

Worcester Writers
Analyses of
Denis Leary
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Denis Leary is a self-proclaimed “asshole”, an Irish drunk, a Willem Dafoe look-a-like, a comedian, a highly revered television actor, movie star, father, author, and most importantly a very funny guy. Throughout his long career, he has been unapologetic and taken no prisoners. He’s taken on subjects like autism, George Bush, the Iraq War, young Hollywood, and even his own faults. Yet, one thing’s for certain, no matter what he does, you will most likely laugh along the way.

Denis Colin Leary was born on August 18th 1957 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the son of two childhood friends, Nora and John Leary. Nora and John were both from Ireland and actually lived very close to each other and eventually immigrated to the United States. Leary grew up in a stereotypical Irish family household. His parents were straight shooters, telling Leary the truth to whatever question he had. His dad taught him that “not everyone gets to do everything”¹. He told Denis that there would be no way that he could become president and that he should do only what he is capable of with what he’s got². His mother was a big influence on him as well. She was a combination of Mother Theresa, Mary Tyler Moore, and Joe Pesci mixed into a blender³. She too was supportive of his acting career, but only so much. At one point in his book, “Why We Suck” Denis calls his mother and asks if his parents ever considered putting him in showbiz when he was younger, she replied “Good God no, Denis--are you crazy? You were good but you weren’t THAT good.”⁴

Denis was given his first taste of stardom when he was young. At the age of eleven, he was grabbed by a nun one day at his school, St. Peter Marian Junior-Senior High School, and he was told to show up that night and try out for the musical. After auditioning, Leary felt a rush that would never leave him. He eventually got the part of Patrick Dennis--Auntie Mame’s nephew--in the play “Mame” and got his first laugh ever when he accidentally walked on stage and had his pant zipper down⁵.

Denis was able to use comedy as a means to further his academic career during his years at Emerson College. After being told that he couldn’t get main roles in the theatre department, so the

¹ “Why We Suck” pg.96

² “Why We Suck” pg. 95

³ “Why We Suck” pg. 50

⁴ “Why We Suck” pg. 116

⁵ “Why We Suck” pg. 119

juniors and seniors can get the main parts before they graduate, Leary took matters into his own hands. With some advice from Dr. James Randall, he and his friends formed The Emerson College Workshop. With the help of Dr. Randall, The Emerson College Workshop was able to be recognized as a legitimate theater group and was able to get funded⁶. The group put on variety shows, one-act plays, and parodies of musicals. Leary was especially happy because he got college credit for all of this. Whether it was lighting design, set design, or just working on creating new works to perform, Leary was able to see that there was a future in performing for others and making them laugh.

Leary soon found out that always being brash and bold wasn't always the best idea. His enthusiasm for writing comedic pieces got the best of him when he was working at *The Atlantic Monthly* one summer in college with his friends as a janitor. One night as he and his friend were cleaning the editor in chief's office, they stumbled across two poems that were to be included in the next issue by celebrated American poet John Ashbery. As he and his friend read the works, they both decided that both of them were awful and decided to take matters into their own hands. Leary wrote two poems he had been working on entitled "Onomatopoeia" and "Fuck", and put them on top of the editor's desk and got rid of Ashbery's poems. Leary was fired the next night for his actions⁷. This did not deter Leary however, as he was able to quickly find another job and still work on his poetry. Eventually, his two poems were published in the poetry magazine *Ploughshares*. His termination helped him get published, he claims, because he was able to find another job as a night security guard and it was during that time he was able to work on his writing more and make it even better⁸.

Leary didn't initially jump onto the comedy scene after he graduated from Emerson College in 1979. He worked at Emerson College teaching comedy writing for five years. It was in his third year of teaching in 1982, when he met his current wife Ann Lembeck, who at the time was a student taking one of his comedy writing classes. Ann Lembeck was a transfer from Bennington College in Vermont and initially took the course as an easy credit, which she says it was⁹.

During the time Denis and Ann were dating, Denis began pursuing comedy as more than just a hobby. He started performing at comedy clubs throughout Boston, Massachusetts. His most popular showcase was at "Play it Again Sam's" and hosted his own show there. Leary also made appearances

⁶ "Why We Suck" pg. 98

⁷ "Why We Suck" pgs. 99-104

⁸ "Why We Suck" pg. 104

⁹ Ann Leary's Biography—annleary.com

and wrote on his friend's, Lenny Clarke, own local comedy show "Lenny Clarke's Late Show"¹⁰. In the late 1980's Leary was cast on the MTV game show "Remote Control" with other famous comedians Colin Quinn and Adam Sandler. Leary played many characters on the program, such as Keith Richards, the guitarist of the Rolling Stones, "brother" of co-host Colin Quinn, and as the artist Andy Warhol. Leary also had small roles in movies, such as "Long Walk to Forever" and "Strictly Business"¹¹. In 1989, Denis and his college sweetheart, Ann Lembeck got married and over the next couple of years they started a family. Their son Jack was born in 1990 prematurely, during one of Denis's tours in England and they eventually stayed in the hospital in Britain for six months¹². Two years later, in 1992, their daughter Devin was born without complications. Leary was enjoying moderate success, he was well-known in the comedy world, was acting in some movies, and was on television. However, Leary wouldn't experience true success until the year that made him a breakout star, 1993.

