He Study Guide

He by Katherine Anne Porter

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter's short story "He" was first published in the leftist magazine *New Masses* (1927), and collected and published in the book *Flowering Judas* in 1930. Porter struggled for a long time to be recognized by one of the large publishing houses, and only after several of her literary friends wrote letters to Harcourt, their publisher, urging the editors there to read her works, did Porter finally succeed. Although Harcourt eventually accepted Porter's work and agreed to publish her, she was humiliated by their lack of confidence in her stories. They chose only six stories to include in the collection, and they printed only six hundred copies, a sign that they did not believe her collection would sell. Little did Porter know that that year, the same publisher had turned down William Faulkner's classic work, *The Sound and the Fury*, a fact that Porter's biographer, Joan Givner, states would not have, however, impressed Porter, as "she was not an admirer" of Faulkner's writing.

The short story "He" exposes another type of humiliation for Porter as it covers a brief stretch of time in the life of a poor but proud family, one that mirrors, in many ways, Porter's own early memories. Like Porter, who would later become somewhat obsessed with buying fancy clothes and jewelry to erode the early poverty she experienced and to impress upon the world that she was a success, so too is Mrs. Whipple, the protagonist in the story, focused on appearances. For instance, Mrs. Whipple has her husband kill a suckling pig to convince her brother, when he comes to visit, that her family is doing well. Appearances are as important to Mrs. Whipple as they were to Porter. Every one of Mrs. Whipple's actions is determined by what the neighbors will think of her. That is why she is so distraught, so torn up inside, about her son, who is obviously not like other children. The story revolves around Mrs. Whipple's struggle to come to terms with her son, to make him appear as normal as possible, and to find some way to love him. Or, read in a different light, the story might be interpreted as being about Mrs. Whipple trying to find some way to forgive herself for not loving him. Either way, the story fits into a pattern of stories that Porter wrote in which characters cannot speak and are left to the whims of people around them to define them.

Author Biography

Katherine Anne Porter was one of those born writers, whose need for telling stories began in childhood when she made up interesting characters to populate her family's lineage. Her vivid imagination allowed her to create a history of early pioneers, Southern gentry, and brave explorers, whose blood, she wanted to believe, coursed through her veins.

Porter, however, was not born on a Southern plantation to an aristocratic family, as she often claimed even well into adulthood; rather, she was born in a two-room log cabin in Indian Creek, Texas, on May 15, 1890, to a family that struggled to keep food on the table. Her birth name was Callie Russell Porter—she adopted the name Katherine Anne later in life. She often claimed to be related to Daniel Boone, her father, Harrison Boone Porter, having fed her these tales; but even after extensive research, Porter never found proof of the family connection. Her mother, Mary Alice Jones Porter, offered little help to the author's need for distinguished lineage, as her maternal grandparents were both orphans.

Despite Porter's brief education that ended at age fourteen, she was determined to make a name for herself through some form of artistic expression. At first, she thought she would become an actress, but a long recovery from a serious illness altered her path. During the time she spent in the hospital, Porter met several young, intelligent women, one of whom was a journalist and inspired Porter to think about herself as a writer. According to one of her biographers, Joan Givner, in the book *Katherine Anne Porter, A Life*, Porter declared, after her time in the hospital, that "one day she would write as well as anyone in America." To this end, she traveled extensively throughout the world, gathering impressions of different kinds of people in diverse situations. She was fascinated with people and was an astute observer of the psychology and emotions behind their actions. She also socialized with famous artists of her time, including noted author Robert Penn Warren, who would become a lifelong friend.

Porter's first experience with writing was as a reporter on two small Texas newspapers. Later she moved to New York, where she wrote the publicity for a movie company. In the early 1920s, she rewrote several folktales for children, which would become her first published works of fiction. During the 1930s and 1940s, she wrote many short stories. Her first collection was published in 1930 with the title *Flowering Judas*. This collection was expanded and republished in 1935 and included the short story "He." One of her most acclaimed novellas, *Noon Wine* was published in another collection called *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). It would take her almost thirty years to complete the only full length novel she would ever write, *The Ship of Fools* (1962), the work by which she is most remembered.

Despite her lack of a formal education, Porter taught writing classes at such prominent schools as Stanford, the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia, and Washington and Lee University. During her lifetime, she received many honors for her

writing, including, in 1966, the Pulitzer Prize, as well as the National Book Award for *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter.*

Katherine Anne Porter was married several times—the first time at the age of sixteen—but she never had children. On September 18, 1980, she died of cancer in Silver Springs, Maryland.

Plot Summary

Beginning

The short story "He" starts with a brief description of the poverty in which the Whipples live. Very quickly, the narrator makes it known that Mr. and Mrs. Whipple have two different ways of dealing with their lack of material wealth. The narrator implies that Mr. Whipple leans toward the pessimistic side of life, bemoaning his fate and seeing no way out of it. Mrs. Whipple, on the other hand, tends to take "what was sent and calling it good," at least this is her attitude whenever she is in the company of neighbors, or even within "earshot" of them. This clues the reader that Mrs. Whipple is into the appearance of things, working toward the goal of making her family appear to be in the good graces of life, even if she must suffer to do so. Appearances are important to her in part because she cannot "stand to be pitied."

Immediately following this description of the mother and father, the narrator declares that Mrs. Whipple loves her second son, even more so than she loves her "other two children put together." At times, Mrs. Whipple is so drawn to making sure that everyone understands how much she loves her son that she would also declare that she loves him more than all her family members put together. Mr. Whipple reminds her that she does not have to make such statements so often, not that anyone would suspect otherwise, but rather that other people might begin to think that he, Mr. Whipple, in contrast, does not love his son at all.

The child to whom they are referring is simply called "He." The narrator refers to this boy as "the simple-minded one." The neighbors, behind the Whipples' backs, blame the father's bad blood for having produced such a child. To the Whipples' faces, the neighbors encourage the parents, searching for positive comments, such as: "Look how He grows!"

Mrs. Whipple is uncomfortable talking about her mentally handicapped son. However, whenever anyone comes to the house, the conversation always turns to him. Once the conversation is started, Mrs. Whipple talks about the positive attributes that He has, such as the fact that He never gets hurt. She attributes this feat to something that a preacher once told her about the innocent walking with God. Mrs. Whipple took this to mean that God was sheltering her son. It is through this thought that she can accept her son, be proud of him, at least in her conversations with her neighbors.

There are other reasons that Mrs. Whipple has created to help her accept her son. He never whines for food like her other children. He works harder and never complains, even when he gets stung by the bees when he gathers their honey. When her other children get cold in the winter, Mrs. Whipple takes His blanket off of him and gives it to one of her other children. He never, Mrs. Whipple believes, "seemed to mind the cold."

Mrs. Whipple does worry about him sometimes, though; especially when neighbors come over and tell her that she should keep him from climbing trees, fearing He might hurt himself because He does not know what He is doing. This angers Mrs. Whipple for two reasons. She is well aware that He could fall, and this does make her feel some concern. However, at the same time, she is also proud that He can climb so well. She even thinks that He is as agile as a monkey. She does not need to have the neighbors remind her to be worried about Him, though, and she particularly does not need to have the neighbors state that He does not know what he is doing. This is an insult that Mrs. Whipple cannot stand. Contradicting her emotions, after the neighbors leave, Mrs. Whipple calls him out of the tree and beats him for acting in such a way in front of the neighbors.

Later, Mr. Whipple makes the statement that the reason that He does not complain when he gets hurt or when he is cold or hungry is because He does not have the sense to complain. Mrs. Whipple, of course, berates Mr. Whipple for having made such a statement. What would the neighbors think if they heard him say such things? They might think that Mr. Whipple loves his other children better.

Middle

Mrs. Whipple receives a letter from her brother, which states that he, his wife, and two children are planning a visit on the following weekend. In the letter, her brother makes the statement, "Put the big pot in the little one," insinuating that she needs to squeeze things together in order to make room for his family. Mrs. Whipple is insulted by this remark and immediately declares that her husband will have to kill one of the suckling pigs. This is, of course, a sign of luxury because if they waited until the pigs were fully grown, they would receive more money for the animal when they took it to the market.

Mr. Whipple is indignant. He knows how wasteful it is to kill a pig before its prime and says so. Mrs. Whipple complains that she does not want her brother and his wife going back home and telling everyone that the Whipples did not have enough food to feed them; so Mr. Whipple relents, but he refuses to be the one who kills the piglet.

Mrs. Whipple knows that her other son, Adna, is too afraid to snatch the piglet away from its mother, so she tells He to do it. He has no trouble running away from the sow and hands the baby pig to his mother, who promptly slices through its neck. At the sight of blood, He runs away. Mrs. Whipple is not concerned, believing that He will forget all about the slaughter and will enjoy the meal when the piglet is cooked. At this point of the story, Mrs. Whipple reveals some of her real feelings about He. She remarks that He would eat the whole pig if she allowed him and not save any for his brother and sister. He is three times bigger than Adna, his older brother, and Mrs. Whipple suggests that it is a shame He is so large and healthy, while Adna is the one with all the brains.

In preparation for her brother, Mrs. Whipple makes sure that her children are clean. However, before her brother arrives, He has already dirtied his clothes, and Mrs. Whipple hits him in his head with her fists. "I get tired trying to keep you decent," she

tells him. Later, when she looks at the expression on his face, she feels bad for having hit him.

When the brother and his family arrive and sit down to dinner, He will not come into the dining room. Mrs. Whipple makes excuses for him, stating that He is shy. She then fixes a plate for him, impressing upon her brother that she always makes sure that He is fed before the others. Mr. Whipple tries to scold Mrs. Whipple after the brother leaves, reminding her how much that dinner cost them. Mrs. Whipple finds consolation at first by stating that her brother and his family were good people for they had not made one rude comment all night, either about He or about the Whipples poverty. Mr. Whipple says that anyone coming to dinner would have shown as much courtesy, but who is to know what they will say when they get home. Mrs. Whipple loses her composure and says that she wishes she were dead.

End

He slips on some ice a few winters later, and when He falls down, He does not get back up. His legs and arms thrash around him because he is having some kind of a fit. The Whipples call the doctor, but eventually the doctor concludes that He will never get any better and suggests that the Whipples put He into a nursing home. Mrs Whipple does not like this suggestion because it means that she is accepting charity. However, Mr. Whipple convinces her that it is the best thing they can do.

On the day that He leaves for the sanitarium, Mrs. Whipple dresses in her best clothes. She sits in the back seat of the wagon as a neighbor drives her and her son away. In the midst of the travels, Mrs. Whipple notices that He is rubbing his face and is astonished to discover that He is crying. At first she feels bad about this, realizing that He does have feelings. If He experiences emotions, that means that every time Mrs. Whipple was mean to him, he must have felt bad then, too. Quite quickly, though, Mrs. Whipple dismisses her thoughts and her feelings of guilt. She has the other children to think about. The story ends with Mrs. Whipple thinking "Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The Whipples are a poor farming family living in the South. With three children to feed and clothe, the family often finds it difficult to make ends meet. Mr. Whipple understands the family's precarious position and often speaks of having bad luck. Mrs. Whipple, on the other hand, is an optimist, particularly in the presence of other people.

The family includes two boys and one girl. One of the boys, known simply as He, is initially described as "simple-minded." Mrs. Whipple is keenly aware of the boy's limitations and goes out of her way to tell others how much she loves him. Mr. Whipple, fearing that people will begin to think that their son is not loved by the rest of the family, asks his wife to not speak of her love for her son in this way. Mrs. Whipple responds that her feelings are no different from those of any other mother.

Even so, in speaking amongst themselves, the family's neighbors feel the boy's limitations are significant and feel it would be more merciful for him to die. However, in the presence of the Whipples, they are reassuring and comforting.

