

Response to "The Day Lady Died"

Initially, "The Day Lady Died" was overwhelming due to the abundance of obscure references. When reading the poem, I continually encounter words which are meaningless to me, yet it maintains rhythm. The specific times at the beginning of the poem infuse it with tension; whatever the narrator is going to accomplish in the gaps of time is limited because he is bound to a set schedule, and the reader feels this pressure. Likewise, the constant flow of movement from place to place gives me the impression of not only being rushed but also supplies the tension of wondering where the narrator is going, where will these errands ultimately take him?

The bareness of the language in this poem is striking. O'Hara adorns almost no nouns with adjectives, which helps the poem move seamlessly because the reader is not encumbered by ornate images. Instead, O'Hara places us in the poem's world through the use of capitalized phrases. This technique is effective in that it distinguishes the words that the narrator sees from the words in the poem but also because words in the world often are capitalized such as street signs and newspaper titles.

The climax to the poem's string of action, after the narrator buys "a NEW YORK POST with her face on it," is beautiful. Here O'Hara's naked writing pays off. By writing "her face" without attaching any descriptive detail to it, O'Hara establishes intimacy. When the narrator says "I am sweating a lot by now" and mentions "leaning on the john door" I am panicked, shocked, and dizzy as I feel my heart being faster.

Ultimately, this poem which at first turned me off ended up hitting me hard. Something about the narrator's disjointed journey, his lack of connection with people such as Linda who he sees often but has no relationship with, and the culmination in a sacred communion of grief in which "everyone and I stopped breathing," illuminates something profound. I don't know who Lady is, but I don't think it matters. I might be able to figure it out with an internet search, but would discovering factual information about her make the poem more meaningful to me when I have no experience of her?

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I can examine the little that I do know about the world of this poem. I assume that Mike is Mike Goldberg from "Why I Am Not a Painter," and I think Patsy is his wife. I read the poem, I saw the painting, I heard the story. Did it add anything? I like the insider's view, but with it I trade off an element of curiosity, a world of gossip and intrigue open to my imagination.

In any event, O'Hara's ability to find the holy in the mundane, to take the daily motions we go through and create poetry touches me.