In 1993, Leary released his first book and comedy CD, both entitled "No Cure for Cancer". The material Leary covers is a wide range of things that annoy him. From his work, you can see that Leary prefers the simple things. He doesn't need a splash of flavor in his coffee, just give him the coffee¹³. He speaks and writes with no fear and you can tell that he feels he is only saying what people are too afraid to say. He hates vegetarians¹⁴ and loves his cigarettes saying "The filter's the best part. That's where they put the heroin"¹⁵. He sings about himself in a song entitled "asshole". One can tell that he doesn't really care what people have to say, his opinion is his opinion alone and feels that he has the right to say it and if you don't like it, then he could probably care less about what you think. He questions drug use and loss in Hollywood, asking a question like why was John Lennon shot six times, but Yoko Ono wasn't shot once or why it is that all the good and talented people are the ones to overdose, but the people we want to overdose never do. "No Cure for Cancer" was a great way for Leary to show America that he's just like them, fed up with the stupid stuff that is happening in our country. He seems to be like an angry persona that we can count on to always say what is on everyone's mind.

"No Cure for Cancer" didn't come with its own controversy. Within the stand-up comedy community, Leary was accused of plagiarizing fellow comedian and good friend Bill Hicks. Not only was Denis accused of stealing Hicks' material, but also his persona and attitude. The friendship ended

¹⁰ Denis Leary Wikipedia Page

¹¹ Denis Leary imdb filmography

¹² Ann Leary Website biography

¹³ "No Cure for Cancer"

¹⁴ "No Cure for Cancer"- "Meat"

¹⁵ "No Cure for Cancer"

abruptly and the two never made up. Hicks later died in 1994 of pancreatic cancer. In a recent interview, Leary talked about the controversy surrounding Hicks and himself and said “It wouldn’t have been an issue, I think, if Bill had lived. It’s just that people look at a tragedy and they look at that circumstance and they go, oh, this must be how we can explain this.”¹⁶

Hicks and Leary’s material was similar. Yet, during that time a lot of comedians’ material was similar. Most comedians use the current cultural way of the world to entertain crowds. During this time, it was the “MTV” generation and the sudden shift to homosexuals being the main debate in America. However, Leary differed from Hicks in several ways. Hicks’ performance was more of a calm and sarcastic point of view. Leary always seems to bring a type of angry and no-nonsense attitude to his comedy. Their approaches were very different and one can see the difference between the two when they see both perform.

During the 1990’s, Leary went through a sort of transformation, from a young and angry man to a calmer man who was married with a family. He began to grow more as a comedian and as an actor. There is a correlation between his career and his kids growing up. He did family films such as 1993’s “The Sandlot” and 1995’s “Operation Dumbo Drop”¹⁷. It was as if he realized that his kids were probably going to see their fathers’ line of work one day, and he wanted them to look back and see that it wasn’t all swears, anger, and controversy. Yet, Leary also did other movies that his kids probably wouldn’t be able to watch any time soon, such as 1993’s “Demolition Man”¹⁸, a futuristic action movie starring Sylvester Stallone. During these years, Leary was coming up with new material from his life that had been constantly changing and it would all soon culminate.

In 1997, Leary released “Lock ‘n Load”, a CD that contained not only some of his stand up routine, but a mix of performed sketches and songs. In “Lock ‘n Load”, one can read into Leary’s’ growth as a man and as a comedian. He talks about his kids a great deal and one can see that his kids have greatly influenced his career. Not only has he become less angry at the world, but his kids are able to give him some new material to write about. Whether his kids are arguing about naming a dog or he is about to explode at them, Leary approaches each situation differently to try and make it work¹⁹. Leary still stays the same in some aspects though, he still loves his beer and pushing boundaries like in the sketch entitled “Deaf Mute Cocktail Party” which is basically two minutes of a doorbell ringing, but no

¹⁶ Denis Leary 2004 Interview with bullz-eye.com

¹⁷ Denis Leary—imdb filmography

¹⁸ Denis Leary—imdb filmography

¹⁹ “Lock ‘n Load” “My Kids”

one can hear it because they are death and there is no conversation and the only sound you hear are mumbles and the sound of glasses banging together. His musical side is very nicely demonstrated in the CD as well. He takes a shot at PETA and other animal activists in the song "Save This". He gives many comical reasons why humans have the right to kill what they want. Such as "a cheetah can't drive a car"²⁰ and the reason why we can kill is because of "...guns, Big fuckin' guns with giant fuckin' bullets pal."²¹ Leary shows his fans through his work that he may have done a couple family films and has a family, but that doesn't make him any less dangerous.

Leary was enjoying success and life when disaster hit. On December, 3rd 1999 in his hometown of Worcester MA, a warehouse fire occurred where six firefighters lost their lives. Two of the firefighters were his cousin Jerry Lucey and his close childhood friend Lt. Tommy Spencer²². In 2000, Leary founded the "Leary Firefighters Foundation" which was aimed to distribute funds to fire departments in Boston and Worcester for equipment, facilities, training materials, and new vehicles. The organization expanded to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2004 to help rebuild the 20 fire departments that were damaged during the hurricane²³.

