Lunch Poems Study Guide

Lunch Poems by Frank O'Hara

BOOKRAGS

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Music, Alma, On Rachmaninoff's Birthday, Poem (1) Summary

Lunch Poems by Frank O'Hara is an autobiographical collection of poems concerning the passions, fears, and neuroses of the author, framed often as lines hastily written during O'Hara's lunch break.

In Music, O'Hara pauses for a liver sandwich at The Mayflower. The days are wet and chilled, while the author is short on cash and mired in a general malaise. He sees Christmas trees being erected and looks forward to the bright lights.

Alma is a four-part poem that veers among different images on the theme of a dancer called Alma. It opens with an image of her spinning under three multicolored suns. In Part 2, the author travels from Nice to Detroit - each beautiful in its own way - making subtly dirty rhymes along the way. Alma continues to dance and sing. Part 3 describes Detroit in classical terms and talks of Alma's place in it. She yearns for her glory days in New York, misses her dead father, opens a jewelry shop, and other things. When she dies in Part 4, the poet imagines a great tremor in the earth. Alma has become a legend, and many feel that she is not even dead.

In On Rachmaninoff's Birthday, the writer is in his apartment listening to the master. He feels half-mad as he looks around the mess in his room.

In Poem, O'Hara walks back to his apartment in the cold winter. He imagines having a nice cup of tea and living in a nice wood house. If he had a samovar for tea he might be a better person, instead of the manipulative neurotic that he is. With the hot tea, he imagines he might be charming and relaxed.

Music, Alma, On Rachmaninoff's Birthday, Poem (1) Analysis

The reader meets its poet and protagonist as he will so often exist, in Music. O'Hara is an emotional neurotic whose deep and pained agonies are exacerbated most often by the weather. The malaise and circular fixations he lives through render him unable to live his life much of the time, but on occasion, the poet can revel in some pleasure. These pleasures are often carnal, occasionally spiritual, and regularly connected to lunch. O'Hara's most clear and specific references throughout the collection are to the liver sandwiches, burgers and malts he consumes, which give him an enormous sense of well being.

In Poem (1), the reader is presented with what will be the most peculiar example of this sense: a conditional gustatory pleasure. O'Hara, on a chill winter morning, longs for a samovar to make some tea. He proceeds to relate a story in which he emotionally devastates a man in order to sleep with him, an example of his inherent viciousness. The warm tea of a samovar represents a perpetual wellness, one that would allow him to act better.

On the Way to San Remo, 2 Poems from the O'Hara Monogatari, A Step Away from Them, Cambridge, Poem (2), Three Airs

On the Way to San Remo, 2 Poems from the O'Hara Monogatari, A Step Away from Them, Cambridge, Poem (2), Three Airs Summary

On the Way to San Remo is a grotesque picture of a New York street. The poet describes a maimed dog, an old ranting woman, and a bus full of fat people. Solitary people dream of love in the horrid night.

In 2 Poems from the O'Hara Monogatari, the poet is in Japan. In the first part, he sits in an extravagant outfit drinking bourbon. In the second, he has returned from an exhausting trip to a shrine. He sits by his seaside cottage at night easing his aching muscles, perhaps with a friend.

In A Step Away From Them, O'Hara walks through New York on his lunch hour. He describes many archetypal New Yorkers: the construction worker, the working girl, the actress, and the Times Square hustler. O'Hara gets a burger and a malt. He thinks of great personalities that have recently died - Jackson Pollock, John Latouche - and wonders if the world is any less interesting without them. The city is a great circus to him.

In Cambridge, the poet is shivering in the rainy English morning. In his flat, he likens himself to the great Russian and German writers, creating their best work in the miserable cold. The poet thinks he might go work on a construction site across the street.

Poem is a short sketch in which the poet wonders if he has fallen in love again, only the second true love of his life.

Three Airs is a pastoral poem in three parts. The poet seems to be sitting in a park. In the first part, he describes a space filled with absurd and kinetic objects: a flying cat and elephant balls. In the second part, he imagines a hummingbird carrying things through the air and dropping them into a morass. He also describes the poplars over the water. In the third part, the poet longs to be an angel, unencumbered by the buildings and enclosures of the city.

On the Way to San Remo, 2 Poems from the O'Hara Monogatari, A Step Away from Them, Cambridge, Poem (2), Three Airs Analysis

On the Way to San Remo and Cambridge present a paradox of the work of Frank O'Hara. He mourns the solitude of modern American life, in which every person exists in his own private prison. San Remo, in particular, presents a city of strangers, completely isolated form one another. O'Hare detests the anonymity his era, but he thrives upon it. Cloistered in Cambridge, he yearns to be an agonized Russian writer and exist apart from the world. This is an agonizing motif that will return again and again: O'Hara seeks solitude for his thoughts only to discover how awful being alone is.

