

ANALYSIS

“The Downward Path to Wisdom” (1939)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“‘The Downward Path to Wisdom’ [is] one of her finest and most moving stories.... The child, Stephen...finds the universe of adults incomprehensible but recognizes its destructive power. Stephen is a ‘victim’ of his family, but he is altogether different from most children of this kind. At the beginning of the story, he is sent out from the confusion of his home, where his parents are quarreling desperately, to what seems the safe sanctuary of his grandmother’s house. But he is to learn, through one of those small tragedies which are always insurmountable to a child, what faithlessness and disloyalty exist in this house as well as his own. The threat to Stephen’s little world is announced early in the story, during a quarrel between his mother and father....

But the real betrayal in ‘The Downward Path to Wisdom’ rests neither with the parents nor the grandmother, but with the grandmother’s son, Stephen’s Uncle David. It is David who introduces Stephen to the joys of balloons, who contests with him for the honor of blowing them up, and who is responsible for the pride Stephen feels in giving the balloons to a playmate. But it is also David who accuses Stephen of theft when he discovers that some of the balloons have been taken from their box, and who thus becomes the agent of separating the child from his grandmother and of having her send him back home.

The obscurity of adult conversation is impressed on Stephen all through the story. From the very beginning, his elders speak as if he were not present, or as if they took for granted that their meanings passed beyond him.... It is this kind of conversation which gives Stephen his sense of the threat to himself in adult relations. He overhears a Negro servant talking to his grandmother, saying, ‘all this upset all the time, and him such a baby.’ And Uncle David, after accusing him of stealing the balloons, turns to his other and reports on his telephone call to his sister, Stephen’s mother: ‘...She asked me if I meant to call him a thief and I said if she could think of a more exact word I’d be glad to hear it’....

In ‘The Downward Path to Wisdom,’ the betrayal of Stephen is a betrayal of love to hatred and frustration. It is not precisely the fault of Uncle David or Grandma or Mama or Papa or any of the servants; it is more accurate to say that it represents a kind of tacit conspiracy on the part of his elders to defeat the forces of love and hope in the child, and to bring him to an unwise and precocious maturity. The maturity, when it comes, is one of cynicism and disillusionment; childhood is surrendered, but nothing is gained.... The path to wisdom is a downward one because it is also the path to despair. Stephen is really no different from most of Miss Porter’s other heroes and heroines; he is a child and most of them are adults, but they have all retained the childishness of hope and of a belief in the essential goodness and dignity of man, whatever their ages. And this is why they matter to us, and why they have something important to say. It is also what they frequently become tragic when they contest their senseless, extravagant fates, when they apprehend the twisted and hideous evil behind the closed doors of society.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.
The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 52-53

“‘The Downward Path to Wisdom’ is an intricate achievement in narrative technique, an adult domestic intrigue seen entirely from the point of view of a four-year-old boy. Stephen, the little boy, gradually becomes aware that his mother and father are living a life of mutual hatred, and that they are using him as a tool in their efforts to hurt each other. Sent away to visit his grandmother, Stephen meets a little girl, Frances, and makes friends with his Uncle David. But a misunderstanding arises over some balloons, and his mother and her brother David quarrel even more bitterly than mother and father had quarreled earlier. Stephen, sick at heart at his parting from Frances and now fully aware of the hate-filled lives of his elders,

is taken back home with a new secret: that it is hatred that dominates the world. Thus the 'downward path to wisdom' has brought him precociously to the pessimistic cynicism of an adult."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 323

"The Downward Path to Wisdom' is a study of the metaphoric death of love: at its conclusion the unwanted and rejected child discovers the core of his self in his little song of hatred."

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

"The Downward Path to Wisdom'...is a...cruel, less subtle, initiation, this time of a young boy caught in the terrifying events of family discord. The child's 'wisdom' becomes finally a protective awareness that he hates everyone with whom he has come into contact: his parents, his grandmother, his uncle, the servant, and even the little girl [debatable] who had aroused in him the first stirring of masculine ego."

