

ANALYSIS

“He” (1927)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

[All but 2 of the following 13 critics miss the significance of capitalizing He, long a convention for identifying God. Politically Correct liberal critics totally miss the allegorical dimension and religious vision of the story.]

“Surely the most accurate comment on the story was the earliest, Howard Baker’s single paragraph...in 1938, which used ‘He’ to represent Miss Porter’s ‘remarkable attainment’ in *Flowering Judas*, her ‘perfection of a highly selective realistic method’: viewing the retarded boy as ‘a kindly, helpful, and beloved creature, whom his parents cannot avoid taking advantage of, and who exceeds little by little their capacity for caring for him,’ Baker saw how the author was able ‘to indicate fully the thousand-fold aspects of the parents’ predicament—the love, the misgivings, the rationalizations, the blind hope, the impotence, the awareness of need for help, the shame of having the neighbors know’—in such a way that ‘the story becomes genuinely tragic’.”

Howard Baker (1938)

quoted by Bruce W. Jorgensen

“‘The Other Side of Silence’: Katherine Anne Porter’s ‘He’ as Tragedy”
Modern Fiction Studies 3.28 (Autumn 1982)

“We have the story of a mother whose whole life lies in her feeble-minded son, and whose final tragedy comes to her when she is forced [debatable] to put him in the county home. Mrs. Whipple is not to be blamed for the fact that her son is a mental defective, but she is altogether committed to Him (throughout the story, the son is referred to only by capitalized personal pronouns) both because she loves him and because he is absolutely dependent upon her. The pathetic ending of the story is implicit in its beginning since life for Him, and for his mother, cannot have a happy outcome, especially given the added stress of the Whipple’s desperate poverty. But the real significance of Mrs. Whipple’s life lies in her effort to make a life for her son, little though she can help; otherwise his going off to the country home would be a solution to a pressing problem rather than a grim tragedy in a mother’s life.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 48

“[This critic refers to] the wickedness of the parents who try to kill their idiot child in ‘He’.”

Louis Auchincloss

Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Woman Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 143

“[This critic would “face reality” and send the retarded boy to the asylum before the Whipples do.] One of the most popular and frequently anthologized of Katherine Anne Porter’s stories, ‘He’ is a masterpiece of finely balanced satire and pathos.... The single character who suffers undeservedly is the one who is least human. The question of just how human he is, is the crux of the story. Before the concluding scene, in which the revelation of his humanity strikes a note of ambiguity that vibrates back through the story, the retarded boy functions simply as a reference point by which the reader measures a growing distaste for Mrs. Whipple, the real center of emotional interest....

The meaning of the story is concentrated in its title. The failure of the boy’s parents to recognize his personality, symbolized by their failure to give him a name, is the root of their error and suffering. Mrs. Whipple’s refusal to face reality has become true blindness, yet retains that degree of willfulness which

makes it a vice and exposes her to the irony with which Miss Porter diligently dissects her. The clearest sign of her self-delusion is a habitual hypocrisy which leads her to base virtually every judgment on 'what the neighbors will say'....

The opening observations, with their repetition of the word 'hard,' seem sympathetic toward these poor country people until the self-pity...reveals them to be subtle echoes of the Whipples' own sing-song complaints. Mrs. Whipple's 'love' for her simple-minded son is quickly exposed as selfish sentimentality... Here and elsewhere words carry strong dramatic irony because of their unintended truth... Though their poverty is caused primarily by their own laziness and ineptitude, not even Mr. Whipple will admit this, in spite of the fact that his main function in the story is to furnish a welcome contrast to his wife by acting as the laconic voice of plain truth....

The doctor is another gauge of Mrs. Whipple's insincerity. When he says near the end of the story, 'It's no use, I think you'd better put him in the County Home... He'll have good care there and be off your hands,' his frankness stands out sharply against the surrounding haze of her evasions. Mrs. Whipple gradually agrees to sending the boy away, disguising her relief with false optimism in spite of her husband's relentless frankness.... When He suddenly begins to cry she tries to fight back the dawning of truth.... Seeing her past treatment of him in a harsh new light, she too begins to cry, violently... The ambiguity in the scene and in all these thoughts...leaves the reader suspended between condemnation and sympathy for this weak woman in her hard fate... The accumulated bitterness...enforces the real impact of the story: the sense of the tedious oppressiveness of hypocrisy, of family life, of existence itself."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 18-22

"'He' was Miss Porter's first attempt to deal with a hopelessly deformed or mentally incompetent person and his place in society or in the family, a theme later explored in 'Holiday' and with Herr Glocken in *Ship of Fools*. 'He' is told with objectivity, stressing the irony of the situation but ending with compassion for both mother and child.

The Whipples (the name suggests a whip) were a poor Southern family not willing to admit they were 'white trash,' a family rather like the Thompsons in *Noon Wine*. Mr. Whipple was a realist, ready to talk to neighbors about their hard life, but his wife insisted on pretending otherwise—just as she pretended love for their simple-minded son. She announced her love for Him to everyone she saw, and the neighbors were so busy with their own analyses of the bad blood which had produced such a child that they did not have time to notice that her professed love was a cover for hatred. She constantly allowed Him to climb trees, to do more work than He should, to handle bees because He didn't seem to notice the stings, to lead a dangerous bull, to steal a pig from its ferocious mother. She was never concerned for his safety, except to wonder what the neighbors would say if He were injured....