Mrs. Whipple also notices that when she has visitors, the conversation immediately turns to her son, and so she must talk about him before moving on to other topics. Whenever she speaks of her son, Mrs. Whipple makes certain to point out positive things, such as his physical strength and activity. Doing so seems to make her feel better and she often repeats a story involving her preacher in which he once told her that "The innocent walk with God – that's why he don't get hurt."

The boy grows and becomes more active, but does not get hurt. He does not speak, but is more patient than the other children. Despite being fat, he is physically strong and is able to carry more wood and water than his brother. Even so, Mrs. Whipple continues to fear that he will get hurt. Her fear seems to be fueled by her neighbors who, upon observing the boy climbing trees, voice their concern.

When her husband refers to the boy's limited abilities, Mrs. Whipple becomes angry and tells her husband that they must defend their son. Mr. Whipple's belief is that the boy will be fine as long as they can continue to provide him with clothing and food. Even so, Mrs. Whipple resents the fact that other people talk about her son.

When Mrs. Whipple's brother writes to say he and his family are coming to visit, she suggests that they slaughter one of their pigs to serve for dinner. Her husband objects, saying the pig can be sold for a significant sum of money at Christmas. They argue and Mr. Whipple finally gives up telling her that if she wants the pig slaughtered, she will need to do it herself.

When the day comes, Mrs. Whipple tries to convince her other son, Adna, to take the pig from its mother. Adna refuses, saying the sow will hurt him. Undeterred, Mrs.

Whipple tells Adna that his brother is not afraid to do the job. She pushes the boy into the pen and he manages to get the pig without getting hurt. As she butchers the pig, Mrs. Whipple notices that her youngest son, at the age of ten, is bigger than his fourteen year-old brother.

On the day Mrs. Whipple's brother and family are due to arrive, the boy cannot stay clean, which frustrates his parents. When the company arrives, the boy remains in the living room while the rest of the family gathers in the kitchen. Mrs. Whipple tells them that her youngest son is shy and timid, an explanation that seems to satisfy her visitors.

After their visitors leave, Mr. Whipple bemoans the fact that they will not have the income from the pig they have just eaten. When Mrs. Whipple comments that her brother's family was pleasant and did not make any remarks about their simple lifestyle, Mr. Whipple responds that anyone who came to their house for a meal would be just as polite. Mrs. Whipple becomes angry and accuses her husband of not liking her family. She says she will never invite them again and then says she wishes she were dead.

Winter arrives and the family continues to have difficulty making ends meet. They scrape together whatever warm clothes they can find for Adna and for their daughter to wear to school. They rationalize that their younger son can remain indoors which will eliminate the need for them to buy him warm clothes.

In February, the boy gets sick and eventually, the family calls for the doctor. The doctor tells them to keep the boy warm and to make sure he has plenty of milk and eggs. Mr. and Mrs. Whipple take the blanket from their own bed and cover their son with it. As she does this, Mrs. Whipple remarks that no one can accuse them of not taking proper care of their son.

Spring comes and the boy's health seems to improve, although he appears to walk with a limp. Mr. Whipple says he has arranged with a neighbor to breed their cow and says he needs the boy to go to the neighbor's farm to get their bull. Mrs. Whipple is uneasy with this plan, but her husband insists and the boy is sent to get the bull.

Mrs. Whipple is anxious for him to return and so she stands in the lane watching for him. As she sees her son returning home with the bull, she is reminded of stories she has heard about bulls hurting people. She implores her son to move more quickly, but he continues to walk slowly and eventually gets the bull safely into the barn.

As time passes, the family seems to get poorer and poorer. Adna declares his intention to leave home at age 16 to get a paying job in a grocery store while Emly tells her parents she wants to be a teacher. That fall, Emly is given the opportunity to wait on tables in a nearby town, and she leaves home. By this time, Adna is gone as well and the Whipples are left to tend the farm with the only help of their youngest son.

One day, as He was returning from the barn, the boy slips on some ice and falls. He appears to have some sort of seizure, and Mr. and Mrs. Whipple put him to bed, calling for the doctor right away. The boy remains in bed for four months and continues to have

frequent seizures. Eventually, the doctor tells them there is no hope and recommends that they put the boy in the county home.

Mrs. Whipple resists the idea, saying doing so is to accept charity. Mr. Whipple argues that they pay taxes to support the hospital and so they are entitled to use it. Further, he says he cannot continue to pay the doctor bills.

Mrs. Whipple finally relents, saying that the boy can come home again when he is well. Although Mr. Whipple tries to tell her that he will never get well, Mrs. Whipple is not convinced and finally agrees to send him to the hospital. When the day arrives for the boy to go to the hospital, a neighbor comes with his truck to take them. Although the hospital will supply an ambulance, Mrs. Whipple refuses, saying she does not want her neighbors seeing their son being taken away like that.

As they drive away, Mrs. Whipple notices her son is crying. Mrs. Whipple does not know what is causing her son to cry, but it makes her realize that her son has feelings. Before long, she begins crying as well. As she cries, she realizes that she has done everything she could for her son, and she still had two other children to think about. For the first time, she admits that it is pity that He was ever born.

Analysis

The first thing that jumps out to readers of Katherine Anne Porter's short story "He," is the fact that the Whipple's youngest son remains un-named throughout the entire story. Referred to only as "He" or "Him," it is unclear to the reader whether the boy has a given name. One possible indication that he does not is in the author's use of capitalization, which transforms the common pronoun into a proper noun.

The fact that the boy is un-named is also symbolic of the fact that he is unable to verbally communicate. Without the ability to speak, the boy is unable to establish his own identity, thus, there is no need for a proper name. Rather, his identity is established by his mother who goes through a considerable amount of time and effort to ensure her neighbors are aware of her son's capabilities.

Finally, the fact that the boy does not have a name indicates that at least on some level, the Whipples believe that his life is less significant than that of his siblings. Even though Mrs. Whipple consistently comes to her youngest son's defense, it becomes clear as the story unfolds that she would prefer that he were dead.

Many of Mrs. Whipple's actions are the result of a simple phenomenon: a mother's love for her child. Not unlike a mother bear protecting her cubs, Mrs. Whipple vehemently defends her youngest son. Ironically though, she often does this at the expense of her other children. Recall from the beginning of the story when she describes her youngest son's physical abilities; in seemingly the same breath, she points out perceived weaknesses in her other children. Later in the story, when Mrs. Whipple decides to slaughter the pig so that she would have something to serve her brother's family, she refers to her older son as "old fraidy," again pointing out a weakens in him.

We also know that Mrs. Whipple is a woman who is very sensitive to how she is perceived by others. As mentioned earlier, she seems to go out of her way to let people know how much her son is loved. When her brother and his family announce they are coming for a visit, she is so concerned that it does not appear as though her family is destitute, that she convinces her husband to allow her to slaughter a pig that could very well bring the family a good sum of money a few months later. During that same visit, she makes a concerted effort to ensure her son is clean and goes out of her way to explain his distant behavior. As she and her husband go through the process of deciding whether or not to have their son put in the county home, she is fearful that doing so will cast her family in a negative light. Even as they take their son to the home, she refuses the offer of an ambulance because she does not want her neighbors seeing her son being taken away in that manner.

Yet, despite all outward appearances to the contrary, it is apparent that Mrs. Whipple would prefer that her son were dead. As the story unfolds, we begin to realize that for as emotionally protective as Mrs. Whipple is of her youngest son, she constantly puts him into physical danger. There are numerous examples of this: giving his blanket to his sister during the cold winter months because they perceive that he did not mind the cold, letting him climb trees, sending him into the pigpen to take the baby pig from its mother and sending him to bring the neighbor's bull home. Given the number of times Mrs. Whipple does this, it would seem as though she is hoping that he will be fatally injured, thus freeing her from having to care for him. In fact, her act of slaughtering the pig is symbolic of this wish and is a sign of what is to come later in the story.

Mrs. Whipple dismisses the entire notion that her son has feelings. Again, there are numerous examples: the fact that he does not seem to mind the cold, his apparent lack of a reaction when he was hit in the head with a plank, and his apparent patience when waiting to be served his meals are all seen by Mrs. Whipple as signs that the boy is not aware of his surroundings. As a result, when she comes to the realization during the final moments of the story that her son was, in fact, aware of what was going on around him, she begins to cry. While it can be said that her tears are a result of her sadness from being parted with her son, they are also tears of mourning; in this final scene, Mrs. Whipple is mourning the fact that she never took the time to get to know her son. As she comforts her son by holding him in her arms, we are reminded of the incident with the pig; when they arrive at the hospital, her son will be ripped from her arms in much the same way they took the young pig from its mother.

Characters

Brother

Mrs. Whipple's brother comes to visit with his family, comprised of her brother's wife and "two great roaring hungry boys." Mrs. Whipple wants her brother to believe that her family is doing well financially, so she fixes a grand dinner for him and his family. She appears to have convinced him, or at least he is smart enough to reassure her with the statement: "This looks like prosperity all right," after finishing the meal. The statement is so obvious and loaded with irony, however, that the brother may well have been aware that his sister was trying to impress him. Mr. Whipple is not as assured that the brother believed the pretense, but Mrs. Whipple is convinced that her brother could not see their poverty. The scene with Mrs. Whipple's brother is brief, but it is used to show at what length Mrs. Whipple will go to avoid anyone thinking that she is poor or feeling sorry for her.

Adna Whipple

Adna is the oldest son of the Whipples. At the end of the story, Adna leaves home to take a job in a grocery store in town, believing that anything would be better than living under the poor conditions at home. Adna is more fearful than his brother, He, and Mrs. Whipple calls Adna an "old fraidy" because he won't go into the pigpen to take the piglet away from the sow. All that is known about Adna other than this is that he is smaller than He and attends school like other normal children. Adna and his sister, Emly, are used in contrast to He, to emphasize the trouble the Whipples have in taking care of him. At one point, Mrs. Whipple makes reference to Adna's intelligence, believing that it is sad that one of her sons is so strong and the other one is so smart, implying that she wished the two sons had been combined into one.

Emly Whipple

Emly is the only daughter in the Whipple home. Her age is not divulged but toward the end of the story, her mother comments that she is old enough to take a job in a small cafe in town, although she is still in school. Little is said about Emly in the story accept that she is more like other children around her than her brother, He, and that she sometimes whines for food. It is insinuated that Emly and Adna are sometimes more trouble than He because they have normal emotions.

He Whipple

He is the second son of the Whipples. He is mute and mentally disadvantaged. It is not known if the Whipples ever name their son because throughout the story the boy is only referred to as He. He is ten years old at the beginning of the story, is larger than his

older brother, and his mother prizes him because he appears to be without fear or any other emotion. Mrs. Whipple takes advantage of this apparent characteristic and makes him do all the hard work around the farm, as well as depriving him of warm clothes and blankets during the winter.

He does as he is told without vocalizing any complaints. Because of this trait, his mother believes he has no feelings. Despite the fact that he demonstrates his feelings through physical gestures, his mother takes no notice until the final scene in the story when she is taking him to a nursing home to live. It is at the end of the story that his mother becomes fully aware of him as a person, but she quickly dismisses this revelation because she must rationalize not taking care of him anymore.

Mr. Whipple

Mr. Whipple is not a quiet man, but he does often acquiesce to his wife after stating his mind. He is more rational than Mrs. Whipple, who seems to live in a dream world. He is also a very practical man, realizing how extravagant it is to kill a suckling pig, as well as knowing when and how his family must economize in order to make ends meet.

