Why I Am Not a Painter Study Guide

Why I Am Not a Painter by Frank O'Hara

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Introduction

Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" was first published in 1957 in the *Evergreen Review.* Having a reputation for publishing some of the more adventurous works of the day, *Evergreen Review* was a fitting venue for O'Hara. Going against the predominant "neo-Symbolist" poetry of the time□a poetry in the tradition of T. S. Eliot, which critic Paul Carroll characterized in his *The Poem in Its Skin* as "civilized, verbally excellent, ironic, cerebral"□O'Hara's work is usually conversational and casual in tone. "Why I Am Not a Painter," in fact, like many of O'Hara's poems, reads as if O'Hara had simply improvised it off the top of his head.

Considered by many critics to be one of O'Hara's greatest poems, "Why I Am Not a Painter" reflects upon the creative process by comparing the writing of O'Hara's poem "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" with the painting of "SARDINES," a canvas by O'Hara's friend, the painter Mike Goldberg. Told in the first person from O'Hara's point of view, "Why I Am Not a Painter" is a narrative poem in which we see O'Hara dropping in on Goldberg who, at the moment, is starting his painting. After describing the process Goldberg goes through in order to complete "SARDINES," O'Hara reflects upon the process he himself goes through in order to write "ORANGES."

Both "ORANGES" and "SARDINES" have what appear to be unusual starting points, with O'Hara initiating the poetic process by thinking about the color orange, and Goldberg beginning his painting by brushing the word "SARDINES" on his canvas. In the end, however, neither of the finished works contains a trace of what originally inspired them: O'Hara's poem never mentions "orange" and Goldberg's painting no longer has the word "SARDINES" in it.

During the course of "Why I Am Not a Painter," O'Hara does not mention the title of either the poem or the painting he is discussing. He saves that until the end when he reveals that, despite the disappearance within each work of the original source of inspiration, the finished poem and painting are titled, respectively, "ORANGES" and "SARDINES."

Critic Marjorie Perloff, writing in her *Frank O 'Hara: Poet among Painters,* describes "Why I Am Not a Painter" as "a profound jest" in answer to the question of why O'Hara□who was heavily involved with the art world and who eventually became a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York□was not himself a painter. Indeed, on a certain level the poem *is* a joke. Yet, as critics such as Perloff have noted, the humor and levity one finds in O'Hara's poetry does not make his work any less profound.

Author Biography

Born on June 27, 1926, in Baltimore, Maryland, Francis Russell O'Hara was the first of Katherine Broderick O'Hara and Russell J. O'Hara's three children. In 1927, the family moved to Massachusetts, where Frank O'Hara grew up and attendedSt. John's High School in Worcester, and studied piano at the New England Conservatory. From 1944 to 1946, O'Hara served in the U.S. Navy as a sonar man on the destroyer USS *Nicholas.* Upon completing his military service, O'Hara attendedHarvard College to study music before changing his major to English. Here, O'Hara met fellow poet John Ashbery who, with O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler, founded what would later be dubbed the "New York School" of poets.

After receiving a master's degree in 1951 from the University ofMichigan at Ann Arbor, O'Hara moved to New York City. There, he soon found a job at the front desk of the Museum ofModern Art. In 1952, O'Hara's first book of poems, .4 *City Winter, and Other Poems,* was published. In addition to writing poetry, O'Hara actively pursued his interest in visual arts, participating in panel discussions at The Club of the New York Painters, an meeting artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Helen Frankenthaler. After leaving the Museum ofModern Art in 1953 to become an associate editor at *Art News,* O'Hara returned to the museum in 1955. Over the years O'Hara's responsibilities at the museum grew, and he found himself writing his numerous poems during lunch or other breaks in his busy schedule□hence the title of his 1964 collection, *Lunch Poems,* published by City Lights Books.

In 1965, O'Hara was appointed Associate Curator at the museum. As his duties in the art world expanded, his poetic output decreased. Nevertheless□despite his work with the museum and his continued work in music as well as theater□he always considered poetry his primary calling. O'Hara died on July 25, 1966

one day after being struck by a beach buggy on Fire Island in New York. He was forty years old.

Poem Text

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,
for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.
"Sit down and have a drink" he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. "You have SARDINES in it."
"Yes, it needed something there."
"Oh." I go and the days go by
and I drop in again. The painting
is going on, and I go, and the days
go by. I drop in. The painting is
finished. "Where's SARDINES?"
All that's left is just
letters, "It was too much," Mike says.
But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is

and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-3:

O'Hara begins the poem with a simple statement of fact. Answering the implied question of the poem's title, O'Hara notes that he is not a painter for what, to him, is a very obvious reason: he is a poet. Still, the question begs a more elaborate answer, and O'Hara admits, "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not." (At the time, "abstract expressionist" painters, such as Jackson Pollock, had gained an enormous amount of attention in the popular press, so it was inevitable that O'Hara, what with his own involvement in the art world, would be asked why he himself had not become a painter.) The third line of the poem then ends with the word "Well," with the remainder of the sentence continuing on the next line after a stanza break.

At first, this sudden ending of the line may seem arbitrary, but allowing the word "Well" to dangle here serves a purpose. First, by keeping it close to the sentence, "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not," the word "Well" hints at how O'Hara feels about the fact that he is not a painter. Here, "Well" could just as easily be "oh well," which is to say that not being a painter is not something that upsets O'Hara to any great degree□certainly, O'Hara does not consider his being a poet a liability. Placed at the end of this line,

"Well" serves the dual purpose of providing commentary on O'Hara's situation, and of initiating the more precise explanation that continues after the stanza break.

