

ANALYSIS

Noon Wine (1937, 1939)



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“Mr. Hatch...enjoys a sense of power—a man whose nature inclines him towards evil-doing. Place him as A a rich employer; B as a powerful reactionary politician; C as a labor leader; D as a social reformer. My argument is that you would still have Mr. Hatch, with his powers for evil working in a wider field (and that he would have an evil influence in any case). That is roughly what I am driving at. One does not change the nature of the individual by changing his economic or social status. One only more or less shifts the level and the opportunities for expression of his fundamental self. I am opposed to the belief that the mere adoption of a set of ideas, no matter how good the ideas may be, is any cure for the innate flaws of the individual. He merely takes his own nature with him, and can adapt and use to his own purposes no matter what situation or argument. It accounts for the comparative failure of all movements towards human improvement: a good half of the adherents to any cause are motivated by hopes for personal revenge, personal expression, personal justification. The formerly oppressed behave with criminal cruelty to those they gain power over.... There is always Mr. Hatch to contend with, and he will always find a Mr. Helton to abuse. A cause is more often weakened and destroyed by its adherents and followers than by its avowed enemy in the opposing camp.”

Porter
Letter to Eugene Pressly (1932)

“Glenway Wescott, in [an] article entitled ‘Praise,’ compared *Noon Wine* to *Paradise Lost*.” Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* (1982) 314.

Glenway Wescott
review of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*
Southern Review V (1939) 161-73

“There is in all these three novelettes [in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*] an absoluteness of technique and a felicity of language that are seldom encountered even in the best fiction. Both the title story, set in the influenza epidemic of 1918, and *Old Mortality*, the indirectly told tragedy of a Southern belle, are as keen and polished as slim steel. Still, *Noon Wine* seems to me the best of the three, though not as perfectly proportioned. It is the story of a Texas dairy farmer whose life falls to pieces after he has inadvertently killed an amateur detective bent on returning to the asylum the Swede farmhand who has brought prosperity and comfortable self-respect to the farmer. It is not the swifter action that makes the story the

best of the three; it is the tense transmission of the farmer's feelings as he goes about the neighborhood after being exonerated by the courts, trying to recapture the respect and belief of his neighbors by telling the story over and over, patiently, knowing they don't believe him, but driven to re-establish his former comfortable and easy peace of mind. That story communicates; it has voltage... I found myself reading all three novelettes with admiration, but only *Noon Wine* with excitement."

Wallace Stegner
Virginia Quarterly Review 15
(Summer 1939) 444-45

"On the whole the most interesting novels this year have come from America... What gives distinction to [Miss] Porter's work is the strain of poetry in it. The poetry is consistently elegiac... The thing that comes all too rarely in fiction nowadays, the thing that is most sorely missed and that reconciles so-called escapism with literature, is the poetic vision—the seeing eye, the invocatory and evocative power of words. Prose is not poetry; but good fiction never lacks a quality that must ultimately be called poetic. It is this that appears...in each of the three stories in [Miss] Porter's volume."

Anonymous
"Away from Near-War Consciousness"
London Times Literary Supplement
(27 May 1939) 311

"*Noon Wine* ranks with the best of her fiction. It is the most dramatic of all her novelettes, and for its sustained emotional intensity, it equals *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.... Nowhere else in her fiction are the mysterious forces so hostile to the individual quite so succinctly dramatized as they are in the character of Mr. Hatch; and nowhere else is the individual's resistance in the face of the unknown quite so heroic as Mr. Thompson's. Much of the drama in *Noon Wine* derives from the taut confrontation of dissimilar types which we have in the long, carefully understated scene between Mr. Hatch and Mr. Thompson, and from the fact that the pawn at stake between them is another human being—Mr. Helton. One possible view of the story would be that of a moral triangle of which each of the three forms a corner... Each man dies in his own way: Mr. Helton from shock and fright and desolation, Mr. Hatch the victim of a most accidental kind of murder, and Mr. Thompson, the hero of the story, a suicide....

We must understand just what *kind* of hero Mr. Thompson is, and we must search for the real nature of his tragedy.... In arranging to employ Mr. Helton on the farm, Mr. Thompson maintains a false bravado which he raises to cover his own sense of inadequacy, and begins 'to laugh and shout his way through the deal.' If Mr. Thompson is not quite a whole man within himself, it soon develops that in Mr. Helton he has found his proper complement, for the farm begins to be a small success as Mr. Helton takes over its management.... After nine years have passed, [Mr. Thompson] confronts an ambiguous but very real horror in the person of Mr. Homer T. Hatch: 'He wasn't exactly a fat man....' The long scene which follows between Mr. Thompson and Mr. Hatch is one of Miss Porter's most brilliant. Mr. Hatch, in revealing why he has come after Mr. Helton, also reveals his own manner of preying on unfortunate human beings.... Mr. Thompson can hardly accept Mr. Hatch's story; he begins to defend Mr. Helton; but Mr. Hatch seems, in his maddening manner, to turn everything Mr. Thompson says inside out. Mr. Thompson decides he had better get rid of Mr. Hatch as quickly as possible, but he wonders how....

When Mr. Hatch brings out a pair of handcuffs, Mr. Thompson becomes all the more frightened, but he has an obscure, nibbling feeling that he does not really grasp what is happening. He raises his voice and orders Mr. Hatch off his property, and then something happens that Mr. Thomson will never understand the rest of his life.... '[He] felt his arms go up over his head and bring the ax down on Mr. Hatch's head as if he were stunning a beef.' It is at just this moment...that Mr. Thompson becomes tragic. All the rest of his life is to be spent in an effort to vindicate himself for having contested this fate. Though he is easily acquitted in court, he becomes all the more uneasy when he learns that Mr. Helton had been captured uninjured. Mr. Thompson had been certain he saw Mr. Hatch's knife entering Mr. Helton, and how he wonders constantly about the nature of what really happened: 'He had killed Mr. Hatch and he was a murderer....'

Why does Mr. Thompson believe he has seen something which he could not have seen? The knife is not an alibi, of course; it is the symbol by which Miss Porter dramatizes the confusion and unreality of the evil which suddenly overtakes Mr. Thompson, just as she dramatizes the evil itself in the strange face and manner of Mr. Hatch. And Mr. Thompson's heroism rises largely from his lack of preparation for his role, and from his spontaneous willingness to defend the light, which he equates with Mr. Helton, against the dark and Mr. Hatch.... Mr. Thompson himself is in no way responsible for either Mr. Hatch or Mr. Helton, and yet he becomes the victim of the issue between them. And Mr. Thompson becomes all the more tragic as he continues to puzzle out his lonely fate, making the rounds of his neighbors in an effort to vindicate himself even after he had been acquitted in court....

Mr. Thompson starts out of his sleep and frightens his wife into a faint, and the last strokes of his swift, sure doom seem to be fulfilled when his sons enter their parents' room, and Mr. Thompson sees the distrust in their eyes. Not only has his mysterious fate overborne him but he now knows irrevocably that he has lost the trust of his family; he is utterly alone with the strange and incomprehensible destiny which has overtaken him.... Though the source of destruction is plainly Mr. Hatch, Mr. Thompson is still fumbling for the meaning of the murder he has committed; in this final testament, his certainty that a knife had entered Mr. Helton has changed to the fact that Mr. Hatch 'aimed a blow,' and he can only state his belief 'that Mr. Hatch would of taken the life of Mr. Helton if I did not interfere.'

It is precisely the ambiguity of Mr. Thompson's experience which makes it seem so universal; we can conceive of its befalling anyone. And though the evil in *Noon Wine* is so concretely embodied in Mr. Hatch, it is nonetheless a subtle and diffuse force the meaning of which man cannot completely grasp. Because Mr. Thompson follows what seems to him to be the course of right, and because he struggles so valiantly to understand and to justify his course against insurmountable odds, Mr. Thompson is heroic. But he is isolated in his heroism, and, after he has written his note, he must submit to the fate, which, even now, he does not understand."

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 40-44

"Let us take...a passage from the novelette *Noon Wine*, the description of Mr. Thompson...in his masculine pride and bitter incompetence... 'Mr. Thompson was a touch weather-beaten man with stiff black hair and a week's growth of black whiskers'.... This passage is simple and unpretending, a casual introductory description...but it succeeds in having its own kind of glitter and purity and flow. Here those things come, as in so much of Miss Porter's fiction, from the writer's rigorous repudiation of obvious literary resources, resources which, on other occasions, she can use so brilliantly. The things that stir our admiration in the passage from 'Flowering Judas' are notably absent here, are notably eschewed. Here the style is of the utmost transparency, and our eye and ear are captivated by the very ordinariness of the ordinary items presented to us, the trotting motion of the churn, the swish of the milk, the tobacco juice glittering on the door stones. Miss Porter has the power of isolating common things, the power that Chekhov or Frost or Ibsen or, sometimes, Pound, has, the power to make the common thing glow with and Eden-innocence by the mere fact of the isolation. It is a kind of indicative poetry....

The pridefully stiff neck and the black whiskers, they tell us something.... In the end, looking back, we can see that the story is the story of a noisy, proud, stiff-necked man whose pride has constantly suffered under failure, who salves his hurt pride by harmless bluster with his wife and children, and who, in the end, stumbles into a situation which takes the last prop of certainty from his life.... He had never intended to do it, he was just protecting the poor Swede. But we are aware that there had been the slow building up of the mysterious anger against Mr. Hatch, of the fear that Mr. Hatch threatened the new prosperity of the farm. And in the trial Mr. Thompson has been caught in a web of little lies, small distortions of fact, nothing serious [not even forcing his wife to lie?], nothing needed to prove he wasn't guilty, just little twists to make everything clearer and simpler.