It is also Mr. Whipple who convinces Mrs. Whipple that the best thing they can do for He, when his health declines, is to send him away to the hospital. Mr. Whipple is not at all concerned about the appearance of things, as is his wife. For instance, when Mrs. Whipple is concerned that sending their son to the sanitarium is the same thing as accepting charity, Mr. Whipple reminds her that they pay taxes just like everyone else in order to use the facilities.

Mrs. Whipple

Mrs. Whipple is the protagonist of the story. It is through her eyes that the story is told. Mrs. Whipple is all about appearances. She is constantly concerned about what her neighbors will think about her and her family. She does not put on airs, but she is obsessed with cleanliness and assuring everyone that she loves her children, especially He.

Mrs. Whipple believes that her husband always looks at life through very darkly colored glasses. Whenever he brings up the truth about their poverty, she chastises him. She does not want him to ever make mention to any of the other farmers that they are in need, such as when Mr. Whipple barters with a neighbor to have his cow impregnated in exchange for fodder, thus avoiding the exchange of cash, which the Whipples have in short supply.

Mrs. Whipple rarely expresses her true emotions. When she does, she seems confused by them and often feels badly about having admitted them. For instance, she often beats He out of frustration and then dismisses it because she wants to believe that He has no feelings. There is an undercurrent in everything that Mrs. Whipple says that hints at her dislike of her son and the burden he causes her. She tries desperately to hide this

fact from other people around her as well as from herself. It is not until the end of the story that she realizes that He does have emotions. However, by this time, she is taking him to a sanitarium, and although she cradles him in her arms because both He and she are crying, she also feels a burden about to be lifted from her shoulders. In the end, she admits to herself that she wishes he had never been born.

Themes

Appearances

The story "He" is narrated through the eyes of Mrs. Whipple, whose main goal in life is to appear as if she and her family are happy and content, without suffering or need, as well as surrounded with love. No matter what is happening in their lives, no matter what emotions they are experiencing, Mrs. Whipple puts all her energies into making it appear that her family fits some kind of image that she has construed inside her head that defines the ideal setting, the ideal family. Toward this image, she is obsessed with keeping her children and their clothing immaculate. She admonishes them if they act in any way that might be considered strange while in the presence of neighbors. She sacrifices her family's meager belongings in order to impress and considers the worst of all possible insults to be forced to accept charity.

Mrs. Whipple takes her fanaticism of creating her illusion of perfection to such an extent that she even tries to fool herself. In her attempts to give the appearance of normalcy, she loses touch with her own emotions. As she butchers the suckling pig to show her brother that she is so well off that she can sacrifice the extra money that the pig would have brought to the family had they waited until it was full grown, so too does she try to kill off her own emotions to prove how much she loves her son He, sometimes without regard to the welfare of the rest of her family.

Although it is not obviously stated in the narrative of this story, the reader can assume from subtle suggestions that in spite of, or maybe because of, Mrs. Whipple's obsession with appearances, most people around her are aware of the family's lack of material wealth and normalcy, and Mrs. Whipple's insistence of the contrary just makes the lack more obvious.

The saddest part of this story is Mrs. Whipple's confusion of her own emotions. She tries so hard to convince herself that she loves He as much, if not more, than the other members of her family, but in the end, worn out by her inability to cope with her real emotions, she ends up barely loving him at all. She tries to rationalize her lack of emotions for He by convincing herself that He appears to have no feelings. So just as she tries to fool her neighbors by trying to make things appear normal in her family despite the truth of their desperate conditions, she also tries to fool herself by exaggerating her son's strength, his lack of need for warmth, and his inability to feel pain. She avoids what she does not feel fits in with the image that she wants to portray.

Mother's Love

Mrs. Whipple seems to do everything wrong when it comes to exploring the pleasures of a mother's love. Although she believes that she is right in all her actions, the results of those actions prove her wrong.

She has three children. Two of them she describes as being smart but whiney, afraid, and easily hurt. Her other child, He, does not attend school and does not speak, but He is described as being fearless, uncomplaining, and giving. She more often praises He than she does her other two children. She even goes so far as to tell neighbors that she loves He more than the other two combined. This eventually wears on Adna and Emly as they want to leave the family as soon as possible, leaving home even before finishing school. He, on the other hand, as soon as he can no longer work, is sent off to a sanitarium. His mother can no longer afford to take care of him.

All through the story, Mrs. Whipple tries to prove to her neighbors that she loves He. She does not miss an opportunity to vocalize her feelings. However, once inside the house, away from the eyes of her neighbors, she takes away his blankets when the other children need extra coverings. She makes him do chores that the other children are afraid of doing, and rightly so, because the chores—such as taking a suckling pig away from its mother—are dangerous. She praises him for being unafraid, and only Mr. Whipple seems to be aware of the fact that it is not so much that He is unafraid but rather that He is unaware of the dangers. Mrs. Whipple will not accept this remark because that would mean that He does not have normal intelligence, and normalcy is something that is very precious to Mrs. Whipple. So she sacrifices her son's safety and praises him for his bravery, all in the name of love.

When He does something that the neighbors do not consider normal Mrs. Whipple beats him, such as when he climbs a tree and swings from branch to branch. This is despite the fact that Mrs. Whipple at first approves and even admires his agility. As soon as the neighbors suggest that He might hurt himself, and therefore insinuate that Mrs. Whipple is not being a good mother, once out of the sight of the neighbors she beats him. Since He does not cry, she dismisses the look of pain and disappointment on his face. It is not until Mrs. Whipple and He are sitting in the back of the wagon as they are driving toward the sanitarium that she notices that He is crying. This is the first time that she must face the fact that He has real emotions.

Although Mrs. Whipple, at the end of the story, takes her son into her arms and rocks him, crying along with him, her final emotional assessment of her relationship with her son is that He should have never been born. This is a cruel thought but probably the most honest emotion that Mrs. Whipple confesses throughout the whole story. This is the closest that she comes to the truth about her feelings, which include both a real love as well as a real disappointment that he has been such a burden on her.

Style

The overriding element in the story "He" is the many uses of symbolism. First there is the silence of the son He, the main focus of the story. He is mute and thus cannot verbalize his feelings or his experience, and therefore cannot overtly make his identity known. He is at the mercy of others to express these most elementary ingredients that make up his definition: how he thinks, what he feels. At least, this is what the most surface portion of this story tries to imply. This is the way that Mrs. Whipple sees her son. She believes that she must cover up his silence, on one hand, making excuses and exaggerating his gifts, as well as her love, so the neighbors will ignore his inability to speak. On the other hand, Mrs. Whipple uses his silence to ignore him. He does speak, in reality, not by use of his vocal chords but through physical gestures such as facial responses to pain, all of which Mrs. Whipple usually ignores.

By using silence, which Porter often does in her short stories, she symbolizes both a sense of helplessness and also a need for people to look deeper than on the surface of things. The helplessness that her mute characters experience comes because society is based on verbal communication. If people do not speak, they are typically ignored, and their identity is created by those around them. This silence could also symbolize people who are oppressed, such as women, especially women during the height of Porter's writing career. Although women could speak, they were not encouraged to and sometimes not allowed to. If they submitted to the men around them, they were most often defined as weak. If they contradicted men and the social confines that were put upon them, they were often considered abnormal or crazy.

Porter could also have used silence to symbolize the need for people to look beyond words. In contrast to her mute son, Mrs. Whipple is all talk. She represents the surface reality of life as she does everything for appearance's sake. This is the sign of insincerity. The harder she tries to make things appear one way, the more obvious it is that she is false. In opposition to this is the silence of her son. In order to communicate with him, one must look deeper. In his lack of verbalization, one must look for his emotional expression through his eyes, his mouth, and other physical gestures. Rather than dismiss his whole emotional and psychological life, one must take the time to understand him, make the effort to get beyond his silence. Porter could also have been suggesting that one must look beyond the material aspects of life, something that Porter herself had trouble doing, to discover a deeper meaning.

The killing of the suckling pig is also highly symbolic in this story. Mrs. Whipple's son Adna is fearful of going into the pigpen and stealing the young pig from its mother. Adna is aware that the sow is capable of attack in order to save her baby. Whether He is also aware of this danger is not evident. He goes because his mother tells him to go. He does what he must do, and he does it successfully. He does not fully understand what his mother is going to do with the piglet until he sees her unemotionally slit the piglet's throat. At the sight of blood, He runs away. His mother assures herself that He will come back, as she believes that He has no emotions.

On a symbolic level, the killing of the piglet could stand for the unconscious feelings of Mrs. Whipple to be rid of her son. This is fortified at the end of the story when Mrs. Whipple confesses that she wishes that He was never born. By sending He into the pigpen, knowing the potential danger and not warning him, Mrs. Whipple expresses her lack of concern for him. When He watches how coldheartedly his mother kills the piglet, on some level He acknowledges his mother's lack of emotion for him. Added to this is the reason behind the killing, which is to give the appearance of wealth to Mrs. Whipple's brother. Appearances are very important to Mrs. Whipple, and He is one of Mrs. Whipple's biggest challenges in that regard. She must forever disguise his true existence, or so she believes, just as she tries to disguise her poverty in killing the baby pig. If Mrs. Whipple had killed (or aborted?) He as a baby, many of her concerns would have been eliminated. The killing of the baby pig thus takes on this significance symbolically.

There is also symbolism in the last scene, during which Mrs. Whipple puts on her finest dress for appearance sake, but it turns out that this dress is black, a sign of mourning. As she rides in the back of the wagon with He, she notices his tears, apparently for the first time in his life. She cuddles him, as if he were a baby, and cries with him, as she laments that He should never have been born. In a way, this scene is like a funeral. Mrs. Whipple is experiencing the death of her son, a death she had secretly longed for from the moment He was born.

Finally, there is the symbolic use of the pronoun "He" that is used to signify the mute son. He is not given the dignity of a name, suggesting Mrs. Whipple's insistence that He was in some way subhuman. By not giving him a name, Mrs. Whipple denies herself the need to fully open up to him. He has no name, no emotions, and no attachment. He is more like the piglet than like her other children.

Historical Context

Dust Bowl

At the turn of the twentieth century, several factors came together that would eventually lead to the devastation of what was referred to as the Dust Bowl, a wide expanse of land in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico that was turned into a virtual desert, thus causing widespread poverty in these southern plains states. First, there was a mass movement of settlers into these territories, with most of the people eking out a living on land that was originally considered sufficient only for grazing livestock. Then there were generally accepted, but invalid, so-called scientific beliefs that cultivation of crops actually attracted moisture; and the spread of railroads and electric wires as well as the use of artillery fire induced rain. None of these theories proved true and adding to an already unstable condition, as the population of these arid areas increased, the drought cycle increased. On top of these factors, Prohibition during the early part of the twentieth century decreased the need for a variety of crops, and farmers, instead of rotating their crops, turned to wheat as their sole source of income. The lack of rotation in planting caused the already precious soil to further erode.

Dust storms in this area were not uncommon. However, in the 1930s, the storms grew ever thicker and their occurrences more frequent. In 1933, there were seventy different dust storms. By 1937, the number had increased to 134. The dust accumulation around doors and windows was so thick that it had to be shoveled, much like in a snowstorm. Sunday, April 14, 1935, became notoriously referred to as Black Sunday for the massive storm that swept across the Plains turning day into night. In a story about Black Sunday, a reporter for the Associated Press coined the phrase "Dust Bowl," for which this region would come to be known.

As if this were not enough to send a farmer to ruin, this same time period was also known for its horrendous hailstorms, tornadoes, and record-breaking hot temperatures. Also, there was a population explosion of jackrabbits, grasshoppers, and other insects, all of whom ate most of the crops that made it through all the other devastating elements.