Ray B. West, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter
(U Minnesota 1963) 29

"This account of the sufferings and initiation of a little boy seems to occupy a different world from the rest of Katherine Anne Porter's fiction. It gives new evidence of her wide scope in subject and style, adopting brilliantly the point of view of the child protagonist. It is not new thematically, however, but occupies a unique position at the center of Miss Porter's artistic vision. It is a microcosm of the rejection theme pattern... Its young hero is portrayed with remarkably little condescension. The author is much closer to him, for example, than to Rosaleen of 'The Cracked Looking-Glass' or the young wife in 'Rope.' At the end of his story, Stephen is...old in the wisdom of suffering and firm in resisting it.

Technically the story is one of Miss Porter's best. Its strong sympathy for the protagonist is combined with artistic objectivity of a different kind from that of *Noon Wine*. Like "Rope" and "Magic," it seems to be more pattern than portrait. Stephen is quite convincing as learner and sufferer... One of its greatest virtues is its strict adherence to Stephen's viewpoint, from which all other characters are seen in large, impressionistic outline. This viewpoint is evident from the opening sentence, with its careful use of simple and concretely descriptive words.... This could be--particularly as Miss Porter reads it on the Caedmon record--a nursery story.

"The Downward Path to Wisdom" enacts several of the crucial steps in a child's initiation into social life. On the level of plot it is a tragedy of pathos, for the inadequacy of Stephen's family leads him to a complete rejection, not maturely willed as in Miranda's case but instinctive and inevitable, and calculated almost certainly to warp him into abnormality.... Stephen's initial oppressive union is, like Miranda's, the family. Mother, father, grandmother, and uncle are immature and almost completely selfish. Stephen receives no wholesome love from them or from the bullying nurses who care for him most of the time; he is positively harmed by the nurse who teaches him a guilty fear of sex. His school relations are normal; the teacher is kind and the children are fickle as children are. But his life within the home taints his life outside it, and at the end he includes everyone in a blanket rejection. This rejection is his only possible escape and brings at least momentary relief: "Stephen began suddenly to sing to himself...."

The sad irony of his precocious hatred is emphasized by the fact that during this song 'his head bobbed, leaned, came to rest on Mama's knee, eyes closed.' The cold rejection theme and her usual objectivity of surface vision safeguard Miss Porter from the crude sentimentality which threatens in this story more than elsewhere.... Objectivity in description prevents excess...when the sight of his parents quarreling causes Stephen to vomit--an indication of his emotional disturbance... The point of the story, the malformation of a child, is subtly contained in physical descriptions at beginning and end, in which bodily plasticity symbolizes the malleability of the soul. When his father lifts him into bed in the first scene he goes 'limp as

a rag for Papa to take him under the arms and swing him up over a broad rough chest.' The description of him lying between his parents like 'a bear cub in a warm litter' recalls the ancient superstition that bears licked their young into shape; a few moments later when his mother hugs him, his neck and shoulders are 'quite boneless in her firm embrace'....

Stephen moves from passivity to activity, and at the end the greater solidification of his nature is again reflected in physical description. (His lack of success in clay sculpture on his first day at school, when he tries to make a car but ends up with a horse, echoes this malformation motif.) As they leave Grandmother's house Stephen's mother tells him that his father is waiting to see him. 'He raised his head and put out his chin a little' and replied that he did not want to go home or see his father. As she drives home with angry speed he is almost flung out of the seat. 'He sat braced then with all his might, hands digging into the cushions.' In this tense position he sings his song of rejection. Only after falling asleep does he relax and lean against his mother. With pathetic speed he has completed his trip along the downward path to wisdom."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U South Carolina 1963) 62-65

"The Downward Path to Wisdom"...begins with another of Miss Porter's ironic contradictions: instead of an ascent to wisdom, Stephen travels downward in his journey from innocence to experience, from blissful ignorance to knowledge, from paradise to hell. An examination of the fiery furnace of childhood, the story concentrate on a few weeks in the life of Stephen, who is called by his correct name late in the story, for he most often was called 'baby' or 'fellow' or 'bad boy.'