In Three Airs, meanwhile, O'Hara presents a vision of his era. In the early sixties, the beatnik movement was beginning to anticipate the free love era of Woodstock and the Be-In. Writers like O'Hara, Ginsberg, and Kerouac wrote viscerally but intellectualized. They are the children of Joyce, Eliot, and Beckett. So, O'Hara's pastoral is at once a celebration of nature and a lament of the modern American cage. O'Hara's dream of a free humanism is still six years away.

Image of the Buddha Preaching, Song, The Day Lady Died, Poem (3), Poem (4), Naphtha

Image of the Buddha Preaching, Song, The Day Lady Died, Poem (3), Poem (4), Naphtha Summary

Image of the Buddha Preaching is an absurd hypothetical sermon, spoken by the Buddha in Germany. He insists throughout the poem that the Indian mystics and the German philosophers have much in common. His sermon largely consists, in the end, of excoriations for German studiousness, free trade, and an end to ideological violence.

In Song, O'Hara dissects the assertion that the city is dirty. He argues mischievously that an item or a place is only dirty if it looks so. We are not perturbed shaking a person's hand - though it may be dirty - or breathing air we know to be unclean.

In The Day Lady Died - "Lady" being Billie Holliday - the poet is preparing to take an Easthampton to have dinner with some anonymous benefactors. He stops for a bite on the way to the train station, buys a gift for a friend, and picks up a paper announcing the singer's death. Deeply perturbed, O'Hara recalls a night he heard her sing live.

Poem is a short, vulgar piece. The poet laughingly imagines a world in which everyone defecated once a week, simultaneously, in church.

In Poem, Khrushchev is visiting New York, and O'Hara thinks it is a great day for him to be here. The day is lovely: he chats with a cabbie and every person looks like a friend. He recalls the night before when he saw a movie with friends and stayed up all night debating art and literature. He knows soon that the cold of September will set in, but for now the city is bright and windy and wonderful.

In Naphtha, O'Hara muses on the advancements and grandeur of the twentieth century, using several persons as benchmarks. The Iroquois he thanks for building the century; painter Jean Dubuffet, for the vibrancy of his imagery. He thanks Duke Ellington for the music played in the buildings of the century.

Image of the Buddha Preaching, Song, The Day Lady Died, Poem (3), Poem (4), Naphtha Analysis

This section features strong examples of two hallmarks of O'Hara's style: his hyper-literacy and his lionization of popular culture. In terms of his literary fixations, the most stirring example is his Image of the Buddha Preaching. Here he playfully intermingles

the seemingly incompatible elements of Buddhist spirituality and German philosophy into a mishmash of cross-cultural malarkey.

Pop culturally, in The Day Lady Died and Naphtha the poet lionizes Duke Ellington and Billie Holliday as modern myths whose music represents a new spirituality. Holliday's death brings a cold sweat to O'Hara, who cannot separate her from the most important memories of his life. Duke Ellington, along with the ubiquitous Iroquois, are symbols of American ingenuity and inextricable from the national behemoth.

In Poem (4), O'Hara shows an uncharacteristic blitheness. He wanders the streets of New York at peace with the air, the bustle, and even his coterie of intellectual friends.

Personal Poem, Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul, Rhapsody, Hotel Particulier

Personal Poem, Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul, Rhapsody, Hotel Particulier Summary

In Personal Poem, he walks down the street with two charms in his pocket on his way to have lunch his friend playwright LeRoi Jones - later Amiri Baraka - where they talk about a recent assault on Miles Davis, and which writers they like. He returns to work, gladdened.

In Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul, the poet is hung over and dreading his coming weekend which a tightly wound associate. He fears he is a terrible poet. As he lists out the unsubstantial news of his friends, he wished he were in "reeling around Paris / instead of reeling around New York" (35). O'Hara says the best one can do is continue to exist as the old cities like Paris do. This perseverance is, in the end, happiness.

Rhapsody is a rumination on the tall office building at 52nd Street and Madison Avenue. The poet decries the false sense of upward mobility created by the many floors, noting that the black elevator operators that move between them belie the notion of social mobility. He stands at the top of the building and looks out at the city, which he calls by its indigenous name: Manahatta. The poet hates the social hierarchy of Midtown. Later, back in Greenwich Village, he feels better.

Hotel Particulier - referring to the hotel in Montmartre - is a playful, coyly sexual piece. O'Hara revels in the lack of learning or creativity involved in his Parisian jaunt. Parenthetically, he implies that he's lolling in bed with a new partner.

Personal Poem, Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul, Rhapsody, Hotel Particulier Analysis

Personal Poem brings the reader another instance of O'Hara's reliance on lunch as a salve for the drudgery of life. It also features a rare specific mention of a real-life companion of Frank O'Hara, the revolutionary playwright LeRoi Jones. The specificity of this scene is heightened by its subject matter: the beating of Miles Davis (Jones's work has to do with violence against African Americans).

Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul and Rhapsody are starkly focused on the drudgery. Adieu to Norman is more attuned to the everyday ennui of city existence. Nursing that omnipresent malady of adulthood - the hangover - O'Hara lists

out the petty, unsubstantial travails of his coterie and wishes he were anywhere but New York.

Rhapsody is more revolutionary in it grievances. In it, the poet lambastes American capitalism by way of Manhattan, its most conspicuous temple. He protests that he skyscrapers of the city speak of a Horatio Alger advancement fantasy that does not exist. His simultaneous invocation of "the challenge of racial attractions" denotes the growing civil rights movement of the early sixties (37).

Cornkind, How to Get There, A Little Travel Diary, Five Poems, Ave Maria

Cornkind, How to Get There, A Little Travel Diary, Five Poems, Ave Maria Summary

Using the growing of corn as a metaphor in Cornkind, O'Hara expounds on the theme of fertility. He wonders what the point would be if his having a son to suffer in the world and add nothing to it. After all, the future will be all the son's, whose only connection to the past is his father. This connection, the poet reasons, is the meaning of fertility.

In How to Get There, O'Hara looks at the white October snow and fog, a white blinding manifestation of lies. This fog spreads through alleys and corridors, and the poet looks at the city as a large convocation of denials and deceptions, from a woman lying about her phone number to politicians lying to their constituencies. These lies separate us, he sums up, and we are alone.

O'Hara is on a train in A Little Travel Diary, passing through the Spanish countryside with his companion John. Evoking many international stars and starlets, O'Hara revels in the champagne, fine food, shopping, and first class accommodations he receives. His tone turns earthier as he mentions that he is so relaxed that he can "freely shit" (46). As they enter France, he revels in that pomp and gaudiness of it all.

Five Poems is a listing of small city pleasures. The first is a night so lovely it might as well be swimming off Montauk. The second is a lunch invite on a day when you run out of food. The third is a savory dinner and good conversation with friends. The fourth is a surprise visit after a night at the movies. The fifth poem questions whether the poet is charmed or simply deluded.

Ave Maria is an impassioned cry to mothers to allow their children to go out to movies instead of keeping them imprisoned at him. Children, the poet reasons, must learn about sex eventually; why not in a darkened theater? They will think fondly of their parents for allowing them the opportunity of sensual pleasure instead of resenting them.

Cornkind, How to Get There, A Little Travel Diary, Five Poems, Ave Maria Analysis

As seen through O'Hara's eyes, the world is a convocation of lies. He creates a potent metaphor for this in How to Get There, with the snowy fog that engulfs the city. The cold - and the hail, sleet, rain, mist and snow that accompany it - is a recurring motif in this collection. Inevitably it is associated with pain, ennui, and discontent. It takes on a horror film quality in this poem, infiltrating and stalking.

A more joyous portrait of the world is presented by the poet in Five Poems. True to form, the joys he expresses in this poem are associated by and large with food and drink. The clever aspect of the piece, however, is his comment in the final line, where he wonders whether his is defying fate or avoiding it. It indicates an inherent fear that all good fortune is fleeting. We all have to eat the old yogurt eventually.

Perhaps the best known - and certainly the most straightforward - poem of this collection is Ave Maria, which lovingly unifies the humanism of O'Hara's poetry with the quiet conformity of his upbringing. Everyone is raised in captivity, he intimates, and soon enough everyone finds an escape.

Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir, At Kamin's Dance Bookshop, Steps, Marie Desti's Ass

Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir, At Kamin's Dance Bookshop, Steps, Marie Desti's Ass Summary

Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir has a distinctly stream-of-consciousness style to it, with the poet free-associating on words. He begins, in fact, in French and proceeds to attempt to extrapolate the working of his heart. He returns often to the name Guillaume. In the second stanza, O'Hara declares that his heart is torn, and his metaphors to turn to those of death.

At Kamin's Dance Shop tells of the poet's dream that one night the ballerina Fanny Elssler appeared in his bed to make love. He is filled with an ecstatic sense of well-being and yearns for her return.

In Steps, the poet speaks to his lover. He wants to spend all day in bed with him, and in planning to leave at last he envisions a New York full of love. O'Hara describes a city where folks rub against each other and woman wear revealing clothes and tights. In this New York, everyone is alive and enjoying life to the fullest. O'Hara revels in this inexhaustible vivacity.

In Mary Desti's Ass, the poet begins by recalling a wonderful night of dancing spent in Bayreuth. He then proceeds to list the customary action he takes in other towns. In Hackensack he does nothing because of the ill will of the people. In Boston and Norfolk he stays in bed with new companions. The poem becomes a list of experiences by locale. He recalls towns where he met pleasant and unpleasant people. He recalls the strange ailment he contracted in Singapore. O'Hara never has a bad time in either Baltimore of San Francisco. In the end, he warns the reader of the bustle in Tokyo and recalls the new love he found once in the snow in Harbin.

Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir, At Kamin's Dance Bookshop, Steps, Marie Desti's Ass Analysis

Sexuality plays a central role in many of the poems in this section. Particularly in Steps, in which the poet mirrors his passion for his lover to the city as a whole, which he portrays as a coquettish community with warm bodies rubbing against each other. O'Hara is a homosexual man living in a period in which acknowledging this publicly was unheard of. As such, his poems are often ambiguous, with sexual partners often not named and distinctly male figures often portrayed as friends or companions. Still these

poems—including Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir and Marie Desti's Ass—represent a bold step forward in the presentation of honest sexual behavior in poetry.

St. Paul and All That, Memoir of Sergei O..., Yesterday Down at the Canal, Poem en Forme de Saw

St. Paul and All That, Memoir of Sergei O..., Yesterday Down at the Canal, Poem en Forme de Saw Summary

St. Paul and All That centers on the poet's pained decision whether or not to move from New York with his lover. It takes place the morning after an intense evening between the two. His lover appears to want to move south to Minnesota and O'Hara isn't sure what to do. They love each other; O'Hara feels safe with him. In the ambiguous end of the poem, he implies that the love just disappears one day, like a sunset no one notices.

In Memoir of Sergei O..., O'Hara is in the nation of Georgia, and he is livid. The area disgusts him, being devoid of beauty, individuality, or anything that makes life worth living. He is disgusted by its inanity. Meanwhile, he dreads returning to the States, where he has no doubt that nothing will be the same. The poem is a miasma of discontent and neurosis, and it ends with an indictment of the whole pathetic country.

In Down at the Canal, the poet speaks to an unknown optimist. He does not understand how one can look at the world with blithe contentment. For him, it alternates between brad and inscrutable. At the end of this short poem, he coyly requests a gun with one bullet.

Poem en Forme de Saw is actually in the shape of a saw, with O'Hara alternating his lines: long, short, long, short, etc. The poem also takes place behind a saw-mill in a park. The poet hides behind the mill with the intention of spending some time with his thoughts, but he finds no comfort in this. He imagines the nearby swans engaging in inane chitchat. He wonders if visiting friends in Winnipeg would be a good idea, but as he weighs his options he gets bogged down in literary allusions. He feels empty and unfulfilled, and signs off as "The Saw" (68).

St. Paul and All That, Memoir of Sergei O..., Yesterday Down at the Canal, Poem en Forme de Saw Analysis

For a poet so often inclined toward the literary and abstract, St. Paul and All That is a bracingly confessional piece, full of honesty and pathos. Relating the end of O'Hara's relationship with a longtime partner, the piece allows us into a situation that is sickeningly familiar. However, the customarily cold and abrasive O'Hara is gentle in an off-putting way in his summation that "the sun doesn't necessarily set, sometimes it just disappears" (63). The image is clear, unaffected, and devastating.

O'Hara is back to his customarily esoteric self in Memoir of Sergei O..., a screed against the inane consumerism of the world, and Poeme en Forme de Saw. The latter is a pained dissection of the poet's inclination toward solitude, a major theme in the collection.

For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson

For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson Summary

For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson is the longest poem in the collection. It is divided into three parts, and it begins with an epigram by D.H. Lawrence, ruminating on entropy and loss.

Part 1 of the poem concerns the reality of New York City. O'Hara states that behind any semblance of order or kindness or civilization is a red, enraged face. This is the true face of the city, and it lives under the ramps, ready to destroy anything resembling sensitivity of kindness. The poet acknowledges that these finer emotions do exist, but they are no match for the monster that exists in the city. In this sense, ancient ordering like the Chinese calendar serves to mollify the terror. The poet takes comfort in these old, Oriental things. Like religion, it creates order in the chaos.

The second part of the poem is markedly angrier than the first. O'Hara begins it by declaring that his enlightened generation is going to do exactly what the previous generation did: destroy. From his point of view humanity is always devolving and failing; he longs for some ascension. In the latter half of this section, the poet declares that there are prophets in our world, those who see the end ahead. From his point of view, our end is read in the inanity of our lives. Sex no longer interests us, and we care not for distant lands and other people. The time will come soon for the whole dismal world to end.

In Part 3, O'Hara expands on his assertion that he wants humanity to ascend. He begins the section with a juxtaposition of Old Europe - which produced festivals, art, and wars - to America, which produces lawnmowers and Muzak. He demands that Americas free themselves of earthly needs since the rapture cannot be far away. Everyone must be prepared to ascend at a moment's notice. This, he reasons, explains his own detachment. As the poem draws to a close, O'Hara states that he has come to a point where he can largely ignore the horrors in the news. The time is coming when all joy and pain will be extinguished. He wants the reader to be aware of this before the end comes.

For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson Analysis

For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson - despite its unprepossessing title - is the centerpiece of Lunch Poems. In structure it is clearly modeled on that most influential of apocalyptic poems, T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland.