He never seemed to mind not having enough cover on His bed or enough warm clothes to wear on cold days, because He had no mind. He was covered with fat, more a harmless beast than a human, and, when Mrs. Whipple killed the pig for Sunday dinner, the description of the pink pig is almost the same as descriptions of Him. Mrs. Whipple desired public approval, she wanted everybody to tell her that He was not bad off; she wanted her two normal children to be fed and dressed properly, and she wanted the approval of her brother and his family when they came to dinner....

One winter near Christmas (the unwary are warned not to fall into the trap of identifying Him with Jesus) [why is this a "trap"? Jesus identified Himself with "the least of these."].... The doctor finally told them to take him to the County Home.... Mr. Whipple was relieved, for oppressed by his poverty, his constant concern was with the bills. He was, however, realistic enough to believe the doctor who said He would never get better. Mrs. Whipple, who didn't want charity, was at first afraid the neighbors would look down upon them, but her true feelings were expressed when she saw her dream of life... Things would ease up on them'.... Cruel, foolish, vain, and hypocritical as she had been, she had instinctively fought for her

normal children, covering her hatred for Him thinly with Christian piety. But her last thoughts stripped the false morality away. It would have been better had He not been born....

He, beyond help, could receive but could not return love [misses a major implication in the story]. The Whipples were too human and too poor to be able to do more than they did for Him.... The constant reference to Him, spoken as if He were a deity instead of a hopeless creature, [contribute to] a completely pessimistic story.” [This obtuse critic avoids the “trap” of interpreting the story accurately as an allegory paralleling He to Christ as a moral test of the Whipples, the reader and literary critics.]

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 84-86

“There is no more harrowing story in English than Miss Porter’s ‘He,’ a little gem of enormous thematic magnitude. A masterpiece of compression, a universe of human suffering is worked out in its nine pages in a way that involves the reader most painfully, without resorting to sentimentality or preachment; yet its moral implications are weighty, and although Miss Porter succeeds as always in maintaining that ‘delicate balance of rival considerations,’ the ethical demands on the reader are such as to make him take sides. In this instance Miss Porter’s method is Joycean. There seems to be no narrator at all.... ‘He’ is the work of an author relentlessly directing the reader how and what to think without appearing to do so....

No matter how His mother feels about Him, that feeling is bound to be something less than or other than a superabundance of unalloyed love.... Mrs. Whipple’s overwhelming concern for the appearances of her life leads one immediately to look for the realities.... The [final] scene is heartbreaking in its pathos... Mrs. Whipple, like Royal Earle Thompson [*Noon Wine*], cares above all for two things, a life free of tribulation and the good opinion of others.... A sentimentalist and a hypocrite, there is nothing about Mrs. Whipple for us to like but everything for us to take seriously, for although it is clear that Miss Porter would have had her treat Him differently, the burden of the story is the terrible question of how many of us could have succeeded in giving love where Mrs. Whipple failed. If is easy enough for the reader to see Mrs. Whipple’s failure for what it is, an incapacity to recognize Him as a person despite his animal dumbness...but Miss Porter permits the reader to judge not the person but only the human proclivity.”

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter’s Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 87-91

“‘He’ is the idiot son of a poor farm family, the Whipples. The personal pronoun, capitalized throughout the story, is the only ‘name’ the boy has. If the parents ever gave Him another name, they have ceased to use it. Mrs. Whipple is fond of saying that she loves the idiot better than anyone else. But neither she nor Mr. Whipple pampers Him. Physically strong, and fearless, apparently able to take simple instructions although He cannot speak intelligibly. He does more than his share of the work on the farm. And He can be entrusted with some tasks, such as tending the bees and taking a suckling pig from the ferocious sow, that His older brother and sister are afraid to undertake....

When His sister falls sick during a hard winter, Mrs. Whipple does not hesitate to take the blanket from His bed as extra cover for the girl, since He has always seemed insensitive to the cold. But toward the end of the winter when He is ten years old, He becomes ill. On the doctor’s orders, He must be given very special care if pneumonia is to be averted. He is to be fed well, with lots of milk and eggs. And, until the weather improves, the parents take a blanket off their own bed to put on His. He seems to recover... The other children have gone away, one to school, the other to a job in town...

Shortly before Christmas, coming up from the barn to the house, He slips and falls on the ice. After the accident He is unable to stand on His swollen legs. He is more than ever mindless and unresponsive. After a time, the doctor suggests that they take Him to the county home, where He can get proper daily care and will be ‘off [their] hands.’ Mrs. Whipple at first protests. She does not want charity. Nor does she want to have her neighbors say that she sent her sick child to live among strangers. But at length she is persuaded—by her husband’s argument that his taxes as much as anyone’s pay for the county services, so that it is not charity but their right. She accepts a neighbor’s offer to drive her and Him to the home....

