

HUMOR

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

ANALYSIS

"A Day's Work" (1940)

The critics have seen "A Day's Work" as Naturalistic. It is true that the story dramatizes victimization in a New York slum during the Depression of the 1930s and recalls Stephen Crane's Naturalistic first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) in its setting, characters of limited intelligence and abundant ironies. The daughter of the Hallorans is named Maggie. Contrary to Naturalism, (1) the fate of the Hallorans is determined by their choices, by free will—as in his choosing to get drunk all the time--whereas Naturalism implies that free will does not exist; (2) the Naturalists evoke sympathy for their protagonists as victims, whereas Porter satirizes them as perpetrators; and (3) Naturalism is atheistic, depicting a world without God, whereas Porter expresses a religious vision. Porter is a Modernist, whereas most of her critics after 1960 are *Post*-modernists--atheist liberals. Liberals enforce Political Correctness, the academic police state, which rejects God. Postmodernist critics avoid reporting the existence of God in literature because they are intolerant of beliefs different from their own. Consequently most criticism of Porter is more about what the critic believes than what Porter wrote.

God is mentioned 18 times in the story and twice more in the corruptions "Crisakes" and "Chees." Yet critics avoid mentioning God at all, even though the author and the Hallorans are Catholics. The Hallorans criticize each other in religious terms, they fight about the state of their souls, and Mrs. Halloran beats up her husband in part for missing Mass. "Surely I have a soul and I'll save it yet in spite of you," she proclaims to him. At the beginning of the story her lazy jobless husband is paralleled to a "dumb-waiter." Many of the ironies in the story are religious: Mrs. Halloran has a face "like a suffering saint," but she behaves like a demon; she exclaims "God's mercy" but has no mercy herself; she will not allow her husband to work for the "devil-may-care" McCorkery on moral grounds—"Numbers is just another way of stealing from the poor"--but eventually she rationalizes his taking a corrupt job getting out voters for McCorkery "alive or dead" for the sake of appearances; Mr. Halloran delights in Connolly being exposed as a criminal, then invokes "Holy Jesus" in hoping he is not caught—"God bless him"; "'Here's to crime,'" said McCorkery." The supposedly religious Hallorans desperately want him to work for Tammany Hall, the most infamous corrupt political machine in American history before the Clintons. The "McCorkery gang" is organized crime. *Mc-Cork*-ery is as politically buoyant as a cork and in context "McCorkery" sounds like a form of dishonest dealing or chicanery. At the end of the story Mrs. Halloran's belief in her husband's fantasy that he finally got a job is implicitly analogous to her own fantasy that she is a Christian: "It's like a miracle," she says. It would indeed be a "miracle" in the ordinary sense of unlikely if her husband got a real job or that a "devil" like her would make it into Heaven.

Other ironies further satirize the Hallorans as hypocrites: Mr. Halloran criticizes his daughter for never listening to him after refusing to answer her persistent call on the telephone. His cynical remark, "But what's a father?" is parallel to his own failure to listen to God the Father. On the one hand he thinks his daughter should leave her abusive husband, on the other hand he identifies with the husband because he got a job with Tammany Hall: "It's like myself beginning all over again in him." Mrs. Halloran blames her daughter and any wife for all the problems in any marriage except her own. Both the Hallorans are more concerned with appearances than with the truth, both idealize themselves, both collude with evil and each makes valid criticisms of the other.

The Hallorans represent the continuation of Victorianism in marriage but Porter parodies the Victorian paradigm by reversing its stereotypes. Mr. Halloran criticizes his wife for making career decisions for him: "It's not the woman's place to decide such things." Yet he is the one who advocates that his daughter leave her husband, a feminist rather than a Victorian attitude: "But she's no daughter of mine if she sits there

peeling potatoes, letting a man run over her.” Yet he sits there smoking a pipe, letting a woman run over him. Mrs. Halloran is the conservative Victorian who insists that their daughter stay trapped in her bad marriage. Her name Lacey is an evocation of genteel Victorian ladies with lace on their bosoms and doilies on their furniture, ironic because she is an overbearing brute feared by her husband. She is also a prude: “Would you believe there was a woman wouldn’t take off all her clothes at once even to bathe herself? What a hateful thing she was with her evil mind thinking everything was a sin, and never giving a man a chance to show himself a man in any way.” It is further ironic that in relation to men this old-fashioned Victorian woman so much resembles a current radical Feminist.

The more ironies a reader discerns, the more comic the story becomes. The critics not only miss the religious vision in the story, they miss other major qualities of Porter’s art. Ideologues intolerant of beliefs that differ from their own are not disposed to irony and have no sense of humor.

Michael Hollister (2018)