</td>
<td>round green vegetables that have fleshy leaves arranged like the petals of a flower. Each leaf can be removed and the fleshy bottom part of it eaten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>odyssey</td>
<td>a long exciting journey on which a lot of things happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>driveway</td>
<td>a piece of hard ground that leads from the road to a person’s garage or front door</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

Like an ode, the poem opens with an address in which the speaker (the speaker can be the poet himself. According to Thomas Merrill, “As with no other poet, Ginsberg’s poems are his most comprehensive and intimate biography. Little is left out.”) invokes the name of Walt Whitman. The speaker’s mind has thoughts about Whitman and he is talking to the older poet (who died in 1892). At the beginning of the poem we see the speaker walking on a moonlit night down the
side streets of California. Physically he is uncomfortable; he is fatigued and has a headache. Psychologically, too, he seems to be downcast, for he is dreaming of Whitman’s “enumerations” and is in search of “images.” His search leads him to a “neon/fruit supermarket.” Let us recall that Whitman’s poetry contains long lists (enumerations) of people, objects, events and phenomena.

The speaker to find something organic in the supermarket but the phrase ‘neon (a chemical element that reacts with nothing) fruit supermarket’ seems to invalidate the hope. In a sense the speaker is going back to the past, history represented in Whitman, seeking answers for the economic and social maladies the modern world has thrown up. As he enters the supermarket he is forced to exclaim, “What peaches and what penumbras!” ‘Peach’ is a fruit but ‘penumbra’ is an area of shadow. That is to say, although the fruit and vegetables displayed in the supermarket are organic and seem to symbolize nature and domestic life, beneath them lurk secrets (shadow); beneath the displays of nature and domesticity there are dark secrets which are the harsh realities that industrialization has brought with it. The speaker further refers to families — husbands, wives and babies — who are “shopping at night.” The word “night” further deepens the meaning implied in the word ‘penumbras.” The first stanza ends addressing Garcia Lorca, a Spanish leftist poet and an admirer of Whitman.

The speaker enters the supermarket with thoughts about Whitman but now, in the second stanza, we see his imaginary encounter with Whitman. He says: “I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking/among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.” Unlike the families described in the previous stanza, Whitman is alone and childless. The expressions ‘poking among the meats’ and ‘eyeing the grocery boys’ seem to have sexual connotations and sexual motifs were not unusual in Whitman’s poetry. In fact, he allegedly had homosexual interests. Interestingly, Lorca too had similar interests. The questions that Whitman asks in the middle of the stanzas seem to denote the closeness and familiarity that existed between people during his time. In his time people could ask about the details of the food items they bought and the sellers could also answer questions like, “Who killed the pork chops?/ What price bananas?” However, in Ginsberg’s supermarket such questions need not be asked and even if they are asked the storekeeper or salespersons don’t seem to know the answers. The customers there mechanically collect their goods and exit. It is a place where human emotions of friendship, warmth and concern are totally absent. Another terrible outcome of industrialization! The supermarket is a society that is devoid of humanity.