Over the next four years, Leary and some close friends started writing the script for a new show about firefighters in New York. The show was called "Rescue Me" a raw, gritty, in-depth look into the lives of members of a firehouse in New York. One can tell that Leary helped write many of the show's episodes. Leary's dark humor shows up many times, whether it's talking about women in the firefighting world or dealing with his character's alcoholism and delusions of seeing his dead cousin that died during the World Trade Center collapse during the September 11th tragedies. The storyline seems real and the events that occur seem like they can really happen, even if some events are extravagant. The characters talk like normal friends do and it feels like you are watching a bunch of friends talking, but it just so happens that their conversation is scripted and is being filmed.

Over the next few years, Leary enjoyed the success of "Rescue Me". He received many honors two golden globe nominations and three Emmy award nominations. His comedic career then flourished again when he releases his book "Why We Suck: A Feel Good Guide to Staying Fat, Loud, Lazy, and Stupid" in 2008. Leary goes all out in this foray into writing. He immediately shows humor when you read the title cover. He refers to himself as Dr. Denis Leary, which is true because he received an

²⁰ "Lock 'n Load" "Save This"

²¹ "Lock 'n Load" "Save This"

²² Denis Leary Wikipedia Page

²³ Leary Firefighters Foundation Official Website

honorary doctorate from his alma mater Emerson College. It's as if he wants to let people know that he is a doctor, so he should be listened to, which he should, but he also seems to be poking fun at people who hang on every word just because they happen to have the word doctor in their title, like Dr. Phil, who Leary refers to as Dr. Full²⁴.

Leary writes as if he is speaking to the reader. It's as if the reader is sitting down with friends and family and is receiving heartfelt advice from them. This heartfelt advice is given in a twisted way. He talks to parents about how "your kids are not cute". He talks about how he is sick of parents putting their kids on display and saying they are the greatest thing in the world. He speaks of an instance that speaks to anyone with children in their life. When a kid doesn't get their way they perform the "Jellyfish" move²⁵. This is where a kid basically relinquishes their ability to have a spine and moves around and screams at the same time so you can't control them and they do this until they get what they want. Leary still holds on to his roots as a comedian from his early life in the book. He makes several phone calls to his mother while writing the book. His mother seems to be his moral compass at times. His mother seems to be able to pull the reins ever so slightly on her son, so he doesn't go too far. One of the most intriguing chapters and probably the one facing the most controversy is his chapter entitled "Autism Shmautism". In the chapter, Leary goes in depth of his feelings of the over diagnosis of Autism in our country. At one point he writes, "There is a huge boom in autism right now because inattentive mothers and competitive dads want an explanation for why their dumb-ass kids can't compete academically, so they throw money into the happy laps of shrinks... to get back diagnoses that help explain away the deficiencies of their junior morons. I don't (care) what these crackerjack whack jobs tell you — your kid is not autistic. He's just stupid. Or lazy. Or both."²⁶ This sparked huge controversy among parents of autistic children. However this was a huge misunderstanding, Leary was only saying that doctors are so quick to diagnose a child with Autism, rather than go deeper and find the problem. Leary later apologized to parents of autistic children, as he didn't want to offend them.

"Why We Suck" reminds the reader that common sense still exists in America. We, as Americans, just seem to have forgotten that it is still here, within ourselves. Of course there is always going to be arguments between the opposite sexes. That is just the way we are²⁷. He talks about how there are some people that we all hate, but just so happen to be black. He talks about the Barry Bonds

²⁴ "Why We Suck"

²⁵ "Why We Suck" pgs. 43-45

²⁶ "Why We Suck" pg. 87

²⁷ "Why We Suck" pgs. 178-189

steroid controversy and thinks that “Bonds could have been chestnut, puce, magenta, aubergine, mauve, moss, or all six mixed together—he would STILL be an asshole. And the more steroids and clear and flaxseed oil and other super-growth hormone chemicals he ingested—literally—he became an even BIGGER asshole”²⁸. While reading “Why We Suck”, the reader notices that Leary is not only being funny, but serious about what he is saying. There is a lot wrong with our country and only we as a society are too be blamed. The lessons may be hidden in crude jokes, but they are there and waiting to be realized by us. “Why We Suck” shows the reader that Leary’s attitude towards the world is not going to change, unless we change. Leary will always be there with a crude joke with a message of gold as long as there are ridiculous things going on in the world.

Over his fifty-two years of life, Leary has done a lot of things to make America laugh. His works of writing are proof of that. Whether you disagree with what he says, you know that there is definitely some truth in there. As of now, Leary is enjoying the success of his show “Rescue Me”, still writing on the show, and still connecting to the American people. During March of 2009, Leary embarked on his first tour in twelve years in “The Rescue Me Comedy Tour”. The tour features Leary doing stand up and appearances from other cast members of the show. This shows that Leary is still mindful of making his fans laugh and as long as Leary never changes who he is, it’s a sure thing that his fans will be laughing too.

²⁸ “Why We Suck” pgs.213-214

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Robert Benchley may not be a household name now, but from 1921 to 1945, he was known for his comedic work in writing and in films. His experience in working for many different publications such as his work during college as the president of the “Harvard Lampoon”²⁹ to his many years writing for “Vanity Fair”³⁰ and “The New Yorker”³¹ made him a comedic mastermind in America. He became even more well known when his famous essays and other works got turned into short films that he directed and starred in many times. Benchley’s humor was considered original and relatable. It was funny then and is still funny today.