On the way, she tries to convince herself that she is doing what is best for Him, as well as for herself and her husband and their normal children. But she is increasingly uneasy. And when He suddenly starts to weep, she is overwhelmed with sharp remorse. She thinks that He may be remembering the time she boxed His ears, the fear He must have felt the time they sent Him off alone to lead home a dangerous bull, the time they took His blanket for His sister and left Him to sleep cold. Although continuing to argue with her conscience that she has done the best she knew how, that she could do little against a merciless fate, she fears that He has felt Himself overworked and abused. His accusations are the more terrible for the fact that He is unable to put them into words. She cries out in her soul that it would have been better if He had never been born. And the neighbor drives on, 'not daring to look behind him.'

The center of interest is in the relationship of the mother and child.... This idea that He enjoys God's special protection is valuable to the mother as an excuse for her own neglect and exploitation of Him.... Like other professed Christian pietists in Miss Porter's fiction, Mrs. Whipple is notably lacking in humility. Indeed, in all her most decisive actions she is principally motivated by pride: pride of possessions and of reputation. Her pride in material wellbeing is one that has been severely tested in the luckless economy of the family.... Mrs. Whipple yearns for prosperity. But sometimes her ambition is self-defeating. For example, over her husband's prudent protest, she roasts a suckling pig, sacrificing its future market value, to celebrate the visit of her brother and his family....

It seems to Mrs. Whipple that everything conspires to keep her and her family in unending poverty and anxiety. She sees Him as only the most severe of the many hindrances an unkind fate has thrown in the way of her rightful progress to the good life. But paradoxically, He provides perhaps her best opportunity to turn the tables on that fate. His strength and presumably witless courage can be put to good practical use in the farm work. Since He cannot go to school anyway, and seems impervious to cold, the money that would otherwise be spent on His clothing and bedding can be spent on the other children. And she can hope to gain a good name among her neighbors for her display of cheerful devotion to the unfortunate child.

There are evidences of an intelligence and sensitivity in Him that might have been cultivated. Although retarded, He had begun to learn a few words before suffering a head injury in early childhood. And, on the occasion of the uncle's visit, He is plainly disturbed at the sight of the suckling pig slaughtered and dressed, and will not eat at the table with the family. But it is inconvenient for Mrs. Whipple to notice these things; so, she does not. In the end, of course, her cruel folly is severely punished. Charity, the central Christian virtue, is offensive to Christian Mrs. Whipple's pride. Above all things, she fears being pitied by her neighbors. 'Nobody's going to get a chance to look down on us,' she says.... There is something ugly and self-centered even in her final grief, in her interpretation of His sobs only as reproaches to her. She is herself so incapable of genuine charity, of love, that she cannot recognize even the possibility that His weeping is an expression of love for her—an appeal, simply, that He not be turned out of the family, rather than a reproach for what He has suffered there.

But there is the suggestion, too, that Mrs. Whipple's incapacity is the common incapacity of mankind, the curse of our intelligent being. Life is indeed 'too hard' for most of us to be able to sustain such love as He, in His innocence, may feel. If, like the neighbor driving the wagon, we dare not look behind us, it is the essential, universal, and eternal misery of the human condition that we cannot countenance."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 34-38

"No one in our century has put the short story to nobler use—or to stricter discipline—than Katherine Anne Porter, and 'He,' a compact tragedy in the low mimetic mode of realistic fiction, is simply one of the finer instances of that fact: a classic story written 'with all the truth and tenderness and severity' that Miss Porter intended as the hallmark of all her work.... The story's action unfolds in a well-knit plot comprising three main episodes: the pig slaughtered to feast Mrs. Whipple's brother and his family; He leading a neighbor's bull to pasture...; His final removal to the County Home.... The audience...needed some check on compassion, and the ironic narrative voice provides that check.... Miss Porter's irony—certainly in this story—is not a headsman's axe but a weight in the scale of justice to keep mercy from overtopping the

balance. It serves to maintain a clear vision of Mrs. Whipple's flaws and errors and also to prevent the excess of pity that could blind a reader to her very real self-deceptions and to her internal conflicts, including the complicated guilt that corrodes her love for her son....

We first see how Mrs. Whipple's stubborn, petty pride motivates the duplicity she practices 'when the neighbors were in earshot'... We need not deny her natural affection, even as we see that because it is also 'expected,' she exaggerates its quantity and purity and thus makes it increasingly difficult for herself to know her own true feelings.... She does patently overstate His invulnerability... In the incident of the plank striking His head, the irony is heavy and lucid: clearly He was injured, for 'He had learned a few words, and after this He forgot them'... When the bull harmlessly 'horn[s] the air at a fly,' she involuntarily shrieks, almost precipitating the violence that she fears and perhaps at the same time unconsciously desires. For her this episode ends in a frantic, self-serving prayer and nervous prostration, yet again without any recognition because her fear is so self-centered.... The torment must be compounded almost unimaginably by her fear of the neighbors' judgment, by her unacknowledged hostility and by her guilt over it.... One might say she destroys her integrity to maintain a partly specious sense of dignity....