Yet Whitman seems to offer the speaker the vision of a way of life that has beauty and that goes beyond the drabness of mass commodities. The speaker follows Whitman everywhere in the supermarket and in the company of the latter the former tastes “artichokes” and possesses “every frozen delicacy”. The line “We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy” is significant in that the speaker and Whitman can form a company that is based on a sense of freedom and love and bond, something the other customers in the supermarket are unable to enjoy. In other words, the poet and the speaker manifest their sense of freedom by secretly tasting the artichokes without paying for them, “never passing the cashier.” It is a kind of life resembling the natural world which Whitman has always glorified in his poetry. The speaker and Whitman appear to be unaffected and are beyond the expectations of a highly commercialized supermarket where cash, payment, profit, loss, etc., are valued dearly.
However, the third and the final stanza breaks this brief moment of togetherness and freedom. The stanza begins with the speaker’s question: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour.” The speaker has to leave the supermarket before its doors are closed and with that, he realizes, his imaginary association with Whitman will end. The beautiful way of life that his imaginary company with Whitman provided him in the supermarket, the pleasure of unfettered/secret enjoyment, now appears unrealistic. What the speaker has to confront outside the supermarket is the modern world of mass culture, competition and commoditization of human beings. Everything is for sale and has a price to be paid. He now considers his ‘odyssey’ to the supermarket “absurd”. Whitman’s vision of a natural world/society and natural man seems to be impractical in the modern industrialized world. Their stroll through silent streets outside the supermarket will only lead them to loneliness. The stark realities of a highly industrialized modern society prevent them from dreaming of the lost America of love, where they could be happy in their silent cottage. The symbols of the consumer society — blue automobiles and driveways — will remind them of the strictly compartmentalized, conformist and coldly formal life of modern nuclear families. The members of these families cannot think of an experience with a dead poet who was a visionary. His America was based on love and it had not become totally consumerist.

In the last four lines of the poem the speaker compares America to Hades, the mythological land of the dead. In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman who would carry the dead in his boat across the river Styx to their final abode in the Underworld. The closing lines of the poem seem to imply that Whitman’s journey to eternity in the boat was incomplete, for “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.” (Lethe is one of the five rivers of Hades. If one drank its water one passes into total oblivion). The moderns, victims of capitalism and consumerism, about which Whitman had predicted long ago, have forgotten him. He is left stranded on a smoking bank and is a forgotten hero. The old world that the poet, “courage teacher”, sang about has lost its significance in a consumerist society.

**35.3.4 Aspects of Technique**

Ginsberg is known for his use of the free verse form in his poetry. Often his lines resemble those of Walt Whitman for whom he had great admiration. As in the case of Whitman’s poetry, Ginsberg’s poetic works also do not conform to the structural forms of poetry like the sonnet or the ode. In other words, he is less concerned about pure metrical compositions.

“A Supermarket in California” begins with an apostrophe or a direct address (Whitman) which is a characteristic feature of an ode. However, it does not have all the properties of an ode, especially its metrical features and stanza form. Yet the poem has its own rhythmic pattern close to prose rhythms. The long lines in “Supermarket” remind one of Whitman’s lines in such poems as “Song of Myself” or “A Passage to India”. Whitman also dealt with unconventional themes and Ginsberg’s poem is also unconventional with its liberal treatment of sexuality.

Whether the poem “A Supermarket in California” contains autobiographical elements or not may be debatable. However, it is a fact that Ginsberg stayed in Berkeley, California, for nearly two years and the two poems prescribed for you were written during that period. Like the New Critics we may say that the poet’s
biography is rather irrelevant while studying a poem and in that sense the poem has a speaker and that may not be the poet. Yet one might find some resemblances between the speaker and the poet and hence one might find the point of view of the poem as the poet’s as well. The fact that the speaker’s companion in the poem is none other than Whitman points to Ginsberg’s entry into it. Similarly, as already mentioned, the unconventional subject of his poem, a supermarket, underlines his predilection for Whitman. Whitman’s style of enumerating objects and events is a characteristic feature of Ginsberg’s writing, too. The appearance of Garcia Lorca in the poem and his involvement with communist ideology may be related to Ginsberg’s leftist leanings which he inherited from his mother. Let us also recall that Whitman and Lorca were allegedly homosexuals while Ginsberg was explicitly so. In “Supermarket” we find Ginsberg using sexually-charged expressions while explicitly talking of Whitman.

At a glance, the supermarket may easily be identified as the poem’s setting, yet as we finish reading the poem we notice that the poem begins and ends on the street. Inside the supermarket there are vegetables and people including families and they are seen under the glare of neon lights. Outside there is “the full moon”, of course, but the reader cannot ignore the references to night and shade. The joy that people find under the artificial neon lights is transient, while outside the supermarket nights of uncertainties are awaiting (the series of questions beginning with, “Where are we going, Walt Whitman” and the image of Whitman stranded on a smoke bank illustrate this fact ). It is also noteworthy that there are punctuations of wonder (exclamation marks) in the first stanza which become questions in the second and third stanzas. Proper punctuation marks to convey life’s uncertainties!

