

ANALYSIS

“A Day’s Work” (1940)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“A few pieces, not yet in book form...have appeared in various magazines—for instance...the brilliant story ‘A Day’s Work’.”

Robert Penn Warren
“Irony with a Center”

Selected Essays of Robert Penn Warren (Random House 1941)

“‘A Day’s Work’ and ‘That Tree’ are carried off at their author’s customary high level of technique... In ‘A Day’s Work’ we meet the Hallorans, a middle-aged Irish couple living in New York. Once, in the past, Mr. Halloran might have cut a small career for himself in the petty ward politics of the city, had not his wife objected to all the politicians he knew, and to one in particular, the boss McCorkery. In the meantime, McCorkery has risen steadily in the world while Mr. Halloran has gone continually down, to the point where he has gone on relief and his wife is taking in washing. Now, in mute despair, Halloran seems to have come under his wife’s morbid, depleting power and, on the day round which the story is constructed, he makes one last attempt to break with his bad luck (which, of course, is synonymous with his vulgar and pretentious wife) only to find himself rejected by his old friend, McCorkery, who makes him drunk and returns him home a fool to his wife. Miss Porter writes in a more colloquial vein than usual in ‘A Day’s Work,’ and her people are just as acutely portrayed as ever.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 50

“‘A Day’s Work’ is a dreadfully sordid, if grotesquely funny, story about two mis-matched and long-married people.”

James William Johnson

“Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter”
Virginia Quarterly Review (Autumn 1960) 607

“‘A Day’s Work’ is a story...set in an Irish-Catholic background similar to that of Miss Porter’s earlier ‘The Cracked Looking-Glass.’ In this story, the author displays the same aversion to Catholic puritanism that she had earlier shown to midwestern Protestant puritanism in her story ‘That Tree.’ It is a ‘depression story,’ a pathetic tale of a man’s attempt to preserve his male dignity in the face of the loss of his job and all prospects for the future and in the presence of a vindictive wife who hides her moral ugliness behind a public mask of pious self-righteousness. It is a story of human failure, complex in its suggestion of causes, humorous in many of its incidents, caustic in its criticism of aspects of society and human character, tough in its denial of hope; yet compassionate in its over-all tone and aim.”

Ray B. West, Jr.

Katherine Anne Porter
(U Minnesota 1963) 29-30

“‘A Day’s Work’ contains more unrelieved bitterness than any other story she has written. It is the example par excellence of the destructive union and of the degraded type of character who is doomed to remain in it. As in several other stories, the basic flaw in the marriage is a failure of communication rooted in the wife’s religion-sanctioned frigidity... Halloran blames his wife for his failure to achieve success, ignoring his own laziness and incompetence. Like Rosaleen, another Irish dreamer, he refuses to face reality. With the help of the author’s brilliant Irish dialogue—a ready vehicle for the story’s heavy dramatic irony, filled as it is with comfortable stock phrases—he builds a dream world to compensate for his failure and thus confirms himself in it....”

The opening scene and his long meditation on the way to Billy's Place furnish numerous examples: McCorkery has 'gone straight on up the ladder with Rosie,' while he himself has gone 'downward with Lacey Mahaffy.' He might have cashed in on the numbers game with the best of them...good quiet profit and none the wiser.' He still thinks that McCorkery won't 'forget an old friend,' for 'never did man deserve more of the world' than Halloran. McCorkery will give him a job with 'nothing to it at all' for a man of his talents: he will 'toss it off with one hand tied, and good money in it.' And so he keeps himself hypnotized with the mystic formulas of politics and the numbers racket.

Lacey too has her language of self-justification, drawn from her Catholic training and shrunken to pharisaic righteousness by the complete evaporation of charity. She uses her piety to fight her husband and pass on bitterness to her daughter. Her telephone conversation with the latter, an evil link between the generations, provides a study in Miss Porter's frequent theme of the transmission of family corruption. She tells her daughter, as Halloran listens, 'So now all you've got to do is stand by your married vows and make the best of it.... The woman has to do right first, and then if the man won't do right in turn it's no fault of hers.' She reports later to her husband, 'I told her to bear with the trouble God sends as her mother did before her.' Lacey is another in a long line of women who have derived from narrow religious training a fear of sex which foredooms their marriages and colors their entire outlook on life. She is also, like the wives in 'That Tree' and *Noon Wine*, a woman whose early-fading beauty constitutes one of the disillusionments of marriage for her husband....

