

### EXPLORATION

1. Examine the first four lines of the poem. Who is the narrator? What is the nature of the speaker's attitude toward the people of the world? What has the speaker's attitude toward the world?
2. Interpret this section of the poem. Why is the speaker's attitude toward the world so important to others? Describe a person whose strengths and whose defeat have influenced your life.
3. Which lines are most powerful? Why?

### TEXT

1. Compare this poem to Valenzuela's "I'm Your Horse in the Night."
2. What views of prison life emerge in this poem?

### JOURNAL ENTRIES

1. Characterize Hard Rock. Why is his situation so important to others?
2. Describe a person whose strengths and whose defeat have influenced your life.
3. Which lines are most powerful? Why?

### IDEAS FOR WRITING

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2. What views of prison life emerge in this poem?

## America

### Allen Ginsberg

*Allen Ginsberg (1926– ) was born in New Jersey in 1926, his father a high school English teacher and poet and his mother a Communist who probably sparked his radical politics. After receiving a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University in 1958, Ginsberg went to San Francisco, where he worked on his own poem, "Howl," which he recited to a group of students at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1956 and which became a major part of his work. He was a member of the Beat Generation and co-edited the journal *Sixty-Eight* with William S. Burroughs and Gregory Corso. He was also a member of the垮掉派 (Beat Generation) and co-edited the journal *Sixty-Eight* with William S. Burroughs and Gregory Corso. He was also a member of the垮掉派 (Beat Generation) and co-edited the journal *Sixty-Eight* with William S. Burroughs and Gregory Corso.*

Eastern religious teachers in his search for alternatives to drugs as a means of expanding consciousness. In the late 1960s, he received a Guggenheim fellowship and visited many North American colleges and universities, where he read his poems to students and advised them. Ginsberg teaches at City College of New York and Naropa Institute in Colorado. His work, *Collected Poems (1984)*, gives a view of American life over several decades and introduces the reader to hundreds of personalities of the times. Ginsberg's poetry is innovative, concrete, and reflects William Carlos Williams' instruction to him, "No ideas but in things."

Some of Ginsberg's other poetry volumes include *Empty Mirror: Early Poems (1961)*, *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958–1960 (1961)*, *Reality Sandwiches (1963)*, *Wichita Vortex Sutra (1966)*, *Planet News: 1961–1967 (1968)*, *Airplane Dreams (1968)*, *The Fall of America (1973)*, *Iron Horse (1973)*, *Mind Breaths, Poems (1978)*, *Plutonium Ode, Poems 1977–1980 (1982)*. His prose works contain many interviews, lectures, letters, journals, e.g., *Indian Journals (1977)*, *As Ever: Collected Correspondence Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady (1977)*, and *Straight Hearts Delight, Love Poems and Selected Letters 1947–1988 w/Peter Orlovsky (1980)*. His most recent works are *White Shroud Poems: 1980–85 and Your Reason and Blake's System (1988)*.

In "America," Ginsberg creates a first-person narrator who claims that he is not in his right mind and who criticizes almost every aspect of life in the United States—he speaks of the "end . . . [of] human war," "libraries full of tears," and the "bad Russians."

- America I've given you all and now I'm nothing,  
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.  
I can't stand my own mind.  
America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.  
I don't feel good don't bother me.  
I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.  
America when will you be angelic?  
When will you take off your clothes?  
When will you look at yourself through the grave?  
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?  
America why are your libraries full of tears?  
America when will you send your eggs to India?  
I'm sick of your insane demands.  
When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good  
look?

