CHAPTER V

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

In almost all of her works Porter is concerned with the difference between appearance and reality; with man's total or partial inability to identify that difference; his slavery to his own nature and consequent subjugation to a human fate which dooms him to suffering and disappointment. For the reader, the truth of a situation may emerge through an interplay of various versions of the situation given by different characters or through the same character at different stages of his exposure to the situation. The protagonist quite often can not recognize the inadequacy of his version either because he wants to cling to his opinion or because he can not grasp fully the significance of his experience. At times particularly towards the end, he does realize the truth of the situation but the reality at such times becomes so disturbing that he can not live with it. He either tries to flee from it or wishes it may not be true. Either way he is unable to accept the truth.

In Miss Porter's stories acceptance of a situation is only possible when the protagonists belong to communities close to nature, who live at an instinctive level. Such characters can accept a non-rational order of existence without questioning the contradictions of life which would disturb a rational individual. "Maria Concepcion" is one story where such acceptance is possible. The characters of "Holiday" and "Hacienda" who accept their situations merely serve as foils to others who can not accept or recognize the situation. Miss Porter herself has
called "Noon Wine" a story of "most painful moral and emotional confusions, in which everyone concerned......is trying to do right". "He" shows the unavoidable tragedy of an abnormal child, the victim of a biological accident; but the suffering his mother undergoes is compounded by her own foolish vanity and pride in refusing to accept the facts of her son's abnormality and her hatred of Him. "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" shows a dying octogenarian facing the shattering realization that all the order she has brought into her existence has not enabled her to cope with her jilting at the altar sixty years before. The violence and suffering, mental and physical in these stories are coupled with the realization that man must face them with little choice, however, senseless they may be.

"Maria Concepcion"

The story of "Maria Concepcion"(p.3) sounds like a Hollywood script. A story of three Mexican Indians caught in a triangular relationship nursed by love, jealousy and revenge; Maria Concepcion, the independent protagonist, married to Juan Villegas, is pregnant. She discovers that her husband is making love to Maria Rosa just before Juan and his mistress run off to war together. Maria Concepcion becomes stolid, refusing to even to cry when her child is born and dies. When Juan and Maria Rosa return, Maria Rosa delivers a healthy child, but before the day is out, she has been fatally knifed by Maria Concepcion. Everybody knows the wife's motives for vengeance, but when the police investigate, both Juan and the other villagers protect her. She takes Maria Rosa's baby for her own and goes home with husband,
child and sanity restored.

The story opens with Maria Concepcion hurrying down a path which ran through cactus and maguey to the excavation site of the buried city to take food for her husband Juan, the head digger at the site, and his employer Givens. Maria Concepcion is pregnant but walks serenely with the free natural, guarded ease of the primitive women carrying an unborn child. She was totally at peace with herself. A good Christian, Maria Concepcion considered herself different from the other Indian women by virtue of her religion. She was a strict young woman who insisted on a wedding in church. She considered herself above their superstitions. However, her closeness to the community from which she affects to stand apart is shown by the fact that she felt if she did not have a crust of honey, from the bees kept by fifteen year old Maria Rosa, her baby would be marked. Ironically, what she saw, as she peeped through the cactus hedge marked both her baby and Maria Rosa for death. Peering through, she could see the golden shimmer of the bees and hear Maria Rosa's laughter. She smiled to think of Maria Rosa's having a man, but, when she saw the man, it was none other than Juan, her husband. She did not interfere but continued to the buried city, her ears straining, as if the bees were in her head, her body burning as if the cactus spines were pricking her skin. She wanted to die, but not before she had cut the throats of her husband and his whore. Maria Rosa, she thought was sinful and she had no right to live. Her Christianity responsible for viewing Maria Rosa’s action as 'sin' but her violent judgment of her rival, certainly unchristian, indicative of the primitive
Before she could go on with her bloody thoughts, she saw Givens. Maria Concepcion and Givens were completely unable to understand one another. Maria like the other Indians failed to understand Givens' delight in archaeology and regarded him condescendingly because he was a diverting white man with no woman of his own to cook for him; who did not feel any loss of dignity in cooking his own meals. This exposes the reality that though Maria's Christianity had come from the white man, she was unable to understand him either, indicating her isolation from the white man's world too. Givens, who had a fatherly indulgence for the Indian's childish primitive ways, felt he could understand their past but not their present. For years he had been rescuing Juan from all sorts of escapades and had many a time warned him that Maria Concepcion would get to know of his infidelities one day and cut off his head with her knife. When Juan left for war with Maria Rosa, Maria Concepcion isolated herself from everyone. She even refused to weep when her son was born dead. She went to church regularly. The Indians could not understand her since her face was so changed and blind looking. She held herself aloof from them and they pitied her for they thought she was being punished for her pride. Maria rebuffed Lupe when she tried to sympathize with her and offered to pray for her. She said she would pray to her own God when she wanted something. Expressing the feelings of her community an old woman Soledad said Maria was wrong to take them for her enemies, adding wisely that all women had such troubles and could share them with
When Juan and Maria Rosa returned a year later, Juan, dressed in the multi-colored finery taken from dead soldiers, looked and behaved like a cock. Arrested for desertion, he was saved from execution by Givens. Maria Rosa gave birth to his son, and Juan, confident that he could manage the two women, stood drinks for everyone at the "Death and Resurrection" pulque shop, looked in upon his new son, and later in a drunken stupor attempted to beat Maria Concepcion, to become again the master of his household. She resisted, even struck back; and he fell into a drunken sleep in a corner.

