THE NATURALISTIC TECHNIQUE

OF JOHN O'HARA

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THE NATURALISTIC TECHNIQUE
OF JOHN O'HARA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN O'HARA

In America today there is a writer of special talent and knowledge and sometimes special achievement whose twilight years are devoted to a prodigious literary output. He is known in all areas of literature with the exception of one--poetry; he is known as a playwright and as a writer of short stories and novellas and novels. His reputation as a writer of above-average quality was established in 1934 with the publication of his first novel, Appointment in Samarra. Almost thirty years after the appearance of that novel, John O'Hara's productivity is such that a novel he wrote three years ago is finally being published this year after the publication of two volumes of short stories, two novels, and a volume of plays. Elizabeth Appleton is O'Hara's twenty-second book and tenth novel since Appointment in Samarra, and his eleventh book and fifth major novel since his current burst of activity began in 1955. About O'Hara's remarkable productivity, Richard Boeth says:

At the age of 58, John O'Hara is such a startling contrast to his neurasthenic contemporaries that a

1John O'Hara, Elizabeth Appleton (New York, 1963).
certain kind of critic and certain kind of reader have come to view his fecundity with suspicion, as if it were a sure sign of hackwork.\(^2\)

The dismay caused by such suspicions is a customary one for O'Hara. It has fallen his lot to be treated off-handedly by critics throughout his career. The blame for the generally insufficient and superficial criticism his work has received is partially O'Hara's own and partially the critics' and book reviewers'. It is his own in that he evidently has insisted (probably perversely, sometimes) that he be allowed to write about what he wants to write about and to write it in the manner that he wants to write it in. The blame is partially the critics' because they have reviewed his books apparently with an eye only for their most readily observable aspects. Possibly, they are compelled by the particular conditions incumbent on them as reviewers to grasp with impunity certain prominent arguments or propositions advanced by the author and to note conspicuous elements of his style.

In O'Hara's case, certain critics have concentrated on his custom of writing works which are concerned with social topics. Certain others of them have concentrated on his stylistic device of depicting verisimilitude of speech. Representative of the former is Granville Hicks' statement

\(^2\)Richard Boeth, "John O'Hara at 58: A Rage to Write," Newsweek, LXI (June 3, 1963), 53.
that "As always, the two things that O'Hara is interested in are money and sex, with sex well out in front." It is true that O'Hara is interested in those two things; it is also true that he is interested in a number of other things. Wilson is one critic who has found that O'Hara has other interests: "O'Hara is not a poet like Hemingway, but primarily a social commentator; and in this field of social habits and manners, ways of talking and writing letters and dressing, he has done work that is interesting and original." Here Wilson touches on O'Hara's tendency to portray speech as it is spoken and on his self-appointed role as a social historian. Wilson says further that "The cruel side of social snobbery is really Mr. O'Hara's main theme." Fleetingly, Wilson has come close to showing insight into O'Hara, but he says nothing more. He has introduced, discussed, and disposed of, in one sentence, what he considers O'Hara's main theme. Neither John O'Hara nor anyone else can be subjected to such cavalier treatment for long without suffering by it.

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3Granville Hicks, a review of Sermons and Soda Water, The Saturday Review of Literature, XIII (December 10, 1960), 18.

4Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room: James M. Cain and John O'Hara," The New Republic, CIII (November 11, 1940), 666.

5Ibid.
Turning to O'Hara as a social historian, Granville Hicks makes the bland statement that "O'Hara takes himself seriously as a social historian, and fiction offers no more carefully documented account of American life in the first half of the twentieth century than From the Terrace." He devotes the remainder of his review of From the Terrace to exploring O'Hara as a social historian and offering assurance that one may "have complete confidence in O'Hara's facts." Hicks then allows O'Hara's main theme, as he perceives it, two sentences: "... he is not content to limit himself to those aspects of life that are a matter of public record. The private lives of his characters—by which he mostly means their sexual activities—are his major concern."

Both Wilson and Hicks are partially right and partially wrong: O'Hara's main theme is the cruel side of social snobbery—at times; and O'Hara's major concern is the sexual activities of his characters—at times; but he is never committed solely to one or the other. Those aspects of his novels are but parts of the whole. And the whole cannot be comprehended until those parts of it are recognized; so, in a sense, Wilson and Hicks and others do contribute, though superficially, to a comprehensive view of the novels of John

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7Ibid.
8Ibid.
O'Hara. Lee Rogow, in the guise of reviewing one of O'Hara's novels, makes some observations about the author which, when taken in context, are flippant:

If I may do a bit of main-currents thinking about O'Hara, these are some of his main currents: He has a tremendous sense of his own generation, that hardy group which attempted to dissolve, destroy, or dismantle themselves in the Twenties, and who find themselves... surviving in the Fifties. He guards the period like a proud literary executor. 9

Rogow thus presents another view of O'Hara, a view insufficient in itself but one which does add to the whole view of the author. Rogow is also impertinent in his comments about O'Hara's stylistic devices. He allows his critical acumen to be lulled into lethargy by O'Hara's most obvious device. That device is his talent for reproducing the rhythms of American speech. Rogow says of O'Hara that he "has a remarkable ear and eye for what he himself called Expense Account Society..." 10 James Kelly adds: "Mr. O'Hara now relies upon his celebrated eye, ear, and small-town social insights to bring off a tour de force." 11 And Fletcher Pratt, in the form of an open letter to O'Hara, comments: "Because you are not specially concerned with it,


10Ibid.

you have caught the rhythm of common speech even better than [Ring Lardner]."\textsuperscript{12} The element or characteristic of O'Hara's style which draws most attention to itself is his "remarkable ear."\textsuperscript{13} As in the case of O'Hara's main themes, criticism of his style is limited to comments made in passing—Parthian shots, almost—which, taken by themselves, are sometimes adequate, sometimes inadequate, and never comprehensive. The comments point out that peculiarity of O'Hara's but do not suggest a possible meaning for his persistent and universal concern with the rhythms of speech. But surely that peculiarity is not merely a quirk of the author's personality expressing itself; surely when viewed as a component of O'Hara's body of works that peculiarity must assume significant proportions. Representative speech is significant when assessed in its proper context, especially as a part of the technique of literary naturalism.

Another of O'Hara's characteristic devices that is observed and glossed over by his critics is his massive use of detail in his novels. Being over-conscious of the conspicuous elements of the novels, the critics have allowed their eyes to be arrested by the author's huge amount of detail; consequently, as suggested earlier, the surface of

\textsuperscript{12} Fletcher Pratt, "O'Hara's Short Stories," a review of Files on Parade, The Saturday Review of Literature, XX (September 23, 1939), 7.

\textsuperscript{13} Rogow, p. 15.
his work becomes their business. Granville Hicks, on two separate occasions, mentions the matter of O'Hara's documentation:

He also, I feel, exaggerates the importance of his researches in social history. His later novels have been too heavily documented, and even in the shorter works his devotion to the precise fact is sometimes excessive.¹⁴

Hicks says too that

The great value of the novella form for O'Hara lies in the fact that it compels him to omit most of the documentation that is his pride and the despair of many of his critics. No one has a better eye for the significant detail than O'Hara, but as a rule, not trusting that detail to do its work, he backs it up with a mass of trivia.¹⁵

These comments by Hicks indicate only superficially O'Hara's purpose in using documentation. The critic does not even attempt to suggest that perhaps O'Hara uses detail and documentation for something more than filler in his novels. Yet, O'Hara so consistently uses documentation throughout almost all of his novels that one must assume that it is more than a contrivance and that O'Hara must consider documentation a significant part of the overall structure of his novels.

Richard Boeth recognizes that O'Hara is being treated meanly by his critics and accuses the "lodge members of serious myopia, willful or otherwise."¹⁶ He says:

¹⁵Hicks, review of Sermons and Soda Water, p. 18.
¹⁶Boeth, p. 54.
To this gift for the precise sociological insight, O'Hara adds a passionate concern for the real texture of things. In preparing such a novel as From the Terrace, . . . he will pore through hundreds of old newspapers and magazines, looking not only for important historical data but for the everyday reality of real-estate prices, dress-hem lengths, auto styles, play openings, and lapel widths.

The surfaces of O'Hara's novels are so detailed and so very nearly flawless, in fact, that some fashionable critics have been beguiled into thinking that nothing goes on beneath them. 17

Critics seem to think not only that nothing goes on beneath the surfaces but also that the surfaces as such are unwieldy and generally irrelevant to the subject matter of the novels. And, for their own purposes, what they think is possibly true; but, for the purposes of O'Hara, what they think is not true. Again, documentation, like his verisimilitude of speech and his sociological insights, when viewed as integral to his literary aim, cannot be thought of as disproportionate to his ends.

Almost universally, O'Hara's critics are limited to the narrow views of the book-review format. Often, the narrowness of their approach to O'Hara results in misinformed and mistaken views of his works. Most of the articles on John O'Hara are found in The Saturday Review of Literature, the New Yorker, and The New Republic; his books are most often reviewed in The Saturday Review of Literature and the New York Times Book Review section. Because of the nature

17Ibid.
of book reviews, critics cannot comfortably undertake a systematic treatment of the full body of O'Hara's novels. Constrained as they are by the book-review format, their approach to O'Hara often is determined by a particular aspect which is familiar to them and which may lead them completely away from the author's aim. They are not, then, altogether to blame for O'Hara's present place in the American literary scene; neither are they altogether blameless, for they do allow themselves to be beguiled into thinking that O'Hara is contributing very little work of literary importance to contemporary American letters.

There is, consequently, a scarcity of material available from which one may learn about the writing of John O'Hara. Presently, the most definitive criticism is E. Russell Carson's The Fiction of John O'Hara.\(^{18}\) Richard Boeth, in his recent sympathetic article in Newsweek,\(^{19}\) strikes a blow for O'Hara, but it too suffers—as the others do—from the narrowness of the book-review format. Unfortunately, those two critical efforts are also insufficient, not in their quality, but in their scope. Carson has produced a study of the "Gibbsville" or "Lantenengo County" novels of John O'Hara which is the most penetrating one now available, but it suffers from lack of a point of focus.


\(^{19}\)Boeth, Newsweek, pp. 53-57.
The vantage point from which O'Hara is best viewed and which best reveals his literary intentions is found in the attributes of literary naturalism. The thesis of this paper on John O'Hara is that certain of his novels contain sufficient characteristics of literary naturalism to reward a study of them from that perspective. O'Hara handles the elements of naturalism not only capably and effectively but also artistically, and perhaps because of this, his novels merit more scholarly attention than they have received in the past. In part, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate O'Hara's merits and, hopefully, to enhance his reputation as a writer of literary worth by viewing his novels from the proper perspective.

The principal materials used in this study of O'Hara are his "Gibbsville" novels. Listed in the order of their publication, they are Appointment in Samarra (1934), A Rage to Live (1949), Ten North Frederick (1955), From the Terrace (1958), and Ourselves to Know (1960). The evaluation of O'Hara as a naturalist is made in accordance with the criteria presented in Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought. Because the encompassments of literary naturalism are elusive, a number of other major secondary sources which deal with naturalism are used extensively. They are

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Horton and Edwards' *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought*; 21 Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream*; 22 Gardiner's *Norms for the Novel*; 23 and Ahnebrink's *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction*. 24

Popular belief is that O'Hara is primarily a novelist of manners. Chapter Two of this paper suggests that O'Hara should be studied from the viewpoint of naturalism to be better understood. American literary naturalism is defined in the chapter, and Parrington's criteria are listed. O'Hara is investigated as a novelist of manners, and the point is made that the novel-of-manners form is too limited to contain works of the scope of O'Hara's Gibbsville novels. The criteria of naturalism are used in the succeeding chapters in the appraisal of O'Hara's works.

The attributes of naturalism may be summarized under three main headings: philosophy, subject matter or setting, and technique. The philosophy of naturalism includes materialistic determinism, absence of free will, and an indifferent universe among its tenets. Each of these aspects

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as O'Hara uses it is applied to the five novels of the Gibbonsville group in Chapter Three. Chapter Four explores O'Hara's modification of the traditional naturalistic settings and, to some extent, subject matter. Specific attention is given to his use of sex as naturalistic subject matter. The chapter also investigates O'Hara's use of naturalistic technique, with particular emphasis placed on his use of masses of detail and minute documentation.

The criteria of naturalism are applied to the Gibbonsville novels of John O'Hara in an effort to determine the degree and extent of his naturalism. Other qualities of his writing are noticed as they impinge upon his naturalism. Chapter Five, in conclusion, reviews O'Hara's use of the naturalistic criteria and notes that the author merits recognition as a writer of naturalistic novels.
CHAPTER II

AMERICAN LITERARY NATURALISM

Naturalism in the United States began timidly in the 1890's and "grew into our most prevalent literary attitude during the first half of the twentieth century."\(^1\) The transplanting of naturalism from France to the United States might not have occurred had not America been spiritually pre-conditioned by Calvinism. The economic pattern in this country was one of mass production, machine technology and finance capitalism; the American economic scheme thus provided naturalism with abundant source material. The spiritual fact of Calvinism and the physical fact of capitalism and a capitalistic society combined to make American conditions fruitful ground for the growth of literary naturalism.

