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## A Rage to Live: *Gender Roles in O'Hara's Post-WW II Fiction*

By CHARLES BASSETT

THERE ARE LEGIONS OF US who will never really give up the struggle to keep John O'Hara's work in the American literary canon, albeit that effort has become increasingly difficult in the years since the author died in 1970. Certainly some O'Hara champions have never lost their enthusiasm for the cause: Matthew J. Bruccoli, who has—more than any other academic critic—brought into print many of the O'Hara stories that would otherwise have been lost and wrote one of the best biographies of O'Hara, *The O'Hara Concern*, twenty years ago. And Frank MacShane, a sophisticated and appreciative devotee whose taste for O'Hara's fiction is flawless. There was Finis Farr, John's biographer pal, and another insightful academic named Sheldon Grebstein. Robert Emmet Long wrote a very intelligent little critique about O'Hara in 1983, and Phil Eppard has put together a solid collection of essays on O'Hara that G. K. Hall published just last year.

And you will read occasional laudatory essays by popular American writers like John Updike and George V. Higgins. Nevertheless, a man who has rightly been called the most popular *serious* author of his day has not sustained the canonical place in the pantheon of his older contemporaries—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, or some of the many younger ones—Flannery O'Connor, Mailer, Cheever, Updike. O'Hara's fiction is rarely taught in college literature courses, and a writer whose name used to be a household word rarely resonates with young readers (even young scholars—it's been years since a critical article on O'Hara has made the annual listing of scholarship in the PMLA annual bibliography).

Not that some haven't kept trying. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on John O'Hara at the University of Kansas in 1964, and for thirty years I've been organizing academic sessions on O'Hara, reading papers at conferences on O'Hara, publishing essays on O'Hara, and, most importantly, *teaching* John O'Hara's fiction. In fact, I took a poll at the end of last year's American Realism and Naturalism course at Colby College: *Appointment in Samarra* beat out Henry James, even Mark Twain.

My area of inquiry is a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of O'Hara's first really publicly successful novel, *A Rage to Live*, which appeared in 1949.

Up to that point, O'Hara had published three novels: *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), which earned five printings in the middle Thirties but, in Bruccoli's words, "was not really a best seller"; *Butterfield 8* (1935), which sold a respectable 13,000 copies in its first year but paled next to such 1935 smash hits as Ruth McKenney's *My Sister Eileen*; and *Hope of Heaven* (1938), a novelette that enjoyed only moderate sales in the still depressed United States. O'Hara also published five books of short stories in his first fifteen years of fiction writing, most of which had originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, but short story collections—even John O'Hara's—rarely appear on best seller lists.

Thus it was with *A Rage to Live* that John O'Hara achieved the success and the notoriety that was to attend him for the next 21 years. O'Hara's first novel in eleven years was a blockbuster in every way. The triple-spaced typescript from which the novel was set in print was 1383 pages long. The hard-cover edition of *A Rage to Live*, O'Hara's second book for Bennett Cerf and Random House, runs 590 pages. And this monster, published on 16 August 1949, cost \$3.75 at the bookstore. It sold with a huge flourish: eight Random House printings in 1949, plus two more for a book club. Grosset and Dunlap reprinted a cheaper hard-cover version in 1950; *Omnibook* magazine condensed it that same year. Beginning in 1951, Bantam paperback editions reached 33. In fact, *A Rage to Live* continues to sell moderately in a paperback edition now published by Carroll & Graf in 1995. But in 1949 almost everyone was reading *A Rage to Live*.

The novel chronicles the life of Sidney and Grace Caldwell Tate, the prominent owners of a farm (commonly and tellingly called "The Caldwell Place") outside Fort Penn (read Harrisburg), Pennsylvania. The majority of this book is set in the first years of the second decade of this century, especially around World War I. *A Rage to Live* is in many ways a true documentary novel, crammed with great troves of period data, with facts, with an almost obsessive verisimilitude. For O'Hara considered himself a social historian with missionary zeal:

The United States in this century is what I know, and it is my business to write about it to the best of my ability, with the sometimes special knowledge I have. The Twenties, the Thirties, and the Forties are already history, but I cannot be content to leave their story in the hands of the historians and the editors of picture books. I want to record the way people talked and thought and felt, and to do it with complete honesty and variety.