Lines 4-9:

In this next stanza, O'Hara narrates an account of the creation of a painting by his friend, Mike Goldberg. O'Hara does not present a cliched image of the artist as a tortured individual slaving over a painting, but rather a portrait of the artist as a calm working man.

As Goldberg begins his painting, O'Hara comes to visit. With O'Hara saying, "I drop in," one should note that this is an informal situation: O'Hara and Goldberg are on equal footing, and his unscheduled visit is neither an imposition nor an inconvenience. Goldberg takes a break from his work and offers O'Hara a drink. With the words, "I drink; we drink," O'Hara starts to delineate the similarities between his friend, the painter, and himself, the poet: just as the painter drinks, he too drinks. What one immediately sees here is that art and everyday life go together.

O'Hara then casually looks up at the painting and makes the simplest of comments: "You have SARDINES in it." (Putting an actual word in his painting, Goldberg is, in a way, borrowing from the poet's territory.) Goldberg's reply, "Yes, it needed something there," is equally simple and direct. Their discussion of the painting is devoid of any

serf-conscious analysis or direction, which implies that the painting is being created in a similar fashion.

Lines 10-16:

The word, "Oh," which begins the following line does not indicate surprise on O'Hara's part. O'Hara, needing no further explanation of what Goldberg is attempting to do with his painting, is simply closing this brief dialogue between himself and his friend. O'Hara then shows how life continues without anything remarkable going on. "And the days go by," he writes, and when he drops in a second time Goldberg is still working on the painting. Again, O'Hara writes, "and the days go by." Using the same phrase over and over again, O'Hara simulates the passage of time.

When O'Hara drops in a third time he finds that the painting is finished. Seeing that Goldberg has removed the word "SARDINES," leaving just random letters with no "meaning" in them, O'Hara asks, "Where's SARDINES?" This time O'Hara *is* surprised. Goldberg answers, "It was too much," indicating that he arrived at the finished work of art through a process of removal.

Lines 17-29:

Writing "But me?" at the opening of the final stanza, O'Hara sets forth to explain what he thinks is the difference between the process by which he creates a poem and the process by which Goldberg creates his painting. Where Goldberg starts by painting the word "SARDINES" on a canvas, O'Hara starts by thinking about the color orange.

Like Goldberg borrowing from the poet's territory by using a word, O'Hara is borrowing from the painter's territory by using a color. But rather than removing things from his work, like Goldberg, O'Hara keeps adding things. "Pretty soon," O'Hara writes, "it is a / whole page of words, not lines. / Then another page." To further clarify the difference between the poem and the painting, O'Hara notes that what he is adding are "words, not lines." At this point the poem comes to a climax with a battle of sorts between the language of a poem and the lines of a painting. Also of note here is the struggle of the poet to express in words what the painter can express by the simple use of a color.

As O'Hara continues with the poem, he finds that what he wants to add is far removed from his original idea: "There should be / so much more, not of orange, of / words, of how terrible orange is / and life." O'Hara lets the closing of this sentence, "and life," begin another line. Again, this is not an arbitrary ending of a line. Here, O'Hara is employing what Perloff calls a "floating modifier"□ namely, "word groups that point two ways." The words, "and life," are connected to the concept "of how terrible orange is." But they also reflect upon the words that directly follow it, providing a transition to yet another repetition of the phrase, "Days go by."

In repeating this phrase, which is used twice in the first stanza where the process of painting is described, O'Hara is subtly setting up the closing revelation of the poem in

which O'Hara realizes that there are more similarities than differences in the way he and Goldberg work. As with Goldberg, it takes a number of days to complete his work. Furthermore, when the poem is finished, O'Hara finds that it does not even mention "orange," his starting point□just as Goldberg's finished painting no longer contains the word "SARDINES," which was his starting point.

In the lines, "It is even in / prose, I am a real poet," O'Hara, after temporarily struggling with the apparent limitations of words, is reaffirming the power of words and the art of poetry. Although he says that his work is "in prose," he is not saying that his work is not a poem□it most certainly *is* a poem, a poem that has taken the form of prose. In addition to this, O'Hara is also implying that he can't help but be a poet.

Finally, even though O'Hara never mentions orange in his poem, he nevertheless decides to call it "ORANGES." Then, upon seeing Goldberg's painting in a gallery, O'Hara finds that Goldberg has done the same thing, calling his SARDINE-less painting "SARDINES." In other words, O'Hara, though he never actually uses orange in his poem, still needs the painterly concept of color; and likewise, Goldberg, though he has no words in his painting, still needs the poetic tool of language to provide entry to his art. Thus the poet and the painter, despite their different approaches, are equals in the overall world of the arts.

Themes

Art and Experience

In comparing the painting of Mike Goldberg's "SARDINES" with the writing of the poem "ORANGES," "Why I Am Not a Painter" presents the creation of both poetry and painting as processes that are rooted in normal, everyday experience. Certainly, there is nothing extraordinary about O'Hara idly dropping in on Goldberg as he works on his painting "SARDINES." Nor is there anything remarkable in Goldberg interrupting his work to have a drink with his friend. But what one senses beneath the surface is that O'Hara's visit, far from being an imposition, is in fact welcomed as a possible source of inspiration. Unlike the cliched image of the temperamental artist working in solitude, Goldberg is more like a gracious host at a cocktail party, welcoming his guest and whatever ideas and conversation he may bring with him.

O'Hara begins work on the poem "ORANGES" with a similarly casual attitude: "One day I am thinking / of a color: orange." As in the section dealing with Goldberg's painting, the phrase "days go by" is used to denote the mundane passage of time. Like Goldberg's work as a painter, O'Hara's work as a poet is rooted in the normal and often uneventful passage of time.