Calvinism "presented a conception of man's existence that heavily stressed the weakness of humanity against the predestined forces of the universe."\(^2\) That concept formed the spiritual basis for America's subsequent view of a universe which was directed by—and at the mercy of—the forces of nature. The tenets of Calvinism had been weakened during

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\(^1\)Horton and Edwards, p. 251.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 252.
the Enlightenment, and man began to imagine himself as individualistic and self-reliant; but as science advanced, particularly in the field of evolutionary biology, man's belief in his perfectibility was replaced by the pessimistic consideration that his importance in the universe was almost infinitesimal—that he was, in effect, nothing more than one of nature's phenomena. As a natural phenomenon, man no longer had to fear Predestination, which was replaced by the prospect of no after-life at all. Horton and Edwards observe that "The old Calvinist in his agonies could at least pray to an all-knowing God; the naturalist in his despair could turn only to an indifferent and crushingly impersonal universe."³

That crushingly impersonal universe was the physical fact of a mechanistic economy which threw the ordinary man into a state of economic insecurity. He became the victim of the unrestricted machinations of the rich. He had very little control over his destiny. He feared for his survival, for if he were not fit, he would die. The double impact of spiritual sterility and the absolute moral sterility of social and economic relations created a discernible pessi-
mism, which man has not yet dispelled, and fostered the growth of literary naturalism in America.

³Ibid., p. 253.
Literary naturalism was at a peak in America during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the middle nineties, three American novelists—Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Harold Frederic—formed the nucleus of what might have become a "movement" in literary naturalism, but their early deaths ended it. They were writers who continued, but with significant modifications, the theories of the arch-naturalist, Emile Zola. None of the American naturalists—including Theodore Dreiser, considered by many to be America's best naturalistic writer—"ever attained the completely naturalistic outlook any more than did Zola himself."4 None of them, however pessimistic, could fully accept Zola's deterministic attitude in his treatment and portrayal of his subject matter. Horton and Edwards provide a meaningful observation when they say that:

Naturalism in literature is a moral and spiritual absolute zero, conceivable but unattainable, and the term "naturalistic" when applied to a book or an author must be taken only in a relative sense.5

Their statement illustrates the case for naturalism: it is a literary attitude which "no sooner does its outline seem to grow clear than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape."6 Naturalistic theory cannot prescribe the bounds of the naturalistic novel. The body of theory, in one way or another, does no more than

4Ibid., p. 259. 5Ibid., p. 260. 6Walcutt, p. 3.
affect it. The body of theory "involves philosophy, biology, sociology, psychology, physiology, and economics, loosely, of course, and in terms that change from one decade and writer to the next."\(^7\) In no single book can all the theories be found, but in the study of a number of books that have been called naturalistic, the general pattern of naturalism emerges. In order to best understand the theories of naturalism, some workable definition of the term must be used as a point of departure. Ahnebrink's definition is probably one of the most cryptic ones available: "Naturalism... is a manner and method of composition by which the author portrays life as it is in accordance with the philosophic theory of determinism."\(^8\) But his definition suffers by its brevity, and it is not as usable as W. F. Taylor's:

Naturalism, as it developed in the latter nineteenth century, is a by-product of the scientific spirit. One of its motives is a scientific curiosity about human nature in all phases, pleasant and unpleasant. The naturalist applies to human life, moreover, the concept of scientific materialism. To him, man is not a complex intelligence, controlling his destiny by free will. Man is, on the contrary, a machine controlled either by the inner constraints of instinct and passion, or by the outer constraints of environment and circumstance. From this point of view, human life appears to be only a part of the automatic processes of the physical universe. The consistent naturalist is, therefore, a determinist, who holds that man's every deed is inexorably shaped by factors beyond his control. In a philosophy where there is no place for free will, there is no place

\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)Ahnebrink, p. vi.
for moral judgment; right and wrong alike fall into perspective as parts of the uncontrollable processes of the cosmos. And as naturalism negates the ideas of free will, and moral control, so it opposes those ideals of gentility which had so long dominated American letters. If the naturalist is to render man faithfully, he must study man not only in the pulpit and drawing room, but in the sweatshop or the brothel or the mud-filled trenches of war—areas of life whither the genteel novel dared not venture.\footnote{Taylor, \textit{A History of American Letters} (New York, 1936), pp. 309–310.}

Taylor's definition is a useful one because it is comprehensive enough to allow for most modifications of naturalism. But it is not comprehensive enough to encompass all naturalistic writers. They seem to disregard definitions as it suits their purpose: they do not always completely exclude free will, they are not always deterministic, and, as their moral judgments—both implicit and explicit—show, they are not always absolutely objective. It is their inconsistent handling of the attributes of naturalism which has helped to produce the ever-changing outlines of the form. The problem has always existed, and today John O'Hara is plagued by it; he is no less guilty of inconsistency than are his predecessors. In an attempt to discover to what extent O'Hara exhibits naturalistic traits in his novels, some attributes of naturalism—as they are outlined by Parrington—may be used as criteria:

1. Objectivity. Seek the truth in the spirit of the scientist.
2. Frankness. The total man and woman must be studied—the deeper instincts, the endless impulses. The three strongest instincts are fear, hunger, sex. In the life of the ordinary person, the third is most critical, hence the naturalist makes much of it.

3. An amoral attitude toward material. The naturalist is not a judge, he holds no brief for any ethical standards. He records what happens.

4. A philosophy of determinism. This is the vital principle of naturalism, setting it off from realism. The scientist has turned philosopher.

5. A bias toward pessimism, especially in selecting details. A reaction from the romantic conception of a purposive will... Hence it is as the victim, the individual defeated by the world, and made a sardonic jest of, that the naturalist chooses to portray man.

6. A bias in selection of characters. The naturalist commonly chooses one of three types:
   a. . . . persons of strong animal drives.
   b. Characters . . . driven by forces that they do not stop to analyze.
   c. . . . a strong character whose will is broken. 10

In Parrington's anatomy of naturalism is seen the prevailing mood of pessimism that O'Hara shows as still existing. Also evident is the loss of dignity in the individual man; the absence of any spiritual beliefs; and, in general, the pervading essence of despair. O'Hara reflects all of these at one time or another throughout his Gibsenville novels; and because they are present in those works, a comment of Horton and Edwards' with respect to Parrington's criteria, as they apply to O'Hara, is particularly appropriate:

For all practical purposes, a book in which some of these characteristics are found to a marked degree can be classed as "naturalistic"; the purely naturalistic

10 Parrington, III, 323-325.
work has never been written and, if written, probably could never be read.\textsuperscript{11}

A sufficient amount of usage by O'Hara of those characteristics makes a survey of his works from the viewpoint of naturalism an appealing undertaking. The immediate obstacle to be overcome is the widely accepted appraisal that has been made of them and their author by book reviewers and critics. Generally, criticism of O'Hara's novels has fallen short. The reasons for that may be many, but several interesting ones invite investigation.

It has been customary for critics to use the characteristics of the novel of manners as a guide in judging O'Hara's novels. Their choice of criteria is almost gratuitous, but it is understandable because they have been confined by the requirements and limitations of the book-review format. Some of O'Hara's most obvious technical devices and some of his choices of subject matter may be considered from two points of view: the novel of manners and literary naturalism. Because critics are limited in their manner of treatment of O'Hara, they have relied largely on the familiar novel-of-manners format as a criterion. They have looked at the superficial features and, generally, have ignored the naturalistic ones. The effect is that today O'Hara is thought of first as a novelist of manners and then as a naturalist.

\textsuperscript{11}Horton and Edwards, p. 260.
Because critics have emphasized the former aspects of O'Hara's novels, his reputation as a serious writer has suffered.

Viewed hurriedly, O'Hara is a novelist of manners; viewed more carefully, he is a naturalist. The difference between the two is primarily a matter of emphasis. The format for the novel of manners calls for a detailed and documented study of social manners, customs, and habits, and it demonstrates how characters are controlled and affected by them. The definition of the naturalistic novel calls for those same things, but much more: a treatment of pessimism, determinism, and absence of free will. It is with O'Hara as a naturalistic novelist that this paper is concerned. Before examining his naturalistic philosophy and technique, it is well to consider O'Hara from the point of view of the novel of manners so that it may be established that that approach to him is an insufficient one.

As a chronicler of American life in the first half of the twentieth century, O'Hara must necessarily, in his fictional treatment of human lives, concern himself with manners and rituals as they control those lives. Considered from the perspective of his philosophy and subject matter in particular and his technique in general, O'Hara presents much more than a transcript of how society conducts itself; he provides an explanation for or, more often, suggests a reason why a character acts in the manner in which he acts.
In that way—and in others—O'Hara is a naturalistic writer, for he shows his characters being subjugated and manacled—and sometimes prostrated—by the impersonal restraints of the social framework within which they move and out of which they sometimes try to venture. In each of the Gibbsville novels O'Hara shows, in a variety of ways, how and why the lack of class mobility adversely affects his characters.

The novels of John O'Hara used in this paper have as their setting the fictional city of Gibbsville, Pennsylvania, and its environs (notably, Fort Penn and Lyons), thus their appellation, the "Gibbsville" novels. Appointment in Samarra, A Rage to Live, Ten North Frederick, From the Terrace, and Ourselves to Know differ from his other works primarily in their capacity as vehicles of autobiographic outlet.

O'Hara says: "You're on pretty safe ground if you start out with a life you know about." He makes "a deliberate attempt in these novels to select from actual experience the characters and situations which appear in his fiction." Part of his method of presenting his selections is to augment the characters and situations with intensely detailed description and documentation. He does not limit himself

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13 Carson, p. 2.
to a particular segment of society but embraces all classes; however, his viewpoint is always emphatically upper-middle and upper class, and those are the classes upon which he focuses his attention.

One of the basic requirements of both the novel of manners and the naturalistic novel is mood or atmosphere. Prior to his exposition of community life, O'Hara establishes atmosphere by the selective detailing of local manners and rituals and their physical environment. Often, critics mistake O'Hara's seeming obsession with minutiae as being his main concern, believing that, as Hicks has said, "he is principally preoccupied with the surfaces of life."¹⁴ That O'Hara is preoccupied with the surfaces of life is not debatable, but to state that they are his principal preoccupation is to state only part of the truth. In the novel of manners, surfaces of life are of primary interest; in the naturalistic novel, they are not. Hicks does not take his criticism far enough; he stops where the definition of the novel of manners stops when he says:

He also, I feel, exaggerates the importance of his researches in social history. His later novels have been too heavily documented, and even in the shorter works his devotion to the precise fact is sometimes excessive.¹⁵

¹⁴Hicks, "A Deep Look at the Surface," p. 21.
¹⁵Ibid.
Hicks' statement invites comparison with a portion of a standard definition of the novel of manners:

In the true novel of manners the social mores of a specific group are defined and described in detail and with great accuracy ... 16

One of Parrington's criteria of naturalism is "Objectivity. Seek the truth in the spirit of the scientist." 17 Seeking the truth in that spirit necessarily incorporates the amassing of detail and unchanging documentation. Hicks implies that only a certain amount of detail and historically factual documentation is necessary. For the purposes of the novel of manners, O'Hara incorporates too much, and the form is unbalanced by it. Or at least, Hicks so implies. But for the purposes of the naturalistic novel, O'Hara does not document too heavily, especially if he is to remain objective and maintain his scientific attitude.

In the following excerpt from A Rage to Live, there is evidence to support Hicks' claim that O'Hara over-documents from the point of view of the novel of manners. At the same time, it may be seen that the excerpt illustrates naturalistic technique. Rage opens in 1917 on the day of the fourth-of-July picnic which is customarily held at the farm of Sidney and Grace Tate. As a part of his preamble to


17 Parrington, III, 323.
the action, O'Hara describes in detail the various modes of transportation employed by the guests on their way to the picnic:

The real farmers, of course, had not been deceived by the light rainfall of the morning, and they had begun arriving as early as ten o'clock, while the committee men still were deciding about a postponement. The early ones came in spring wagons, and hay wagons and truck wagons, some drawn by draft horses, some by teams of mules, some by mixed teams of horse-and-mule; and the next to arrive were farmers more prosperous than the earliest, and they came in buggies and buckboards and democrats and surreys and barouches and cut-unders. There was even a team of goats from a neighboring farm, a nice turn-out with real leather, not web, harness and a small-size truck wagon. Then a little later came the trucks and automobiles: Ford cars and Maxwells and Chevrolets and Partin-Palmers and Buicks and Hahn trucks and Mackcars and Garfords and Autocars and Vims, and a few Cadillacs, Franklins and one Locomobile and one Winton.18

O'Hara's emphasis is misleading. Read from the novel-of-manners angle, he has wasted his readers' time because he is not talking about people and their customs, which is what he is supposed to be doing; so, by emphasizing the peoples' modes of transportation instead of the people themselves, he has, in a sense, been untrue to the form. But read from the naturalistic angle, the excerpt is more meaningful. O'Hara is not interested in early twentieth-century vehicles as such; but as a means of establishing atmosphere for the picnic and for his introduction of Grace Caldwell Tate, his evoking of a consciousness of relative positions

of wealth and social standing is a technique representative of both the novel of manners and naturalism.

Social snobbery is an element of the novel of manners that is stressed in Appointment in Samarra, a novel about which William Rose Benet says: "Naturalism could go no further." E. Russell Carson observes that the Gibbsville novels are partly distinguishable as a group by reason of "their emphasis upon class standing as social determinant." Though social snobbery is apparent in the first chapters of Samarra, at the novel's close it is seen that snobbery alone is not the cause of the protagonist's suicide; the underlying principle of socio-economic determinism—a modified and softened determinism, to be sure—becomes apparent as the force which drives Julian English to suicide.