Robert Benchley was born September 15th, 1899 in Worcester, Massachusetts to parents Maria Jane Moran and Charles H Benchley. Benchley faced early trauma in 1898 when his older brother Edmund N. Benchley died in the Spanish American War. Benchley from then on had a tough childhood and writes about it in the essays entitled “Lost Youth”³² and “Mind’s Eye Trouble”³³. In “Mind’s Eye Trouble” he mentions “being endowed at birth a Bad, Bad Fairy with a paucity of visual imagination which amounts practically to a squint.”³⁴ He never had the ability to imagine worlds when reading novels, which is partly the reason he stuck with reading “gentlemen’s essays and the daily newspapers”³⁵. It didn’t matter what story he read, the only images that would appear in his imagine were images of his hometown of Worcester. When he read “Gates to Caesar”, he was unable to see ancient Rome, but instead see his driveway with Marcus Antony making a speech standing on a fence post at the end of his driveway. He eventually sees no point in reading novels as it seems to always take place in “the South End of Worcester, Massachusetts?”³⁶ This may lead to the creation of Benchley’s style of writing.

Benchley had a very unique style to approaching his work. Benchley writes about ordinary situations that could happen to anyone in the world. However, he writes differently by making it sound as if great things are happening. He writes about things such as spending a boring and dreadful holiday with his family³⁷, but makes it sound as if it is an image out of an upper class celebration. Nowadays, this type of exaggeration is fairly common in books, television, and by comedians. However, in this story, the idea sounds fresh and original, like most of his work.

Benchley was also able to relate the most mundane and out of place activities to life. This social commentary makes the reader think about the many ways life relates to strange things. Most people would never think that the mating rituals of the common newt could possibly relate to the courtship of humans. Or

²⁹ Robert Benchley - Foreword pg. xiii

³⁰ Robert Benchley Society Biography - <http://www.robertbenchley.org/sob/index.htm>

³¹ Robert Benchley Society Biography - <http://www.robertbenchley.org/sob/index.htm>

³² Robert Benchley Society Biography - <http://www.robertbenchley.org/sob/index.htm>

³³ The Benchley Roundup - pgs.204-209

³⁴ The Benchley Roundup – pg.204

³⁵ The Benchley Roundup – pg.204

³⁶ The Benchley Roundup – pg.209

³⁷ The Benchley Roundup – “Christmas Afternoon: Done in the manner, if not the spirit, of Dickens”- pgs. 36 - 41

how the way a male newt tries to grab the attention of a possible mate is much like the way a strapping young man might go after a woman he finds attractive³⁸. Metaphors are important to comedy and Benchley is a master of metaphors in his writing. He describes these events as if they weren't happening in a terrarium of newts, but in the human world. The most amazing thing is that he never explicitly mentions humans; it's woven in so perfectly into the story that it is perfect subtlety. This makes the reader do something very important when reading a book, think. The reader has to think and see the comedy in his work. This might seem like a troublesome ordeal, but the more you think about it, the funnier and more enjoyable the essays become.

Benchley's observations are like a work by Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson, but only if Thoreau and Emerson were aiming for humor. It is almost as if Benchley wants to express his views to the everyday people, not to the upper class members of society. However, Benchley seemed to unexpectedly gain the favor of many different classes of people. His writings are almost as if someone is not observing regular days of life, but he is watching the whole world going through different things. He applies comedy to the most awkward and unique situations with great results.

Although Benchley openly admitted that he had no imagination when reading novels, it didn't mean that he still didn't try. There are many instances when he uses experiences from plays, movies, and operas in his writing. During one entry entitled "Shakespeare Explained"³⁹, Benchley tries to help his readers understand the confusing language of William Shakespeare. In it he takes the simple stage direction and line from one Shakespeare's plays "Enter first Lady-in-Waiting (Flourish, Hautboys, and torches). First Lady-in-Waiting: What ho! Where is the music?" and translates it so the reader can understand it better, and thus understand Shakespeare better. He hilariously goes through each word and finds the root of the word to truly get the sentence. For example, he takes the word "torches" and eventually goes through the history to discover that Shakespeare meant to write "trognies" as to refer to a box of tobacco pieces that one of the Hautboys was to carry out and let the other actors suck on them during the performance⁴⁰. He basically goes in the wrong direction of the true meaning of the line, but in Benchley's defense, his interpretation is a lot more funny and enjoyable to the audience.

He again takes a stab at giving synopses of operas⁴¹. Benchley's explanations are basically the early 1900's version of "Spark Notes". He takes each act and cuts out all of the singing, emotion, and performance, basically the things that make an opera an opera, and just summarizes the plot into a few sentences. He takes the romanticism of the opera experience out, but puts his comedic twist that makes the reader want to

³⁸ The Benchley Roundup – "The Social Life of the Newt" pgs.11-15

³⁹ The Benchley Roundup – pgs 33-35

⁴⁰ The Benchley Roundup – pg 34

⁴¹ The Benchley Roundup – pgs 51-56

experience his version of the opera rather than the original version. If someone has the ability to make a treasured art throughout the world even better, you know they have something special.

It wasn't long until Benchley made some famous friends at the time. He eventually founded The Round Table with Dorothy Parker and Robert Sherwood in 1919⁴². This group was formed after meeting with Parker and Sherwood at the Algonquin Hotel in New York, where Benchley visited as he lived right across the street to the hotel, and they discussed literary works. It was there he met other famous writers and actors at the time such as Harpo Marx and George S. Kaufman. It was here that Benchley eventually got roped into Hollywood and because of this Benchley's life was to change forever.