Lacey's comforting assurance of 'doing right' enables her to judge and condemn others. Years before, after her husband had introduced her to McCorkery's wife Rosie, she had 'turned upon him a face ugly as an angry cat's and said, 'She's a loose, low woman, and 'twas an insult to introduce her to me.' Miss Porter's use of symbolism coupled with appropriateness in the naming of characters has been pointed out... She has never forgiven her husband for violating her virginity. Finishing the job, she ties the wet towel around her head, 'the knotted end hanging over her shoulder'—like a bridal veil.

Lacey's position is morally complex. She probably has kept her husband from a life of petty crime, and even he has admitted to himself that McCorkery's helpful wife Rosie is a low woman. It is precisely in this ostensible goodness that the irony of Lacey's viciousness lies. The damage she has done easily outweighs the good. This blend of outward goodness and inward destructiveness is brilliantly illuminated when the young policeman, scolding the drunken Halloran, praises Lacey in one of his own stock phrases: 'I knew her from old when I used to run errands for St. Veronica's Altar Society,' said the cop, 'and she was a great one, even then. Nothing good enough.' 'It's the same today,' said...Halloran, almost sober for a moment.'

There are other instances of powerful irony. Halloran thinks admiringly, on the way to Billy's Place, that McCorkery, a 'born judge of human nature,' could 'look a man over, size him up, and there was an end to it,' just before this great talent turned against him. The central irony, emphasized by the story's title, is Lacey's belief at the end that Halloran, in spite of his drunkenness, at least has a job. There is irony also in the impressionistic descriptions of the onset of drunkenness from the point of view of Halloran, the victim—'Mr. Halloran reached for the bottle but it skipped sideways, rolled out of reach like a creature, and exploded at his feet. When he stood up the chair fell backward from under him. He leaned on the table and it folded up under his hands like cardboard'—and of Lacey's transformation into a death figure as he enters the room drunk—'She was standing there before him in a kind of faded gingham winding sheet, with her dead hands upraised, her dead eyes blind but fixed upon him, her voice coming up hollow from the deep tomb, her throat thick with grave damp.'

The terrible power of this story results from the fact that its explicit theme corresponds exactly, at least in its central emotional force, to one of the fundamental motifs of the rejection theme. Subordinate themes of the story [are] the destructive nature of narrow morality and the transmission of evil through the generations... Escape is impossible for this couple but Halloran asserts his desire for it vicariously by advising that his daughter escape from her unhappy marriage. Lacey, of course, favors perpetuation of the destructive union, and the story closes on a note of despair."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 65-68

“‘A Day’s Work’ (1940) is more than a story of the battle of the sexes or another of Miss Porter’s investigations of marriage, as some critics have seen it. It has as its setting the slums of New York during the depression, and as a social background the political corruption of Tammany Hall. Mr. Halloran, a past middle-aged Irish immigrant from whose point of view we see much of the story, had been fired from his job in a grocery store two years before his retirement, ostensibly because of the depression but more likely to avoid paying him his pension. For seven years he had been sitting at home, drawing his relief money and listening to the complaints of Mrs. Halloran, who added to their income by doing washing and ironing. He was as cantankerous as she, always talking back, constantly provoking his shrewish wife. He was particularly bitter because he had wanted to go into politics—and then numbers racket, closely allied—but his wife wouldn’t allow it. Mrs. Halloran has, as McCorkery the political boss had predicted, held Halloran down, but, in holding him down, she had kept him out of the rackets.

Mrs. Halloran, puritanically religious, had disapproved of McCorkery and his fast crowd but had approved of Connolly, a good Catholic with nine children. Halloran learned from a policeman that Connolly was wanted by the G-men because of his criminal activities; Halloran, completely amoral, objected to police meddling, and the policeman, corrupted by the system, wanted to know what the harm was: ‘A man must get his money from somewhere when he’s in politics. They oughta give him a chance.’ On the way to the saloon, Halloran imagined what might have been if his wife had let him work with McCorkery, and he dreamed of what it would be like when he talked with McCorkery, telling him of his dismal home life and his willingness to help get out the votes, now that election time was near.

