The Day Lady Died

SUMMARY

It's 12:20 in the afternoon in New York City on Friday, July 17, 1959, three days after France's national holiday. I get my shoes polished, because when I get off the 4:19 train in East Hampton, NY, at 7:15, I'll be headed right to a dinner party, and the hosts are strangers (whom I'd like to make a good impression on).

I head up the street as the humid day gets sunnier. I grab a burger and a malted milkshake for lunch, then purchase the unattractive literary journal called *New World Writing*, curious to see what poets in western Africa have been writing lately.

I stop by my bank, where the teller, Miss Stillwagon (or Linda, as I heard her called once), doesn't check how much money is in my account, the way she usually does. Next, in the Golden Griffin bookstore, I buy my friend Patsy a small book of poems by the 19th-century French poet Paul Verlaine, illustrated by the modern French artist Pierre Bonnard. I consider buying, instead, a book of poetry by the ancient Greek writer Hesiod, translated by the American classicist Richmond Lattimore; or the new play (*The Hostage*) by the Irish writer Brendan Behan; or the plays *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*, by the French writer Jean Genet. But after I've almost bored myself to sleep with indecision, I go ahead and buy the Verlaine book.

As for my friend Mike's gift, I simply walk into the Park Lane liquor store and buy him some Italian herbal liqueur. Then I head to 6th Avenue, where I started, and stop by the tobacco shop at the Broadway theater called the Ziegfeld. I nonchalantly buy two cartons of cigarettes—the brands called Gauloises and Picayunes—and a New York tabloid with a photo of Billie Holiday (who's just died) on the cover.

At this point, I'm soaked with sweat. I remember standing by the bathroom door in the jazz club called the Five Spot Café, listening to her sing softly, accompanied by Mal Waldron on the piano. Her performance took everyone's breath away.

THEMES

LOSS, MOURNING, AND MEMORY

"The Day Lady Died" is an elegy for the jazz singer Billie Holiday, who was nicknamed "Lady Day." Though O'Hara didn't know Holiday personally, he deeply admired her music. O'Hara memorializes Holiday by narrating his activities on the afternoon of July 17, 1959, the date of her death. At first, his experiences seem ordinary—buying lunch, a book, cigarettes, etc.—but they culminate in an extraordinary memory of Holiday's singing, prompted by the sight of her photo in a newspaper. The poem shows how a shocking loss can seem to freeze surrounding events in the mind, as in the cliché about "remembering where you were the day [X] died."

The day the poem describes isn't particularly eventful for O'Hara himself; "only" the death of a beloved celebrity makes it memorable. Outwardly, O'Hara's experience of that day consists of mundane activities: getting a shoeshine, buying lunch, going to the bank, etc. (O'Hara was known for using real-life details in his poems—including, in this poem, the names of two of his friends—so it's fair to assume this speaker is the poet himself.)

O'Hara's attitude also seems lighthearted and nonchalant at first. As he "stroll[s]" around New York, he isn't grieving, at least not outwardly. But the news of Holiday's untimely death (she was just 44) causes an intense *inner* experience: a memory of the breathtaking live performance O'Hara once saw her give. It's possible that she's been in the back of his mind all along: she died early in the morning, so he may have already heard the news by the time he buys a newspaper "with her face on it." More likely, however, the sight of the newspaper informs him of the tragedy.

O'Hara memorializes this otherwise average day with extreme detail and clarity, implying that Holiday's death has made its smallest moments meaningful. He narrates the poem—which he really wrote the day Billie Holiday died!—in the present tense. The loss is fresh, and he's recording all the events surrounding it as if documenting a historic event. As death overshadows his daily routine, it makes even trivial events seem potentially momentous.

For example, O'Hara's bank teller "doesn't even look up [his] balance for once in her life"—is this a coincidence or an omen that something is "off" about this day? Similarly, O'Hara "sweat[s] a lot" after buying the newspaper with Holiday's picture: is this just because he's been walking around in "muggy" weather, or because he feels shaken?

By the end of the poem, the rush of superficially random events seems like an inevitable buildup to a tragic climax. O'Hara is actually describing a pretty lazy lunch break, but the poem's blur of details creates a sense of restless tension, which seems to foreshadow and accentuate the bad news. On the one hand, Holiday is just a face in the news with modern life swirling all around; on the other hand, even in busy New York City, her death seems to stop the world for a moment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ART

"The Day Lady Died" not only mourns Billie Holiday's death but also celebrates her music—as well as the arts more generally. O'Hara devotes much of the "Day" he narrates to shopping for books and literary journals: evidence that literature is central to his life. And his narration builds to the memory of a Holiday song that left him breathless. By comparison, the other events he describes are fairly minor, background details. He clearly likes eating, drinking, and hanging out with friends, but he seems to *live* for the arts. He also shows that the art Holiday left behind outlives *her*, and implicitly, shines through the many struggles and indignities of her life. Whether it's a beautiful book or a captivating song, the poem suggests, art can be so transcendent that it makes the rest of life look secondary.

Though it's an elegy for Holiday, the poem is also a snapshot of a day in the life of Frank O'Hara (one of what he called his "I do this I do that" poems). Based on his description of his "Day," the poet seems to prioritize and value artistic experiences over other kinds. This snapshot captures all sorts of small incidents and details, but the overwhelming focus is on his experience of literature, art, and music. He comes off as a free spirit who enjoys life's pleasures—good food, liquor, friends, etc.—but whose greatest pleasures are aesthetic:

- Throughout most of the poem, he's purchasing things, but he spends more of the poem commenting on the arts-related purchases (journal, book, newspaper with Holiday's photo) than the others. He's a consumer of many things, but he's a *connoisseur* of the arts.
- He also seems to be on his Friday lunch break (the poem appears in the collection *Lunch Poems*), and he spends most of that break at a bookstore and a Broadway theater. Given some free time in the heart of the big city, he naturally gravitates toward arts-related spaces.
- The climactic memory at the end of the poem also takes place in a performance space: the jazz club where he heard Holiday sing.