The Algonquin Round Table was known for its humorous reviews and snarky comments to many facets of the entertainment world at the time. The Table struck a couple nerves of actor J.M. Kerrigan who challenged the Table to do their own show after being fed up with the Table's snarky comments of the theatre performances of the season⁴³. The Round Table, not being afraid of such a challenge, responded by producing the show "No Siree!" which was a pun of the European show "Le Chauve-Souris". This performance could be seen as a variety show by today's standards that comprised of many short sketches written by the Round Table. The Round Table took another shot at Kerrigan by giving it the subtitle "An anonymous Entertainment by the Vicious Circle at the Algonquin Hotel", almost boasting their new title of being vicious as a gold medal. It was in this performance that Benchley performed his short play called "The Treasurer's Report"; in it Benchley portrayed a nervous and bumbling man trying to explain an organization's yearly expenses⁴⁴. This performance was a hit and was asked to be performed multiple times. In fact Benchley's performance caught the eye of Irving Berlin who hired Benchley to perform "The Treasurer's Report" once a week for five-hundred dollars during his "Music Box Revue"⁴⁵.

His performances eventually lead him to start writing screenplays for movie producers like Jesse L. Lasky. Benchley was given credit as a producer of the title cards for the silent movie "You'd Be Surprised" and was invited to do more titling for two other films⁴⁶. Benchley also got to work with Hollywood legend Fred Astaire on a Broadway musical entitled "Funny Face", although Benchley did not have his name attached to the project. Benchley soon went to work attempting to make a film version of "The Treasurer's Report".

⁴² Robert Benchley Society Biography - <http://www.robertbenchley.org/sob/index.htm>

⁴³ Robert Benchley Wiki page - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Hollywood_and_The_New_Yorker_call

⁴⁴ "The Treasury Report" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edlpn3CnqaQ>

⁴⁵ Robert Benchley Wiki Page - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Benchley_On_Film_and_.22How_to_Sleep.22

⁴⁶ Robert Benchley Wiki Page - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Benchley_On_Film_and_.22How_to_Sleep.22

Although, Benchley thought that his performance wasn't that good, the film was a financial and critical success.

Benchley was really busy during this time of the late 1920's, but he persevered by not only working on films but contributing to The New Yorker. He was determined to let his humor be known by many. He worked so hard in fact that The New Yorker published forty-eight of his essays in the year of 1929 despite Benchley being incredibly busy. His writing didn't waiver either, his work was still being read by millions of Americans. He worked hard to keep people laughing with him and made sure to always to keep smiles on his fans faces. Yet, Benchley realized that the time being spent at The New Yorker was more important than that of his film career so for about two years, Benchley focused most of his time writing for the publication rather than being in Hollywood.

Benchley eventually came back to acting in films in 1931 when he did a voiceover role for the radio show "RKO Radio Pictures" and he also acted in his first feature film entitled "The Sport Parade" with Joel McCrea⁴⁷. Acting in the film caused him to miss the fall theatre openings, which embarrassed Benchley even though the success of "The Sport Parade" was reportedly due to Benchley's role. His urge to do filmmaking did not leave especially when RKO offered him a writing and acting contract that paid him more than what he was getting at The New Yorker. One might see this as selling out, but Benchley probably made this move as a way to get his comedy out to the masses, so this was probably the best decision for Benchley at the time.

The next couple of years were full of ups and downs for Benchley. He did eventually return to films although he wanted to stick to writing rather than acting. He took a role in the film "Rafter Romance" in 1933 as a salesman. He also appeared in the feature film "Dancing Lady" with big names such as Clark Gable, Fred Astaire and The Three Stooges⁴⁸. Benchley was even nominated and eventually won an Academy Award in 1935 for Best Short Subject for his short film "How to sleep". It was also during this time that he released other short films such as "How to Train Your Dog" and "How to behave", but these weren't received well by critics. Things got even worse when he was eventually fired from his job at The New Yorker, as they were frustrated with his lack of commitment to his column because of being too focused on his acting.

Benchley began to become upset with his life. He felt he wasn't doing what he wanted to do. He was always torn between writing and acting, which he both loved to do. At one point he tried to just focus on his acting by hosting his own program entitled "Melody and Madness" in 1939⁴⁹. His show was eventually cancelled most likely because he wasn't writing any part of the show, so he could just focus on acting. That year Benchley experienced even more turmoil, but also some success as well. He found out that not only was he fired from The New Yorker that year, but MGM, the studio that produced his radio show and several of his

⁴⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Benchley_On_Film_and_.22How_to_Sleep.22

⁴⁸ Robert Benchley iMDB profile - - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0070361/>

⁴⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Benchley_On_Film_and_.22How_to_Sleep.22

short films, would not renew his contact. However, this ejection from MGM could also be a good turning point for Benchley.

Paramount Pictures eventually signed a contract with Benchley to produce some of his old essays such as "Take the Witness!" into short films. He also appeared in a Disney movie entitled "The Reluctant Dragon" in 1941 which involved Benchley taking the audience on a tour of the inner workings of Disney. He also took a surprising dramatic role in "Nice Girl?" with Deanna Durbin⁵⁰. Things were looking good for Benchley until he decided to go back to working for MGM in 1944. This was not the best situation for Benchley to be in as he was soon cast in non-important roles and soon became established as a comic lecturer for most of his roles.