The creation of art, as O'Hara sees it, does not involve an esoteric process that cannot bear interruption. The creative process, rather than being some undertaking that is disconnected from normal life, follows the rhythms of everyday experience. Furthermore, the mundane passage of time is not an obstacle to creativity. O'Hara, in fact, finds inspiration, beauty, and art in familiar experience. Neither the common orange nor the prosaic sardine is unworthy of artistic presentation.

Language and Meaning

Another important theme addressed in "Why I Am Not a Painter" is the relationship between language and the actual objects or qualities it attempts to describe. Language, the poem seems to say, is inescapable in any attempt to describe the world. Even someone working in a visual medium, like Mike Goldberg, cannot completely avoid the influence of language in the way he looks at the world. Goldberg first adds the word "SARDINES" to his painting because "it needed something there." This shows how, ironically, language has inspired a work of visual art. As the painting progresses, Goldberg removes the actual word, leaving just random letters in what can be seen as an attempt to remove any specific meaning from language and transform it into something purely visual. Yet in the end his attempt fails, as he feels compelled to title the painting "SARDINES." Even though the actual word has vanished from the painting, it is that word that has informed the vision he presents in his painting.

While O'Hara thus argues for the necessity of language, he is nevertheless aware of its limitations. Beginning the poem that will eventually be titled "ORANGES" by thinking of the color orange, O'Hara uses words to try to describe what that color means to him, how it affects him, and how it fits into the world at large. Soon, O'Hara finds himself writing page after page "of words, not lines. / Then another page. There should be / so much more." Here, O'Hara is struggling with language, trying to reach some sort of description and definition of orange and finding that language can only go so far toward this end.

What O'Hara offers us here may seem paradoxical: language (in this case the word "SARDINES") somehow gives birth to a painting, while something visual (the color orange) gives birth to page upon page of words. But what O'Hara is saying here is simply that, for people with the ability to use language, the word and what that word denotes are inseparable. Language is such an integral part of our thought processes that we cannot see anything, be it a specific object or a general attribute like color, without referring back to language.

Identity

O'Hara had worked on and off at the Museum ofModern Art since 1952 and counted many of the famous painters of the day among his friends. With O'Hara being so closely involved with the world of visual art, it was inevitable that he would be questioned as to why he himself was not a painter, especially at a time when painters from the "New York School"□as opposed to poets from the "New York School"□had gained a great amount of attention in the media. Implied, of course, is the question of whether O'Hara might not be somewhat envious of the attention his painter friends were receiving while he, as a poet, was not publicly celebrated to quite the same degree.

For an artist without a clear sense of identity, these would be bothersome questions. But for O'Hara these questions are merely foolish. One will note the tone implicit in the lines, "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not. Well." Although it may not be apparent at first, "Why I Am Not a Painter" shows how the fact that O'Hara is not a painter bothers other people much more than it bothers him. Thus, in saying, "I think I would rather be / a painter," O'Hara is most likely being facetious.

Regarding identity, O'Hara is implicitly responding to critics and other readers who are not secure with the idea of O'Hara as poet□people who may not believe that O'Hara's writing, with its odd, conversational style, actually *is* poetry. In "Why I Am Not a Painter," O'Hara asserts his identity as a poet with bravado, noting that "ORANGES," the poem he is working on, "is even in / prose, I am a real poet." In other words, O'Hara is so confident in his skills as a poet that he does not even need to write his poems in conventional verse.

O'Hara's strong sense of identity, addressed obliquely in "Why I Am Not a Painter," can be seen very clearly in his brief essay, "Personism: A Manifesto," where he writes, "But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means.... Too many poets act

like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat.... I don't give a damn whether they eat or not." Here, one sees that O'Hara is that rare person in possession of true confidence, a confidence that does not compel him to prove himself to anyone. And although O'Hara may on occasion take the time to explain what he does, it's an explanation he offers only grudgingly.

Style

"Why I Am Not a Painter" is written in free verse and divided into an introductory stanza of three lines, followed by two stanzas of thirteen lines each. While free verse, which has no regular meter or line length, has been the most common form of twentieth-century poetry, what made this poem□and O'Hara's work in general□stand out in the 1950s is the degree of freedom with which O'Hara wrote his poetry. As it was, O'Hara disliked many of the most common poetic qualities and techniques.

In "Personism: A Manifesto," O'Hara went so far as to say, "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve." This does not mean O'Hara did not use rhythm; he just preferred the rhythm of natural conversation. Thus, within "Why I Am Not a Painter," O'Hara presents what can be laid out as actual dialogue; but, in keeping with O'Hara's preferences, it is one of the least "poetic" instances of dialogue one will ever encounter in a poem:

"You have SARDINES in it." "Yes, it needed something there." "Oh."

This is, indeed, a far cry from the poetic exchanges one sees, for example, in a Shakespearean play. (Not surprisingly, O'Hara was not a great fan of William Shakespeare, preferring the less "poetic" work of some of Shakespeare's contemporaries instead.)

Despite the predominantly "free" quality of his poetry, O'Hara (especially in his earlier work) usually adhered to some sort of formal structure. As noted previously, "Why I Am Not a Painter" is divided into three stanzas, each of which serves a rather logical purpose. Here, the first stanza presents the basic premise of the poem, and is followed by a stanza where O'Hara discusses the art of painting. In the final stanza, O'Hara brings everything together, discussing his own art (poetry), and then connecting it to Goldberg's work in the visual arts. In this stanza O'Hara also manages to bring the poem to a climax, and then leads it to a proper conclusion.