Although the rest of the nation suffered under the effects of the Great Depression during this time, many people living in the Plains, at least those who were not forced to give up their farms, had some form of food on their tables, even if it meant living off meals of wheat mush and jackrabbit.

Eugenics

Before the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, many disabled people were not only discriminated against but also had very few support systems. People with mental or physical handicaps were often institutionalized and

even were considered a burden on the rest of the so-called normal society. In the late nineteenth century, this concept was carried out to the point that it was believed moral to improve humanity by eliminating the least able and most unhealthy segments of the population. This philosophy was called Eugenics. It became popular not only in Nazi Germany, but also in the United States.

Toward the goal of purifying humanity, in 1907, the state of Indiana passed a law of compulsory sterilization of people who were concerned "degenerates." At first, this was only applied to those accused of crimes, but later the Eugenics movement included the sterilization of inmates in institutions for the insane. Such a case, in Virginia, went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where in 1927 in the case *Buck v. Bell*, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes upheld the right of doctors to forcibly sterilize Carrie Buck, a seventeen-year-old girl whose only crime was that she was classified as "feeble-minded."

In another example of Eugenics, Dr. Harry Haiselden, a Chicago surgeon, became famous for his claims of allowing babies, whom he considered too deformed to lead a so-called normal life, to die rather than saving them through surgery. The feature film *The Black Stork* (1917) was produced, featuring Haiselden, playing himself. The movie was viewed all over the United States, making the topic of Eugenics an ever more popular one. The subject of Eugenics was taught at prominent schools such as Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and Brown. Eventually, Eugenics came to be considered by some a science, and it even found its way into high school science textbooks.

Critical Overview

Although her whole collection of writing, from her book reviews and her published letters to her short stories and novel, is considered rather small, Katherine Anne Porter, according to many academicians, including Don Graham, in his article "Katherine Anne Porter's Journey from Texas to the World, in the *Southwest Review*, is revered as one of the "grande dame[s] of American literature." Without a formal education, a family that supported her interests, and a confident stance in regard to her own gifts, Porter was able to dig down into her personal history, where, Graham writes, "there were never any easy answers," and come up with a "key to her ability to create stories of lasting value." From this material, mostly taken from the struggles in her youth, Porter found "hard questions" most of which, Graham continues, "were never solved, but they produced some literature with lasting merit."

Most reviewers hold similar sentiments concerning Porter's writing. She had a unique talent for understanding the emotional impulses behind people's actions, and it is this element that held her works together. Her works, stated a critic in a 1930 *New York Times Book Review of Flowering Judas*, the book in which the short story "He" was first collected, are "technically perfect." The stories in this collection, continues the review, "are carefully wrought, devoid of clichés, distinguished for their technical originality." In referring to the story "He" specifically, the reviewer found that it escaped "sentimentality by reason of its careful objectivity."

In another 1930s review of *Flowering Judas*, written by Louise Bogan for the *New Republic*, Porter is described as a writer who "rejects the exclamatory tricks" and instead uses "straightforward writing" with attention to detail. She "has a thorough imaginative grasp on cause and character" and "has chosen the most exacting means to carry her knowledge into form."

Mary Gordon, herself an accomplished author, wrote an essay on Porter for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1995. In her essay titled "The Angel of Malignity: The Cold Beauty of Katherine Anne Porter," Gordon writes Porter wrote during a period of time when the short story was not appreciated. Gordon claims that that was a sad mistake in reference to Porter's work, for she is best known for her novel, *The Ship of Fools* when in fact her best writing is found in her early short stories. It is in her short stories, Gordon believes that Porter was able to "look in the face of such unimaginables as evil, death, the irreparable blows of fate, and force them to turn themselves beautiful."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and focuses her writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart examines the contradictions of Mrs. Whipple, the protagonist in Porter's story.

Katherine Anne Porter's short story "He" is told through the eyes of its protagonist, Mrs. Whipple. However, both the eyesight and the insight of Mrs. Whipple are twisted, or convoluted, to the point of creating double vision, resulting in a blurred reality that throws both Mrs. Whipple and the reader off on many misguided trails. There is the surface vision that Mrs. Whipple would like everyone to believe, and that, in fact, she would like to believe herself. Then there is the deeper insight that Mrs. Whipple sometimes touches upon but recoils from the minute it comes into view. Lastly, there is the reality that everyone else envisions, to which Mrs. Whipple appears to be completely blind. This variety of interpretations leads to many contradictions for Mrs. Whipple, keeping her in a kind of no-man'sland of chaos and confusion.

Within the first few lines of Porter's story, Mrs. Whipple is described as a woman who "was all for taking what was sent and calling it good." However, Mrs. Whipple's character is more clearly defined with the qualifying statement that follows this. It is Mrs. Whipple's nature, according to the narrator, to be the eternal optimist, but, most often, this positive take on life is found only "when the neighbors were in earshot." It becomes quite obvious to the reader as the story progresses that Mrs. Whipple will do almost anything to impress her neighbors. She is a woman for whom life is more dependent on appearances than on food on the table. She would rather starve than be pitied. She would rather lie than give anyone a chance to look down on her.

It is the lies that ultimately confuse her, for she tells them so regularly and in such an exaggerated manner that she begins to believe them herself. So fearful is she of how the neighbors judge her son that when she is in view of her neighbors, she makes grandiose outpourings of her emotions toward her son, He, who is referred to as the "simple-minded one." Mrs. Whipple does not know for sure how she feels toward her son, and yet she believes she must constantly defend not only him but also her own feelings toward him. She is so uncertain of her feelings that she diminishes her love for her other two children in order to garner enough love for him. She often tells her neighbors that she loves him more than her two other children put together. Behind closed doors, however, she defers to her other children to the detriment of her son, He. She gives her other children the benefit of warm pajamas and extra blankets by taking these things away from He.

While she makes sure that He receives extra portions of food, piling up his dish and relishing in the noises that he makes while eating, she also criticizes him, to herself, about how much he eats. The neighbors may not see that He sleeps at night without any blankets, but they would notice if He were malnourished. So Mrs. Whipple feeds him, and He grows to twice the size of his older brother. The neighbors, hiding their real thoughts of disgrace, also comment on his size, as if that were proof that one day He

will grow out of his so-called simple-mindedness: "He's not so bad off," they often reassure Mrs. Whipple, "Look how He grows!"

The size of He is relevant in this story for other reasons, too. His size represents the dominance he has in Mrs. Whipple's thoughts. He is the hub of the wheel around which Mrs. Whipple directs the other members of the family, and around which she directs most of her thoughts. To Mrs. Whipple, He is the weakest link in the family. She must make sure that he appears as strong as possible, thus elevating all the other members around him.

It is not only the size but also the strength of her son that makes him a viable participant in this family. For instance, Mrs. Whipple is proud of the way he can climb a tree. He is not only strong, in her mind, he is also fearless. Only when the neighbors suggest that He does not understand the possible consequences of falling out of the tree—and therefore suggest that Mrs. Whipple is not being a good mother for allowing him to climb so high and so freely—does Mrs. Whipple yell at him. Later, out of sight of any of the neighbors, she beats him in the head.

It is in her allowing him to do things that her other children are fearful of doing that one may begin to wonder what lies beneath Mrs. Whipple's motives. Is she really proud of him for his lack of fear? Or does she not care if He gets hurt because in her mind, he feels no pain? And of course, one would then wonder, why does she choose to believe that He feels no pain? Has she so removed herself from her own emotions that she feels no pain when he is suffering? Or is there an even deeper motive? Despite the fact that the narrator discloses that "Mrs. Whipple's life was a torment for fear something might happen to Him," she encourages him to do things that his older brother Adna will not do. If the narrator is reliable, one wonders from where Mrs. Whipple's fear is coming. If she is not fearful that He will get hurt, then is she merely afraid of what the neighbors would think of her if He should hurt himself? "It's the neighbors," Mrs. Whipple tells her husband. "I can't afford to let Him do anything for fear they'll come nosing around about it."

Besides climbing the tree, there are two other incidents in which Mrs. Whipple allows He to put himself in the midst of danger. First there is the snatching of the piglet. Adna knows that this particular sow is meaner "than a Jersey cow" and would rip his "insides out all over the pen." So Adna refuses to capture the piglet, and Mrs. Whipple calls him "old fraidy." At this point, Mrs. Whipple belittles Adna further by claiming that He is not scared of the old sow, and she laughs at the thought of it "as though it was all a good joke." She then pushes He toward the pen, knowing that He will do anything that she tells him to do. He trusts his mother. Of course, He follows his mother's orders, grabs the small pig from its mother, and runs with the sow "raging at His heels."

Mrs. Whipple does not praise her son's bravery. She merely takes the pig, which is "screeching like a baby in a tantrum," and slices ("with her face stiff") through its neck. The only thought of her son that she has, as He runs away in utter horror at his mother's actions, is to criticize him for his appetite, a strange reaction since earlier she seemed to

be proud of his size and strength. "He'd eat up every mouthful from the other two if I'd let Him."

The next major incident occurs when Mrs. Whipple sends He to fetch the neighbor's bull. Again Adna is too fearful to deal with the bull, so Mrs. Whipple must resort to using her other son. She feels easy about her decision at first, then later, when He seems to be taking too long to fetch the bull, she begins to worry. Her worries are strange, however, as she brings them into herself, feeling sorry about her own life, not necessarily about the welfare of he son. "It was just like everything else in life, she must always worry and never know a moment's peace about anything."

Mrs. Whipple finally sees her son in the distance. Through the narrator, the reader understands that Mrs. Whipple is aware of how one must treat a bull. Bulls, apparently, can be easily startled, so one must be steady and quiet. "She mustn't make a sound nor a move; she mustn't get the bull started," Mrs. Whipple reminds herself. If the bull bolts, he might run himself right through her son, and Mrs. Whipple was concerned that He would not have the sense to get out of the bull's way. So what does Mrs. Whipple do next? She lets out a shriek and starts screaming at her son to hurry home. When He does not respond, Mrs. Whipple runs, not walks, back home. While she runs, she prays that nothing will happen to her son. "Lord, you *know* people will say we oughtn't to have sent Him."

The story jumps forward to the time when the other children have left home, and He must take on not only his own chores but those of his brother's. He seemed to have accepted the extra work "fine," and "without even noticing" the extra burden, the narrator relates. Unfortunately, He slips on the ice, and his injuries cause him to have a fit. Mr. Whipple's first concern, while driving to town to get the doctor, is the money his son's extra care will cost him. Mrs. Whipple, on the other hand, denounces the doctor's suggestion that they send their son to the "County Home," so He will be off their hands. Why does she not want to do as the doctor has recommended? "I won't let Him out of my sight," she tells the doctor, sounding like the good mother than she wants to believe she is. Then she adds another comment that exposes her true concern: "I won't have it said I sent my sick child off among strangers."

Mrs. Whipple comes around to the doctor's way of thinking. Mr. Whipple points out that it is not like they are accepting charity, as they pay taxes to maintain the sanitarium to which He will be taken. This is all that Mrs. Whipple needs to hear, for here is her chance to escape. She has suffered many years under the humiliation she experienced by having a mentally handicapped son. He has caused her so much worry because he did not fit into her image of what a child should be like. Her concern for appearances was driving her crazy, because He always seemed to destroy the facade that she tried desperately to maintain. Sending him away, if she could find a legitimate reason for doing so without fearing that her neighbors would condemn her, brings forth a dream, a hidden or suppressed desire, that she has held since the moment of his birth.