After refusing to be subdued, Maria Concepcion bound the legs of her chickens as if to go to market; but instead of taking the path, she ran stumblingly through the fields, - her confused psychological state objectified in her stumbling and running through the fields. She ran unknowingly until at last she regained possession of herself and knew what she wanted to do. The new-found knowledge was at first shocking, and she sat in the shade of a thorn-filled bush, giving way "to her long devouring sorrow" (p.13). She sat, sweat pouring from her, as if all past wounds "were shedding their salt ichor" (p.13). Rebuke drawn over her head which rested on drawn-up knees, she was a figure of sorrow, consumed in anger and grief. When she arose, she no longer ran stumblingly but walked.

At this point Maria Concepcion shed off her Christianity and went back to her primitive culture with its own morality, its own order, and its own ethic. Clearly she could re-establish order in her own world only by breaking with outward restraints and
taking the law into her own hands; by becoming a goddess dispensing justice. The actual murder and the flight of Maria Conception are not described and the scene shifts to Juan’s being wakened from his drunken stupor by noises he could not comprehend. Maria Conception loomed in the doorway, knife in hand, then crawled toward him as she had previously crawled toward a shrine; he was, in fact a kind of God for her, she had put away her earlier desire to kill him. Juan at first feared for his own safety; but, when he heard her story, he felt immense pride and a desire to protect her. He went through a carefully reasoned plan of cleansing her and the knife. The scene is played in the dark - Maria Rosa had been killed about sundown - in flickering candlelight. The dangers of the night were everywhere, but Juan prepared the poor creature, the “mad woman” as he called her, for the police. He threatened, in his awakening manly responsibility, to settle accounts with her after she was safe, but she replied that all was settled. Juan knew it was true and wanted to repent not as a man but as a child; he could not understand her or himself, or life itself - life now confused when in former times it had seemed simple.

That night they ate from the same bow], as they had before his flight, symbolizing their reunion, and, when the police came, Juan began his public defense of his wife. At Lupe’s house, where they were taken for the interrogation, the body of Maria Rosa lay in open coffin; she was covered with a red rebozo, but Maria Conception could see Maria Rosa’s scarred feet which were similar to the swollen feet of the death-marked chickens. She was
no longer afraid, no longer angry at the pitiable creature in the coffin. Maria Rosa had eaten too much money and had had too much love. How she must sit in hell, crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever. The relief she gets is certainly unchristian; ironically she can not realize that she has committed a sin by killing Maria Rosa.

Old Lupe knew the truth but enjoyed outwitting the police, enjoyed her moment of glory while being questioned, enjoyed describing the evil-sounding footsteps. She was intensely aware of the role she played as medicine woman, a sophisticated role in a primitive society; the police were aware of the part she was playing, but could do nothing.

Maria Rosa had been rejected in death, and the Indians embraced life. As Maria Concepcion looked around the circle, the eyes which met hers were filled with reassurance, understanding, and sympathy. Absolved, Maria Concepcion took as her natural right the child which lay at the head of the coffin, new life juxtaposed with almost forgotten death. Maria Rosa, destined for the grave, was to become a part of their buried past.

Juan was sentenced to life in the dead city. His fate was, in some ways, more tragic than Maria Concepcion's. As a Don Juan, he was a vacuum; forced into maturity by the murder of his mistress and by the defense of his wife, he still had no strength. Sentenced to dull, senseless labor, from which he saw no escape, he accepted his fate. He did not understand his actions of the day, felt only a "blind hurt like a covered wound"(p.21). Significantly, he did not ponder his fate, but went to sleep, first symbolically throwing off his vari-colored
clothes, the outward sign of his destroyed, unfettered life.

Maria Conception's world was now aright. She milked the goat, maternally letting the kid suckle briefly, and fed the baby, a baby she dreamed was hers. Family had won over love; life had won over death.

The scene and her feeling one with nature indicate that her return is to an intuitive level of her own character, her racial heritage. Ironically, Juan who was presented earlier as the typical gregarious, irresponsible Indian male, is unable to accept fully the socially approved role of husband, protector and provider of the family. The appearances both of them had put on, Maria Conception the pious Christian and Juan the self-confident male, have finally been discarded for reality.

