ANALYSIS

"Theft" (1928)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

"'Theft' is an adroit story of self-revelation. Once again we have a central character who is nameless, though this time she is a woman, a young writer living in the art world of New York in the late twenties or early thirties, who learns, when her janitress steals her purse, that there is a greater and more insidious kind of theft than that which the law courts acknowledge, and who concludes: 'I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing'…. [Porter] is projecting on the level of the individual consciousness a conflict for which the immediate history of the world is only a larger parallel; and in doing so she enlarges our sense of human resourcefulness and complexity."

Harry John Mooney, Jr.
The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 51

"'Theft' shows a girl [*sic*] robbed of everything—things left, borrowed books, unspoken words, 'dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love'—until the theft of her purse reminds her that no loss but that of her hope in life and trust in others really matters."

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

"Miss Porter is clearly critical of this heroine…an implicit Miranda, and the story is related closely to 'Flowering Judas' in that it is concerned primarily with the over-rejection of the heroine, who could be Laura about twenty years later. A formal irregularity new to Miss Porter'' stories is most evident in the fact that 'Theft' does not follow the normal time order…. 'Flowering Judas' was written in generalized present tense and contained some passages of generalized recollection in the past tense… The present story employs the flashback more extensively. For example, it opens on the morning when the heroine, just come from her bath, first misses her purse.

Immediately her thoughts jump back, with the purse as connecting link, to the moment on the previous evening when she looked to see if she had train fare to get home from a date with Camilo. From there the scene continues almost uninterrupted through two meetings with men friends, until she reaches her apartment. This transition and others, made with Miss Porter's usual smooth economy, give the impression that the story is taking place in the heroine's mind, with its temporal fluidity… The external plot is extremely simple: by chance, she rides home with one man from a date with another; pays a short visit to a third; reaches her apartment, reads a letter from a former lover, and goes to bed; misses her purse the next morning, finds that the janitress has stolen it, and after a brief quarrel with the thief, gets it back. This action has two purposes: to typify and to symbolize the pattern of her life. There is virtually no evidence of the presence of the ironic narrator; the heroine, seemingly of equal intelligence and insight with the author, judges herself….

For the first time the setting is that of modern urban life, a setting in which the mature author has lived, and she seems to be confronting, with all her intelligence and personal involvement, one of the urgent and painful mysteries of life. Her fictional narrator no longer occupies a secure artistic world in which she can manipulate relatively simple characters and look down on them with ironic superiority. She is, rather, at the very frontiers of her own world, where knowledge shades off into fear and darkness…. It opens just as the heroine becomes aware of the loss of her purse, which is representative of all her possessions, a symbolic extension of her personality…. Between the initial sense of material loss and the profound anguish of spiritual loss with which the story ends, there are three distinct movements, each climaxed by rejection.

(1) The long first scene culminates in the heroine's relinquishment of fifty dollars which she sorely needs, and which rightfully belong to her…. (2) There is a short continuation of the remembered scene, in which she rereads the letter, then tears it carefully into narrow strips and burns it, a ritual rejection of the lover…. (3) There is the long final scene in which the heroine rejects the purse by trying to give it to the janitress. The first of these rejections typifies her willingness to give up valuable possessions in everyday life. The second is the crucial rejection of love—the most important of her life, perhaps. The third rejection, that of the purse, while the concrete value involved is by far the smallest, is dramatically the most important. It comes immediately after the rejection of love which has left the heroine profoundly disturbed and sensitive to loss. The element in this third loss which was lacking in the two earlier ones is the presence of a thief, or scapegoat, who can be blamed.

Just as the heroine decides to 'let it go,' thus reminding herself of the link between this loss and all the earlier ones, there rises up in her blood 'a deep almost murderous anger.' Suddenly projecting the resentment and guilt of all the losses of her life on to the thief, she sees her as a figure of fantastic evil, and finds her in the infernal regions of the building, facing her 'with hot flickering eyes, a red light from the furnace reflected in them.' She makes the accusation, but at the first denial of guilt the instinct of rejection reasserts itself and she says bitterly, 'Oh, well then, keep it.' The form of the [thief's] denial—'Before God I never laid eyes on your purse, and that's the holy truth'—gives an ironic note of solemnity to the revelation which her accuser suffers at this instant. Suddenly she realizes that this disproportionate anger, the resentment of hundreds of losses, should be directed at herself.

In realizing the extent of her own guilt for the present loss she has taken the first step toward an intuition of her deeper guilt for more serious ones. Meanwhile, the mountain of remembered losses…rushes down upon her…. The janitress follows her up the stairs to return the purse, and reminds her of the extent to which she has, with seeming indifference, left her belongings exposed to theft. The heroine's anger has cooled somewhat at the realization of her own complicity, but the woman revives it by touching on a particularly painful aspect of loss—the decline of youth and beauty—and by unwittingly reminding her of the loss of her lover by saying that he will buy her another purse if she needs it. Bitterly, the heroine thrusts the purse upon her, rejecting it with it both the sufferings and the values it represents…. Back in her own room, over cold coffee, she feels the lesson sink in.

Once more she has seen herself instinctively reject her own possessions, this time in a parody of generosity which has left her even more alienated than before. She is now painfully conscious of the extent of her self-impoverishment, though how far she sees into its causes remains uncertain…. 'The protagonist's childishly dimmed proprietary sense is a function of a more generalized flight from feeling. To own is to be responsible for, to be concerned with, to expend effort on'…. It is fear of contact and commitment that motivates the…rejection that robs her of life…. Calculated self-protection in human relations appears in two conversations overheard by the heroine and Roger while their cab is waiting for a light…. These scenes present vulgar parallels to the heroine and her former lover…whose romantic faith in love is revealed in the few words quoted from his letter…. Although the apparent suggestion of the plot…is that she loved this man before finally breaking off with him, the impression of real love is entirely absent from the story…. Of the five marriages or love affairs referred to, not one is happy or successful…. Her bitterness over the path not taken does not suggest that she might turn back…or…that she has made an avoidable mistake." [This critic sees only one theme, which results in reductive distortion.]

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 30-34

"'Theft,' one of Miss Porter's most subtle and complicated stories, is told from the point of view of a no-longer young writer, supporting herself largely by writing reviews. The central character of the story has much in common with the unnamed, alienated narrator in 'Hacienda.' The setting is the New York bohemian world, perhaps in the 1920's; the characters are insecure and poor; and the mood is sad, gloomy, dismal. In the opening scene, the lateness of the hour, the desolate Elevated station, and driving rain, set the tone of the story.