As has already been noted, the immediate setting of the poem is the supermarket but its location is in California, a sprawling city. Further, towards the end, there occur thoughts about a lost America and the reader is made to travel with the speaker from the particular (the supermarket and California) to the general, thereby implying that the supermarket is a microcosm of the American consumerist society that has become “the lost America of love.”

The speaker enters the supermarket not to buy anything, it appears, but to shop for images. Yes he suffers from “hungry fatigue” but his purpose is to be inspired by the supermarket which, he seems to think, has become a mini version of the consumerist American society. Indeed his visit appears to be successful, for the poem is full of images that adequately characterized Ginsberg’s America. His imaginary encounter with Whitman provides him the occasion to think of the lost values of his country.

This is evident in the fact that inside the supermarket the speaker and Whitman form a society of their own which is in direct contrast with the discipline of that place which involves buying, paying bills, etc. With Whitman, the speaker is able to violate, briefly, of course, the norms of the supermarket society and celebrate their freedom: “We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy/tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy and never passing the cashier.” Further, Whitman’s activities in the supermarket, with homosexual overtones (“eyeing the grocery boys”, “poking among the meats”, etc.), are man’s natural instincts that are stifled by a society that pays only lip service to morality. Sexual freedom is something that the Beat poets valued and the poem is also an example of Ginsberg’s Beat attitude.
Self-check Exercise I

1) Can you prepare list of the objects that Ginsberg gives in the poem?

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2) What is the main theme of the poem?

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3) What can you say about the stanza form of the poem?

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4) Pick out any two images/symbols from the poem and briefly state their significance

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35.4 SUNFLOWER SUTRA

35.4.1 Introduction

The poem is essentially the description of a sunflower which has withered in a very badly polluted locale. In it Ginsberg uses a number of words and phrases that describe the devastating encroachment of industrialization upon what is natural. The first part of the poems describes the destruction of the flower but the closing is a contrast; the flower, although withered, is not a symbol of helplessness or powerlessness. The poet wants his readers, along with the characters in the poems, to understand the fact that nothing/no individual is so
helpless as to be wiped out by destructive agencies. The essential spirit of all living things and beings has the power to withstand all forms of physical/materialistic onslaught

35.4.2 The Text

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry.

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole, companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery.

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums on the riverbank, tired and wily.

Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray shadow against the sky, big as a man, sitting dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust—
—I rushed up enchanted—it was my first sunflower, memories of Blake—my visions—Harlem and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joes Greasy Sandwiches, dead baby carriages, black treadless tires forgotten and unretreaded, the poem of the riverbank, condoms & pots, steel knives, nothing stainless, only the dank muck and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into the past—
and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset, crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives in its eye—
corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a battered crown, seeds fallen out of its face, soon-to-be-toothless mouth of sunny air, sunrays obliterated on its hairy head like a dried wire spiderweb, leaves stuck out like arms out of the stem, gestures from the sawdust root, broke pieces of plaster fallen out of the black twigs, a dead fly in its ear, Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul, I loved you then!
The grime was no man’s grime but death and human locomotives, all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis’ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—modern—all that civilization spotting your
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crazy golden crown—
and those blear thoughts of death and dusty loveless
eyes and ends and withered roots below, in the
home-pile of sand and sawdust, rubber dollar
bills, skin of machinery, the guts and innards
of the weeping coughing car, the empty lonely
tincans with their rusty tongues alack, what
more could I name, the smoked ashes of some
cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and the
milky breasts of cars, wornout asses out of chairs
& sphincters of dynamos—all these
entangled in your mummied roots—and you there
standing before me in the sunset, all your glory
in your form!
A perfect beauty of a sunflower! a perfect excellent
lovely sunflower existence! a sweet natural eye
to the new hip moon, woke up alive and excited
grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden
monthly breeze!
How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your
grime, while you cursed the heavens of the
railroad and your flower soul?
Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a
flower? when did you look at your skin and
decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?
the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and
shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?
You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a
sunflower!
And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me
not!
So I grabbed up the skeleton thick sunflower and stuck
it at my side like a scepter,
and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack’s soul
too, and anyone who’ll listen,
—We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread
bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we’re all
beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we’re blessed
by our own seed & golden hairy naked
accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black
formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our
eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive
riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening
sitdown vision.
Allen Ginsberg
Berkeley, 1955