The Wasteland was a reaction to the horror of the First World War. For the Chinese New Year is a reaction to the utter inanity that has followed the dropping of the atomic bomb. O'Hara states at one point that his generation will offer nothing better to the world than the earlier one that enacted the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, his generation is one of unparalleled complacency, for whom sex is old hat and lawnmowers and Muzak are the new arias.

Time and again, the poet mentions a desire to float up. He wants to fill huge balloons and be drawn into the heavens. He foresees the rapture, in which all the world will be taken up.

This prophetic quality of For the Chinese New Year makes it a major clarification to the poems that have preceded it. One could easily draw the conclusion, from the previous sixty pages, that O'Hara is something of a whiner. He is horrendously self-involved, dismissive of others, and he agonizes over every thought, theory, or decision (with the exception of what to eat for lunch). In this, his apocalyptic opus, the poet cites the coming end-times as the reason for his neurosis and, in particular, his detachment. The world is spiraling out of control, he states. Why should one senselessly become sentimentally attached?

Poem (5), Galanta, Fantasy

Poem (5), Galanta, Fantasy Summary

Poem is a humorous trifle after the apocalyptic For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson. In it, O'Hara notices a paper announcement that Lana Turner has collapsed. Reasoning that there is no logical reason why she should have done this, the poet panics and hysterically begs her to get back up.

In Galanta, O'Hara recalls his pubescent misadventures with a girl named Sally. They used to play and gallivant naked together. They had grand dreams together. Now, the neurotic, detached poet wonders where she is. They dreamed of distant lands and torrid adventured together as children; now he cannot help but associate her with America at its most American.

Fantasy is a funny, jumbled story told to the ailing Allen Ginsberg. It centers on an image of Helmut Dantyne, an actor renowned for playing Nazis. O'Hara envisions himself as Dantyne dropped off by a submarine in Canada. He is not a Nazi, but a spy; the last spy in Canada. Another spy comes around, but the poet kills him and feeds him to his huskies. All the while, he is trying to fix some remedy for Ginsberg. At the end, O'Hara asks Ginsberg if he is feeling better and assures him that Canada is still free.

Poem (5), Galanta, Fantasy Analysis

The final three poems of Lunch Poems are trifles after the opus that proceeds them. They focus on two of O'Hara's favorite topics: popular culture and naughty sexuality. They lionize both. The poet's early sexual experiments with Sally form a foundation for his later neuroses. Both Helmut Dantyne and Lana Turner become modern deities whose actions and images become Gnostic texts. In his final line, O'Hara excoriates us in his most satiric voice: "never argue with the movies" (82).

Lunch Poems is, in the end, a portrait of a nonconformist railing against the closing days of a conformist era. Our poet longs for spiritual and sexual freedom and the shattering of old monoliths. He wants pure life. In the early sixties, this drives him half-mad. The modern reader knows the outpouring of humanistic energy that waits over the horizon.

Characters

Frank O'Haraappears in All poems

Lunch Poems is a collection of autobiographical poems, and as such the poet Frank O'Hara is its protagonist. All poems are told in the first person from O'Hara's point of view. His words reflect his sensibilities.

O'Hara was born and grew up in Baltimore. In Galanta, he describes his relationship with Sally, with whom he had his first sexual experience. Little is revealed about the period between then and the time of the first poem, when O'Hara is in his mid-thirties. In this time, however, the poet has discovered his homosexuality.

Frank O'Hara lives in Greenwich Village during the period of the collection (1953-1964). He is part of a coterie of artists, writers, and intellectuals that includes the playwright LeRoi Jones. O'Hara is a neurotic who detests the inanity of modern life and worries that he is a failure. In For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson, he reveals that he expects the world to end soon.

Throughout Lunch Poems, O'Hara mentions many lovers, often associating them with the places he travels: Spain, Paris, Germany, Georgia, Japan, etc. Each trip seems to involve another tryst. In St. Paul and All That, the poet reveals a long-time partner, a dancer. The poem ends with the two separating because O'Hara refuses to leave New York.

A cynic who detests the bland consumerism of America capitalism, Frank O'Hara does take immense pleasure in small things: a sunny day, Billie Holliday, movies. More than anything, he enjoys a good lunch.

Almaappears in Alma

Alma is a dancer from Detroit, whose story O'Hara tells in four parts. When he introduces her she is dancing against a sky with several multicolored suns.

Alma performs at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City at one point, but after a time she returns to Detroit to open a jewelry shop. In Detroit, she becomes a mother and invents an arch-supporter. She thinks often of her dead father and his garden. Eventually, she dies, and the poet imagines at that moment a tremor shook Fordham, her alma mater.

Buddhaappears in Image of the Buddha Preaching

The satirical Buddha that O'Hara presents in Image of the Buddha preaching is making a speech in Essen, Germany. He begins by explaining that the modern German

philosophers have much in common with Buddhist belief. Buddha goes on to call for the improvement of trade between Germany and England.