'He' ends as Mrs. Whipple is taking her feeble-minded, unnamed son to the County Home where she has finally admitted He may receive better care [such government institutions have a history of neglecting and abusing patients] and no longer physically burden his family for whom 'Life was very hard'.... Neither we nor Mrs. Whipple can know for certain the motive of His weeping, but it drives in upon His mother the awareness she has warded off all of His life—that, however hindered by His condition from showing love or gratitude, He is far more a human being, a person, than she has allowed herself to think....

Surely the last two sentences intend to focus for our minds and imaginations the classic emotions that Aristotle said tragedy purifies—pity and terror; and surely those emotions are proper to the situation and action of 'He'... In sending Him to the hospital, the Whipples simply intend His good, though his going will relieve them of practical burdens they can no longer bear (they can neither care well enough for Him themselves nor pay for the doctor's care; to keep Him would simply mean worsening poverty and privation, which could do Him no good). Yet, in a powerful situational irony, He weeps at what is happening, and there is no way Mrs. Whipple can ignore it or attribute it to anything except her present or past actions. The story's closing tableau is a devastating Pieta as the mother holds and weeps over her son, whose well-being and whose humanity she has continually sacrificed piecemeal to her confused feelings, and whose well-intentioned sacrificial expulsion now brings illumination but no release from guilt....

My students had a hard time seeing it: either they excessively, sentimentally pitied Mrs. Whipple, or they excessively, moralistically condemned her. I have learned that recent critics of Miss Porter's story have fared little better: most of them lean either toward excessive pathos or toward excessive, even contemptuous irony.... Its earliest commentators, those of the Thirties and Forties, read the story most clearly, whereas those of the Sixties and Seventies, supposedly better trained [but Postmodernist and Politically Correct], have so persistently misconstrued it or seen it partially rather than as a whole....

Thus James W. Johnson...implied that Mrs. Whipple might have suffered less had she not 'refus[ed] to accept the facts'.... Harry John Mooney...sentimentalized Mrs. Whipple in seeing her as 'altogether committed to Him'.... Paul F. Deasy...read the story moralistically as showing how Mrs. Whipple's 'failure to face reality leads to frustration'; he saw her love for her child as 'unreal'... William L. Nance...viewed the story as 'a masterpiece of finely balanced satire and pathos' [and] he condemned Mrs. Whipple's 'totally inadequate response to reality,' her 'folly of self-delusion' or 'willful blindness'... though finally allowing that the last scene 'leaves the reader suspended between condemnation and sympathy for the weak woman in her hard fate'.... George Hendrick...saw Mrs. Whipple's 'professed love' as merely 'a cover for hatred' thinly masked 'with Christian piety'... Winfred S. Emmons...admitted the boy was 'a problem that nobody could solve'; but he also saw Mrs. Whipple as 'very possibly hat[ing] Him,' as certainly 'wish[ing] He had never been born'... John Edward Hardy...regarded her as 'severely punished' in the end for the 'cruel folly' of her pride... Myron M. Liberman called 'He' one of the most 'harrowing' stories in English, 'a little gem of enormous thematic magnitude'... Like Hendrick, Liberman saw the ironic narrative voice as allowing the reader to feel compassion for Mrs. Whipple only at the end...

Most importantly, he pointed out that ‘the burden of the story is the terrible question of how many of us could have succeeded in giving love where Mrs. Whipple failed.’

Bruce W. Jorgensen

“‘The Other Side of Silence’: Katherine Anne Porter’s ‘He’ as Tragedy”
Modern Fiction Studies 3.28 (Autumn 1982)

“The interpretation of its critics make one wonder whether they have read the same story.... The key question seems to be how Porter wants the reader to react to Mrs. Whipple. Are we to view her finally with compassion, condemnation, or ambivalence? [The title of the story is “He,” not “Mrs. Whipple”].... Economical stories of this sort (where not a word is wasted and much is implied) are often misread, for the simple language and seemingly straightforward narration may relax the reader into overlooking subtleties and ironies meant to darken the story’s tone and complicate its tragedy.... The subject matter of ‘He’—coping with the psychological and physical demands of raising a retarded child [or, coping with the demands of conscience and Christian morality—is one that causes many readers to sympathize with Mrs. Whipple instead of judging her according to the story’s evidence....

Mrs. Whipple is vain and self-deluding and often unaware of, or incapable of admitting, her true motives.... Throughout the story her assertions are exaggerated contradictions of her actual feelings.... Her claims of a monumental love for Him are made only in front of the neighbors.... Mrs. Whipple’s relationship with Him is dictated by what others would think, not by motherly love or tenderness.... Unconsciously or subconsciously, she desires His death, provided she cannot be blamed for it....