Julian English affronts a social climber at a dance. In turn, Julian himself is made the subject of ridicule for his error in taste. Desperate, he commits suicide two days later. The characteristics of both the novel of manners and of naturalism are found in Julian's rush to self-destruction. From the viewpoint of the novel of manners, Samarra supplies two varieties of social snobbery. One is the exclusiveness of the smoking room of the Lantenengo Country Club; the other is the ostracism which Julian faces at the hands of the

20Carson, p. 6.
middle class of Gibbsville and of his own clique at the
cub. O'Hara is precise and meticulous in his treatment
of class stratification in Gibbsville. In describing the
Christmas Eve dance at which Julian throws his drink in
Harry Reilly's face, O'Hara says:

Any member of the club could come to the dance,
but not everyone who came to the dance was really
welcome in the smoking room. The smoking room crowd
always started out with a small number, always the
same people. The Whit Hofmans, the Julian Englishes,
the Froggy Ogdens and so on. They were the spenders
and drinkers and socially secure, who could thumb
their noses and not have to answer to anyone except
their own families. . . . By three o'clock everyone
who wanted to had been in the smoking room; the
figurative bars were let down at about one-thirty,
which time coincided with the time at which the
Hofmans and Englishes and so on had got drunk enough
to welcome anyone, the less eligible the better. 21

In the same vein, O'Hara depicts Julian's class-conscious
estimation of Harry Reilly:

Reilly had gone pretty far in his social climbing,
by being a "good fellow" and "being himself," and
by sheer force of the money which everyone knew the
Reillys had. Reilly was on the greens committee
and the entertainment committee, because as a golfer
he got things done; he paid for entire new greens
out of his own pocket, and he could keep a dance
going till six o'clock by giving the orchestra a big
tip. But he was not yet an officer in the Gibbville
Assembly. He was a member of the Assembly, but not a
member of the governors and not eligible to hold
office or serve on the important committees. So he
was not unreservedly sure of his social standing, and
damn well Julian knew it. 22

21 John O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra (New York, 1934),
pp. 9-10.

22 Ibid., p. 16.
With regard to the consciousness of class stratification as O'Hara depicts it, Louis Auchincloss says:

But my trouble is that what he seems to be doing . . . is writing an old-fashioned novel of manners where the most important item about any character is the social niche in which he was born. Each hero must start his race of life with a particular ribbon pinned to his lapel, and he will never be able to take it off, whether he be proud of it or ashamed. To O'Hara, it really seems to matter if he belongs or does not belong to the Lantenengo Country Club. 23

Auchincloss is right. As a novelist of manners O'Hara has to project his feeling that it really does seem to matter if one belongs or does not belong to the Lantenengo Country Club. Auchincloss, like Hicks, though, stops at the surfaces of O'Hara's novel. What he states is true enough in itself, but it does not go deeply enough beneath the surface. O'Hara employs a vital principle of naturalistic determinism in Samarra when he depicts Julian as one of those "Characters . . . driven by forces that they do not stop to analyze." 24 At one time Julian does make an effort to analyze why he is being castigated by members of his own class, but when he sees that there is no material reason for their actions he is perplexed and discontinues his analysis. O'Hara concludes Julian's analysis with: "Julian had another drink

24Parrington, III, 324.
and a fresh cigarette." And in that way Julian surrenders to the external forces that are working on him.

In *Ten North Frederick*, as in *Samarra*, O'Hara turns his eye toward the superficialities of society. Early in the novel, Arthur McHenry, the protagonist’s closest friend, makes a revelatory statement concerning the manner of life most of the characters of Gibbsville’s upper social stratum must endure:

The safest way to live is first, inherit money. Second, marry a woman that will co-operate with you in your sexual peculiarities. Third, have a legitimate job that keeps you busy. Fourth, be born without a taste for liquor. Fifth, join some big church. Sixth, don’t live too long.

Arthur McHenry’s admonition is in the tradition of the novel of manners because he has listed for O’Hara the tactical situation of Gibbsville’s upper-middle class in enumerating the code by which Joe Chapin, the protagonist, conducts his life. Still, it does not explain Joe’s ultimate condition in life or his despair before his death. Something vital is missing in *Ten North Frederick* as a novel of manners. Perhaps Irving Howe’s comparison of O’Hara with his contemporary novelist of manners Edith Wharton supplies a clue to

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what is missing: "It is precisely such a standard [as
Wharton's standard of humane values and civilized reflection]
that one looks for and seldom finds in O'Hara. . . ."27

Howe has encountered difficulty in evaluating O'Hara
from the viewpoint of the novel of manners. But he would
not have if he had criticized O'Hara as a naturalistic
writer. (Naturalism denies kindness and benevolence by def-
inition: "Man is . . . a machine controlled either by the
inner constraints of instinct and passion, or by the outer
constraints of environment and circumstance. From this
point of view, human life appears to be only a part of the
automatic processes of the physical universe."28 Further-
more, if O'Hara is to be consistent with the norms for
naturalism, he must be objective and "seek the truth in the
spirit of the scientist."29 He must, in short, deny humane
values and civilized reflection.)

Critical opinion is seen, then, to be concerned with
O'Hara's most superficial aspects as a novelist. He has
been overlooked as a writer of merit because his contri-
bution to literature is thought to be chiefly an over-docu-
mented investigation of contemporary American manners. He
has not been credited with being more than an investigator.

27Irving Howe, "The Flaw in John O'Hara," The New
Republic, XLV (November 27, 1961), 16.
28Taylor, p. 309.
29Parrington, III, 323.
of manners partly because, as Boeth says: "The surfaces of O'Hara's novels are so detailed and so very nearly flawless, in fact, that some . . . critics have been beguiled into thinking that nothing goes on beneath them."\(^30\)

Unfortunately, Boeth is largely correct in his observation. Generally, critics have viewed only the surfaces of the five novels that comprise the Gibbsville group. As a result, the substance of the novels—their naturalistic content—is de-emphasized and often overlooked. But, the critics' misplaced emphasis is understandable, for on the surface the attributes of the two forms appear to be identical. The novel of manners is a detailed and documented representation of social manners, customs, and traditions with the characters and actions controlled and affected by them. Literary naturalism is that and more: it is a scientific and philosophic study of man as a part of the structure of the cosmos. As one of the harmonious components of nature, man cannot be a self-determining creature. He must act in accordance with the designs of nature. The naturalistic writer is concerned with the effects of those designs on the individual man, and that is O'Hara's concern in the Gibbsville novels. The following chapters provide evidence that John O'Hara's characters reflect to a large degree the

\(^{30}\)Boeth, p. 54.
pessimism and determinism of naturalism and that his novels become more meaningful when studied in that light.
CHAPTER III

NATURALISTIC PHILOSOPHY IN

THE GIBBSVILLE NOVELS

Deterministic philosophy in O'Hara's novels is never as manifest as it is in the novels of his naturalistic predecessors. O'Hara has modified it to the extent that its materialistic or economic aspects have been softened by the addition of a sociological element. O'Hara's modified approach to determinism has the corollary effects of minimizing the absence of free will and the indifference of the universe by accentuating the role of man. His de-naturalization of nature has, in some sense, made naturalism a more believable concept by introducing characters who are less fatalistic than are the characters of the earlier naturalists; for, in his modifying, he has allowed them something close to free will. O'Hara's people, even though inevitably battered by an indifferent universe, do feel that they are choosing their courses of action for themselves. They do not know, though, that only within severe limitations are they exercising freedom of choice or free will. Their choices are insignificant in proportion to the number and significance of choices denied them. As for their volition, then, O'Hara's characters may be said to have free will; as
for their action, they do not have free will: they can wish freely, but they are not free to carry out their wishes.) Walcutt states that "The theme of determinism, which is of course basic, carries the idea that natural law and socio-economic influences are more powerful than the human will."¹ And Taylor supplements Walcutt by saying: "The consistent naturalist is, therefore, a determinist, who holds that man's every deed is inexorably shaped by physical factors beyond his control."²

John O'Hara's celebration of socio-economic determinism and its corollary, the absence of free will, is modified to the degree that it is a more sociological than economic determinism, but the economic factor has not been completely eliminated, however, for it is sensed rather than seen. It remains as an unseen element of determinism because the sociological element derives from it. Perhaps if O'Hara had written at another time he would have emphasized the economic aspect of determinism, but he is writing at a fairly distant remove from the era which stressed the forces of an amoral economic environment.

The shift from economics-based determinism to sociology-based determinism may be accounted for, in part, by a transformed American industrial situation. "In the politico-economic

¹Walcutt, p. 20.
²Taylor, p. 310.
field, demands of the voters provoked a substantial broaden-
ing, between 1900 and 1920, of the powers of government over
industry." Economic conditions were changing by the time
O'Hara began to write, and that may be a partial explanation
for his emphasizing sociological aspects of determinism.
Also, O'Hara writes of a social class different from that
which interested the early naturalists. His characters are
of the upper-middle class and sometimes of the upper class;
so, they are not affected by the same economic conditions
that affect the middle class. Most of his major characters
were born during the decade on either side of 1900; they are
financially secure through inheritances, and work only be-
cause, according to their mores, it does not look proper not
to work. O'Hara's emphasis, accordingly, is on a sociological
determinism which is not as harsh as economic determinism.
His emphasis is softer and, therefore, more subtle. Conse-
quently, to pinpoint instances of determinism in his novels
is not as simple as it might be, because rather than being
shown hard and clear instances, one is presented with an
aura, so to speak, or a spirit of determinism.) Perhaps
O'Hara's most clearly presented philosophy of determinism
occurs in his first (and possibly most naturalistic) novel,
Appointment in Samarra. As a sort of preface to that novel,
O'Hara relates Somerset Maugham's Legend of Samarra:

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 332.}\]
DEATH SPEAKS: There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.4

The parallels between the stories of the servant and Julian English, the protagonist, are of course obvious. At the Lantenengo Country Club Christmas Eve party in 1930, Julian insults an Irish social sycophant named Harry Reilly by throwing a drink into his face. Two days after insulting Reilly, Julian becomes subject to the same variety of pettiness and malice which he has exercised upon the Irishman. A fellow club member says to him, "I've done a lot of things in my life, but by Jesus if I ever sunk so low that I had to throw ice in a man's face and give him a black eye."5 This suggests, perhaps a little ludicrously, that Julian has committed an error in taste unbecoming a member of Gibbsville's aristocracy.

4O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra, Title Page.
5Ibid., p. 91.
That evening Julian goes to a roadhouse, the Stage Coach Bar, with his wife. He becomes drunk and disappears with Helene Holman, a singer there who is the mistress of Ed Charney, the local gangster. By this time, Julian has done more than behave in bad taste, as with Reilly. He apparently has committed a major moral infraction, and the chain of events in which he is involved begins to increase in tempo and violence.

When he appears at the Gibbsville Club for lunch the next day, he is insulted once more. A quarrel begins; he tries to avoid it and depart, but:

"Froggy swung on him and Julian put up his open hand and the punch made a slight sound on his wrist, and hurt his wrist. "Gentlemen!"
"Don't be a God damn fool," said Julian.
"Well, then. Come on outside."
"Gentlemen! You know the club rules." It was the steward. He stood in front of Froggy, with his back toward Froggy, facing Julian. He certainly made it look as though he were protecting Froggy from an attack by Julian.6

Some lawyers from out of town who know Froggy Ogden come over. One of them insults Julian; Julian insults him in return by calling him a "Polack war veteran and whoremaster."7

"Hey, you!" said the lawyer.
"Aw," said Julian, finally too tired and disgusted with himself and everyone else. He took a step backwards and got into position, and then he let the lawyer have it, full in the mouth.8

6 Ibid., p. 237.  
7 Ibid., p. 238.  
8 Ibid.
Julian attacks both the lawyer and Froggy. Furious, he hurla carafe at still another man and runs for his car. This last experience has cost Julian any chance to make amends for his bad behavior. His reputation, if not ruined, is in a precarious condition.

He arrives home to discover that his wife has deserted him. Alice Cartwright, a journalist, happens by, and Julian attempts to seduce her, but after a few minutes they both lose interest. He realizes then that he must eventually face Giabsville society for his moral infractions: the drink thrown into the face of Harry Reilly, the roadhouse affair, the fight with Froggy Ogden and the lawyer, and the attempted seduction. Julian English then becomes drunk and goes out to his car and commits suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

Because the incidents listed above are instrumental in forcing Julian to self-destruction, they provide suitable material for a study of the philosophy of determinism in the novel. The first incident, Julian's throwing his drink, indicates that he acts under pressure of sociological determinism. Julian is upper-class, an aristocrat; Reilly is middle-class, a social climber, and he is the object of Julian's wrath against the middle class. Julian is a second-generation aristocrat and his social position is secure. He has been brought up in the Giabsville tradition of aristocracy, and during his youth he is never allowed to forget that he
is what he is and that very few others in Gibbsville are. Julian is in his late twenties when the action of the novel occurs, which is in 1930, a time when there remained much class-consciousness but little delineation of class lines. Edmund Wilson writes:

"There is no longer any hierarchy here, either of cultivation or wealth; the people are all being shuffled about, hardly knowing what they are or where they are headed, but each is clutching some family tradition, some membership in a selective organization . . . ." 9

Thus it is that Julian is particularly belligerent where Reilly is concerned, for Reilly is encroaching on Julian's heritage, on his membership in a lodge whose numbers are dwindling. His conscience is out of step with the times, and when his position is threatened by the Irishman, the snobbery he learned as a youth strikes out at the man. Not Julian English but tradition—the received standard—throws a drink at Harry Reilly. O'Hara describes the conditions that lead to the first event in Julian's plunge to self-destruction:

"Julian English sat there watching him, through eyes that he permitted to appear sleepier than they felt. Why, he wondered, did he hate Harry Reilly? Why couldn't he stand him? What was there about Reilly that caused him to say to himself: "If he starts one more of those moth-eaten stories I'll throw this drink in his face." But he knew he would not throw this drink in Harry Reilly's face. Still, it was fun to think about it." 10

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Five pages later the scene has shifted to another group at the party. Someone runs up to announce that Julian has thrown his drink at Harry Reilly. O'Hara's shift in emphasis seems to indicate not that Julian throws the drink but that the drink was thrown by Julian, that is, Julian's aristocratic tradition throws the drink—Julian is but a pawn.