LeRoi Jonesappears in Personal Poem

LeRoi Jones is an actor and playwright. He is a friend of Frank O'Hara's who joins him for lunch to discuss music, art, literature and the recent assault on Miles Davis. LeRoi Jones - who would change his name to Amiri Baraka - writes primarily on racial themes. He is still alive, writing and occasionally acting in film and onstage.

Gianniappears in Rhapsody

Gianni is Frank O'Hara's friend who accompanies him to the top of 515 Madison Avenue. The poet is depressed and enraged by the building, but he assumes Gianni's thoughts are elsewhere, on Rachmaninoff or Elizabeth Taylor.

Johnappears in A Little Travel Diary

John is Frank O'Hara's companion on his tour of Spain and France. He is unclear whether they are lovers or merely friends. John - in a euphoric fit - buys an absurd amount of clothes, which they have to cram in with them as they travel by train across the Spanish countryside.

Isadoraappears in Mary Desti's Ass

Isadora is a friend of Frank O'Hara's that dances with him in Bayreuth, Germany. It is a particularly fond memory for him as Isadora tells him he danced wonderfully. She forbids O'Hara to dance with anyone else.

O'Hara's Unnamed Loverappears in St. Paul and All That

The Unnamed Lover of St. Paul and All That is the only man that the poet indicates has been a regular companion as opposed to a casual fling. He is definitely a dancer. The poem tells the story of this relationship's dissolution. The lover wants to move to St. Paul, Minnesota, but O'Hara is unwilling to leave New York. As a result, the two men disappear from each other's life.

Sallyappears in Galanta

Sally grew up in the same neighborhood of Baltimore as Frank O'Hara. In Galanta, the poet recalls the attic in which he and Sally - then barely pubescent - experimented with

each other's young body. They dreamed of traveling to distant lands with each other. In the poem, O'Hara says he thinks of Sally often but knows nothing of her life.

Allen Ginsbergappears in Fantasy

Allen Ginsberg - that great beat poet of the body and soul - is ill of health in the last poem of the collection. O'Hara tells Ginsberg a story of Hollywood spy-craft and fixes his medicine in the poem. At the end, the poet asks Ginsberg if he is feeling better.

Objects/Places

New Yorkappears in Most Poems

Frank O'Hara lives in New York City, in Greenwich Village, and most of the poems in this collection take place in New York. O'Hara alternately presents the city as filthy and brutal or as lively and full of opportunity. He loves the diversity and artistic flare of New York but detests its class structure.

Detroitappears in Alma

Alma, the subject of Alma, moves to Detroit from New York to open a jewelry shop. The poet describes Detroit as a town of surprising artistic quality.

Rachmaninoffappears in On Rachaninoff's Birthday, Rhapsody

Rachmaninoff's music is a favorite of both O'Hara and his coterie of friends; it is passionate, complex, and challenging. O'Hara himself is a trained pianist and frequently plays Rachmaninoff.

Japanappears in 2 Poems from the Ohara Monogatari

O'Hara travels to Japan in 2 Poems from the Ohara Monogatari an has a wonderful time. He drinks bourbon, visits shrines, and relaxes with a companion at the end of long days of touring.

Cambridgeappears in Cambridge

Cambridge, England, is portrayed by the poet as damp, drab, and cold. Bundled in his room on a frigid morning in Cambridge, O'Hara imagines he is one of the classic Russian novelists.

Lunchappears in Most Poems

Lunch is Frank O'Hara's favorite meal of the day. Many of the poems in this collection - true to the title - are written during his lunch hour.

Charmsappears in Personal Poem

O'Hara has a habit of carrying charms in his pocket for good luck. The only ones that work for him, though, are a Roman coin and a bolt head from an old briefcase.

515 Madison Avenueappears in Rhapsody

515 Madison Avenue is an office building on the corning of Madison and 52nd Street. To O'Hara is is a representation of the lie of American capitalism, promising upward mobility but only offering subjugation.

Parisappears in Hotel Particulier

O'Hara's trip to Paris is spent at a fine hotel in Montmartre with a lover. For him, Paris is a carefree city meant for living and loving.

Fogappears in How to Get There

Fog, in this piece, comes off the Hudson and engulfs New York City, snaking down streets and obscuring vision. This fogis O'Hara's representation of the deception that pervades New York life.

Spainappears in A Little Travel Diary

Frank O'Hara travels through Spain - and eventually into France - with his friend John. They shop, drink and eat too much, spending hours on trains between destinations, watching the countryside pass by.

Moviesappears in Ave Maria

In Ave Maria, the movies are an oasis of freedom and sexual possibility for young people. He encourages parents to let their children go out to movies and experience the pleasures of sex.

Georgiaappears in Memoir of Sergei O...

O'Hara is disgusted by the nation of Georgia in this poem. He hates that everything old is being torn down for inane modern buildings. This, he protests, is a crime.