Underneath the facade that Mrs. Whipple has created not only for her neighbors, her husband, and her other children but also for herself seems to be a death wish for her

son. This is fortified by her admission at the end of the story when she declares, "Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born." She had forever looked upon him as something less than human, for in her mind he did not get cold, he did not get hurt, and he never reacted to human emotions. Her refusal to believe that he was not scared because he was not aware of the consequences of his action could be interpreted that she really did not care if he fell out of the tree, was bitten, stomped on, or gored by the sow or the bull. By pushing him into these circumstances, encouraging him to take on things that may have been well over his ability, suggests that she, all along, wanted to see him dead, wanted to be rid of him. She was tired of worrying about him, not for his sake but for her own. "Mrs. Whipple hated to talk about it, she tried to keep her mind off it, but every time anybody set foot in the house, the subject always came up, and she had to talk about Him first, before she could get on to anything else." Mrs. Whipple secretly wanted to get on with her life, without him.

So she sits in the wagon with him, holding on, not to him, but to the edges of the blanket that is wrapped around him. Her exaggerations and lies were also like a blanket in which, since his birth, she had wrapped and held him. That blanket was placed around him not so much to protect him as to protect her. With her lies, she kept her own emotions at bay. She could not face the truth. She could not confess that she really did not love him; that she really did not want to take the extra effort to take care of him. As long as he was well, and she could work him like an ox, she would adjust to his behavior. Once he slipped and demanded a nurse's attention, she was willing to send him away. After all, as she reiterated throughout the story, he had no real emotions.

In the final scene, Mrs. Whipple is forced to face the truth, when she sees He cry for the first time. She is taken aback by this show of emotion, and tries desperately to convince her son—as well as herself—that his tears are not real. "Oh, honey," she calls out to him, the first terms of endearment mentioned in the entire story, "you don't feel so bad, do you?" In his eyes, Mrs. Whipple sees a reflection of herself: she senses that her son is accusing her, reminding her of all the lack of emotion he has experienced under her care. She painfully remembers the times that she treated him unfairly. Almost as soon as this truth registers, however, she excuses herself, by remembering that she is poor, and that she has two other children to think about. She then pulls herself even further away from He, turning the blame back on He when she states, "there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life," as if she had not been a major part of it.

Mrs. Whipple comes close to dealing with the truths of her life, but even in the final scene, she slips away from the truth whenever it draws near. For a mother to admit that she wished her child never to be born, to wish that her child be taken away from her, is a contradiction that Mrs. Whipple could not bridge.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "He," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Jorgensen examines "He" within the context of tragedy and focuses on the difficulty readers can have understanding the character of Mrs. Whipple.

"He" ends as Mrs. Whipple is taking her feebleminded, unnamed son to the County Home where she has finally admitted him. He may receive better care and no longer physically burden his family for whom "Life was very hard." On the way He begins to cry, "rubbing His nose with His knuckles, and then with the end of the blanket" and "scrubbing away big tears that rolled out of the corners of His eyes." 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. The knowledge is terrible; whatever the reason for his weeping,

Mrs. Whipple couldn't bear to think of it. She began to cry, frightfully, and wrapped her arms tight around Him. His head rolled on her shoulder: she had loved Him as much as she possibly could, there were Adna and Emly who had to be thought of too, there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life. Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born.

They came in sight of the hospital, with the neighbor driving very fast, not daring to look behind him.

Miss Porter once remarked that "Any true work of art has got to give you the feeling of reconciliation—what the Greeks would call catharsis, the purification of your mind and imagination— through an ending that is endurable because it is right and true. . . . Sometimes the ending is very tragic, because it needs to be." The ending of "He," I believed when I first tried to discuss the story with beginning literature students, intends just such a catharsis, "endurable because it is right and true" and "tragic because it needs to be." 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."

My students had a hard time seeing it: either they excessively, sentimentally pitied Mrs. Whipple, or they excessively, moralistically condemned her. I have since 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. Thus James W. Johnson in 1960, though mentioning "the unavoidable tragedy of the abnormal child, the victim of a biological accident" (thus seeming to use the word in its loose, non-literary sense of "deep misfortune"), moralistically implied that Mrs. Whipple might have suffered less had she not "refus[ed] to accept the facts." Harry John Mooney came a little closer in 1962, speaking of the "pathetic ending" as a "final" and "grim tragedy in a mother's life" and of the story itself as "a small tragedy;" but he did not point to the pity and terror of the ending as evidence, nor did he explain what he meant, and he

sentimentalized Mrs. Whipple in seeing her as "altogether committed to Him." In 1963 Paul F. Deasy, though seeing that in the last scene Mrs. Whipple realizes "He is as real as anybody," 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" and argued, without explaining how, that "Peace would lie in accepting Him as He is."

William L. Nance in 1964 viewed the story as "a masterpiece of finely balanced satire and pathos" with an "all-judging ironic narrator;" he found no one in the story "with whom the author or reader is inclined to identify sympathetically," and like Deasy he condemned Mrs. Whipple's "totally inadequate response to reality," her "folly of self-delusion" or "willful blindness;" he rightly called attention to "the failure of the boy's parents to recognize his personality" as "the root of their error and suffering" but also, without evidence, blamed their poverty on "their own laziness and ineptitude;" though finally allowing that the last scene "leaves the reader suspended between condemnation and sympathy for this weak woman in her hard fate," he seemed to miss the way the last sentence about the driver brings into focus the tragic emotion of terror.

In 1965, George Hendrick saw the story as "stressing the irony of the situation but ending with compassion for both mother and child," yet he did not allow that the reader could have compassion for Mrs. Whipple before the end; he felt, rightly I think, that the boy is "beyond human help," able to "receive but . . . not [to] return love;" yet far too simplistically he saw Mrs. Whipple's "professed love" as merely "a cover for hatred" thinly masked "with Christian piety;" for him, finally, the story was "completely pessimistic." Winfred S. Emmons in 1967 allowed the Whipples "a certain dignity, though small," and 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" (though that is not precisely what she says), and as practicing "the eleventh commandment, which is to put up the appearance of a virtue if you cannot manage the real thing;" for him, the story's tone was "unrelievedly pathetic."

In 1971, in the fullest discussion so far, Myron M. Liberman called "He" one of the most "harrowing" stories in English, "a little gem of enormous thematic magnitude" in which "a universe of human suffering is worked out . . . in a way that involves the reader most painfully, without resorting to sentimentality or preachment," and in which the author "succeeds as always in maintaining that 'delicate balance of rival considerations'" that Robert Penn Warren long ago cited as a primary quality of her work; like Hendrick, Liberman saw the ironic narrative voice as allowing the reader to feel compassion for Mrs. Whipple only at the end; reading more cautiously than Hendrick or Emmons, he noted that "no matter how His mother feels about Him, that feeling is bound to be something less than unalloyed love," yet he did not clearly define her feeling; he did see what I would call the "choral" function of the last sentence about the neighbor, and thus came close to defining the story's catharsis; 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."

That remark, of course, is the perfect answer to those critics who find it too easy to condemn Mrs. Whipple, and after Liberman's care and clarity it is a letdown to come to

John Edward Hardy's comment in 1973 (which acknowledged a debt to Liberman's discussion of the neighbor's final reaction), for Hardy saw Mrs. Whipple as having an "obsession" with her retarded son which she is "pleased to call . . . love;" he regarded her as "severely punished" in the end for the "cruel folly" of her pride; thus he found it "easy justice on the reader's part to refuse [Mrs. Whipple the pity] she so despises."

The main irony of the critical history of "He" is that its earliest commentators, those of the Thirties and Forties, read the story most clearly, whereas those of the Sixties and Seventies, supposedly better trained, have so persistently misconstrued it or seen it partially rather than as a whole. Thus Mary Orvis in 1948 saw Mrs. Whipple as "caught in a moral trap" from which "there is in all reality no possible escape" and in which her final action "is at best a compromise that must confront her all the rest of her life," leaving her "only the agony of guilt." Mrs. Orvis did not use the word "tragedy" in her comment, yet she defined the story clearly in a way that would accord with Karl Jaspers' dictum, "Absolute and radical tragedy means that there is no way out whatsoever." Claude M. Simpson and Allan Nevins in 1941 also viewed the ending of the story as "an incident of genuine tragedy," though without explaining why. But surely the most accurate comment on the story was the earliest, Howard Baker's single paragraph published 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 rationalizings, the blind hope, the impotence, the awareness of need for help, the shame at having the neighbors know"—in such a way that "the story becomes genuinely tragic."

The problem "He" poses for its audience, critics and common readers alike, is moral as much as literary: how to avoid easy pity or easy contempt for Mrs. Whipple; how to arrive at the justice of a clear, balanced estimate of her situation, character, and actions. Baker's summary displays the kind of critical negative capability that the problem demands—the capacity to see Mrs. Whipple in terms of both/and rather than either/or, to see that she can and does love her retarded son even at the same time she compulsively exposes Him to danger and harm, and to see that intolerable moral paradox as defining her tragic predicament. Baker took a long step forward in understanding the story, which unfortunately most recent critics failed to follow. Those who saw Mrs. Whipple's love as a mere mask for her "real" hatred and thus found it easy to condemn her would have done well to take the advice Blake once addressed in a couplet "To God":

If you have form'd a Circle to go into, Go into it yourself & see how you would do.

Liberman at least brought the discussion back to this point.

The audience's problem with Mrs. Whipple, I suspect, was also the author's problem, and I further suspect that she began to solve it by going into the circle she had formed, sympathetically trying to see Mrs. Whipple's situation from inside, though with greater

clarity of intelligence than Mrs. Whipple could possibly bring to bear on it. We might formulate the moral problem Mrs. Whipple faces in this way: because her son is retarded (and after a head injury forgets the few words He has learned), so that He cannot respond to his family or express his feelings with anything approaching the fullness of even relatively inarticulate people like the Whipples, He is in some sense hindered from being fully a person, but He is not a dumb animal either. Mrs. Whipple must in the beginning have loved Him as instinctively as most parents love the infants who must utterly depend on them; but as his body grew, He remained in that infantile dependence, and Mrs. Whipple already had one child older than He, and later another younger, both of whom were normal and who thus not only outgrew their total dependence but also were capable of returning their parents' affection and of responsibly caring for some of their own needs. In the family's "hard" life (which, significantly, Miss Porter defines for us before introducing their second son), Mrs. Whipple cannot possibly care adequately for all three, so she compromises, giving Him a larger share of privation and risk because "He don't really mind;" in this, of course, her judgment is already distorted by unconscious resentment of his disability and by guilt for that resentment. And so the fabric of Mrs. Whipple's self-deceptions and rationalizations weaves around her to the point where she cannot, until the end, realize or admit the degree to which He is a person. How *would* we do in that circle?

The great risk to our justice as we enter the circle is the temptation of sentimental identification with Mrs. Whipple, of excessive pity for her as the victim of impossible circumstances. The audience, and I suspect the author as well, needed some check on compassion, and the ironic narrative voice provides that check. Contra Hendrick and Liberman, I do not hear Miss Porter's irony as consistent throughout the story up to its last scene; to my ear its effects are intermittent, local rather than pervasive, and qualified by context so as not entirely to undercut Mrs. Whipple's view of herself.

Thus in the story's exposition we first see how Mrs. Whipple's stubborn, petty pride motivates the duplicity she practices "when the neighbors were in earshot;" but with a retarded child and *those* neighbors, how would we do? For they talk "plainly among themselves" of how the child's defect is "the sins of the fathers," the result of "bad blood and bad doings somewhere, you can bet on that." We can hardly blame Mrs. Whipple for not wanting to be looked down on by such neighbors, even if she doesn't know exactly what they say behind her back.

Similarly, that Mrs. Whipple is "forever saying" that she loves "her second son . . . better . . . than the other two children put together" and occasionally "even throw[ing] in her husband and her mother for good measure" does not necessarily mean that she simply hates her son. Mr. Whipple, bitter and cynical as he is, implicitly accepts that she does have "feelings about Him." As she says, "It's natural for a mother," and 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.