Stephen, at the opening of the story, was a four-year-old child described and treated as if he were an animal: when he was lifted into his parents' bed, he sank between them 'like a bear cub in a warm litter'; he crunched his peanuts 'like a horse.' His peanut-eating reminds one of the monkeys in 'The Circus' and of Otto in 'The Leaning Tower' who was beaten as a child because his mother did not like the sound of cracking walnuts. The story contains many echoes of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: Stephen as Stephen Dedalus, Stephen's meow and Stephen Dedalus being told the story about a moocow; Stephen's being jeered at by the schoolchildren when he tried to make a meow; Stephen Dedalus' being pushed into the square ditch; Stephen's father with a tough (hairy?) chest and Stephen Dedalus' father with a beard; Stephen's eating peanuts and Stephen Dedalus being given a cachou.

The rejection of Stephen takes several forms: his mother doesn't like peanut shells spilling all over her, and he was put out of bed and finally out of the room while his parents quarreled over his eating the nuts--an argument as pointless and at the same time as pointed as the one in 'Rope.' Since the whole story is reported from Stephen's point of view, the reader does not know exactly what went on between the parents, only how it affected Stephen. Rejected by both parents, he was soon rejected by the maid Marjory) who called him a 'dirty little old boy' because he didn't want his breakfast; she even repeated what we learn later was the family opinion of Stephen's father--he was mean. The fight between the parents became so intense that Stephen was sent suddenly to his grandmother's house to stay. He was frightened, even though he had been sent to her house before; the only comforting thing he could think of was his peanuts, and he cried for them.

Stephen's hostility toward the world was a natural reaction: he could never be certain of the reactions of those around him. His father had given the boy the peanuts and then scolded him for eating them. His Uncle David gave him the balloons but turned on him when he took others without permission; the old grandmother, seeing all the hate building up over the boy, finally declared that she just wanted to be left alone; the old servant Janet who took him to school made him feel guilty about sex. All of the adults had been expelled from paradise themselves, and the crucial scene in the story is Stephen's expulsion.

At school, Stephen met Frances, the archetypal Eve. To win her affection, he gave her balloons; but his offerings did not appease her. She was larger and more mature than he; when they danced at school, she wanted him to follow her; she punished him by saying he couldn't dance and then that she didn't like the way he danced. It was she who had the other children look at Stephen's animal which he thought was a cat

but which she declared to be a horse. Stephen learned in his first days at school that popularity could be bought with favors but could vanish suddenly, leaving him a scapegoat, a figure to be ridiculed.

The balloons he and Francis sat blowing on one Saturday swelled, changed colors, became part of his dreams and aspirations; but they grew and grew, only to burst, a final disillusionment. Stephen chose an 'apple-colored' balloon and Frances took a 'pale green one,' perhaps representing the green fig leaves used by Adam and Eve after they tasted the apple. They were still in paradise: 'Between them on the bench lay a tumbled heap of delights still to come.' Frances--her name can be, with a slight change of spelling, masculine or feminine--bragged of a beautiful long silver balloon she had once had (the images become phallic in this scene), but Stephen urged her to go on playing with the round ones they had. He felt of his ribs and was surprised not that he had lost a rib for the creation of Eve but that the ribs stopped in front. Frances was growing tired and restless, just as Eve did.

Stephen pushed the 'limp objects' toward her and urged her to go on enjoying the delights they had, the millions more that would last and last. Instead, she wanted other delights: 'a stick' of licorice to make 'liquish' water. Stephen didn't have any money, but Frances was persistent; she was thirsty, and she might have to return home. To keep her, Stephen promised to make lemonade. He took the forbidden fruit and made the drink, putting it into a teapot; to keep the adults (God) from knowing, Stephen suggested they go to the back garden, behind the rose bushes. Frances ran beside him like a deer, 'her face wise with knowledge,' as Stephen ran with the teapot. They drank from the spout of the teapot--a phallic image again, and in keeping with her rejection of limp balloons and request for a stick of licorice--playing games, letting the lemonade run over them. Finally full, they began to give the rosebush a drink, and Stephen baptized it in the "Name father son holygoat," making the Christian ceremony pagan again.