Julian English is the type character that a naturalistic novelist commonly selects. He is a character driven by forces that he does not stop to analyze, and those forces are centered in Gibbsville's social atmosphere. They are nurtured in the deterministic society that O'Hara imagines:

[H]is is the imagination of society as some strange sentient organism which acts by laws of its own being which are not to be understood.\(^{11}\)

Julian does not know why he wants to throw his drink at Reilly; after he throws it he says to himself: "I thought it was about time someone shut him up."\(^{12}\) Julian knows that the explanation is weak, but it is the best one he has. He does not know why he did it, and since he does not know why he did it, it may be assumed that his action was determined for him. Considered in the context of sociological determinism, his action is explainable and, for the purposes of the novel, justifiable. The causative force of determinism


\(^{12}\) O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra, p. 15.
overpowered Julian's will: ("But he knew he would not throw this drink or any other drink in Harry Reilly's face.").

It is no act of free will which initiates the series of events leading to Julian's suicide. The naturalistic novelist does not allow his characters enough free will to allow them to affect the course of their lives. For O'Hara to have allowed Julian free will would not have resulted in the drink's being thrown, for Julian would not have thrown it. It was not his intention to throw it; still, it was thrown, and the course of Julian's life is changed. His lack of self-determination causes him to throw the drink, and from then to the moment of his death he is in conflict with society, the "strange, sentient organism."

Society as a deterministic force in Julian's several-day rush to self-destruction is next observed as a silent, suspicious organism which is instrumental in advancing the action of the novel. In the event at the Stage Coach Bar, Julian's actions derive from inner sources. W. F. Taylor has said with regard to the lack of free will that "Man . . . is a machine controlled either by the inner constraints of instinct and passion, or by the outer constraints of environment and circumstance."\(^13\) Julian's action at the roadhouse derives primarily from passion, but the influence of circumstance is also felt. Julian, drunk, attaches himself to

\(^{13}\)Taylor, p. 310.
the singer, Helene Holman, who, on this particular night, is more or less free to indulge her sensuality because Ed Charney, her lover and the local gangster, is not present. The affair between Julian and Helene might not have occurred had Ed been there; Julian and Ed have had a pleasant relationship: Ed buys Cadillacs from Julian's agency, and Julian buys bootleg liquor from Ed (champagne: one hundred dollars per case; Scotch: seventy-five dollars per case). But Ed is at his home with his wife, and Julian is at the roadhouse with Helene Holman. Compulsively, he asks her to go to his car with him; she agrees, and they leave the room.

Julian does not have a history of being unfaithful to his wife. What happens at the roadhouse is unique in their married life, but suddenly, inexplicably, it happens. Convenient circumstances are partially responsible, but Julian's reaction to them is so sudden that he only could have been acting irrationally. He instinctively seizes the moment. It is as if he has no voice in what he does. His passions are aroused, and he is urged to his car by them.

Julian's heeding the inner forces which compel him at the roadhouse excites the sentient organism into action. The following day, while lunching at the Gibbstville Club, Julian is accosted by his friend, Froggy Ogden, who berates him for his behavior the previous night. Julian does not even attempt to reconcile his differences with Froggy; he
does not tell him what he had told his business partner a few hours prior to lunch:

"You're wrong about one thing," said Julian.
"What's that?"
"I didn't lay that girl."\textsuperscript{14}

By now Julian recognizes that he is caught up in something against which resistance by a mere individual is ineffectual. He recognizes that it matters little whether he seduced Helene Holman, for, as his partner has said: "Well, maybe you didn't, but everybody thought you did and that amounts to the same thing."\textsuperscript{15} What it amounts to is that he is effectively being alienated from all sources of assistance, that is, from people, the traditional bulwark against adversity.

At the Gibbsville Club, Julian endures the insults leading to the fight, and the fight itself, as a matter of course. When Froggy says to Julian that "'This is between you and me,'" Julian replies:

"Not any more, it isn't. No, Captain, it's between me on the one side, standing here alone, and you and the Polack war veterans and whoresmasters on the other side. I'll stay where I am."\textsuperscript{16}

O'Hara has set the sentient organism against Julian, and the laws of that organism have cancelled any self-determination

\textsuperscript{14} O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 238.
Julian may have had up to that point. Julian says that he will stay where he is; that is no free choice of his own but a realization that he is unable to cause things to be any different from the way they are. He leaves the club and drives away from Gibbsville, thinking of his car in order to keep from thinking of the events of the last forty-eight hours, and then he remembers an appointment he has with his business partner and turns his car back toward Gibbsville.

He wished he had gone on instead of turning around. To go on until he had spent his money, write a check in Harrisburg, write another in Pittsburgh, until his money was gone; then sell the car, sell it and buy a second-hand Ford, then get a job in a lumber camp or something—where he wouldn't last a minute, not a day. There was something awfully good and lucky for him in being guided out of the club and into the car and away, but something else had pulled him back. You did not really get away from whatever it was he was going back to, and whatever it was, he had to face it.17

This last is not a matter of personal ethic; it is no moral choice. Julian is returning to honor his appointment in Samarra, for he knows that somehow, that for some unexplainable reason, Samarra is wherever he is.

In Gibbsville, he finds his wife at her mother's home. She has been discussing divorce with her mother. Julian tells her that something terrible has happened and is happening, and he vainly hopes that she can save him:

"This is a pretty good time for you to stick by me."
"I can't ... if you don't tell me what for."

17Ibid., p. 242.
"Blind, without knowing, you could stick by me. That's what you'd do if you were a real wife, but, what the hell."\textsuperscript{18}

For a petty reason, she refuses to go home with him; with that, his decision is made for him and his destiny is determined. Driven by the uncontrollable determinism of society with which he has been trying unsuccessfully to be reasonable, he returns to his home.

The brief episode with Alice Cartwright serves mainly to start Julian thinking about his wife and what a divorce will mean to him. It will mean that he is ruined in Gibs ville, even more ruined than he already is. While becoming drunk and thinking about his friends who are not his friends and his wife who is not his wife, he recalls "a slang axiom that never had any meaning in college days: 'Don't buck the system; you're liable to gum the works.'"\textsuperscript{19} The axiom has meaning for him now:

He went out on the porch and down the steps and opened the garage door and closed it behind him. It was cold in the garage, so he hurried. He had to see about the windows. They had to be closed.

He climbed in the front seat and started the car.

... "There, the bastards," said Julian, and smashed the clock with the bottom of the bottle, to give them an approximate time. It was 10:41.

There was nothing to do now but wait. He smoked a little, hummed for a minute or two, and had three quick drinks and was on his fourth when he lay back and slumped down in the seat. At 10:50, by the clock in the rear

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 256.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 276.
seat, he tried to get up. He had not the strength to help himself, and at ten minutes past eleven no one could have helped him, no one in the world.  

From the moment of the impact of Julian's drink in Reilly's face, no one could have helped him, no one in the world. At the mercy of his own instincts and passions and of his environment and of the particular circumstances of the two-and-a-half days, Julian is beyond help. Like a machine, he mechanically plods to his destruction at the hands of an impersonal society which is concerned with his situation only as a momentarily interesting diversion from its own directionless plodding through time. Julian is but a phenomenon among phenomena. His inept and fumbling starts and stops distract society's eye from its own condition only long enough for it to see reflected in him its own destiny. John O'Hara has shown through Julian English a view of the role of mankind: to freely choose its end, its goal, and strive for it, and to be dismayed but not surprised when the way to it is blocked. The story of Julian English is more sensational than is the story of the average man, but O'Hara's point is clear: the forces and factors which shape and control man's life are unvanquishable and unalterable, and man must restrain himself with as much dignity as possible within the bounds set for him.

\[20\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 230.\]
The purpose of all of the Gibbsville novels is similar in that each shows how determinism, whether instinctual or environmental, affects a character's life by shaping it for him. O'Hara emphasizes environmental, or outer, determinism as a sociological manifestation in Appointment in Samarra by illustrating the great extent to which it affects Julian English's life. In A Rage to Live, published fifteen years later, he explores the effects of instinctual, or inner, determinism by expounding Grace Caldwell Tate's libidinalism. Sensual impulses determine Grace's destiny. Critics have tended to make light of Rage because Grace is not a complex character who experiences change during the course of the novel. John Woodburn says:

The astonishing thing about A Rage to Live is that O'Hara, who has almost always written with such insight that I had begun to think no one was safe from him, could do such a thin job on his heroine. She is neither wholly understood nor satisfactorily explained.21

Because O'Hara's heroine does not change, the novel may be judged a failure as a "novel" if the evaluation is made with the necessity of character change as a criterion.

But when evaluated by another criterion, Rage is successful as a "novel." O'Hara's attitude toward his material in Rage is underscored by his presenting the heroine as a static character through whom he constantly discloses his theme.

Judged by that standard—the standard which allows a writer to present a static character as his main protagonist—Grace is a successful novel because Grace is a wondrously unchanging heroine. O'Hara depicts Grace as consistently and predictably at the mercy of her sensual whims. Sensuality is the unchanging inner drive in Grace which aliases her actions and directs them at its will. O'Hara presents Grace in a completely naturalistic manner; for according to Parrington:

> The total man and woman must be studied—the deeper instincts, the endless impulses. The three strongest instincts are fear, hunger, sex. In the life of the ordinary person, the third is most critical, hence the naturalist makes much of it.22

Around Grace's sensuality, O'Hara revolves his story. He does not concern himself with plot to any great extent except as it is necessary for the relationship between Grace and her husband, who dies fairly early in the story. Aside from the minor consideration of plot, O'Hara devotes all of his time to portraying Grace as a person whose life is destined to be controlled by the pleasure principle. As Carson has pointed out: "Her character is constant . . . . Every phase of her life, even during childhood, shows her as being under the influence of the principle of sexual pleasure."23

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22Parrington, III, 323.
23Carson, p. 19.
The complete absence of variety in Grace's sexual pleasures detracts from any effectiveness that might be gained by recounting them. It is sufficient to point out that she pursues them in her childhood, in her adolescence, in her late teens, in her adulthood, on through menopause, and into old age. The significant episode in her life occurs in her late thirties when she has an affair with Jack Hollister, a newspaper man.

Grace and Jack have their affair and put it behind them, but Jack moves on to an affair with another woman. His wife, Amy, discovers his infidelity but mistakes the woman for Grace Tate. During a Thanksgiving Day turkey shoot at Grace's farm, Amy appears and tries to shoot Grace. Amy is taken away by her husband, and Grace is assured by the forty guests that they will remain silent about what has happened. The turkey shoot is discontinued, the guests depart, and Grace, her brother and his fiancee, and the Martindales discuss Grace's alternatives. It is finally decided that she shall stay in Fort Penn—for appearances—until Christmas, and then go to New York to stay until she wants to return.

Grace writes to her son, who is away at school:

If it may at first appear that we are leaving while under fire, so to speak, I can only say that again we must risk that criticism. But we are not behaving in cowardly fashion if we know that the decision to leave is our own, arrived at independently, without even a whisper by an outsider. What is more important to remember is that we are leaving Fort
Penn, Fort Penn is not leaving us. It may at first be difficult to understand that, but the difference is important. We are who we are and what we are and by the very act of leaving we are making a protest against the things that have been happening to Fort Penn in recent years.24

Grace is, of course, lying to her son; for she is fully aware that, as an unmarried woman involved in a scandal, she has no future in Fort Penn, especially in view of the fact that most of her set are aware of her promiscuity. As her brother's French fiancée so well sums it up:

"Grace, this time it is not gay gossip, sly, laughing. 'Oho! Grace is sleeping with that man.' I know how that gossip is. This is different. It is mean, angry. A gun is not funny to laugh at and wink. It is ugly. Iron. Steel. It creates fear. It frightens with the sound, the noise. It is a big, ugly, noisy fact. It is not love, it is ugly hate. . . . People will say horrible things because they think that if they say horrible things they push Grace away from them and push the horrible gun away from them."25

As in the case of Julian English and Helene Holman, the implicit irony in Grace's situation is not unknown to her, and she can do nothing to reverse her circumstances. She probably is not aware that she is not responsible for what is happening to her. She does not stop to consider, as did Julian English, that she is driven by forces over which she has no control and that she therefore does not have free will and consequently is not responsible for her actions. Grace,

24Hara, A Rage to Live, p. 582.
25Ibid., p. 572.
as O'Hara carefully indicates, is not a person of even above-average intellect, but she is a cunning person. And her cunning tells her to leave Fort Penn; it tells her that she is experiencing a significant moment in her life. Without being philosophic—without being able to be philosophic—Grace intuitively recognizes the forces of sociological determinism in realizing that by continuing to live in Fort Penn under the censure which Fort Penn society is readying for her, she will be living in accordance with the requirements of pressures more powerful than her will.

