

Creative Destruction in Fiction

Lauren Weiner

John O'Hara: Stories

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If you ever want to make America decline again, you can read John O'Hara. That is to say: the cities, towns, and rural areas of “flyover country” that gave Trump his margin of victory in November are in a funk that we might suppose is new; but really it isn't. O'Hara chronicled life among the bicoastal big shots, but his more compelling depictions are of Pennsylvania, where he was from. He gave his native Pottsville, a small city built on the fortunes of the anthracite coal industry, the fictional name of Gibbsville and set many of his stories and novels there. It was not that happy a place even back in the day.

We recall the boosterism of Sinclair Lewis's *George Babbitt*, who looked forward to his town reaching the milestone of one million inhabitants. It is as if O'Hara were reversing Lewis (one of his great literary influences) in his 1963 story “The Man on the Tractor,” in which a Gibbsville banker offers this lament about the state of the coal industry and of his community:

There's no money here, not the way we knew it. We're losing population, a thousand a year. The town is back to where

it was in the 1910 census, and no new industries coming in. These people that are buying your land, they'll put up a supermarket and a big parking lot, but sure as hell that's going to be the end of some more of the smaller stores. . . . It's the fast buck, the quick turnover, build as cheaply as possible, take your profits and get out. Some of our people drive as much as fifty miles to work and fifty back. Car pools. . . . A few of our old friends have made some money in the stock market, but that's not here. That's New York and Philadelphia, and representing industries as far away as California. (501)

O'Hara writes about ambition and the things it makes us do. His business people drive hard bargains and his married couples obsess about how they might move themselves up in the social pecking order. Worse, his young people, observing this behavior in their parents, are so jaundiced that they don't seem to harbor much ambition at all. In the posthumously published story “Family Evening” (1972), a daughter refers to her elders as “the B.D.'s” or “Better Deads.”

What is refreshing about O'Hara (1905–1970) is that he was an outlier. For whatever reason—and quite possibly it was his Roman Catholicism—he was immune to the attractions of the “protest novel” of the 1930s and '40s. While he cultivated friendships with trendy Reds and Popular Fronters like Dorothy Parker, Clifford Odets, and Ernest Hemingway, their politics—their proletarian-glorifying and their reform impulses—were not his. O'Hara's America is rather grim, yet he does not come across as anti-American but as a writer trying to capture the earthy reality. And not incidentally trying to attract a big audience. If earthiness involved touching on subjects like sexual infidelity, illegitimate births, alcoholism, suicide, euthanasia, drug overdoses, or abortion, O'Hara, a reporter and columnist for several Manhattan newspapers and national magazines, wasn't above using sensationalism to get on the bestseller list.

Appointment in Samarra (1934) features a luxury car dealer who goes on a drinking binge and commits suicide-by-Cadillac (carbon monoxide in the garage). This first O'Hara novel was wildly successful. He went on to write sixteen more, several of which—*Butterfield 8* (1935), *A Rage to Live* (1949), *Ten North Frederick* (1955), and *From the Terrace* (1958)—were adapted into movies. He wrote for the movies himself, having made the sojourn west that Hemingway, Parker, William Faulkner, and other literary men and women did during Hollywood's golden age. O'Hara wrote or contributed to several screenplays without interrupting the steady stream of short fiction he contributed to the pages of the *New Yorker*. He turned a group of his *New Yorker* pieces into a libretto for what became a classic of the musical theater, *Pal Joey* (1940).

The fact is that verisimilitude, of the earthy sort or any other, goes missing from the fiction of John O'Hara a good deal of the time. There are exceptions, even brilliant

ones, including some of the stories in this new Library of America collection edited by Charles McGrath. Perhaps its crowning achievement is “The Doctor's Son” (1935), based on reminiscences from the author's youth. The story opens with horses: the leisure horse ridden by our narrator, Dr. Malloy's son Jim, and the coal-cart-dragging workhorses that power the local economy. Jim takes us through this socially complex community of Gibbsville and environs as he accompanies his father on house calls. The father, a workaholic who is especially needed at this time (the flu epidemic of 1918), is quietly heroic. He is like the coal-cart horses. He says he hasn't the time to put on jodhpurs and ride like his son can. He isn't bitter about it; instead he seems proud that his son is forming the habits of a gentleman.

Many of O'Hara's families, though, do not gain in happiness as they ascend the economic and educational scale. The men in these stories—the district superintendent for a mining company, the creator of a chain of cafeterias in industrial plants, and others—have skills for which there is a demand, and being in demand means mobility. As their jobs take them from hearth and home, their role as parents, and especially as husbands, suffers. Not a few of them wind up getting cuckolded in their capitalism-forced absence.