(Foreword to *Sermons and Soda-Water*, 1960)

In *A Rage to Live*, O'Hara was clearly fulfilling his mission as "recorder"; a number of reviewers began to use adjectives (later to become litany) like "sprawling," "all inclusive," and "over-documented" to characterize the assiduous inventory of the inextricably intertwined lives and fortunes of the Caldwells and the Tates and the Schoffstals and the O'Connells at the elite end of the Fort Penn spectrum to the Baums and the Jays and the Bannons and the Hollisters in various niches in that same small town's social hierarchy.

My unsurprising thesis in this analysis of O'Hara's historical novel is that *A Rage to Live* is not aimed primarily at those who are interested in the first twenty years of the twentieth century in a small Pennsylvania city, but at a 1949 post-World War II audience preoccupied with its own concerns and confusions and values. *Rage* is no antiquarian catalogue of historical minutiae but a book designed to resonate in American readers of a different generation—one much changed and “sophisticated” by the upheavals attendant on the Second World War and the uncertainties in American society and culture that plagued the rest of the 1940s.

O'Hara himself never made it into the armed forces during World War II: ulcers and bad teeth kept him from the commission in the navy that he coveted. He pulled strings with Robert Lovett and James Forrestal, but he remained a civilian. “It’s a hell of a time to be a writer or at any rate a writer who is 37 years old and very likely 4-F,” he complained to a friend. O'Hara worked for a short time for the office of the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs (Nelson Rockefeller) and even—for a month—trained for the OSS (the predecessor of the CIA) until his health broke. In 1944 he did sail the Pacific on aircraft carriers and tankers, but he produced only one “war” report for *Liberty* magazine: “Nothing from Joe.”

Interestingly enough, a theme in this wartime article was the nagging fear of service men about their wives' or sweethearts' fidelity. That fear was not unjustified. In *Virtue Under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes*, John Costello asserts that “the more mature women were the ones most affected by the relaxed morals of wartime, and traditional considerations of fidelity were not the great restraint on married women that they had been in the past” (203). O'Hara himself had no such qualms about his own wife Belle (who became pregnant with their only child upon O'Hara's return from the Pacific), but sexual infidelity was a raw nerve in the chaos of the 1940s.

Thus, what more significant theme could O'Hara use in his “big” novel of 1949 than marital infidelity? At the novel's opening, Grace Caldwell Tate would seem to be the perfectly contented, indeed maternally paradigmatic wife of Sidney Tate, described by one O'Hara critic as “a rare man . . . kind, just, sane, intelligent . . . an aristocrat at his best, for his wealth and education have sensitized him without making him effete” (Grebstein, 50). Yet Grace's sexual passion leads her into an affair with an Irish-American contractor, Roger Bannon. Grace Tate is never notoriously promiscuous (certainly *not* a nymphomaniac as one addled reviewer thought), but she has always been compulsive, instinctual, uncontrolled. “‘I couldn't help that affair,’” she confesses to her doctor (*Rage*, 339). As she tells an unsuccessful wooer, “‘I'm sorry. . . . It has to be love with me, Paul. Or the other so much that I don't know where it comes from, and can't help it’” (*Rage*, 425).