Grace Caldwell Tate relocates in New York City. She escapes from the destiny which Fort Penn is preparing for her; she is, she thinks, free to do as she wishes and free to do with her life what she will. In New York City she continues her wanton existence, still under the influence of the principle of sexual pleasure, and her destiny is no more her own than Julian's is when he turns his car around and returns to Gibsenville. (Grace had once talked to Julian at a Lantenengo Country Club dance when she was thirty-seven and he was twenty; seven years later, if she had read in the New York papers of his suicide, and if she had known the similarity of their circumstances, she probably would have laughed at him and thought herself the more clever for having run from Fort Penn.)
In *A Rage to Live*, O'Hara's foremost naturalistic concern is for sexual attraction as an agent of internal determinism. Grace Caldwell Tate's sensuality is instinctual within her, and she reacts spontaneously to its urgings. Toward the end of the novel, her urges bring sociological determinism briefly upon her; she avoids that, however, only to relapse into the pursuit of gratification of her sensuality. Thirty years later, now approximately sixty-seven years old, she is still at the mercy of her passion, seeking without dignity a successful love relationship. The novel ends on a note of despair as Grace seeks satisfaction with Ned Minor, a homosexual whom, in the year Grace left Fort Penn, she had spurned. Grace has escaped Fort Penn, but she is still living in the private hell of an existence beyond her control and understanding. The principal causative factor of her particular existence is her lack of self-determination, and she will fill her remaining years aimlessly and "die of nothing but a Rage to live."26

O'Hara resumes his treatment of the determinism of sex in 1955, six years after *A Rage to Live*, in another of his pessimistic novels, *Ten North Frederick*. Sex and society are united as determinants in the life of Joe Chapin, the novel's protagonist. The portrayal of Joe Chapin is decidedly

26*Ibid.*, Title Page (Quotation from Alexander Pope's *Epistle to a Lady*).
dualistic: his failure in public life is due largely to the designs of sociological determinism, and his domestic failure is directly traceable to the determinism of sex. The argument that Chapin's public life is not a success may be untenable, depending on the definition given the term. As a business man, Joe is a success. His legacy includes $100,000 for his son, and a like sum for his daughter, and the bulk of the estate for his widow. He is co-partner of the most successful law firm in Gibbsville. But as an aspiring politician, he fails humiliatingly.

In the light of naturalistic determinism, it is as a defeated politician that Joe must be studied. Frederick is one of O'Hara's most pessimistic novels. Walcutt lists the forms which the naturalistic novel may assume. One of them is "the chronicle of despair, in which a whole life is depicted as the weary protagonist trudges across the dreary wastes of the modern world and finds, usually, an early death."27 Joe Chapin is just such a weary protagonist, and these are Joe's "dreary wastes": his early years, his love for his wife, his middle years, his love for his children, his ambitions, his love for the woman he cannot marry, and even more desperate than any of those, his later years, his final, unresponsive years.

27 Walcutt, p. 21.
At fifty-two, Joe's consuming ambition is destroyed. He has always wanted to be President of the United States and thinks that he should be. But for at least two good reasons, both of which are sociological determinants, Joe Chapin does not receive the nomination he seeks. Carson says that Joe Chapin never became President both because of his difference with Mike Slattery, the local Republican opportunist, and ultimately because of his apparently high, but actually limited, social position.²⁸

Joe Chapin's difference with Mike Slattery is an uncomplicated one: Mike does not want Joe to be President. The explanation O'Hara gives is brief:

As soon as he suspected that Joe Chapin was beginning to act like a man who wanted to be President he decided that Chapin was not presidential timber, and from that moment on Joe Chapin never had a chance.²⁹

Joe spends between one hundred and one-hundred and fifty thousand dollars in his effort to win the nomination. The opposition by Mike Slattery cannot be overcome, especially when it and the fact of Joe's social position combine to keep Joe in Gibbstown. The Joseph Benjamin Chapin family is the foremost family in Gibbstown, Pennsylvania. But being the head of the leading family of Gibbstown means nothing on the national scale. Joe is at a social disadvantage because he is from Gibbstown, and the town's social

²⁸Carson, pp. 22-23.

²⁹O'Hara, Ten North Frederick, p. 11.
ladder does not have a rung high enough for Joe to achieve which will allow him to transcend his "humble" national position. It is thus that Mike Slattery is aided in his campaign against Joe Chapin: Joe cannot live away from the restrictions of his social or sociological milieu; his social class, and his responsibility as the leading member of it, is a determinant in his life and a deterrent to his ambition. O'Hara succinctly states the case against Joe:

On Joe's income [his family] could have travelled to the far places and seen the strange things, the lands and people that they knew through Stoddard's Lectures. But who in Shanghai, China, would know that in Gibbsville, Pennsylvania, U.S.A, Joseph B. Chapin was an aristocrat of unassailable standing? If a Chinese prince were to come to Gibbsville, he would be entertained by the Chapins, but if the Chapins were visiting in Pekin, would the reverse be true? Closer to home, to take up residence in Philadelphia or New York was not a prospect that attracted Edith. It would require much, much greater wealth than Joe possessed to get established in the big American cities. Joe could, of course, continue his legal career, but that was not to live as a retired gentleman.30

O'Hara presents Joe Chapin as an affluent, decorous, and discreet protagonist who is successful in business but a failure in politics. His disappointing entrance into politics leaves him spiritually broken, with no prospects for a full life during his remaining years. He tells his wife:

First, I'll try to get back my self-respect without the conceit. I'll try to get over my embarrassment. ... I'm going to live at 10 North Frederick Street, go to

30 Ibid., p. 189.
my office, spend the summers on the farm. . . . I'm a useless chump. I'm one of the little princes of Gibbstown, Pennsylvania, and I wanted to be President of--. 31

His marriage and home life, he realizes, will be no comfort to him, because his relationship with his wife is ruined by her sexual inadequacy (the result of a Lesbian affair while in college). Sex, as a determinant, is both passive and active in its effects on Joe's life.

Edith Chapin's past homosexual attachment causes the ruin of their marriage and also affects the lives of their children. Joe endures his wife's hatred for men until after his political defeat, and then, within ten years of his death, he has an affair with Kate Drummond, his daughter's New York roommate, which causes Joe to feel even more acutely the failure of his marriage. On discontinuing the affair, because of the social pressures involved, Joe turns to liquor for solace during his last years. The remorse brought about by the disruption of his only meaningful love relationship drives Joe to alcoholism and, finally, to cirrhosis of the liver and death. Joe's private failure provides the gloomy note on which his life, and the novel, ends. His private failure is thus seemingly as significant as his public failure, but neither of them is as important to the few friends who knew of them as they are to Joe: they still consider his life a great success.

31Ibid., p. 358.
In his own opinion, Joe has lived a meaningless life; his final years are miserable years for him because the achieving of two of his most ardent desires has been denied to him by an impersonal society represented, publicly, by Mike Slattery and, privately, by his wife, who ruined his marriage, and the censure he would receive if he were to marry Kate Drummond.

O'Hara portrays Joe Chapin as a man who never has a chance for happiness because he cannot be a self-determining individual. Ten North Frederick is "an objectification of John O'Hara's essential pessimism towards life in general."32 The novel goes beyond Appointment in Samarra and A Race to Live in its presentation of "an underlying morbidity and the sense of a hostile universe."33 The essential difference between Frederick and the two others lies in O'Hara's treatment of the effects of determinism on the leading characters.

In Samarra, Julian is permitted an early death. In Rage, Grace is too simple to be deterred from her pursuit of sensual pleasures. Society's censure does not overcome her inner drives. In Frederick, Joe's last eleven years are the years of his private hell, and O'Hara seems to imply that Julian English and Grace Caldwell Tate—the former by his early death and the latter by her unthinkingness—are fortunate in comparison with Joe Chapin. Joe continues to

32 Carson, p. 29. 33 Ibid.
live, and that is his tragedy. St. Clair McKelway says of Ten North Frederick: "You have the sensation of being not in the middle of a book but in the middle of life." And, as Carson says, "... in the midst of such a life, one can only prepare for death."

A pattern in O'Hara's development as a novelist and a naturalist begins to emerge with his publication of From the Terrace. In Samarra and Race, the author points directly to the causes of despair in the lives of the respective heroes; but, in Frederick, he seems unwilling to commit himself to either external or internal determinism. Apparently, he is hesitant to isolate either one as the dominant determinant, and feels that each interacts with the other and that neither functions independently of the other. In the first two Gibsenville novels, O'Hara writes as if he believes that, in the first case, the principal causative force directing man's life is society, and, in the second case, as if it is instinct. In Frederick, external and internal forces share equally the responsibility. And, in From the Terrace, O'Hara's shift in emphasis continues: both forces affect Alfred Eaton's life, but O'Hara seems to consider inner determinism as the stronger of the two.

34 St. Clair McKelway, a review of Ten North Frederick, New Yorker Magazine, XXXI (December 17, 1955), 162.

35 Carson, p. 29.
Alfred Eaton is much like Joe Chapin in that each is the subject of a "chronicle of despair," each accrues great wealth, each is considered successful in life, and each falls before an impersonal universe which shapes and controls and influences his life. Joe Chapin, at least outwardly, awaits his death with as much dignity as he can muster, but Alfred Eaton does not fully recognize his own situation.

*Terrace* is as much a study in cause and effect as is *Appointment in Samarra* because O'Hara shows Alfred being almost capriciously swept to success by a fortuitous series of events which he in no way is instrumental in producing. The same impersonal forces that make him a success in business and politics are the ones which bring about his downfall, and Alfred, in pondering his existence as a failure, does not realize that he has condemned himself to ignominy in addition to failure. Aiding the impersonal circumstances of environmental determinism is Alfred's hypersensitive adherence to the particular set of mores by which he tries to guide himself in conducting his affairs. The inner drive of his conscience contributes materially to his abject state at the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, the interplay of the two expressions of naturalistic determinism moves on the mechanism of coincidence.

The initial cataclysm in Alfred Eaton's life occurs at the age of eleven when his brother dies and Alfred realizes
that his father would be less sad if Alfred had died and the brother lived. This event is significant in Alfred's life because it is the first in a series which impassions him with a sense of moral consciousness. Naturalism, of course, in denying free will, precludes moral values; but O'Hara emphasizes that Alfred's moral consciousness is a passion and that if it is not instinctual in him, it occurs early enough in his life to be decidedly instinctive in effect. With the emphasis being placed on the passional aspect of Alfred's strict adherence to his moral code, the very severity of it makes it seem to be more of an expression of inner determinism than of social ethics.

When Alfred is eighteen, there occurs the death of a girl he has loved from childhood. He and the girl have an argument over his rival, and the girl—Victoria Dockwiler—goes off with the rival in his car. They are both killed in an accident. The next year, while in college, Alfred is beaten by some students. Later that year, Alfred beats a man named Frolick, with whom his mother has been adulterous. In each case, Alfred's main concern is for the role he has played. It does not matter as much that Victoria and the rival were killed as it does that he feels to blame. At college, the humiliation and suffering he undergoes do not cause him as much anguish as does his desire to avenge himself. And it is his own trait of possessiveness that causes
him to thrash Frolick. During the Dockwiler funeral, Alfred and Norma Budd, who is seven years older than he, begin an affair. Several years later, Norma dies in a double suicide, and Alfred feels guilty also about her death. When Lex Porter, Alfred's closest friend, says, "I'm sorry, boy. I know she was a great friend of yours," Alfred replies: "I wasn't a great friend of hers, though. If I had been, maybe this wouldn't have happened."36 In his confusion, he ponders the past events. O'Hara says of him:

And throughout all three phases of his self-blame—his guilt in the Frolick episode; his desire for revenge in the college incident; his clear responsibility for what had happened to Victoria and Peter—he had an expectation of punishment that was so strong as to be a need... Hence his fear, his fears, and his terror, made worse by his inability to release some of it in an expression of his guilt and alarm to another living person.37

It is with such a mental attitude that his adult life begins. After his father dies, Alfred goes into a business with Lex Porter which fails because Alfred will not be party to a minor illegal financial transaction. Alfred is seeking other employment when his destiny is again affected. He saves the life of a drowning boy who is the grandson of James D. MacHardie, the president of MacHardie and Company, a private bank and brokerage firm. Alfred is hired by MacHardie, and on his first assignment meets Natalie Benziger, for whom


37 Ibid., p. 220. The italics in this citation are mine.
he will later divorce his wife. Things go well while he is with MacHardie, and when World War II begins Alfred becomes Assistant Secretary of the Navy, through another improbable coincidence. The nature of coincidence in his being hired by MacHardie and being appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy is deterministic in that they are occurrences which Alfred does not deliberately create. It is by accident that Alfred is involved in the coincidences, and in that way his destiny is being shaped by naturalistic forces.