She boxes Him on the ears because He got His clothes dirty, unaware of how hard she has hit Him until she notices Him fighting back tears and rubbing His head.... She gives her daughter Emily the extra blanket off His bed and provides warm clothes for both her other children claiming that they cannot afford the same for Him. Yet He is the one taken sick in February.... The doctor...tells them He must be kept warm.... Mrs. Whipple’s death wish for Him manifests itself less clearly...in His encounters with the pig and with the bull.... Encouraging Him to court danger is not the only way that Mrs. Whipple displays her death wish for Him. Indeed, throughout the story the physical description of Him is reminiscent of a pig... Mrs. Whipple’s stream-of-conscious self-pity underlines how closely she too connects her son to the pig.... The link between the butchered pig and Him is thus too obvious to overlook: both make her sick. We may deduce that when she cut the pig’s throat she was also thinking about Him... The incident with the bull reinforces the impression that Mrs. Whipple harbors an unconscious death wish for Him.... Her fear is not for her son’s safety; rather, she is afraid that an accident would ensure the neighbors’ scorn because she had let Him undertake a dangerous task....

Mrs. Whipple’s attitude toward her son is dictated entirely by her selfish concern for appearances.... Once Mrs. Whipple finds excuses with which to fend off neighbors’ gossip His fate is settled.... [Her] optimism is intended to delude herself and others as to her true motives.... Without Him, family life will be normal, and the farm will become profitable.... Although He has been a real help around the farm, even doing Adna’s chores when he left to take a job, Mrs. Whipple associates Him with their hardship. The stigma of having a retarded child is more than the vain Mrs. Whipple can bear. Having at last found a way to get rid of Him, other than by His ‘accidental’ death, she plans to do so.... Mrs. Whipple is accompanying Him to the county home because of her concern not for Him but about the neighbors.... [She] has not admitted her death wishes....

The final scene...not only reaffirms Mrs. Whipple’s callousness, but also confirms His sensitive nature, which previous Porter has only hinted at.... Although the Whipples are careful not to discuss their plans for His institutionalization in front of Him, He seems to know He is being sent away. His dumbness becomes that much more painful to the reader, for He cannot protest or prevent His fate.... His understanding coupled with His dependency—and contrasted to Mrs. Whipple’s deception and selfishness—makes Mrs. Whipple’s victimization of Him even more appalling.... She cannot accept Him for what He is, nor can she love Him. Her final thought is ‘what a mortal pity He was ever born,’ a feeling the neighbors voiced behind her back and the death wish she can finally admit—now that He will no longer cause her misery. As far as she is concerned, He is dead....

Mrs. Whipple's hatred of Him, derived from the loss of comfort and prestige that she believes her retarded son has caused her, is despicable, no matter how universal her feeling of injustice might be.... Porter...is concerned, as she is in many other stories, with self-deception, vanity, and hypocrisy. In 'He' Porter shows us not a weak but well-meaning mother of a retarded child, but rather one whose pride and hypocrisy make her a moral monster. To be swayed by Mrs. Whipple's self-serving rationalizations is to miss the point of the story."

Debra A. Moddelmog
"Narrative Irony and Hidden Motivations in Katherine Anne Porter's 'He'"
Modern Fiction Studies 3.28 (Autumn 1982)

"Mrs. Whipple is particularly susceptible to self-delusion and moral blindness.... Like Him, she is stupid and dumb, senseless as to how she got where she is and as to how to change her situation. He symbolizes the hard, uncontrollable realities that Mrs. Whipple is unable to acknowledge: her poverty, her personal inadequacy, and, most of all, her insufficiency as a mother.... Mrs. Whipple's public sentiments do not belie her true attitude toward this huge child she cannot control; to her, He is nothing more than an animal.... Most of all, her inability to reconcile His animal-like behavior with any human sensibility is evidenced in the fact that she is unable to call Him by any given name.

Ironically, it is she who is grossly insensitive to His demonstrations of human feeling. When He bolts from the sight of her butchering a suckling pig, she ignores it. When He refuses to come to the dinner table when the roasted piglet is set out, she brushes it off. Ignoring his humanity, she is able to treat Him like an ox brought in to do the heavy work, a creature impervious to pain and fatigue.... Ultimately, she will sacrifice Him, just as she sacrifices the pig, in an attempt to make the farm appear prosperous.... He is deprived of warmth and adequate medical care.... He develops latent pneumonia, begins to limp and, finally, to have seizures....

Mrs. Whipple, of course, has not been changed by adversity. As she is about to relinquish her idiot child, she projects a utopian image of the family secure and united in a kind of happiness that is clearly Edenic fantasy.... Mrs. Whipple finally recognizes in His tears human pain and a sense of loss based on His love for her. She and her simple child create a mournful pieta as she cradles His head on her bosom and weeps over Him.... She *has* loved Him as much as she was able, and in the sense that she could never have done much better, it is truly a mortal pity He was ever born." [Correctly making an analogy between He and Christ, this critic then loses touch with the story, implying that it is a pity Jesus was ever born. She fails to recognize the full significance of the analogy.]

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 36-38

"The tone is bitter to the point of sarcasm. One of the stylistic methods Porter uses to create irony here is to follow seemingly straightforward statements with a comment or modifier that undermines the accuracy of the statements and establishes a paradox.... Mrs. Whipple's concern with appearance never abates in the story. When her brother and his family come to visit, she kills the pig that later would have brought much needed money, only in order to impress her relatives, whom she considers 'refined'.... Irony is implicit in the distance between the ideal of mother love and Mrs. Whipple's disdain for 'Him,' between a selfless love declared by the mother and the total self-absorption that underlies her concern with appearance and is revealed in all its horror at the end of the story, when in her guilt she interprets His tears as accusations against her, completely missing...the possibility that His tears are an expression of love for her or a normal human reaction to being separated from His family, no matter how odious they are....