To portray the devastating effects of such helplessness in the face of sexual temptation is to reveal the soul of John O'Hara's morality. The cuckolded Sidney responds as if he spoke for all those deceived warriors of the Forties:

"But the difference is, you see in this world you learn a set of rules, or you don't learn them. But assuming you learn them, you stick by them. They may be no damn good, but you are who you are and what you are because they're your rules and you stick by them. And of course when it's easy to stick by them, that's no test. It's when it's hard to obey the rules, that's when they mean something. That's what I believe, and I always thought you did too. I'm the first, God knows, to grant that you, with your beauty, you had opportunities or invitations. But you obeyed the rules, the same rules I obeyed. But then you said the hell with them. What it amounts to is you said to hell with my rules, and the hell with me." (*Rage*, 245)

Sidney Tate's declaration of faith is a humanistic ethos, although shards of O'Hara's childhood Roman Catholicism are a muted undertone here. But the wife and mother as betrayer is a new feature in O'Hara's fiction. In his previous novels, wives like Caroline English are two-timed by their feckless husbands, and neither the pathetic (and *truly* nymphomaniacal) Gloria Wandrous (*Butterfield 8*) nor the neurotic Peggy Henderson (*Hope of Heaven*) are married with families. Grace Caldwell Tate's adulterous treachery strikes at the heart of the heart of the country.

Yet Sidney seems to be an eminently responsible man whose vision of family and community continues to be strong even *after* he discovers Grace's infidelity. He cannot forgive Grace (a lack of compassion for which some critics—notably Sheldon Grebstein—rather roughly tax him) for her betrayal of him and of the standards that make patriarchal American society secure and trustworthy; but, worse still, she destroys her family as well.

Families had been at great risk in the 1940s. Richard Polenberg devotes an entire chapter of *War and Society: The United States, 1941-45* to this thesis: "If the war offered many Americans a higher standard of living and a satisfying outlet for their energies [!], it just as surely subjected families and communities to severe strain" (131). Likewise, in *Virtue Under Fire*, Costello repeats a statement issued by the American National Conference on Family Relations: "In every war, the family is the first and greatest casualty" (205).

O'Hara is too sensitive to the power of custom and tradition to allow Grace Tate's dalliance with the brutish Roger Bannon wholly to destroy the Tate family. Sidney simply withdraws from his relationships with his wife while maintaining his position as exemplary father, aristocratic gentleman farmer, and true New York aristocrat nevertheless acclimated to the special environment that is Fort Penn, Pennsylvania. In a sense he *endures*; he carries on in the stoic tradition of an earlier America when divorce was rare. That divorce and broken families occurred in almost terrifying numbers during and after World War II makes Sidney's forbearance seem anachronistic, yet still admirable. He will be both aristocrat *and* gentleman; Grace may be an aristocrat, but she's no lady.

In a stroke that some critics find excessively gratuitous, Sidney dies of polio just after failing (he has a bad heart) to escape his untenable marriage with a commission in the World War I navy. Compounding the family's dissolution is the death of the Tates' beloved youngest son, Billy, from the same deadly polio. Ironically, the disintegrator, Grace, escapes the disease. And she rationalizes the loss of those closest to her by claiming:

"Maybe I'm not *being* punished. Maybe I didn't do anything to deserve punishment. Why punishment anyway? Payment, maybe, but not punishment. The law of averages, as much pleasure as you get pain. You're trying to make me think like a Catholic, and I don't even believe in God." (*Rage*, 340)

Americans in 1949 were extremely wary of polio in this pre-Salk vaccine era. Polio was a mysterious disease that struck without warning, killing many, paralyzing more. The malady knew no class lines: Franklin D. Roosevelt could never walk again without aid after his polio attack in the Twenties. Sidney and Billy Tate die senselessly, hopelessly scarring the utopia of the Caldwell farm, already weakened by Grace's perfidy. The connections here between adultery and illness are not medically causal but symbolically concatenated. One need not be blown up overseas to be victimized by the war.

In fact, war was a recurring motif in the class struggle that dominates most all of O'Hara's fiction. As far back as *Appointment in Samarra*, O'Hara used war imagery and references to characterize the conflicts between rich and poor, insiders and outsiders, crooks and citizens, tradition and entrepreneurship, men and women.