By the time one has finished reading "Why I Am Not a Painter," one will have experienced some of the same things one would experience by reading a well-crafted story□even though at first glance the poem may seem chaotic and arbitrary, even sloppy. However, this is the quality that is at the heart of O'Hara's poetry: taking common, everyday (and sometimes even ugly) elements, and turning them into a thing of beauty.

Historical Context

The 1950s, the period during which O'Hara first began to develop his poetry, often has been portrayed as an era when "normality" or convention ruled the day. And, when contrasted with the more obvious turbulence of the 1960s, the 1950s certainly did seem like a peaceful, uneventful era. As seen in popular situation comedies of the time, such as I *Love Lucy* and *Leave It to Beaver,* one might think the 1950s were a time when social problems did not exist. More likely, it was a time when social problems were often not addressed. Dwight David Eisenhower, who was the president of the United States for most of the 1950s, was socially and economically conservative. The social reforms that did come about during the Eisenhower years usually resulted from the efforts of the Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Earl Warren. One of the major decisions of the Warren Court, for example, involved the 1954 case *of Brown v. the Board of Education,* which ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Of course, the United States still had a long way to go as far as the rights of minorities were concerned.

On occasion one will see explicit references in O'Hara's poetry to some of the more troubling aspects of the time. "Personal Poem," written in 1959, mentions that African-American jazz trumpeter "Miles Davis was clubbed 12 / times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop." More often, O'Hara's references are less specific, as in "Why I Am Not a Painter," when he writes "of how terrible orange is / and life." O'Hara, who was gay, had himself experienced some of the problems of minorities and other people in the 1950s who were considered "different."

That the problems O'Hara and others experienced led to rebellion in one form or another isn't surprising. The 1950s, so conservative in many aspects, was actually a time that was rife for rebellion in the arts. (This was, after all, the era when rock 'n' roll music first came to prominence.) In the world of jazz, pianists such as Thelonius Monk and Cecil Taylor were venturing into new territory, creating sounds that stretched the boundaries of that musical genre. Painters like the aforementioned Jackson Pollock rebelled against simple representation in art and strove to display action and movement in their paintings. Likewise, in the realm of literature, O'Hara's work stood out as something incomparably new.

Dubbed "the last avant-garde" by writer David Lehman, O'Hara and theNew York School of poets were writing poems that were decidedly different from most of the work being published at the time. O'Hara, for instance, resented what he saw as the institutionalization of poetry. O'Hara would be witty where a more traditional poet would be solemn, ironic where another poet would be moralizing. O'Hara's poetry takes what on the surface looks mundane and holds it up to the light to show that it has its own patterns, its own beauty, and its own depth. Like the era of the 1950s, O'Hara's poetry may at first seem light on the surface, but lying underneath that are serious issues that O'Hara deals with in his own unique and□some would say, inimitable□style.

Critical Overview

Just as the reputation of Robert Lowell, long considered one of the foremost American poets of the century, has fallen somewhat, O'Hara's reputation has risen. At first O'Hara wasn't taken all that seriously. As Marjorie Perloff notes in her *Frank O 'Ham: Poet Among Painters,* O'Hara was first seen as "a coterie figure□adored by his New York School friends and acolytes, especially by the painters whose work he exhibited and wrote about, but otherwise regarded (when regarded at all) as a charming minor poet."

In fact, the first really insightful criticism on O'Hara's work did not appear until 1968, two years after his death, when Paul Carroll's critical survey of some of the younger poets of the day, *The Poem in Its Skin,* appeared. Carroll writes that, "No one could have guessed ten years ago that the poems of Frank O'Hara would be among the most seminal influences on the work of the youngest generation of American poets now in their 20s." Perloff goes on to report that, at a 1996 conference on the poetry of the 1950s, "there were more papers (eleven in all) on O'Hara than on any other single poet, and his name cropped up repeatedly in the various keynote addresses on larger topics."

Among O'Hara's large body of work, "Why I Am Not a Painter" is one of his most popular poems. Commenting on this poem, David Lehman writes in *The Last Avant-Garde* that it "made poetry seem as natural as breathing, as casual as the American idiom, and so imbued with metropolitan irony and bohemian glamour as to be irresistible." The engaging irony and the attractiveness of the artistic life, as presented through the work of O'Hara, were never in question. But it was a long time before critics saw that these qualities, in addition to being entertaining, were worthy of serious study.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

David Caplan is a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia, writing a dissertation on contemporary poetry and poetic form. In the following essay, he considers how O 'Hara 's poem relates to other poems about paintings and questions the relationship it establishes with the reader.

Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" continues a long and distinguished line of ekphrasis poetry. From the Greek word for "description," this category includes poems that describe other works of art. This tradition dates to classical antiquity; the most famous articulation of its guiding principle remains Horace's dictum, "ut pictora poesis": "as a painting, so a poem." As this comparison suggests, this position stresses a basic similarity between poetry and painting. They are "sister arts" which inspire each other.

A host of modern poets have composed works under these guiding assumptions. O'Hara's friend, John Ashbery, wrote one of the most widely admired poems of this kind. The title poem of a collection that won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award, "Serf-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" meditates upon the Italian Renaissance painter Parmigianino's "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

The soul has to stay where it is,

Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,

The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the

wind,

Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay

Posing in this place. It must move As little as possible.

This is what the portrait says.

This exemplary passage suggests the most common tactic of ekphrasis. The poem analyzes a painting in order to draw some truth from it. "This is what the portrait says," Ashbery writes, and even though the self-portrait he witnesses appears in "a convex mirror," it mirrors his own experiences.