The poet's particular responses make clear that art, in general, can be tremendously important and even life-changing:

- O'Hara quips that he buys an "ugly" international literary journal just "to see what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days." But despite his flip humor, he pays real money to satisfy his curiosity about poetry on the other side of the world. Only a poetry lover would make this kind of purchase on an average lunch break!
- O'Hara then elaborately describes his "quandariness" (indecision) in the bookstore. Again, despite the facetious phrasing, he actually seems to feel there's a lot riding on his book purchase. (Will his friend like it? Is he making the best possible choice? etc.) By extension, he feels that literature and reading are high-stakes, meaningful endeavors.
- Finally, he reminisces about a Holiday performance that made "everyone and I stop[] breathing." The performance was powerful enough that it made life seem to stop (in a seeming preview of Holiday's own death). It also lodged in the poet's memory and, evidently, inspired the poem itself. In other words, the music changed him—in a way he may not have fully appreciated until now, with the news of "Lady's" passing.

O'Hara also emphasizes Holiday's transcendent art rather than her famously challenging life, suggesting the one outweighs the other. Unlike a traditional elegy, which would cover its subject in greater depth, O'Hara's singles out a moment in which Holiday made sublime art. This, he seems to say, is what her life truly meant (at least to me). The phrase "whispered a song" hints at the decline of her later years, in which she struggled with drug addiction, alcoholism, and other personal problems. Her voice was only a whisper toward the end—but that whisper, O'Hara suggests, was hauntingly beautiful.

Amid the blur of daily minutiae (meals, errands, etc.), it's ultimately the enduring value of art that stands out. Irreverent as it first appears, the poem takes the arts seriously and celebrates a major artist in the process.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-10
- Lines 14-19
- Lines 22-23
- Lines 25-29

CELEBRITY, CONSUMERISM, AND AMERICAN CULTURE

"The Day Lady Died" consistently draws attention to its cultural setting: the fast-paced, consumerist, mass-media-driven America of the mid-20th century. As he shops in cosmopolitan New York City, O'Hara has the world at his fingertips. He can buy artifacts of "high" and "low" culture from around the globe—a burger one minute, a book of French poetry the next. In classic American fashion, he also buys a tabloid and mourns the death of a celebrity: a Black woman whose life differed greatly from his own, but whose exceptional art reached and touched him nevertheless. The tragedy in the poem isn't *personal*; O'Hara never knew Holiday. Yet in mass-media culture, the poem suggests, famous figures can seem as important to us as people we *do* know, and their deaths can move us as deeply as deaths in our own social circle.

O'Hara is at the center of what came to be called a "globalized" city, and he can pick whatever cultural experiences he wishes. He buys various things throughout the poem, and many of his purchases (or prospective purchases) have an international flavor: "NEW WORLD WRITING"; books of Greek, Irish, and French literature; French cigarettes; Italian liqueur, etc. Others are quintessentially American: "a hamburger and a malted," the "NEW YORK POST." At one point, he's so overwhelmed by his consumer options that he almost "go[es] to sleep with quandariness," or indecision! In general, he's a man about town, spending eagerly, taking full advantage of the fact that he lives in a global hub.

In this modern society, the poem shows, a dizzying range of cultural encounters are possible, and the death of a famous stranger can feel as meaningful as the death of a loved one. The poem's title refers to Holiday (a.k.a. "Lady Day") simply as "Lady": a gesture that suggests both affection and reverence. ("Lady" is a title you might call an aristocrat.) And the memory of her breathtaking "song" hints that her music had a genuine impact on him. (Including, perhaps, on his art, since O'Hara's poetry shares an improvised quality with jazz.) He recalls the live performance he witnessed as something special, a connection that transcends the other consumer and cultural experiences in the poem.

Ultimately, the poem is a heartfelt tribute: O'Hara dedicates both a poem and a day to a woman he admired, albeit from a distance. Much as other countries might mourn the passing of royalty, this American poet mourns the passing of a modern American icon. A normal Friday is suddenly elevated to "The Day Lady Died."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 8-10
- Lines 14-29

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

It is 12:20 ...
... it is 1959

The poem begins by specifying its setting. O'Hara seems to have written "The Day Lady Died" on the actual day of Billie Holiday's death, and he establishes that sense of immediacy right up front.

The speaker—O'Hara himself, as later details make clear—narrates events in the present tense, naming the day of the week ("Friday"), the time of day ("12:20" p.m.), the year ("1959"), and his current location ("New York" City). He also specifies that it's "three days after Bastille day"—meaning France's national holiday, which is celebrated annually on July 14. So the poem takes place on the afternoon of July 17, 1959, in the city where Holiday, the "Lady" of the title (her nickname was "Lady Day"), had died of cirrhosis hours earlier.

Right away, the narration style is fast-paced, a rapid blur of detail with very few pauses. Line 2 contains one of only a handful of caesuras (the comma before "yes) in a poem of 29 lines. For the most part, O'Hara omits punctuation where it would normally go: for example, after "New York" and Friday" in line 1 ("It is 12:20 in New York a Friday"). The poem also uses heavily enjambed free verse, with no meter, rhyme scheme, or regular stanza pattern.

These techniques make the poem feel dashed-off and spontaneous, as if O'Hara is jotting down his impressions and experiences as fast as possible. (He once claimed that poetry sounds best if "You just go on your nerve.") The resulting language feels fresh, candid, and also a little anxious.

As the title hints, he's recording his impressions on this particular day because the death of Billie Holiday feels like a historic event. Interestingly, he starts by invoking a famous event from *French* history: the storming of the Bastille (a political prison) during the French Revolution. This reference suggests that "The Day" of Holiday's death is also, in its way, a major occasion, which he's rushing to document and commemorate.

It might also subtly relate to Holiday's career. She was considered a revolutionary artist; her art was sometimes political; she had trouble with the law (in part due to her art/politics), spent time in prison, etc. The same is true of other artists the poem mentions later, including Jean "Genet" (line 18).

In all these ways, the seemingly random "Bastille day" detail may be a meaningful allusion. If nothing else, it shows that O'Hara is keenly aware of international culture—a trait he'll continue to demonstrate throughout the poem.

LINES 3-6

and I go ...
... will feed me

Lines 3-6 start to narrate O'Hara's activities on the afternoon of Billie Holiday's death.