Caught by the maids, Frances looked at her shoes and let Stephen take the blame. Stephen, in this scene, left babyhood, left innocence, and his route paralleled the Old Testament account of man, expelled from the garden and free to follow strange gods. Uncle David made a great scene about the theft of the balloons, called the boy a thief, railed against Stephen's father. The grandmother made no real attempt to protect the boy; she agreed with David that Stephen should be sent home, but hypocritically referred to Stephen as 'your Grandma's darling.'

When Stephen's mother arrived, she quarreled with her mother and brother; but it was a histrionic scene ending with a promise to come for a visit in a few days. Stephen, stripped of all of his innocence, didn't want to go home to his father, who had rejected him; but his mother carried him to the car. In the front seat, rejected and frightened, without love or comfort, initiated into the ways of the world, Stephen sang to himself: 'I hate Papa, I hate Mama, I hate Grandma, I hate Uncle David, I hate Old Janet, I hate Marjory, I hate Papa, I hate Mama....' He had started over and had not yet mentioned Frances. The story does not end with this terrible song, but with Stephen growing sleepy, resting his head on his mother's knee. She drew him closer; he could be her love; she drove with one hand, obviously caressing Stephen with the other.

The martyr Stephen, in the sixth and seventh chapter of *Acts*, reminded the multitudes that they would not accept the message brought by Jesus and that they always persecuted the prophets. True to his prediction, he was stoned to death. Miss Porter's Stephen was martyred; he was driven into exile just as Joyce's Stephen was. Stephen Dedalus went into exile in France at the end of *A Portrait* and has just returned from that country at the beginning of *Ulysses*. Could not Frances be a play on France? And could it not be that the balloons are a subtle reference to the wings of the original Daedalus?"

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 96-100

"Four-year-old Stephen is one of Porter's child-victims who are destroyed morally because love has not tempered the animal nature. What Stephen has learned is rejection, to which his response is hate, and as his name indicates, he is a martyr to human cruelty. Understandably, animal imagery is important in this story, as Stephen's animal self is depicted. The theme of betrayal is dominant, but there is no self-betrayal here because Stephen is not old enough to consciously choose his delusions. Rather, all the adults betray him.

He is sent from the quarreling parents to Grandmother, whose house should have been a refuge from faithlessness and disloyalty but is not, and then back to Mama, who already has rejected him....

Balloons are an important symbol in the story, associated as they are with childhood, carnivals, springtime, and birthday parties. In Stephen's story, they become much more. The balloons that Uncle David give to Stephen have advertising on them and thus have a purpose other than a festive one. They also become a means to popularity for Stephen, who, wanting to ingratiate himself with his school friend Frances, brings all the balloons to her. When she comes to visit, they blow up balloons again, Stephen significantly choosing an 'apple-colored' one, which...is an allusion to Adam and Eve. He takes further risks to please Frances when he sneaks a lemon, sugar, and a china teapot to make lemonade for himself and Frances in a scene suggestive of the Garden of Eden, redolent with both sexual and religious imagery. In the midst of it Old Janet, Grandmother's servant, comes to accuse Stephen of theft, his sin in the eyes of the adults, who banish him to his mother. Stephen's sleepy song as Mama drives away with him is the natural result of his betrayal and his experience."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 84-86

"He baptizes (with illegal lemonade) the rose bush in 'Name father son holygoat.' Porter's humor is, needless to say, close at hand in this otherwise chilling story of child molestation. As the title of this story suggests, the Edenic loss of innocence through disobedience leads, or *should lead*, to some sort of knowledge. The 'downward path,' the road of sin, beginning in small acts (like 'stealing' sugar for lemonade and balloons for games) will supposedly lead to more serious misdemeanors later in life--or at least so goes the moralistic cant that Porter puts into the mouth of Stephen's Uncle David, an over-reacting pharisee, as the Grandmother, despite her peacemaking efforts, is the longsuffering sadducee....