The name 'Whipple' suggest a whip, indicating the family's being whipped by the circumstances of their lives, some of which circumstances they create or nourish in their ignorance, their mindset for poverty and failure, and their obsessive attention to social appearances.... The capitalizing of 'He' shows that the pronoun has come to be His name, but it also ironically suggests the Deity and draws the reader's attention to the great distance between Mrs. Whipple's surface piety and her un-Christian treatment of her idiot son. [excellent] Mrs. Whipple's failure to see Him as human is integrated into her obsessive concern with appearance. He is treated like an animal, and it is no wonder he identifies with the baby pig... Porter

illustrates poignantly in 'He' that love is necessary for children to become fully realized humans.... One must first recognize his or her animal self, and then one must be the recipient of love, a somewhat deterministic view. If a child is not loved, then he or she is forever doomed to a heartless existence."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 71-74

"One could argue convincingly that 'He'...is Katherine Anne Porter's...finest creation.... The power of this story is demonstrated by the numerous critical attitudes toward Mrs. Whipple, mother of the retarded child... Capitalizing the personal pronoun *He*...is subtly suggestive of legends of the sacred idiot (He blithely leads a frightful bull without harm to himself); on the other hand, the character's lack of a genuine name tends to make him something less than truly human.... The ironic tone of the story seems designed, as several critics have observed, to counterbalance any possible drift, on the reader's part, in the direction of sentimentality; the neutral, cold-blooded, objective, matter-of-fact narration corrects what could have become simply another tear-jerker....

It is the ambivalence of parental love that is the subject of this powerful story. It is quite possible for parents of a defective child to harbor pity, compassion, and love for the same child which they secretly despise and would like to see dead.... It is especially the mother of the child who commands out sympathy in this story, for it is she who feels affection and pity for small and helpless things that of necessity must be sacrificed to the order of things as they are.... Significantly, Mrs. Whipple had already sensed the affinity between her own helpless child and the frightened pig...which had to be forcibly removed from its mother (a foreshadowing of her own parental fate)... The pig, which 'screeches like a baby' is thus a displacement for Mrs. Whipple's parental emotions... She must sacrifice Him for the very survival of the family...

Mrs. Whipple, as her name suggests, is a whip to her own conscience, but a subtle whip, as her various rationalizations demonstrate.... That Mrs. Whipple is constantly concerned with what others might think does not, in any way, controvert her equal love and concern for her child.... Mrs. Whipple's motive for dehumanizing Him is clear: this is the only way she can justify the treatment of Him that her circumstances require her to perform. She *must*, consciously or unconsciously, think of Him as something less than human; otherwise she would have to confess herself guilty of a desire to destroy her own child....

Numerous critics have failed to understand the genuine pathos of this story. Some have condemned Mrs. Whipple for her refusal to face the facts; others have self-righteously accused her of an excessive desire for social approval. Emmons notes sarcastically that Mrs. Whipple 'practices the eleventh commandment, which is to put up the appearance of virtue if one cannot manage the real thing.' What practically all critics of this story have failed to bring into proper focus is the hard-scrabble existence of sharecropping Texas farmers.... Not many of us could—under the dreadfully circumscribed conditions imposed by the author—measure up so well as Mrs. Whipple under such adversity."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1990) 99-105

"So complex is the ironic narration of 'He,' with statements continuously undercut by other statements and these in turn undercut by events, that getting a sure grasp on Mrs. Whipple's feelings toward her retarded son is a slippery, if not finally impossible, task. Critics still regularly contest Mrs. Whipple's motives.... Jorgensen argues [for] 'allowing the validity of Mrs. Whipple's natural motherly feelings but also insisting on the reality of her unadmitted guilt and hostility.' Modellmog, in contrast, finds nothing motherly in Mrs. Whipple. 'In "He," Porter shows us not a weak but well-meaning mother of a retarded child, but rather one whose pride and hypocrisy make her a moral monster,' Modellmog writes. 'To be swayed by Mrs. Whipple's self-serving rationalizations is to miss the point of the story'....

[Mrs. Whipple] refuses to acknowledge the value of any perspective outside her own; she wants to dominate, not engage, others. Whenever her husband disagrees with her, she exhorts him to keep quiet.... Despite the complaints of her husband, who knows full well how valuable the pig will be by the time of

winter slaughter, Mrs. Whipple is adamant, valuing the appearance of prosperity before visitors above prosperity itself.... She is willing to do just about anything to convince neighbors and visitors of the family's well-being.... She will make sure that 'nobody's going to get a chance to look down on us'.... She fears, and her fears are founded, that the neighbors see He as a blot on the family, a sign of retribution for previous sins in the family line....

