

# Noon Wine Short Guide

## Noon Wine by Katherine Anne Porter

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# Characters

Characters in *Noon Wine* are drawn from those visual memories Porter examines in her essay about the story.

Helton is drawn from the lonely figure of a man playing a harmonica on a cabin porch. The farmer and wife visiting her grandmother provided the outlines for the Thompsons, but Porter's artistry fleshes them out and balances this small cast of characters in elegant simplicity.

The opening characterization of Thompson as outwardly guffawing while inwardly scheming when he meets Helton is artfully reprised in the characterization of Hatch. The dislike Thompson immediately feels toward Hatch is founded in fact upon qualities they share, prefiguring the downward spiral of Thompson's idea of himself.

The weak and socially superior Mrs. Thompson provides the perfect reinforcement for Mr. Thompson's rise and fall. Her watery eyes are emblematic of the difficulty of seeing the truth in her husband's action.

Helton remains a distant, lonely figure whose human longings are expressed only in his harmonica playing.

Quite appropriately, he never is allowed to speak directly to the Thompsons or to the reader about his own guilt in killing his brother. His nine years of labor in isolation are summed up in the money he sends his mother.

Helton has also felt the insufferable weight of guilt.



## Social Concerns

In this short novel, Porter turns to the rural environment in which she grew up. The struggling farmers of depression era Texas may have more distance from their neighbors, but they are as concerned with social acceptance as are the passengers aboard the Vera.

The Thompsons of this story are acutely aware of their standing in their community.

The desire to succeed in dairy farming, a task to which he and his wife are ill suited, is actually an articulation of Mr. Thompson's need to be respected in his community. Satisfaction of this need is complicated by his antipathy to so-called "woman's work." Since his sickly wife cannot take over these tasks, Mr. Thompson feels defeated by his farm. The Swedish hired hand, Mr. Helton, appears as the answer to a prayer. He makes the Thompsons successful, and they simply do not care to ask too many questions about his past.

In her essay "Noon Wine: the Sources" (1956), Porter writes about the genesis of the work in certain memories of social scenes she witnessed as a child. One of the most pertinent, the visit of a neighboring farmer and his wife to her grandmother, gave young Katherine Anne the vivid picture of a man struggling to keep the respect of his neighbors although he had committed a morally questionable act.



## Techniques

In *Noon Wine*, Porter uses third person narration to highlight the interior lives of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson at crucial times during a nine year period.

Mr. Thompson's skirmish of values when he first hires Helton, a foreigner, and his interior monologues about his failure as a farmer show his limitations as a narrator. The assessment he makes of Hatch when he first sees him prepares the stage for his fuzziness about what really happens when he strikes the man.

Parallel settings for the opening scene and the confrontation with Hatch reinforce the reader's readiness for a momentous occurrence. Both scenes take place in brutal heat, which befuddles Thompson's perception, and both take place in the side yard of the farmhouse, a relatively isolated area. Mr. Thompson's premonition of disaster also prepares the reader for the attack on Hatch.

The briefly but clearly documented decline of the Thompsons' family life after the murder and trial prepares the way for Thompson's suicide. When his sons, depicted as frolicking puppies at the story's opening, are suddenly grown men judging him guilty both of murder and violence toward his wife, Mr. Thompson can stand his life no longer.

## Themes

In *Noon Wine* Porter examines the theme of guilt, the adulterated nature of human motivation. Essentially a good man, Mr. Thompson commits murder and suicide in the course of the story. Feeling the weight of his guilt and wanting to convince himself and his neighbors that he did not kill Mr. Hatch, the bounty hunter, from base motives but only to defend Helton from attack, Thompson simply cannot overcome the fact that he instantly disliked Hatch on meeting him.

While trying to show his neighbors his innocence, Thompson compounds his guilt by making his wife lie to protect him. Still trying to convince his neighbors, his family and himself of his blameless motives, Thompson commits suicide.

## Literary Precedents

Porter had stated in her "Reflections on Willa Cather" (1952) that all true art is provincial, firmly rooted to its specific time and place. In much the same way as Cather had done in *O Pioneers!*

(1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), Porter examines the potential for tragic moral struggle and deep emotions in supposedly "simple" people.

Porter's regional stories, such as "He," "Holiday," and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," draw a vivid portrait of the hard life on Texas farmland, never presenting its inhabitants as quaint or dull. The harsh demands of combatting nature and winning a living from it leave no room for folksiness and gentle humor as in earlier Southern local-colorists like Joel Chandler Harris and his Uncle Remus tales.

The literary heritage that Porter draws upon has much in common with that of Thomas Hardy and his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), in which nature's harshness toward man is often mirrored in man's harshness toward his fellows.



# Copyright Information

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