Is Mr. Thompson innocent or guilty? He doesn't really know. Caught in the mysteriousness of himself, caught in all the impulses which he had never been able to face, caught in all the little lies which had really meant no harm, he can't know the truth about anything. He can't stand the moral uncertainty of this

situation, but he does not know what it is that most deeply he can't stand. He can't stand not knowing what he himself really is. His pride can't stand that kind of nothingness. Not knowing what it is he can't stand, he is under the compulsion to go, day after day, around the countryside, explaining himself, explaining how he had not meant to do it, how it was defense of the Swede, how it was self-defense, all the while plunging deeper and deeper into the morass of his fate. Then he finds that his own family have, all along, thought him guilty. So the proud man has to kill himself to prove, in his last pride, that he is really innocent.

That, however, is the one thing that can never be proved, for the story is about the difficult definition of guilt and innocence. Mr. Thompson, not able to trust his own innocence, or understand the nature of whatever guilt is his, has taken refuge in the lie, and the lie, in the end, kills him.... Poor Mr. Thompson—innocent and yet guilty, and in his pride unable to live by the provisional.”

Robert Penn Warren
“Irony with a Center: Katherine Anne Porter”
Selected Essays (Random House 1958)

“The fifth body of stories is those which deal with the theme of *Noon Wine*: man's slavery to his own nature and subjugation to a human fate which dooms him to suffering and disappointment. The destiny which decrees that Mr. Thompson, the self-indulgent child of pride, will benefit from the lucky hiring of the insane farm hand also assures that he will finally be crushed under its grinding wheel. Miss Porter firmly insists that man's suffering is inextricably related to what he is, though she also suggests that certain destructive forces—disease, death—are inevitable and inescapable in spite of one's character.”

James William Johnson
“Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter”
Virginia Quarterly Review (Autumn 1960)

“In the perfection of its sinister mood and in its economy of detail, in its unrelieved grimness, this story is the equal of *Ethan Frome* [Edith Wharton, 1911].... 'Noon Wine,' the masterpiece of the trio [in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*], is the story of three men, one an exploiter, one the exploited, and the last a kind of nemesis or devil. Olaf Helton comes to work on Mr. Thompson's ragged little patch of a dairy farm which, by dint of unflagging industry, he restores to a paying condition. Mr. Thompson takes a conscienceless advantage of him and pays him a slave's wage, but the dim-witted Helton is perfectly happy so long as he is left alone in his few hours off to play the same tune over and over on his harmonicas.

Only when anyone threatens to touch the latter does he become ugly. Homer T. Hatch, a man who is not fat but who looks as if he 'had been fat recently,' with brown rabbit teeth and a loud humorless laugh, comes to reclaim Helton for a lunatic asylum, and Mr. Thompson, acting on a sudden wild impulse, fells him with an axe. Helton, running away from the scene, is shot and killed by pursuers, and Mr. Thompson is acquitted on the perjured testimony of his wife who swears that she saw Hatch pull a knife on Helton. Thompson's life thereafter, however, is made unendurable by the neighbors, and at last he kills himself.

Homer T. Hatch is the embodiment of human malice. He spends his life recapturing escaped lunatics, which appears to be his only pleasure. He may be a bit of a lunatic himself, or he may be a symbol of the perversity of human nature. He does what he does for no principle, for no god, not even for revenge... He enforces the law for the mere sake of enforcing it. Everything, the wretched Thompson tries to persuade himself, would have been all right if Hatch had only stayed away. But Thompson's unprecedented violence in killing Hatch is quite inexplicable to his sons, his wife, his neighbors, and ultimately to himself. He is obsessed with the need to substantiate to everyone his own false version of what happened.

In the end he cannot live either with their disbelief or with his own. He *has*, in one fashion, killed Hatch in self-defense, because Hatch in threatening Helton was really threatening him. Thompson knows that his happiness and prosperity have been the work of the simple-minded harmonica player of whom he has taken unscrupulous advantage.”

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 141-42

“The scene of this book is a dairy farm in Texas which is run rather reluctantly by Mr. Thompson, who regards the chores as women’s work, but who is married to an invalid, Ellie. The silent hard work of Mr. Helton, a taciturn and rather strange new hired man, puts the farm on a paying basis. After nearly nine years, their peace is disturbed by the arrival of Homer T. Hatch, a sly and devious man who inspires distrust in Thompson at once. When he accuses Helton of being an escaped lunatic and tries to capture him for profit, Thompson kills him, believing that Hatch has knifed Helton. Although no marks of wounds are found on Helton, Thompson is acquitted of Hatch’s murder. Nevertheless, he is burdened with an overwhelming guilt and finally kills himself.

The story is told in a simple, clear manner with the touches of irony usual in Miss Porter’s work. Her reticence in explanation and her love of minute psychological detail force the reader to arrive at his own conclusions as to what actually happened. With the help of the author’s amazing power of characterization, the everyday level of existence, which she so beautifully portrays, is contrasted with a deeper spiritual level at which she only hints.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 806

“‘Noon Wine’ moves sharply out of the deceptively romantic world of ‘Old Mortality’ into the squalid actualities of a rundown farm, but the country is the same. Any reader of this story who is also interested in the creative processes and especially in Miss Porter’s, should read, too, her remarkable essay called “‘Noon Wine’: The Sources,’ in which she separates out of the texture of her childhood memories all the main elements of this story, which came to her at different times and about different people, and shows how they all then fell together into the unified pattern that makes this story, which tells for her a ‘truth’ about life in that time, that place. That larger truth is simply the fact, which Miranda did not yet know, that it is not easy, perhaps not possible, to know ‘the truth about what happens’ to oneself....

But let us observe first...Miss Porter’s remarkable skill in moving into a kind of life that was not hers and into a point of view that was completely alien to her own, to Miranda’s. The story is chiefly about Mr. Thompson, the slovenly farmer.... The boys are still only wild youngsters, and it is he himself who spends his days ‘sitting around,’ in effect if not in actuality ‘whittling.’ He is projecting his easygoing present into an easygoing future. For the time he has been rescued in his farming by the presence of Mr. Helton, a stranger from the Dakotas who has turned up mysteriously and taken over the running of the farm. All goes well for nine years, until another stranger appears, a Mr. Hatch, and observe again the skill in pinning these alien creatures down in all their particularity.... And the dialogue—Mr. Hatch, for example, telling about the single tune that Mr. Helton plays, day in and day out, year in and year out, on his harmonica....

Mr. Helton, it develops, had escaped nine years before from an asylum for the criminally insane, and Mr. Hatch, having located him, has come to earn some easy money by returning him. The situation suddenly involves Mr. Thompson, who had had no such intention, in killing Mr. Hatch, and the rest of the story consists of his trying to persuade people that he did that only in defense of Mr. Hatch and in calling upon his wife, who had not witnessed the scene, to say that he was telling the truth. But the shame of these two people, of Mrs. Thompson for lying and of Mr. Thompson for finding himself inexplicably in a situation that ‘don’t look right’—he had always justified his laziness through a curiously crippled code of what one can only call ‘decorum’—is overwhelming. Mr. Thompson finally knows that he is ‘a dead man,’ and in the last sentence of the story, he sees to it.

After all the easygoing years, the sudden unexpected *horror* of the present, the horror whose truth one could not know until one was inextricably in it, when it proves to be an absolute doom to which one’s own nature, however trivially expressed before, now commits us: this is what the story is about. One man’s present, the wine bottle empty and the time not yet noon.”

Mark Schorer
Afterword
Pale Horse, Pale Rider
(New American Library/Signet 1962) 172-74

“Of the three novellas in that volume...*Noon Wine* is the one I love best... One could not ask for a more objective work of fiction than *Noon Wine*.... Katherine Anne’s *Noon Wine* is a model of the form, an example for the textbooks. It has epic quality despite its small scale and modern dress...The epic that it makes me think of, I may say, humorously but not insincerely, is *Paradise Lost*, because it has Lucifer in it, a very modern and American Lucifer named Mr. Hatch.... To save Helton, as he thinks, Thompson kills Hatch....

There is a most touching page toward the close which is like a song or an aria: Mrs. Thompson weeping to have Helton back, saying a sort of prayer against the violence of menfolk, kneeling before her icebox as if it were an altar; the icebox Helton had helped her to buy. This perfectly womanly woman, eternal bystander and born widow; and the typical hired man, the type of wrongdoer whom even the Eumenides might spare because there was no idea or idealism behind his wrong, whom everyone except the Hatches of this world must forgive; and the Thompsons’ fine little boys, by the evolution of whose characters we are subtly made to feel time passing and humanity incessant; all these are exemplary, human and arch-human, in the grandest manner. Grand also, the way in which the murder of Hatch is made to epitomize our lesser losses of temper also... Also it is a reminder of how evil may come of resistance to evil...

