

Frank o'hara's revelation of the similarities between painting and poetry

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" constantly draws parallels between painting and poetry. O'Hara uses the title to set up these parallels. Next, he proceeds to use the first stanza to catch the reader's interest in why, in fact, he is not a painter. The second stanza draws the reader into the world of a painter. Finally, the third stanza enters O'Hara's mind as a poet, allowing the reader to draw comparisons between a painter and a poet. O'Hara uses a flow from his title through his three stanzas to capture the reader's mind, forcing a question to arise: what is the difference between painting and poetry? O'Hara's purpose in writing "Why I Am Not a Painter" is to show that painters and poets reveal the same ideas through different methods, and, in essence, poetry is painting on paper while painting is poetry on canvas. It is appropriate to follow O'Hara's poem from the title through the stanzas in order, because he uses a very precise style to show his ideas. "Why I Am Not a Painter" is, essentially, a logical argument for the similarities between poets and painters that begins with the title of the poem. In titling the poem "Why I Am Not a Painter," O'Hara forces his reader to invest interest in discovering why, in fact, Frank O'Hara is not a painter. In fact, "Why I Am Not a Painter" sounds like an appropriate name for an essay, not a poem. Thus, O'Hara has the reader expecting a logical, structured explanation that reveals his reason for not being a painter. Instead of providing this logical explanation, O'Hara uses the title to set up a digression into his comparison of Mike Goldberg's painting and O'Hara's own poetry. O'Hara's first stanza appears rather simplistic. Upon viewing the structure of the poem without reading it, it seems like the first stanza, since it is only three lines, should contain much less significance than the significantly longer second and third

stanzas. However, the entire focus of the poem is solidified in the first stanza. The poem is centered on O'Hara's " Why?" (line 2). O'Hara's first stanza repeats the idea that he is not a painter, and causes the reader to believe that he will establish differences that separate poets and painters. Instead, O'Hara's statement " I think I would rather be/ a painter" (3) causes the reader to question the purpose of the poem. One asks, " well, why aren't you a painter if you'd prefer to be one?" This sets up the transition into the second stanza's description of Mike Goldberg's painting, as the reader wonders why being a painter is so fascinating to O'Hara. By breaking the first stanza after " Well," (3) O'Hara has the reader ready for a transition into an explanation of why he isn't a painter. Instead, O'Hara moves into a description of Mike Goldberg at the beginning of the second stanza. This is O'Hara's second defiance of his reader's expectations. By defying the reader's expectations, O'Hara prepares to show the similarities between painters and poets. Since the reader no longer knows what to expect, O'Hara can avoid any form of logical progression in the poem. He develops random associations between everything that is going on in his life. As days go by, and the painting develops, O'Hara makes two important observations. First, he states " the painting/ is going on" (11-12). O'Hara shows painting as an ongoing process, as an evolution towards some final product. This is his first line between painting and poetry. By the end of the second stanza, O'Hara observes of the sardines " all that's left is just/ letters" (15-16). In the end, painting evolves to meet some final vision. O'Hara is mirroring this final vision in " Why I Am Not a Painter" by leading the reader toward a final realization that there is little separation between painting and poetry. The

third stanza of " Why I Am Not a Painter" switches the focus of the poem to O'Hara's life as a poet. The transition from Mike Goldberg's painting to O'Hara's poetry creates a switch in which the reader is still thinking about painting while reading about poetry. Thus, the reader can make necessary connections between painting and poetry. The third stanza is the most important part of the poem. It is the place where O'Hara draws parallels between Mike Goldberg's SARDINES and O'Hara's ORANGES, finally establishing a direct parallel between painting and poetry. Beginning with " One day I am thinking of/ a color: orange" (17-18) O'Hara establishes a direct connection between his method of writing and Goldberg's method of painting. In the same way Goldberg thinks of sardines and puts them in a painting, O'Hara thinks of oranges and begins writing a poem about them. That is O'Hara's first obvious revelation that there is little difference between poetry and painting. He continues by repeating the " days go by" (24) of the second stanza. Immediately, one realizes how similar his descriptions of the two processes are. O'Hara's poem finishes without mentioning oranges in the same way the sardines are practically invisible in Goldberg's painting. The connections between poet and painter are as simple as " I drink; we drink" (7), and as complex as the avoidance of the triggering subject in their works. O'Hara has established a foundation for an argument that the only difference between poets and painters is the means by which they produce their art. The third stanza focuses heavily on the lines, " There should be/ so much more, not of orange, of/ words of how terrible orange is/ and life" (21-24). To O'Hara, the triggering subject of the poem is less important than the work as a whole. As the sardines aren't the main focus of Goldberg's

painting, the oranges aren't the focus of O'Hara's poem. Yet, each ends up developing into a satisfying work as a whole. Goldberg ends up with a satisfying painting, and O'Hara ends up with twelve poems without ever mentioning oranges. This connection sets up the end of the poem. O'Hara's final two lines finish the poem with the most important connection between Goldberg's painting and O'Hara's poetry: It's twelve poems, I callit ORANGES And one day in a galleryI see Mike's painting, called SARDINES. The comparison between the final product of SARDINES and ORANGES shows the reader that Goldberg and O'Hara arrive at finished products that are extremely similar. They use a similar time period and allow their work to evolve freely to whatever end it meets. The works are so similar that the titles even resemble each other. Sardines and oranges, simple food items, inspire works that move away from the subject entirely to become noteworthy works. When the reader realizes that the final product is essentially the same, one conclusion makes the most sense. The only reason O'Hara distinguishes between painting and poetry is because of the difference in materials used. Otherwise, art is a universal medium. Without the difference in materials, the inspiration and process involved in the work are the same. So, the reader must come back to find out why, in fact, O'Hara is not a painter. Connectivity exists throughout the poem. The first stanza brings poets and painters into the same light by grouping them together. In the second and third stanzas, the action of the poet and the painter are virtually the same. So, this extreme level of connectivity, in combination with an attempt to answer this question, places the reader in a tough situation. One must ask, " how different is Frank O'Hara from a painter, and is he, in

fact, on the verge of becoming one?" He develops such a similar view of painters and poets that it is almost impossible to distinguish between Goldberg's artistic process and O'Hara's artistic process. The main difference between the two is this: Goldberg uses a brush and paint, while O'Hara uses a pen or pencil. At the conclusion of "Why I Am Not a Painter," one can conclude that this is the only thing stopping O'Hara from being a painter. The traditional means of painting is the only separation. Without this separation, O'Hara could be called a painter, and Goldberg a poet. Their processes are the same. One may conclude that, because they are so similar, O'Hara actually paints with words, while Goldberg creates poetry with paint. By showing the intricate similarities between the two, O'Hara shows that the words used to describe them don't matter, what matters is the finished product. So, the main answer to O'Hara's "Why?" (2) is this: it doesn't matter whether he is a painter or a poet. What matters is the final product, a work of art that evolves from his experience. Whether he is a painter or a poet, O'Hara is creating something. The ultimate reason he is not a painter derives from that: creation is creation. Words or paint, something has been created from nothing, adding art to the world.