"Holiday"

"Holiday" (p.407) is the only story other than "Hacienda" which is narrated by a first person observer. The narrator is young, impressionable, acutely sensitive and searching for ways to outlast recent emotional ravages.

Related long after the actual events the narrator is now older and capable of looking back on the pain and naivete of "that time" (p.407) with hindsight, asserting that she has since learned that we can not escape from the troubles which belong to us, and that we are wise to run "like a deer" (p.409) from any others. But she did not have that knowledge as a young woman, and her experience of pain and renewal in this story belong to a younger narrator who records her emotions and fears with great poignancy.
"Holiday" has two narrative threads: the narrative tale which accounts for her coming to the country to restore her psychic health and the story of the Muller family. These two threads, are linked not only by the fact that the narrator has a place in both but also by the presence of the natural world which begins to breed lilacs out of the dead ground of a bleak March, and by the increasing significance of uttiele, the Muller's grotesquely deformed daughter who could be the embodiment of the narrator's psychological upheaval. They are further linked by a cycle of events - a wedding, a birth and a death - and natural images which begin and end the story.

On a cold bleak morning when "there was nothing beautiful in these woods now except the promise of spring"(p.410) the narrator comes to the farm in the hope of restoring herself. She expects to be nourished by the natural world here and she retreats down a tunnel-like lane through the woods to the womb of the Muller family, who retain their native German tongue and customs in spite of being in Texas for three generations. In this "house of perpetual exile"(p.413) the narrator desires isolation and incubating space until she is ready for rebirth.

The Mullers work unceasingly to increase the already abundant store of the Muller dynasty. They are German peasants who toil with great reward in East Texas; their crops abound and the livestock multiply while the Mullers marry and increase. In the course of the story the youngest daughter, Hatsy, is married; and another daughter, Gretchen, bears one of many third-generation Mullers. All live under the same roof.

I got a powerful impression that they were all,
even the sons-in-law, one human being divided into several separate appearances. The crippled servant girl brought in more food and gathered up plates and went away in her limping run, and she seemed to be the only individual in the house.... she was whole, and belonged nowhere (p.417).

Appearances are deceptive, and the narrator gradually realizes that the servant, Ottilie, is no one else but an older sister of Hutay, Gretchen, and a third sister, Annetje. Ottilie has been terribly and hopelessly transfigured by a nameless childhood accident, and what remains is a grotesque distortion of humanity. She is pictured as a frustrated automation, "a mere machine of torture" (p.427), working in "aimless, driven haste" (p.420), preparing and serving "that endless food that represented all her life's labors" (p.427). Yet ironically Ottilie is the most human and sympathetic character in the story who achieves humanity in inhumanity, whereas the remainder of her family do not.

Despite the success of the Mullers there are deficiencies which the narrator does not mention so much as sense, and the reader through her deepening consciousness, perceives the terrible shortcomings of the Mullers - and of humanity. Simple people are no longer simple. The Mullers' lives are something more than tranquil, orderly and perfectly consistent. The apparent simplicity and neatness of the Mullers' lives leads the narrator to flee there and make a haven of their home, but she soon finds out that life is unpredictable any and everywhere despite man's best efforts to avoid it. The mystery of the human experience remains, whether in cottage or city.

These once respectable Mullers have forgotten that Ottilie is
a member of their family. Shocking but the matter is not so simple as that, because the narrator sympathises in a large part with the Mullers:

It was not a society or a class that pampered its invalids and the unfit. So long as one lived, one did one's share. This was her place, in this family she had been born and must die; did she suffer? No one asked, no one looked to see. Suffering went with life, suffering and labor. While one lived one worked, and that was all, and without complaints, for no one had time to listen, and everybody had his own troubles. So, what else could they have done with Ottillie? As for me, I could do nothing but promise myself that I would forget her, too, and to remember her for the rest of my life (p. 427).

The last sentence reminds one of Robert Penn Warren's lines in "brother to Dragons": "Forgetting is just another kind of remembering". In this patriarchal world Ottillie has lost her original place as child, wife, and mother - functions which are fulfilled by all her sisters, but she is assigned another place, and in and through it she works out her own salvation, while at the same time remembering her past.

The story describes suffering and labour, labour of the farm, the labour of childbirth, the labour of life and the labour of death. Here we have not only marriage and childbirth, but death. Mother Muller dies as a result of her struggles in a storm which ravages the countryside and blights the land. Her death is lamented with great and open grief. The narrator perceives that "it was good to let go, to have something to weep for that nobody need excuse or explain... they wept away the hard core of secret trouble that is in the heart of each separate man..." (p. 432).