There is no end to the kinds of evil which Hatch typifies. You belittle him unfairly and unwisely if you assume that he has gone hunting his twenty-odd madmen just for the cash compensation. It has been chiefly to satisfy his clear sense of right and wrong; and to exercise the power to which he is entitled as a democratic citizen.... Hatch has the legal mind... At the start he positively woos Thompson, like a candidate for public office... In him also may be seen some evils of journalism, and some evils of the police... He is not only a man hunter, he is mankind as man hunter... He is not only a busybody, he is the great American busybody; godlike as only a devil can be. Lucifer! No wonder that Thompson at first is reminded of someone he has seen before.... [At the same time], do not forget that both Helton and Thompson commit murder; and the latter’s plea of self-defense is specious or erroneous, if not dishonest. Hatch is not to blame for anything except his being, and his happening to be just there, in juxtaposition with these others.”

Glenway Wescott
“Katherine Anne Porter Personally”
Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism
(Hamish Hamilton/London 1963) 39-43

“The events of this story center upon a Mr. Thompson, a West Texas farmer, and upon his guilt—the psychological effects of his unpremeditated killing of a workman on his farm. The whole atmosphere of the Thompson place, as rendered by Miss Porter, seems to suggest that such an event must actually have occurred in the years between 1896 and 1905, even if not precisely as it is related in the story. It is clear that the author knew very well the kind of people Mr. and Mrs. Thompson were, even if she did not know exactly these same persons. Mr. Helton, the victim in the story, who is a Swede and who came to North Dakota, is an interesting and successful character... We can imagine that the story began from a memory either of the event or of the character of Mr. Thompson... There can be no better phrase to describe Miss Porter’s special sensibility than to call it ‘historic memory’.”

Ray B. West, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter
(U Minnesota 1963) 12-14

“It was in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* (1939) that Katherine Anne Porter reached the center of her fictional world with the introduction of the semi-autobiographical heroine Miranda. The latest episode in this heroine’s life were recorded first, and it remained for *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944) to portray her childhood and even her ancestors.... *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* contains three novelettes—‘Old Mortality,’ which introduces Miranda at the age of eight and leaves her at eighteen; ‘Noon Wine’; and the title story, which records her illness at twenty-four....

‘Noon Wine’ contrasts remarkably with its two companion pieces. It is one of Miss Porter’s most objective works, whereas ‘Pale Horse, Pale Rider’ is by far her most subjective. All three stories are excellent... Though many critics rank ‘Noon Wine’ as the best of the author’s stories, these three novelettes

furnish proof of the difficulty of attempting to rank works of art.... It is the story of Miss Porter's which most nearly approaches tragedy. A brilliant work...reminding the reader, at least in its plot, of...Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person.' It also contains some of the author's finest writing, beautifully adapted to character and setting. Interest centers in the mind of Mr. Thompson, where conflicting motives are delicately probed; his wife is portrayed less directly... Some of the finest descriptive lines are devoted to her.... Convincing description of the setting and of ordinary life provides a solid and contrasting background the murder. That action itself is described with quick economy, in a suggestive understatement which lets the violence strike the reader directly....

The title...refers most directly to the words of the song which Helton plays constantly on his harmonicas—as Hatch says, 'that part about getting so gay you jus' go ahead and drink up all the likker you got on hand before noon. It seems like up in them Swede countries a man carries a bottle of wine around with him as a matter of course, at least that's the way I understood it.'... Hence the words symbolize all the slightly twisted information which Hatch brings to Thompson. It is this new and shocking information, apparently so unrelated to the present Mr. Helton, which revives the first murder and leads to the second. All of this calls attention to the strong parallel between the two murders. Both are unpremeditated and committed with tools. Helton is declared to have been 'crazy with the heat,' and the deliberately emphasized heat of the day surely helps to induce Thompson's violent state of mind. The apparently casual statement that 'The idea of drinking any kind of liquor in this head made Mr. Thompson dizzy' suggests that Helton might have been dizzy with his noon wine when he killed his brother—a possibility that increases immensely the bitter injustice of the treatment he receives....

The two murders are parallel in their consequences. Each leads to other murders; Thompson's guilt obsession is a milder version of Helton's insanity. Particularly in view of Helton's death, the title of the story has ironic reference to his happy youthful life. It also suggests the sight of Hatch's blood, 'running away in a greasy-looking puddle' in the midday sun. 'Noon Wine' is the minor tragedy of the destruction of a goodhearted but weak man, brought on him by circumstances and some mysterious defect in himself.... His 'tragic flaw,' carefully emphasized from the beginning of the story, is his excessive concern for his standing in the eyes of others; he is a small man, but proud. The wily Hatch plays on this sensitive point. He tells him that harboring an escaped lunatic 'won't look very good' to his neighbors, and 'Mr. Thompson knew almost before he heard the words that it would look funny'....

After the murder, while a man less concerned with status-seeking would have kept his guilt obsession on a more personal basis, Thompson's takes the form of a compulsive need to explain. Like Mrs. Whipple ["He"], he has become so accustomed to judging himself through the eyes of others that his self-justification must follow the same path. It is not his social sense which is condemned but its excess. This is only one aspect of the torturing ambiguity of his situation. He has enough money and self-awareness to recognize his mixed motives but lacks the strength of character to escape from his moral impasse by accepting it. He is also deeply disturbed, as his suicide note reveals, by the fact that he has lied and caused his wife to lie in the trial which exonerated him.

Mrs. Thompson's dilemma is hardly less painful than her husband's. She is formed on the pattern of blind adherence to a strict moral code. Her sense of duty leads her to lie in public but it can never lead her to accept the lie or extend it further, even by repeating it to her husband. This, in Thompson's eyes, is his strongest condemnation. He begins his suicide note on the familiar pattern of self-justification, but when he reaches the point of calling on his wife's testimony he stops after writing 'My wife--'. After thinking for a moment he marks out these words and sits a while 'blacking out the words until he had made a neat oblong patch where they had been'—a patch which resembles a coffin enclosing the wife whom he has brought to spiritual, and soon perhaps physical, death. Then he writes a second brief message, expressing as well as he can his true feelings: 'It was Mr. Homer T. Hatch who came to do wrong to a harmless man. He caused all this trouble and he deserved to die but I am sorry it was me who had to kill him.' Then he kills himself. Fate would seem to have been, if not positively against him, at least indifferent....

The excellence of 'Noon Wine' is owing in large part to the fact that in achieving its great objectivity Miss Porter did not weaken correspondingly her understanding of her characters or sympathy with them.... The Thompson family is composed of good people. They love each other and have that prime essential, the

ability to communicate. Thompson feels that his wife's delicate health has been a major obstacle to his success with the farm, but still she is 'his dear wife, Ellie, who was not strong.' She wishes she could count on him more confidently and scolds him occasionally, but never with bitterness. Yet their situation is one of the most destructive in all of Miss Porter's fiction.... The Thompsons are oppressed by the ironic good fortune of the presence of Helton—first by his taciturnity, next by his harsh treatment of the boys, and finally by the flood of evil he brings upon them. The oppression motif is, in fact, carried further in this story than in any other by the actual portrayal of the final destruction wrought by the union. Yet, and herein lies the tragic significance, the union is destroyed not because of, but in spite of, the fundamental moral character of its members.

'Noon Wine' contains another important embodiment of the oppression motif in Helton's legal subjection to society, a subjection which remains remotely in effect in spite of his escape and finally takes the more immediate and evil form of his subjection to Hatch. Since Helton, like the retarded boy who oppresses another family in 'He,' is seen more as victim than as person... His subjugation is unwitting, and its emotional force is transmitted to the reader directly and through the effects it has on the Thompsons.... At two points in his conversation with Hatch Mr. Thompson adverts to the intolerability of such restraint as Helton has suffered. Learning that he had been in an asylum and worn a straitjacket, Thompson tells about his Aunt Ida who died in the state asylum....

Thompson's resentment at Hatch's handcuffs sets his head buzzing and is one of the proximate incitements to the murder. Helton succeeds in his first escape and his second is effected by the ambiguous murder, but leads ultimately to his death. The evil in Hatch is based on his function as captor, and the power with which he is portrayed, as well as the fact that his scene was the first to crystallize in the author's mind, suggests that a strong basic thematic note has been struck. The escape impulse lies, though somewhat obliquely, behind the explicit theme of the story: Thompson's excessive deference to public opinion makes a prison of society and stern judges of all his neighbors.... Finally rejected even by his wife and sons, he is to compress his escape into a single action, a liberation of the bitterest kind."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 54-62

"In *Noon Wine* we have an incompetent poor white farmer whose fortunes are saved by a Swedish hired hand down from Dakota. The hand speaks to no one, slaves night and day and consoles himself only by playing the harmonica. Years pass and then a blackmailer comes down from Dakota to reveal that the Swede is a murderous escaped lunatic. The farmer, faced with losing his savior, kills the blackmailer. The Swede runs away, consoled by his harmonica [gets caught, beaten and dies]. The poor farmer has nothing but a sense of social injustice. He kills himself out of self-pity."