The first thing he does is "go get a shoeshine," a service often offered on the street or other crowded public areas. He gets his shoes polished "because," he says, he'll be "go[ing] straight to dinner" after he gets off the "4:19" commuter train "at 7:15" that night, "and I don't know the people who will feed me." This indirect explanation suggests that he wants to look sharp and make a good impression on his dinner-party hosts. The dinner will be in "Easthampton"—that is, East Hampton, NY, a ritzy town on Long Island, known as a summer and weekend getaway for wealthy New Yorkers. (Together with Southampton, it

makes up "the Hamptons.")

The narration style continues to be fast-paced, chatty, and personal. This was a style O'Hara developed through a number of poems in the late 1950s and early 1960s; he called them his "I do this I do that" poems. The details are loosely strung together by a series of "and"s. Phrases and sentences often seem arranged almost in random order (e.g., "it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine"), with the logical connections between them indirect or unclear. This technique is known as parataxis and, again, O'Hara used it frequently in his poems around this time.

Random though they may seem, the details O'Hara reports illustrate a great deal about his life and culture. These lines, for example, say something about his class status, and maybe his class anxieties. He's not a working-class laborer like the shoeshiner, and he has some disposable income to spend on extras like a shoeshine. (The poem doesn't describe the shoeshiner, but in 1950s America, that job was most commonly held by Black men, so some critics have also tied this detail to the poem's commentary on race.)

At the same time, he holds a day job and seems to be on his lunch break (in real life, O'Hara worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art), so he's not an independently wealthy artist or a bohemian rebelling against the rat race. He's going to a swanky dinner party, but he's not one of the posh people *throwing* that party, and he doesn't seem to have been invited directly. He's tagging along with friends, has to rush from his job to get there, and wants to put his best forward for "the people who will feed me."

LINES 7-10

I walk up ...
... doing these days

Lines 7-10 begin a new stanza and sentence, even though the previous stanza/sentence never came to a full stop. O'Hara chooses not to punctuate the ends of sentences in this poem, instead letting one statement run into the next. The result is an almost stream-of-consciousness style, in which thoughts and details blur together over the course of a busy New York afternoon.

Having gotten his shoeshine, O'Hara now "walk[s] up the muggy street," which is growing sunnier ("beginning to sun"). He buys "a hamburger and a malted" milkshake, possibly from a diner, lunch counter, or what used to be called a malt shop or soda parlor. ("The Day Lady Died" appears in O'Hara's 1964 collection *Lunch Poems*, which features many poems written on his lunch breaks.) Basically, he's having a classic American meal in the heart of America's busiest city.

But as a sophisticated writer type, he also maintains a global outlook, and he buys something much more niche: an issue of "NEW WORLD WRITING," a (now-defunct) literary journal showcasing authors from around the globe. He's flippant about his purchase: he calls the cover design "ugly," and the claim that he buys it "to see what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days" sounds like a wisecrack.

Ghana is a country in West Africa, and some critics have argued that these lines, coming from a white American poet, take a dismissive or exoticizing attitude toward Black/African authors. Others have suggested that they reflect a sincere interest in Black/African literature, in keeping with O'Hara's appreciation for Black American music (evidenced by this poem).

Either way, this detail—like many others in the poem—seems intended to signal O'Hara's eclectic, cosmopolitan tastes. He chooses to spend his pocket money on a digest of international literature, much as he later browses other world literature in the "GOLDEN GRIFFIN" (lines 14-19), buys both American and French cigarettes (lines 23-25), and so on.

LINES 11-13

I go on ...
... in her life

Lines 11-13 contain one of the poem's most memorable and ambiguous details. Fresh off buying his burger, milkshake, and literary magazine, O'Hara goes "to the bank"—apparently to withdraw more money for further purchases. There, the bank teller, "Miss Stillwagon," dispenses the funds he requests without checking how much is available in his account—that is, she "doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life." In the poem's only parenthetical, O'Hara notes that he "once heard" Miss Stillwagon's "first name" is "Linda."

Why does O'Hara pause to share this truly random-seeming information? For one thing, Miss Stillwagon's habit of looking up his balance may be another clue about social class: a sign that he's not that wealthy. He may have a history of requesting withdrawal amounts close to, or over, his limit. Or she may routinely look up balances for all but her wealthier clients. But she doesn't look it up today—"for once in her life," as he says with a hint of snark.

Maybe something has thrown off her routine, just as Billie Holiday's death throws off O'Hara's. (Was Miss Stillwagon also a fan? Is her behavior an omen that something is "off" about this day?) Some readers have even found allegorical meanings in Miss Stillwagon's unusual name, linking it to the *stillness* of death, etc.

It's hard to say for sure, but what comes through clearly here is O'Hara's lively interest in other people—even people he knows peripherally or not at all. This character trait matters in the context of the poem, which is an elegy for a celebrity O'Hara never met. Since he seems to care in *some* way about "Linda," with whom he's probably never had a meaningful exchange, it's not surprising that he feels strongly about "Lady Day," a stranger whose music touched his life.

Line 11 ("I go on to the bank") is dropped and indented,

signaling a sharp transition, somewhere between a line and stanza break. Technically, this "dropped" formatting indicates that "I go on to the bank" is a continuation of line 10 ("in Ghana are doing these days"), but it's designated line 11 here for clarity's sake. O'Hara seems to have used this formatting in part to signal the start of a new sentence without punctuating the end of the one before.

LINES 14-18

and in the GOLDEN ...
... of Genet,

Lines 14-18 describe O'Hara's next errand: a trip to the bookstore.

Having withdrawn some extra spending money at the bank, he heads to "the GOLDEN GRIFFIN," a now-defunct bookstore located on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. He intends to buy a gift "for Patsy," a friend whom he doesn't identify further, but whose full name was Patsy Southgate (1928-1998). Southgate, a writer and translator, was then married to the artist Michael Goldberg (1924-2007), the "Mike" mentioned in line 20. On this Friday in 1959, Patsy and Mike have invited him to the "dinner" in the Hamptons (line 5), and though they're not the hosts, O'Hara is buying them thank-you gifts. (Or else just gifts for friends he hasn't seen in a while.)