On the day of Mother Muller's funeral the narrator dreams
that she hears the howls of the dog Kuno who is caught in a trap, but it is not Kuno she hears: It is Ottillie, caught in a far more terrible trap, and nightmare becomes waking life. Ottillie wails against disorder in her world. She howls "with a great wrench of her body, an upward reach of the neck, without tears"(p.433). Surely like the other members of the family, Ottillie too was weeping over the bitter tragedy of her own fate. The bare wood through which the narrator travelled to the farmhouse has been changed as a result of the storm into a "violent eruption of ripe foliage of a jungle thickness, glossy and burning, a massing of hot peacock green with cobalt shadows"(p.433) and Ottillie sits before the oven in the kitchen howling her grief. It is as if the narrator's retreat to the womb of this place must now be reversed. Feeling that Ottillie wants to join the funeral procession the narrator settles her in the same spring wagon in which she came to the farm and sets out in a comic "lurching progress" through the mud paralleling re-birth.

As Ottillie begins to slide from the seat, the narrator grabs her by the waist, her hand rubbing against Ottillie's skin, and she is stunned to understand that touch, that Ottillie is both human and female. She is so shocked by the discovery that: "a howl......doglike and despairing......rose in me unuttered and died again, to be a perpetual ghost"(p.434). But Ottillie unwittingly reminds her that life is still worth celebrating: holiday ends with an astonishing sight when suddenly Ottillie laughs, "a kind of yelp, but unmistakably laughter"(p.434). The speaker
then sees her "ironical mistake":

There was nothing I could do for Ottilie, selfishly as I wished to ease my heart of her; she was beyond my reach as well as any other human reach, and yet, had I not come nearer to her than I had to anyone else in my attempt to deny and bridge the distance between us, or rather, her distance from me? Well, we were both equally fools of life, equally fellow fugitives from death. We had escaped for one day more at least. We would celebrate our good luck, we would have a little stolen holiday, a breath of spring air and freedom on this lovely, festive afternoon (pp. 434-35).

We do not know why Ottilie laughs. It may be a triumphant laugh since she is still among the living. She is perhaps once again trying to exalt her humanity as she has done poignantly earlier when she was shown to the narrator her picture as a normal healthy child. It is one of the most compassionate and compelling scenes in all literatures: its tenderness and pathos are unforgettable. Ottilie's entire predicament is touchingly rendered and starkly portrayed in this story. Her joy seems blasphemous on the funeral day, the family holy day with which the holiday is ended. Yet is not the family's treatment of her equally blasphemous? In the "festive" afternoon, Ottilie's laughter is best regarded as an affirmation amidst almost unbearable suffering and sorrow; and Ottilie celebrates the triumphant return of spring and the continuance of life amidst grief and death.

Ottilie, the caricature who is once described as unreal, is more human and real than the remainder of the family. Ottilie, physically and mentally and psychically wrenched by fate, is still less a fool and more a person than the others, and she celebrates her "good luck", her "stolen holiday" (p. 435), even
while returning to the kitchen to continue her suffering. It is a final irony that Ottilie is able to steal a holiday only when her mother was dead.

She and the narrator both "equally follow fugitives from death" (p. 435), celebrate the passing of death and the rebirth of life in the green spring air, what Robert Penn Warren says of Miss Porter's stories in general is particularly relevant here, the story is:

...paradoxically, both a question asked of life and a celebration of life; and the author knows in her bones that the more corrosive the question asked, the more powerful may be the celebration. 2"he"

"He" (1947) (p. 49) is Miss Porter's attempt to deal with a hopelessly deformed or mentally incompetent person and his place in society or in the family. "He" is told with objectivity, stressing the irony of the situation but ending with compassion for both mother and child.

The Whipples are a poor Southern family not willing to admit they are "white trash" (p. 56), a family rather like the Thompsons in "Noon Wine". Mr. Whipple is a realist, ready to talk to neighbours about their hard life, but his wife insists on pretending otherwise - just as she pretends love for their simple-minded son. She announces her love for him to everyone she sees, but the neighbours are so busy with their own analysis of the bad blood which has produced such a child that they do not have time to listen. She constantly allows him to climb trees, to do more work than he should, to handle the bees because he doesn't seem to notice the stings, to lead a dangerous bull, to
steal a pig from its ferocious mother. She is never concerned for His safety, except to wonder what the neighbours will say if He is injured.

Mrs. Whipple and He are the chief characters of the story; Adna and Emily. Mr. Whipple, and the neighbours are minor but necessary figures who make significant contribution to the action and the theme of the story. He never seems to mind not having enough covers on His bed or enough warm clothes to wear on cold days, because He has no mind. He is covered with fat, more a harmless beast than a human; and, when Mrs. Whipple kills the pig for Sunday dinner, the description of the pink pig is almost the same as the description of Him.

Mrs. Whipple desires public approval; she wants every body to tell her that He is not bad off; she wants her two normal children to be fed and dressed properly, and she wants the approval of her brother and his family when they come to dinner.