While with the Navy he learns that some of his former business associates are planning to buy an airplane plant. Knowing that a connection between their names and his will appear suspicious to many high government officials, he resigns his post and begins to seek other employment. He encounters difficulty because of his poor health and his moral hypersensitivity. Weakened by a massive hemorrhage, he enters the period of his ultimate pathos and becomes an "Archy Busby." Alfred tells Natalie about Archy Busby:

"A symbol. He was a real person. But he's a symbol of all the Yale guys and Princeton guys and Racquet Club nice-guys that for some reason or other didn't quite make it. Forty. Forty-five. Fifty. Along in there they get let out when they most need some reassurance. . . . But they're always around. Professional Yale men or Princeton men. Reunions. Games. Professional uncles, too. And if somebody wants somebody to drive their car to Florida, they call up an Archy Busby and think they're doing him a favor. And in a way they are. It makes him feel useful." 38

38 Ibid., p. 930.
In a very few years, Alfred receives a telephone call:

He hung up and turned to her and he was even able to simulate a small triumph. "Don's brother-in-law. He's seventy-five and partly paralyzed. He's coming in on the nine-forty train for New London, and Don wants me to meet him and see that he gets to the hotel."

"How did he know you were here?"
"Just took a chance."
"At five minutes after nine? What if you hadn't been here? Mr. Shanley wouldn't have been able to get in from the country."
"I didn't ask him that, Natalie."
"Well, . . . let's go."
"You don't have to go with me."
"Oh, but I do," she said.
"Well, all right. It's something to do."

Those are the last words of the novel. Alfred is in his late forties; he has become a parody of what he might have been in the preceding years. He is now "Archy Busby," and his most important function is to be socially decorative when his peers have use for him. Much of his deterioration is the result of circumstances that he neither created himself nor controlled in any way, exemplified by his saving the MacHardie child. But more noticeable than the external factors which contribute to his failure is the inner determinism that is revealed in his unreasonable moral consciousness. The perpetual punishment to which he has condemned himself is exemplified by his leaving his Navy position.

O'Hara's irony is implicit in his attitude toward Alfred Eaton, and Alfred's story is similar to Joe Chapin's. Alfred and Joe are both above-average men who partly by

39 Ibid., p. 981.
their own weaknesses and partly by factors which control them are reduced to shadowy representations of what they once were. In Alfred's case, "he is victimized by ignominious personal disgrace."\(^{40}\) It is a disgrace determined by passion and nurtured by circumstance.

In the four novels already mentioned, the protagonists are defeated by death or humiliation through a variety of agents, all of which in some way derive from sociological or instinctual determinism. But in *Ourselves to Know*, O'Hara reveals his protagonist, Robert Millhouser, of Lyons, Pennsylvania, as a man who wants only to know himself and to be certain of the meaning of life and his role in it. O'Hara's choice of titles brings to mind Pope's *Essay on Man*, the final lines of which are:

> That reason, passion, answer one great aim;  
> That true self-love and social are the same;  
> That virtue only makes our bliss below;  
> And all our knowledge is, ourselves to know.\(^{41}\)

Robert Millhouser seeks to know himself. But at the end of the novel, he still does not. If anything, he has decided that life is even more meaningless than he had first imagined. The two major events in Robert's life that are most significant are his mother's death, which causes him to

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\(^{40}\)Carson, p. 66.

seek someone with whom he can be as close as he was with her, and the murder of his wife, Hedda. Robert is rather desperate when, at age fifty-one, he meets Hedda Steele, who is eighteen. They experience a physical attraction for each other which they experiment with, and then they marry.

Robert is an emotionally inaccessible man. The reason may be that he experienced the shattering knowledge that his best friend was homosexual. The impact on Robert drives him home to his mother, with whom he has a satisfactory mother-son relationship. O'Hara carefully points out that there is no abnormal dependence by Robert upon his mother and that certainly their relationship is not incestuous. Robert's mother, above all else, represents a static quality to the boy, and it is for that reason that he remains with her until her death. Millhouser marries Hedda Steele only on the vaguest provocation. For whatever reason, he is "totally devoid of any reaction to untoward occurrence in reality outside himself..." But he is jarred to action by Hedda's taunting admission of infidelity, and he murders her in her sleep. He has no feelings at all about the enormity of his action; he does not even realize that it is an extreme act. O'Hara says of Hedda and Robert:

But she had been coldly and deliberately cruel; having destroyed the man that he had been, and that he had come to like, she expressed no regret. She

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42 Carson, p. 41.
had desecrated what was left of that man by her vicious taunting, by taking pleasure in her wildly free admissions and her nastily childish eagerness to turn confession into boasting. . . . She had made it impossible for him to do anything but what he was about to do. 43

Later, in prison, Robert is able to admit to himself that his lack of emotion is the substance of his predicament:

"But literally I am insane. There is something missing, and it's what I've been saying. Feeling, that's what is missing. A normal, sane man would feel remorse for killing a beautiful creature. But I don't feel either remorse or pleasure, the pleasure of revenge." 44

Somehow, Robert Millhouser has lost hope. Perhaps the knowledge of his friend's homosexuality drove it from him, or perhaps his mother's death did, or perhaps Hedda's murder; which one it was, or whether it was all three, is immaterial, for the result of any or all is that Robert Millhouser finds the certainty in life that he is seeking. And that certainty is that life is meaningless, as it must be in a naturalistic and indifferent universe. Millhouser comes to know that his hope for happiness on earth is meager and that the best he can do in the face of all the forces exerted against him is try to maintain his dignity as an individual human being. He says to his attorney:

"I'm going back to Lyons and live in that house for the rest of my life. Once a day I'll go for a walk so that the people will be able to see me, and

43 Hare, Ourselves to Know, p. 355.
44 Ibid., p. 380.
won't suspect me of—oh, lying drunk in my room. Maybe I'll go to the post office every day. I'll speak to those who speak to me, and I suppose in time they'll all get used to me."\(^4\)

But even so, Robert Millhouser knows that only outwardly will he seem dignified, for in all his searching he has discovered that he has no soul.

Robert's biographer is a young man much like Robert in that he is searching for certainty. Chester Calthorp, Robert's homosexual friend who has become a monk and has visited Robert in prison, is mentioned in a discussion between Robert and his biographer. Robert exclaims:

"We mustn't expect the absolute answers!"

\(\ldots\) "Chester Calthorp, with his vain deluding joys. I wept, yes, I wept. I had no answer! I was dead, as I'm dead now, as I've been dead all these years. As dead as you're alive. But this man that I loved, deceiving himself with his penance and his prayers. Fighting, stifling his soul with prayers to the God that gave him a soul! Asking his God to benumb that soul. Does he believe in his God, or doesn't he? He doesn't, my young friend, or he wouldn't ask Him to crush his spirit."\(^4\)

And when Gerald Higgins, the biographer, asks Robert what he believes, Robert replies that he believes in luck.

"And what else do you believe?"
He ceased to smile. "Nothing."
"But that's not true, Mr. Millhouser."
"It's true now. I make it true by saying it. You have had your last peek at my life, and even that was only what I let you see."


"But I can study what I've seen, and I will."...
"Look out, Gerald. You may find what you're looking for. Yourself."

Robert Millhouser reflects the final stage of John O'Hara's shift from external to internal determinism. The knowledge that he discovers is not what he had hoped to discover: he had wished to believe that he had meaning as an individual in the universe, but the truth that he finds is that he is meaningless. In delving into himself, he learns that beneath his surface nothing exists; he learns that he, as a distinct, self-determining being, does not exist. Robert Millhouser is O'Hara's strongest statement of his own naturalistic philosophy. When Robert claims that he believes in nothing but luck, he admits to himself that he has no hand in determining his own destiny, for luck, whether precious or pernicious, is irrepressible.

In the Gipsyville novels, there may be seen in varying degrees of intensity the author's naturalistic philosophy of determinism and its attendant absence of free will. In each of the novels, the delineation of the attributes of literary naturalism grows less pronounced. At the same time, however, the general sense of despair and pessimism, which increases as the novels progress from 1934 to 1953, perhaps offers the most effective unifying element among the novels, especially in view of John O'Hara's deepening.

47Ibid.
pessimistic attitude as it is reflected in his shift of emphasis from external to internal determinism.

In both his philosophy and technique, O'Hara presents his pessimistic attitudes. He consistently reveals his characters in their most vicious moments, almost sadistically places the least favorable construction upon their actions, and never allows them contentment except as momentary respite from their travail and despair. Philosophically, O'Hara pointedly illustrates through his characters that reality is essentially evil and that such happiness as it may allow is vastly overbalanced and outweighed by the evil in it. The particular evil that O'Hara emphasizes in the Gibsville novels is the determinism of society and of individual instincts.
CHAPTER IV

NATURALISTIC SETTING AND TECHNIQUE

IN THE GIBBSVILLE NOVELS

O'Hara's subject matter differs from that of his literary predecessors in his choice of milieu and characters. His forebears' interests generally ranged from the slums of great cities to rural areas. The early naturalists were writers of the commonplace in life, and their characters were often of the lower classes, people concerned above all else with economic survival. For some of his work, Frank Norris employed tenement areas as background; Stephen Crane used New York City for the same purpose, and included much of the sordidness and brutality incidental to life in slum districts or subsistence-level areas. There is little of the fashionable in the settings and material chosen by the early naturalists. Their concept of milieu was deterministic in that they transformed setting into a force which had considerable influence on their characters. The characters' state of economic deprivation seems to indicate that naturalism was a concept that applied more to deprived persons than to persons of wealth and social position. The early naturalists often presented their characters as people who might have survived if they had had the advantages of wealth and power, the implication being that poor people are more
susceptible to the forces of naturalistic determinism than are wealthy people.

O'Hara's milieu is different from that of the early naturalists in that Gibbsville, Pennsylvania, is a city much like most other American cities and also in that the people in whom he is interested are apparently equipped to offer deterministic forces more of a battle than are the poor. One of O'Hara's main points in all of the Gibbsville novels is that the rich suffer as much as the poor and that the difference between their sufferings is not in degree but in kind.

The physical and spiritual characteristics of Gibbsville\textsuperscript{1} are not peculiar to that city. It has diversified industrial interests, a representative cross-section of races in its citizenry, and the customary amount of class-consciousness of most towns its size. Its population is probably less than 50,000, and O'Hara carefully avoids making Gibbsville appear to be an extraordinary city, as is evident in Ten North Frederick: Joe Chapin is a citizen of Gibbsville, but no one outside of Pennsylvania has heard of the town, and Chapin is defeated, in part, by reason of his being from Gibbsville, which is an ordinary, medium-size town.

\textsuperscript{1}Gibbsville, as it is referred to in this chapter, is symbolic of all the towns that appear in the novels. Fort Johnson, Fort Penn, or Lyons would serve equally as well as Gibbsville.
Joe Chapin is the leading citizen of Gibbsville; he is of the upper class, owns his law practice, and is wealthy, mannerly, discreet, and decorous. In that way he is representative of most of O'Hara's main characters: Julian English is upper class, the inheritor of his family's tradition of prestige, and he is the owner of his business; Grace Caldwell Tate is the wife of a gentleman farmer and the sister of the editor of the Gibbsville newspaper; Alfred Eaton is of the upper class, hugely successful in finance and politics; and Robert Hillhouse is a bank president and gentleman of leisure. Their manner of living is in keeping with their status as members of Gibbsville's higher echelons. They are members of the Lantenango Country Club, the Second Thursdays (a luncheon club), the Assembly, the John Gibb Club, the Gibbsville Club, or any association which is distinct from the kind of organizations belonged to by the other classes of Gibbsville.

The action of the Gibbsville novels occurs in the first half of the twentieth century. With the exception of Appointment in Samarra, in which the action is limited to the year 1930, the life span of the main character of a novel determines the time of the novel. Generally, though, O'Haraprefaces his treatment of a major character by going back through time to reveal certain qualities of his parents. Most of O'Hara's main characters are born around 1900, and World War I is significant in the lives of the male characters.
From the above, it may be seen that O'Hara departs from the patterns of his literary predecessors in the matter of his setting and in his choice of characters. He sets his characters in a high social station, and slum life and other such sordid aspects of life have no part in his novels. He does, however, present his characters as being cruel and savage, which is probably a result of his pessimistic attitude toward life and people. As for his depiction of the sordidness of his people, it is most evident in their interpersonal relationships. O'Hara's people seldom have sympathy with others of their set, and they never have sympathy for people who are beneath them on the social scale. Their interpersonal relationships inevitably fail, and, because the most elemental relationship between them is sex, some attention should be given to it as an aspect of naturalism. The second criterion listed by Parrington covers the matter of sex:

Frankness. The total man and woman must be studied—the deeper instincts, the endless impulses. The three strongest instincts are fear, hunger, sex. In the life of the ordinary person, the third is most critical, hence, the naturalist makes much of it. ²

Mention has already been made of O'Hara's use of sex as an internal determinant in the lives of his characters. As a determinant, sex is given either biological or psychological expression. Often, sex is presented by O'Hara as

²Parrington, III, 323.
a divertissement for his characters; more often, it is presented not as lust but as an outlet for emotional frustrations. As a divertissement, sex in Appointment in Samarra is limited to the minor characters; the major characters are not concerned with it as such. In A Rage to Live—Grace Caldwell Tate to one side—sex as a titillation is found principally in the male characters. There is much visiting of brothels and many casual connections with girls of the street. In one case, the seduction of Grace Tate is pursued by a man named Roger Bannon, who accomplishes the fact merely as a means of crossing class lines. (Ten North Frederick also has much extra-familial sexuality, expressed primarily in the District Attorney's seduction of Joe Chapin's wife and in the nymphomania of Joe's daughter.) All of the characters in From the Terrace give way before the sexual urge, and, of the major characters, Alfred Eaton is typical: British prostitutes during World War I, show girls in New York City after the war, wives of friends, and his ex-wife. Robert Millhouser, in Ourselves to Know, is a frequenter of brothels; in fact, his initial interest in Hedda Steele is a sex-oriented one. In general, most of the casual sex encounters occur away from Gibbsville, and, as the reader becomes more familiar with O'Hara's novels, he expects as a matter of course for the ladies of Gibbsville to mingle sex with business during shopping trips to Philadelphia.
But, sex of the sort that is described above is public domain and is not characteristic of naturalism.