She declared the clearness of her memory and the value placed on the purse: she had put it on the wooden bench the night before and had dried it. The next day when she realized the purse was gone, she began to think about the events of the night before. Camilo, a graceful young Spanish acquaintance, had walked her to the Elevated station in the rain, even though his new, biscuit-colored hat was being ruined. She saw Camilo as one who used most effectively the small courtesies but ignored 'the larger and more troublesome ones.' Somewhat intoxicated, her thoughts were on the impractical hat, which would now look shabby; and she compared Camilo's hat with Eddie's—always old, but worn with 'careless and incidental rightness.' She had no intimate relationship with Camilo, no real concern about him except for his hat. She saw him at the corner putting his hat under his overcoat, and she felt that 'she had betrayed him by seeing,' though this is certainly her interpretation of the event and may be only partially true.

Before she could get to the Elevated, Roger called to her; and the scene with him is perhaps the most pleasant one of the story. They were old friends and perhaps lovers; he readily admitted the bulge under his coat was his hat being protected—the hats help reveal the characters of three of the men—and she willingly shared a taxi with him. His arm around her shoulders was comforting, and it was obvious their relationship had been an amiable one. Stopped at a light, she saw, and in her recollection she comments on, two scenes: three young men, in 'seedy snappy-cut suits and gay neckties' arguing about marriage, the first maintaining he would marry for love; the second wanted him to tell that to the girl; and the third insisted on the sexual connotations: 'Wot the hell's he got?' The first had defended his manhood: 'I got plenty,' and they had squealed and scrambled away. She saw them not as human but as scarecrows, and her use of 'gay' as a description of their neckties may have been her subconscious attempt to de-masculinize them. She also saw, at the same stop, two girls, in transparent raincoats; and the girls were, in a way, transparent to her. One girl said, 'Yes, I know all about *that*. But what about me? You're always so sorry for *him*…' She saw them not as human, but as rushing by on 'pelican legs.'

Later, Roger told her that Stella was returning, that all was 'settled.' She said she had had a letter too, but things had been settled for her. Roger, self-reliant, when asked about his show, announced he wouldn't argue about things; they would have to take it on his terms or abandon it. He borrowed a dime to help pay for the fare, and told her to take aspirin and a hot bath to ward off a cold. Upstairs, she visited Bill, a self-centered, weak writer, without the outer strength of Camilo or the inner strength of Roger. He complained about paying alimony, was oblivious to the fate of his child, refused to pay her the $50 promised for her help on his play. She let him steal her money, without a real objection. Upstairs she had read the letter, obviously from Eddie, accusing her of destroying his love for her. She tore the letter into strips, and her actions demonstrated clearly that her alienation from those around her sprang from herself. In destroying the letter, she destroyed her last link with Eddie.

She then remembered that the next morning the janitress had come in while she was having a bath, saying the radiators had to be looked after before turning on the heat; and the janitress had sometime later gone out, 'closing the door very sharply.' When she returned to the room, the purse was gone. She dressed and made coffee, her excitement and anger growing. She put the cup down in the center of the table (emphasizing the religious ritual) and descended into the basement to demand her purse from the janitress, who was at the furnace and streaked with coal dust. The scene that followed was that of an inferno. The woman first denied stealing the gold-cloth purse. The writer attempted to reassert herself, to act positively, instead of giving in, as she had done with Bill. As she confronted the janitress, she remembered that she had never worried about possessions, that she h ad been indifferent and careless with them, that she had not loved them just as she had not loved or been able to go on loving others; she had therefore given others the chance to rob her.

Then the physical act became a symbol to her: 'she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible: things lost or broken by her own fault, things she had forgotten and left in houses when she moved: books borrowed from her and not returned, journeys she had planned and had not made…the long patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love'; all of these she had lost and was losing again in memory. Her anger and her desire to get the purse back had been a desire to keep from losing herself. The woman returned the purse, first saying, with 'red fire flickering in her eyes,' that she had a seventeen-year-old niece who needed a pretty purse, and then that she must have been crazy to have taken it.

The janitress argued that her niece was young and needed her chance; the writer had already had hers. The writer tried to return the purse to the janitress, who said spitefully that the niece didn't need it because she was young and pretty: 'I guess you need it worse than she does.' The writer was then caught in a circular trap, never able to keep from causing her own alienation, her own losses. The janitress had the last word: the purse was being stolen from the niece.

The writer put the purse on the table again, but the coffee (sacrament) was chilled. The purse was on the altar, but the woman knew that 'I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing.' All of the incidents of the story are chosen to emphasize this final view. The alienation is pointed up by the rain and its effects on Camilo, Roger, and the writer; she saw that the rain changed the shape of everything. Stairs would have taken her to the Elevated (and the life of the spirit); she went down the stairs into the basement, a trip into a heart of darkness, where she saw the fire-filled eyes of the janitress and had the first intimations of the real nature of the theft.

The primary symbol in the story, which unites all the story, is the purse and the woman's feelings about it. At first, it was a material possession, a birthday present probably from Eddie; and therefore it represented their past relationship and its dissolution. The purse, at the beginning of the story, was almost empty, for she was both physically and spiritually poor. The janitress forced her to take the purse, but she had decided she no longer wanted it; she had physical possession of that which she had lost, but was haunted by all the symbolic losses. The final irony is perhaps the most bitter of them all; for, after her descent into hell, she has seen her own tragedy and the tragedy of all men—but in the meantime the wine of the sacrament (coffee) had become chilled.

The search for both profane and sacred love are the important themes of this complex story. The narrator rejects Camilo; loses Roger to his wife; is cheated by Bill, a blasphemer; and causes Eddie to reject her. She did not take the Elevated, or spiritual way, but descended into a hell, and found upon returning from the depths that the modern sacrament was unsatisfactory. She was left with a gold purse and cold coffee, a wasteland figure without any kind of love."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 100-03

"The theme…is self-delusion in the face of evil and is most clearly developed in *Ship of Fools*…. The girl in 'Theft' closely resembles the voyagers in her failure to oppose the evil-doers… Camilo, Bill, and the defeminized janitress are…representatives of moral laxity…. The evil in each of them is indicated by profanity, insobriety, and thieving. Camilo is merely beginning to gravitate toward evil. He is almost sober, almost honest, and only slightly profane…. Bill is deeply entrenched in his evil ways. He is drunk, profane, and dishonest…. He has moved from overt, conscious deceit to self-deception. When others refuse to permit his abuse, he sobs with self-pity…. The janitress represents evil in its most extreme and undisguised form…. Her appearance…is evocative of the devil in a medieval play—a suggestion entirely appropriate to Porter's concept of evil as a recognizable, physical entity….