Even if it is offered, He is beyond human help. He can work as if He were a beast of burden, taking on the chores of Emily and Adna who leave home during the "hard times" on the farm. One winter near Christmas, He falls on the ice, thrashes about in a fit, and is carried into the house. When He had a serious illness, obviously pneumonia, some years before, the Whipples waited two days before going for the doctor, but this time His suffering is more obvious, and they go for the doctor immediately, but He is beyond help. The Whipples keep Him at home for a time till the doctor finally tells them to take Him to the County Home. Whether the advice is given on humanitarian or
on mercenary grounds, the Whipples do not know. It is true that
Mr. Whipple is relieved, for oppressed by poverty, his constant
care was with the bill. He is however, realistic enough to
believe the doctor who says he will never get better.

Mrs. Whipple, who doesn’t want charity, is at first afraid the
neighbors will look down upon them, but her true feelings are
exposed when she sees her dream of life: "All at once she saw it
full summer again, with the garden going fine, and new roller
shades up all over the house, and Ada and Emily home, so full of
life, all of them happy together. Oh, it could happen, things
would ease upon them" (pp. 57-58). He will not be there.

A neighbor drives him and Mrs. Whipple to the County Home. He
begins to cry, and Mrs. Whipple imagines he is remembering all the
maltreatment and hardships of his life. Mrs. Whipple cries too,
and for the first time the reader has compassion for her: "she
had loved him as much as she possibly could, there were Ada and
Emily 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" (p. 58).

The neighbor driving the carryall, driving very fast to get
them to the County Home daren’t not to look back at the suffering
Mrs. Whipple trying to soothe her son.

Says Liberman:

The scene is heartbreaking in its pathos, but, the
complexities of the human condition having been
so forcefully arrayed, we sense that the driver’s
fear of looking back is more than an avoidance of
the emotional pain occasioned by a spectacle of
acute sadness. "Behind him" is what is behind
everyone, a career of human error, human
imperfection, human deficiency in the face of
human demands on us for generosity, even when,
having received little, we have little to give. 3

Says Becky:

There is something ugly and self-centered even in her final grief, in her interpretation of his woes, only as reproaches to her. She is herself so incapable of genuine charity of love, that she can not recognize even the possibility that his weeping is an expression of love for her - an appeal, simple, that he not be turned out of the family, rather than a reproach for what he suffered there.

But there is the suggestion, too, that Mrs. Snipple’s incapacity is the common incapacity of mankind, the curse of our intelligent beings. Life is indeed too hard for most of us to able to sustain such love as he, in his innocence, may feel. If, like the neighbor driving the wagon, we were not too jaded, we might be a little less indifferent, more human, if we could sympathize with the condition of our fellow being, and countenance the imperfections of our fellow beings.

Mrs. Snipple says she loves him more than the other two children put together. It is obvious that no matter what she says, her feelings are something less than a superabundance of unalloyed love. Her true attitude is seen in her descriptions of him. He destroys the clean clothes she puts on him and skitters through trees “like a monkey”(p.50). He eats like an animal, and she fears that if she does not control him, he will devour a whole roast pig himself. She can not “keep him out of mischief”(p.50) because “he’s always into everything.....”(p.50). Her inability to reconcile his animal-like behaviour with any human sensibility is shown in the fact that she is unable to call him by any given name.

The reality is that it is she who is grossly insensitive to the demonstrations of human feeling. When he bolts from the sight of her butchering a suckling pig, she ignores it. When he refuses to come to the dinner table when the roasted piglet is
set out, she brushes it off. Ignoring his humanity, one is able
to treat him like an ox brought in to do the heavy work, a
creature impervious to pain and fatigue. He must keep the bees,
lead home dangerous bulls, and steal the suckling pig from its
angry sow.

In the last scene in which he is removed to the home,
Mrs. Whipple and her simple child create a mournful pieta as she
cradles his head on her bosom and weeps over him. Recalling her
abuse of him she rationalizes that "she had loved him as much as
she possibly could ... there was nothing she could do to make up
to him for his life. Oh, what a mortal pity he was ever born". The
irony of this final sorrowful pieta brings the story back to
its root in Mrs. Whipple's motherhood. Having had a sentimental
idea of what a mother must be, she had compounded her personal
insufficiency by sacrificing her only real wealth to keep up the
appearances she thinks her society expects of her. She has loved
him as much as she was able, and in the sense that she could
never have done much better, it is truly a mortal pity he was
ever born. Mrs. Whipple's own psychic handicap is as uncontro-
rollable and immutable as her son's imbecility.

"Magic"

In "Magic" (p. 39) Porter focusses on a kept woman who tries to
escape her circumstances. A compact gem-like masterpiece,
"Magic" is about a woman who has the courage to rebel against her
physical entrapment but who still ends bound to the life she
hates.