Again, it seems quite true that, at one level, Mrs. Whipple "wouldn't have anything happen to Him for all the world," though this masks her unadmitted guilt over his defect

and her suppressed resentment at his passive dependence. She does patently overstate his invulnerability ("He can do anything and not get a scratch"), and she takes a desperate though quite real and deep solace in the preacher's saying that "The innocent walk with God." 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;" but it may also be simply true that "He never seemed to know it." We arrive at the same sort of judgment when "in bad weather" the Whipples give Emly "the extra blanket off His cot," rationalizing that "He never seemed to mind the cold": obviously it cannot be good for Him, yet He may indeed not "mind" it. It must be simply true that, however much she deceives herself about such compromises, "Just the same, Mrs. Whipple's life was a torment for fear something might happen to Him;" but the torment must be compounded almost unimaginably by her fear of the neighbors' judgment, by her unacknowledged hostility and by her guilt over it.

In the exposition of "He," then, an ironic narrative voice, always qualified by context so as to preclude easy, simplistic condemnation, requires us to make such complex judgments, allowing the validity of Mrs. Whipple's natural motherly feelings but also insisting on the reality of her unadmitted guilt and hostility. Miss Porter was not the kind of writer who, in Arthur Mizener's words, "encourage[s] people to enjoy the insidious pleasures of righteousness unearned by understanding" by pretending she and her reader "are Christ harrowing a hell full of all the people who disagree with them;" the hell she imagines in "He" is not for other people, but for herself and her readers, too. And 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 over-tipping 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 selfdeceptions and to her internal conflicts, including the complicated guilt that corrodes her love for her son.

Throughout "He," except in the last paragraphs where it is no longer needful, that kind of irony operates from time to time, counterpoising Mrs. Whipple's professed feelings by clarifying her unacknowledged ones, as 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 at the Whipples' as payment for the bull's breeding their cow; His final removal to the County Home. In the first, Mrs. Whipple's pride brings her to endanger her son to serve its turn, and it also leads her toward a possible recognition of His personality and of her guilt: "When He saw the blood" as she slit the pig's throat, "He gave a great jolting breath and ran away;" but Mrs. Whipple only thinks "He'll forget and eat plenty" and—probably correctly, though it is another rationalization—"He'd eat it all if I didn't stop Him." (At the meal, He won't enter the dining room where the pig lies in the center of the table, but presumably He does eat the "big plate" that Mrs. Whipple serves Him in the kitchen.) When on Sunday morning she boxes his ears for getting dirty. "His face hurt[s her] feelings," and her suppression of this incipient realization makes her physically weak. The episode ends in despair for Mrs. Whipple ("—oh, honest, sometimes I wish I was dead!") but with no clarification because she is so full of self-pity.

The Whipples' hardship the following winter comes partly from the improvident slaughter of the pig, which would have meant "three hundred pounds of pork" to use or to sell; with poor crops, they have barely enough money for food and thus too little for clothes. Most of that goes to Adna and Emly; because "He sets around the fire a lot, He won't need so much." He almost gets pneumonia, and, although He seems well next spring, "He walked as if His feet hurt Him"—probably a sign of some residual infection. The bull episode that summer develops from Mr. Whipple's effort to save "paying out money when [he hasn't] got it," and it once again reveals the intensity of Mrs. Whipple's moral and emotional conflicts. At first she feels "easy in her mind about sending Him for the bull," but then she starts thinking, "and after a while she could hardly bear it any longer." He returns, "leading the big bulk of an animal by a ring in his nose, . . . never looking back or sideways, but coming on like a sleepwalker with His eyes half shut" in what could be either near-paralyzing fear or just simple-minded insouciance. Mrs. Whipple possibly exaggerates the danger, for the bull lumbers "along behind Him as gently as a calf," but she recalls "awful stories about how [bulls] followed on quietly enough, and then suddenly pitched on with a bellow and pawed and gored a body to pieces," and she thinks how "Any second now that black monster would come down on Him." She imagines this so vividly that, 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: "Lord, you *know* people will say we oughtn't to have sent Him. You *know* they'll say we didn't take care of Him. Oh, get Him home, safe home, safe home, and I'll look out for Him better! Amen."

The recognition does come in the final episode— a *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* as close to the classical tragic pattern as anyone has ever come in a realistic short story. Mrs. Whipple is hardly a classical tragic heroine. Perhaps she hardly reaches the stature of Arthur Miller's "common man" who becomes tragic in being "ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity": one might say she destroys her integrity to maintain a partly specious sense of dignity. Yet her final tragic recognition, like that of Oedipus, does fall on her because of her most important traits of character, which have conflicted throughout the story—her quite genuine feeling for her son and her pride (she refuses the ambulance because she "couldn't stand to see Him going away looking so sick as all that," and when she rides with Him, she wears her most dignified "black shirt waist" because "She couldn't stand to go looking like charity." 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 Pietá 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 sacri ficial expulsion now brings illumination but no release from guilt.

The cathartic ending of "He," "tragic because it needs to be" and "endurable because it is right and true," calls to mind a passage from Chapter Twenty of *Middlemarch*, in which George Eliot says:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

Miss Porter's subject in "He," tightly circumscribed by the Whipples' hard life and the ineludible moral dilemma of their feeble-minded son, is simply the tragic nature of ordinary familial love, of which, as she wrote twenty years after the story, "hatred is part . . . the necessary enemy and ally." With a keen vision and feeling of that ordinary love in her ordinary characters, the last scene of Miss Porter's story shows Mrs. Whipple finally hearing the roar on the other side of her son's inarticulate silence and of her own self-deceiving silence as well; it shows the terrified neighbor hearing both those roars; and it has the reader hearing all three in full fidelity. 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.

Source: Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Other Side of Silence: Katherine Anne Porter's 'He' as Tragedy," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1982, pp. 395-404.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Moddelmog looks at "subtleties and ironies meant to darken the story's tone and complicate its tragedy."

"He" has received varied critical attention in the fifty-five years since its publication, so varied in fact that the interpretations of its critics make one wonder whether they have read the same story. "He" is ostensibly about the Whipple family, but because Porter develops in detail only the relationship between Mrs. Whipple and her retarded son, the story becomes essentially a study of the psychology of that relationship. Critically, 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?

Winfred Emmons, for example, says of the story's conclusion: "Everybody has done his best, but He was a problem that nobody could solve. The reader may hope that Mrs. Whipple's bright outlook will somehow return; it has seemed to be her natural state and would doubtless be more pleasant to her than the defeated pragmatism of her husband. And it is possible that their luck might change for the better some day. Sometimes luck works that way, and Mrs. Whipple's desire for order and a better life might find a way to help luck along." But whereas Emmons applauds Mrs. Whipple's optimism, William Nance claims that Mr. Whipple's main function in the story is "to furnish a welcome contrast to his wife by acting as the laconic voice of plain truth." And whereas Emmons hopes that Mrs. Whipple's life will improve now that He has been placed in the county home, Nance takes a more ambivalent attitude toward the mother. He maintains that the reader is left "suspended between condemnation and sympathy for this weak woman in her hard fate." In contrast to Emmons and Nance, George Hendrick states that "He" ends with compassion for both the mother and the child, but that it is "a completely pessimistic story."

What gives rise to this diversity of opinion? M. M. Liberman suggests that "He" is a "gem of enormous thematic magnitude" and "a masterpiece of compression" in the tradition of Joyce's *Dubliners*. Unfortunately, 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. Furthermore, the subject matter of "He"— coping with the psychological and physical demands of raising a retarded child—is one that causes many readers to sympathize with Mrs. Whipple instead of judging her according to the story's evidence. My objectives in this paper are, first, to indicate how the story should be read and, then, to establish the view that Porter expects the reader to take toward Mrs. Whipple.

"He" is a *tour de force* in using point of view to unveil the hypocrisy of a character. We learn Mrs. Whipple's sentiments in two ways: directly, through quotation, and indirectly, through the restatement of her words by a third-person narrator. The narrator paraphrases accurately, but, in the story's opening paragraphs, qualifies Mrs. Whipple's noble and loving assertions by reminding us that she makes them only when the

neighbors are (or might be) listening and by "loading" his descriptions with tags such as "would say," "kept saying," "forever saying so," and "keep on saying it." Thus, we learn immediately that the narrator is ironic. In reality, Mrs. Whipple is vain and self-deluding and often unaware of, or incapable of admitting, her true motives. In order to understand Mrs. Whipple, we must remember that throughout the story her assertions are exaggerated contradictions of her actual feelings.

Porter's focus is on Mrs. Whipple's relationship with her retarded son, and in the opening scenes we discover the conditional nature of that relationship. The narrator mentions that her claims of a monumental love for Him are made only in front of the neighbors. Mrs. Whipple's priorities are further clarified when she explains to her husband the reason for this great love: "It's natural for a mother . . . it's more natural for a mother to be that way. People don't expect so much of fathers, some way." In the repetition of the idea of her love as being "natural" and in her concern for what people expect, we note the unnaturalness of her "love." Although she would not admit the fact, even to herself, Mrs. Whipple's relationship with Him is dictated by what others would think, not by motherly love or tenderness.

That is, Mrs. Whipple's public relationship with Him is governed by her anticipation of the neighbors' reactions. For when Mrs. Whipple is alone with Him and does not expect the neighbors to visit, eavesdrop, or spy, her true attitude toward Him becomes apparent, at least to the reader. John E. Hardy claims that the preacher's assurance that He enjoys God's special protection ("The innocent walk with God") has been valuable to Mrs. Whipple as "an excuse for her own neglect and exploitation of Him." However, Mrs. Whipple's treatment of her son in private suggests her intentions go further than neglect and exploitation. When Mrs. Whipple tells her neighbors, "I wouldn't have anything happen to Him for all the world, but it just looks like I can't keep Him out of mischief," we search for the reality behind that seemingly loving, but defensive, assertion. We quickly realize that, unconsciously or subconsciously, she desires his death, provided she cannot be blamed for it.

The evidence is copious. She allows Him to climb peach trees until a neighbor, concerned for his safety, warns her that she shouldn't let Him do that. She permits Him to handle the bees in their apiary, for He doesn't mind their stings, until, once again, she becomes fearful of what the neighbors might say. 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. Then she gets scared and has to sit down because her knees are trembling. 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 Whipples fret for two days, His condition growing no better, before they finally send for the doctor, who tells them He must be kept warm. Mrs. Whipple is ashamed, for, not being able to stand dirt, she has washed his blanket and they must wait until it dries to put it back on His bed. So the Whipples give Him the blanket off their bed and put His cot by the fire, but again Mrs. Whipple is motivated by her fear of gossip: "They can't say we didn't do everything for Him . . . even to sleeping cold ourselves on His account."

Mrs. Whipple's death wish for Him manifests itself less clearly, but not less significantly, in His encounters with the pig and with the bull. When her older son Adna refuses to take a baby pig away from its mother because "The sow'd rip my insides out all over the pen," Mrs. Whipple pushes Him into the pen, claiming He's not afraid. The mother pig is "a great fighter, worse than a Jersey cow." He comes running back, suckling pig in his arms, the sow "raging at His heels."

Encouraging Him to court danger is not the only way that Mrs. Whipple displays her death wish for Him on this occasion. Hendrick notes that in this scene the description of the pink pig is almost the same as description of Him. Indeed, throughout the story the physical description of Him is reminiscent of a pig: for example, "Rolls of fat covered Him like an overcoat" and "He blubbered and rolled." After He catches the piglet, Mrs. Whipple takes it from Him and, with her face stiff, slices its throat in a stroke. He runs at the sight of the pig's blood, but Mrs. Whipple assures herself that He'll forget and eat plenty just the same. She cannot, however, stop thinking about Him:

"It's shame, a shame," she kept saying under her breath, "and Adna with so much brains!" She kept on feeling badly about all sorts of things. In the first place it was the man's work to butcher; the sight of the pig scraped pink and naked made her sick. He was too fat and soft and pitiful-looking. It was simply a shame the way things had to happen.