Glossary:
tincan : a metal container in which food, drink or paint is put
box house : houses which look like boxes, without enough space inside
gnarled : twisted and oddly shaped
rheumy-eyed : having moist and watery eyes
bernal : persons having no permanent home or job
clanking : producing a sound like the noise we hear when metal objects bang together
lreadless tires : tyres without the pattern of grooves on it that stop them slipping
unretreaded : (of a tyre) which has not been given a new outer surface
dank : unpleasantly damp and cold
muck : dirt or unpleasant substance
rackly : making a lot of short harsh noises
smut : dirt such as soot which makes a dirty mark on something
obliterated : destroyed completely
grime : dirt which has collected on the surface of something
phallus : male sex organ
protuberance : a rounded part that sticks out from the surface of something
innards : here, the parts inside the car (the word means the organs inside the body of a person or animal)
wheelbarrow : a small cart with one wheel and handles that is used for carrying things in the garden, etc.
sphincters : rings of muscle that surround an opening to the body and that can tighten to close this opening
hip : bright red (from the word ‘rosehip’)
specter/spectre (Br E) : a ghost; something frightening
scepter/scepter (Br E) : an ornamental rod that a king/queen carries on ceremonial occasions as a symbol of power

35.4.3 Analysis of the Poem

Ginsberg wrote “Sunflower Sutra”, too, at Berkeley, California. The poem contains some of his frequently dealt with themes. The devastation of the American landscape by the encroachments of modern industrialized society constitutes the central idea of the poem. However, while a poem like “America” ends on a pessimistic note, “Sunflower Sutra” ends on a positive note; it ends with the speaker’s assertion that he will preach a sermon to himself, Kerouac and, significantly, to “anyone who’ll listen.”

When the poem opens we find its speaker (Ginsberg?) sitting “under the huge shade of a Southern/Pacific locomotive.” He is watching “the sunset / over the box house hills.” The view should give him joy but watching it in the presence of an ugly urban landscape only makes him cry. The speaker is not all alone; Jack Kerouac also is sitting beside him. They are alike in their thoughts and feelings: “we thought the same thoughts/ of the soul, bleak and blue and sad eyed…”

They cannot enjoy the beauty of the sunset because they are surrounded by objects (“the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery”) that are symbolic of ruthless urbanization. In Romantic poetry we come across sunset, hills, trees, etc. which are objects of pure beauty and joy, but here they have lost their charm in the context of an ugly urbanized landscape. The image of trees presented in lines
8-9 does not evoke any organic feeling in the readers; the image is presented to underline the ugly mechanization of America. The speaker and Kerouac, thus, are “surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery.”

In the next lines the ill effects of industrialization is depicted. The water in the river has become oily, perhaps because of the industrial waste flushed into it. Fish cannot live in it. The mountains that overlook San Francisco cannot be the peaceful abode of a hermit who wants to cut himself off from the buzz of the city. Even the mountain landscape appears to have been encroached upon. The speaker and Kerouac watch this bleak landscape. They describe themselves as “rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums/ on the river bank, tired and wily.” They don’t seem to have any escape from this terribly mechanized society; while hating it they have to be a part of it, too.