The story is told in a dramatic monologue by a black maid who
believes in charm and magic, to her mistress who, she hopes to
relax as she brushes her hair. She tells of a villainous madam who cheats and bullies the prostitutes in a New Orleans brothel. The title is used ironically and the maid's story of the poor prostitute's return to the fancy house by "magic" is meant to be balanced against the reader's perception of the grim reality of the situation.

Ninette, the fallen woman or the prostitute of the fancy house, a sex object well liked by the men who visit the house is also a person. She is spirited and independent in challenging the madam who is cheating her of her earnings, even to the point of tolerating physical punishment in an effort to get what is due to her. She refuses to conform to the role her society imposes on her. She barely survives the madam's beating when she tries to buy her way out of the house and finally ends in the street badly injured and penniless.

Eventually, the madam wishes Ninette back and seeks charms from the black cook for the purpose. Ninette returns, apparently irresistibly drawn by a potion made of her leftover face powder, hair, blood, and fingernail trimmings. Porter's real implication, however, is that Ninette comes back for the same reasons she probably came in the first place: she is sick, she has no money, and she has no prospects. Further, if she tries to live outside the circle where her way of life is the norm, she will be a pariah; she can not escape what she is in the eyes of society. Nor can she be herself inside the microcosm of the bordello; unless she behaves as she is expected to, all will conspire to harm her.
The reality is also that the madam's activity is made possible by those around her, the male clients and the police who do nothing and the cook who was incantations to disara her. Not only are these people guilty, but so also are the woman and the maid who relish the story. The woman sniffs scent (possibly indicating her desire to hide the unpleasant realities), stares at her blamable reflection in the mirror, and urges the story teller on whenever she pauses. There isn't any doubt about the equation in guilt between both madams and both maids, they resemble each other so closely as to invite confusion, when the story teller describes the cook of the brothel it might be herself she is describing:

(She) was a woman, coloured like myself, always among people who worked spells. But she had a very hard heart, she helped the madam in everything, and liked to watch all that happened (p.41).

"Magic" is an early example of a preoccupation with the passive promotion of evil by apparently innocent people, which runs through all of Porter's works in a steady unbroken line until it reaches its fullest expression in *Ship of Fools*.

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall".

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (p.80) set in the atmosphere of the Old South is an account of Granny Weatherall's disappointments. The centre of interest is the dying lady's mind. The story consequently has some similarity to "Pale Horse, Pale Rider". There is genuine charm about Granny Weatherall and she seems to have the author's true respect and sympathy.

On her deathbed Mrs. Weatherall's whole life passes before her, and she is proud that she has been "strong enough for every-
thing" (p. 83), despite the fact that every thing she made "melted and changed and slipped under" (p. 83) her hands. Life had certainly been very different from anything she hoped or imagined. One of the great ironies of the story lies in her name and its title, for the deathbed recollections of the protagonist illustrate that although she has survived, she has not really "weathered" the storms of her experience. The repressed pain of her lover's betrayal - the jilting - has never been resolved; it surfaces from the depths of her psyche every time her controlled consciousness wanes and fades.

The story moves backward and forward in time from Mrs. Weatherall's old age through her womanhood until, finally she completes the circle by reverting in the last moments of her life, to a womb-like darkness. Also the story moves back and forth between the concrete world of her deathbed and the world of her unconscious parallelizing Emily Dickinson's poem "My life closed twice before its close".

My life closed twice before its close,
It yet remains to see
If immortality unveil
A third event to me.

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven.
And all we need of hell.

The first closing in Ellen Weatherall's life comes when she is jilted. "A young woman with (a) peaked Spanish coiff in her hair and (a) painted fan" (p. 83), Ellen, lives by her beauty and her delicacy. She is a prize to be claimed by a worthy man, who, by marrying her, will make of her a complete woman. A dependant
person, Ellen dreams of living happily ever after; but the dream is based totally on one man. If George loves her enough to give her his name, then order and light prevail; if he doesn't, chaos is done. It doesn't occur to her that she may have some power to create her own happiness. She completely trusts in romantic love and expects fulfillment through it.

She suffers a terrible betrayal when the man for whom she has "put on the white veil and set out the white cake"(p.84) fails to meet her at the altar. Not only does her lover reject the love she has declared for him by putting on her wedding dress, but he has left her liable to public ridicule because she stood up to be claimed, and he declined to claim her. This suffering was not only due to her "wounded vanity" (p.84) but because she has been dealt a psychic death blow from which something could be salvaged but nothing saved.

The depth of the wound caused can be understood when she later imagines that she is giving her daughter a message for her faithless lover, George. She wishes him to know that she has forgotten him and that, further, she has had husband, house, and children in spite of his abandonment: "Tell him I was given back everything he took away and more. Oh, no, oh, God, no, there was something else besides the house and the man and the children. Oh, surely they were not all? What was it? Something not given back..."(p.86). At the end of the story, this realization of incompleteness still reverberates in the old lady's mind.

