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D.D.S.: Dental Details in Samarra

By A. M. PLESNAR

IN *THE LIFE OF JOHN O'HARA*, biographer Frank MacShane writes that in order to satisfy his patriotic fervor O'Hara used his Washington "connections" to try to secure a commission in the armed forces during World War II. The efforts of O'Hara's well-placed friends notwithstanding, it was a combination of the author's physical ailments that ultimately kept him out of the service. In particular:

The many years of heavy drinking and neglect had produced ulcers that required active treatment, and he had startlingly bad teeth for a man so fastidious. He had begun to lose teeth in his late twenties. Those that remained were so weak that one fell out once at a dinner party when one of the guests, while joking about boxing, tapped him lightly on the jaw. As a doctor's son, O'Hara was predictably afraid of medical involvement, but by 1943 he could no longer procrastinate, and in April he entered the Presbyterian Hospital in New York with a badly swollen jaw to have most of his teeth extracted. . . . [Later, in the early '60s,] the neglect of his teeth caused him to have the few survivors removed. (MacShane 122–23, 234)

While O'Hara's problem with his teeth plagued him throughout his lifetime, it may also have had a positive, albeit unconscious, impact on the writing of his first and, by many critical accounts, his best novel, *Appointment in Samarra*. For in this work there are numerous instances where O'Hara uses teeth or biting imagery to illustrate certain specific character traits or as a commentary on Gibbsville society. Some of the more important uses of this dental theme, which speak to the issues of wealth, aggression, ambition, snobbery, and arrested development, are examined below.

With regard to wealth, one of Caroline English's early suitors is Ross Campbell, a "stuffed shirt" from Scranton, Pennsylvania, who has a "St. Paul's-Harvard" accent. Ross is not just rich, but is a member of the exalted upper-upper class that is referred to simply as "having money." Because wealth is such a desirable class trait in Gibbsville, O'Hara sketches Ross Campbell as having "big strong teeth" (O'Hara 119).^{*} Similarly, Caroline's mother, Mrs. Waldo Wallace Walker, is not valued for the advice (minimal) that she gives to her daughter but for her appearance, an appearance that is maintained by wealth. In short, Mrs. Walker was

^{*} John O'Hara, *Appointment in Samarra* (1934; New York: Vintage Books, 1961). Subsequent page references within the text are to this edition.

such a good ad. She would have made a good ad for spectacles; but she also would have made a good ad for drinking a cup of hot water in the morning, Don't Worry, take a nap every afternoon, walk a mile every day, the Golden Rule, visit your dentist twice a year, and all the other codes that she had the time and the means to live by. (195)

Of course, it is easy to be a "good ad," or at least give the all-important Gibbsvillian appearance of being a good ad, when one doesn't have to worry about paying the rent.

The dental motif in *Appointment in Samarra* is also used to convey sexual tension and aggression. When Julian's behavior gets the better of Caroline and she tells her mother that she is contemplating divorce, Mrs. Walker's counsel to her daughter is that "in the hands of a woman, the strongest man in the world is weak" (202). Immediately thereafter, Mrs. Walker offers Caroline some chewing gum with the directive that "the muscles of the jaw need exercise," and then proceeds to inquire about her daughter's teeth (202). This dental discussion, coming so quickly after the matriarch's comment on weak men and aggressive women, suggests that in the English family it is the wife who has the power to provide or withhold sexual pleasure. That Caroline responds to her mother's query by saying she "is going to have a wisdom tooth out" is symbolic of her desire to remove Julian (who does not measure up to her society's expectation of the wise and mature husband/provider) from her life, in the short run, by divorce, although it is Julian himself who will execute the ultimate of removals (202).

A more vivid example of dental-inspired aggression is seen in the fight at the country club just after Froggy throws a glass of water in Julian's face. Wondering if the men at the nearby lawyers' table had seen the blowup between the two friends, Julian "heard some children playing in the street and he thought of the horrible Saturday mornings at the dentist's when he was a kid" (189). As if being at the dentist's on a Saturday weren't horrible enough, Julian remembers the less than pleasant activities that took place outside the dentist's window. There, instead of horses pulling carriages, Julian's recollections are of horses being "whipped." Likewise, the children of his memory are not frolicking in the safety of a park; rather, they are "playing in the street." Further, he hears no 1920's version of soothing muzak; instead, the car to Collieryville supplies background music by noisily "ringing its bell" (189). These aggression-laden memories of Saturdays at the dentist's prefigure the imminent violence at the club, where Julian, Froggy, and the Polish lawyers forgo the usual congenial club handshake in favor of an exchange of fisticuffs.

No discussion of a dental motif would be complete without a dentist, and O'Hara dutifully provides one. While O'Hara could have had Julian address any of his partygoers, it is Dr. Ted Newton, Buick owner and Cadillac prospect notwithstanding, to whom Julian directs his cheerless holiday undertone, "Merry

Christmas . . . and don't call me Ju" (11). This anti-Semitic consciousness, which was so biting prevalent at private clubs for many years, is just one of the dental-related examples of snobbery in the novel. Another involves the story of Joe Schermerhorn, who, one day at the country club, walked into the practice swing of a visiting golf team member, "got a broken jaw, lost his beautiful teeth, and went a little bit nuts, so that two years later, when his car went off the Lincoln Street bridge, people said it was suicide" (86). Here the Gibbsvillians "charitably" choose to interpret Schermerhorn's unfortunate demise as a suicide rather than having to deal with the fact that "one of their own" suffered from a mental illness. Ever attentive to detail, O'Hara gives his dentally-impaired golfer the same name as one of the more successful locations of "The Ritter Painless Dental Company," an emporium that specialized in cut-rate dental care, which was situated at "Schermerhorn" Street and Third Avenue in Brooklyn in the early 1900's (Ring 295).