The ups and downs that Benchley experienced were too much for him to handle, and so he turned to alcohol and soon developed a severe case of alcoholism. Sadly, as disappointment seemed to surround Benchley's career and life, alcohol seemed to be there as well. He was later diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and although he tried to complete his life's work, his condition got even worse and he died due to complications in a New York hospital on November 21st, 1945. He was buried in his family's plot in Nantucket⁵¹.

Benchley's humor is still noted as being classic, unfortunately, like most writers of his generation he took the wrong paths in life and eventually died due to bad choices. Yet, he probably didn't care about how he passed, but what he left behind for the world to remember him, his classic humor. His writings and films were unique in that any person of any generation could read or watch his work and appreciate it for its nostalgia. It's not complicated to understand, it's just funny. There is no deep thinking, metaphors, social commentary, it's just pure humor. Humor that is pure is very hard to not only obtain, but difficult to express to the masses. Robert Benchley was smart and talented enough to master the art and share it with the entire world. That is probably what Robert Benchley wanted the most during his life, to have people laughing at his work and enjoy it with him for as long as they can.

⁵⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley#Benchley_On_Film_and_.22How_to_Sleep.22

⁵¹ www.robertbenchley.org

- “Pluck and Luck” by Robert Benchley (Copyright, 1925, by Henry Holt and Company)
- “The Benchley Roundup: A Selection of Nathaniel Benchley of His Favorites” (Copyright, 1954, by Nathaniel Bentley)
- “Starring Robert Benchley “Those Magnificent Movie Shorts”” by Robert Redding (Copyright, 1973, by The University of New Mexico Press)
- “Robert Benchley” by Nathaniel Benchley (Copyright, 1955, by Nathaniel Benchley)
- Robert Benchley Society Website - <http://www.robertbenchley.org/>
- Robert Benchley Filmography - <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0070361/>
- “...That Inferior Feeling...” (Short Film, 1940) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXP4YSsoKr8>
- “Robert Benchley: How to be a Detective” (Short Film, 1936) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiLrj7IF3T0&feature=related>
- “Robert Benchley: A Night at the Movies” (Short Film, 1937) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0aV2aQJNCo&feature=related>
- “Robert Benchley: The Treasurer’s Report” (Short Film, 1928) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edlpn3CnqaQ>
- Robert Benchley Wikipedia Web Page - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Benchley

Frank O'Hara might not be known to many of the current generation. Yet, if someone from the current generation were to read one of his great works of poetry, they'd probably enjoy the irreverent humor and descriptive storytelling. He may have not lived a long life, but he left behind many great works of writing.

Frank O'Hara was born March 27th, 1926 in Baltimore, Maryland. He was raised in Grafton, Massachusetts and attended school in Worcester, Massachusetts. His parents, Russell Joseph O'Hara and Katherine Broderick, tried to hide the fact that Frank was born out of wedlock (<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/20/books/a-poet-in-the-heart-of-noise.html?pagewanted=1>). When he was younger, he studied playing piano and eventually went to Harvard University, with funding from veterans, to study music. Although he was a major in music, his attendance for classes was erratic and eventually his interest in studying music waned. Instead of attending his music classes, he attended many classes in philosophy and theology. This sudden switch of interest was probably the turning point that got Frank on the path to being a writer. While attending these classes, he would start writing impulsively about his own life experiences. This way of writing can be seen in his work as his poems seem to be autobiographical in a sense.

During his time at Harvard University, O'Hara met the then unknown John Ashbury, who eventually convinced him to submit his poems to the *Harvard Advocate* (poets.org). Eventually O'Hara changed his major from music to English and graduated in 1950 from Harvard with a degree in English. After he graduated, O'Hara went to graduate school in Ann Arbor, Michigan at the University of Michigan. A year later he graduated with a M.A. in English and also won a Hopwood award which is a scholarship award for his poetry writing.

All his hard work definitely paid off when one reads his works. When someone reads a poem by O'Hara, they are transported to O'Hara's side as he walks through his own life for a short time. The reader experiences his battles with love, grief, excitement, and new life experiences. He was extremely open with his life and this was probably why he was extremely popular with many popular artists of that time. He was acquaintances with artists like Larry Rivers and Joan Mitchell. His openness with life experiences is something that any good writer has shared with his audience. There is nothing better to do than to make the reader relate to the subject matter you are writing about.

There are many poems about love in his works. They are very vivid and although they sometimes seem to be written by a fourteen year-old girl who just broke up with her boyfriend. They are still very enjoyable to read. In the poems, “Mr. Auden in Love: Twice” (Early Writing pgs.20-21), O’Hara writes to a lover that he has just ended a relationship with. He writes about feelings that a lot of people have felt during an ending of a relationship. He goes to the extreme to “pray you dead” and the still lingering feelings that his “blood is blaring to share yours with you”. This feeling of longing for someone you love has been felt by everyone at one point in their life. This ability to speak to both ends of the spectrum of sexual orientation was an amazing talent of O’Hara. He writes with no specific targeted audience. One can tell that he is just being honest with himself and wants to share his openness with the world. He shows no fear which is essential for any type of writer to do, if you can’t even share your feelings, then what are you doing writing with an audience in mind? When you are writing for an audience, you are opening up a small window into your own life. O’Hara knows this and doesn’t just open a small window; he opens a giant door and pulls down a drawbridge to allow the masses inside his life.