The dream and the reality came together violently, for McCorkery was at the bar, and Halloran did ask for a job. While McCorkery was in a back room with some of the boys, Halloran was even more depressed by what might have been after seeing the prosperous political boss; he drank too much and dropped the whiskey bottle—reminiscent in many ways of the opening scene of Joyce’s ‘Grace.’ McCorkery, needing votes, was outwardly calm when dealing with his old crony who was a failure; his voice was loud and hearty but had a curse in it; he slipped money to Halloran and sent him home by taxi.

At home, Halloran was repulsed by his wife. She appeared in his alcohol-induced state as a ghost in a ‘faded gingham winding sheet,’ and her voice was ‘thick with grave damp.’ He threw the iron at the ‘devil’ advancing toward him and then fled into the street and told a policeman he had killed Mrs. Halloran. Before they could investigate, Mrs. Halloran appeared and told the policeman she had fainted and struck her head on the ironing board. She helped her husband upstairs, threw him on the bed, wet a large towel, tied knots in the end, and began to strike him in the face, at each whack calling out his offense: drunkenness, stealing, walking in his stocking feet, his part in raising their daughter. (The scene is remarkably similar to the *Ship of Fools* scene in which Mrs. Treadwell strikes Denny in the face with her shoe.) As symbol of her victorious assault, she wound the wet towel about her head, knot over shoulder; put the money from McCorkery in her locked metal box; and called her daughter to announce, for the neighbors to hear, that Halloran had a job. All her objections to the political boss had disappeared.

Illusion and reality come together forcibly and ironically in this sordid, black comedy, filled with mellifluous Irish phrases. Miss Porter managed to capture the sterile, hate-filled lives of the Hallorans, and she brilliantly etched in the political machinations of two Tammany leaders, the corruption of the ward itself, and the corrosive effects of the depression. She presents...the ‘strange, violent life in a society as dead on the surface as Joyce’s.’ In addition to a moral landscape similar to Joyce’s *Dubliners* stories, Miss Porter also introduces characters named Gogarty and Finnegan, instantly recognizable to those who know Joyce’s life and work. The psychological probings and the rhetorical dialogue are especially noteworthy, and this realistic story of the depression in the New York slums deserves to be better known.”

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 106-7

“The middle-aged New York Irish couple of ‘A Day’s Work’ do have a married daughter, but she no longer lives with them. In most respects, the life of the Hallorans runs true to the type of the childless unions. The viciously puritanical wife has robbed her husband of his pride and his manhood. Her rigid

pietism and propriety lead her to forbid him the kind of associations he would like to cultivate with men of the world [criminals]. Thus her narrowness offers him an excuse for his natural laziness, and he is condemned to embittered failure. Old before his time, out of work, reduced to cadging drinks and money from petty politicians and daydreaming of a chance to join them in their shady enterprises, Halloran is a study of the uxorious man who is hopelessly bound to his wife by soured love and enmity.... [This story has] varied technical brilliance...mastery of the Irish idiom...complex use of symbolism.”

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 46

“Based on a family’s quarrels which she overheard through the air vent of the Perry Street apartment [New York, 1937]...”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 303

“In ‘A Day’s Work’...Porter expands her view of Irish Catholic immigrants.... Set in the slums of New York [Greenwich Village] during the depression, ‘A Day’s Work’ focuses on another husband and wife in a soured marriage, this one against the backdrop of the political corruption of Tammany Hall. A day’s worth of work means something different to each of the Hallorans. To the bitter Mrs. Halloran, who looks ‘like a suffering saint,’ it is being reduced to ironing other people’s clothes. To Mr. Halloran, who was let go after many years in a steady job at a grocery store, it means avoiding work and figuring out how to get his daily beer.

The Hallorans are like many of Porter’s poor whites in other parts of the country in that they are concerned with appearances. Like many characters throughout her canon, they live by illusions that make reality bearable. Mr. Halloran asks McCorkery for a political job, to which request McCorkery responds with ‘Ah, sure, sure...in a loud hearty voice with a kind of curse in it.’ Halloran blends that with a memory/daydream in which McCorkery had said, ‘I’ve got a job for you up to your abilities at last... Name your figure in the way of money. And come up to the house sometimes’...

