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And these speculations by the boy Tristram describe the God of *V. I. P.*, whose name is Becomor. Later in the poem Becomor traces his own growth from His primitive manifestations in the old fertility gods to his present "operation crossroads." Through suffering on the cross as man, Becomor is learning from man to be a better God.

Thus through Becomor, Coffin states his final conclusion that man's culminating glory is his partnership with God in the evolution of a new universe. Through pain man and Becomor grow and in growth not stasis lie security and permanence for the best in human experience. Becomor's brother gods Beor and Unbeor claim in succession all mortality, but man's and Becomor's true identity, or soul, is realized in the salvation which is forever becoming.



## THE BRIEF FICTION OF SEAN O'FAOLAIN

By GEORGE BRANDON SAUL

SEAN O'FAOLAIN (*John Whelan*; 1900 -     ), a Dublin-born member of the Cork group of authors particularly notable in the Yeatsian era, is the sort of man chauvinistic Irish must find uncomfortable. A Roman Catholic "intellectual" of demonstrated patriotism, in his youth one of the "hounds of Banba," he has nevertheless not been silent about the absurdities of Irish politics and moralism. Further, he has even asserted that "The greatest curse of Ireland has not been English invasions or English misgovernment; it has been the exaggeration of Irish virtues . . . to that point where every human quality can become a vice instead of a virtue." Nor has he attempted to condone the effects of priestly interference in all sorts of things, from personal conduct to politics: indeed, he has confessed of his church that "whenever power emerges it will follow after—to bargain with it." An admirable translator of the traditional Irish lyric (*v. The Silver Branch*, 1938), he has nevertheless remained clear-eyed and free of Sigersonian extravagance in his estimate of the material translated. In ad-

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dition, he has not hesitated to show the Irish as a people frequently hag-ridden by old memories and bitternesses, by a morbid fear of sex and compulsion toward it, by sentimentalities and sociological stresses leading to such silliness as irrational book- and film-censorship.

He has also proved himself a gifted writer with moments of moving lyrical power, whatever his limitations of theme and attitude. Like too many of his fellows, he has perhaps also been an over-voluminous producer—and in a variety of fields. There is, for example, biography—and autobiography; there is drama; there is literary theory and criticism; there is stimulating racial history; there are charming travel books; there is prose fiction. The results are *in toto* qualitatively uneven, but I think the fiction builds the finest claim to attention.

More specifically, the novelettes and short stories: the novels—except for the structurally best first, *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1933), which is said to have won O'Faolain charter membership in the Irish Academy of Letters—seem at best, in their strained effort to project lurid character out of the complex of religion, politics, and sex O'Faolain habitually exploits, no better than second-rate. But then, O'Faolain has himself remarked (*The Short Story*), “The novel and the short story are two totally different genres and few men have been equally at home in both.”

The short fiction was initially gathered into *Midsummer Night Madness* (London: Cape, and N. Y.: Viking, 1932). This collection was followed by *A Purse of Coppers* (London: Cape, 1937; N. Y.: Viking, 1938); *Teresa and Other Stories* (London: Cape, 1947), here to be considered under *The Man Who Invented Sin* (N. Y.: Devin-Adair, 1948), which reprints its contents with the addition of “Up the Bare Stairs” and “The Fur Coat”; *The Finest Stories of*—(Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1957; in England, *The Stories of*—, London: Hart-Davis, 1958); and *I Remember! I Remember!* (Boston and Toronto: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1961).

*Midsummer Night Madness* contains only seven tales—mostly novelettes, ranging from about thirty to approximately sixty pages each, though “Lilliput” requires only eight. The best tales in the book are the two longest—the title story and “The Small Lady.” Two others—“The Bombshop” and “The Death of Stevey Long”—have a sequential event-and-cause relation-

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ship, and the character Stevey Long also plays a leading part in the title story.