Mrs. Whipple's stream-of-conscious self-pity underlines how closely she too connects her son to the pig. Reviewing her feelings about the pig, scraped pink and naked, triggers the thought of Him. 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 of Him, and that this confused lamentation is partly an effort to propitiate her conscience, to prevent it from accusing her of the wish to murder. We recall the similar action of another Porter character with a death wish, Maria Concepcion, who soon after she discovers her husband's infidelity, selects a chicken for the archeologist Given and "silently, swiftly drew her knife across its throat, twisting the head off with the casual firmness she might use with the top of a beet." Givens is unnerved by Maria's cold-bloodedness, but her resoluteness here is an explicit foreshadowing of her later bloody revenge.

The incident with the bull reinforces the impression that Mrs. Whipple harbors an unconscious death wish for Him. The Whipples borrow a bull for breeding purposes from a neighbor, and once again Mrs. Whipple excuses Adna and sends Him to perform a dangerous job—bringing the bulk back to the Whipple's farm. After He has been gone for some time, however, she begins to worry and goes out to the lane to wait for Him. When she finally sees Him, coming slowly and leading the bull behind Him, she panics:

Mrs. Whipple was scared sick of bulls; she had heard awful stories about how they followed on quietly enough, and then suddenly pitched on with a bellow and pawed and gored a body to pieces. Any second now that black monster would come down on Him, my God, He'd never have sense enough to run.

She mustn't make a sound nor a move; she mustn't get the bull started.

Significantly, right after she cautions herself to be still, Mrs. Whipple sees the bull move his head at a fly and "Her voice burst out of her in a shriek, and she screamed at Him to come on, for God's sake." Fear causes Mrs. Whipple to endanger His life. However, 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. Running toward the house, she prays, "Lord, don't let anything happen to Him. Lord, you *know* people will say we oughtn't to have sent Him. You *know* they'll say we didn't take care of Him. Oh, get Him home, safe home, safe home, and I'll look out for Him better! Amen" (Porter's emphasis).

Psychoanalysts tell us that death wishes are not uncommon to parents, especially to the mother, of a retarded child. Maud Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst who has studied the mother-retarded child relationship, emphasizes the intensity and frequency of the mother's death wish: "The mother-child love relationship will always, in such cases, have an aftertaste of death about it, of death denied, of death disguised usually as sublime love, sometimes as pathological indifference, and occasionally as conscious rejection; but the idea of murder is there, even if the mother is not always conscious of it." Simon Olshansky observes that parents of a simpleminded child have little to look forward to, which leads them to search for a permanent escape: "they will always be burdened by the child's unrelenting demands and unabated dependency. The woes, the trials, the moments of despair will continue until either their own deaths or the child's death. Concern about what will happen to his child after he is dead may be a realistic concern for a parent, or it may be associated with death wishes, either for himself or for his child. Release from his chronic sorrow may be obtainable only through death." Thus, besides selfish reasons for wishing for a child's death, Olshansky's investigation uncovers humanitarian motives.

If we ignore the ironic narrator who dictates viewpoint in Porter's story and attribute, Mrs. Whipple's death wishes to her worry over her son's future, we might argue for humanitarian motives and conclude as Harry J. Mooney does:

In "He," 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 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 . . . both because she loves him and because he is absolutely dependent upon her. . . 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 county home would be a solution to a pressing problem rather than a grim tragedy in a mother's life.

Mooney's sympathetic interpretation of Mrs. Whipple cannot be accepted—first, because we should not overlook (as Mooney has) the ironic third-person narrator, and second, because Mrs. Whipple is *not* the typical mother of a retarded child. Mooney's belief that Mrs. Whipple loves her son is far from accurate. Indeed, as I have indicated, Mrs. Whipple's attitude toward her son is dictated entirely by her selfish concern for

appearances. Furthermore, I would argue that His going to the county home *is* a solution to Mrs. Whipple's pressing problem, and, if so, the story's ending requires a very different response from the reader than the one Mooney proposes. The crux of our understanding of the story lies in determining Mrs. Whipple's motives for sending Him to the county home and in analyzing her feelings in the final scene.

When the doctor advises the Whipples to put Him in an institution, Mrs. Whipple promptly refuses. Her reasons, however, are far from loving ones: she does not want the neighbors saying she sent her sick child off among strangers, and she refuses to depend on charity. But Mr. Whipple maintains that He will be better cared for at the county home and assures his wife that they are not accepting charity when their taxes support the place. Once Mrs. Whipple finds excuses with which to fend off neighbor's gossip. His fate is settled. Almost cheerfully, she states that they'll bring Him home when He's better, although, as Mr. Whipple reminds her, the doctor has diagnosed his condition as untreatable. "Doctors don't know everything." Mrs. Whipple retorts, but immediately we see that Mrs. Whipple's optimism is intended to delude herself and others as to her true motives.

Clearly, she does not desire his return. When she begins to make plans for their family, she remarks, ". . . we'll all work together and get on our feet again, and the children will feel they've got a place to come to." In other words, without Him, family life will be normal, and the farm will become profitable. In her exultation she envisions summertime, "with the garden going fine, and new white roller shades up all over the house, and Adna and Emily home, so full of life, all of them happy together. Oh, it could happen, things would ease up on them." 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 that 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.

The final scene of mother and child in the neighbor's wagon is the most difficult to assess because Mrs. Whipple finally *seems* to feel some compunction over her previous cruel treatment of Him. If we can determine that that guilt is a small sign of love or the indication of a change of heart, Mrs. Whipple would gain in complexity and become the tragic figure that Mooney claims she is. We note first that Mrs. Whipple is accompanying Him to the county home because of her concern not for Him but about the neighbors: "The hospital would have sent an ambulance, but Mrs. Whipple couldn't stand to see Him going away looking so sick as all that." Second, she continues her story about her plans for Him when, to the neighbor driving the carryall, she asserts: "Besides, it aint's as if He was going to stay forever. . . . This is only for a little while."

Mrs. Whipple apparently expects an uneventful ride, a quick trip to the county home. But as she sits holding her son in her arms, she is amazed to see big tears rolling out of the corners of His eyes. She instantly believes He is accusing her of something: "Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears, maybe He had been scared that day with the bull, maybe He had slept cold and couldn't tell her about it; maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him.

Whatever it was, Mrs. Whipple couldn't bear to think of it . . . there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life." Mrs. Whipple has not admitted her death wishes, but she has a complete inventory of them running through her mind. And she has given herself away, contradicting in this more lucid, private moment her previous claim that his institutionalization is only temporary (although even privately she rationalizes that decision with the economic excuse). But, primarily, she refuses to think about Him or to try to understand his feelings. As a Hardy notes: "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."

The final scene, then, not only reaffirms Mrs. Whipple's callousness, but also confirms His sensitive nature, which previously Porter has only hinted at. We recall, for instance, that He gasped and ran at the sight of blood when Mrs. Whipple sliced the suckling pig's throat. Mrs. Whipple dismissed his reaction, claiming that He would "forget and eat plenty, just the same." However, during the Sunday meal, He would not enter the dining room where the prepared pig was being carved. Mrs. Whipple attributed His refusal to timidity, but knowing her habit of rationalization, we might more plausibly argue that His reluctance arises from His memory of the butchering of the pig. At one point in the story Mrs. Whipple chastises her husband for calling Him senseless. Pretending to understand Him, she maintains, "He sees a lot that goes on, He listens to things all the time." Ironically, Mrs. Whipple is right. For 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.

As in Greek tragedy where blindness is an indication of "sight," in Porter's story dumbness becomes a sign of awareness. 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. As Mrs. Whipple observes, He does anything she tells Him to do. Yet 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.

Having identified Mrs. Whipple's motives throughout the story and having understood the total lack of love she feels for her son, we can hardly feel compassion for her, as many critics do, at the story's end. In fact, Emmons' hope that Mrs. Whipple's "desire for order and a better life might find a way to help luck along" now seems terribly ironic; Mooney's conclusion that "the real significance of Mrs. Whipple's life lies in her effort to make a life for her son" is simply a misreading. Even Hardy's suggestion that Mrs. Whipple's incapacity is "the common incapacity of mankind, the curse of our intelligent being" cannot be accepted; for Porter, with her use of the ironic third-person narrator, does not let us condone that incapacity or the woman who manifests it and tries to pretend otherwise. 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.

In charting the psychology of the relationship between a mother and her retarded son, Porter actually anticipated by twenty years any extensive efforts of psychoanalysts to examine the same territory. However, "He" should not be viewed as a literary precursor to a scientific enterprise. Porter's purpose is not to depict the psychological and emotional problems that the ordinary mother of a retarded child might face. Instead she 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.

Source: Debra A. Moddelmog, "Narrative Irony and Hidden Motivations in Katherine Anne Porter's 'He,'" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1982, pp. 405-13.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Deasy examines the first fourteen paragraphs in "He," tracing the development of Porter's central concern: "failure to face reality leads to frustration."

Katherine Anne Porter's recent novel has served to emphasize a pre-occupation in all her work: to trace to its sources and understand the logic of what she calls the "majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world." The early stories are short exercises, what the preface to *Flowering Judas* calls "fragments" of a larger plan concerned with this theme. They were written, she says, in a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society when the world was heaving in the sickness of a millennial change.

The story "He" is a good illustration of how one aspect of this general concern can be developed and complicated to the point where it becomes the primary structural factor of a story. As an abstraction, this meaning might be stated rather weakly as "failure to face reality leads to frustration." Actually, the meaning ramifies and develops in a host of contrasted and repeated relationships in the narrative. An examination of the first major part, the first fourteen paragraphs, will show the main lives of this development and will suggest that it contributes much to the story's success.

Life is hard for the Whipples: "'It looks like our luck won't never let up on us,' said Mr. Whipple, but Mrs. Whipple was all for taking what was sent and calling it good, anyhow when the neighbors were in earshot." Several of the meanings that will permeate the story are present here: Mr. Whipple's outlook is contrasted with Mrs. Whipple's; what Mrs. Whipple *believes* differs from what she *says* to others; the neighbors are established as opposed to the Whipples. The conservation reveals that the Whipples consider themselves subject to occurrences rather than responsible cause of them. This indicates another basic contrast: what they *do* is seen as happening to them. Their life, then, is not really "hard" but is seen as such because their concern is to escape as much as possible. As for the narrator, we can note that he merely reports the surface level of thought and incident, at this stage, from the Whipples' viewpoint. He makes no judgment, nor does he point up the antithesis of appearance and reality, for the more complex meanings of the story develop beyond His vision.

In the second paragraph, another contrast is suggested, between Him and the other children. Elements already noted are further developed around this relationship: Mrs. Whipple professes love for Him, but to the neighbors, who were presented before as causes of her hypocrisy. Her "love" then is unreal as Mr. Whipple causes her to indicate: "*People don't expect* so much from fathers, some way."

The fault of saying one thing while believing another is extended to the neighbors: "There's bad blood and bad doing somewhere, you can bet on that. This behind the Whipples' backs. To their faces everybody said, 'He's not so bad off. He'll be all right yet. Look how He grows!'" The relationship of the Whipples to the neighbors, therefore, becomes more complex, for their fault is shared.