The girl's inclination to let herself be wronged is habitual and persistent even in the case of outright theft. The author's purpose, I believe, is to show that the girl is directly responsible for the increasing boldness of the evil-doers because she encourages them. Furthermore, she is responsible for their ill-treatment of other people. For this reason the author has carefully mentioned the other personal involvements of Roger, Bill, and the janitress…. The girl meets Roger… They allow themselves to be used and swayed by stronger, usually evil, people. Their precarious taxi ride between the pillars of the Elevated is a symbolic indication of the dangerous course they hold. Together they share three encounters that are miniature versions of the three main episodes of the story…. When they part, it is made clear that Roger's values have become confused, and he aligns himself with the evil characters. Like them, he treats the girl with empty solicitude and shirks his responsibility towards her….

The girl is evidently being criticized because she allows others to take advantage of her…. William B. Stein…reads the story as 'the betrayal of the holistic ideal of Christian love.' Leonard Prager sees it as 'the problem of an 'emancipated' career woman who is starving emotionally in the Wasteland of urban

anonymity and alienation.' I think that a reading of *Ship of Fools* corrects the perspective of such interpretations, for it makes clear the writer's attitude to the girl's kind of casualness [collusion with evil]… To Katherine Anne Porter it is monumentally disastrous in its consequences. The whole of *Ship of Fools* expresses this point of view." [Contrary to her dismissive attitude, this critic's valid interpretation does not invalidate all others, it demonstrates how rich the fiction is in implications.]

Joan Givner
"A Re-Reading of Katherine Anne Porter's 'Theft'"
Studies in Short Fiction 6 (1969) 463-65

"Like the central figure of 'Theft,' Miss Porter's story of another young woman who is seen explicitly to have stolen life's spiritual riches from *herself*, Laura has betrayed Laura."

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(Wayne State 1971)

"The story has a distinct autobiographical ring, and is probably based on some episode of Miss Porter's experience in New York City during the 1920s…. She accepted the invitation of another roomer in the house to stop in for a drink. Bill had been feeling lonely and sorry for himself over the failure of his latest play, canceled during rehearsal, and his ex-wife's incessant demands for money. The protagonist offered him sympathy, but mindful of her own poverty, she reminded him of the fifty dollars he owed her for a part of the play she had written. It had been agreed that she was to be paid whatever the fate of the play. He said that he could not give her the money, and she impulsively told him to forget it….

The janitress at first solemnly denies the accusation, swearing before God. But stung by the bitterness with which the writer responds—'keep it if you want it so much'—she follows her upstairs to confess. She stole it on impulse, the janitress explains, for her pretty young niece. She hands over the purse, but begs forgiveness and understanding. In her explanation…there is an implicit plea that she be allowed to keep the purse after all. Yet, when the writer tries to give it to her, saying that she no longer wants it, the janitress reverses herself and angrily refuses the purse. 'I don't want it either now,' she says. 'My niece is young and pretty… I guess you need it worse than she does.' The writer reminds the janitress that the purse was not hers in the first place. 'You mustn't talk as if I had stolen it from you.' But the janitress, taunting her once more with a reference to the pretty niece, has the last word: 'It's not from me, it's from her you're stealing it.' Alone again, laying the recovered purse on the table and settling down to her cold cup of coffee, the writer thinks: 'I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing.'

It is notable that most of the story's action is presented in recollections. Except for the two brief, direct encounters with the janitress, we see the protagonist entirely alone. And she explicitly sums up her own situation and passes judgment on herself…. She gets the purse back. But getting that one thing back as she does—with the contempt of the janitress that she recognizes as justified, since she has made a fuss over the gift without really caring about it—only confirms the general sense of spiritual loss…. One Shakespearean allusion is apparent. 'Who steals my purse steals trash'…. For, as she points out to the janitress, there is no money in it…. But the present purse, though a material object, is one of complex significance as a female sex symbol. It is beautiful, but empty. It is a gift—probably from a lover, probably the same lover whose letter, hinting at a desire for reconciliation, she read and destroyed…. In the painful experience of the loss-recovery of the purse, the protagonist is forced to ask herself what she does value, if it is not material possessions. And the answer is terrifying.

It is not love that she wants. The letter that she so meticulously destroys is evidently an appeal for reconciliation, which she rejects. It is implied that she has had a number of lovers and is still being sought after by men. Camilo is a suitor of sorts. But the feeling elicited in her by his gesture of wearing his new hat in the rain is a best pity, at worst contempt. In her mind, she adversely compares him to a man called Eddie—perhaps the estranged husband or lover who wrote the letter she destroys—who is able to wear old and shabby hats 'with a careless and incidental rightness.' And watching Camilo pause to look at the hat and put it under his coat, after he leaves her at the El station, she meanly supposes that the next day he will 'associate her with his misery,' and regret his gallantry. She seems to be more than casually involved with Roger, who tells her in the taxi: 'I had a letter from Stella today, and she'll be home on the twenty-sixth, so

I suppose she's made up her mind and it's all settled.' But her response, whatever else it may imply about her role in Roger's troubles with his wife, is curt and impatient. The words suggest that she is already weary of him, and probably does not care very much what he decides to do. 'I had a sort of letter today, too,' she said, 'making up my mind for me. I think it is time for you and Stella to do something definite.'

Her habit of leaving doors unlocked is not so much an expression of inner security, and of confidence in the goodness of humanity, as of contempt for anyone to whom material possessions are so important that he would steal. And it is contempt, and a kind of bitter indifference, not generosity, that compels her to forgive Bill's debt to her. She forgives the debt, but not the debtor. In short, she values only herself. And she discovers by the end of the story that to love oneself, to the exclusion of all other things and persons, is ultimately to despise oneself—indeed, to lose oneself.