She attempts to deny her son's mental handicap by not giving him any special care...and by putting him in situations fairly commonplace for farm children but life-threatening to a retarded child. In this way Mrs. Whipple implicitly answers those who offer her pity, refuting their interpretation of the boy's handicap and at the same time acting out her own unacknowledged death wish for the boy... Her prayer as she watches He lead the bull speaks crucially of her attempts to manipulate events to protect her own image while disregarding the emotional and physical consequences of these manipulations upon others... Her prayer seems an appeal to safeguard her image rather than the life of her son.... Mrs. Whipple repeatedly places [Him] in situations...without regard for his feelings...

When she and He journey to the mental hospital...He for a moment steps free from the identity established for him by his mother, emerging as a person with deep feelings that lie beyond Mrs. Whipple's control. His bellow and his tears forcefully challenge Mrs. Whipple to see him as a complex and sensitive individual who perhaps has known all along how Mrs. Whipple was using—and abusing—him.... As the story ends, it is not clear if Mrs. Whipple has been markedly changed by this experience, ready now to abandon her monomania and open herself honestly and caringly to those about her.”

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 103-07

The style from the start is simple and direct: “Life was hard for the Whipples.” The word *hard* occurs 4 times in the first 3 sentences, repetition in the manner of Hemingway. The prose style of Porter in this story is (1) Neoclassical overall like Hemingway's: plain, clear, economical and objective, with simple subject-verb syntax and conventional mechanics rather than Expressionistic. (2) Also like Hemingway she writes according to the “iceberg principle” and relies upon deep archetypal symbolism. (3) Her primary literary mode is Realism, exemplified by close observation of people, detailed characterization, objective rendering of human nature, common speech in dialect, and revelation of universal truths. The name Whipple is typical of Realistic fiction in evoking undistinguished ordinary people. The more common they are, the more representative and universal their story will be. The Whipples face the common problem of what to do about an invalid in the family.

The vision of this story is Christian in the Modernist mode of *holistic realism* with Cather, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Capitalizing the pronoun *He* conventionally denotes God, or Christ. Hence the simpleminded boy “He” is like a son of God--a Christ-evoking figure. He becomes a test, a mirror reflecting the humanity of those who react to him, a measure in particular of their professed Christianity, like Melville's Bartleby, Crane's Henry in “The Monster,” and Faulkner's Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*. Porter emphasizes the religious theme in the first paragraph by making *God* the first word uttered by a Whipple—the first of 12 references to God—and by making the second utterance of Mrs. Whipple introduce her conflict in values: “Don't let a soul hear us complain,’ she kept saying to her husband’—14 times in the story. Her religion conflicts with her competitive pride: “nobody's going to get a chance to look down on us.” The story is a religious allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne, sustained by the capitalized pronoun.

The neighbors gossip behind the Whipples' backs, suspecting them of “bad doings somewhere.” The simpleminded boy is seen as a punishment and a nuisance: “‘A Lord's pure mercy if He should die,’ they said. ‘It's the sins of the fathers’.” A mercy to His parents, perhaps, but not to the boy. Capitalizing the pronoun makes the story an allegory criticizing the failure of most Christians to be sufficiently charitable. The boy presents his parents with an opportunity to please God by loving Him despite his limitations and their loss of status among their neighbors. Mrs. Whipple is “forever” claiming to her neighbors that she loves the simpleminded boy better than all the other members of her family put together. Her exaggeration is a measure of her desire to feel above her neighbors morally and spiritually, like Cora Tull in Faulkner's

novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930). She doesn't want her neighbors to look "down" on her. At the same time, some critics lack charity in condemning her totally. She frequently thinks of Him as an innocent "and the tears would fill her eyes." She is a representative human being, not that exceptional.

The spiritual meaning of the boy is enhanced by details such as when the preacher says, "The innocent walk with God—that's why He don't get hurt." Mrs. Whipple repeats these words because they make her feel better about herself when she is insensitive to the boy, fending off guilt. Of course, the boy *does* get hurt and feels pain and cold, but he does not complain. In this way He is self-sacrificial. His mother gives his extra blanket to his sister because He is so accepting, "He never seemed to mind the cold." Mrs. Whipple says she has a "cold in her head most of the time." It eases her conscience to think he doesn't mind getting hit in the head with a plank or stung by bees. As if he is not really human. In fact, she sees him in the peach tree "skittering along the branches like a monkey, just a regular monkey."

The monkey simile implies evolution and suggests that the simpleminded boy is part of the natural order rather than dissociated from Nature by society. The neighbor who admonishes Mrs. Whipple for allowing the boy to climb trees is comparable to the Feminists in the education establishment who try to prevent boys from playing rough games and belittle them for behaving naturally: "He'll lose His balance sometime. He can't rightly know what He's doing." This recognizes that the boy is balanced—both natural and civilized, both free and constrained—implicitly unlike the condescending neighbor. Like the idiot Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, He has natural qualities normal people lack, ironically.

Mrs. Whipple defends Him: "He *does* know what He's doing!" The double reference of "He" makes an ironic joke, suggesting that people commonly think God does not know what He is doing. Allegorically, the boy descending from the tree corresponds to the human race descending from monkeys. Contradicting her declaration of faith in Him, Mrs. Whipple orders the boy to come down from the tree and "she could hardly keep her hands off Him for acting like that before people." Appearances are her highest priority. "Just the same, Mrs. Whipple's life was a torment for fear that something might happen to Him." Coming down from the tree is a metaphor of socialization, traditionally a function of women. Mrs. Whipple is a traditional mother in the Victorian tradition who turns into a Postmodern woman too selfish to be charitable.