Saw-Millappears in Poem en Forme de Saw

In Poem en Frome de Saw, Frank O'Hara decides to abandon human company and hide behind a saw-mill in a park to write. He is saddened upon doing this to discover he hates the intense sense of isolation.

Themes

Solitude and Isolation

The poet, as presented in Lunch Poems, is a detached neurotic constantly questioning every aspect of his society. Throughout the collection, he is cloistered from the world, in his apartment in On Rachmaninoff's Birthday, on the street in A Step Away from Them, and in a park in A Poem en Forme de Saw.

In his solitude, O'Hara intends to be alone with his thoughts. He states in his opus For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson that in a devolving world, detachment is the only reasonable choice. Still, this self-imposed solitude - most effectively dissected in Forme de Saw - becomes a detested, epidemic isolation for the poet. He chooses it for himself, but once alone he cannot brook it.

This haunting portrait of the artist as pariah is a central theme of Lunch Poems. O'Hara stands astride a complacent world and demands change. His intellect and his imagination are his only true companions; so, lovers, friends, even casual acquaintances fade quickly and with little fanfare. In the end, what begins as a quick retreat becomes a quarantine, and getting back to society is too painful a process. Besides, this is a society that has ceased to interest the poet, who sees to clearly to be a part of it.

Inanity of Modern LIfe

The agony that pervades O'Hara's work rarely has to do with personal pain. Indeed, his most personal poem of the collection, St. Paul and All That, is remarkably objective about the painful parting of the poet and his longtime lover.

The true pain that flows through the line of Lunch Poems is a reflection of the intense disappointment O'Hara feel for modern America. In For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson he detestably states that his generation will do nothing better than his parent's atomic generation. That generation shook the world to its foundations with the introduction of immeasurable destruction to earth, and instead of engendering an era of existential exploration, they created to disgusting consumerism of the fifties that the poet lambastes in Memoir of Sergei O...

Little wonder that O'Hara time and again mentions his affinity for Samuel Beckett, the premiere voice of post-war absurdity. Beckett envisioned a word devoid of meaning in which wretched figured soldiered on never knowing who. While audiences may fall in love with the tramps of Waiting for Godot, O'Hara has no love for the American generation bred out of the war. For him, a new golden calf of skyscrapers, lawnmowers, and popular culture has replaced true humanism.

In less than a decade, the modern reader knows, this humanism will emerge in America and throughout the world, forged in the crucible of a new war.

Mood and the Weather

O'Hara's phenomenal poems - that is, poems that exist entirely in his emotional perception of the world - view his surroundings through the prism of his agonized neurosis. As such, his poems often contain a significant amount of pathetic fallacy, or instances of the weather reflecting the protagonist's emotional state.

This most often appears in the form of the cold, damp, chill, or foggy. In Poem (1) and Cambridge, he likens the emotional detachment of his life to the cold morning air. In Poem he goes so far as to blame to wet cold for his insensitivity to lovers. In How to Get There, O'Hara creates an enduring metaphor for existence. Watching the chill fog off the Hudson engulfing the city streets, he likens it to the deception that pervades modern daily life and the lies that allow existence to continue.

The opposite corollary is also true, however. O'Hara has moments of transcendent joy most often associated with the warm and sunny. Three Airs with its pastoral sunshine is the most obvious example. Wind also seems a joyful meteorological phenomenon for the poet, as he walk down the street on a lovely New York day in Poem (4).

Throughout Lunch Poems, Frank O'Hara keeps one eye on the world and one on his inner life. Never are the two out of sync.

Style

Point of View

Lunch Poems is told entirely in the first person, and by and large the poems exist in the present tense. The speaker of all but one poem in the collection is Frank O'Hara himself. As such, the collection is autobiographical in nature and - true to the title - takes on the air of musing jotted down on a lunch break.

A notable exception to the present tense in Lunch Poems is Poem en Forme de Saw, in which O'Hara is relating an experience in a park that takes place in the past. Besides this piece, the assembled works are told in the present, signifying two things. The first is that the collection has immediacy. O'Hara is tossing these anecdotes and meditations to the reader moment by moment. Secondly, these poems are meant to be theses on the present. The poet has a clear agenda: to stir us from our complacency. He does this by allowing us a vicarious experience, becomes his surrogate in New York, France, Spain, etc, and experiencing the agony he feels as he suffers through the inanity of modern life.

As stated above, one poem is not from O'Hara's point-of-view: Image of Buddha Preaching. This absurd piece is spoken from the Buddha's vantage, though the reader may infer that the poem is being related by a sardonic O'Hara in the guise of Siddhartha with an intense concern for German politics.

Setting

Lunch Poems take place primarily in New York during the period in which they were written, approximately 1953-1964. This time period is particularly significant as it informs the passions and anxieties of the poet. This is the era of the beats, and it ends just shy of the emergence of full-blown American counterculture. As such, the poet's intensely humanistic belief system and his disgust with the inane consumerism of his time have yet to be echoed by the culture at large. Also, the Stonewall riots have not occurred yet, leading to a sort of coding in the poetry meant to disguise O'Hara's homosexuality.