He chooses Patsy's gift carefully. Though he settles on "a little Verlaine / [...] with drawings by Bonnard" (a book of poems by the 19th-century French writer Paul Verlaine, illustrated by the late 19th/early 20th-century French artist Pierre Bonnard), he considers other options. These include:

1. A volume of the major works (*The Works and Days*, *Theogony*, *The Shield of Herakles*) of Hesiod, an ancient Greek poet (c. 750-650 BCE), translated ("trans.") by the American poet and scholar Richmond Lattimore (1906-1984).
2. The "new play" by the Irish writer Brendan Behan (1923-1964), a reference to Behan's 1958 play *An Giall* (*The Hostage*).
3. Two plays by the French writer Jean Genet (1910-1986): *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*, 1956) and *Les Nègres* (*The Blacks*, 1959).

Among other things, O'Hara seems to be choosing which *era* to pull from. Hesiod is ancient literature, whereas Behan and Genet were, at the time, very modern (and politically radical, bohemian, etc.). The first would be a safe and conservative choice, the others potentially riskier, though still within the realm of his friend's tastes. By choosing Verlaine, a poet from the previous century—but one who lived a stormy, controversial, bohemian life—O'Hara seems to split the difference. (Since O'Hara was an art curator and Southgate was married to a painter, the modern "drawings by Bonnard" likely added to the appeal, though this context doesn't appear in the poem.)

The allusions to Behan and Genet also add an undercurrent of political tension to what is not, on the surface, a political poem. In this way, they resemble the mention of "Bastille day" in line 2, a reference to the storming of the Bastille prison during the French Revolution. Behan's play centers on an imprisoned member of the Irish Republican Army (a revolutionary paramilitary organization), and Behan himself saw prison time as an IRA member. Genet's *Le Balcon* and *Les Nègres* are politically charged plays about revolution and racism, and Genet was frequently jailed throughout his life on various charges. All of these references might loosely relate to Billie Holiday, a Black artist whose race and politics made her a target of U.S. law enforcement, and whose prison sentence for drug possession hampered her career. (See the Context section of this guide for more.)

LINES 18-19

but I don't, ...
... sleep with quandariness

Lines 18-19 add a kind of punchline to O'Hara's bookstore expedition. After naming all the books he *thought* about buying, he "stick[s] with" his original choice—a volume of Paul Verlaine poems—"after practically going to sleep with quandariness."

Quandariness isn't a dictionary word: O'Hara invented it. It means "the state of being in a quandary" (a puzzling predicament). Basically, it's a fancier, funnier word for "indecision." It's funny, too, that this feeling almost puts O'Hara to sleep. Indecision usually raises stress levels, but in this case, O'Hara suggests, he overthought the situation so much that he finally got bored and tired.

Notice that line 18 contains two of the very few caesuras in the poem:

> [...] of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine

In fact, this is the *only* line with more than one caesura: a sign that this normally on-the-go speaker really is hesitating.

Even though his decision may strike readers as comically low-stakes, he seems to think the choice of books will send an important social signal—about his tastes, politics, and/or judgment of his friend's tastes and politics. It's also another sign that O'Hara cares deeply about literature and the arts. This context helps set up the poem's final lines, in which he remembers feeling transported by a great artist's music.

LINES 20-25

and for Mike ...
... face on it

Having bought a book for "Patsy," O'Hara now buys a second

gift, this time for his friend "Mike" (the painter Mike Goldberg, Patsy Southgate's husband). It seems Mike is easier to shop for, possibly because it's easier to know what someone likes to drink than to predict what someone will want to read. In any case, O'Hara marches straight into a nearby shop and buys him some Italian herbal liqueur: "and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE / Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega."

Next, O'Hara returns to "6th Avenue" (where his real-life workplace was located) and stops by a tobacco shop in the "Ziegfeld Theatre" (a famous Broadway theater, later torn down in the 1960s). There, he "casually" orders two cartons of cigarettes—one of "Gauloises" (a French brand), the other of "Picayunes" (an American brand)—as well as a copy of the "NEW YORK POST," a tabloid newspaper, which has "her face on it."

Who is "her"? Billie Holiday, the "Lady" of the title. This seems to be the moment when O'Hara learns about her death, thanks to a cover story in a tabloid.

Notice how he emphasizes the word "casually" by enjambing it over the line break. It's an ambiguous adverb: why does he feel the need to include it?

- "Casually" can mean "by chance," so maybe he's stressing the fact that he learned about Holiday's death, in that moment, through random happenstance. (As one of many chance events in the busy city.)
- Or maybe the word pokes fun at his purchase, because two cartons of cigarettes (20 packs total) is a fair amount to order "casually." Such casual tobacco addiction stands out in an elegy for Billie Holiday, who died of complications related to alcohol and drug addiction.
- Maybe O'Hara is gesturing ironically, here, toward his own self-destructive habits. (Then again, some of these cigarettes might be for O'Hara's friends—hence the two different brands—and Americans in 1959 smoked much more heavily than they do now, with less awareness of the health risks.)
- Finally, "casually" could hint at O'Hara's emotions in this moment. Critics generally assume that O'Hara learns about Holiday's death from the *Post* cover (although the poem never makes this explicit). Perhaps O'Hara notices the news, feels shocked and sad, but masks his emotions by making his purchase "casually." The forced casualness could also be a way of defusing social tension, since Holiday was a controversial figure to some, and the "tobacconist" might have had his own feelings about her death (or about jazz, race, etc.).

LINES 26-29

and I am ...
... I stopped breathing

The last stanza focuses on the poem's subject, Billie Holiday, for the first time. The first 25 lines have been all about O'Hara's ordinary day. Now, the news of Holiday's death triggers a memory of something extraordinary: a song Holiday once performed live at "the 5 SPOT" (the Five Spot Café in Manhattan). This sudden juxtaposition of present and past, normal and exceptional, makes the ending all the more surprising and powerful.

These lines also contain more concrete imagery than most of the others. As O'Hara recalls the performance, he's "sweating a lot." This could just be from wandering around New York on a "muggy" day (line 7), but it could also be from anxiety or intense emotion, caused by the shock of "Lady's" passing. Either way, this detail seems to intensify the memory that follows. O'Hara remembers "leaning on the john door" (the men's room door) at the Five Spot, while Holiday "whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron," her accompanist on piano. Her singing was so incredible that "everyone and I stopped breathing."