World War II was officially concluded in 1945, but America's return to peacetime economy/polity/society was difficult, tentative, and full of ambiguity. In the years following the war, America was clearly the most powerful nation on earth, possessed of awesome atomic weaponry, ubiquitous industrial might, a vigorous economy, a rapidly developing infrastructure, and an increasingly accepted federal role in the affairs of most Americans. Class lines were shifting; millions of young men and some young women went to college "free" under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Suburbs grew rampantly around major cities. Marriages, babies, jobs, consumerism, omnipresent advertising, ubiquitous popular culture (radio, television, films, large circulation magazines, flourishing newspapers, paperback books) homogenized the United States; at the same time the certainties of the past, the stability of a pre-Depression America still held a powerful place in the average citizen's memory. Women were back in the house after their wartime jobs as "Rosie the Riveter." World War II had signaled the end of an era, but the end of anything is ambiguous.

Consequently, O'Hara's depiction of the moral disintegration of the Caldwell-Tate marriage, the symbol of classic stability in class-conscious Fort Penn, is paralleled by the decline of the Old Order in this conservative and hierarchical

little Pennsylvania city. For decades the Caldwells and their wealthy circle had enjoyed power and prestige beyond ordinary consequence. Grebstein argues that “they can have almost anyone or anything they want” (46). These Fort Penn aristocrats dominate *A Rage to Live* because, in Norman Podhoretz’s phrase: “The rich appear to O’Hara most representative of the human condition, because their lives are frankly, clearly, and fully implicated in the life of society” (270).

The Old Order is indeed passing in Fort Penn. Invested too conservatively, the Caldwell money has shrunk (though not terribly much). Housing developments are eating up farmland around Fort Penn. Robert Emmet Long stresses the symbolism of the house that the bachelor Miles Brinkerhoff contracts with Roger Bannon to build next to the Caldwell farm: easy sexuality and moral corruption have entered Eden (81). The Schoffstal House has been razed for a modern building. Charlie Jay, who first initiated Grace into the pleasures of sensuality but who was warned off by her social status, is now running for mayor; Jay is a crooked grafter, but his candidacy as the representative of the rising middle class of Fort Penn suggests the beginning of the end for the Old Order.

Grebstein cogently explains the responsibilities of O’Hara’s rich:

to carry their heads high, regardless of circumstances; to bury their dead without hysteria; always to conduct themselves in public with modest but unshakable dignity (as Grace must make her public appearances with composed mien no matter what tragedy or scandal surrounds her); to ensure that the politicians steal only small sums and do not throttle the town’s spirit and well being; to recognize and reward people from the lower classes and to help the right ones climb; to protect the good name of their own class and always to stand together in solidarity. (47)

*A Rage to Live*’s first two books celebrate the simultaneous strength and weakness of this code of conduct of which Sidney Tate is the paragon and Grace Caldwell the betrayer.

The final two books of the novel, dismissed by many critics as an awkward appendage, are defended by Matthew Bruccoli this way: “The novel is a study of Grace, who with all her life purchases ‘Pain with all that Joy can give,’ and her life goes on after she is widowed” (*O’Hara Concern*, 195). My argument takes a slightly different tack. The last two books and the “Postlude” of *A Rage to Live* are indeed structurally less vital in Grace Caldwell Tate’s most significant role in the novel. But the last 250 pages of the book most clearly face Grace off against the “new” Fort Penn and its more complex class relationships.

Certainly the Caldwells are not deracinated from the Fort Penn power structure. Grace’s brother Brock arranges “little conferences” that effectively destroy the business and, therefore, the boorish attentions of Grace’s now rejected lover, Bannon. “‘I know how to deal with scum like that. Like one of your horses. You have to be boss from the beginning, the very first time he acts up’” (*Rage*, 499). But Grace, whose largess and graciousness have prompted a Penn-

sylvania state trooper to comment that “these bastards know how to live” (*Rage*, 584), can no longer rise above the nasty public consequences of her private lubricities. She has an affair with Jack Hollister, an editor of the Fort Penn *Sentinel* (a Caldwell-owned newspaper), and this carnality ends with the hugely public scene when Hollister’s wife tries to shoot her rival and her husband. A melodramatic and violent confrontation like this one can even shake the imperturbability of Grace Tate and goad the moralistic plebeians of the new Fort Penn into action. Aristocrats, even aristocrats of the Grace Caldwell Tate stripe, cannot indulge their passions in public, and so Grace and her two remaining children (her youngest, remember, has died of polio like Sidney) give up the longstanding Caldwell hegemony in Fort Penn and move to New York. The destruction of the Old Order is complete.

