



[The Day Lady Died](#), by Frank O'Hara

In A Nutshell

The jazz singer Billie Holiday died of liver disease in a New York hospital early in the day on July 17, 1959. The early editions newspapers carried the news and printed picture. Holiday, nicknamed "Lady Day," was the singer of such hits as "Strange Fruit." She is one of the most important figures in the history of jazz music. Her life, however, held many hardships. She was involved in abusive relationships and grappled with a serious drug problem. Even as she lay dying in the hospital, she was arrested for drug possession.

On July 17, Frank O'Hara was walking around New York, running some errands, when he happened to see a newspaper with Holiday's face on it, from which he learned of her death. A huge admirer of jazz and of Holiday in particular, O'Hara had been to several of her performances. He once saw her perform in an old movie theater – an unusual venue made necessary by the fact that Holiday had been arrested for possession of heroin and was not allowed to enter a normal club. The last time he had seen her was at a New York club called "The Five Spot," backed by the piano player Mal Waldron (source). You might compare the reaction of serious jazz fans to her death to the reaction of serious grunge fans to the death of Kurt Cobain. It was a huge blow.

Hearing of her death, O'Hara quickly wrote up the poem "The Day Lady Died" – on his lunch-break (source). Yes, you read that right. This classic American poem was probably written in one shot, in less than an hour. Actually, the conditions under which the poem was

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written are pretty much par for the course for O'Hara. He had one of the most unique styles in contemporary poetry. He wrote piles and piles of poetry, and many of them remain unpublished. He wasn't one of those tortured geniuses who sat for hours laboring over a line. He wrote in a very fast, breathless, rambling style, incorporating bits of tabloid news and snatches of telephone conversations. He never intended many of the things he wrote to be published. An extremely social guy, he preferred reading his poems to friends over drinks or dinner.

He worked at the front desk of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for much of his life, selling postcards and such, and he scribbled down many of his poems during lull periods in his job. This approach seems to resemble throwing spaghetti at a wall and hoping something sticks. Sometimes, as in this poem, the spaghetti did stick. The result is one of the most interesting, innovative, and accessible American poems of the second half of the 20th century.

Frank O'Hara was a major figure in the so-called New York School of poetry, along with fellow New Yorkers like John Ashbery. His two most famous collections are *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), and *Lunch Poems* (1964), in which "The Day Lady Died" was published.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Do you find the speaker's hip attitude and intellectual creds appealing or off-putting?

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- 2 Have you seen a performance so amazing that you literally forgot to breathe?
- 3 Why does O'Hara capitalize the name of brands, stores, and clubs?

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