

ARTS & LETTERS

Too often, critics have confused the opinions of Kipling's characters with his own. In 1942, George Orwell wrote, for example, "It is no use claiming . . . that when Kipling describes a British soldier beating a 'nigger' with a cleaning rod in order to get money out of him, he is acting merely as a reporter . . . Kipling is a jingo imperialist, he is morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting." But, born in Bombay and trained as a journalist in India, Kipling far more than his foes had witnessed firsthand the workings of empire at its outposts. His imperialist views were tempered by a firm belief that expansion without a proper sense of responsibility toward the governed was foolhardy. In his "The Ballad of East and West," he salutes strong men whatever their race.

Kipling was no saint: "He was never a democrat, he detested female suffragism, he despised the very concept of mass education," notes Orel. But his efforts to probe grief, the horrors of war, and the "irrationality of human existence" through fiction deserve the serious consideration of scholars.

Godless Art

"American Impressionism" by Barbara Novak, in *Portfolio* (Mar.-Apr. 1982). P.O. Box 2716, Boulder, Colo. 80322.

American intellectual thought before the Civil War revolved around God and a perceived divine order: Nature was God's handiwork; man was subordinate. The young Republic's art reflected this emphasis, until Charles Darwin and French impressionism together prompted a major change in artistic theory and style. So writes Novak, a Barnard College art historian.

Between 1825 and 1865, Americans developed a native art form, *luminism*. It drew on their experience in a New World, with its force, energy, and seemingly certain promise of renewal. Art showed "God-in-Nature," not man's interpretation of nature. Artists such as Fitz Hugh Lane painted smooth, linear surfaces; an individualistic stroke was taboo, since it presumptuously indicated the artist's ego.

The emergence in the late 1860s of impressionism in Europe helped to change all this. Where luminist art had striven for a transcendent "spiritual illumination," impressionism was secular and personal. Luminists had used minute modulations in tone to create landscapes that shone with divine light. French impressionist works also have a sunny, optimistic glow. But the viewer of paintings by such impressionists as Claude Monet is always conscious of the paint itself and of the artist's use of "broken color" to create light.

Meanwhile, the evolutionary theory in Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) challenged Americans' certainty about divine control of a stable world. American artists began to rely on their impressions and to experiment with style; God and nature lost some of their prominence in paintings.

The new American impressionist art produced by John Singer Sar-

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gent, William Merritt Chase, Mary Cassatt, and others corresponded to tensions in U.S. society at the time, argues Novak. Industrialization and new technology were changing the landscape. Nature required curatorship; the Yellowstone (1872) and Yosemite (1890) national parks were established. U.S. artists no longer merely copied nature, but neither did they "fracture" it with the extreme broken strokes of their French mentors. They used their new, assertive styles to "solidify" nature on their canvasses and to preserve it.

Violence and Laughter

"Crippled Laughter: Toward an Understanding of Flannery O'Connor" by Clara Claiborne Park, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1982), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

A self-righteous atheist flirts with a Bible salesman, who returns her interest by stealing her artificial leg. An old woman feels an instant of pity for the madman who has just murdered her family; he responds by shooting her in the chest. "Most people think of [my] stories as hard, hopeless, brutal," wrote author Flannery O'Connor, a prolific writer despite her own long struggle with a crippling, incurable disease. "I read them over and over and laugh and laugh."

Few readers have drawn much cheer from the grotesqueness and violence of O'Connor's fiction. O'Connor, as a result, felt compelled to write countless letters and essays trying to explain herself—explanations that her stories should have made unnecessary, argues Park, professor of English at Williams College. Why did her fiction fail? Part of the problem lay in her devotion to both Catholicism and literary modernism. Adhering to a contemporary literary style, she crafted her fiction with understatement and objectivity, letting the stories speak for themselves through subtle, nearly opaque symbolism. But, argues Park, the aesthetic rules "elicited from Joyce and James were not adequate to carry a burden of conviction more like Dostoevski's."

Violence and suffering, in O'Connor's view, were necessary to communicate her Christian vision to an unbelieving audience. "To the hard of hearing you shout," she wrote, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

In her private life, as her letters reveal, O'Connor had learned how suffering could teach Christian love, humility—even good humor. Yet in her fiction she could "take her ugly characters up to the moment of grace" through violence, but no further. Her stories end without the clear affirmation of Christianity that she sought to inspire. The reason, says Park, lay in O'Connor's private fear of sentimentality—of pity. "Within pity," she observed, "lay self-pity, everywhere in ambush."

Toward the end of her life, O'Connor seemed ready to make room in her art for compassion. "I have got to the point now," she wrote, "where I keep thinking more and more about the presentation of love and charity." She died, says Park, too soon to accomplish it.