Her going down to the basement, in pursuit of the thieving janitress, is described in terms of a descent into the underworld. The janitress, her face smeared with soot and her eyes glowing with the fire of the furnace she is tending, is a demonic figure, accusing and threatening. And when she follows the writer back up the stairs, she still carries the infernal light in her eyes. We are to understand that once she has glimpsed the hell of her self-imposed loneliness, the protagonist can never again escape it. It is appropriate that she should be nameless, for through her contemptuous rejections she has finally stolen from herself her very human identity."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 63-68

"'Theft'…was a masterpiece, the most nearly perfect story she had written so far and one which showed her in complete control of her metier. The theme was the one she had used in 'Magic,' the dangerous apathy of the apparently innocent. The central character is a nameless woman, a writer, no longer very young, who lives in New York. She allows various people to take advantage of her, borrowing sums of money and treating her discourteously, and instead of resisting she takes pride in her unaggressive, unmaterialistic nature.

Two incidents, however, make her question her motivation. A former lover writes to terminate their friendship and the janitress of her apartment building brazenly steals her purse. The striking similarity in the two incidents is that both the lover and the janitress deftly switch the blame to the woman herself. She realizes at last that she is indeed guilty since her indifference had invited their crimes. And there is the further indication that she is more guilty than they because she is responsible not only for her own loss but for their moral decline….

In this story [Porter] achieved a complete mastery of the lyrical style for which she became celebrated, capable of great virtuosity and yet always held in restraint and never overworked. The story opens in a low-keyed prosaic way, but as the climax approaches and the woman's thought processes quicken, it soars to a poetic intensity which makes it completely arresting and dramatic. That it should be so is a feat, since the subject matter is so psychological and internal.

The dramatic and moral impact of the story is reinforced by a discreet use of symbolism. The characters' biblical quotations and blasphemies take on a special significance, as do the woman's purse and the cup of coffee which goes cold on the table during her moment of self-revelation. The only bold stroke is that the woman who steals the purse is graphically depicted as a devil as tangible as that which Porter once believed lived in her grandmother's closet. She has red eyes which flash fire, a coal-blackened face, and she is stoking up a fiery furnace. While the symbolism effectively emphasizes the moral point, the description is entirely plausible on the literal level since the woman is a janitress. Such symbolic naturalism became an inherent part of Porter's method."

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 205-07

"The protagonist in 'Theft' is broke, both financially and emotionally. She is surrounded by insecure relationships which give her little or no sustenance. The only thing she apparently values is a gold purse, a bit of finery given her as a birthday present by a lover…. The purse itself symbolizes both the repressed femininity and the emotional poverty of its owner, but more importantly, in the final quarrel over ownership of the purse, the protagonist recognizes her own complicity in her losses.

The first part consists of the protagonist's memory of the events of the night before, an objective correlative which defines her psychic character; the second part tells of the next morning, when she discovers the purse missing and succeeds in retrieving it…. Since the reader has an open window on the events stored in the protagonist's unconscious, they reverberate for the reader just as they do for the protagonist in her moment of emotional epiphany…. The whole sequence may be read as a series of transient encounters between the woman and several men, whose spending and hoarding characterize their personal worth. Besides creating an emotional ambience, these events impress us with the woman's aloofness: she parts from each of the men in turn.

The first of these is the Spaniard Camilo, her escort for the evening…. He is a mock gentleman, a man of pretense whose reliance on a mask prevents any true communication with the heroine… Rather than expend himself by accompanying her to her door, he makes a performance of seeing her off at the station. Gentlemanly gesture, not generosity, prevails…. His new biscuit-colored hat is being ruined by the rain, but pretense keeps him from removing it and covering it with his coat until he thinks he is beyond the view of the lady…. Eddie…not only wears shabby hats without embarrassment, but lends to them a certain flair… The image of the ineffectual but pretentious Camilo hiding his new hat under his coat is replaced by the presence of Roger…[who] has buttoned his hat into the breast of his overcoat. In addition, he provides a taxi for the protagonist to ride home in, which Camilo is too poor to do. Because he is a weak personality…Camilo points up the strong character of the protagonist, who humors his need to play the gentleman's part… It might be said of Camilo that he hasn't the sense to come in out of the rain, but not so of the heroine. She is obviously practical and capable of taking care of herself, and in her understanding of Camilo's psychology, clearly superior to him. When they finally part, she has dismissed him, but in such a way that his gallant image is preserved.

With Roger, obviously a longtime friend, she…enjoys a comfortable companionship that requires little of her…. Roger has heard from Stella, who is coming home with her mind made up…. The protagonist again opens her nearly empty purse to contribute a dime to the cab fare…. 'How's your show coming?' He replies in terms that the reader later recognizes are an apt reflection of the protagonist's aloofness and emotional retention. He stresses that he refuses to argue or compromise…. She is a woman who, having chosen independence and separateness, refuses to compromise her freedom with emotional entanglements. She is so comfortable with Roger because they are equally dispassionate people who make no demands on each other and are therefore easy in each other's company. As he holds out, refusing to compromise the principles of his play, so she holds out emotionally, refusing to compromise her personal integrity for love. Neither of them will accept 'second best'…

Roger's insistence on holding out contrasts with the behavior of Bill, the protagonist's neighbor… He, too, has a play on the verge of being produced, but, unlike Roger, he is incapable of keeping his distance. By keeping himself dispassionately separate from the fracas of his play's production, Roger maintains his integrity *and* his dignity, something both he and the protagonist value. In contrast, Bill grovels, shamelessly pleading for his play to go on, even after he has been told that it 'doesn't play'… When he faces the reality of his bad luck, he gets drunk and cries in his cups, then begs sympathy from the protagonist…. He needs money, just as he needs emotional support, because he is a spendthrift…. He is buying on credit expensive items like a piano and a Victrola. The rug his visitor admires, however, is a bargain, which best illustrates the second-hand quality of his possessions and his character…. Sodden with self-pity, Bill, too, is damaged and not worth much…. He hasn't the pride to honor his debt…. She begins to recognize the price she is paying for repressing her emotions; she finds herself responding, despite the fact that she had meant to be firm about the debt, 'Let it go, then.'

This phrase becomes the ironic echo of the story, being the philosophical conclusion of 'taking it or leaving it' and 'holding out.' One who practices the kind of detachment she does soon finds herself in a

position where she must say ‘Let it go’ in order to hold on to detachment. Fighting for something one wants requires emotional expenditure which the protagonist, in her poverty, is hardly capable of making. Returning to her own apartment, she ‘lets it go’ again, this time saying a deliberate farewell to a lover by purposefully burning his letter in the grate. The phrases of the letter she dwells on indicate that she is not being rejected but abandoned, because her lover cannot tolerate the terms she has set for their relationship… She presumably put limits on their intimacy; perhaps she rejected emotional bonds or a partnership or in some way refused to ante up. Like Bill who owes her money, she holds out on this lover who claims an emotional debt from her. Like Roger, she holds out to gain some greater wealth… She also saves her emotional energy for other—presumably artistic—purposes. What she fails to realize is that, like all misers, she is gradually building an inability to spend at all—that is…to love.