A friend of many visual artists and a professional curator, Frank O'Hara possessed great expertise about painting and the commercial art world. His numerous poems on these subjects include "Joseph Cornell" and "Ode to William de Kooning," and he also collaborated with the artists Jasper Johns, Norman Bluhm, and Larry Rivers. In "Why I Am Not a Painter," O'Hara tries a different approach from Ashbery's in "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror." The poem quickly demonstrates one of these differences: unlike Ashbery, O'Hara describes the process of composition, not a finished painting. The poem starts with the start of a painting:

I am not a painter, I am a poet. Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well, for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in.

Part of what is distinctive about O'Hara's poems is their chatty casualness. The speaker doesn't "visit" his friend; instead, "I drop in." On the rare occasions that poems use phrases elevated enough for expository prose, it undercuts their potential pretensions. The speaker declares, "[F]or instance, Mike Goldberg / is starting a poem"□but not before opening the sentence with a less-than-authoritative interjection, "Well."

This technique underscores O'Hara's stance of taking a potentially serious subject less than seriously. Listen to how flatly the speaker describes his interaction with Mike Goldberg, "'Sit down and have a drink,'" he / says. I drink; we drink. I look up." This scene is far from an august meeting of great minds ready to discourse on the subject of painting, life, and poetry. As always skeptical of any great claims for art, O'Hara describes the creative process in very prosaic terms. Two friends talk about what they are doing, although they barely know themselves: "'Where's SARDINES?'/ All that's left is just / letters, 'It was too much,' Mike says."

O'Hara's similar determination to keep "too much" out of his art, though, leaves the reader wondering exactly what he includes. Describing his composition process, the speaker exclaims:

There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet.

This crescendo of language rises to the height of an epiphany, but its culminating boast seems more ironic than sincere. The statement raises a host of questions. If the speaker is "a real poet," what does that mean? If the artistic process is this accidental, what separates "real" art from "fake"? In the poem's own terms, O'Hara finds these questions to be "too much"; declining to answer them, he again reveals an interest in poetic process□that is, in how artists make art□not in exposition□in how he might explain his own poetry.

Even when read ironically, the declaration, "I am a real poet," though, contains more than a hint of authorial arrogance. In the best critical study of Frank O'Hara's work, *Frank O 'Hara: Poet Among Painters,* Marjorie Perloff, a leading scholar of twentieth-century poetry, calls "Why I Am Not a Painter" "a profound jest. If someone asks a stupid question, O'Hara implies, he deserves a stupid answer ... O'Hara is a poet not a painter for no better reason that is what he is." Perloff s general point is very convincing, as the poem's sly humor archly deflects a kind of clueless interrogator's implied question. But is the question, "Why are you a poet, not a painter?" really that "stupid"? One hesitates to say that it is not, as, according to both the poem and its most sympathetic reader, to do so would be to mark oneself as hopelessly naive.

From Alexander Pope's satirical couplets to Ezra Pound's sneers at bourgeois respectability, poets have scoffed at, derided, and mocked the general public's philistine assumptions about art and culture. Indeed, the modern age almost defines such disdain

as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for poetic creativity. Yet, even though there are many reasons to think that "real" and "fake" are not the most sophisticated terms to apply to poetry, one also might recoil at how much energy O'Hara's poem exerts in turning his answer into a "jest." The poem ultimately tells the reader that poetry and painting are interconnected artistic acts and that temperament decides an individual's suitability to one or the other. But is this point "profound"? Lacking the generosity of O'Hara's other poems or even their more biting derision of worthier objects, "Why I Am Not a Painter" wins a pyrrhic victory over an easy opponent.

Source: David Caplan, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Aviya Kushner, the poetry editor for Neworld Renaissance Magazine, *earned an M.A. in creative writing fromBoston University. In the following essay, Kushner discusses O 'Hara's interest in painting and its enormous influence on his life and writing as well as his desire to be perceived as what he truly was: a poet. She also compares the process of O'Hara writing a poem to Mike Goldberg creating a painting, as portrayed in "Why I Am Not a Painter."*

Lunch hour. That is when O'Hara wrote many of his poems, while on break from his job as a curator at the Museum ofModern Art. His famous volume, *Lunch Poems,* includes descriptions of coffee with "a little sour cream in it," bare-chested construction workers downing a sandwich, and women walking over subway grates as the afternoon wind blows their skirts up over their knees. These mid-day moments fit in with O'Hara's mesmerizing poetry of moments, snippets of life that, when read together, form a rich and fascinating chronicle of a man and his city□New York.

According to many of his friends, O'Hara never worked at becoming a famous poet. He worked at getting to know art, and he worked at living a full life. Although he had a circle of writer friends like John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, O'Hara spent much of his time surrounded by painters. Many of his poems refer to painters or painting movements, and his work is deeply visual. As Marjorie Perloff, author of the biography *Frank O'Hara: A Poet among Painters* has observed, O'Hara wrote for the eye, not the ear. His lines are exciting to look at. They can be long and sensual, like a brushstroke, or perky and staccato, like music notes.

O'Hara originally wanted to be a concert pianist, and his knowledge of and interest in composers like Erik Satie, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Arnold Schoenberg can be seen in his work. Perloff's observation of O'Hara as an "eye" poet may explain all of the punctuation in O'Hara's poetry, which create numerous built-in pauses. The musical background naturally influences the sound, and O'Hara himself used to call writing "playing the typewriter," which of course alludes to playing the keys of a piano. While O'Hara was not known as a good reader of his own work, his poems are interesting to read aloud, and they sound playful and conversational. This can be misleading, because, as Perloff has observed, O'Hara was among the most learned and best-read poets of his day. While his poems may have been scribbled during lunch or written on the Staten Island Ferry on the way to a reading, they are also steeped in tradition and deeply aware of the concerns of visual art, music, and literature.