On "the day the wedding cake was not cut, but thrown out and wasted"(p.87), Ellen realizes she has been abandoned and she faints, in effect dying to the reality of the moment. As if to
emphasize this symbolic death. Porter describes her falling through space where all physical limits have disappeared, the same terms she will later use to describe Granny Weatherall's physical demise. When Ellen faints, "the whole bottom dropped out of the world, and there she was blind and sweating with nothing under her feet and the walls falling away" (p. 87). Later, when Granny dies, her heart sank down and down, there was no bottom to death, she couldn't come to the end of it" (p. 88).

The death of Ellen's total personality on her spoiled wedding day is averted by the man who will eventually marry her and transform her identity by giving her children. Catching her as she swoons, he breaks her fall and saves her for the next and most significant phase of her life. But her painful loss is not to be assuaged. "It is bitter to lose things" (p. 84), she thinks. Now she can not trust anybody. She has to be self-sufficient. George's parting has been all Ellen needs of hell, for he takes with him all Ellen needs of love, for he takes with him her youthful sense of self-worth and her pride in her beauty and fragility - so deftly suggested by her Spanish comb and painted fan, and so easily destroyed in one stroke.

Although she has suffered a lethal blow, with John's help she assumes the name and identity of Weatherall and begins to assert the indomitable nature "Weatherall" implies. Having learned that investing in the love of a man is ruination, even damnation, she severs the image of a dependent Ellen and moves toward the identity which marks her even as an elderly woman.

The real value of motherhood for Mrs. Weatherall, however, is that through it she learns about power. She becomes a woman who
can "spread out the plan of life and buck in the edges orderly" (p. 61). No longer dependent on anyone but herself, she can create her own order by cooking, sewing, and gardening; she can "have everything clean and folded away" (p. 61) without recourse to any man.

Recycling over life and death, she rereads "Country Roads in the Winter" (p. 65) when women have their babies, and sits up nights with "sick horses and sick negroes and sick children, hardly ever losing one" (p. 65). Finally, she is an anonymous woman with power enough to perform a man's tasks; a person her husband wouldn't know "she had fenced in a hundred acres once, closing the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That enraged a woman." (p. 63).

Unfortunately, that power she has enjoyed so deeply she will miss most keenly. Having achieved a vital matriarchy, her mother must withstand a second death, the loss of her importance and power as her children themselves grow independent. "when she was sixty she...felt very old, finished..." (p. 62); having seen her children and her children's children, she no longer feels like the prime mover she has been in their early lives, and she attempts, unsuccessfully, to die.

Her passage from primal motherhood to old age to grandmotherhood is an enviable second closing of a phase of her life.

When Granny thinks of her children now, she remembers how they were years ago. "Little things, little things! They had been so sweet when they were little" (p. 63). Little things become little children, and Granny remembers how she directed the children when they were little: "I want you to pick all the fruit
this year and see that nothing is wasted" (p. 84). But Granny cannot stop the train of associations once it is under way. A few seconds later she remembers that she once "set out the white cake for a man" (p. 84) and he did not come. It was wasted, and so too was part of her life. Later she again remembers "the day the wedding cake was not cut, but thrown out and wasted" (p. 87) and that with the wasted cake she lost one world. Granny's orderly mind returns inevitably to its source—the wedding day that never was.

Granny's poignant sensuous recollections distract her attention from the present to remind her of her husband, her children, and her religion, points of order in her past; they also remind her of George, the source of disorder in her life. The light of her head reminds Granny of the ritual of lighting the lamp for their children: "Lighting the lamps had been beautiful. The children huddled up to her and breathed like little calves waiting at the bars in the twilight. Their eyes followed the match and watched the flame rise and settle in a blue curve, then they moved away from her. The lamp was lit, they didn't have to be scared and hang on to mother any more" (p. 84). The nearby light not only reminds Granny of the ceremony of lighting the lamp for her children, but also of the day of her jilting.

Finally the old woman is tormented by the realization that she has not conquered her bitterness against George. After sixty years of unrelenting effort to convince herself that she has overcome her anger and resentment, an effort made out of the
conviction that not to overcome her feelings was to condemn herself to hell, her mind in the last moment of life is still filled with the grief of that betrayal. Watching the seemingly flickering and dwindling light of the blue-shaded lamp on the bedside table she cries out in her soul asking God to "give a sign"(p.39).

For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house(p.39).

The pressure beneath Granny’s breast from shortness of breath becomes for her the pains of childbirth: "Her breath crowded down under her chin grew into a monstrous frightening shape with cutting edges; it bored up into her head, and the agony was unbelievable: 'Yes, John, get the Doctor now, no more talk, my time has come'"(p.86). But this pain does not only remind Granny of the birth of her children, who were her consolation, but it also recalls the abortive wedding day: "His hand caught her under the breast, she had not fallen, there was the freshly polished floor with the green rug on it, just as before. He had cursed like a sailor’s parrot and said, 'I'll kill him for you'"(p.37).

