

Allen Ginsberg's "America"

CONTENT AREA & GRADE LEVEL: Literature/Poetry, Upper Level High School

TIME: One class period

LESSON FOCUS: Students will become more familiar with the epistle form of poetry and ways they can use it in their poetry. Students will learn how this form can be used to call attention to political and/or personal issues.

STANDARDS ASSESSED-

Colorado Reading and Writing Standard 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing.

As students in grades 9-12 extend their knowledge, what they know and are able to do includes:

- recognizing an author's point of view, purpose, and historical and cultural context;
- knowing what constitutes literary quality based on elements such as the author's point of view, the author's selection of significant details, theme development, and the author's reflection of events and ideas of his or her lifetime; and

Colorado Reading and Writing Standard 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

As students in grades 9-12 extend their knowledge, what they know and are able to do includes:

- reading, responding to, and discussing novels, poetry, short stories, non-fiction, content-area and technical material, plays, essays, and speeches;
- using literary terminology accurately, such as theme, mood, diction, idiom, perspective, style, and point of view;
- identifying recurrent themes in United States literature; and
- developing and supporting a thesis about the craft and significance of particular works of literature, both classic and contemporary, from a variety of ethnic writers.

ASSESSMENT: Through classroom discussion and in journal writing, monitor students understanding of the epistle form of poetry and how it is used by authors to emphasize personal/political issues.

MATERIALS/TEACHER PREPARATION:

- *The Handbook of Poetic Forms*. ed. Ron Padgett;
- "America" by Allen Ginsberg – Naropa Archive reading?; text found in *HOWL and Other Poems*, City Lights Books.

POSSIBLE PROCEDURES:

Previously in this unit, students were introduced to the poems "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes (available on-line) and "why is we american?" by Amiri Baraka

(available from Baraka's book *Somebody Blew Up America*. Students have written questions to Baraka about this, such as "Why are you so mad at Elvis?" Students have been discussing the questions: What does it mean to be American? What is American poetry? How does identity shape poetry? When/why is poetry political?

In this lesson, students will read about the epistle form and listen to and discuss Allen Ginsberg's poem "America".

1. **Do Now (5 minute period of writing in journal):** Choose one of the questions you asked Amiri Baraka in last night's homework and answer from the point of view of anyone you know. Start your journal addressing your answer to yourself. For example, you may start, Hey Rachel! or, My Dearest Rachel.
2. **Brief class discussion:** Read about and discuss the epistle form of poetry.
3. **Introduce** Allen Ginsberg and his poem "America". Have students underline details they notice in the poem while listening to Ginsberg read it.

4. **Play poem.**

Audio: http://www.naropa.edu/archive/audio/ginsberg_allen_94p056a_clip_america.mp3

5. **Discuss:** Is Ginsberg's poem an epistle poem? Why/why not? What kinds of differences/similarities do you notice between his poem and the Hughes, Baraka poems we've read?
6. **HOMEWORK/FOLLOW UP LESSONS:** Students will research at least two of the historical references in Ginsberg's poem and bring notes about those historical references to class tomorrow.

By Rachel McKeen, Bushwick Community High School, New York