That the loving part of her nature, her femininity, is repressed but not completely destroyed is revealed by the second half of the story… Like the purse that contains small change, she still retains vestiges of another personality that allowed her to feel and to act on her emotions. This personality desired love and attachment and made her want to spend herself… When the janitress falsely denies the theft, the protagonist responds with a bitter variation of ‘let it go then’: ‘Oh, well then keep it’… In that instant three recognitions occur, one upon the other, as she sees for the first time that her rejection of attachments has been a fear of responsibility and emotional pain, she has traveled lightly to avoid obligations to any other… She is like the biblical steward who, fearful of losing what his master has given him, buries his single talent. Her moment of insight is overwhelming as she thinks of lost goods and opportunities that ended in compromise…. The harshest insight comes to her in the clumsy speech of the janitress, who, without knowing where of she speaks, names the protagonist’s greatest loss: her youthful femininity and her desire to love and be loved….

After the janitress has identified the purse as a ‘pretty thing’ needed by a husband-hunting female, the protagonist rejects it for having that significance as well as its particular meaning to her: a love gift from a man she has decided not to love, a symbol of her womanly ties to a lover, who, if allowed, will become a ‘possession’ that demands care and attention from her…. The janitress, a generation older than her seventeen-year-old niece, has linked herself with the protagonist. They are ‘grown’ women whose ‘chance’ for life through love is past. For an instant, the protagonist sees herself as another sees her, washed up… The ironic truth of the janitress’s comment rings home: it is not her older self that has been deprived, but the youthful beauty in her of which the empty gold purse is the remaining visible remnant. Finally, the rightness of her original instinct to leave her door unlocked returns to her ironically also. It has been a good instinct, not because of her ‘general faith,’ but because she was right not to be afraid of any thief but herself. Thus Porter begins to assert that if traditional roles do not foster personal integration, choosing independence in matriarchy and ‘single blessedness’ are also mined with difficulty.”

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter’s Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 61

“Inspired by Porter’s years in Greenwich Village in the twenties, this complex story is read with an understanding of Porter’s views on apathy and her treatment of self-betrayal in other stories, and if the function of the religious imagery and symbolism is properly identified, the story’s meaning emerges clearly. The story begins with the unnamed protagonist’s discovering that her purse, a birthday gift from a former lover, was stolen from her apartment. Most of the remainder of the story is told in retrospect, as the woman reconstructs the events of the preceding day that led up to her discovery of the theft. The retrospective events involve her relationships with four men, Camilo, Roger, Bill, and Eddie. Each has represented an unsatisfactory love relationship. Camilo lives by impractical, romantic standards; Roger will be reconciled with a woman named Stella; the self-pitying and self-indulgent Bill has cheated the protagonist out of money; and the missing Eddie has finally ended the relationship that he implies in his letter the protagonist had already destroyed.

In recounting the events that preceded the discovery of the missing purse, the protagonist realizes that the janitress stole the purse. Her first thought is that getting it back will be impossible, and she decides to let it go. But there arises ‘in her blood a deep almost murderous anger.’ Under an emotional compulsion that is separate from her will, the narrator descends to the domain of the janitress and asks for the purse

back, pointing out that it has a sentimental value only to her. After swearing that she 'never laid eyes on' the purse, the janitress finally admits she took it for her niece, who 'needs a pretty purse,' and makes the protagonist feel guilty for reclaiming it. In an ironic reversal, in a Dantesque scene that suggests an awakening to knowledge, the protagonist sees herself as thief of her own purse and by association extends her culpability to all her other losses. She sees that by her will-less apathetic existence, she has stolen life from herself.

The religious structure of descent and ascent, the prevalence of the mystical number three, and the meaning of the tableaux the protagonist and Roger observe during their wild taxi ride through the rain-drenched city have enabled the protagonist to infer some truth about her existence. The night before, she talked to three men, and three boys walk in front of her and Roger's taxi. The three boys are arguing, albeit in vulgar terms, about the relative merits of sacred and profane love. Roger apathetically rejects both extremes. In another scene two girls run by, one of them complaining in self-pity. Roger represents a will-less position; Bill a self-pitying like the girl; and Camilo, whom the protagonist had left earlier in the evening, lives by a code of romantic love like one of the adolescent boys. Only Eddie, who is known merely by the memory of the protagonist and a letter she receives from him, seems to have offered the woman a love that was real; according to the letter, she destroyed the love, and he has decided that it is 'not worth all this abominable….'

The protagonist's failure to claim her possessions, all of which are represented by the purse, is her representative stance in her apathetic existence. She and all her friends of the modern wasteland are hollow people of the twentieth century, substituting ritual and withdrawal for commitment and vitality. It is important that they all try to escape the rain, a symbol of growth and renewal, and that coffee and alcohol are the communal potions of their false sacrament, their religion of non-life."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 94-96

"'Theft' had been called…'a perfect story' that 'unmercifully lays bare the conflict between myth and reality.' Porter's life in New York City comes into play in this tightly constructed narrative which functions as an urban 'slice of life.' The heroine's stolen purse provides the basis for an examination of her character; weighted in a moral balance, the heroine finds that she, as a victim of theft, is in part responsible for theft. Criminal and victim are in collusion. Porter's rural Texas habits are in evidence in this tale. The nameless heroine, obviously a young woman very much like Katherine Anne Porter herself, never locks doors; she leaves things lying carelessly around; she puts a trust in the natural goodness of her associates and acquaintances, and even brags to her friends about her careless habits. But being 'a little girl from Texas in New York' imposes certain unpleasant truths upon her consciousness. A person willing to be taken advantage of *will be* taken advantage of in this dog-eat-dog milieu.

The female protagonist is by nature passive (always a serious moral flaw in Porter's moral world), one who does not want to make a scene. The moral seems clear: the passive individual is victimized because she allows herself to be victimized; the victimization occurs because the victim cooperates with the victimizer. While one might consider the heroine noble in one respect (she is above making an issue of petty theft), one must also consider her culpable in another respect: her failure to resist crime is an encouragement of crime. Weakness invites attack; passivity is a cause of violence. Once again, Katherine Anne Porter launches an attack against the unforgivable sin of her Texas father—passivity, refusal to be bothered, lack of interest in the moral issues involved in any given situation, a dislike of being hassled, a desire not to get involved. Interestingly, Porter never had any difficulty in condemning her father for such weaknesses of character; in this story, Porter's alter-ego faces up to the same deficiencies in her own character.