Frank O’Hara isn’t a one-dimensional writer, though. He writes about humorous topics as well that can be seen as funny to someone who just started analyzing poetry. Some of his best poems are about nonsensical topics that are similar to “Deep Thoughts” by comedic writer Jack Handey of Saturday Night Live fame (www.deepthoughtsbyjackhandey.com). The reader can tell when a poem is just another one of O’Hara’s random thoughts just by the title itself. When one sees the title “Poem” in one of his books, this is usually an indication that something very deep is about to be told, most likely in a very comedic way. However there are some instances when they become serious thoughts. This is as if O’Hara knows that we will probably omit a poem with such a boring title as “Poem” from our view. Yet, it’s these excerpts that are probably the most enjoyable. There is one example when O’Hara goes to potty humor. Now most people think potty humor is the lowest form of entertainment, they might be right, but O’Hara does it with such elegance that you can’t help appreciate it, even if it is a joke about only going to the bathroom once a week and releasing one’s waste during a mass at church (Love Poems pg. 28). There aren’t many writers that can do this, but O’Hara did it and that is to be commended.

O’Hara also showed many cultures in his writing. These poems about different explorations of diverse cultures show O’Hara as a man who was very knowledgeable about many

cultures. They also show his willingness to learn and grow more as a poet. It's as if he has dreams of seeing the world and gathering more life experience to improve his writing. His poems are able to show great imagery and have the reader become curious about the culture he is writing about. In the excerpts, "2 Poems from the O'Hara Monogatari" (Lunch Poems pgs. 16-17), O'Hara describes moments when he is serving in the army in Japan during World War II. These poems are again autobiographical, as the word Monogatari is a "novel or an epic" (uwosh.edu). The imagery is so descriptive that it makes the reader feel like he or she is watching a traditional Japanese silk painting being made. This showcases O'Hara's talents once again, as it takes an exceptional writer to create an image inside the reader's mind with just words on paper.

O'Hara is very observant of people. There are times when he writes as if he is sitting in the park and just watching people go about their lives. These turn into new experiences that O'Hara tries to describe to us all. In the poem "Song" (Lunch Poems p.26), O'Hara uses this experience and writes this poem to young girls, almost as if he were sitting down with a daughter and give advice about boys and dating. The poem describes a situation of the attractiveness of the "bad boy". The poem is written in a very present time frame. It makes the reader think that he was standing right next to O'Hara as a mysterious and handsome stranger with a bad boy aura. We've all met or seen people like this. He actually gives sound advice as well. He compares dating this type of man to the dust collecting around the city. The analogy is no matter how much you clear dirt and soot away from a building, it's still that building and he relates it to how some people try really hard to change a person that they are with. O'Hara goes against this by describing that no matter how much soot you clear off that person, he's still going to be the same man with a "bad boy" persona. Although, there are many people that would probably disagree with the idea that anybody can change. However, O'Hara speaks with a very mature adult tone and is not forcing the message into the reader's mind, which no one really likes. There are many instances where a person will be reading, watching, or hearing that will immediately turn away because that person wants to be entertained and not be preached to. O'Hara is able to write in a tone that like mentioned before like a father or best friend. O'Hara is here to warn us of his experiences that he wished he probably not want to experience. Advice is something that many readers are seeking, and what's better than getting it in a comedic, mature, and helpful tone.

O'Hara's talent to speak to any reader is amazing. He can even relate to the reader's feeling to a bad day. Everyone has experienced a day when the weather is awful and it makes that person just feel depressed and angry at that day. If the reader also happens to be sick, well that's just icing on the cake. The poem "God!" is another one of O'Hara's foray into the normal, but making the normal sound amazing. The plea to God to make the day better and to make an illness go away is probably done by millions of people every day in any part of the world. His comical side is again shown in this entry. He brings out the childish nature that everyone feels when they are aggravated. He goes as far to make the last sentence in his poem a sound effect, the sound effect being "Pfui!" (Early Writing pg.62), the very common noise that can be heard by every selfish child in the world. The old story of bargaining with God goes back to the very beginning of time. Usually this bargaining is for some major change in life, such as good health or fortune, but the mundane and unimportant wishes are usually the ones made by today's society. O'Hara shows through his writing, much like this entry, that he may be famous and talented poet, but in the end he is still a regular guy that can relate to any person.

As talented as a poet as O'Hara was, he had one qualm with writing. He was always being called a "painter". He didn't necessarily agree with this, he seemed to have conception that painters can't be writers and that writers can't be painters. This seems to cause a lot of different observations by many readers. He actually writes about this in a poem entitled "Why am I not a Painter" (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/why-i-am-not-a-painter/>). The poem is actually funny in some ways. The entirety of the poem is him trying desperately to portray to the reader that his not a painter. However, he uses such imagery that it's almost as if he is a painter. He seems perplexed with the process of creating a painting. The poem is basically a recollection of a day he spent with painter Mike Goldberg. While they are talking, O'Hara notices that Goldberg has put an image of sardines in his painting. Upon asking Goldberg why he put sardines in the painting, Goldberg said that "it needed something there". When O'Hara returns later that day, he notices that the sardines are gone, again he asks Goldberg why, and Goldberg said that "it was too much". This absolutely puzzles O'Hara to no end. The process in which Goldberg paints is completely different than O'Hara's writing process. Which makes sense, because every piece of art is unique and is probably created through its unique process. O'Hara explains that if he thinks about the color orange, he will just write about it. He writes about his feelings of the color and the fruit orange. His process is more like a crazy impulse. He writes his thoughts, no matter how

inane and boring they are, and transforms this poem into a piece of art. Eventually he writes more pages and eventually the prose shifts off the topic of orange, he then has twelve poems that don't even have to do with orange and just has to do with the feelings that he experiences towards orange. He then has twelve poems that he will call "Orange" and later he looks at Goldberg's painting called "Sardines". He stares at the painting in awe and still doesn't quite understand the process, what's funny is that most people would probably read about his process and wonder the exact same thing.