"Why I Am Not a Painter" is one of O'Hara's most famous poems. It may have been the answer to a question O'Hara was frequently asked, as a curator of modern art and friend of many painters. It is written in O'Hara's trademark off-the-cuff, casual tone, but it hints at how O'Hara achieves that casual tone.

Like many of O'Hara's poems, "Why I Am Not a Painter" mentions individual people. Another O'Hara poem, "The Day Lady Died" is an homage to Billie Holliday. "Lana

Turner Has Collapsed" is about Lana Turner. Other poems are about his lovers, friends, and muses. He is the king of name-dropping. And yet, despite all the interest in fame and persons of fame, he himself was not interested in fame. This casual attitude and love of poetry for poetry's sake seems crucial to understanding this poem about not only painting, but poetry. Here is *Floating Bear* magazine editor Diana di Prima's account of how she found O'Hara's poems:

I would go over to Frank O'Hara's house pretty often. He used to keep a typewriter on the table in the kitchen, and he would type away, make poems all the time, when company was there and when it wasn't, when he was eating, all kinds of times. There would be an unfinished poem in his typewriter and he would do a few lines on it now and again, and he kept losing all these poems. They would wind up all over the house__ The poems would get into everything and I would come over and go through, like, his dresser drawers. There would be poems in with the towels, and I'd say, "Oh, hey, I like this one," and he'd say, "OK, take it." Very often it would be the only copy. My guess is that huge collected Frank O'Hara has only about one-third of his actual work."

"Why I Am Not a Painter" begins very simply, with an opening line that doubles as a manifesto. The first line says it all: "I am not a painter, I am a poet." That sounds pretty authoritative, but in the second line, O'Hara starts to explain:

Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well,

O'Hara admits that he likes painters and paintings. But he was careful to state that he is not a painter, but a poet. The "well," hanging seductively at the end of the brief opening stanza, begins the explanation. Now O'Hara will really explain the real reason why he is not a painter□because he is a poet. And he proceeds to prove that he looks at the world as a poet does. Clarity departs after those first few lines, as people and thoughts start dropping in: for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in.

"Sit down and have a drink" he says. I drink; we drink. I look up. "You have SARDINES in it." "Yes, it needed something there." "Oh."

O'Hara drops in as Mike Goldberg starts a painting. Of course, as Goldberg begins to put his painting together, O'Hara is actually beginning to compose a poem. O'Hara mentions Mike Goldberg by name, just as the name "Lana Turner" functions as a building-block for his other poem.

The plot of the poem is "I drink; we drink." On the surface, Goldberg and O'Hara are simply drinking, but beneath, Goldberg is painting and O'Hara is writing a poem. O'Hara comments on Goldberg's work□"You have SARDINES in it." Goldberg answers that "it needed something there," and O'Hara, the professional curator, plays naive friend. "Oh," he says.

Then there is a blur, depicted by O'Hara as simply the days going by. Life is lived:

I go and the days go by

and I drop in again. The painting

is going on, and I go, and the days

go by. I drop in. The painting is

finished. "Where's SARDINES?"

All that's left is just

letters, "It was too much," Mike says.

Already, "needed something" and "too much" refer to a painter's interest in proportion. O'Hara has stated that he is not a painter. Naturally, then, he has different concerns.

But me? One day I am thinking of a color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, how terrible orange is and life.

"There should be / so much more"□that is the difference, for O'Hara. He wants there to be "so much more," and Goldberg is concerned that there was "too much." For O'Hara, a thought about a color becomes a line, then a page, then several pages, then a rumination on "terrible", and of course, life itself. The narrative continues:

Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven't even mentioned orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call it ORANGES.

Life continues, and the moments pile up. O'Hara finishes the poem, he finishes twelve poems. He has not mentioned the color orange yet, but the reader gets the feeling he has mentioned all kinds of other things. He is writing about life, about the "days" that "go by." He manages to make fun of himself, as he always does. "It is even in / prose, I am a real poet."

The whole poem is composed of the simplest of words, and a dictionary is definitely not needed here. O'Hara is explaining how he writes without the slightest touch of artifice. The last two lines go back to the original question of why he is not a painter, returning to the painter Mike Goldberg and his SARDINES painting:

And one day in a gallery

I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

So Goldberg and O'Hara work similarly after all. Goldberg's painting, one can surmise, has nothing to do with sardines, except for the letters that form it. Abstract Expressionism was at its height, and O'Hara's description is probably right on target. However, O'Hara's poem series, titled "Oranges," probably has nothing to do with oranges. Yet while Goldberg tried to get the excess out, O'Hara aims to cram the excess in.

This is a very playful, somewhat sarcastic poem. It can be read as a stupid answer to a stupid question. But it also provides a priceless window into the mind of a poet, and it begins to explain why O'Hara lived his life as a poet among painters. The paintings stimulated him, and painters helped him both become a poet and continue as one.

Source: Aviya Kushner, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Morton D. Rich is an associate professor of English atMontclair State University who teaches a variety of courses in writing and contemporary literature. He is guest editor of the Spring 1999 issue o/Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines, *an issue dedicated to autobiography and critical thinking. In the following essay, Rich describes "Why I Am Not a Painter " as O 'Hara 's definition of a poet and his or her art and discusses how the poem portrays the differences between the work of a poet and a painter.*

The voice and personality of the poet, O'Hara himself, are strongly present in "Why I Am Not a Painter." He does not hide behind a persona or create a character to act in his poetic drama. It is O'Hara presenting incidents and thoughts of his daily life. They are, of course, selected thoughts and incidents, not just anything that came to his mind. The poem may sound like a journal entry, but it is not; it is a shaped statement about what a poet is and does, what a poem is, and obliquely, a statement about what poetry should be and how poetry should be read. It can be read as an example of O'Hara's manifesto about composition he called "Personism":

Personism has nothing to with philosophy, it's all about art ... one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person ... thus evoking overtones of love ... It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person ... The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.