Stephen is described as a typical mammalian, desiring warmth and comfort. 'He sank between his parents like a bear cub in a warm litter.' When eating peanuts, he 'crunches like a horse.' His father thinks he is 'dumb as an ox.' When his parents indulge in their domestic arguments, their shrieking voices remind him of 'the two tomcats who fought at night.' Old Janet, the household servant, smells to him 'like wet chicken feather.' And when at school he is given clay and told to make anything he wishes, he tries to make a cat, like Meeow, the household pet. All in all, life is a jungle, threatening, uncertain, mysteriously cruel. Most important, he stands 'staring like an owl' when Mama and Papa are discussing his case; and like the owl (symbol of wisdom in this story about the downward path to such) he knows more than he seems to know. And his mother, when she attacks the hypocritical sermonizing of her relatives, refers to their 'beastly little moral notions.'

Knowledge in the biblical sense is subtly presented in the ironic symbolic contexts of the story. Stephen is made to feel ashamed by Old Janet when she discovers that 'there was a little end of him showing through the slit in his short blue flannel trousers.' Profoundly self-conscious, 'He felt guilty and red all over, because he had something that showed when he was dressed that was not supposed to show then.' Even when he is bathed, the towels are wrapped quickly around him so that the body remains a hidden part of his nature. The description of the balloons as 'limp objects,' the licorice ('liquish,' to Frances) as 'the nice rubbery, twisty kind,' and the treatment of the wet, lumpy clay--all these images point to unrealized, natural urges not yet visible in the four-year-old boy. Sin, misconduct in general, is associated with sexuality. Uncle David provides a clue to his own attitudes toward child rearing when he teaches the child to play at boxing, encouraging roughness. 'We don't want him to be a sissy,' he remarks. And in the name of the anti-sissification doctrine, it is clear that outright cruelty can be justified.

The four-year-old Stephen (modeled somewhat, no doubt, on Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) falls from grace through his desire to please his playmate, the little girl Frances. It is for her that he 'steals' his uncle's advertising balloons and his Grandmother's lemon and sugar. Because of his father's alleged 'bad blood,' the child is seen as following in footsteps that run along 'the downward path.' 'It's in the blood' is a favorite phrase of Stephen's tormentors. That natural depravity is the curse under which Stephen lives is made manifest early in the story when Mama and Papa discuss his case.... "We'd be better off if we never had had him,' said Papa." But they have had him. And this fact,

Stephen's presence, is, it seems, the cause of the violent domestic arguments that cause Stephen to be bundled up and taken to his Grandmother's house every so often. In point of fact, Stephen is not 'dumb as an ox'; he is quite clever when circumstances require him to be. And he is quite perceptive.

The story escapes sentimentality through the complete objectivity of tone. Stephen's mother, attacking with abandon the 'beastly little more notions' of her brother and her mother, might earn our sympathy were it not for the evident fact that she is in many ways an unfit mother, herself therefore unqualified to sermonize. And Stephen clearly does not like either his parents or his uncle and grandmother, his surrogate parents. Bohemian abandon is apparently as hurtful as Calvinistic rigidity to the young child. Adding to the irony is--as usual in Porter's stories--the victim's unwitting cooperation with his tormentors.

The story is told entirely from Stephen's point of view, that of an innocent, helpless, naïve child, caught up in an unfriendly environment. The third-person, 'silent' narrator never intervenes to comment or interpret, except at one harmless point, when the reader is told that Frances 'was beginning to feel that she had enough' lemonade.... Stephen quickly intuits this truth for himself. The point of view otherwise remains as intact as any Jamesian could desire.