When her purse, a special gift, is stolen, obviously by a janitress, the heroine accosts the janitress and demands the purse back. When the janitress finally admits the theft, however, the tables are turned. The janitress now accuses *the victim* of thievery; for, as it turns out, the janitress has a niece who really 'needs' the purse much worse than its legal owner. The janitress had been encouraged in the theft because of the careless way that things had been left lying around in the apartment. 'It's not from me, it's from her you're

stealing it,' the janitress says. The heroine understands, finally, that 'I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing.' In fact, the story is a compound of several examples of how the protagonist allows herself to be taken advantage of. Rather than take up arms against her tormenters, however, her response is simply 'Let it go.'

The Joycean epiphany is vintage Porter: 'In this moment she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible things lost or broken by her own fault…' The clear, spare prose describes the heroine's sense of futility in her human relationships. She has repeatedly been betrayed. And she is herself responsible for these betrayals. The only thief she has to fear is herself. Passivity and indifference in human relations are open invitations to the world's opportunists…. ''Theft' is a particularly frightening picture of the way a woman like Katherine Anne Porter could allow (unconsciously encourage) her friends to exploit her."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 154-58

"'Theft' portrays another of Porter's women protagonists who suddenly gain insight about the emptiness of their lives of denial and negation. Like Laura in 'Flowering Judas,' the main character here (she remains unnamed) has withdrawn so far into her interior world that she lives essentially without will, allowing others to manipulate and control her life. She trivializes everything outside the self—possessions, friends, relationships. The narrative consciousness characterizes the governing force of the protagonist's life as a 'principle of rejection,' writing at one point of this character's thoughts: 'She remembered how she had never locked a door in her life, on some principle of rejection in her that made her uncomfortable in the ownership of things, and her paradoxical boast before the warnings of her friends, that she had never lost a penny by theft; and she had been pleased with the bleak humility of this concrete example designed to illustrate and justify a certain fixed, otherwise baseless and general faith which ordered the movements of her life without regard to her will in the matter.'

Her disarming passivity, like Laura's, represents another debilitating danger of the isolated self, quite different from the monomaniac power exercised by the mother in 'He' and by Cotton Mather; the danger of not taking responsibility for either one's own life or those of others, thus inviting and permitting domination and abuse by others not so withdrawn and submissive. Although not as spectacularly destructive as the monomaniacs, these passive individuals wreak pain and hardship on others through their apathy, as we have seen in Laura's complicity with Eugenio's suicide. In 'Theft,' the protagonist casually, even callously, dismisses her lover. Despite the deep feelings he voices in his letter to her—'thinking about you more than I mean to…yes, I even talk about you…why were you so anxious to destroy…even if I could see you now I would not…not worth all this abominable…the end'—the protagonist remains unmoved, tearing up the letter with mechanical exactitude and then burning it.

The protagonist's crisis of identity comes after the maid steals her gold purse. When the woman confronts the maid about the missing handbag, the maid admits taking it, claiming that her niece needs it more than the protagonist does. The maid says that the protagonist has already had her chance at love and beauty (her words suggesting that she has come away with neither) but that her youthful niece still has a chance for fulfillment. The purse, she argues, should go to her, a woman still vibrant and hopeful. The maid's words completely disrupt the stability of the protagonist's sheltered life, bringing her to understand that she has lost a deeply felt emotional life shared with others by living entombed in her private world of self. The story ends with the protagonist's crushing realization that she herself is the most terrifying thief of all: 'I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing'."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 108-09

"After the opening, where the woman realizes the purse is lost, the story takes on the form of memory, offering a double vision, simultaneously a review of the preceding day and a self-analysis. In this way it mirrors Porter's own retrospective stance toward the 1920s, compacting into a day's losses her summation

of the decade's betrayals. The story's laconic, alienated protagonist is an artist who allows both her creative material and her material possessions to be taken from her. Withholding judgment and thus tacitly condoning the loss of values she witnesses everywhere around her, she repeatedly allows herself to be shortchanged by refusing to honor her own feelings or meet her own needs. As a woman and an artist, she is exploited by others, and, the story suggests, because of her passivity, ultimately she alone deserves blame.

The recollected encounters that make up most of 'Theft' touch on the same personal losses Porter identified in her 1928 journal entry. The first encounter is with Camilo, an admirer, who customarily pays the female protagonist's way on the Elevated. By such acts as dropping a dime in a turnstile, Camilo 'managed to make effective a fairly compete set of smaller courtesies, ignoring the larger and more troublesome ones.' He has established an economy of relationship, in which small payments ensure a superficial appearance of emotional caring while allowing him not to recognize a larger debt of commitment. With his dime he buys her acquiescence. Unhappy with the superficiality of her relationship with Camilo, the woman resolves to begin paying, and thus she hopes to purchase a more honest relationship. However, despite her plan to refuse the small change of Camilo's attentions, she continues to focus almost entirely on his needs rather than her own. She justifies stifling her own desire for independence and honesty by telling herself that Camilo 'would take it badly.' Overall, through such self-denial, she allows herself to be bought with 'little encounters' and 'smaller courtesies.' The first recollected encounter in 'Theft' exposes the first theft: this woman shortchanges herself.

Camilo indicates something of the superficial, inadequate emotional relationships that Porter's protagonist lets suffice. Her next companion, Roger, extends attention from her needs as a woman to her needs as an artist. Of the men she encounters in 'Theft,' Roger most resembles the female protagonist—both are struggling artists, and their affinity is clearly apparent in their initial companionable exchange of glances. As the two share a taxi, Roger shares his professional problems: his show is not selling. He tells her his response to such failure: avoidance and a stubborn refusal to change. "I don't go near the place,' he says. 'Nothing sold yet. I mean to keep right on the way I'm going and they can take or leave it.' Both Roger and the woman approve his negative stance, perceiving it as a purity of intention and translating his avoidance into independence. His refusal to yield to the demands of the marketplace elicits the woman's commendation; this is her refusal as well. Like him she believes 'it's absolutely a matter of holding out.' Their brief encounter makes clear that as artists both Roger and the woman are out of fashion and choose a stubborn loyalty to their artistic integrity over popular success. But adherence to independent ideals in this world also leaves one shortchanged: when they part, Roger needs a dime for taxi fare.