It is at this moment Kerouac tells the speaker, “Look at the Sunflower.” The speaker could not imagine the presence of a sunflower in that polluted environment. Unable to believe such a presence, he sees the flower as something unnatural,” a dead grey shadow . . . big as a man.” As he rushes up to see it, memories well up in him about his auditory vision of Blake (while reading the poem “Ah! Sunflower”) followed by his life in New York:

It was my first sunflower, memories of Blake. . . . past

The objects described in these lines are hideous symbols of urbanization, mechanization and industrialization and New York happens to be the most urbanized city.

The Sunflower that Kerouac shows, which should have revived the speaker’s spirit, has no charm since the vicious and polluted environment surrounding it has destroyed its beauty:

and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset, crackly, bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotive in its eye.

In the subsequent description the personified flower is not presented as something beautiful but as something that has been destroyed chemically. It looks like a “battered crown”; the seeds in it have fallen off and the dried leaves of the plant stick out of the stem like arms. In short the flower, and the plant on which it stands, is not an object of beauty but an object made ugly and mercilessly devastated by industrial waste.

In the lines that follow (line 41 onwards) the speaker lists the pollutants that have caused the destruction of each part of the personified flower:

all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis’ry, that sooty hand or phallicus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial— modern—all that civilization spotting your crazy golden crown

In another listing of objects, with obvious sexual overtones, the speaker makes it clear that the plant has not been growing from a layer of natural soil but from the home-pile of sand and sawdust; its roots were entangled in the skin of machinery, the guts and innards of the weeping coughing car, the smoked ashes of some cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and the milky breasts of cars, etc. Ginsberg uses
these sexual images to express, as a Beat poet, his anger at a mechanized urban society that has hardly any respect for what is beautiful and artistic.

Having described its pitiable and ugly existence, in the last thirty odd lines, the speaker expresses his admiration for the sunflower. He is rather reluctant to acknowledge that any kind of industrial invasion can destroy what is beautiful, organic, original and artistic:

and you there
standing before me in the sunset, all your glory
in your form!
A perfect beauty of a sunflower! A perfect excellent
lovely sunflower existence! A sweet natural eye
to the new hip moon, woke up alive and excited
grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden
monthly breeze!

The speaker has reasons for refusing to accept the disfigurement of the flower. According to him, the flower has inherent beauty and strength that can withstand all attacks on it. Once again the personification of the flower is made prominent. Although the flower is covered with grime, “many flies buzzed round” it. The speaker’s objection is that the flower does not assert its beauty and strength as Sunflower; it has been cursing the destructive external force and itself:

How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your grime, while you cursed the heavens of the railroad and your flower soul?

The speaker exhorts it not to forget its original identity as a sunflower and not to consider itself a locomotive, the very cause of its, and America’s, destruction:

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?

the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive?

The frequent references to the ‘locomotive’ in the poem have special significance in American history. When it was first introduced, nobody thought that the industrialization process it signalled would have such terrible impact upon the American landscape. Thus even Whitman, an ideal poet for Ginsberg, sang in praise of its arrival in his “A Passage to India.” He thought it would connect people across America and would be a means to witness America’s varied landscape. So he sang:

I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surmounting every barrier;
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying freight and passengers;
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world...
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea...
The destructive impact of the locomotive is now manifested in the crass industrialization and the all-encompassing pollution of the landscape. Thus, even Ginsberg’s personified sunflower decides to think of itself as “an impotent dirty old locomotive/ or the ghost of a locomotive.”

However, the speaker’s present attempt is to revive the withered spirit of the flower and instilling in it enough faith to assert its beauty and power. With this intention he makes a clear distinction between what is beautiful and what is despicable:

You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!
And you locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget me not!

With this address he picks up the battered, “skeleton thick” sunflower and keeps it by his “side like a scepter”—a symbol of power.