Even here, in a miniature way, O'Hara relies on the power of juxtaposition. He reports doing something uncomfortable and unglamorous—leaning against a bathroom door—while witnessing something sublime. He maximizes the contrast between his humble self in the audience and the transcendent artist on stage. In the same way, the poem as a whole maximizes the contrast between the humdrum nature of daily life and the beauty that art makes possible.

The verb "whispered" probably alludes to the vocal changes Holiday experienced in the later years of her life, as she struggled with addiction and health problems. But it also evokes a gentle, intimate sound, a voice that might send chills down your spine—or take your breath away.

That final phrase, "everyone and I stopped breathing," affirms that she left the crowded nightclub breathless. But it's also an ironic foreshadowing of her death, because breath is symbolic of life. In the magical moment O'Hara remembers, she seemed to be the only one breathing. Now, as her audience's lives go on, she's the one *not* breathing. Still, the elegy ends on a note of soaring tribute, as the Holiday performance that seemed to make the world "stop[]" brings the poem to a close as well.

SYMBOLS

BREATHING

Breath symbolizes life. When Billie Holiday's performance leaves everyone in the "5 SPOT"

breathless, it's as though the power of her art has caused life to stop for a moment. But in the context of the poem, this moment also becomes a foreshadowing of her death—the permanent end of her own life. As she "whispered" her song, she was the only one in the jazz club making a sound, or even breathing. Ironically, she may now be the only one of that crowd *not* breathing—that is, dead. The end of her life is all the more tragic because it's also the end of her art.

Breath can also be symbolically associated with artistic inspiration. *Inspire*, in fact, originally meant "to breathe upon or breathe into," as in ancient myths of gods breathing life into mortals. (Many writers in the Western tradition, dating back at least to ancient Rome, have imagined artists' inspiration as coming from a divine breath or wind.) During her show at the "5 SPOT," Holiday's "whisper[ing]" performance is so inspired that it takes the breath away from her listeners. In that moment, she's the great artist in the room; everyone else is the audience.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-29:** "while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

"The Day Lady Died" doesn't contain much vivid imagery—until the end. Most of it catalogues O'Hara's errands and purchases without supplying a lot of sensory detail. (For example, he *mentions* the "drawings by Bonnard" in the book he buys, but he doesn't *describe* them; if readers don't know that artist's work, they can't picture it in their minds.)

There are occasional exceptions: in lines 7-9, for example, he describes the "muggy" weather, the brightening of the "sun," and the "ugly" cover of the magazine he buys (although this last description is pretty limited). Arguably, his mention of his lunch—"[I] have a hamburger and a malted"—engages with the reader's sense of taste. But even here, he doesn't describe *how* these things tasted; he just rattles them off like items on a shopping list.

Things get more concrete in the closing lines, though. In fact, the relative lack of imagery in the first 25 lines might be seen as a setup for the final stanza, which becomes all the more vivid by comparison. In line 25, O'Hara buys a tabloid "with her face on it," meaning a photo of Billie Holiday, the "Lady" who has just "Died." Then, in lines 26-27, he describes "sweating a lot"—an uncomfortable *tactile*, or touch-related, image—and remembering a Holiday performance he once saw. As he "lean[ed]" against the men's room "door" of a jazz club, "she whispered a song along the keyboard," so beautifully that a hush fell over the crowd.

In other words, in this humble, uncomfortable location (by the bathroom), he witnessed something sublime: a song that still echoes in his mind years later. The verb "whispered" conveys a gentle, haunting, intimate quality, while hinting at the vocal strain Holiday experienced in her later years. This image stands out powerfully against the hush described in the final line: "everyone and I stopped breathing."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun / and have a hamburger and a malted and buy / an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING"
- **Line 25:** "and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it"
- **Lines 26-29:** "and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of / leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT / while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes O'Hara's ordinary, busy day—"The Day Lady Died"—with the night he saw Billie Holiday's extraordinary performance.

The first 25 lines describe a blur of low-key experiences: eating lunch, shopping around New York, anticipating a dinner party, etc. Only in the last four lines does the poem turn to its true subject: Holiday's death. But in these four lines, the imagery becomes more vivid ("I am sweating a lot," "she whispered a song," "everyone and I stopped breathing"), snapping the poem into focus and conjuring an atmosphere of intense quiet within the daily rush. As a result of this heightened intensity, the last four lines seem to carry as much weight as everything that's come before.

The poem also juxtaposes the busy whirl of New York City life (which goes on no matter what) with the tragedy of Holiday's death (which gives O'Hara pause for a moment and inspires the poem). It's realistic about the place of this tragedy, or maybe any tragedy, within the grander scheme of things.

O'Hara's elegy doesn't do most of the things conventionally associated with the genre, such as express deep sorrow for the person's passing. (Remember, O'Hara didn't even know Holiday.) Instead, it simply sketches a single memory, a moment when the lives of the deceased and the poet connected in a powerful way. Holiday's death can't stop the hustle of city life—she died hours before the poem takes place, so that hustle has already continued—but it does register strongly with the poet and brings the poem itself to a stop.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29

PARATAXIS

Much of the grammar in the poem is paratactic, meaning that it assembles phrases and sentences without spelling out the logic connecting them. O'Hara seems to present the poem's events in rough chronological order, but he strings most of them together with "and"—or with an unpunctuated gap between sentences, as at the ends of lines 6 and 10—so that they could be rearranged with very little loss of meaning. Through this technique, he recreates the jumbled experience of wandering around New York on a busy afternoon, including the miscellaneous thoughts passing through his head.

An example of parataxis occurs in line 3:

> it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine [...]

There's no real logical relationship between these two statements; it's just a fact and experience set side by side, casually noted and joined with "and."

The rest of the poem proceeds in much the same way. The last line of this first stanza, "and I don't know the people who will feed me," is apparently part of the explanation for why he "get[s] a shoeshine." (He'll be dining with strangers and wants to make a good impression, etc.) But it could just be an afterthought; the connection isn't spelled out.

