

Ten North Frederick Short Guide

Ten North Frederick by John O'Hara

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Characters

Many of the characters introduced or mentioned in *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) appear in *Ten North Frederick*. The novel begins in 1945, just after Joe Chapin's death, but its action spans the decades since 1880, when Chapin's father first moves to the house in Gibbsville whose address is the title. Dr. English, his son Julian, Whit Hofman, and others are minor characters in the drama of the Chapin family, while Arthur McHenry, Joe's law partner, and Mike Slattery, the Gibbsville political leader, assume more central roles — the latter as a counterpoint to Chapin's impractical ambitions. The female characters in *Ten North Frederick* are particularly strong, not only in their complexity, but also in their ability to manipulate life to their own advantage. Chapin's mother, Charlotte, and his wife, Edith, nurture and direct his ambition so that they can benefit from its anticipated rewards.

Both are women for whom love means power and ownership; on her wedding night, in fact, Edith Chapin says to the sleeping Joe, "I own you." Yet these women are not malicious; O'Hara portrays women who, because they are denied most masculine forms of power, participate vicariously by requiring their men to succeed in their stead. As in *Appointment in Samarra*, the central characters are presented from multiple perspectives, a device that underscores the variety of roles each person plays in a community.



Social Concerns

Ten North Frederick, O'Hara's fifth novel, is the first after Appointment in Samarra to be set in Gibbsville, and it enlarges upon several of the concerns of that early novel. Joe Chapin is a more single-mindedly ambitious person than is Julian English in Appointment in Samarra: He wants nothing less than to leave each of his children a million dollars and to become President of the United States. Although Chapin is not presented as a powerhungry schemer, he has been raised by his mother to believe that his own potential is limitless. The American dream of wealth and political influence, however, eludes Chapin, as happiness eludes Julian English; both men substitute social forms for human responses and end by being bewildered by the emptiness of their lives. Ten North Frederick explores the mechanics of party politics, including the power of local political leaders such as Mike Slattery, but O'Hara is less concerned with political corruption than with the ability of ambition to blunt or even eradicate one's essential humanity. To maintain what he believes to be the proper image for an aspiring politician, Chapin manipulates the lives of others, even forcing his daughter to divorce the dance-band musician with whom she has eloped and to end her pregnancy by abortion.



Techniques

By beginning *Ten North Frederick* with the funeral of its major character, O'Hara essentially starts at the conclusion of the story and then traces the events that have led to this point. The comments of the people gathered for the funeral become the threads that have been the tapestry of Joe Chapin's life and also the life of Gibbsville over a period of sixty-five years. The narrative voice several times refers to the story as a "biography," but although there are some superficial resemblances between the life of Joe Chapin and that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, this is not the biography of an actual person.

Instead, O'Hara uses the concept of biography as a device to step away from Chapin and view him as a figure in a larger drama. *Ten North Frederick* consists of two parts. Part One, by far the majority of the novel, tells the story of Joe Chapin until the point at which he begins drinking himself to death.

The last fifteen pages form Part Two, a coda that summarizes Chapin's last years and his withdrawal from the life of Gibbsville: "When Joe Chapin had begun to feel . . . the story became not Joe Chapin's but the stories of other people, and with Joe's part in the stories one of diminishing importance."

Themes

As is often the case in O'Hara's novels, a major theme in *Ten North Frederick* is human isolation. At Joe Chapin's funeral, which occurs at the beginning of the novel, one of his cousins remarks, "I could never figure Joe out," and as the novel continues the reader becomes aware that there is very little to "figure out" about Chapin: his life has consisted of surfaces; its reality has been identical with its facade. Even with his wife, Edith, Joe Chapin has a formal, almost businesslike relationship, and it is only when he falls in love with his daughter's friend Kate toward the end of the novel that he is willing to acknowledge his own vulnerability and understand the feelings and needs of another person. Chapin's isolation is created by his ambitions, and a corollary theme in the novel is the illusory and ultimately temporary nature of personal power. Mike Slattery, the Irish politician, understands this, and his realistic appraisal of what he can and cannot do contrasts with Chapin's impractical dreams. Nor can Joe Chapin change as he might like to toward the end of his life; as O'Hara notes at the beginning of Part Two, "Only death itself causes that overnight change, but then of course there is no morning."

Adaptations

A film version of *Ten North Frederick* was made by Twentieth-Century Fox in 1958. Directed by Philip Dunne and starring Gary Cooper and Geraldine Fitzgerald, the motion picture was not successful.

Literary Precedents

The elusive nature of the American Dream of wealth and social prominence — and its detrimental effect on those who pursue it — has been a frequent concern of American writers since the late nineteenth century. William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* (1937) are just a few of the novels preceding *Ten North Frederick* that deal with this theme. Like these other writers, O'Hara is deeply sympathetic with those whose dreams are thwarted; from his perspective, the fault lies not with the individual people who pursue the promise of American success, but with the emptiness of the promises themselves. Jay Gatsby and Joe Chapin both "create" themselves in accordance with what the culture seems to demand of the successful individual. O'Hara's novel differs from Fitzgerald's, however, in its far more detailed delineation of the social matrix from which his character comes: Gatsby is a mythic, symbolic figure, whereas Chapin, like Howells's *Silas Lapham*, is an ordinary person caught up in the economic and social forces of his era.

Related Titles

Anyone who reads more than one of O'Hara's novels set in the Gibbstown area comes to understand the geography, the social strata, and the values of the region and its inhabitants. The fictions do not proceed chronologically, as do the novels in John Updike's "Rabbit" trilogy, but familiar characters, such as Dr. English and Mike Slattery, and places, such as Lanteno Street and the nearby town of Lyons, link the novels and stories and give the reader a sense of continuity.

Together, O'Hara's Pennsylvania fictions provide a social history of the region during the first half of the twentieth century.



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