Except for the relatively trivial "Lilliput," the stories have all to do in some way with the forlorn miseries of members of the Irish Republican Army as they fought the "Tans" while being hunted down in wild mountain districts. The author's keen response to physical beauty, whether of "nature" or woman; his lyrical aptness in description; his ability above all else to suggest the fearsome loneliness of the mountains—the rural backgrounds—the sodden and discouraging climatic conditions; his reflection of the constricting effect of religion on the ignorant Catholics: all these come clear in a prose style of great flexibility and quiet strength. One finds some striking characters, too—whether the wild, cruel gunman Stevey, whose eventual capture and execution become a tawdry—almost sordid—mockery, and the tinker's girl Gipsy, whom he forces the eighty-year-old lecher-aristocrat Henn to marry after presumably having himself had the determining share in her pregnancy; or the "little lady," lugged off into the mountains for execution as an informer, who seduces her young guard in a monastery room en route; or the character hounded through lonely country (and out of a love-affair) in "Fugue," which, written in 1927 during his Harvard sojourn, O'Faolain considers his "first successful story."

All in all, this is a remarkably well-done book, likely to stand for the sheer quality of its writing and the observation it records, even though the activity whose tattered shadow it suggests may eventually prove a forgotten and dated thing; for history is here merely the reason for the characters' activities—not something exploited as propaganda. And the sense of vastness in the natural backgrounds achieved by O'Faolain is perhaps the most moving residue of the whole.

*A Purse of Coppers* is dedicated to Edward Garnett with the query, "What can a writer do but gather up the coins and make his own fumbling effort to say to what Caesar each belongs?"—a curious defense against Garnett's wish that the author were "more passionate and heroic."

There are fourteen stories here, suggesting in a toned-down way the dry-mouthed tenor of Joyce's *Dubliners*. The dominant impression is one of futility, sometimes with a seeming implication of hatred for the hopelessness of Irish life—per-

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haps of life in general. The tales suggest a sharper sense of form and structural balance than those in *Midsummer Night Madness*; but here is petty, day-by-day lonesomeness, not epic lonesomeness; here is more urban than rural life, less richness and infusion of natural background, with a corresponding loss in poetic impact. Perhaps there is too regularly a "Yes" implied in the author's attitude toward what seems his central question (cp. "The Old Master"): "is it . . . that one kind of life is just the same as another in the end?" (If it is, why did O'Faolain leave school-teaching?) But the concluding sentence of "Egotists," a story laid in Texas, does have that momentary epic suggestiveness which Bret Harte sometimes achieved in his short stories: "The starry plain tapered to where the Americas lay joined on the waters of the world."

Among the most moving stories are "Sinners," "Kitty the Wren," "The Confessional," and "Mother Matilda's Book"; and of these, three deal with concerns of a religious nature. Indeed, there is considerable preoccupation with the lives and activities of priests and nuns here: nor is one sure in the end that O'Faolain isn't at bottom scornfully critical of them, though he handles them with ostensible respect. One story, incidentally, "Admiring the Scenery," was first published under the title "Lonely Lives."

*The Man Who Invented Sin* sustains but scarcely advances, O'Faolain's best work. True, the title story, "Innocence," and "Teresa" continue to stress concern with religious experience (the "Man" was a priest) and suggest that repeated cultivation of certain areas can eventually point limitations of interest. But there is still emphasis on character (suggesting a reason why O'Faolain excels in novelettes), with generous variety and expertly controlled artistry. Almost any one of these pieces, pungent with racial tang, deserves anthologizing; and such tales as "The Fur Coat" (its title the same as that of one of Hjalmar Söderberg's finest and most ironic stories) and "Lady Lucifer" as marvelously effective in revealing humane understanding and in achieving emotional impact. But one unaccountable descent to flippancy there is: in the last sentence of "The Woman Who Married Clark Gable," in other respects a very amusing tale.