Chronicling this bittersweet rise of a modern city like Fort Penn on the ashes of aristocratic hierarchy may not seem peculiarly unique for a writer trying to entertain and instruct an audience of Americans in 1949. After all, F. Scott Fitzgerald dramatized similar new money/old money, licit/illicit love in *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. But Fitzgerald was still positive that the rich were different (though inferior) and could escape retribution for their crimes. Tom and Daisy Buchanan conclude Fitzgerald’s novel drinking ale and eating chicken, knowing that Gatsby has paid for their sins. The Old Order remains in command.

In 1949, however, perhaps less stridently than in the Depression Thirties when O’Hara’s more radical associates heralded the coming of the Revolution, Americans could practically witness the same changing of the guard that made Fort Penn safe for crooked Charlie Jay but dangerous for aristocratic Grace Caldwell. No sane observer would contend that wealth and privilege, class and power, vanished after World War II, least of all John O’Hara. But Fort Penn society can no longer subsume the infidelities of its most representative, yet notorious, embodiment, Grace Tate.

Even at the end of the novel, Grace has her admirers, the most enthusiastic of which is Mary Kemper who insists that “Grace was the best-dressed woman in Fort Penn—but without trying. She was the handsomest—but without caring. She was the kindest—but expected nothing. She did everything the right way—but without stopping to think about it” (*Rage*, 518). In athletic parlance, Mary is paying tribute to Grace as a *natural*. But natural though she is, she is not a “lady” in the sense that Americans defined that term; she will not control her sexuality. In Frank MacShane’s opinion: “In *A Rage to Live*, he wanted to show that unpredictable relations between men and women act as counterweight to American society’s obsession with status and social structure” (*The Life of John O’Hara*, 143).

O’Hara’s critics will argue that such was always O’Hara’s obsession. But in *A Rage to Live* he incorporated America’s not-so-latent fears about the war-



induced freedom of women (and their potentially destructive sexuality) with the uncertainties of the class system of the post-war United States. The title of the novel is taken from Alexander Pope's *Epistle to a Lady*: "you purchase Pain with all that Joy can give, / and die of nothing but a Rage to live." Grace Tate took her sexual chances when *she* wanted to, a disturbing prospect in a patriarchal culture. However, she is driven from her native place by her boldness.

Yet Grace never really "learns." In O'Hara's "Postlude" to the novel she is in New York—surrounded by her pathetic, sick, alcoholic, anti-Semitic, lesbian circle—arranging an assignation with still another married man. All those readers who enriched John O'Hara with \$50,000 in 1949 dollars for the hard-cover sales hope that she is as unhappy and degraded as she should be, yet, a little like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, unrepentant, independent, self-sufficient. Grace (even her name is ironic—what kind of secular grace can save her?) had a clear impact on post-WW II American fiction and culture. No longer would we be so certain about our own stereotypes—matron or wanton, Madonna or immoralist, aristocrat or sensualist.

That O'Hara's portrait of the complexity of American society is best embodied by a *woman* is no accident. As a realistic writer, he sought to de-romanticize the genteel female idealizations of earlier generations. As a social historian, he sought to trace the place of women in the American social world. And as a writer attuned as few others were to the popular obsessions of his era, he wrote a bestseller incorporating those obsessions. *A Rage to Live* should be read again by those who earlier scorned it for its imperfect structure or its excessively lengthy catalogues. The book is truly a monument to "In this Time, of that Place"—the late 1940s in America.

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