This wouldn't happen so regularly if females did not have feet of clay, as do most of the ones we meet here (excepting the occasional humble Irish Catholic housemaid). It stands to reason that loose women would fill the O'Hara stories that concern the hyper-modern and vain members of the smart set. But even the wholesome-seeming immigrant housewife in “The Doctor's Son” turns out to be a serial adulteress. Even the no-nonsense matron in the story set in Gibbsville in 1898 (“Afternoon Waltz,” 1966)—a female juggernaut seemingly right out of the pages of Henry James—seduces a young bachelor

neighbor on Lantenengo Street, where all the most respectable and respected Gibbsvillians live.

O'Hara wants the shock value of piercing the smooth social surface. Then, too, as a Catholic he is intensely aware of who is in the majority in most of America's towns and small cities, and these same people, the WASPs, hold the keys to social, economic, and political distinction. The Protestants of his fiction are well-spoken, well-educated, and inclined to respect the rules (if only in the breach, especially when it comes to matters of the heart). They are prim and proper in demeanor but seldom shown going into their churches except for weddings and funerals. The WASP worthies of Gibbsville seem to be "low energy" people, as the now-famous description has it. They usually stand idly by as their dominance is challenged by smart and daring arrivistes.

The WASPs are doomed to see their place in the social order eroded. Why? Because they drink too much, for one thing. For another, time marches on, and with it, capitalism. People who made their money in coal or in railroads better find some other way to stay on top.

The matter-of-fact O'Hara is not always so matter-of-fact about the challenge that the outsiders—frequently Catholic but occasionally, though he never explicitly says so, Jewish—pose to the Old Money in-crowd. Sometimes a little rooting for the outsider peeks through the hard-boiled narration. In "I Can't Thank You Enough" (1964), a real estate man and war veteran, Arthur Felzer, wants to prove to his paramour, a spinster schoolteacher named Jane Campion, that he deserves the riches he has piled up. He is ascending the social and economic hierarchy while she and her family, as she freely admits, are fading from prominence. The story ends with a frank and pitiful plea from Jane that they continue their illicit relationship, which Arthur declines. We sense the

authorial satisfaction with this reversal of fortunes.

Likewise, O'Hara seems to relish putting a fastidious snob from an old Pennsylvania family through the wringer in the 1962 story "Justice." Mr. Daniels, whose first name we never learn, has culture. He has deep roots in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a feeling for its history—unlike the nouveau riche who have invaded his world. Says Mr. Daniels:

I was sure that Harry Rupp and his wife and children had never looked out from their terrace and tried to imagine Washington and his men in the snow. But it didn't matter. Barbara Rupp, with her contact lenses, could not see that far, and from what I came to know of their children, they hated history, which they called "social studies." As for Harry, his imagination was active enough but he had trouble recalling any date prior to Pearl Harbor. (363)

Barbara gets strangled to death by Harry after her affair with Mr. Daniels is gossiped about in the town. We can't tell if the morally bankrupt Mr. Daniels feels any remorse as he lays this tragedy before us. It's a wonderfully creepy effect—one that makes Mr. Daniels into O'Hara's Humbert Humbert, and makes him nearly as memorable as Nabokov's creation.

While sexual politics are pretty much nonexistent for O'Hara, a writer of the old school, he did try much harder than, say, Hemingway or Faulkner to capture the inner lives of women. That these efforts tend to fall short (a wonderful exception is young Mrs. McCrea in the 1960 story "Imagine Kissing Pete") is unsurprising given that the inner male self does not very often come through, either. O'Hara seems to have handicapped himself in this respect, for the mediating institutions he depicts—whether the setting

be Gibberville, or suburbia, or Manhattan, Philadelphia, or Chicago—show a puzzling lack of variety. They are nearly all country clubs, and the O’Hara country club is no salutary Tocquevillian phenomenon but mainly a staging ground for the destruction of monogamous marriage.

Many of the stories revolve around one’s ability to stay interested in one’s mate, and the general competition for mates. Many consist almost entirely of dialogue between two people—a stick-to-the-surface method that as often as not brings forth a tale lacking in emotional resonance. When those conducting the dialogue are a man and a woman, they frequently describe soap-opera-like lives, and yet as individuals they do not really come to life.

Still, a lot of what O’Hara tells us about capitalism in America seems right, and so does what he implies about capitalism’s rest-

lessness even seeping into personal relations. He had an eye for these things—not least because of his resemblance to the characters he invented. According to his biographer, Matthew J. Bruccoli, he would not take no for an answer when his friend Philip Barry, the playwright who wrote *The Philadelphia Story*, balked at putting him up for membership in an exclusive literary club in New York. Barry figured O’Hara would be blackballed, which would oblige Barry to quit in protest, which Barry did not want to do. But O’Hara prevailed on him. When O’Hara did get blackballed, and Barry failed to resign, O’Hara stopped speaking to him. Only for a while, though. Eventually they let O’Hara in the club.

Lauren Weiner is the associate editor of *Law and Liberty*.

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