In the next stanza, the anecdote about the "GOLDEN GRIFFIN" immediately follows the anecdote about the bank, without any transition except for "and" (see lines 13-14). It's like a jump cut from one movie scene to the next. In fact, the whole poem is something like a fast-paced montage, mimicking the busy whirl of city life.

This jumbled, paratactic style also helps create interesting ambiguities. For example, "and I am sweating a lot by now" (line 26) could be a more or less random aside, relating back to the "muggy" weather mentioned earlier (line 7). But it could also follow from the line before it (line 25), in which O'Hara buys a tabloid with Billie Holiday's photo. In other words, the "sweating" might be a symptom of anxiety, prompted by news of Holiday's death.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 6-15
- Lines 20-21
- Lines 26-29

ENJAMBMENT

The poem is heavily, almost constantly, enjambed. Only one line ends with punctuation of any kind (the parenthesis in line 12), and even when the end of a line clearly coincides with the end of a sentence (as in lines 6, 10, and 29), O'Hara omits a period or any other terminal punctuation. When the end of a line coincides with a grammatical pause, O'Hara omits a comma, semicolon, etc. Line 1, for example, might normally end with a comma, but instead it just leaves the word "Friday" hanging out there, unpunctuated.

As a result, O'Hara seems to deliver the poem in a headlong rush, almost a stream of consciousness. The language sounds animated, breathless, agitated, because it's hardly ever end-stopped, and slowed only by line breaks and occasional stanza breaks.

Enjambment often highlights important words that fall just before or after the line break. Arguably, it does so once or twice here: for example, the enjambment in lines 23-24 stresses the word "casually," which seems potentially significant and possibly ironic:

> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre **and**
> **casually** ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton

Is O'Hara emphasizing that he learned about Holiday's death as a result of "casual[]" chance? Might his "casual[]" purchase of tons of cigarettes ominously echo the self-destructive habits that killed Holiday?

For the most part, though, the enjambments seem to fall almost at random. Look at how many lines end with minor words like "and," "or," and "of." This seeming randomness adds to the poem's spontaneous, dashed-off appearance; it's as if O'Hara is registering events and impressions quickly, without too much attention to where and how things fall on the page.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Friday / three"
- **Lines 2-3:** "yes / it"
- **Lines 3-4:** "shoeshine / because"
- **Lines 4-5:** "Easthampton / at"
- **Lines 5-6:** "dinner / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "sun / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "buy / an"
- **Lines 9-10:** "poets / in"
- **Lines 11-12:** "bank / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "life / and"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Verlaine / for"
- **Lines 15-16:** "do / think"
- **Lines 16-17:** "or / Brendan"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Nègres / of"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Verlaine / after"
- **Lines 20-21:** "LANE / Liquor"
- **Lines 21-22:** "and / then"

- **Lines 22-23:** "Avenue / and"
- **Lines 23-24:** "and / casually"
- **Lines 24-25:** "carton / of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "of / leaning"
- **Lines 27-28:** "SPOT / while"
- **Lines 28-29:** "keyboard / to"

CAESURA

What's most remarkable about the caesuras in "The Day Lady Died" is how few of them there are! For the most part, the poem charges full-speed ahead (like the "4:19" train in line 4), with very few interruptions aside from line and stanza breaks. This style gives the poem its sense of headlong momentum, energy, and anxiety.

Only five lines out of 29 contain pauses in the middle. The first of these is line 2, which contains a comma before the interjection "yes":

> It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
> three days after Bastille day, yes

This seems almost like the speaker clearing his throat for a moment before plunging ahead with his story. The second caesura occurs in line 12, which features the poem's only parenthetical:

> and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)

The grammatical pause here reflects a rare pause in the speaker's thoughts, as O'Hara shares the apparently random detail about his bank teller's first name. (But it may not be so random after all: it highlights his gregariousness and interest in other people. Ultimately, it's not surprising that a speaker who pauses to include a detail like this would also feel deeply about a stranger's death.)

Three other pauses occur as O'Hara waffles over his purchase in the bookstore (lines 16 and 18). These caesuras reflect an unusual stretch of hesitation—"quandariness"—in the life of a person who's otherwise perpetually on the go. In that sense, they're an exception that proves the rule, and a signal that O'Hara cares more about literature than about most other things.

The last caesura is the most significant: it occurs in line 25, just before O'Hara mentions the newspaper with Billie Holiday's "face on it." Out of all the "and"s in the poem, this is the only one preceded by a comma. The pause subtly registers O'Hara's surprise and dismay on seeing the article about Holiday—which undoubtedly announces her death. Like the news itself, the caesura seems to break the flow of a busy day.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "day, yes"
- **Line 12:** "Stillwagon (first"
- **Line 16:** "Hesiod, trans."
- **Line 18:** "Genet, but," "don't, I"
- **Line 25:** "Picayunes, and"

VOCABULARY

Bastille day (Line 2) - France's national holiday, celebrated on July 14 (the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, a political prison, during the French Revolution). In France, it's known as the Fête de la Fédération.

Shoeshine (Line 3) - A professional cleaning and polishing of shoes, typically offered for a modest fee in public areas with heavy foot traffic.

The 4:19 (Line 4) - A commuter train departing Manhattan for Long Island at 4:19 p.m.

Easthampton (Line 4) - Usually spelled East Hampton. A resort town in Long Island, known as a swanky weekend/summer destination for New Yorkers.

Sun (Line 7) - Here used as a verb. O'Hara apparently means that the *street* is beginning to get sunny, but also might mean that *he* is beginning to get some sun.

Malted (Line 8) - A malted milkshake.

NEW WORLD WRITING (Lines 8-9) - A literary magazine published from 1951 to 1964, featuring work from authors around the globe. You can judge its cover design for yourself.

Ghana (Lines 9-10) - A country in western Africa. Two years before the poem was written, Ghana had won independence within the British Commonwealth (under which it previously existed as four separate colonial territories).

Balance (Line 13) - Here meaning the amount of money in a bank account.

The GOLDEN GRIFFIN (Line 14) - A bookstore formerly located at 611 Madison Avenue in New York City.

Verlaine (Line 14) - Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) was a French Symbolist poet, so "a little Verlaine" means a small volume of his works.