- America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world.  
Your machinery is too much for me.  
You made me want to be a saint.  
There must be some other way to settle this argument.  
20 Burroughs<sup>2</sup> is in Tangiers<sup>3</sup> I don't think he'll come back it's sinister.  
Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke?  
I'm trying to come to the point.  
I refuse to give up my obsession.  
America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.  
25 America the plum blossoms are falling.  
I haven't read the newspapers for months, everyday somebody goes on trial  
for murder.  
America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.<sup>4</sup>  
America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry.  
I smoke marijuana every chance I get.  
30 I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.  
When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.  
My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.  
You should have seen me reading Marx.<sup>5</sup>  
My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.  
35 I won't say the Lord's Prayer.  
I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.  
America I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came  
over from Russia.  
I'm addressing you.  
Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?  
40 I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.  
I read it every week.  
Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.  
I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.  
It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious.  
45 Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me.  
It occurs to me that I am America.  
I am talking to myself again.  
Asia is rising against me.  
I haven't got a chinaman's chance.  
50 I'd better consider my national resources.  
My national resources consist of two joints of marijuana millions of  
genitals

an unpublishable private literature that jetplanes 1400 mi  
an hour and twentyfive-thousand mental institutions.

- 55 I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivilege  
live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns  
I have abolished the whorehouses of France, Tangiers is the next t  
My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I'm a Catholic

America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?

- 60 I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as h  
automobiles more so they're all different sexes.

America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your c  
strophe

America free Tom Mooney<sup>6</sup>

America save the Spanish Loyalists<sup>7</sup>

America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die<sup>8</sup>

- 65 America I am the Scottsboro boys.<sup>9</sup>

America when I was seven mamma took me to Communist Cell m  
they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nic  
and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentime  
about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what  
70 good thing the party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand o  
man a real mensch Mother Bloor the Silk-strikers' Ewig-Weib  
made me cry I once saw the Yiddish orator Israel Amter p  
Everybody must have been a spy.

America you don't really want to go to war.

- 75 America it's them bad Russians.

Then Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Ru  
The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power mad. She wa  
take our cars from out our garages.

- 80 Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red *Reader's Digest*. Her  
our auto plants in Siberia. Him big bureaucracy running our  
fillingstations.

That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read. Him need big b  
niggers. Hah. Her make us all work sixteen hours a day. Help.

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from looking in the television

- 85 America is this correct?

<sup>1</sup> American Wobbly, convicted for murder in 1916 and pardoned more than twenty  
years later. Republicans, who opposed Franco's Nationalists during the Spanish Civil  
War (1936-1939).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Burroughs (1894-1977) and Pauline Vanzetti (1888-1927). American anar-

chists, convicted for murder in 1927 and pardoned more than twenty years later.

<sup>3</sup> Tangiers, Morocco, a city of Moroccan Jews and Muslims, famous for its hashish and  
prostitution.

<sup>4</sup> American novelists (1914-1919).

<sup>5</sup> Poet on the Street of Chinatown in North Beach,  
San Francisco.

<sup>6</sup> Members of the Industrial Workers of the World  
(IWW) who were convicted for the murder of  
Frank Merriam, an Oregon state legislator, and  
sentenced to death in 1932.

I'd better get right down to the job.  
 It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts  
 factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.  
 America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

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■ EXPLORATIONS OF THE TEXT ■

1. Describe the speaker. Focus on his character traits, tone, values, and attitudes.
2. In addressing “America” as his audience, to whom does he speak? What are his criticisms of his culture?
3. Why does he state “It occurs to me that I am America./I am talking to myself again”?
4. Analyze the section beginning: “Asia is rising against me.” From whose view is the persona speaking? Is this change of point of view effective?
5. Discuss the speaker’s vocation as a writer.
6. How are the historical allusions—Spanish Loyalists, Sacco and Vanzetti, Communist cell meetings—important to the poem?
7. Why does he speak in baby talk, in “Indian” dialect? When does the voice shift?
8. What impact does the humor have? Does it develop themes of the work?
9. In the last line, does the speaker change his point of view and attitude? How?
10. Compare this poem to the poems by Brooks and Hughes.

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■■ JOURNAL ENTRIES ■■

1. Characterize the speaker.
2. Make a catalogue of the criticisms of America. Are they valid?
3. Write a humorous critique about some aspect of life in the United States. Begin with “America, I . . . .”

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■■■ IDEAS FOR WRITING ■■■

1. Analyze the speaker in this poem. How does Ginsberg achieve this characterization? Discuss voice, tone, imagery, humor, word choice, and/or theme.
2. Compare themes of this poem with another work in this chapter.
3. Compare this poem with Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” in Chapter 4.