First, what is the plain sense of the poem? The speaker says what he is not and what he is in the first line. All doubt, we are told, is removed because the poet has asserted his position. However, he knows that the reader will ask why, so he asks first and then answers. The writer and his writing are in control here and the reader must follow or stop reading the poem. "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not." Do we believe him? Should we? He moves into an example: "Well, / for instance, Mike Goldberg / is starting a painting." While "for instance" is usually used as an informal logical connector, logic is absent here. But the poem is conversational, and strict logic does not apply to conversation. The rules of thought used here are those of everyday life, not those of academia. "Well," as used at the end of line 3, is without content; it is used to get the poem and the reader from one stanza to the next. Should we care that Mike Goldberg is starting a painting? Apparently, since the work of the painter is likely to be compared to the work of the poet and the promise of the title must be kept. Since O'Hara knew many painters, Mike Goldberg, Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock among them, what he writes about the connection between poetry and painting is important for the reader to understand.

The poem continues: the poet drops in on the painter, he drinks, they drink, and the poet looks up and notes that "SARDINES" is in the painting, but is it a word, or an image? The answer may be provided later in the poem. What is the rationale for including it? As the painter says, "it needed something there." This is what abstract painters do□include what they feel is needed. The stanza continues with seemingly

nonchalant statements about the days and the painting going on, and when the painting is finished, the poet asks "Where's SARDINES?" and observes "All that's left is just / letters." We are left to wonder what this means and given but little help by the painter's answer,

"it was too much." Too much of what? We would need to see the painting in progress to know.

The second long stanza switches back to the poet answering the reader's implied question: "But me?" Now the poet-painter comparison is developed. What does this poet do? He thinks ofa color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life.

He writes for days, twelve poems, "and I haven't mentioned / orange yet." Nevertheless, he calls it "ORANGES," just as Mike's painting, sans sardines, is called "SARDINES."

In "Why I Am Not a Painter" O'Hara takes a stand similar to that of Emily Dickinson in her number 505 from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson:*

I would not paint□a picture□

I'd rather be the One

Its bright impossibility

To dwell□delicious□on□

The painter and the poet work in different media and while the poet can appreciate the work of the painter, he or she must work in words, however tempting the other medium might be. O'Hara dabbled in painting, but found it too time consuming and less immediate than writing.

After O'Hara writes "ORANGES," he sees Mike's painting in a gallery. Including that occasion in his poem is equivalent to Dickinson's "To dwell□delicious□on□".

O'Hara's biographer, Brad Gooch, writes in *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* that "Why I Am Not a Painter" begins "with his usual deferential salute to painters," and goes on to say that it "remained one of the self-doubting poet's favorites. Writing to Goldberg once to complain of writer's block, O'Hara added, 'In the midst of the sh------ a little flame glows and it spells SARDINES.'" For O'Hara, Goldberg's painting was a light in the darkness of writer's block.

Critic Alan Feldman suggests in his work *Frank O 'Hara* that the need to follow the demands of the work, painting or poem, drives the artist:

Mike begins with a word and ends up with a design; O'Hara begins with a color and ends up with a poem. The work creates itself according to its own serendipitous will.

(The poem seems to "drop in" on O'Hara in the same casual way that O'Hara drops in on Mike Goldberg.)... The work seems to complete itself, and all the artist can or wants to explain about it is when and how it got done, but not its logic or formal structure.

However, there is organization in the poem, if not a structure in the sense that a sonnet or vil-lanelle has structure. As critic Marjorie Perloff observes in *Frank O 'Hara: Poet among Painters* repetition is "the rhetorical device governing the poem." ("I drink; we drink"; "I go and the days go by"; "I drop in ... I drop in again"). Perloff reads the poem as

a profound jest. If someone asks a stupid question, O'Hara implies, he deserves a stupid answer. For in fact, Frank's art turns out to be just like Mike's. If Mike's painting finally contains no sardines, so Frank's "Oranges" never mentions the word "orange" ... O'Hara is a poet not a painter for no better reason than that is what he is ... the poem is also saying that poetry and painting are part of the same spectrum, that in the final analysis SARDINES and ORANGES are one.

But are they? Goldberg's abstract paintings contain some recognizable images and seemingly random selections of words that require full suspension of disbelief or training in the appreciation of abstract art to understand them, whereas "Why I Am Not a Painter" contains statements that follow and flow from each other. If it were presented as paragraphs, it might be even easier to follow:

I am not a painter, I am a poet. Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well, for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in. "Sit down and have a drink" he says. I drink; we drink. I look up. "You have SARDINES in it." "Yes, it needed something there." "Oh." I go and the days go by and I drop in again. The painting is going on, and I go, and the days go by. I drop in. The painting is finished. "Where's SARDINES?" All that's left is just letters, "it was too much," Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of a color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven't mentioned orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

What has been lost and what gained by paragraphing the poem? Obviously it no longer looks like a poem, so the reader's expectations are different. And because of the absence of lines with breaks it must be read with a different pace and different emphasis on words and pauses marked by punctuation rather than line breaks. But is a poem simply words set down in lines of verse? Certainly not. Poems are traditionally made of images, sounds, meter, movement, and form. Line breaks are meaningful in good poems, not arbitrary, as they appear to be in O'Hara's poem.