Patsy (Lines 14-15) - O'Hara's friend Patsy Southgate, a writer and translator, who was then married to Michael Goldberg (the "Mike" in line 20).

Bonnard (Lines 14-15) - The French artist and illustrator Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947).

Richmond Lattimore (Lines 15-16) - A 20th-century (1905-1984) poet and translator of ancient Greek classics.

Hesiod (Lines 15-16) - An ancient Greek poet, best known as

the author of the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.

Trans. (Lines 15-16) - Short for "translated by."

Brendan Behan (Line 17) - A 20th-century Irish playwright, poet, and fiction writer (1923-1964). The "new play" mentioned here is *An Giall (The Hostage)*, first performed in 1958.

Genet (Lines 17-18) - Jean Genet (1910-1986), a controversial French author and activist, best known for his plays and fiction.

Les Nègres (Lines 17-18) - *Les Nègres* (*The Blacks*) is a 1958 play by French writer Jean Genet, which examines racism and Black identity.

Le Balcon (Lines 17-18) - *Le Balcon* (1956), or *The Balcony*, is a play by the French writer Jean Genet, which explores political revolution along with philosophical themes.

Quandariness (Line 19) - A word invented by O'Hara, meaning uncertainty or indecision (the state of being in a *quandary*).

PARK LANE Liquor Store (Lines 20-21) - A now-defunct liquor store in midtown Manhattan.

Strega (Line 21) - A brand of yellow Italian liqueur.

6th Avenue (Line 22) - A major avenue running north-south through the middle of Manhattan.

Tobacconist (Line 23) - A retailer of tobacco products, such as cigarettes, and related paraphernalia.

Ziegfeld Theatre (Line 23) - A famous Broadway theater at 6th Avenue and 54th Street in Manhattan, active from 1927 through 1966. (Not to be confused with the movie theater of the same name, located nearby and active 1969-2016.)

Gauloises (Line 24) - A brand of French cigarettes (now owned and manufactured outside the country, but still strongly associated with France).

Picayunes (Lines 24-25) - A brand of American cigarettes, now defunct, formerly manufactured by Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company.

NEW YORK POST (Line 25) - A daily tabloid based in New York City.

John (Line 27) - Slang for "bathroom."

5 SPOT (Line 27) - The Five Spot Café was a New York City jazz club. It opened in 1956, closed in 1962, reopened at a nearby location, then closed for good in 1976.

Mal Waldron (Lines 28-29) - A jazz pianist (1925-2002) who accompanied Billie Holiday in performances from 1957 through 1959.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Day Lady Died" is a free verse poem broken into stanzas of mixed length. Technically, there are four stanzas, though there may appear to be five, since lines 10-11 ("in Ghana [...] I go on to the bank") in the second stanza are "stepped": there's a drop in the middle that indicates a line break, but not a stanza break.

The poem's lack of rhyme, meter, and other formal structures helps it achieve a fast-paced, almost stream-of-consciousness style. O'Hara even drops the punctuation at the ends of sentences, suggesting the way one thought blurs into another. This style helps him convey his rapid rush of actions, thoughts, and impressions on an unexpectedly sad day.

Throughout his career, O'Hara tended to avoid strict poetic forms, which struck him as somewhat stiff and old-fashioned. In his essay "Personism: A Manifesto," he famously wrote:

> [...] I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

METER

As a free verse poem, "The Day Lady Died" has no meter. Written on the actual day Billie Holiday died, it captures a series of impressions in a quick, loose, spontaneous style. Any kind of strict formal pattern would ruin that sense of spontaneity. However, the poem's lines aren't completely all over the place; O'Hara breaks them into roughly even lengths (10-15 syllables each, aside from the shorter line 2 and the "stepped" lines 10-11), imposing some degree of regularity on the rapid flow of his thoughts.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse, so it has no rhyme scheme. There's one internal rhyme in line 3 ("1959"/"shoeshine"), but as the critic Robert von Hallberg has written, it's "only a chance thing." The poet's stream of thought rushes ahead without any formal pattern shaping it. The result is a feeling of improvisation and you-are-there immediacy.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Day Lady Died" is the poet, Frank O'Hara. O'Hara was known for his highly personal style (which he half-jokingly called "Personism") and for using details from his real life in his work. This poem is no exception: it's a basically accurate account of what he was doing the day Billie Holiday died, and he wrote it that same afternoon. (See the Context section of this guide for more details.) The poem appeared in his collection *Lunch Poems* (1964), much of which he wrote during lunch breaks from his day job at New York City's

Museum of Modern Art.

As he depicts himself here, he's a man about town, running errands on his Friday lunch break and looking forward to a dinner party in "Easthampton" (East Hampton, NY) that evening. He doesn't know the hosts of the party ("the people who will feed me"), but he's been invited by his friends "Patsy" and "Mike" (Patsy Southgate and Mike Goldberg). He's buying them "a little Verlaine" (a book of poems) and "a bottle of Strega" (some herbal liqueur), respectively, as thank-you gifts. He's a connoisseur of literature and the arts—he hesitates for a long time at the bookstore, trying to choose the perfect book—but in many ways, he's also an ordinary mid-20th-century American, enjoying his burger, milkshake, and cigarettes.

Finally, he's a fan of the jazz singer Billie Holiday, the subject of the poem, who once took his breath away in a live performance. (As things turned out in real life, the dinner party was canceled, and O'Hara, Mike, and Patsy spent the evening listening to Holiday records.)

SETTING

The poem has a highly specific and well-established setting: midtown Manhattan, New York City, around 12:20 in the afternoon of Friday, July 17, 1959. In this setting, the speaker, O'Hara, runs a series of errands on his lunch break. He names several locations on his route, so one can pretty much map his movements, even though most of these city landmarks are long gone.

O'Hara worked at the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd Street (between 5th and "6th Avenue"), so that's his likely starting point, though he doesn't mention it by name. He buys lunch at an unnamed "hamburger" place, buys a magazine (at a newsstand, perhaps), stops at an unnamed "bank," then heads to the "GOLDEN GRIFFIN," a now-defunct bookstore formerly located at 611 Madison Avenue. Next, he stops by the "PARK LANE / Liquor Store" (also defunct) before heading to the famous "Ziegfeld Theatre," a Broadway theater that stood at 1341 6th Avenue and was demolished in 1966. All these errands take place within a few midtown blocks.