Halloran deceives himself sufficiently to tell his wife that he has a job in the McCorkery Club, a job that Mrs. Halloran knows is shady and had previously rejected, having held herself above the McCorkerys in the past. Nevertheless, she is able to create a false façade of respectability, as she tells their daughter, Maggie, ‘Yes, it’s political work, toward the election time, with Gerald McCorkery. But that’s no harm, getting votes and all, he’ll be in the open air and it doesn’t mean I’ll have to associate with low people, now or ever. It’s clean enough work, with good pay; if it’s not just what I prayed for, still it beats nothing, Maggie. After all my trying...it’s like a miracle.’

‘A Day’s Work’ is rich in social commentary and psychological probing of the effect economic change has on a marriage with a fissure already present in its structure. The attraction Mr. Halloran has toward corrupt power and the repulsion Mrs. Halloran feels toward it identify their different class values. Although part of Mr. Halloran wants Connolly to escape the G-men who are after him for the numbers racket, an identification with the fellow Irish who are outsmarting the anti-Irish establishment, another part of him enjoys telling his wife that a man she had always admired for being a good Catholic is corrupt. The ambiguity of truth and the subjectivity of standards are reflected in the young police officer O’Fallon, sworn to uphold the law, asking about Connolly, ‘What’s the harm, I’d like to know? A man must get his money from somewhere when he’s in politics. They oughta give him a chance.’ In this story Porter’s social satire is equal to that of ‘He,’ *Noon Wine*, and ‘The Cracked Looking-Glass’.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 101-3

“‘A Day’s Work’ is, like...‘The Cracked Looking-Glass,’ a narrative dealing with the Irish. It treats of the poverty and misery of the poor Irish in New York during the Depression of the 1930s. It is an

unflinching study of a miserable marriage and of the two miserable human beings caught up in it.... It comes as close to 'Naturalism' as anything Porter was ever to write. The story depicts Porter's favorite thematic material—a sorry, unemployed, indecisive, passive husband attempting to deal with a necessarily shrewish wife who, he thinks, keeps him from advancing up the ladder of success. The story owes much to the marriage of Katherine Porter and Eugene Pressley which was breaking up at the time the story was composed, during the spring of 1937. Pressley's indecisiveness about his future and his constant interference with her creative work had caused the failure of the seven-year marriage.

The brutal beating scene at the conclusion of this story was probably psychological relief for Katherine Anne Porter, who, as usual, was able in her fiction to punish the exasperatingly passive male who (like her father) unwittingly caused great human suffering for all those connected with him. The reader will also, no doubt, compare this scene with the beating, in *Ship of Fools*, administered to William Denny, the drunken Texan, by Mrs. Treadwell. The clinical perspective attained by Porter in 'A Day's Work' reveals a profound psychological intensity, which raises it somewhat above a naturalistic 'case study.' What is happening is that Porter is vicariously brutalizing all the passive, ineffectual males that have interfered with her work.... But lest the sentimental reader be tempted to sympathize with the overburdened Mrs. Halloran, Porter is careful to reveal her self-righteousness and her pettiness....

The fact that Mr. Halloran's 'job' will be political hack work and may involve his making the rounds of taverns, the seeking of bribes, and so on—all this is rationalized away in order that [Mrs. Halloran] can demonstrate to her daughter the value of persistence in a miserable marriage. The institution of marriage, in this story, is exactly what Byron called it in *Don Juan*—'holy deadlock'."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 162-65

"There is a clear downward path from the bickering couple of 'Rope' to the terrors and delusions of the Hallorans in 'A Day's Work.' There, bitter and enraged by her disappointments, the terrible Mrs. Halloran savagely beats her weak-minded alcoholic husband on the face with a knotted towel. All that remains of marriage's ideals in this story are Mr. Halloran's vaguely recalled attraction to Mrs. Halloran during their courtship, and Mrs. Halloran's shocking advice to her own daughter, now trapped as well in an abusive marriage: 'If anything goes wrong with your married life its your own fault... Bear with the trouble God sends as [your] mother did before [you]'."

Mary Titus
The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 151

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 “McCorkey 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)