Those who have eyes to see do not see; and those who have ears to hear do not hear. Those who have most to learn, learn nothing. Irony blossoms all along the way, as the downward path to wisdom leads, for the adults, to a dead end. The story, which reminds us clearly of James's *What Maisie Knew*, can function as a Jamesian case study of child abuse. Without commentary or authorial intrusion, the objective narrator pitilessly reports the facts. And the result is a powerful, detached reportage of 'fallen' creatures seen through the eyes of a child, an 'angel' entertained unawares among aliens."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 105-11

The most pertinent allusion to a Stephen is to the martyr in the Bible, an innocent apostle of Jesus who got stoned to death. Only four years old, the little Stephen in this story is persecuted, figuratively stoned, by the adults around him. His mother calls him a "dear lamb" and at the end of the story, running to her "He bleated like a lamb." The comparison to a lamb identifies him with Jesus, the sacrificial lamb of God. When the servant Old Janet takes him to school, he "wanted to run ahead," but she holds him back, saying "Don't go running off like that and get yourself killed." All the adults retard his progress, adversely determine his concept of himself, and lead him to expect a bad end. "'I'm going to get killed, I'm going to get killed,' sang the little boy." What gets killed is his innocence.

Stephen's father gives him peanuts, then blames him for eating them. He calls his little boy "dumb as an ox," declares that "We'd be better off if we never *had* him," and puts him out of the bed when his mother objects to the peanut shells. He gives the child a shove out the bedroom door: "'You get out of here and stay out,' said Papa... It was not a hard shove, but it hurt the little boy." His mother is sentimental on the surface, saying "He's an angel and I'll never get used to having him," but underneath, she doesn't really want him either, has never gotten used to being a mother and keeps sending him away to his grandmother, who doesn't really want him anymore than she does. His mother is a child herself: "She was screaming in a tantrum, just as he remembered having heard himself." She makes him so sick he vomits. His self-absorbed parents quarrel over trivia--over "peanuts." The servant Marjory conveys what would give them a sense of proportion by exclaiming "Oh, my God" three times. Yet she lacks charity herself as she bathes the child "with disgust," shaming him to his grandma: "He's just scared."

A child of four needs love, encouragement, and forgiveness. Jesus said "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Stephen's own family members avoid him and do not even talk to him much, not even his grandma: "He did not know these women, except by name"; "they examined him with crinkled eyes without any expression that he could see"--without affection. They give him strict orders. His toy at his grandma's is a hoop, like her supervision. Like the insensitive parents in "He," all the adults in this story underestimate the boy's awareness and talk to each other as if he is not present, indifferent to the hurt they inflict upon him. By analogy, the adults act as if God is not present.

The child brings God further into the story when he baptizes a rosebush with lemonade. Earlier when his peanuts were taken away he had a tantrum, “threw himself upon the carpet and rubbed his nose in a dusty woolly bouquet of roses.” Love for Frances elevates his spirit. To know the baptism ritual, Stephen must have been baptized himself or witnessed baptism. In his imitation of the ritual he expresses belief in the Holy Trinity, though he is too young to understand its meanings and calls the Holy Ghost a “holyoat”: “Name father son holygoat,” shouted Stephen, pouring.” Baptism is purification from sins. Baptizing a rosebush suggests forgiving the “sins” of Nature--the hurt and evil in life. Roses are sweet and beautiful, but have thorns that can make you bleed. Stephen is affirming the sweetness and beauty he has experienced in life despite his persecution and hurt, the thorns. The rosebush represents life at its best, what is worth saving. He does not baptize a weed. He is too young to know that roses are a symbol of love and that a rose is a traditional symbol of Jesus, with his crown of thorns.

In baptism, pure water symbolizes purification. Stephen uses lemonade instead, with “devoted hands.” He took more balloons since there were so many in the box and he takes a lemon from the kitchen secretly because the adults took away his peanuts and ignore his appeals. His lemonade is a mixture of the sweet and the sour, evoking the old adage, If life gives you a lemon, make lemonade. “He decided there was not enough sugar.” Craving sweetness, Stephen adds more sugar by the “handful.” His ritual unconsciously reconciles opposites--rose/thorns, sweet/sour, holy/goat--a characteristic of transcendent consciousness. This child’s baptizing the rosebush is evidence of wisdom in his soul--the *upward* path.