Lunch Poems is set almost exclusively in New York City, a home of ambiguous meaning to Frank O'Hara. In some passages - Poem (4) and Steps, for example - the poet seems enamored of the location, which he associates with hustle and bustle and a constant sense of possibility. Other times, he bemoans its filth (On the Way to San Remo), cold (How to Get There) and class system (Rhapsody). Several poems take place abroad or in different cities. These vary from the ecstatic and carefree (A Little Travel Diary, Hotel Particulier) to the dismayed and disgusted (Memoir of Sergei O...). Travel often invigorates O'Hara, but it also codifies his neuroses.

Language and Meaning

Frank O'Hara's major influences are the modernists - Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot - and the absurdists - Beckett, Ionesco. His poetry reflects their effect. It is written entirely in free verse, without punctuation except for commas and the odd question mark or exclamation point and no capitalization except for proper nouns.

Most poems - all except for Ave Maria and some of the shorter sketches like Poem (3) - are told in a stream-of-consciousness style with the poet free associating in the style of Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake. This creates a free-flowing, unhinged quality full of unfinished thoughts and elastic use of words with multiple meanings. The best example of this latter technique is O'Hara's play on the word "lies" in How to Get There. This style of writing places the poems resolutely in the mind of the poet, as if the reader were experiencing his unedited thought process.

One other interesting component is the several of the titles - A Step Away from Them, Naphtha, Pistachio Tree at Chateau Noir - have no readily discernible connection to the body of the poem. The implication created is that the title is a prompt or an inspired setting. O'Hara begins his apocalyptic opus on the occasion of the Chinese new year or the story of his heartbreak by a pistachio tree.

Structure

Lunch Poems is a collection of 37 poems by Frank O'Hara, most between one and four pages in length. One poem, For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson, is nine pages long. The poems are arranged in chronological order base upon the date of their composition; the earliest is from 1953, the latest 1964.

The effect created by the ordering of the poems chronologically is that of a world in flux. O'Hara is fiercely attuned to the realities of the world - his long apocalyptic opus is written the year of the Bay of Pigs and his racially charged Rhapsody in the early days of the civil rights movement - even as he decries his society's apathy. The reader gets the impression of a man who sees the world changing, but not nearly at the right pace for his revolutionary sensibility.

The length of For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson makes it the de facto centerpiece of the collection. This is appropriate, given that its broad themes inform the other poems, which are largely introspective.

Many of the poems - Three Airs, Five Poems, and For the Chinese New Year, for example - are subdivided into multiple parts. This practice reflects the influence of modernists like T.S. Eliot.

Quotes

"and I'll be happy here and happy there, full
of tea and tears..."
Poem, p. 8

"Oh to be an angel (if there were any!) , and go
straight up into the sky and look around and then come down
not to be covered with steel and aluminum"
Three Airs, p. 21

"the only thing to do is simply continue
is that simple
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do"
Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul, p. 35

"it isn't enough to smile when you run the gauntlet
you've got to spit like Niagara Falls on everybody..."
Rhapsody, p. 38

"it's true that fresh air is good for the body but what about the soul
that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images"
Ave Maria, p. 51

"the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won
and in a sense we're all winning
we're alive"
Steps, p. 57

"here we are and what the hell are we going to do
with it we are going to blow it up like daddy did"
For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson, p. 71

it's goodbye
to lunch to love to evil things and to the ultimate good as "well"
For the Chinese New Year & For Bill Berkson, p. 76

"...it is already too late
the snow will go away, but nobody will be there"
How to Get There, p. 45

"I seem to be defying fate, or am I avoiding it?"
Five Poems, p. 50

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the means O'Hara uses to express his sexual life in an era in which homosexuality was not acknowledged. What euphemisms and obscurities does he use? How does this affect the verse?

Discuss solitude. Why is the poet so often alone despite the fact that he detests isolation? What are your personal feelings regarding being alone? Is it comfortable? Unnerving? Both?

What is the poet's attitude toward New York in Lunch Poems? How does it compare to the scores of other cities that he visits throughout the collection? Is it a city of joy, work, or both?

Discuss the personality of the narrator. What does is his attitude toward his setting? What about the coterie of intellectual friends he has? How does this worldview affect the way in which he behaves and reasons through problems?

Discuss the setting of Lunch Poems. How does O'Hara anticipate major changes that will occur in the United States over the next decade? Is he a creature of the future?

O'Hara seems to create a modern Olympic pantheon over the course of the collection, consisting of artist, writers, stars and starlets. Do human beings naturally form a de facto spiritual system around famous figures of the era? Who are our living deities?

Discuss the metaphor of lunch in the collection. What does it represent to the poet? What is lunch's place in the daily existence of the working American male?