The final section of the poem (the last 9 lines) is the speaker’s sermon to himself, Kerouac “and anyone who’ll listen.” Once again the locomotive and sunflower are used as powerful symbols. The locomotive (industrialization), the speaker exhorts, certainly has had its annihilating impact on the sunflower (beauty/art), but the damage is only external; beneath the layers of grime the flower has its original beauty and strength that are inviolable. It is significant that the poet is using the second person (inclusive) pronoun ‘we’, giving his sermon a kind of universal significance in the whole of America, perhaps even outside it. The process of industrialization may take frightening proportions but the spirit of America handed down over centuries remains invincible:

We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we’re all beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we’re blessed by our own seed and golden hairy naked accomplishment.

Human beings cannot be made up of industrial waste, the covetousness of the corporate world or the violence of war. The spirit of America and every American is a sunflower.

### 35.4.4 An Appreciation

The word ‘Sutra’ in the title of the poem is significant. ‘Sutra’ is a Buddhist form of literature. This kind of literature contains works whose contents are a string of aphorisms. An aphorism, as you may be aware, is a short phrase or line that says something true or wise; it is, according to MH Abrams, “a pithy and pointed statement of a serious maxim, opinion, or general truth.” Ginsberg’s poem is not merely aphoristic, it is much more complex but, as in the case of Sutra, the message it conveys is simple and truthful.

The sunflower as a symbol receives elaborate treatment in the poem, although it mainly stands for America and its indomitable spirit. Like the sunflower in the poem America has been tarnished and battered yet, the poem implies, it has in it inherent power to reconstruct and reinstate itself. Although outwardly it is battered, it still has its beauty within it. What is needed is people’s understanding of the fact that America can regain its inherent beauty. America’s beauty lies in its core values which include freedom of expression and progressive political and social thought. Like a romantic poet-seer, Ginsberg reveals this beauty to a country that has lost its core values.
Allen Ginsberg

The poem may be considered as a prophetic poem. A prophetic poem has its tradition in the prophetic literature of the Bible. The Old Testament prophets, inspired by the Spirit of God, often warned the people of Israel, who turned unfaithful to God, against the wrath of God upon them. The poems “America” and some sections of “Howl” are prophetic in nature. However, in “Sunflower Sutra” one comes across Ginsberg’s vision of a Romantic society in which Industrial devastation is totally absent, a society which has the capability to return to its original beauty. The fact that the closing lines of the poem resemble a sermon further underscores this prophetic quality of the poem.

The poem, like many others by Ginsberg, has different kinds of long lines which do not essentially adhere to any specific metrical or rhythmic pattern. It has the rhythm of breath. Such lines help him pass on his message to his leaders clearly. Each Stanza contains a couple of lines that drive in a truth. This gives the poem the quality of a Sutra.

John Tytell finds some similarities between Blake’s sunflower in “Ah-Sunflower” and Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra”. According to him, the latter poem “is an elegy of glorious optimism for a dead sunflower.” Both the poems deal with mutability and transience of living objects and the surety of death. The critic informs us that the sunflower that Ginsberg sees is the flower of industry and as such it looks ugly. It is, the poet says, “the flower of the world, worn, brittle, dry yellow—miracle of gravel life spring(ing) to the bud.” A poem like “Howl” has a repetitive base form (for e.g., the repetition of the pronoun ‘Who’). In “Sunflower Sutra”, without any such repetition, Ginsberg builds up a kind of increasing rhythmic tempo. What the poet attempts to do in the poem is to present, to quote Tytell again, “a paean to the life-force within the heart of the wasteland, the sordid details of junk, treadles tires, used condoms, and abandoned tin cans and industrial grime, enveloping the dessicated sunflower in which Ginsberg chooses to believe, vigorously asserting his belief by seizing the skeleton stalk and holding it at his side like a scepter.”