Stephen is a “holyoat” in being made an innocent scapegoat for the sins of the adults around him--their neglect, cruelty, selfishness, anger, hatred, and lack of charity and forgiveness--a parallel to Jesus being made a scapegoat for the sins of the human race. Though treated like a goat, Jesus was in fact the lamb. As traditionally depicted, Satan is the goat--the opposite of holy. The Satanic figures in the story are Stephen’s father and Uncle David, whose “long, crooked shadow” falls upon Stephen when he rejects the boy as a lost cause: “I won’t be bothered with him... Too far gone already, I’m afraid.” This is exactly what Satan wants, for the adults to abandon the child to him on a downward path. Stephen senses that he is in jeopardy: “He was afraid something was coming after him.” Stephen’s mother says of Uncle David, “You know David was a coward and a bully and a self-righteous little beast all his life... He calls my baby a thief over a few horrible little balloons because he doesn’t like my husband.” This recalls her own rejection of her little son over peanut shells.

Uncle David purports to teach the boy manners--how to be a *gentle*-man--by yelling and threatening him with his hairy fists: “Say ‘please,’ and ‘thank you,’ young man,” he would roar, terrifying, when he gave any smallest object to the little boy.’ “Well, fellow, are you ready for a fight?” Uncle David has the other biblical name in the story, after Stephen. Although King David led his nation in battles, he is iconic for his brave feat as a boy when he killed the enemy giant Goliath with his slingshot. This David is his opposite, bullying a four-year old child. This modern David does not write religious songs or dance or play a musical instrument--that stuff is for sissies--or slay giants or worship God. When the inflated roughneck brings home a box of balloons, they are advertising balloons with a commercial purpose. Uncle David uses them to teach Stephen to be competitive, like his parents: “Let’s see who can blow up a big balloon the fastest.” He is full of hot air, a blowhard teaching the boy to blow hard. Sooner or later, having a competitive goal will blow up in your face. Competition for its own sake is child’s play.

The balloons suggest bright hopes and joy, as well as their ephemeral fragility. When Stephen tries to sculpt clay into what he hopes looks like a cat, he is laughed at: “His balloon was perfectly flat.” He gives both of his balloons to Frances and she resembles Uncle David in being competitive: “Let’s have a race.” And when he gives her another balloon the next day, she enjoys popping it. When he makes lemonade, she wants to “see who can take the biggest swallows.” After he takes a lot more balloons from Uncle David’s box, he learns the pleasure of giving presents. When he chooses an “apple-colored” balloon, the reference to apple evokes Eden and the Fall into knowledge of Good and Evil, with the gender roles reversed, as Stephen is cast as Eve. He gives Frances a whole pile of balloons, “gazing at her with the pure bliss of giving added to loving.”

On his downward path to “wisdom” Stephen learns that (1) he is dumb; (2) he is a “dirty little boy”; (3) he is “mean” like his father; (4) he is disgusting; (5) he must learn to fight and not be a sissy; (6) fighting is

fun; (7) he is a “bad boy”; (8) “inside his clothes there was something bad the matter with him”; (9) he is a thief; (10) he is a liar; (11) hating everybody is the way to fit in. The title of the story is ironic: Hating is not wise and most real fighting is not fun. Stephen is too young to be wise. His downward path is made by the adults around him and he follows it because he is innocent and accepts their judgments. However, he does learn a few truths, such as: (1) adults who fight become like wild animals; (2) if you inflate too much your balloon will burst; (3) people you love may want more than you can give; (4) girls will get tired of balloons and want something that costs money.

Like the biblical Stephen, this little Stephen is redeemed by love. He does not include Frances in his list of the people he hates, though the ellipsis at the end of the sentence leaves open the possibility that he still may. As of now, despite all his feelings of reciprocal hatred, he still has the capacity to love. He still has wisdom in his soul, but hatred may corrode it away. Frances has shown that she is selfish and will keep popping his balloons. She doesn't like the way he dances, for example. They already had a little quarrel over that, prefiguring fights in the future. He is already retaliating, as when Marjory is abusive: “‘You're dirty yourself,’ he told her.” Then he smashes his bowl of oatmeal. In the future, since he is on a downward path, this Stephen may grow up to be a serial killer.

Michael Hollister (2018)