V. S. Pritchett
"The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter"
New Statesman (10 January 1964) 41-43

"If it is the function of the artist to produce a masterpiece Miss Porter may rest easy. In *Noon Wine* she has written a short novel whose largeness of theme, tragic inevitability, and steadiness of focus put it into that small category of superb short fiction that includes Joyce, Mann, Chekhov, James and Conrad. A study of the effects of evil, it is a story one can turn around in the palm of one's hand forever. So many meanings radiate from it that each reading gives it a new shade and a further dimension. Without once raising its voice, it asks questions that have alarmed the ages, including our own: When a good man kills an evil man, does he become evil himself? If the answer is no, then how are we to define what evil is? It is one of the nicer ambiguities of *Noon Wine* that the two 'good' men in it commit murder while the one character who is 'evil' does not. In the fateful meeting of the farmers, Mr. Thompson, the deranged Swedish harmonica player, Mr. Helton, and the Devil's salesman, Mr. Hatch, Miss Porter has constructed one of those dramas that seem not so much to have been written as discovered intact, like a form in nature. In the perfection of *Noon Wine*, she has achieved what she has worked for—the artist in total command, totally invisible."

Howard Moss
"The Collected Stories: A Poet of the Story"

“Noon Wine’ belongs to the time and place of the Miranda stories, but for artistic reasons it is not one of them.... Hatch had come to return Helton to the asylum, to which he had been committed after killing his brother in a fight over a harmonica.... Perhaps thinking that Hatch was going to injure Helton, Mr. Thompson killed Hatch and, like the Ancient Mariner, kept trying to explain to his neighbors just what happened. One night after an all-day trip to explain the killing, Mr. Thompson had a nightmare, and Mrs. Thompson cried out, ‘Oh, oh, don’t! Don’t! Don’t!’ Mr. Thompson...cried ‘Light the lamp...’ The two sons rushed into the room, believing that Mr. Thompson (once a murderer always a murderer) had attempted to harm their mother. ‘You touch her again, and I’ll blow your heart out,’ one son said. Mr. Thompson, at this moment, felt utter defeat; he had known that his neighbors did not believe his story; now, he saw, his own sons did not believe him. He said he was going for the doctor, but instead he took his gun, went into the field...and then he killed himself....

Porter remembers when she was a child hearing one late summer afternoon...the sound of a thundering shotgun, and a long-drawn-out scream.... When she was about nine, she noticed a strange horse and buggy in the drive and saw a man and woman inside the house, talking to her grandmother... Though Miss Porter never knew the facts of the killing or the outcome, she knew that the woman was made to lie; that she did it unwillingly; but that her husband, dishonest as he was, made her lie in an attempt to make his lie true.... Mrs. Thompson...too, as the boys do, thinks him to be a murderer. By making her consent to lie, he has murdered her spirit... Mr. Thompson did not want his new prosperity damaged. Hatch was obviously an evil man, and all of society agreed that Mr. Thompson should not be punished. The courts would not convict him, but he was still a murderer. The name Hatch...is particularly appropriate, since he has come to return Helton to the booby-hatch; even his given name Homer (who was blind) is significant, for Hatch is a man blindly working within the law, with no regard for the suffering of Helton. Helton, suggesting Hell tone or the sound of Hell, is...a murderer; his own victim and the victim of others...

None of the Thompsons is fully capable of understanding or opposing the evil of Hatch and the evil he left behind or the good-evil of Helton. Mr. Thompson never understands his motives in killing Hatch and is driven to his own self-murder. Mrs. Thompson cannot tell the ultimate lie which would save her husband. The Thompson boys believe the worse of their father. Helton has largely overcome his psychic malaise, or rather his compulsion to do violence; but he lives in a private hell which no one can understand. Hatch’s motivations cannot be explained away in terms of the financial rewards he received; he is the evil principle, beyond understanding. ‘There is nothing,’ Miss Porter says, ‘in any of these beings tough enough to work the miracle of redemption in them.’”

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 87-90

“*Noon Wine* is visible all the way through, full of scenes charged with dramatic energy; everything is brought forth into movement, dialogue; the title itself is Mr. Helton’s tune on the harmonica. *Noon Wine* is the most beautifully objective work she has done.... I find Mr. Hatch the scariest character she ever made, and he’s just set down there in Texas, like a chair. There he stands, part of the everyday furniture of living. He’s opaque, and he’s the devil.... What Miss Porter makes us see are those subjective worlds of hallucination, obsession, fever, guilt.”

Eudora Welty
“The Eye of the Story”
Yale Review (Winter 1966)

“*Noon Wine* is such a structural triumph that its classification seems to be of little importance [novel or short story?]. But its astonishing comprehensiveness combined with equally astonishing concentration entitles it to a place among short novels of the first rank.”

Lodwick Hartley and George Core
Introduction
Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium
(U Georgia 1969) xviii

“Miss Porter’s rightful place among the classical moderns—Yeats, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and James ...should have been clear from the first with the shorter pieces and certainly with *Ship of Fools*.... *Noon Wine* [is] in my view one of the three or four finest novellas by an American author... Almost a third of the novella is devoted to the Hatch scene, including the killing. Only very slightly less is devoted to the consequences of the killing which deal almost exclusively with Thompson’s efforts at self-justification.... Helton is always present in the background. There is no representation of his thoughts, even indirectly.... Thompson, in the full pride of a fraudulent masculinity, has throughout been ‘dead,’ has worked his wife into her own grave, and has alienated his sons.”

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter’s Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 52, 54, 57

“Covers the events of nine years in the life of a family on a small South Texas farm at the turn of the century. On a hot late-summer day in 1896, the owner of the farm—a ‘tough weatherbeaten...noisy proud man’ named Thompson...is approached by a stranger looking for work. Accustomed to expecting the worst of all hired help, the lazy, shrewd Mr. Thompson agrees to take the man on... The stranger, a Mr. Olaf Helton, says that he earned a dollar a day in the wheat fields of North Dakota... He is punctual, hard-working, frugal, and efficient. He methodically tidies up the operations of the farm, which...Thompson, blaming fate and his wife’s chronic sickliness, has allowed to fall into deplorable disorder... Helton...seems to take no pleasure in anything except the lonely music he makes with his remarkable collection of harmonicas. (The title of the story refers to the theme of his favorite tune—a Scandinavian drinking song, the Thompsons are to learn later, about a farmworker who improvidently drinks up during the morning the bottle of wine he brought to the fields to have with his lunch....

Once a mild family crisis develops over Helton’s strangely violent reaction to the Thompson children’s sneaking into this shack to try out the harmonicas. Mrs. Thompson is disturbed when she sees him shaking the frightened boys in a cold and silent fury. But both she and her husband are too sensible of Helton’s economic value, as well as anxious about their offspring’s delinquent tendencies, to take sides against the hired man.... Then...a second stranger arrives at the Thompsons’ gate.... There is something oddly and unpleasantly disconcerting about the man, for all his outward joviality, something indefinably sinister. He identifies himself as Mr. Homer T. Hatch... He has come to inquire about Olaf Helton.... He intends to arrest Helton. The hired man, it appears, is a fugitive from a lunatic asylum in North Dakota, to which he was committed after killing his brother in a fit of rage over the brother’s having borrowed and lost one of his harmonicas. Hatch has learned of his whereabouts from Helton’s mother, to whom he sent a large amount of money saved over the years from the wages paid him by Thompson. Thompson...so dislikes the shifty and patronizing Hatch, whose authority as well as whose motives he is inclined to question, and so resents his sudden intrusion into the peaceful and prosperous order of life on the farm, an order that has largely been achieved by Helton, that he is unwilling to let Hatch accomplish his purpose without resistance....

Helton appears suddenly from around the corner of the house, and rushes in between the other two men, confronting Hatch with his fists raised. Hatch, armed now with handcuffs in one hand and a bowie knife in the other, charges Helton. And Thompson, thinking that he sees the knife plunge into the hired man’s stomach, picks up an axe and strikes Hatch on the head with it. Helton, it turns out, is not knifed. He runs away into the woods. But Hatch is dead. After the sheriff arrives, and a posse is formed to hunt down Helton, Thompson is arrested for murder. Helton dies later in jail from injuries inflicted by his captors when he tries to fight them off. Thompson is tried and acquitted. But the episode breaks him, and he is morbidly convinced that all his neighbors think him a murderer, despite the legal acquittal. For weeks, he wearily drags himself and his wife around the countryside, calling on people to ask them to listen to his story and to believe in his innocence....

His conscience is further burdened by the lie he persuaded his wife to tell, which is that she witnessed Hatch’s attack on Helton and her husband’s justifiable intervention. He feels at last that there is no one but God to whom he can appeal for understanding and justice. Then one night...he leaps out of bed, and his wife gets up screaming in a nightmare. She collapses in a faint, and he is trying to arouse her when the boys awakened by her screams, rush into the room. They look at him accusingly, as if they suspect he has struck

their mother.... The characterization of Mr. Thompson, in whose consciousness the story centers, brilliantly exemplifies Miss Porter's power of sympathetic imagination.... And there is a good deal of conscious humor in the portrayal of the semiliterate farmer, with his absurdly pretentious name of Royal Earle, that is designed to be appreciated only by highly literate readers. But...there is no hint of moral condescension... At the end Thompson is as tragic a figure as any in modern literature....

Essentially, it is his own behavior that Thompson finds inexplicable. The social and moral code by which he lives, and the self-image that corresponds to the code, prove inadequate to the reality of his experience. This disparity between the ideal and the actual is the central theme of the story, and the source of its dramatic tensions.... The coming of the foreigner, the stranger—first Helton, then Hatch—has its ultimate importance in revealing to him the stranger within himself. To some extent, the lifelong inconsistencies in Thompson's attitudes and patterns of behavior are typical of the provincial character—the Southern white, Protestant, yeoman farmer with baronial pretensions. A good example of Miss Porter's satiric humor at the expense of this stereotype is the conflict between Thompson's code of many behavior...and his puritan religious convictions... And if we see that Thompson is perhaps more than typically lazy in the exercise of his moral sense, more than commonly capable of evasive psychological maneuvers to escape self-conviction for his shortcomings as a husband, father, and provider, we must also see in him, finally, an extraordinary sensitivity and strength of conscience...