The nature of the world that these two artists 'hold out' against is evident in their surroundings. As they ride through the rainy streets, they overhear the conversation of three intoxicated young men, 'cheerful scarecrows' in 'seedy snappy-cut suits.' The incident recalls the bar scene in 'The Waste Land,' where drunken, lower-class speakers reveal the absence of either love or commitment in their personal relations. In 'Theft' one of the young men confesses to a romantic hope: 'When I get married it won't be jus' for getting married. I'm gonna marry for love, see?' But his companions do not see and 'hoot' and mock 'that stuff.' Love, like the other high ideals such as following one's own artistic vision, has no place in this world. His drunken response to their mocking gibes—'Aaah, shurrup yuh mush'—reduces words to gibberish. This is what love has become, 'mush,' foolish language and nothing more. These young men also reflect the woman's situation. Like them she lives in a world where idealism invites mockery. In her bitterness and alienation, she too destroys the language of love. Later she tears a lover's letter into fragments, actively destroying the words, which might create a meaningful connection between her and another. 'Why were you so anxious to destroy?' the letter asks.

In the story's third encounter, we learn that the woman may approve of Roger's 'holding out,' but her refusal to yield to the marketplace has not been so complete. Bill, her downstairs neighbor, is a successful playwright, paid seven hundred dollars in advance because he can produce 'a good show.' Although the woman contributed a scene to his last play, Bill will not give her apart of the advance he received, for the play was rejected in rehearsal. Stingy and full of self-pity, Bill asks for sympathetic attention while refusing outright to offer concern for the woman's difficulties, or the money he rightly owes her. It is not just a failed play that brings Bill to cry in his cups, however. He also complains about alimony payments,

claiming that his wife has 'no right' to alimony and she knows it,' despite the fact that 'she keeps on saying she's got to have it for the baby.' Weeping in comfort, surrounded by his expensive possessions, Bill resembles the safely affluent young men and self-proclaimed artists Porter excoriated in her drafts of 'The Twenties.' Like the outpoured feelings of Henry Miller, whom she described 'leaning on bridges sobbing about himself,' Bill's selfish emotions are also 'worth exactly a spit in the river.'

By offering a scene for Bill's play and then letting go of her own right to payment from the advance, the woman allows Bill to continue his exploitative ways. When he asks her to forget the money he owes her, the woman's response is bitter and self-denying. 'Let it go then' she found herself saying almost in spite of herself.' What she lets go are her own needs; she will injure herself rather than confront others or openly condemn a wrong. Yet by remaining passive, while accepting drinks from Bill, as earlier she would have accepted Camilo's dime, she again shortchanges herself, this time more seriously, and by her passivity she tacitly condones the abuse.

The losses in 'Theft' are multiple, and by the story's conclusion the gold purse comes to suggest them all. With Camilo the purse seems to represent the woman's independence; it contains enough money for her to pay her own way if she would only allow herself to do so. With Roger the purse is something 'beautiful,' a 'birthday present.' Here it suggests her talent and artistic integrity, the gifts from birth she would like to be loyal to, holding out against the demands of the market. After her meeting with Bill, she thinks of the purse as 'empty.' She compromises her talent in her relations with Bill, and like Porter herself, according to the self-reflections of her 1928 journal entries, she sees another profit by her talent while she gets nothing. Bill certainly makes better use of the woman's creative material than she does, enjoying a seven-hundred-dollar advance on a script to which she contributed without recompense.

All of these losses mass before the woman's eyes as she slowly pieces together her day and decides that it is the janitress of her apartment building who has stolen the purse itself. Hoping to regain it, the woman descends to the building's basement, where she finds the janitress, a satanic figure 'with hot flickering eyes,' stoking the flaming furnace. Confronting her, the woman confronts her own devils; her descent to these infernal regions is a descent into her own private hell, and again she betrays herself. When the janitress at first denies the theft, the woman responds bitterly, 'Oh, well then, keep it.' But this last incident proves too much for her, and she suddenly recognizes that 'she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible.'

Obeying principles of a 'baseless and general faith which ordered the movements of her life without regard to her will in the matter,' she has managed to spread a moral cover over her hollow and even cowardly passivity. Her recognition also echoes Porter's own insight, recorded in her 1928 journal entry, that she place a 'moral construction' over her 'timidity and weakness,' likewise allowing others to take her property from her. In 'Theft' what the woman loses through her silence is what she most values—her own dreams, both dreams of love and of talent. What she receives instead are 'bitter alternatives and intolerable substitutes worse than nothing.' Porter turned thirty-nine years old between her painfully honest journal entry and the publication of 'Theft.' There seems little distance between the gender-thinking shaping this story and her own reality. It is likely the story summarizes what she felt in her darker moments about her achievements as both a woman and an artist in the 1920s. In 'Theft' the janitress finally admits that she stole the purse for her seventeen-year-old niece but exonerates herself by stating that her niece—unlike the narrator—is 'young and needs pretty things.' In the words she gives her satanic spokeswoman—'You're a grown woman, you've had your chance'—Porter cuts to the bone. Last and most painful of all the losses that come flooding to mind at the close of 'Theft' is the 'dark inexplicable death of love'….

This double perspective, comprised of an immersion in experience and a subsequent ironic review, corresponds to Porter's struggles during the postwar years and to the acts of distancing and control she undertook in essays during the forties and fifties. These are stories that depict things 'twice lost,' once in actual experience, then again in the understandings that come with distance, the truths found while quarrying in that 'landslide of remembered losses'."