Frank O'Hara was very involved in painting even though he did not quite understand the process of creating this type of art. He wanted to be involved, so that maybe one day he could actually understand the process. He worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art during the 1950's holding many different positions. At one point he sold postcards at the gift shop in 1951. He only took the job so he could have access to all the paintings and he could observe the works of art (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5920>). He had a whole selection at his fingertips and he began to look at them all with a lot of curiosity. His passion and desire to be involved in the art community eventually led him to become an administrator of the Metropolitan. He was constantly looking for ways to help different artists. He would do small things as stretching out a canvas that is about to be used for a painting to going as far as to be a model for artwork. He became revered by the downtown artists and made such friends as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who at the time were just starting to be known for their abstract expressionist paintings. During the last years of his life, he was involved in reviewing art exhibits for magazines like "ARTnews" and actually doing curatorial work at the museum. He had no real education for being a curator, but he was known for having an eye and knowledge of multiple painting traditions. He also was one of the main powers defending Jackson Pollack's art when he was being criticized and attacked by the art community and the public.

O'Hara never saw one form of art greater than another. He always thought that each branch was strong and each was important as the next. He shows his extensive knowledge of various forms of artwork in the poem "Having a Coke with you" (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5920>). He constantly brings up works like the "Polish Rider" or the piece "Nudes Descending a Staircase". His reviews of art were very robust as well as he always focused on the critical analysis of the art and what the painter was trying to

convey through his work. However, he would show his own talent in these reviews by writing them with his unique sense of humor that he was known for writing. O'Hara was the type of person to say yes to any form of art. He might visit the museum and admire the new Pollack painting and then later that same evening, go to see the newest comedy playing at the movie theater. It's this overall appreciation of art that makes O'Hara unique. His appreciation for multiple facets of culture is what separates him apart from other poets and writers in that none of his works are one-dimensional. There is always something new to read about and something new to analyze that one might've not picked up before. This makes O'Hara's work long lasting and entertaining to the reader no matter how many times they read one of O'Hara's plays.

Frank O'Hara shows appreciation of art through showing his appreciation of famous actors of his generation. One of his most famous works "The Day Lady Died" (Lunch Poems) is a poem written about the day O'Hara had found out that actress Billie Holiday had died. The poem starts out as one of his usual poems, a walk through New York City, doing his usual routine. He goes to a diner for lunch, walks through the park, and other things. He is having a good day, as usual until he comes across the newest issue of the New York Post. He sees Billie Holiday's picture on the front page and sees the headline. In this brief moment in time, O'Hara takes a quick moment to himself. He is overcome with a rush of emotion. His last stanza is written as this "and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of/leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT/while she whispered a song along the keyboard/to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing." O'Hara experiences what all of his reader have always experience, the sudden shock and grief of learning someone very dear to you has passed on. There are times when we remember the last moment when we saw or were with that person. To O'Hara it was remembering her singing to a crowd and he imagines her slowly finishing her final song to the world and then leaving forever. O'Hara describes her death as her leaving the world with a song in her fans and loved ones hearts that they will always remember.

O'Hara does the same thing when he discovers that actor James Dean has died in a car accident. This poem is almost a giant lash out to God after his death. O'Hara had never known Dean personally, but O'Hara knew true talent when he saw it. The poem is almost a eulogy that is being said at the young actor's funeral. He writes "Do we know what excellence is? It's all in this world not to be executed." (O'Hara Early Writing) He wants God to take care of him as he is

an important piece of their present culture. O'Hara was right, even to this day, James Dean is known as one of the greatest acting talents to be born in America. "For a young actor I am begging peace, gods", this line is really what O'Hara wants everybody to reflect on, he wants people to always treasure this actor, for it was a loss in the artistic world.

O'Hara's knowledge in love of all things art shows his ultimate talent in writing and experiencing art. He knows what will change the face of culture in the United States forever. It's as if he loses a part of himself when the world loses a great name in art. This is probably what many readers, poets, writers, painters, and actors felt when he died. O'Hara died on July 25th, 1966 following a vehicle accident on the beaches of Fire Island. This was due to complications of a ruptured liver as a result of the accident. He is buried in Green River Cemetery in Long Island. O'Hara left this world at a zenith. His death created a huge hole in American culture. His observational poetry was unique, it was about everyday life, but it was unique in which it told a story. His work is a great place to read for anybody that wants to experience true poetry that is unique, funny, and poetry that really makes any reader reflect on their own writing and life.

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- Frank O’Hara – www.frankohara.org
- Modern American Poetry – Frank O’Hara page - http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/ohara/ohara.htm
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