The poem mentions several other locations as well. "Easthampton" (usually spelled East Hampton) is a town on Long Island, known as a fashionable summer destination for New Yorkers. "Ghana" is a West African country, which at the time had only recently (1957) won independence within the British Commonwealth. Finally, the "5 SPOT" (the Five Spot Café) was a jazz club, then located at 1 Cooper Square in the Bowery neighborhood of Manhattan, frequented by many famous writers and artists as well as musicians.

Like many of O'Hara's poems, "The Day Lady Died" showcases the poet's love of New York City and his deep familiarity with its arts scene. The frenetic urban whirl provides the backdrop against which Billie Holiday's death, and the quiet memory it brings, takes place. (Holiday died in Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, also in Manhattan.)

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) was one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century. Along with his friends John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, he was a leading light of the poetry movement that critics came to call the New York School.

The New York School poets valued improvisation, formal experimentation, urbane wit, and a style combining sophisticated allusions with American vernacular and pop culture references. In their embrace of both "high" and "low" culture, they sometimes resembled "Pop" artists such as Andy Warhol, who were part of the same generation and broader New York arts scene. In fact, O'Hara, in his day job as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), was an expert on the visual arts and a friend to many artists—including the painter Mike Goldberg, the "Mike" of this poem.

"The Day Lady Died" is one of the most famous poems from O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* (1964), which also includes such classics as "Poem [Lana Turner has collapsed!]" and "Personal Poem." (The former is a tribute to another headline-making celebrity, the movie star Lana Turner, while the second mentions another jazz legend, Miles Davis.) Like many of the *Lunch Poems*, this one draws on the city sights and sounds O'Hara witnessed during lunch breaks from his job. In fact, O'Hara seems to have actually composed it on July 17, 1959, the day of Billie Holiday's death. According to biographer Brad Gooch:

> O'Hara had written his poem on his lunch hour. Later he caught the train with LeSueur to East Hampton where they were met by Mike Goldberg in the olive-drab Bugatti he had bought the year before [...] Goldberg explained in the parking lot, "We're eating in, the dinner was called off." On the drive to the house Goldberg was renting that summer on Georgica Pond [in East Hampton], the only topic of discussion was the tragedy of Billie Holiday's death at the young age of forty-four. "I've been playing her records all afternoon," said Goldberg. Arriving back at the house, Goldberg put a Billie Holiday record on the hi-fi while Patsy Southgate, having finished putting the two kids to bed, brought out a tray of hors d'oeuvres. O'Hara, who had been silent about the matter throughout the trip, pulled a poem out of his pocket that he announced he had just written that afternoon and read it straight down to its concluding

stanza [...]

A star during her lifetime, Holiday is still regarded as one of the greatest jazz singers of all time. Her passing was tragic in part because she was still relatively young: she died at age 44, from complications related to alcohol and drug addiction. Seven years after he wrote his tribute to her, O'Hara died even younger, at age 40, when a vehicle struck him in a freak accident on New York's Fire Island.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written in the present tense on the day it describes, the poem now provides a historical snapshot of mid-20th-century New York City, including a number of landmarks (the Ziegfeld Theatre, Five Spot Café, etc.) that have long since vanished. It's also a cultural snapshot of mid-20th-century America, not only in its tribute to the jazz singer Billie Holiday but in its details: the "hamburger and malted [milkshake]" lunch, the tabloid newspaper, and so on.

Interestingly, the poem alludes to French history as well: it mentions "Bastille day," a holiday honoring the 1789 storming of the Bastille (a political prison) during the French Revolution. This detail may subtly relate to the writers and artists the poet mentions—two of whom were French, several of whom revolutionized their respective art forms and/or saw prison time in their respective countries. O'Hara, as a gay artist, had his own outsider relationship to mainstream American culture, so his interest in these rebellious figures may reflect his own experience. He name-checks, for example:

1. The French poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), who was imprisoned for two years after shooting his lover, Arthur Rimbaud, in the hand.
2. The Irish writer Brendan Behan (1923-1964), who served two separate prison sentences as a member of the Irish Republican Army.
3. The French writer Jean Genet (1910-1986), who was a petty criminal in his early life, served numerous prison sentences, and wrote his first novel behind bars.

Billie Holiday herself battled drug and alcohol addiction, as well as the extreme racism and sexism of mainstream, mid-20th-century America. A Black female star before the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, she became a primary target of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, particularly after her celebrated recording of the anti-lynching protest song "Strange Fruit." After serving a prison sentence for drug possession, she lost her cabaret performer's license and, with it, a major source of income. (The performance O'Hara describes in lines 27-29 was technically illegal, as Holiday was no longer permitted to sing in venues that served alcohol.) Legal troubles, substance abuse, and abusive relationships all contributed to her decline.

In many ways, Holiday's art exemplifies the kind of cultural connections democratic society is said to foster. Jazz originated in Black American communities, but by O'Hara's time, it had long since become popular with audiences of all races. Many critics and listeners saw it as bridging social divisions, as well as supposed divisions between "popular" and "high" art. Yet, like many successful Black American artists, Holiday found her career hampered by racism, including harassment by law enforcement. O'Hara doesn't mention this context directly, but his poem signals some awareness of and concern with racial divisions (e.g., he considers buying the Jean Genet play about racism) along with an interest in Black artistry (jazz, "the poets / in Ghana").

In elegizing Holiday, then, O'Hara seems to honor an artist who exemplified the best within her culture, but whose life held a mirror to that culture's flaws.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Frank O'Hara reads "The Day Lady Died." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWiB2bmDa4I)
- Holiday and Waldron on Record — Listen to a 1957 performance by Billie Holiday (with Mal Waldron on piano). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0AU0nazAI8)
- The Poet's Life — Read a short biography of Frank O'Hara at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/frank-ohara)
- "Lady Day" on Film — Watch a documentary about jazz singer Billie Holiday (the "Lady" of the title). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_ccHPheiOQ)
- An Introduction to the New York School — A brief guide to the literary movement with which O'Hara is closely associated. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-new-york-school)

HOW TO CITE

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