*The Finest Stories* . . . (twenty-seven: nineteen drawn from earlier volumes) might perhaps more accurately have been called "The Favorite Stories . . ." since, good as the selection

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is, it omits the indubitably remarkable "The Small Lady," "Kitty the Wren," and "Lady Lucifer." In a curious "Foreword," O'Faolain speaks of the "weighted [I have never felt it burdensome] style"—the romantic vocabulary and general luxuriance—of the three stories drawn from *Midsummer Night Madness* and written during his twenties; fancies a certain adjustment to reality in *The Man Who Invented Sin*; and while oddly claiming (in the face of Yeats's example!) that "To rewrite years after is a form of forgery," confesses that "half the art of writing is rewriting" and "that stories, like whiskey, must be allowed to mature in the cask." Here, too, he acknowledges certain unsuccessful efforts at satire: unsuccessful because he can't really dislike his countrymen and "may be still a besotted romantic." And a romantic he obviously is, as his travel books in particular would emphasize; but why the "besotted"? One reflects: Did not "the real man" Hemingway, whom he approved, turn suicide in the end—a genuine example of the "besotted romantic"? The true romantic, as James Stephens recognized, is the truth-teller.

The eleven tales of *I Remember! I Remember!* add little to O'Faolain's record. Herein the approach assumed is largely that of the character in "A Touch of Autumn in the Air" who is engaged in "playing archeology with his boyhood": at least, there is much concern with recalling such witch fires of youth as calf love, politics, and revolution, the "abstrusities" of religion (cp. "Angels and Ministers of Grace") still clearly a provocation. But the author's characteristic effort to read significance into matter intrinsically of little import (cp. "One Night in Turin") continues; and only the title story, with its undertone of a sister's duplicity toward her memory-cursed relative, "Two of a Kind" (conceivably many an emigrant's essential story), and "Angels . . ." have much consequence, though "Miracles Don't Happen Twice" is not commonplace.

Braybrooke, in his little study in the *Dublin Magazine* (N.S., April-June 1955), perspicaciously remarks that "Newman's shadow falls over the whole O'Faolain corpus" and that "The dilemma . . . that faces O'Faolain (as indeed it faces Irish letters) is to what extent Catholicism and nationalism are at loggerheads," with O'Faolain realizing "that there are no ready-made answers." But the critical reader concerned only with O'Faolain as an artist will wonder frequently whether that

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"dilemma" has not led to a certain limitation of range and to overly discursive handling: whether sometimes an unwilling moralist—perhaps even schoolmaster (for one seems to apprehend an air of defiance of past timidities suggestive of the ex-teacher)—is not manipulating the material, with concentration toward unity of effect in some of the stories consequently violated.

Be all that as it may, and granting that an occasional touch of strain—even smartiness—is evident in his tales (one recalls, again, especially "The Woman Who Married Clark Gable"), that he would not suffer by possession of a measure of the casual amiability of, say, Frank O'Connor—or of O'Connor's capacity to amble widely through Irish experience, it is still true that O'Faolain at his best is a writer who counts and that from his volumes could be drawn an anthology to stand perhaps only half a pace behind a marshaling of similar hypotheticals representative of the Irish best. For he has with reasonable frequency achieved that fusion (v. *The Short Story*) of "punch and poetry," of "reality . . . and personal voltage," which he demands of the short story: that communication of "personality while appearing only to tell a story" which operates through "suggestion" and charged language and which does not lack "subtle comment of human nature."



### THE POETIC REALISM OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT

By JEAN BOGGIO-SOLA

BECAUSE of her precarious health in youth, a private education at home developed Sarah Orne Jewett's sensibility above the average. It might have made her an earlier Mary Wilkins Freeman if she had been left to brood in spiritual solitude but her father, a successful country doctor, fought against isolation by taking her with him on his visits to his patients all over the Berwick region. This proved an efficacious means, for Sarah not only grew into a sociable young woman but she also kept her eyes open to observe country people and their manners. Her receptive sensibility made her understand and