Hatch's role of the *Doppelgänger*, the sinister 'familiar,' is most explicitly suggested when Thompson feels that he has seen the man somewhere before. They have been talking about where their families come from... We realize that the person Hatch reminds him of is himself. It is Thompson who hasn't, indeed, 'met himself' for so long that he cannot be sure of his identity. Cannot be sure of it, perhaps, because he cannot *tolerate* the recognition. All the things about Hatch that are most offensive to the farmer are a mockery, a wicked caricature, of Thompson's own prejudices and pretensions. Among the characteristics of Thompson that Miss Porter strongly emphasizes in the first scene of the story, so as to fix it in the reader's mind, is his exaggerated and calculating good humor. 'When Mr. Thompson expected to drive a bargain he always grew very hearty and jovial'... It is precisely the same technique, disguising the sinister purpose of his visit, that Hatch uses on Thompson himself nine years later.... Hatch holds a magnifying mirror up to all Thompson's own destructive follies. At every turn, he out-Thompsons Thompson. And Thompson finally cannot bear it.

Thompson is made uncomfortable by Hatch's coldly self-righteous contempt for the 'Scandahoovian' Helton, the hapless 'loony,' a man in hiding so foolish as to send his mother money—an act of affectionate concern ruthlessly exploited by the man-hunter. Never quite consciously, Thompson sees in Hatch's attitude a maddening reflection of his own hypocrisy. He has enjoyed the fruits of Helton's labor all these years, but secretly he has despised the man, despised as 'meeching' and unmanly the very frugality of the hireling that is the basis of the family's new-found prosperity. From time to time he has thrown a sop to his unacknowledged bad conscience with a small increase of wages. Under the disguise of a philosophy of tolerance for eccentricity, he has steadfastly resisted all of his wife's urgings that he get to know Helton; 'letting him alone' was actually his way of refusing Helton human companionship.

Psychologically, it is himself, then, this intolerable image of himself, that Thompson strikes at when he takes the axe to Hatch. He sees Helton knifed because he wants it to be so, wants to be rid of this living human evidence of his own mean-spiritedness. And he desires, and achieves, his own destruction. He does not, of course, at this point, consciously desire anyone's death... Even later, he consciously wants to destroy not himself, but what he earnestly believes to be a false image of himself—thereby to establish the true image as he conceives it.... Thompson's 'tragic flaw' is his social pride. In his desperate need for justification, he can think of nowhere to turn except to the community of his neighbors.... The legal acquittal is unsatisfactory to his conscience because it is based on lies and suppressions. His wife was instructed to testify falsely that she witnessed the slaying of Hatch. And, on the advice of his lawyer, Thompson does not reveal that Hatch told him Helton was a lunatic. His subsequent appeal to the superior court, so to speak, of his neighbors, defeats its own purpose by continuing the falsehood—as if, in his desperation, he hopes that if he only tells the lie often enough it will become the truth. But in a sense he cannot help himself. For if, indeed, he is lying about why he killed Hatch, then his whole life is a 'lie—i.e., there is nothing in it that conforms to his image of himself.

But his neighbors—all of whom, of course, are preoccupied with their own lies and confusions—cannot help him. Either they will not tell him what they really think, or they prefer to think nothing. The self-tortured Thompson is an embarrassing nuisance to them. And his wife is worse than useless to him in his trouble. He keeps hoping that one day she will tell him, in private, that she really did witness the killing, and that what she saw was just what he said happened. But although her sense of wifely duty permits or compels her to lie in public, she will not grant him the comfort of private complicity.... We might see her as acting out of an unimpeachable righteousness, one that puts direct adherence to truth above personal loyalty. But it may be that that loyalty has been seriously compromised. After the killing she deeply resents her husband. Perhaps she faults him less for demanding that she perjure herself than for having deprived her of the comfort and order that Helton brought into the life of the family. On the last, again insufferably hot, afternoon of her husband's life...she stands for a few minutes in front of the refrigerator—one of the previously undreamed-of luxuries that Helton's labor purchased... Pausing there, she loses herself in a flood of reminiscences about the hired man and his music that suggests the mood of a woman grieving for her lost lover....

[The critic] Nance makes much of the blacking-out of the two words [in his suicide note] as a sign of Thompson's rejection of his wife. The black oblong patch, according to Nance, is the design of a coffin, to which Thompson has consigned his wife. But I would suggest that his second thoughts might also be taken to signify a final and terrible honesty on Thompson's part, his acceptance of the fact that this last and dearest hope of human understanding has been irrevocably denied him, and that he must appear before God utterly alone. The act of leaving a note indicates that Thompson still hopes to be justified, if not before his neighbors or even his wife, then somehow before humanity at large. His fatal pride, the hope of restoring his good name, is active almost to the end.

But not quite to the end. The instrument of his final and all-consuming purpose is the shotgun. In the last paragraph of the story Miss Porter concentrates exclusive attention upon the struggle of the man's will with recalcitrant physical reality—with the gun, with his own clumsy body. Mr. Thompson's satisfaction in hitting upon the idea of using his toe to trip the trigger—'That way he could work it'—is entirely practical. That way he could work what? His salvation, his justification before men? At that moment, no. There is no thought then of sin and redemption, no one else is there, only he and the gun."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 97-108

"One unhappy experience...was turned into the short novel *Noon Wine*, which many of Porter's admirers consider her strongest work, and in which Lady Bird Johnson saw the tragic impact of the great Greek myths in a place 'where the outcome was even bleaker and less hopeful.' At one time [her father Harrison Porter] decided to relocate his family and needed somewhere to leave his younger daughter.... [He] left them with...Ellen [Skaggs Thompson]...on a small farm near the former Porter holdings... Her family consisted of her husband, Gene, her two sons, Clay and Herbert, a black cook called Cindy, and a hired man called Mr. Helton... Ellen Thompson was an invalid during these years... Gene Thompson himself was an easygoing and even-tempered man... Not only did the farm closely resemble the Porter farm but Mr. and Mrs. Thompson closely resembled her own parents.... Harrison Porter...did have exactly the same kind of pride which Porter in the story attributed to Mr. Thompson...and his disinclination for work might well have been described in the words used for Mr. Thompson.... Mrs. Thompson is not unlike Alice Porter, a gently reared girl, well educated enough to teach school but physically delicate....

Many have seen the portrait as a harsh exposure of ignorant, dangerous people. Among these were the Thompsons and the Skaggses, who thought the author should be sued. Porter herself on the other hand regarded her characters with indulgence, saying of Mr. Thompson that he 'was not an evil man, he was only a poor sinner doing his best according to his lights, lights somewhat dimmed by his natural aptitude for Pride and Sloth.' One critic, more attuned than most to the nuances of local speech, has seen the relationship between the Thompsons as a gentle, teasing, affectionate one, the only portrayal of a happily married couple in the whole of Porter's fiction. In contrast to the diversity of opinions about the characters, critical opinion has been unanimous in its praise of the wealth of vivid detail in which the Thompson farm is described, and there has been speculation on how Porter achieved such remarkable clarity.... The events

which made up the plot presented no difficulty. She took these from an incident or series of incidents which happened in the community... One incident was a murder and the other was of a murderer touring the neighborhood with his wife, begging his neighbors to believe in his innocence....

The fact that [Porter] came so close and yet could still not acknowledge her relationship to her own place and her own people suggests her fatal ambivalence on the subject. She could not identify with her family and yet she craved a sense of identity. She was alienated in the most basic sense and spent years of her life in a vain quest for a place and people.”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 73-77

“The tragic story of a vain and foolish man named Royal Earle Thompson who destroyed himself because, in the Socratic sense, he did not know himself.”

Don Graham
Texas: A Literary Portrait
(Corona, San Antonio 1985) 64

“Faith is...absent in the religious attitudes of the Thompsons of *Noon Wine*, who rely on Protestant fundamentalism as a means to respectability.... Helton is the first to appear... He seems ghostly from the start... He is referred to by Mrs. Thompson as ‘a disembodied spirit’... Figuratively, Helton is a dead man, simply waiting for law and order to catch up with him, just as he brings death indirectly to other characters.... Royal Earle Thompson is a realistic representative of his class and place.... His pretentious name is a sign of his appreciation for appearances, and he does appear to be a solid citizen who pays his taxes, contributes to the preacher’s salary, owns land, and heads a family. The truth is that he is shiftless and lazy... In developing the characters of the three men, Porter makes sanity a moral issue. Although Helton is insane by any standard, having murdered his brother for borrowing (and losing) his harmonica, are Thompson and Hatch necessarily ‘sane’? Thompson illustrates the subjectivity of the label when he defends Helton...

