Queer Here: Poetry to Comic
Emma Lennen
Katie Jan
Pull Quote: "For the new audience of queer teenagers, the difference between the public and the superhero resonates with them because they feel different from the rest of society."

It's a summer day, and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the WORLD

Consider this: a superhero webcomic. Now consider this: a queer superhero webcomic. If you are anything like me, you were infinitely more elated at the second choice, despite how much you enjoy the first. I love reading queer webcomics because by being online, they bypass publishers who may shoot them down for their queerness. As a result, they manage to elude the systematic repression of the LGBTQA+ community. In the 1950s, when repression of the community was even more prevalent, Frank O'Hara wrote the poem "Homosexuality" to express his journey of acceptance as well as to give advice to future gay people. The changes I made in my translation of the poem "Homosexuality" into a modern webcomic demonstrate the different time periods' expectations of queer content, while still telling the same story with the same purpose, just in a different genre.

Despite the difference between the genres, the first two lines and the copious amount of imagery present in the poem allowed for some near-direct translation. The poem begins with "So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping / our mouths shut? As if we'd been pierced by a glance!" (O'Hara 1-2). While usually masks symbolize hiding your true self and therefore have a negative connotation, the poem instead considers it one's pride. Similarly, for many superheroes, the mask does not represent shame, it represents power and responsibility. They take pride in their alternate selves, sometimes more than in their "real" selves. My choice of the superhero genre stemmed from this similarity. In my translation, the protagonist is first surrounded by darkness, a direct connection to Frank O'Hara's words, "so I pull the shadows around me like a puff" (O'Hara 5). He dons the mask and feels freedom compared to the sullenness of before. With the mask, he struts about with happy pride, representing his pride as a gay man. His super power is implied to be his athleticism and ability to control the high-heel characters behind him. In the poem, "their long elegant heels of hot air" (O'Hara 20) contain the only mention of an actual gay symbol, and so, in their manifestation in the comic, they appear as lackeys to support the main character. With these exaggerated symbols of queerness, he runs by "14th Street," "53rd," and some "latrines" (O'Hara 15-16). In each of these, figures act out what the poem suggests about the people who inhabit these locations. These images within the comic serve the same purpose as the poem, since it is the contrast between superhero and the public that suggests that being gay is great. For the new audience of queer teenagers, the difference between the public and the superhero resonates with them because they feel different from the rest of society.

Besides the imagery, however, it became increasingly difficult to translate the poem into a webcomic because of the plot-driven storytelling expected of the new genre. The new audience for the webcomic consists of teenagers, which is reflected in the protagonist who is, as per genre

convention, a high school student. Poetry can be oblique in its storytelling, but webcomics are not supposed to be oblique. As Scott McCloud said, the goal is to create a comic that "[tells] it straight with a maximum of clarity" (McCloud 9). There had to be an added portion that focused on how the protagonist started off with confidence, lost it, and then regained it. In order to make the story clear with as few words as possible, I used a heart to display his state of mind to the audience. On the first page, he rips his own heart out after seeing how his society perceives him. Without this, a reader could interpret the people around him as the cause of his loss instead of himself. Another addition to clear up the story was that the reader needed to see the cause of his change. The poem tells it as self-realization since "It is the law of [his] own voice [he] shall investigate," but in a comic, this is just bad storytelling (O' Hara 10). On the second half of the first page, there is a rainbow outside while the panel colors change color, so they too match the rainbow. Through these backgrounds, it becomes clearer to the audience that paying attention to his surroundings and seeing this symbol of queerness leads the main character to explore himself. According to Mike Bunn, reading like a writer is "Questioning why the author made certain decisions" (Bunn 32). When translating the poem to a comic, I began questioning why "heels" (O'Hara 20) were the only specifically gay symbol. There was certainly room for the symbolism of the rainbow, but then I realized that the rainbow flag was not designed until 1978 (The Rainbow Flag). In this modernization of the message, the symbol that has become a staple to the queer community means more to the intended audience than just the heels. Any modern teen would recognize the rainbow as a symbol of the LGBTQA+ community even without the blatant title. To effectively communicate the message, I added symbols of hearts and rainbows to the webcomic that were not present in the original poem to clarify that story.

Besides the changes I did and did not make, the new genre includes new elements not present in poetry, most importantly panels. Even more so than their traditional counterpart (comics), webcomics use panels to extend the emotion of the scene. Unhindered by traditional page length, webcomics utilize background space to keep the story's flow. The second and fifth panel echo each other with the protagonist surrounded and appearing small. The impression on the reader is that he is heavily affected by the people around him, yet still detached from them. He feels different from them. This continues into the much lighter eighth panel; however, after that point, the panels focus solely on him as he begins to focus on himself as well. On the second page, his hand breaks out of the panel, representing him stepping out of his box to take pride in himself. Despite the dark color of the background panels on this page, the white space is greater, suggesting that even though he has inner turmoil, it is the correct path to go down. The next out-of-panel shot embodies the freedom he feels as he is leaping off a building. His elated face is seen throughout the jump that most would find terrifying. To emulate O'Hara's imagery, I used a transition McCloud calls "scene to scene" since the panels present "transitions across distances of time and/or space" (McCloud). It highlights the extended time he struts around the city with his newfound confidence, contrasting his bright colors with the dull city and normal people. As in the poem, the imagery is covered quickly, but the reader understands that the protagonist moves more than is shown. On the fourth and final page, there is only one panel, with the rest being an open frame transition into the dark with the protagonist saying the last two lines of the poem; "'It's a summer day, / and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world'" (O'Hara 21-22). Even after all his running around the city and being proud of his mask, he eventually takes it off and regresses to how he was before. This choice mimics the effect of

O'Hara's last words, where he pulls away all the pride and ends on an honest note. The panel choices enhance the emotion of a particular scene, furthering the message of the webcomic.

In order to effectively convey the message of O'Hara's poem "Homosexuality" in a webcomic, changes were made to the story and panels were used to enhance it while keeping the original imagery. The focus on storytelling for the genre of webcomics led to the addition of two symbols to clear up and modernize the message. The added element of panels allowed for another way to enhance emotion in the scenes. For this new generation of queer people, perhaps the best way to convey O'Hara's original advice is through a webcomic published on the internet where its audience can find it. Ultimately the purpose of both pieces come through their respective genres, because they are good ways of reaching their respective audiences in the differing time periods in this personal topic of finding pride within yourself for being gay.

Works Cited

Bunn, Mike. "How to Read Like a Writer." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*. Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor, 2011. 71-86.
O'Hara, Frank. "Homosexuality." *Poetry Foundation*. 1970. Web. 21 May 2018.
McCloud, Scott. "Writing with Pictures." *Writing 2 Reader*. UCSB: Alternative Digital Printing, 2016 8-57. Print.
"The Rainbow Flag." Carnegie Mellon University, www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/usr/scotts/bulgarians/rainbow-flag.html. Accessed 21 May 2018.

Author Profile: I'm a first year College of Creative Studies Mathematics major. As you may have guessed by the title, I am gay and will not hesitate to put a gay perspective on everything. I enjoy reading anything gay, but most of what I read comes from internet because of the failure of the mainstream media to produce quality gay content. One of my favorite mediums has always been web comics for their diversity in style and story. I hope you will find that this piece plays on the differences between the genres as well as their many similarities.