Mary Titus
The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 139-44

"Theft" is first a model of Realism in (1) characterization, (2) dialogue, (3) description, and (4) its most conspicuous theme: Trying to get ahead in the City. In his *Autobiography* (1789) Benjamin Franklin initiated the literary tradition of the "self-made man," which became the dominant myth in American cultural history. (5) The protagonist in this story is trying to be a "self-made" woman, one of the most common themes of the 20th century. (6) She is also trying to be an artist, a writer like a multitude of others, two of whom are also characters in the story. This ambition is only implicit because she has not succeeded yet. (7) The setting is New York City, where realistically, literary success is most likely to be attained. (8) A less conspicuous major theme is the necessity of the artist to reduce human attachments and other concerns in order to have the time and concentration needed to create art. (9) Most important perhaps is the transcendental feminist theme that a women who fails to stand up for herself and insist on her rights is colluding with evil. Later, Porter makes collusion with evil the major theme of *Ship of Fools.*

As well as being a model of Realism, "Theft" is a *realistic allegory of symbols*, the most difficult form of fiction to write and the most intellectually challenging to interpret. Postmodernist critics are too literal-minded and political to see that Katherine Anne Porter is one of the 5 greatest allegorists in American literature, along with Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and O'Connor. Her Realism is so effective it dominates the attention of critics, who may discern an obvious symbol like the stolen purse but usually not in a pattern with the rest of the elements in the story that make it allegorical. After the purse, New York City is the most obvious symbol--of Success. Other settings are symbolic as well. The first to appear is "the Elevated," the city train that is her chosen transport. The word "elevated" evokes her elevated standards ironically, since the train is mass transit used mainly by the poor. The settings in the story descend from the Elevated to her apartment and down the stairway to the basement with its infernal furnace, stoked by the janitress who becomes her inner demon of self-betrayal--from her elevated conscious mind generally dissociated from life down into her unconscious.

Her interactions with the men in the story dramatize her elevated standards. Camilo does not ride the Elevated and she rejects him because he is pretentious. "Do go home. I can surely reach the station by myself." Unlike Camilo, Roger is honest and a serious writer like herself with whom she has "amiable associations." She shares a taxi with Roger they can barely afford. Both of them express their integrity as artists by supporting each other in their determination to keep "holding out" for their elevated literary standards in the commercial world of New York: "It's absolutely a matter of holding out, isn't it?" she says, and Roger agrees, "Holding out's the tough part." Symbolically, the two writers follow the course of the Elevated, which is hazardous in New York, their taxi dodging in and out between obstacles.

Both writers have just received letters from lovers with whom they are ending relationships. Both have just become available. At a traffic stop the three boys who walk in front of them argue drunkenly about marrying for love, raising a significant issue in the lives of both these writers. One of the two girls in raincoats expresses the conflict between self and other that threatens intimate relationships. When the taxi arrives at the protagonist's building, Roger expresses concern for the woman writer, offers advice and says, "you look as though you're catching cold." She is cold in the sense of not inviting Roger in for a drink or otherwise encouraging him to take a romantic interest in her. At the end of the story when she returns to her cup of coffee, it has "chilled" like her heart.

Instead of having a drink with Roger she accepts an invitation from Bill, another writer, perhaps because he owes her money. Bill does not pay his bills. On credit he has purchased a new carpet, a piano, and a victrola, yet he complains bitterly about paying alimony to support his wife and baby. He does not ride the Elevated. He is not a serious literary writer and feels sorry for himself because his commercial play has failed: "I didn't say it was a masterpiece, I said it would make a good show." He uses the expressions "For Christ's sake" and "God" and "Weeping Jesus" mindlessly, while displaying a lack of character far worse than Camilo. Throughout her fiction Porter uses such references to imply a Christian context for the story. Although he made seven hundred dollars for his failed play, Bill refuses to pay the protagonist her share for writing a scene in his third act: "Your stuff was no better than mine, after all." In refusing to share, he contrasts with Roger, who pays more than his share of the taxi fare. The woman writer "had meant to be firm about it," but she gives in to avoid a hassle: "'Let it go, then,' she found herself saying almost in spite of herself." Hereafter, "letting it go" becomes a motif of self-betrayal that contrasts with the motif of

“holding out” for her integrity. Her failure to stand up for her rights is an evil more evident when compared to more abusive and dangerous situations women face.

She has previously compared Camilo unfavorably to Eddie, who does not appear in the story. Her only reference to Eddie is positive, but he may be the lover whose letter she destroys. Whoever wrote the letter is clearly in love with her: “thinking about you more than I mean to…yes, I even talk about you…” Before she tears up the letter, she seems torn herself: “there were phrases that insisted on being read many times…” That no reason is given for rejecting the lover implies that she is rejecting love. Her lover accuses her of destroying their relationship and she confirms it by tearing up his letter and burning it. In the next sentence the janitress comes in “to examine the radiators before she started the furnace.” The janitress is the most obviously allegorical figure in the story. The woman writer’s descent into the basement is a stock evocation of descent into the depths of the soul. The janitress tends the furnace “with hot flickering eyes, a red light from the furnace reflected in them.” When accused of stealing the purse, she lies in the name of God: “’Before God I never laid eyes on your purse, and that’s the holy truth,’ said the janitress.” A liar as well as a thief, she is red-eyed like a demon. The woman writer surrenders once again to her inner demon: “’Oh, well then, keep it,’ she said,” again not standing up for her rights. The juxtaposition of the burning letter with the burning furnace associates her destruction of love with evil, at least with respect to the lover who wrote her the letter. Surely he deserved a reply at least.

Another symbolic detail is that “she had never locked a door in her life.” It will seem very naive of the woman writer not to lock her door in New York City, where today theft is less a concern for a woman than rape or murder and virtually all residents use multiple locks on their doors. Americans used to feel safe in their homes. It used to be common for them to leave their doors unlocked, especially in the countryside and even in cities. During the 1840s the poet Longfellow wrote of New York, “I have an affection for the city. I feel safe in the neighborhood of man, and enjoy the sweet security of the streets.” This woman writer lives in New York in the 1920s, before the city grew so corrupt and dangerous, confirming the worst predictions of Thomas Jefferson about all cities in contrast to agrarian America. In any case, leaving her door unlocked is a metaphor of her attitude. She does not invite relationships, her door is closed, but not locked. She is accessible for “amiable” relationships like those with men in the story, but figuratively her door is locked to love, which entails responsibilities and expectations.

After confronting her inner demon in the form of the janitress, the woman writer realizes that she has been betraying herself by withdrawing so completely from life, similar to “Wakefield” by Hawthorne and John Marcher in “The Beast in the Jungle” by Henry James. She accepts responsibility for losses that were “her own fault”—including the “death of love.” This is a moral ascent imaged in her climbing the stairs. The janitress follows her up and tries to give back the purse with “the same deep red fire flickering in her eyes,” indicating that she has not changed morally, she is full of hatred. She fears that she will be arrested: “Don’t never tell on me…” To the woman writer, the purse has become a symbol of her losses. The janitress makes it also a symbol of her losing her youth and opportunities to marry. This hurts because it is at least partly the truth. In the end, ironically, neither woman wants the purse. The janitress inverts the literal truth by accusing the woman writer of stealing the purse, an irony that adds force to the spiritual truth that in rejecting all love she has been stealing from herself.

Michael Hollister (2017)