Thompson is disregarding Helton’s strangeness and saying that Helton is an industrious, thrifty, sober bachelor who is Thompson’s opposite, in many respects his ideal.... Thompson shares with Helton insanity or its latency (his Aunt Ida was in the state asylum), but beyond that they are bound together by Thompson’s dependence on Helton for his economic survival... To Thompson, Hatch represents his own worst self; he continuously thinks that Hatch looks familiar to him, and he regards him with dislike from the beginning.... All the characters act from subconscious motives or misguided intentions, irrational impulses illustrated by Porter’s repeated use of images of blindness, light, and animals.... Mrs. Thompson is particularly unseeing; bolstered as she is by her pious adherence to fundamentalist strictures, she misses her own similarity to Hatch, whose ‘rabbit teeth’ link him to Mrs. Thompson, who is described in rabbit images.... Porter again implies that humans must first recognize their animal natures before they can be redeemed by love....

That Thompson’s killing of Hatch is subconsciously motivated is proved by his inability to remember exactly what happened. Thompson believes that Hatch attacks Helton with a bowie knife, a fantasy that represents Thompson’s belief that Hatch is a threat to his own well-being.... Thompson’s killing of Hatch can be seen clearly as Thompson’s attempt to save himself and his family from economic ruin. On the other hand, since Hatch represents to Thompson his dark self, killing him can be construed as his attempt to kill off the side of himself that he despises.... The title of the story refers to the song that Helton plays on his harmonica...a song that describes Thompson’s self-indulgence and explains his middle-age apathy which works against his desire to maintain a good appearance in the eyes of his neighbors.... With Helton dead, the farm’s decay is sure, and with his good name gone, as well as the moral support of his family, Thompson has no choice but death.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 78-83

“‘Good country people’ [title of story by Flannery O’Connor] are examined in *Noon Wine*, whose setting is a small south Texas farm.’ Don Graham says that the story is set near Buda, Texas, very close to Kyle, the town where Katherine Anne Porter lived with her grandmother Porter (*Texas: A Literary Portrait*). In such small Texas towns and rural areas, respectability was all... Like Mrs. Whipple in ‘He,’ Royal Earle Thompson could never look truly into himself.... And what keeps him from knowing himself is that he is so everlastingly concerned with what the neighbors will think of him....

Mr. Royal Earle Thompson, as his name suggests is prone to take on ‘royal’ airs when it comes to domestic duties.... The Thompsons, like the Whipples of ‘He,’ are poor dirt farmers with very little going for them. Mr. Thompson’s laziness, sorniness, and rationalizations seem to offer little hope that the family will ever be in much better circumstances. The farm is neglected, maintenance practically unknown. The reader accustomed to Southern regional fiction will be reminded of the ‘poor white trash’ frequenting such works.... But with the mysterious arrival of Mr. Helton the prospects of the Thompsons quickly improve. Mr. Helton demonstrates industry, frugality, and determination.

Comically taking credit for Mr. Helton’s improvements, Mr. Royal Earle Thompson now begins to move up in the world. Nothing darkens this idyllic picture except Mr. Helton’s slight tendency toward violence when his personal belongings (especially his harmonicas, symbolizing his fragile personal and creative identity) are bothered by the Thompson children, Herbert and Arthur. The haunting melody played by Mr. Helton is suggestive of something mysterious, alien, but also something perhaps aesthetically attractive in him; Mr. Helton’s ultimate destruction by this society can be metaphorically understood as the conservative community’s need to destroy the threatening artist.... Even boys who took piano lessons in the rural areas were looked at askance during this period....

Mr. Thompson, essentially a no-account farmer, is enabled by Mr. Helton’s industry to appear in the social guise he prefers, something like a gentleman farmer. We are informed ever so subtly that Mr. Thompson is a drinking man, that he stops off at ‘the hotel’ in town for a nip whenever he has the opportunity. It is clear throughout this story that Mr. Thompson places an undue emphasis upon what people will think, upon *reputation* as opposed to *character*; this misplaced emphasis will be his destruction. For the Thompsons are like the Whipples; having little of the world’s goods, they tend to overrate the commodity that is most affordable, the world’s opinions....

With the arrival of Mr. Homer T. Hatch, all the chickens of this story come home to roost. Hatch is a most disgusting caricature of the financial opportunist, but he successfully cons Mr. Thompson into believing, in spite of himself, that something is amiss with Mr. Helton.... Thompson is afraid of what the neighbors will think if they learn that he is harboring an escapee from an insane asylum.... Thompson, who saw—or *thought* he saw, Mr. Hatch thrust a knife into Mr. Helton’s stomach, splits open Mr. Hatch’s head with an axe. But Mr. Helton was not killed by Homer T. Hatch; he is hunted down and killed by a sheriff’s posse. The knife that had *seemed* to go into his stomach actually never did. Mr. Thompson therefore has a problem: how is he going to convince the neighbors...that his killing of the despicable Homer T. Hatch was in any way justified? It matters not at all to him that a good lawyer gets him off, for the court of public opinion has the final judgment. In the end, the only solution for Mr. Thompson is suicide...

This story, like ‘He,’ shows us that aspect of Texas rural life that Katherine Anne Porter most hated, its preoccupation with the social order and its almost total obliteration of individuality. To be an individualist in such a situation is almost impossible; conformity is a requirement for the citizen who might at any time have to call on his neighbors for assistance. This was the very environment that Katherine Anne Porter herself had to escape if she wanted a literary career. The novella [she prefers the term short novel] has a distinguished history in literature, and Katherine Anne Porter is one of its greatest practitioners.”

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 111-117

“The situation in *Noon Wine* might be described as a photographic negative to that of ‘Maria Concepcion’; its ultimate view of the relationship between the morality of a community and the letter of the

law is, however, an exact reproduction. In *Noon Wine*, Mr. Thompson murders the bounty hunter, Homer T. Hatch, believing that Hatch has just stabbed Mr. Helton, the hired hand... When his vision clears, Mr. Thompson discovers that Helton is unharmed, and he cannot make sense out of the circumstances that led him to bring his ax down upon Hatch's head and of the face that he is now a murderer... Although Mr. Thompson attempts to untangle in his mind the confused strands of what 'really happened in his struggle with Mr. Hatch, he can never work out the knots in a way that justifies his act....

Unlike Maria Concepcion, Mr. Thompson cannot exonerate himself, even though he tries until the very end to pin the blame on Mr. Hatch.... Mrs. Thompson 'never said anything to comfort him'; his wild dream in which he reenacts the murder finally forces her to accuse him not with words but with her violent, frightened estrangement. Mr. Thompson claims that he commits suicide as a last attempt to justify his behavior to his neighbors and himself, but his act is, in reality, the execution of a guilty man.... Mr. Thompson's story provides another example of a law of the moral sphere conflicting with and finally taking precedence over a law of the state."

Debra A. Modellmog

"Concepts of Justice in the Work of Katherine Anne Porter"

Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 26.4 (Fall 1993) 37-52

"Mr. Thompson...has none of [Porter's] honest openness to memory and experience, and so he fails in his efforts to structure a truthful narrative of his life. Perhaps Mr. Thompson's most telling flaw is his obsession with controlling meaning—a monopoly that allows him to criticize others for their failings but to see none in himself. Despite the fact that he knows the farm is deteriorating, his interpretation of its decline focuses on everything but his own responsibility.... Mr. Thompson's handicaps, as he sees them, include useless help, a sickly wife, and lazy sons. Faultless to his own eyes, he must bear the burden of all of them. The key to transforming the farm successfully is of course hard work, precisely what Mr. Thompson will himself not do. So concerned is he with appearances—and particularly with the image he cuts according to his preconceived notions of how a man in his station should act—that he does not even consider performing the necessary but to his eyes unmanly chores. 'Slopping hogs was hired man's work...' 'It don't *look* right,' was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do.' Only with the arrival of Helton, a steady and industrious worker who cares not at all for appearances, does the farm eventually turn around....

Protecting appearances now no longer means for Mr. Thompson avoiding particular kinds of work (since Helton does them all) but safeguarding Helton.... The greatest threat to Helton, and thus to the farm, is of course Homer T. Hatch, a bounty hunter who reveals that years earlier Helton had in a fit of passion killed his brother and later escaped from an insane asylum... Mr. Thompson's killing of Hatch undoes the stability by which he has lived, both literally in his life at the farm...and psychologically in his perception of himself. He does everything he can to see himself as guiltless and upstanding, directing the blame for everything onto Hatch.... Publicly he proclaims his innocence, but privately he works and reworks his memories in an effort, finally unsuccessful, to justify his killing of Hatch.... In his probings of self, Mr. Thompson on one level is fuller and wiser than he was before Hatch's death when he was so confident of himself and his views. Like the artist Porter envisioned, he now engages his memory in endless remembering, searching for meaning and understanding.

Ultimately, however, Mr. Thompson resists the truth of memory: instead of giving himself over to its insights, he still seeks to impose his preconceived version of events.... Mr. Thompson revises his memory not to get at the truth but to justify himself. Finally, however, he cannot control his memories.... The light of consciousness and memory is too much to bear, and he takes his life rather than living with its burden. For Porter, living with, rather than escaping, the burden of memory was the means for growth and fulfillment. Memory had to be engaged and responded to freely and honestly. By the early thirties this burden had become central to her understanding of imaginative creation, and it became the crucial inspiration and focus of almost all of her fiction." [Overall, otherwise, this is an unreliable critic.]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.

Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 141-45

“Nowhere, perhaps, is verbal style used as a manifestation of values more fully than in what is perhaps her finest single work, *Noon Wine*.... Almost universally, the story has been placed as one of her greatest works.... Much of the subtlety of this beautifully achieved story is conveyed through the differing speech styles of the three men. Speech serves as a powerful index to character. In contrast to the taciturn Helton, Mr. Thompson is given to empty talk, filling conversational space just for the sake of filling it. Moreover, he sometimes becomes jovially talkative in pursuit of profitable business deals, warming to a forced geniality when he senses a bargain at hand. This volubility of Thompson’s is more an amusing fault than a vicious one, but it indicates his willingness to use a friendly manner and a stream of talk for purposes of minor dissembling. In its parallel contrasts of Thomson’s manner and Helton’s and of the work habits of the two, the story firmly associates Thompson’s kind of talkativeness with shiftlessness or shallowness, and reserve (though perhaps not to the degree exhibited by Mr. Helton) with conscientiousness and competence....

When Hatch appears, he is at once marked as a shabby character by the simple fact that he talks too much. The contrast of Thompson and Helton has prepared the reader to recognize the signs. Hatch is like a demonic double of Thompson, his roar of false laughter an exaggerated parody of Mr. Thompson’s joviality. He has a ‘free manner’ which in its excess reveals the ‘forced amiability’ of Mr. Thompson’s ‘public self.’ Moreover, Hatch’s seemingly loose talk is actually sly, calculated, and thus doubly reprehensible. If Helton is taciturn and Thompson is garrulous, Hatch is voluble. The reader quickly distrusts him. Indeed, Mr. Thomson himself notices that Hatch’s jokes and laughter do not ring true; he seems to be ‘laughing for reasons of his own.’ Hatch’s talk is shot through with simple untruth, and his manner is an attempted disguise. To assist the reader in navigating these fairly subtle implications, the narrative voice serves as a model of reserve and a standard against which looseness and fakery are measured, underscoring the moral significance of the contrasts among the characters’ speech styles....

Near the end of the story, as Mr. Thompson drives about the countryside trying to convince his neighbors that he is not a murderer, he is embarrassingly voluble in the attempt.... No one believes him. In contrast to his wordy groveling before unsympathetic neighbors, his suicide note is honest, direct, and terse.... He pauses to think and decides against invoking his wife’s witness, which had been false all along. Instead, he makes a new start on the whole story, stating it directly and without the slightest evasion.... This unembellished statement of the facts is Thompson’s ‘true testimony.’ The act of giving it accords him an enhanced moral stature, and its conciseness and evident honesty measure his distance from the speciously talkative Hatch. Porter’s narration of the suicide, in its simplicity, sparseness, and concreteness, underscores the verbal ethic of reserve, implying but not stating a quality of terrified determination in the face of the ultimate.... In *Noon Wine*, reticence becomes an ethical standard against which slackness and inauthenticity are measured. It is posed in the story line, in the characterization, and in the narrative voice. Porter’s restrained, incisive style defines and delineates, but at the same time poses ambiguities and ironies.”

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 254-56

“*Noon Wine* is the...story of a South Texas dairy farmer, Mr. Thompson, who hires an itinerant Swede to ‘help out’ and keeps him on for nine years, profiting handsomely meanwhile by the Swede’s many capabilities and his willingness to work for very little. When one day a stranger, Mr. Hatch, arrives to claim the Swede as a fugitive from a North Dakota asylum, Thompson resists, and the Swede, thinking his employer is being threatened, intervenes. In the altercation that follows, Thompson inadvertently kills Hatch, and the Swede, hysterical and too terrified to be subdued without force, is taken to the local jail, where he soon dies of his injuries and shock. Thompson is exonerated at the trial but, branded as a murderer and unable to convince anyone that he is really not, finally commits suicide. In both of these stories about characters moved to despair by a recognition of their inability to relate to other human beings, Porter uses James’s device of the central intelligence to present psychological studies of extraordinary complexity and in *Noon Wine* she also makes it work to produce an action of intensity and power seldom achieved in short fiction.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature

“O’Connor liked *Noon Wine* more than any of Porter’s other stories (*Habit* 485) and wrote her own variation on the short novel in ‘The Displaced Person’.”

Gary M. Ciuba

Desire, Violence & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction:
Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O’Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy
(Louisiana State 2007) 251n1

Helton escaped from hell, from being restrained in a straitjacket in a mental asylum—a booby hatch. Mr. Hatch is a sneaky devil who would take Helton back to hell. The name Hatch sounds like Old Scratch, a traditional name for Satan. Mr. Thompson had an aunt who died in the state asylum while restrained in a straitjacket, the possible fate of Helton had he not escaped.

The title of the story alludes to a drinking song that Scandinavian field workers sing, about prematurely drinking up the wine intended for the noon layoff--about *lacking restraint*. Noon wine is secular in contrast to the sacred wine in the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion—representing the blood of Christ. Just as the field workers drink their noon wine before they have earned it, Mr. Thompson feels that he is saved by prosperity he has not earned. Noon wine is also a metaphor of Hatch’s blood shed prematurely by Mr. Thompson because he lacks restraint. Mr. Thompson has a “weakness for a dram too much now and then” and he also lacks restraint in his speech and manners. In contrast, Helton’s personality seems to be in a straitjacket. He is “as good as dead,” as if in killing his brother he killed himself. Similarly, after Mr. Thompson has killed Hatch, he ‘felt he was a dead man.’”

According to Hatch, the only source of background information, Helton played the drinking song on his harmonica while restrained in the straitjacket, transcending his misery through music. For nine years the Thompsons hear him playing only that one tune, evidence of his simple mind, his arrested development and his guilty obsession with what drove him mad. Helton’s brother took his new harmonica to serenade a girlfriend and lost it, then he refused to buy Helton a replacement. Mr. Thompson suggests that “His brother may a been a mean ornery cuss.” The brother was going to be married, whereas the harmonica was all that the simpleminded Helton had to love. Helton had a legitimate grievance, whereas Hatch makes it sound like Helton was unprovoked and “jus’ went loony one day in the hayfield and shoved a pitchfork right square through his brother.” The pitchfork evokes the hell that Helton lives in thereafter. “They was goin’ to execute him, but they found out he had went crazy with the heat.” Since Hatch is a lying deceiver, his account cannot be entirely trusted. He wants to make Helton sound as dangerous as possible and he might conceal that the brothers got into a fight with pitchforks. Hatch twice indicates that Helton went crazy *after* he killed his brother, probably out of guilt. The parallels between Helton killing his brother and Mr. Thompson killing Hatch suggest that neither man premeditated murder, that both nevertheless feel guilty because they lacked restraint.

Hatch pretends to be tolerant: “What I say is, if a man has lived harmless and quiet for nine years it don’t matter if he *is* loony, does it? So long’s he keeps quiet and don’t do nobody harm.” Mr. Thompson insists, “The man ain’t loony now. He’s been perfectly harmless for nine years.” What is more, Helton is humble, egalitarian and hardworking--a better role model for the Thompson boys than their father, who is proud, lazy and prejudiced. Making the Thompson farm prosperous, “Helton was the hope and the prop of the family, and all the Thompsons became fond of him...as a good man and a good friend.” When Mr. Thompson starts to menace Hatch, “Mr. Helton came in between them, fists doubled up, then stopped short”—he is able to restrain himself. He proves that he is no longer dangerous. The major irony is that the “lunatic” is the most virtuous man in the story and the man who wants to return him to a straitjacket is by nature the least virtuous. Hatch “laughed like a perfect lunatic.” And Mr. Thompson declares, “You’re the crazy one around here, you’re crazier than he ever was!” Ironically, Thompson even says, “If he’s crazy...why, I think I’ll go crazy myself for a change.” And then he does.

In psychological terms Hatch is the Shadow—the repressed negative characteristics--of Mr. Thompson: “He certainly did remind Mr. Thompson of somebody”; “He had never seen a man he hated more, the minute he first laid eyes on him.” In Jungian psychology, for the individuation process of development to

proceed, one must confront the repressed Shadow of the darker self. As Hatch opens up and gradually reveals himself and his true purpose, he opens the sealed hatch of the unconscious in Mr. Thompson, who displays some characteristics of Hatch to a lesser degree: He “hated like the devil to pay wages,” he threatens to discipline his sons by breaking “every bone in ‘em,” and when he pinches his wife too hard trying to be seductive she chides him gently, “Why, Mr. Thompson, sometimes I think you’re the evilest-minded man that ever lived.” Hatch likes his chewing tobacco “natural” whereas Thompson likes his sweetened “a little.” Thompson expresses prejudices against several different races and against women, though he is not an absolute misogynist like Hatch, who values a wife less than a tractor: “It’s just as you say: a dead loss, keepin’ one of ‘em up.” Yet he kept his last wife working “like a mule” until she wore out and died. Hatch twists the words of Mr. Thompson: “This was not at all what Mr. Thompson had heard himself say; he had been trying to explain that a wife as expensive as his was a credit to a man.” At the same time, however, while defending Helton he says, “He always acted like a sensible man, to me. He never got married, for one thing.” Hatch and Thompson have comparable personalities when bargaining, but [Hatch’s] joviality made Mr. Thompson nervous, because the expression in the man’s eyes didn’t match the sounds he was making.” Hatch has no integrity.

