

INTRODUCTION



John O'Hara

(1905-1970)

The first of eight children, John Henry O'Hara was born January 31, 1905, in Pottsville, Pennsylvania (later the Gibbsville of his fiction), to Katharine Delaney O'Hara and her considerably older husband, Patrick Henry O'Hara. Before he was legally old enough to drive, O'Hara was pressed into service as a chauffeur for his physician father during the influenza epidemic of 1918-19, and experience from which he would later develop "The Doctor's Son," perhaps the strongest of his early tales and also the title story of his first collection. Trained as a reporter, the young O'Hara nevertheless planned to attend Yale University until the sudden death of his father changed the O'Hara family fortunes.

Determined to write, as a journalist if need be, O'Hara worked for a variety of newspapers in Chicago and New York, eventually attracting attention with jokes and other short pieces published by friendly columnists who admired his work. In time, he became a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine, although his employment situation remained unstable until 1934, when he published *Appointment in Samarra* and was hired almost at once to write for the motion-picture studios in Hollywood. His short fiction, meanwhile, continued to appear in *The New Yorker* and in collections.

His first marriage, to Helen Petit, having ended in divorce after two years, O'Hara in 1938 married Belle Wylie, who would remain his wife (and in time was the mother of his only child) until her death in 1954. Rejected for military service during World War II because of his age and various health problems, O'Hara served briefly as a war correspondent for the now-defunct *Liberty* magazine. Two more volumes of short stories followed, dealing in part with O'Hara's wartime and postwar experiences. O'Hara, meanwhile, was turning his energies increasingly toward longer fiction--considerably longer, in fact, than any of his previous published novels. Seldom praised by "serious" critics and reviewers, with whom he seemed to exist in a state of mutual distrust, O'Hara with his postwar novels drew harsher criticism than ever before. A particularly negative review of *A Rage to Live* in *The New Yorker* caused him to sever all relations with the magazine, a rupture that lasted ten years, as did his loss of interest in writing short fiction. For O'Hara, the 1950's was largely a decade of long, exhaustive novels, several of which were successfully filmed. The novels from *A Rage to Live* onward also drew strong censure concerning O'Hara's frank, often-graphic treatment of his characters' sex lives.

Reconciled with *The New Yorker* after 1960, when the magazine's editors agreed to publish the three short novellas collected in *Sermons and Soda Water*, O'Hara devoted most of what would be the last decade of his life to the plotting and execution of well-crafted short fiction, dealing both with the historical present and with the period of his own youth, between the two world wars. Although O'Hara continued to write and publish novels, most of his energy and true talent found their outlet in short stories, generally longer and more detailed than the early pieces that had established his reputation at *The New Yorker*, although a number of his later tales were in fact first published in that magazine. Remarried in 1955 to Katherine ("Sister") Barnes Bryan, the former wife of a friend, O'Hara spent his last years on the rural outskirts of

Princeton, New Jersey, recalling and recording the first half of the twentieth century in memorable short fiction until his death at the age of sixty-five.

Shunned by the "critical establishment" no doubt because of his appeal to the popular market and his fondness for lurid detail, John O'Hara is now recognized among the major prose writers of his time, notable for the acuity of his social observations and his keen ear for dialogue. Alert to the smallest details of speech, dress, and behavior, O'Hara in the 1940's came to be considered as a novelist of manners, his work frequently compared to that of John P. Marquand. Like Marquand, O'Hara had begun his life in relative affluence, only to find the family fortunes reversed toward the end of his adolescence. Keenly alert to social nuances, O'Hara used his unsought "outsider" status to analyze, and criticize, the life-styles of those who still belonged to the perceived "establishment." To his credit, however, O'Hara did not limit his observations to the rich and presumably famous: He is also quite effective in his descriptions of white- and blue-collar workers; as a doctor's son, he had indeed witnessed all conditions of life as he was reared in a small but self-important city dependent upon the local coal mines.

Like John Cheever, who also gained his first recognition as a writer of short fiction for *The New Yorker*, O'Hara is more likely to be remembered for his short fiction than for his novels. Although similar in theme and tone to his shorter pieces, O'Hara's novels (with the notable exception of his first, *Appointment in Samarra*, a truly remarkable achievement) lack the incisive impact of his finest short stories.

One possible reason for O'Hara's slow recognition by critics is that his tales, long or short, are largely self-explanatory, defying critical analysis of their immediate effect upon the reader. Drawing upon commonly shared experiences such as ambition, failed love, and death (not infrequently by suicide), O'Hara invariably managed to establish communication with his readers, doing so with such apparent ease that his accomplishment was easy to dismiss. His influence upon younger writers, however, has been considerable, particularly through the mediation of John Updike, whose accomplishments, although possibly greater, owes much to O'Hara's precedent.

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