The last part of the poem is a verse paragraph and it closely resembles Whitman’s verse. One of Whitman’s disciples, Dr. Richard Bucke, has recorded a mystical experience that his master had around 1853-54. This experience, like Ginsberg’s Blake vision, “resulted in an ecstatic sense of ineffable joy, a knowledge of the unity of the universe, of the bonds existing between men and all living things.” The impact of the experience is perceivable in Whitman’s celebration of life and fellow men. His poems revealed his ability to sympathetically identify with and love everything—living and non-living—in the universe. Whitman’s celebration of life everywhere and his ability to see beauty in everything is so intense and open that rational individuals might even find it sentimental. This celebration of life is visible in Ginsberg’s eulogy of the dead flower and the optimism that he develops out of it.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Can you explain how “Sunflower Sutra” is different from “A Supermarket in California”?
2) How does the poet bring in pollution as a theme in the poem?
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3) Read William Blake’s poem on sunflower and see if you can compare the flower with Ginsberg’s sunflower
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4) Pick out any two images from the poem and comment on their significance
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35.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you mainly studied about the life and poetic style of Allen Ginsberg. You have also understood the themes of his two poems, “A Supermarket in California” and Sunflower Sutra.” Both the poems were written when he was in Berkeley, California and they are taken from one of his controversial collections, Howl and Other Poems. You must have also noted that he was different from conventional poets in his writing and use of the stanza form. While the first poem does not offer much hope, the second one does so through a sermon.
35.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

A lot of biographical and critical works/articles on Ginsberg are available. You may also get a long list of them if you Google ‘Bibliography on Allen Ginsberg.’ Some of the books you may refer to are:


35.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self check exercise on Ginsberg’s biography. All answers are according to the Serial numbers of the questions.

1) He had a poetic style of his own; used long free verse lines; in his techniques he resembled Walt Whitman (e.g., Cataloguing of objects, events, etc.)

2) Perhaps not, because Ginsberg’s father wrote highly traditional poetry. Ginsberg’s time, especially during the Modernist period and after World War II, was socially and culturally a very complex age in the history of America and it demanded a kind of new poetry that challenged all ideas of conventional poetry.

3) Think of the poets you have already read in this course. For e.g. you may think of the influence of the Metaphysical poets on TS Eliot’s writing.

Answers to the questions on “A Supermarket in California”.

1) For example, the last three lines of the first stanza contain a list; you may also make a list of the phrases that the poet uses to describe Whitman.

2) You will find the answer to this question in the section ‘Analysis of the poem.’

3) The Stanzas resemble the stanzas written by Whitman; the number of lines in the stanzas varies; lines are long.

4) The Supermarket itself is a symbol (read the section ‘Aspects of technique’ Carefully); the ‘blue automobile’ in the third stanza can be considered as a symbol of the consumerist society.
**Answers to the questions on “Sunflower Sutra”**.

1) The first poem is less optimistic than the second one (Read the analyses of the two poems). The sermon in the second poem underlines the poet’s hope for America.

2) The poet refers to many objects that can cause environmental pollution. For example, ‘busted rusty iron’, ‘oily water’ and ‘dank muck’. You can find more such expressions in the poem.

3) Blake’s poem is given below. Both the poems are about flowers and their destruction. The destruction of the sunflower is caused by man but of the rose by nature (the worm); does Blake’s poem end on an optimistic note like Ginsberg’s?

   **The Sick Rose**  
   by William Blake  
   O Rose, thou art sick:  
   The invisible worm,  
   That flies in the night  
   In the howling storm,  
   
   Has found out thy bed  
   Of crimson joy;  
   And his dark secret love  
   Does they life destroy.

4) The sunflower itself is a symbol and its symbolic value is described in the Analysis. The ‘locomotive’ and ‘scepter’ are also symbols.
35.1 INTRODUCTION. The attempt in this Unit is to give a general "en izleme. İndir. reading of Allen Ginsberg's Beat poetry - 
Literator. https://literator.org.za/index.php/literator/article/download/149/122. like "Howl" (CP:126-133), "Sunflower sutra" (CP:138-139). Although Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky were the only Beat writers to 
actually visit the Duru and Edg simply use "şirler" or "poems" which, while perhaps basic, "en izleme. İndir. COMPILER 