Mrs. Whipple is also typical of human beings in blaming her neighbors. She is whiplike in her criticism of others. When she says her daughter is "smart as a whip" the name Whipple becomes ironic, since it is not smart of her to serve their valuable pig to her brother and his family when they need money, a decision that subverts her blaming Him for their poverty. There is another joke in the fact that she accommodates religion to her desires, like most people: "And anything I tell Him to do He does it." Her husband pays no attention to religion at all. He thinks his son "ain't got sense" and he advises his wife to "Just let Him alone, He'll git along somehow."

On a Sunday, the day of God, the brother of Mrs. Whipple is coming with his family to visit. She insists to her husband that they butcher a pig because of social appearances: "I'd hate for his wife to go back and say there wasn't a thing in the house to eat. My God..." Being seen as "down" is juxtaposed to her exclamation "Godamighty" to suggest that society is her true Godamighty. Similar juxtapositions reinforce the Christ-evoking theme: "come down on Him, my God" and "she screamed at Him to come on, for God's sake." Her husband reluctantly agrees to sacrifice his valuable pig, while revealing that his God is success: "Christ-mighty, no wonder we can't get ahead." In his life Christ is mighty but not almighty.

Mrs. Whipple sacrifices the pig, who is analogous to the boy in being "fat and soft and pitiful-looking." His sensitivity is obvious when she kills the pig and He runs away and will not come into the dining room on Sunday. He gets sick afterward and the doctor tells Mrs. Whipple that He needs an extra blanket: "You must put more cover onto Him, too." In denial, covering up his needs with rationalizations, she has coldly deprived him of warmth. Thereafter he limps. Mrs. Whipple is "ashamed" and lies to the doctor. She and her husband *do* give the boy a blanket off their own bed, but her hypocrisy is routine: "I always say He ain't to be slighted, no matter who else goes without."

He is sent to "pasture" the bull, to pacify and lead the beast to pasture. Allegorically this corresponds to Christ pacifying the barbaric human race and leading it to redemption. In western civilization, from ancient

Babylon and Crete to modern Spain, the bull has symbolized the divine wilderness that must be subdued for civilization to exist. To Mrs. Whipple the bull is a “black monster” and she prays, “Lord, don’t let anything happen to Him. Lord, you *know* what people will say.” She promises God that if the boy gets home safe with the bull, “I’ll look out for Him better! Amen.”

As the Whipples get poorer, however, she laments her moral virtue: “Why can’t we do like other people and watch for our best chances? They’ll be calling us poor white trash next.” The two daughters move out to jobs and the boy takes on more of the farm work, until He falls on the ice and is rendered an invalid. The doctor advises the Whipples to put Him in the County Home: “He’ll have good care there and be off your hands.” Mrs. Whipple resists with an echo of Christ sent off to prison among strangers: “I won’t have it said that I sent my sick child off among strangers.” Having it said is worse than doing it. She seizes her “best chance” and rationalizes doing “like other people.” She lies to herself: “Soon’s He’s better, we’ll bring Him right back home.” She knows He cannot get any better, but “‘Doctors don’t know everything,’ said Mrs. Whipple, feeling almost happy.”

At the end the main irony of the story is stated: “they never knew just how much He understood.” Again the capitalized pronoun gives the statement religious significance: They never knew how much God understood. Mrs. Whipple states the major theme when she says ‘that’s what we’ve come to, charity!’” Precisely. She is averse to be seen as accepting charity, a supreme Christian virtue, and in the end gives none to her retarded son. He is lifted into a “carryall” to be sent away out of their sight, like Bartleby sent to prison. The uncharitable Mrs. Whipple has dressed up in her best clothes as if for church, ironically: “She couldn’t stand to go looking like charity.” She is shocked to see that He “was scrubbing away big tears.” He is human after all. She just noticed. Her guilt is evident in her feeling that “He seemed to be accusing her of something.” Here the capitalized pronoun implies that in sacrificing Him like a pig she is forsaking her God. Christ identified himself with “the least of these, my brethren.” In a sense, this boy too is being “crucified”—sacrificed for the sins of his parents. Mrs. Whipple then reviews in her mind the instances of her lack of charity to Him and admits her lie: “maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him.” In the first paragraph of the story she is willing to “live in a wagon and pick cotton around the country” if necessary. And after he becomes an invalid she tells the doctor, “We don’t begrudge Him any care.”

If they really have no choice, why does she feel so guilty? She wants to fix up the farm so her daughters will visit more often and buy some “new white roller shades” for all over the house. Hugging Him close she cries in pity for herself: “she had loved Him as much as she possibly could.” She rationalizes her decision, telling herself that “there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life.” She is only His mother. He will be better off abandoned in an asylum. Like most people, in the end Mrs. Whipple does not want to be accountable. She wishes the human race had remained barbaric: “Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born.” She would have aborted Jesus.

Michael Hollister (2017)