Mr. Thompson has a number of valid reasons for wanting to stop Hatch from taking Helton away, but he did not have to kill him to stop him. “Why hadn’t he just told Mr. Hatch to get out before he ever even got in?... After all, he might have got rid of him peaceably, or maybe he might have had to overpower him and put those handcuffs on him and turn him over to the sheriff for disturbing the peace... If he could have done anything else almost except kill Mr. Hatch, then nothing would have happened to Mr. Helton.” In the heat of the day and his outrage, like Helton when he killed his brother, Mr. Thompson is overcome by his emotions and lacks restraint. Like the workers who cannot wait for their wine, Mr. Thompson cannot wait for Helton to help him subdue Hatch. Ironically, he is the one who goes crazy, while the harmless one is hunted down in order to be returned to a straitjacket. Laws are the basis of civilized society, but laws are written mostly by lawyers, whose profession requires them in some cases to disregard evil. Lawyers often act like Hatch, using the law unjustly. “Circumstances alters cases, as the feller says.” The most dramatic irony of the story is that the reader probably feels that Mr. Thompson did a good thing by ridding the world of such an evil man as Hatch. Lacking restraint, we may feel glad to see the lying bounty hunter with his “wicked and piglike” eyes get axed in the head. But the act was nonetheless morally wrong. And tragic, as it leads to the deaths of Helton—the one he meant to protect--Mr. Thompson himself, and soon after his suicide probably the fragile Mrs. Thompson.

Royal Earle Thompson is doomed by pride. His failure to tend his declining farm is evidence of a failure to tend his soul. Feeling superior, he rationalizes his laziness with prejudices against work he considers beneath him, chores suitable for hired men, “niggers” and women. “It was his dignity and his reputation that he cared about, and there were only a few kinds of work manly enough for Mr. Thompson to undertake with his own hands.” Like Mrs. Whipple in “He,” Mr. Thompson cares more about what the neighbors think of him than about what is right, setting Man above God. In his pride, he sees no difference between his own will and the will of God. “All his carefully limited fields of activity were related somehow to Mr. Thompson’s feeling for the appearance of things, his own appearance in the sight of God and man. ‘It don’t look right,’ was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do”--as if God is a dupe and will accept appearances for the truth. The tension between Mr. Thompson’s violent impulses and his desire to maintain respectable appearances is sometimes comical: “He wanted to turn around and shove the fellow off the stump, but it wouldn’t look reasonable.”

Mr. Thompson has been lying to himself all his life. In the very act of killing Hatch he lies to himself with the illusion that he saw Hatch stab Helton, then he lies to his wife: “He killed Mr. Helton, he killed him, I saw him do it. I had to knock him out.” Mr. Thompson then lies to the sheriff by claiming that his wife was a witness and revises his initial lie when telling his wife how to lie. His lawyer gives him an escape hatch, telling him about how his own father killed a man in “self-defense”: “His father had waited a long time to catch the other fellow in the wrong, and when he did he certainly made the most of his opportunity.” This suggests that contrary to “self-defense,” Mr. Thompson likewise wanted to kill his victim, though like Helton he lost control of himself and did not premeditate murder. At his trial Mr. Thompson “pretended to be perfectly ignorant” of Helton’s having escaped from a booby hatch. The more he lies, the more he becomes like Hatch. After he has been acquitted, he struggles to maintain the lie to

himself that he did not commit a murder because it was not premeditated: "It was right there that Mr. Thompson's mind stuck, squirming like an angleworm on a fishhook: he had killed Mr. Hatch, and he was a murderer. That was the truth about himself that Mr. Thompson couldn't grasp." He still clings to the desperate self-deception that Hatch stabbed Helton, contrary to the fact that after his capture there was no such injury found on Helton.

Mr. Thompson's pride becomes a straitjacket of denial that he is guilty of murder. Trapped by his lies, he tries to escape by visiting all his neighbors and pleading with them to believe that "he never killed Mr. Hatch on purpose." He hit the victim in the head with an axe but he didn't mean to kill him? His repressed guilt is evident in his washing his hands intensely before he goes out to plead for absolution from his neighbors, as if trying to wash off the blood he shed, like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare. Meanwhile, ironically, Mr. Thompson is committing an even greater sin—"on purpose" and cruel. He drags his miserable wife along and forces her to lie in support of his lie, humiliating her before her neighbors and her God: "If you don't believe me, you can believe my wife. She won't lie." Mrs. Thompson supports her husband as she feels she must, but it is obvious to the neighbors, as it was to Porter when she witnessed such a scene as a child, that the poor woman is lying. "Mrs. Thompson, with her hands knotted together, aching, her chin trembling, would never fail to say: 'Yes, that's right, that's the truth--'" Worst of all, Mr. Thompson wants his wife to believe his lie and to say so to his face: "He hoped she would say finally, 'I remember now, Mr. Thompson, I really did come round the corner in time to see everything. It's not a lie, Mr. Thompson. Don't you worry.'" This is ironic because he has never listened to her before and yet now he has elevated her to the role of his moral judge and savior—if she will only lie.

Mr. Thompson should have been listening to his wife all along. She is a former Sunday School teacher, the parent who says grace at meals and the one who worries about the "immortal souls" of her two children. "Mrs. Thompson pondered now and then over Mr. Helton's soul. He didn't seem to be a churchgoer... 'I think we ought to invite him to go to hear Dr. Martin,' she told Mr. Thompson. 'It isn't very Christian of us not to ask him.'" In contrast, her husband says, "Let him alone...The way I look at it, his religion is every man's own business." Mr. Thompson himself has not minded his business—neither his farm nor his soul. His wife welcomes Helton: "I think it's a mighty good change to have a man round the place who knows how to work and keep his mouth shut." She also welcomes her new icebox, but at the same time, she sees that her husband has substituted material prosperity for true salvation. "Oh, God, said Mrs. Thompson in a long dry moan, kneeling before the icebox." Her poor health annoys her husband and he scapegoats her as Hatch does his last wife. The work of a farmer's wife and mother is hard and unending—especially with a lazy husband. Mrs. Thompson was frail to begin with, has been an invalid for almost fourteen years, and has had four operations. After her husband kills Hatch, "She wished now she had died one of those times when she had been so sick, instead of living on for this."

One night in bed Mr. Thompson fantasizes how it could have been had he subdued Hatch rather than killing him. Helton would still be alive and playing his tune "about feeling so good in the morning, drinking up all the wine so you'd feel even better." Mr. Thompson came to depend on Helton for saving him and his farm and it made him even more lazy, enjoying the proceeds without earning them, just as he expects to enjoy salvation without earning it. He imagines Hatch in jail "ready to listen to reason and to repent of his meanness." Ironically, Thompson himself does not act reasonably nor repent of murder. In fact, in this situation, Mr. Thompson is worse than Hatch—chopping a man down with an axe being worse than "meanness." And what Thompson does to his wife is also worse than mean. It is true that if Hatch had prevailed, he would have returned Helton to the torture of a straitjacket and possible slow death, but Helton might have escaped again, whereas killing Hatch definitely causes Helton's death. Mr. Thompson relives clutching the axe and jumps out of bed with a yell, terrifying his wife. She screams and the boys rush into the room and blame their father for the state she is in: "What did you do to her?" He denies responsibility with the same excuse he made for murder: "I never did your mother any harm in my life, on purpose." This is a lie, since he has been so lazy she has had to take on more work that damaged her health, and since he forced her to jeopardize her soul and humiliate herself by lying for him. The comma before "on purpose" is an example of how subtle details in Porter's style enhance her writing.

As a Satan figure Hatch gives the story an allegorical dimension in the tradition of Hawthorne. Mrs. Thompson is his opposite, a Christ-evoking figure. She is a potential savior to her man in the Victorian

tradition of Hawthorne's fair ladies such as Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*, who escapes the Satan figure Westervelt. Like Dimmesdale until the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Mr. Thompson is too proud and cowardly to acknowledge his sin. Even in his suicide note, sworn to "Before Almighty God, the great judge of all before who I am about to appear..." Mr. Thompson still denies that he did anything wrong: "I still think I done the only thing there was to do. My wife--" He marks out the last two words, indicating that he stops including his wife in his lie. He is finally taking a little responsibility for his actions, moving toward the truth too late. Blacking her out with a "neat oblong patch" (1) emphasizes his decision to stop involving her in his guilt and failure. It is a slightly redemptive act, but (2) the coffin shape of the patch hints that he will also be responsible for her probable death in reaction to his suicide. (3) He has been blacking her out with his pride and male prejudice since he married her. (4) Allegorically, she represents his conscience—sickly, weak, ashamed, and restrained as if in a straitjacket. If he had listened to his wife, she would have urged him to admit to his sins, to repent and to ask God for forgiveness. Mr. Thompson instead unwisely submits his soul to his neighbors for judgment.

"This is the only way I can prove I am not a cold blooded murderer like everybody seems to think." Mr. Thompson is not a cold blooded murderer, he is a hot blooded murderer. His suicide is a final example of his lacking restraint. It is the lazy way out. He could have started practicing his religion for a change. He could have earned back the respect of his neighbors and family with good works like Hester Prynne. He could have tried to set a better example for his sons than blowing his head off. Maybe he could learn to think straight. He is so proud that when he loses the respect of his wife and sons as well as the community, he has nothing else to live for. He kills himself because of what people think of him, yet his suicide will probably be seen by most people as confirmation of his guilt rather than his innocence. As one of his boys says of his going around pleading to neighbors, "It just makes matters worse."

Michael Hollister (2017)