Sermons and Soda-Water Short Guide

Sermons and Soda-Water by John O'Hara

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Characters

The unifying consciousness in the three novellas comprising Sermons and Soda-Water is that of Jim Malloy, who narrates all three in the first person. Malloy is O'Hara's most closely autobiographical character; he first appeared in the title story of O'Hara's first collection of short stories/ The Doctor's Son (1935), as the son of a small-town doctor who, like O'Hara, resists the pressure to follow in his father's professional footsteps and instead becomes a journalist. In Sermons and Soda-Water, Malloy, like O'Hara, is in a reflective mood; each novella is composed of a personal reminiscence in which other characters take center stage for a time, but in which Malloy is a consistent presence and voice. Some of the same characters appear in "The Girl on the Baggage Truck" and "We're Friends Again," the first and third novellas, especially Junior and Polly Williamson, a Long Island socialite couple whose lifestyle recalls that of Fitzgerald's Gatsby. The novella's focus on a few characters allows O'Hara to develop some memorable individuals — particularly women — and among the more interesting are the film star Charlotte Sears, whose real life begins when her film career is cut short by a disfiguring car accident, and Bobbie McCrea, in "Imagine Kissing Pete," who becomes almost an heroic figure as she endures economic deprivation and an unfaithful husband.

Social Concerns

The three novellas that comprise Sermons and Soda-Water all deal in various ways with human relationships as they are affected by time and social conditions. In the first, "The Girl on the Baggage Truck," the setting is primarily New York in the 1930s, a world of speakeasies and vast differences between the rich and the poor. O'Hara uses his knowledge of the film industry in presenting the figure of Charlotte Sears, a movie star whose position as a public figure prevents her from having a normal love relationship and involves her with a snobbish, back-biting crowd. In "Imagine Kissing Pete," O'Hara turns again to Gibbsville, to chronicle the decline of Bobbie and Pete McCrea from a position in the Gibbsville social scene to near-poverty through drinking and infidelity, and their slow struggle to regain respectability. The third novella "We're Friends Again" returns to New York and to the excesses and superficiality of the affluent. Major portions of each of the three stories are set in the 1930s, the era of Prohibition, and alcohol consumption and abuse is a common activity for the characters, a fact that demonstrates the failure of the "Great Experiment" and also recalls O'Hara's own heavy drinking before he gave up alcohol in 1953.

Techniques

O'Hara's use of the novella form influences both the tone and the perspective of Sermons and Soda-Water. One of the common characteristics of the novella is the use of a narrator whose limited interaction with the other characters necessarily limits the reader's knowledge of them to only those moments of greatest drama or conflict.

Instead of the panoramic sweep of the typical O'Hara novel, in which a central character is presented through multiple points of view, the novellas offer glimpses of characters at widelyspaced intervals, so that character development is suggestive rather than exhaustive. The narrator, Jim Malloy, makes this approach explicit in "Imagine Kissing Pete," when he remarks, "Such additions I made to my friends' dossiers as I heard about them from time to time; by letters from them, conversations with my mother, an occasional newspaper clipping." This technique enhances the tone of nostalgic memory and makes Gibbsville a small town from which some people move away, rather than the center of the universe it often seems to be in O'Hara's novels. Similarly, the contrast between people of power, wealth, and prestige and those who live average, middle-class lives is sharpened by Malloy's movement between the worlds of New York and Hollywood, on the one hand, and his hometown of Gibbsville on the other.

Themes

Central to Sermons and Soda-Water is a concern for the fleeting nature of time. In his foreword to the collection, O'Hara refers to his own aging and to his sense of urgency about his own work: "I want to get it all down on paper while I can. . . . at fifty-five I have no right to waste time." What O'Hara wants to "get down on paper" is the story, from his perspective, of the decades between 1920 and 1950, which he was not willing to leave "in the hands of the historians and the editors of picture books." For the characters in these three novellas, time is an almost tangible quantity: youth is too short; life is measured by marriages, births, and funerals; the past is more vivid than the present. As always, O'Hara is also concerned here with the difficulty of forming and maintaining honest, warm relationships. People at all social levels marry for the wrong reasons, are unfaithful to their spouses, and seek meaning in money and alcohol. These two themes — the rapid passing of time, and human loneliness — are closely related in O'Hara's presentation of a period of rapid social change in American life.

Literary Precedents

In form, these three novellas are reminiscent of the shorter works of Henry James, such as "Daisy Miller."

James referred to the novella form as "the idea happily developed," which is similar to O'Hara's desire to "get it all down," and both use the narrator as a controlling device, providing a limited, personal perspective on the central characters. In theme, Sermons and SodaWater provides a reflective summation of many of O'Hara's earlier concerns: the tension among people of various social classes, the difficulty of maintaining meaningful human relationships, and the resultant sense of human isolation in a rapidly-changing culture.

Related Titles

The reappearance of characters and places from O'Hara's other fictional works relates Sermons and Soda-Water to the rest of his canon. Especially striking is O'Hara's use of the autobiographical character Jim Malloy as his narrator; the young boy in the 1935 story "The Doctor's Son" is here a man of O'Hara's age, reflecting on the changes the years have brought to Gibbsville, its inhabitants, and himself.

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