But is it fair to apply the criteria of traditional criticism to a poem that does not fit a known mold? Or can a poet join with other poets to create something new? O'Hara

moved in a group of innovating writers known as the New York Poets, including Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery, and knew many abstract painters, among them Jackson Pollock, from whom they drew inspiration. O'Hara writes a new kind of poetry, of daily experience, of immediacy, and he writes in the frenetic America of the 1950s and 1960s. His style reflects his response to contemporary life, not his response to earlier literary works, so readers must allow new criteria, based on innovative poetry, to emerge. Literature evolves, it is not static. However, some attention must be paid to what discerning readers have appreciated in earlier poetry, unless the poet hopes to nurture a new kind of reader. Has O'Hara succeeded in doing this? In the future, will he be read in other than school anthologies or only as a curiosity in the history of modern poetry?

Source: Morton D. Rich, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

Three Voices: for Joan La Barbara, released by New Albion Records in 1989, is a compact disc featuring a composition by Morton Feldman that sets O'Hara's poem "Wind" to music.

Four Songs, published by E. C. Schirmer in 1986, is the musical score for a voice composition by Ned Rorem that sets O'Hara's poem "ForPoulenc" to music. Another score is 1972's *Three Airs for Frank O 'Hara 's Angel,* which was published by Edition Salabert. This composition by Lukas Foss features the O'Hara poems "Three Airs" and "Four Little Elegies."

Lost, Lost, Lost is a film diary by experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas. This lengthy video, which was released in 1995 by Recycled Video, includes scenes dealing with Mekas's friendships with O'Hara and other New York poets like Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).

Frank O 'Hara Second Edition, released by American Poetry Archive in 1978, features out-takes from the 1966 NET series *USA: Poetry* and shows Frank O'Hara reading and discussing his work with filmmaker Al Leslie.

Disconnected: The Dial-a-Poem Poets, a 1974 long-playing record from Giornio Poetry Systems, includes readings by O'Hara among many other poets.

Topics for Further Study

Explain what happens when you take the lyrics from a popular song and attempt to read them as you would a poem. In other words, how do a song's lyrics depend upon its music to give its words weight and meaning?

Green is considered to be a color that relaxes people while orange is believed to have the opposite effect. Report on some of the theories of the psychological effects of color.

Explain the speaker's reasons for why he is not a painter.

Write a poem and paint a picture. Describe the differences between the two artistic expressions.

Compare and Contrast

1957: American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage releases his film *Anticipation of the Night.* Attempting to portray the world as it would look to an infant who has yet to develop the ability to organize his impressions, the film has no narrative content and presents a continual flow of shadows and colors.

1961: Jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman releases his recording of *Free Jazz.* Featuring the Jackson Pollock painting *White Light* on its album cover, *Free Jazz* dispenses with many of the traditional melodic and harmonic conventions of jazz in order to allow the musicians to improvise without constraint.

1965: Folksinger Bob Dylan is booed at the Newport Folk Festival for playing an electric guitar, an instrument that was frowned upon by traditional folk music fans.

1973: Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* wins the National Book Award. Complex as well as comic, the novel uses a variety of styles and draws upon everything from science to popular culture to explore a wide range of human experience.

1986: The Green Mill bar in Chicago holds its first "poetry slams." A contest in which poets compete against each other (reading poems that are then rated by appointed judges), the poetry slam soon gains widespread popularity.

1999: New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempts to halt funding to the Brooklyn Museum of Art after the opening of its controversial *Sensation* exhibit.

What Do I Read Next?

Published in 1988, *A Certain Slant of Sunlight* is a collection of poems Ted Berrigan originally wrote on postcards. Some of these poems are actually collaborations with other poets and artists who would take a postcard and write a line or even draw on them. Berrigan would then take these postcards and use them as a starting point for his own work. Berrigan, like a great number of poets who came to prominence in the 1960s, was highly influenced by the work of O'Hara.

The Unbearables are a loose-knit collective of writers and artists from New York City whose predilection for extreme parody (combined with a subtle sense of irony) makes them stand out among contemporary literary movements. *Unbearables,* published in 1995, is a collection of stories, poems, and graphics by the Unbearables collective, which includes poets such as Ron Kolm and Hal Sirowitz, fiction writers like Carl Watson, Bart Plantenga, and Jose Padua, and the artists David Sandlin and Michael Randall.

O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* was first published in 1964 and has since gone through numerous printings. This slim volume collects some of the poems O'Hara wrote during his lunch breaks, hence the title of the book. Included here is "The Day Lady Died," which, like "Why I Am Not a Painter," is considered one of O'Hara's greatest poems.

In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O 'Hara and American Art (1999) by Russell Ferguson concentrates on O'Hara's involvement in the art world. Included here are reproductions of work by some of the artists O'Hara promoted as a curator at the Museum ofModern Art.

Frederick Exley's .4 *Fan's Notes* (1968) is a fictionalized memoir in which Exley recounts his life from his college days up until the time when he attempts to write his first book□a book that will eventually become *A Fan's Notes.* Exley□ a fan of professional football who did not associate with many writers or artists□provides an interesting contrast to the more Bohemian view of a writer's life.

Further Study

Berkson, Bill and LeSuer, Joe, eds., *Homage to Frank O'Hara,* Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1980. This was first published as issue 11/12 of the journal *Big Sky* in 1978, and collects various remembrances of O'Hara by a wide variety of writers and painters. As such, it makes for a nice companion volume to Gooch's biography.

Stern, Jane and Michael, *Encyclopedia of Pop Culture,* HarperPerennial, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1992.

This book contains essays on various elements of popular American culture going back to the 1940s. Easy to read, it nonetheless provides some critical perspectives on America's recent past.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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