On a further sociohistoric note, the fact that the Polish lawyer who is involved in the country club fight "reaches fingers in his mouth to keep from choking on his bridgework," and that Harry Reilly "always whistled faintly when he spoke" as a result of his ill-fitting dentures, is also consistent with the dental practices of the times (191, 8). In addition to The Ritter Painless Dental Company, "Painless Parker's" was another well-known chain of dental parlors, that, in the 1920's and '30's, advertised medical procedures as if their businesses were mechanical repair shops. The dental parlors' claims, among others, included: "Durable Work, Reasonable Charges, Honorable Dealings," "Painless Parker, Preeminently Par Excellent in Positively Painless Periodontal Practices," and "Teeth Without Plates" (Ring, 5, 295). These establishments, with their minimally trained staffs and rock-bottom prices, were the dental health providers of choice for many people. With regard to *Appointment in Samarra*, the improperly fitted dentures of O'Hara's characters symbolize the exclusionary forces at work in Gibbsville's upper society. An immigrant Polish lawyer would have been out of place in a 1930's country club; hence his bridgework necessitated easy removal. This too is the case with the Irish Catholic Harry Reilly; although he may be making inroads into Gibbsville society, his ill-fitting dental work, "done before the Reillys came into the big money," serves as a reminder that, despite Harry's financial and civic achievements, he will always be considered a social outsider (8).

Finally, there is also the implication that Gibbsville's Catholics liked their priests to be successful but were somewhat biased against their clergy's becoming too successful, as in Monsignor Creedon's case: "I was ambitious once, and I got a nice kick in the teeth for it" (92). Through his persistent use of the dental motif, O'Hara makes it clear that, despite the sophistication (real or otherwise) of Julian English's world, Gibbsville is, at its core, a primal, predatory, dog-eat-

dog world. It is a microcosm where aggressiveness, violence, and sexuality reign, and where compassion and love are, sadly, in short supply. In Gibbsville, gangsters, trendsetters, molls, and Junior Leaguers are all subjected to, and are themselves most certainly capable of, responding to situations with fangs drawn when the need arises.

O'Hara also uses the imagery of teeth to call attention to the childish behavior and arrested development that characterizes both the wealthy of the town and the spoiled country club set. Take for instance the successful mistress-keeping gangster, Ed Charney, whose routine of "putting his cigar in his teeth and taking it back out again" speaks to an oral fixation as well as serving as a tobacco-laden phallic symbol of power (42). A similar infantile regression is seen in the exchange between Helene and Al over her approval of his admiration of the nipples of her breasts, when Al threatens to "knock her teeth down her throat" and to "smash all of her nice molars" (129). Completing this picture of sophisticated childishness is the "masticate/masturbate" exchange of puns at, and on the way home from, Christmas dinner at Julian's parents (57, 68). Conversely, the fact that Jeanie, the twenty-one year old friend of Caroline's, who is married, has a child, and may need to have false teeth to replace her natural ones ("the loveliest, strongest, and most sparkling teeth Caroline ever saw"), indicates that any hint of mature responsibility tarnishes the attractiveness of the juvenile Gibbsvillians (69). However, the crown in the oral fixation motif belongs to Julian, who, in a moment of despondency over his exaggerated view of the financial health of his Cadillac dealership, removes the Colt .25 automatic from his office desk drawer and inserts it into his mouth (185).

In a work that is so heavily infused with things dental, it is significant that Julian commits suicide. In recent years studies have suggested that the proportion of dentists' deaths from suicide is higher than the proportion found when all other occupations are combined. Explanations for suicides in the dental profession are numerous, varied, and obviously as unique as each individual in this statistical group. However, some observers propose that the suicides might be due, in part, to the stress-inducing fact that a large percentage of dentists' work involves the infliction of pain as well as the dentists' awareness that a sizable portion of their patient bases would rather be anywhere in the world but in their operatories. In *Appointment in Samarra*, although Julian fancies himself as the victim of pain—"You poor guy, I feel so sorry for you" (186)—he certainly plays an active role as the inflicter of many types of pain: the social embarrassment and emotional pain he causes Caroline; the anguish which his disappointing lifestyle imposes upon his father; not to mention the actual physical pain he inflicts on Harry with the thrown drink and the punches put forward during the country club fight. Of course, the most tragic pain is that which Harry, Lute, and the others are forced to endure at the waste of such a young life.

Finally, O'Hara completes his dental motif by tying it to *Appointment in Samarra*'s setting. An automobile drive along Interstate 81 in northeastern Pennsylvania, particularly around the Pottsville (the real Gibbsville) area, reveals that the years spent by coal companies in their aggressive excavation of anthracite coal have produced large culm banks and extensive depressions in the landscape that look as if large chunks have been "bitten" out of the earth.

Although medical science has long recognized that "the chief function of teeth is to grind food into pieces small enough to be easily swallowed and digested," the teeth "also help to form words and to give expression"—topics that were certainly on the mind of the young O'Hara as he struggled to complete his first novel (Fishbein 1244). His persistent dental discomfort notwithstanding, John O'Hara could not have picked a more appropriate motif for his unsmiling novel of self-destruction.

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