O'Hara emphasizes the psychological aspect of sex as a natural drive. His characters seem to find in it a quality of stability which is missing in other of life's activities. O'Hara almost invariably follows a cataclysmic event in a character's life with an episode in which the character seeks a sexual attachment. Adversity in life seems to be neutralized for a character by the constant nature of sex, and in it he finds a refutation of the nothingness of life and an escape from the knowledge of life's despair.

In all of the Gibsenville novels, the main character seeks refuge in sex and tries to recoup his faltering faith in both himself and his environment, but the three novels in which the idea appears most clearly are Appointment in Samarra, From the Terrace, and Ourselves to Know. Julian English promises his wife that he will go to Harry Reilly to apologize for embarrassing him the night before.

"One condition," he said.
"What?"
"Will you do it?" he said.
"I won't promise till I know what it is. What's the condition?"
"That you be in bed when I get home," he said.
"Now? In the afternoon?"

She agrees. Julian goes to Reilly's home, is turned away by the Irishman's sister, and returns to his own home.

30 O'Hara, Appointment in Samarra, p. 77.
"He wouldn't see me." Julian lit a cigarette and walked over to the window.

"It's all right," she said.

"No," he said, gently. "No, it isn't."

"No, it isn't," she said. "But let's not think of it now." . . . It was the greatest single act of their married life. He knew it, and she knew it. It was the time she did not fail him.\(^4\)

Julian and his wife go to the Stage Coach Bar that night, and on the way he extracts her promise to go out to the car with him sometime during the evening. Julian seems to be aware that he will be involved in something. As it happens, the involvement is between him and the singer at the bar. But later, toward the novel's end, after his return to Gibbsville, he tries to persuade his wife to go home with him so that he may reveal his fears to her. She is in her automobile, and Julian is standing beside it, in the street. He pleads with her:

"Listen, will you go away with me? Now? This minute? Will you? Will you go away with me?"

"No, no, no, no, no. What did you do? Tell me what you did? What did you do to Froggy?"

"I can't talk to you like this. Let's go home."

"Oh, no. I don't want to go home. You'll make me stay with you. Oh, go away, Julian. Please let me alone."\(^5\)

It is probable that if Caroline had "stayed" with Julian, he would have been diverted from his still unformulated plan to commit suicide. But Caroline fails him. She does not go with him, and he attempts to substitute Alice Cartwright for her, but by now even sex provides no respite.

\(^4\)Ibid., pp. 79-80.  \(^5\)Ibid., pp. 255-256.
from his burgeoning sense of doom. When sex, the last defense against outside pressures, is no longer effective, Julian kills himself. In no other novel does O'Hara emphasize the role of sex as much as he does in *Samarra*; that is, it is never made a buffer between life and death, but that is probably because none of the other novels is as sensational as *Samarra* and because the main characters of those novels are vitiated by the vicissitudes of their lives.

Throughout *From the Terrace*, a pattern of disaster followed by sex is revealed in the character of Alfred Eaton. The three most notable occurrences of the disaster-sex motif are the death of Victoria Dockwiler, Alfred's falling-out with his friend and business partner, and the infidelity of his wife. When he is eighteen, his girl friend is killed in an automobile accident. Norma Budd, of Gibbsville and New York, is a house guest of the Eatons' during the weekend of the funeral. The girl and Alfred slip away on two different occasions during the time because, as Norma says, "It's time isn't it?" On the day of the funeral, they are together in her family's home, which has been closed, and O'Hara says of Alfred:

As long as he lived, (and he knew it), this time—-not the evening before, not any other time to come—-would always be somewhere in his senses.6

6O'Hara, *From the Terrace*, p. 143.
From then on, Alfred is aware of the constant quality of sex which makes it such a good defense against the despair which is caused by the forces that shape the course of his life. Later in his life, he has an argument with Lex Porter, who is his best friend and business partner. The result of the argument is that he and Lex become distrustful of each other and their business fails. Realizing what is happening, Alfred goes home to his wife, and O'Hara devotes a number of pages to the ensuing sexual encounter between them. During the encounter, which lasts from late afternoon until midnight, some mention is made of Lex, and after that the whole matter is forgotten. After Alfred is hired by MacHardie, he is sent into the coal regions to contact a Mr. Benziger and to determine the state of affairs in the coal industry. He stays in Mountain City for a month, and during that time, in various ways, he comes to realize that his marriage is in an unsatisfactory state. With that realization, he allows himself to begin an affair with Benziger's daughter, whom he marries after his divorce from his wife. (He "allows" himself in the sense that if his marriage were satisfactory he would not, as a point of honor, indulge his impulses.)

Each of the three events cited is significant in shaping Alfred's destiny: the first contributes to his pessimistic attitude, the second removes certain obstacles which impede his development as a financial success, and the third
demonstrates to him that as a person of honor he stands in a company whose numbers are few. Each of the events affects his life in a permanent way, and the stability of sex comforts Alfred in the confusion brought about by the events.

In the life of Robert Millhouser, sex attraction and expression constitute the end of one way of life and the beginning of another for him. From early in life, Robert has been strongly attached to his mother, and he lives with her until her death. When she dies, Robert is approximately fifty years of age, and until her death he has satisfied his normal sexual urges at brothels. Zilph Millhouser's death disrupts Robert's pattern of existence, and when he meets Hedda Steele, a wanton if not nymphomaniacal girl eighteen years of age, he attaches himself to her sexuality and marries her. Robert's uniting with Hedda is a deliberate affair, for as O'Hara says of him on the day of Zilph's burial:

The lonely years seemed only to have been leading up to this loneliest night of all, and he knew that this would be the rest of his life if he did nothing to change it. But he recognized that there was hope so long as he could want it changed. On that hope, and not much more, he lived for three more years. 7

Apparently, Robert's hope rests in Hedda Steele's sexuality; within a matter of days he arranges to be introduced to her; and within a matter of days of that, he uses her.

7O'Hara, Ourselves to Know, p. 226.
Sex, in itself and as it is represented in Hedda, affords Robert the means of putting distance between himself and his unsatisfactory life to that time. The device is effective for several years. He then learns of Hedda's infidelity. He has been hospitalized by pneumonia, and, when he returns home, he confronts Hedda with his knowledge of her activities. She is noncommittal, saying only that she will leave if he will give her money. She then taunts him with her body, but when he is unable to complete the act, she jeers at him and humiliates him. Hedda is both the means by which Robert regains his hold on life and by which he irrevocably loses it. Sex briefly quells Robert's pessimistic attitude, but in the end it is not sufficient as a buffer between him and the forces that shape his destiny.

Sex in O'Hara's novels is often the cause of discord between the major characters and their spouses. Caroline English is contemplating divorce from Julian for a number of reasons, and it is his tryst with the singer that impels her to action; Sidney Tate dies suddenly, thus leaving unresolved his intention to divorce Grace for her infidelity; Alfred Eaton divorces his wife; and Robert Millhouser slays his. Joe Chapin and his wife remain together, but only because that is in keeping with what is proper behavior for people in their position.
In the Gibbsville novels, O'Hara presents the subject of sex to promote understanding of his characters, which serves the dual purpose of supporting his naturalistic philosophy and of illustrating, in part, his naturalistic technique. His method is to present his characters as they move about in relation to the material backdrop and the ethnic atmosphere in which he places them, and that is why his study of them must be a synchronic rather than a diachronic one.

A large part of any single novel in the Gibbsville group is devoted to documenting social history and to detailing customs, rituals, events, or anything which is part of the environment of the characters. One of the principles of literary naturalism is objectivity in technique. Others are truth and sincerity. But literary theory, especially naturalistic theory, is likely to be adjusted by writers to fit their own practices. As Ahnebrink has said of the early American naturalists: "... in practice, however, they deviated greatly from their individual theories because of differences in temperament, experiences, and attitudes toward and concept of life." O'Hara has never stated explicitly his literary theory, of course, but if he were to do so, he would have to include in it heavy reliance on the power of documentation and detail to show how and where his characters live and as a device to draw his readers

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8Ahnebrink, p. 89.
into the story. Whatever his theme, O'Hara attempts to lend an illusion of reality to it by thoroughly documenting it. Gardiner comments on that aspect of naturalistic literature:

The whole field of spiritual truth . . . is forbidden the naturalist by his underlying philosophy. Realizing or feeling uneasy that he is not telling the whole truth . . . he will almost inevitably be impelled, as a sort of compensation, to heap up too many facts in another sector and this will lead . . . to the double fault of over-writing and lack of motivation.  

He might well have O'Hara in mind, because it is that writer's habit to rely very heavily on the power of documentation. Still, difficulty is encountered when a critic endeavors to pluck an O'Haran character from his milieu and analyze him. Stripped of the effects of his milieu, the character loses much of his meaning; so, in that respect, O'Hara's documentation is effective. A long explication of the history of the Lantenengo Country Club, for example, is generally superfluous; but when O'Hara finally returns to his main character, the reader sees him as a member of the Club: a person who is posted for his dues, perhaps, or the kind of person who is small enough to participate in petty prejudices, or any one of many things that being a member of the Club reveals of him. As a matter of fact, it was, in part, Julian's being a member of the Lantenengo Country Club which prompted him to insult the social sycophant, Harry Reilly.

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Gardiner, p. 83.
Documentation and characterization interact harmoniously in the Gibserville novels, and quite often, the documentary sections of the novels provide surprisingly absorbing reading. In his review of *A Family Party*, James Kelly says of O'Hara:

"I can make you read me," he seems to be saying, "even if I just give you the principal speech at a dinner to honor a country doctor you don't know who practiced forty years in a town you never heard of." In *A Family Party*, Mr. O'Hara makes his point.  

O'Hara undoubtedly does over-document at times, and critics, as a matter of form, take him to task about it, not recognizing, as Kelly does, that in itself his documentation is enjoyable reading matter. The example of O'Hara's documentary writing which has been presented in Chapter II of this paper is taken from *Appointment in Samarra*. In other of the Gibserville novels, O'Hara continues to display his "sometimes special knowledge." Richard Boeth summarizes some of them in his article on O'Hara:

> The "sometimes special knowledge" has always displayed itself in his books in an astonishing variety of people and things: saloon owners, political bosses, railroad conductors, bums, tennis bums, mine owners, steelworkers, Broadway stars, Hollywood starlets, coupon clippers, lawyers, servants, doctors, automobiles, whore houses, locker rooms, investment banks, needed beer, college fraternities, and the precise amount of carbon monoxide necessary to kill a man in a closed garage.

Add to that O'Hara's knowledge of such wider areas as personal

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11Boeth, p. 54.
philosophies of life, psychology, man's role in life, current definitions of the Good Life, and the observable despair of modern man, and part of the reason for the underlying pessimism in his novels becomes apparent. In almost all of his documentation, there is a noticeable presence of pessimism and of scorn and of bitterness. A Rage to Live offers some documentation of the temper of 1902, the year of Grace Caldwell's marriage to Sidney Tate:

The wedding was conceded to be the biggest thing of its kind ever held in Fort Penn. Everybody agreed on that, from the very small group who actually witnessed the ceremony to the thousands who knew all about it. Like everything the Caldewells did, it had to be unique. Grace's wedding started being unique with the invitations: the important weddings in Fort Penn always had followed the system of taking care of the sheep and the goats by inviting the persons of the goat status to the church but not to the reception.12

It is not without a certain humor and satiric attitude that O'Hara details the wedding gifts:

The presents were on view in the hall, the dining-room, the sitting-room, and the library of the big house. They were being guarded by three Pinkerton men disguised as waiters and Chief Lengel of the Fort Penn police, who, although not intended to be disguised as Admiral Dewey, had evoked recollections of the hero of the recent war. . . . In his uniform Chief Lengel was a reminder to the guests that they were looking upon articles of great value, in case there was a single person more than ten years old who was so stupid as to need a reminder. "A man could easily retire on what's here," said Chief Lengel to one of the Pinks. In the sterling and Sheffield line there was enough to furnish a small, expensive hotel, what with the chests of flat silver, roast platters, butter dishes, tea services,

12O'Hara, A Rage to Live, p. 128.
tea-service trays, smaller tea-service trays, bread trays, coffee services, samovars (in the event Grace decided to have a Russian-type cozy corner), cigars, cigar boxes, cigarette boxes, candelabra, pairs of candle holders, candle snuffers, salvers, salt-and-pepper shakers, pepper mills, cup-holder and saucer sets, decanters, demi-tasse spoons, cake knives, spatulas, ash receivers, matchboxes, punch bowls, tureens, bon-bon dishes, tea canisters and infusers, matching and unmatched sugar bowls and cream pitchers, coasters, water pitchers, chafing dishes, statuettes, inkstands, complete desk sets, flasks (for the saddle), bells, and the Death's Head loving cup (one to every Death's Head bride). "I can't help thinking of that William J. Bryan," said Chief Lengel to the Pink. 13

O'Hara describes the orchestra:

Professor Herman Schoffstal, who played the pipe organ at the church (it had been installed in time for the ceremony), also conducted the orchestra on the lawn. He had eight violins, two violas, two cellos, one bass viol, two harps, two flutes (one flautist and one harpist were ladies), and piano. 14

This last illustrates O'Hara's contempt for the picayunish interests of the guests at the reception: they are the kind of people who would notice, without seeing the rest of the orchestra, that one flautist and one harpist were ladies, and then comment on the fact. All of his well-documented and detailed descriptions of history and life in Gibberville are written in the same belittling tone as the ones cited above.