The preliminary patterns revolving around reality and the failure to confront it or express it support the key relationship that develops in the next eight paragraphs and becomes the impetus to the incidents of the plot: Mrs. Whipple and He, or more precisely, the real He and Mrs. Whipple's concept of Him. Initially we are told that Mrs. Whipple "tried to keep her mind off it, but . . . she had to talk about Him first . . . It seemed to ease her mind." Later, recalling the preacher's words about Him that "The innocent walk with God—that's why He don't get hurt," a "warm pool spread in her breast, and the tears would fill her eyes." These feelings of relief and warmth surround her confession that it "just looks like I can't keep Him out of mischief." This inability she lamely covers with praise of His strength, activity, and vitality, and she emphasizes these things by contrasting them with the frailty of Emly and Adna. Her feelings played against His condition reveal that warmth comes only when she escapes the actual facts of His condition and His lying beyond her control.

Developing in contrasts, the story moves from the level of "uncontrollable son to mother" to a point where He assumes symbolic proportions. His mother attempts to see Him as a triumph over "hard" times: "He did grow and never got hurt. A plank blew off the chicken house and struck Him on the head and He never seemed to know it . . . He didn't whine for food, as the other children did . . . He could carry twice as much wood and water as Adna . . . He never seemed to mind the cold." But running parallel to this series of comparisons are statements which reveal the actuality: "He had learned a few words, and after this had forgot them . . . He ate, squatting in the corner, smacking and mumbling." He, then, becomes a personification of the theme that reality must be accepted as it is or frustration will result: "Just the same, Mrs. Whipple's life was a torment for fear something might happen to Him."

With this established, the remaining paragraphs of the first part heighten the tension: "a grin all over His face and her worried sick about Him all the time . . . I can't afford to let Him do anything for fear they'll come nosing around about it . . . But if He gets a sting, he don't really mind." Mr. Whipple, always there to point to the limited view of His wife, replies: "It's just because He ain't got sense enough to be scared of anything." This leads her to a perfect juxtaposition of delusion and reality: "Anything I tell Him to do He does it . . . What's done can't never be undone . . ."

So far we have uncovered the controlling thematic tension and various ways in which it is developed in the first part of the story. In summary, the more apparent motifs could be stated as follows: what is said versus what is felt; what the neighbors are told versus the truth; statements to the Whipples' face and behind their backs; Mr. Whipple versus Mrs. Whipple; He versus the other children; He as opposed to Mrs. Whipple; His physical condition versus His mental state; what happens and what is thought to happen; what the narrator reports and what is implied. These contrasts could be multiplied readily, extending as far as the verbal elements Miss Porter uses to contrast the continual state of fear and worry against single incidents exemplifying the fact: Phrases like "would say," "kept saying," "forever saying so," "keep on saying it" are contrasted with the simpler forms used in dialogue.

If one selects several incidents in the story where He and Mrs. Whipple are involved, the elements noted can be further substantiated. When the other son refuses, He easily takes the pig away from the sow and Mrs. Whipple exults. His reaction, however, is revealing: "When He saw the blood, He gave a great jolting breath and raw away." She quickly attempts to escape the truth: "But he'll forget and eat plenty, just the same." The morning of the dinner she "dropped everything to get Him all cleaned up," but He rapidly gets dirty again. She then significantly reverses the usual contrast with the other children and places Him on the short end: . . . "There's Adna and Emly staying so quiet. I get tired trying to keep you decent." The "tired" motif has been running through the previous scene and will appear in the final incident also. Here it is filled with exasperation, and she "boxed His head." On the level of the plot, this is a turning point, for it is the first time she expresses her anger against Him, and it consequently leads to the strongest reaction she has yet shown: "Her knees began to tremble, she had to sit down while she buttoned His shirt." She is beginning to perceive the reality, and the nature of her escape becomes more violent.

The dinner is a party of contrasts between families, children, the delicious pig, and the Whipple's failure to enjoy it through worry. There is a play, too, on the neighbor motif with her brother's family now being contrasted with the Whipples. She continues her attempt to escape Him: "I always say He ain't to be slighted, no matter who else goes without," and manages to delude herself until her foil, Mr. Whipple, crushes her with "Who knows what they had in their minds all along?"

In winter the escapist Whipples follow the same patterns as in other seasons; they will not accept it as it is. In fall they had looked ahead: "That pig'll be worth money by Christmas." In spring, Mr. Whipple planned to "pasture the bull this summer and give Jim some fodder in the fall." Later when Mrs. Whipple dreams of summer, she makes a world of fantasy and ease: "the garden going fine, and new white roller shades up all over the house, and Adna and Emly home, so full of life, all of them happy together." But winter will be winter despite their efforts to avoid it, and He falls sick after they take away His blanket. And His sickness, of course, precipitates Mrs. Whipple's full realization that He is as "real" as anyone else.

The bull scene vividly portrays the basic tension. She first trusts Him with the bull in accord with her illusion that He is more capable than the other children. But this idea is brought to play against another contrast: what goes on and what she thinks goes on. "Mrs. Whipple was scared sick of bulls; she had heard awful stories about how they followed on quietly enough, and then suddenly pitched on with a bellow and pawed and gored a body to pieces." Finally, there is a third flight—into prayer, where she aptly expresses her condition: "Lord, you *know* people will say we oughtn't to have sent Him. You *know* they'll say we didn't take care of Him."

His second sickness brings her to the final point of realization and also the final escape. As she sits beside Him in the cart going to the hospital, "Mrs. Whipple couldn't believe what she saw; He was scrubbing away big tears that rolled out of the corners of His eyes. Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears, maybe He had been scared that day with the bull, maybe He had slept cold and couldn't tell her about it; maybe He

knew they were sending Him away for good and all because they were too poor to keep Him. Whatever it was, Mrs. Whipple *couldn't bear to think of it*." She is brought to the point of realizing that He is as real as anybody, as anything. Peace would lie accepting Him as He is, but she cannot, and she chooses a final escape, the only one possible in the face of the actuality: she thinks, Oh, what a mortal pity He was ever born.

The threads are fittingly pulled together by the neighbors' "not daring to look behind him"—not daring to see them as they are.

Source: Brother Paul Francis Deasy, "Reality and Escape," in *Four Quarters*, Vol. 12, No. 2, January 1963, pp. 28-31.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history and philosophy of eugenics in the United States. How did this philosophy affect legislation passed during the early part of the twentieth century in regard to people who were mentally challenged? Do you see any relationship between eugenics and contemporary research in genetics?

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s devastated much of the farmlands in the southern Plains. Research all the causes that created the enormous dust storms and soil erosion of that era. How have the lands and the farming practices changed since then?

The Whipples' son He is entirely mute through this short story. Create a diary for him in which he discusses the emotions he experiences throughout the events of this short story, including entries that He writes upon watching his mother leave him at the sanitarium.

Katherine Anne Porter, according to her biographers, was obsessed with creating an image for herself. To this extent, she made up a family history and spent most of her money on clothes and jewelry. Read a biography of Porter, then examine how similar she is to the character of Mrs. Whipple. What things about them are the same, other than the obvious that they were both very much into appearances.

Research the difficulties of raising a child who is mentally challenged. Then write a letter to Mrs. Whipple as if you were her counselor, helping her to understand her son, to deal with her neighbors, and any other topics about which you consider Mrs. Whipple needs assistance to better prepare her for the task.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Texas Panhandle agriculture is hit hard by a devastating drought and unusually strong wind storms and becomes part of what is referred to as the Dust Bowl. Some counties in Texas lose as many as 25 percent of their farms. This time period is also called the "dirty thirties."

Today: Great aquifers supply water to the agricultural lands in Texas as farmers learn better ways to prevent soil erosion. The economy of Texas is bolstered by oil drilling, tourism, and the building of massive prison systems.

1930s: American Eugenics Society is in full strength. Among their tenets is to prevent "the undesirables"—such as people who suffer from alcoholism, poverty, and epilepsy, to mention a few—from reproducing.

Today: Although the American Eugenics Society lost favor after its concepts were used by Hitler in his bid to create an Aryan race, many people believe that eugenics is slipping back into American consciousness through the practice of genetic manipulation of crops, some forms of standardized testing in schools, and genetic prenatal testing.

1930s: Americans suffer the effects of the Great Depression with unemployment almost reaching 25 percent of the work force. Government programs are developed to give people work. Long "breadlines" wrap around city blocks as people stand in line waiting for handouts.

Today: Factors combine to send the soaring economy of the 1990s into a tailspin as technology stocks plummet, terrorist attacks destroy the sense of stability, major corporations layoff thousands of employees, and smaller businesses go bankrupt.

1930s: Led by Helen Keller, a group of people form the American Foundation for the Blind, one of the first programs created to help people with this disability. Also the League for the Physically Handicapped is created to demonstrate against job discrimination in the Work Progress Administration, which was set up to provide jobs for unemployed people during the Great Depression.

Today: Although many challenges still persist, people with physical or mental disabilities have many programs available to them to ensure proper education, assisted living facilities, easy accessibility, and other assistance to maintain a more beneficial lifestyle.

What Do I Read Next?

Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (1965) won the Pulitzer Prize. This collection contains the best of Porter's short stories.

Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* (1939) contains "Noon Wine"—one of her most talked-about stories that deals with evil—and "Old Mortality" and the title piece, both of which are narrated through the eyes of Miranda, a female protagonist that Porter used in many of her short stories. Many critics believe this to be Porter's best collection.

Although Porter enjoyed writing short stories more than novels, after thirty years of working on it, *Ship of Fools* (1962) was published and became an instant bestseller. The story is short on action, but the psychological depth of her characters makes this book a very fascinating read.

Porter was a prolific letter writer, and much of her correspondence has been collected in *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter* (1990), edited and selected by Isabel Bayley. It was in her letters that Porter most often talked about her writing process, often working out details of some of her stories in them. Reading her letters gives aspiring writers a look behind the scenes of Porter's polished works.

Eudora Welty liked to read Porter's stories, so if readers like Porter, they might enjoy reading Welty's *Collected Stories* (1980). Welty is considered one of the great American masters of the short story.

Another master of the short story is Anton Chekhov. His *75 Grands and Other Stories, Complete Early Short Stories by Anton Chekhov* (2001) is a great way to get to know this classic Russian writer.

Further Study

Busby, Mark, and Dick Heaberlin, eds., *From Texas to the World and Back: Essays on the Journeys of Katherine Anne Porter*, Texas Christian University Press, 2001.

Busby and Heaberlin have collected several essays written by scholars and critics, following the development of Porter as a writer.

Carlson, Elof Axel, *The Unfit: The History of a Bad Idea*, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001.

Carlson has put together a study of the philosophy and history of eugenics, the philosophy that led to the involuntary sterilization of people in the United States who were deemed unfit and later to the Nazi campaign of creating a super race. This is not a pleasant book to read but one that gives the reader some idea about why Mrs. Whipple was so concerned about hiding her son's supposed lack of normal mentality.

Lopez, Enrique Hank, *Conversations with Katherine Anne Porter*, Little, Brown, 1981.

Lopez provides a collection of conversations with Porter, published one year after her death.

Paul, Diane B., *The Politics of Heredity: Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine and the Nature-Nurture Debate*, State University of New York Press, 1998.

If people think the consequences of the theories of eugenics is something of the past, this book might inform them otherwise. Very contemporary in its approach, this book will bring the reader up-to-date on what is happening in the sphere of genetic studies as well as the politics involved in the publication of college science textbooks.

Worster, Donald, *The Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, Oxford University Press, 1982.

Although the Dust Bowl is not directly mentioned in Porter's story, the aftereffects of poverty caused by the lingering drought in Texas is part of the living conditions that drive the story. If readers want to learn more about the devastation and see photographs of just how bad these storms were, this book will meet that need.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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