Further citation of O'Hara's documentation and detail would serve the purpose of merely multiplying examples. The practice of documenting fills various needs and follows

13Ibid., pp. 130-131.
14Ibid., p. 129.
similar patterns in all of the novels. The most obvious need that it fills is that of the naturalist to be objective and to create the deterministic environment that is an essential attribute of literary naturalism, but another important use of the practice is to create a realistic atmosphere, an atmosphere which can make the reader feel that he is taking part in the action of the story. O'Hara's documentation is always formed by the particular demands of the subject matter which it supports. Appointment in Samarra is vitally concerned with social snobbery; consequently, O'Hara delves into the history of Gibbsville and discovers somewhere in it the reason why the English family, which is not a particularly wealthy family, occupies its prominent position in Gibbsville society. While he is laying out the history of the development of Gibbsville, he may reveal that Julian's grandfather committed suicide and thereby make Julian's suicide a readily understandable act in the eyes of the citizens of Gibbsville. In Ten North Frederick, politics constitutes a large part of the subject matter, and O'Hara permeates his story with the political history of Gibbsville. Also, since Frederick Street is so important in the novel, O'Hara actually supplies a history of how Frederick Street comes to be the most socially correct street, and then gives way to South Main, and finally to Lantenengo Street.
Joe Chapin never moves from his father's house on Frederick Street. After his marriage, he moves his bride into 10 North Frederick. O'Hara points out that "It was just short of a rebuke to the other young people, those who had decided to build or buy on Lantenengo Street." Joe Chapin endears himself with the older inhabitants of South Main and North Frederick by marrying not merely a Gibbsville girl but a Gibbsville girl from South Main, and by choosing to live on North Frederick. He thus "established himself as a young man who could be relied upon not to confuse change with progress . . . ." Such judiciousness on Joe's part is instrumental in his being successful as a lawyer. From this, it may be seen that O'Hara effectively combines his historical documentation with his narrative as well as deepens his characterization of Joe Chapin.

At times, however, he does not even attempt to integrate documentation with narrative. It is as if he possesses a certain piece of information or knowledge for which he has no use in the novel but which he wants to include for the mere pleasure of writing it. For example, during a dinner party, Alfred Eaton has a conversation with a lady from England:

"Why are there two Portlands in the States?" asked Lady Sevringham.
"Oh, we have some worse ones than that, Lady Sevringham."

15 O'Hara, Ten North Frederick, p. 107.
16 Ibid.
"You have? How worse?"
"Well, you've heard of California?"
"Of course. I have a friend there."
"And you've heard of Indiana?"
"Yes, I think so. Yes, yes. Indiana. Indianapolis."
"And Pennsylvania?"
"Of course. I have a dozen friends there. The Pennsylvania Railway takes you to Philadelphia."
"Right. Well, there's a California in Pennsylvania, and an Indiana in Pennsylvania."
"A state within a state? Two states within a state? How could there be? I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation. But why do you, for instance, call a place the Polo Grounds and they've never had anything but baseball there?"
"I never saw an elephant in Piccadilly Circus."
"No, I daresay."  

The quotation cited above also, when taken in context, and when compared with other conversations, reveals much of the character of Alfred Eaton. The discussion which he has with Lady Sevringham occurs at the dinner party at which MacHardie tentatively offers Alfred a position with his firm. Alfred recognizes that he has reached a significant point in his life and that the offer of a job from MacHardie provides him with the opportunity to be as wealthy as his father was. Yet, in the solemnity of the occasion he is able to maintain his customary attitude of self-confidence. As Carson has said of Alfred: "Even on those rare occasions of encounter with a person of greater means than himself, Eaton remains calm, never envious or self-demeaning."  

\footnote{O'Hara, \textit{From the Terrace}, pp. 466-467.}
\footnote{Carson, p. 36.}
characterized, through dialogue, as a person who is confident of himself and of his position in society.

O'Hara's use of dialogue is another of his departures from the techniques of the early naturalists. True, they tried to represent speech faithfully, but the speech of their characters was not as important to the writers as was the environment in which they moved. Consequently, characterization through dialogue was not one of their major stylistic devices. O'Hara noticeably stresses dialogue, and his narrative is as heavy with dialogue as it is with documentation and detail.

Julian English reveals his essentially snobbish nature in a drunken conversation with Al Grecco, who is the local bootlegger's lieutenant:

"No, I don't exactly see what you mean, Mr. English."
"Just call me Mr. English, Al. You call me Mr. English and I'll call you Al. The hell with this informality. We've known each other all our lives." 19

There is no question that Julian is drunk, but O'Hara is able to make the reader feel that it is not a drunken Julian English that is talking but Julian English in his primitive state. At the party at which he meets Helene Holman, Julian is further characterized:

"You got my chair, Mister," said Helene Holman, who had finished her song.

"Not at all," said Julian. "Sit right down. Don't apologize. Just sit down. If this is your chair you needn't apologize. Just sit right down and Al will get another chair for us, won't you, Al?"

O'Hara achieves characterization by describing in great detail the social milieu in which he sets his characters and by the manner in which he reveals particular traits of character through the dialogues and monologues of his major characters. Another of his characteristic stylistic devices is his employment of recurring themes and characters in the Gibbsville novels.

It is not unusual for a major character in one book to reappear as a minor character in another one. Julian English is O'Hara's favorite major-minor character. Only in Ourselves to Know does he not appear, and when he is mentioned in another novel, he receives only momentary attention. He appears in A Rage to Live at a Lantenengo Country Club dance and tries to seduce Grace Tate, and would have but for unfavorable circumstances. Alfred Eaton meets Julian at the Lantenengo Club soon after Alfred is back from the service. He is driving along, sees the lights of the Club and, out of curiosity, goes to the Club house. While he is standing on the porch, Julian walks out to look at the stars, introduces himself to Alfred, invites him to the locker-room for a

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 175.}\]
drink, and then goes back inside when Alfred says he must leave. Sometime later, Alfred reads of Julian's suicide. In *Ten North Frederick*, Julian tries to persuade Joe Chapin to permit his son to be a jazz pianist, but Julian becomes slightly insulting. When he leaves, Edith Chapin replies to Joe's comment on Julian's enthusiasm and impatience:

"Oh, rot. It's common, ordinary bad manners by an ungrateful spoiled brat. Caroline can be glad they have no children. That's going to make it easier when the time comes." 21

Another favorite theme used often by O'Hara is the wedding-night activities between main characters. The male is consistently shown as the innocent party. After a big dinner, he bedecks himself in all manner of house slippers and pajamas and smoking jackets or dressing gowns only to find on re-entering the bedroom that his wife is awaiting him in the nude. Embarrassed because he is fully clothed, he finally divests himself of his paraphernalia. He asks her if he may leave the light on, and a compromise is reached. The bathroom light is left on. He is surprised by his wife's passion, suddenly expends himself, and goes to sleep. She then leans on one elbow and claims victory. She usually is proud of herself for having advanced her social position or for possessing him. The whole procedure is anti-romantic and is designed to cast the hero in a poor light, which is

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in keeping with O'Hara's practice of presenting unfavorable views of his major characters.

In his technique and choice of setting and subject matter, O'Hara employs the theories and practices of literary naturalism. He departs from the traditions of the early naturalists in his choice of milieu and characters and in his method of presenting them, but he remains close to the general theory by supporting his themes and characters with heavy documentation and detail in order to maintain objectivity and to create a realistic atmosphere. Setting and technique in the Gibsenville novels are at once naturalistic and distinctively O'Hara's own.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented in the preceding chapters makes possible some generalizations about the degree and extent of naturalism in the Gibsville novels of John O'Hara.

It has been suggested that O'Hara's reputation as a writer worthy of scholarly attention has suffered because of the cavalier and generally misinformed criticism his work has received. Critics may be partially absolved of blame when the handicaps under which they work are taken into consideration. The convenience of judging by the novel-of-manners format often is a temptation too strong to be overcome by critics who are constrained by the book-review limitations of time and space. Reviewers of O'Hara's novels forego accuracy and insight for standardized formulas in criticizing O'Hara; consequently, the area in which he exhibits considerable literary merit is either overlocked or side-stepped, and the result is that O'Hara receives only scant recognition as a naturalistic writer.

The principal difference between realism and naturalism is the importance which the latter assigns to the philosophy of determinism, which Farrington refers to as "the vital
principle of naturalism.\(^1\) O'Hara's employment of determinism, though somewhat different from that of his literary forebears, is as effective as theirs and probably more so because of its subtlety and its forthright presentation of the author's strong pessimistic attitude.

O'Hara's determinism assumes two forms, in accordance with the naturalist's view that there may be external or internal forces which shape a character's destiny by overpowering his feeble exercise of personal will. External forces for O'Hara are found in a society which is overly conscious of a system of classes. In particular, he is concerned with the snobbery engendered in the upper-middle and upper classes. Other external forces which O'Hara treats are those that originate in a culture devoted to business and politics, and these forces successfully defeat O'Hara's protagonists, either by killing them, reducing them to impotence, breaking their spirit, or by allowing them to remain living in their private hells. Internal drives which O'Hara stresses as agents of determinism are the instinctual urges of sex and the psychological forces of acute moral consciousness and the need for understanding and knowledge of self. Each of these expressions of inner determinism is as effective as the outer determinants in

\(^1\)Parrington, III, p. 324.
rendering useless and helpless a potentially productive and dignified individual existence.

In his early novels, O'Hara emphasized the effects of external determinism on the individual. *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) is primarily a statement of the forces of sociological determinism tempered by the internal determinant of sex. And *A Rage to Live* (1949) is a statement of the opposite view: the internal determinism of sex is tempered by the outer determinant of society. Apparently, O'Hara is still unsure about which of the two forms of determinism is the stronger, for in the third Gibbsville novel, *Ten North Frederick* (1955), he presents the story of a man on whom the two forces of determinism act with almost equal effect. With the publication of *From the Terrace* (1958), O'Hara seemingly commits himself to the position that internal determinism is the more formidable of the two.

Essentially, a hypersensitive moral consciousness is the agent of inner determinism in the novel, and O'Hara seems to be readying himself for one of his final statements of determinism. *Ourselves to Know* (1960) provides that final statement in the form of the destiny of its protagonist: inner determinism is certainly the more vicious because it leaves the individual with nothing to which he may cling; it does not leave him any self-respect. With *Ourselves to Know*, O'Hara seems to have arrived at his destination: when defeat
is administered by outside forces over which the protagonist has no control, he at least still has himself to fall back on for strength and reassurance; but when he administers defeat himself—as happens in *From the Terrace* and *Ourselves to Know*—he is left with no source of strength and can only wait for death to end his misery and his miserable knowledge of himself, his hollow inner self which is no more substantial than his surface.

Since determinism is the vital principle of naturalism, O’Hara’s extensive use of it contributes to the validity of the thesis that he is a naturalistic writer. His insistence on the power of society and self as agents of external and internal determinism never flags; if at times his emphasis vacillates, it is because he seems unsure of which form is more powerful, but with the final Gibbsville novel, O’Hara seems to feel that internal factors are the principal determining force in man. In *Appointment in Samarra*, O’Hara could allow his protagonist to die; but in *Ourselves to Know*, O’Hara can only allow him to live.

The case for evaluating O’Hara as an adherent of literary naturalism is supported by his use of setting and technique in his novels. Gibbsville is O’Hara’s invention; it is a normal American medium-large city which is in no way an outstanding city for its size. There is a flavor of regionalism in Gibbsville, but O’Hara allows it to affect
only his minor characters, and he uses them mainly for local color. O'Hara carefully intimates that what happens in Gibbsville could happen anywhere in America. His characters are, with one notable exception, of high intelligence, which is a departure from the general portrayal of characters of low mentality in the early naturalistic novels. Another notable departure is in his choice of classes. O'Hara habitually selects his main character and his major supporting characters from the upper-middle and upper classes of Gibbsville. As members of these classes, O'Hara's characters are not automatically immune from deterministic forces. They suffer as much as do the lower classes portrayed by the early naturalists, but their suffering is different in kind rather than in degree.

O'Hara's technique is, in the main, common to all naturalistic writers. His most obvious naturalistic technique is the use of documentation and detail. He employs these for the same purposes that his predecessors did: to create an atmosphere of reality. He has been criticized for over-documenting and for including too much detail, and perhaps he does, but he is saved by the fact that it all eventually contributes to a better understanding of the characters involved in the novels.

O'Hara effectively and consistently employs the attributes of literary naturalism in his Gibbsville novels.
In view of that, he deserves scholarly attention because literary naturalism has been important in American literature, especially in the early years of the twentieth century. In recent years, the shift has been away from naturalism in America; however, the form is one which fades and reappears. Possibly, in naturalism's next strong appearance, the works of John O'Hara will be recognized for what they are: significant contributions to American literature.
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