Granny made her new life out of things that compose the worlds of most women: "I had my husband......and my children and my house like any other woman"(p.86). Besides this Granny had her religion "She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her"(p.86). It is only fitting that Father Connelly should come to her deathbed to minister to her: "the table by the bed had a linen cover and a candle and a crucifix"(p.37). This reminds Granny of an altar and of the day that she was left at it by
George: "What if he did run away and leave me to face the priest by myself?" (p. 88).

Her daughter Cornelia reminds Granny of Hapay, a daughter whom she seems to love most but who also seems to have caused her most pain. Hapay also recalls George. Hapay seems to have been Granny's last child, the "one she had truly wanted". Hapay becomes confused with Granny's very self: "She had to go a long way back through a great many rooms to find Hapay standing with a baby on her arm. She seemed to herself to be Hapay also, and the baby on Hapay's arm was Hapay and himself and herself, all at once, and there was no surprise in the meeting" (p. 85). Granny keeps asking for Hapay. At one time she thinks that Lydia is Hapay, at another she mistakes Cornelia for Hapay; altogether she asks for Hapay on five occasions, but Hapay never comes. As Granny is dying, presumably in pain, watching the light within her, aware of the priest nearby, Hapay does not come, just as George did not come under similar circumstances sixty years ago. Disorder breaks through the order of Granny's life; no sign comes to give meaning to the delay of the heavenly bridegroom, who merges with Hapay (who does not come) and with George (who did not come), and Granny is overwhelmed: "She could not remember any other sorrow because this grief wiped them all away. Oh, no, there's nothing more cruel than this - I'll never forgive it. She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light" (p. 89). The final realization of truth is bitter and pessimistic. The agony of Granny is terrible. John Hagopian finds the moral "to be that the universe has no order, the proper bridegroom never comes - to expect him will inevitably lead to
Thus, as her life ends, the fact of the jilting shows itself, as her life-source and challenges the conventional order of her existence. Granny finds that all the order that she has deluded herself with, not enabled her to cope with the reality of her jilting sixty years before. We thus see that despite of showing great courage, despite of pushing against the stone of her jilting, despite of doing more than any other person might have done in similar circumstances, Granny has lived a less than satisfying life. The problem of existence has been vexing, and difficult and she has not satisfactorily solved it. In short, we see in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" that to weather all is not necessarily to live. As a Christian Granny has borne her cross; she has carried her private sorrow with her for sixty years without letting it interfere with her sense of duty. Her tragedy is that she never realized that she had tried to love God without forgiving the one who jilted her. She had not heeded the command to leave her gift at altar and make peace with her fellowwoman before trying to offer it. Poor Granny, she could neither forgive nor forget. Therein lies the terrifying tragedy of this aging octogenarian.

"hacienda"

"hacienda" is a complex story. A woman writer absent from Mexico for eight years, journeys to an ancient feudal estate which acquires its wealth from producing pulque, a liquor drunk by the peons of the country. She makes the trip to witness the filming of a documentary of the Mexican Revolution by a trio of
Russian cinematographers, but the filming has been interrupted by the development of a sexual triangle involving the master and mistress of the hacienda and the leading actress of the film. Another interruption occurs when a young Indian woman is accidentally shot by her brother and he is jailed. The writer finds the inhabitants of the hacienda jaded, neither problem is solved, and she departs without witnessing any of the filming she came to see.

The theme of appearance-reality is very strong in "Hacienda". There is distortion, corruption and destruction perpetuated at every level of human experiences: in the physical world, in politics, in art, in society and in the realm of human love. Ultimately corruption becomes death. The narrator realizes that a love of death is at the core of Mexican life. This love of death is not tragic; it does not come from an acceptance of the realities of a difficult life in a hard land, but rather from the emptiness of spirit, which the Mexicans seek to fill with the thrill of violence and the excitement of sex. At the bottom of this is a belief in the corruption of human sexuality and its kinship to death. The narrator, the nameless faceless woman is the only person in the story who is not a pawn in the chess game of the hacienda. It is her perception that allows her to see through appearance and form a clear impression of reality. The story focuses on the need of the narrator to separate distortion from truth.

She begins her journey to the hacienda by train, flanked by Kennethly, the American business manager, and Andreyev, the Russian filmmaker. Their presence is important as they introduce
the political, social and artistic issues in "Hacienda" (p. 135). The issue of distortion is introduced immediately in the first movement of the story. The narrator’s ironic tone from the first assertion shows that everything is not as it appears, and she immediately begins to catalogue the distortions of language and attitude that have taken place since the revolution in Mexico, which has been twisted and perverted. She notes that the names of things have changed, in not the reality! Third class rail travel is still available, but it is now called second-class, to illustrate that no one in Mexico remains as poor as to require humble transportation. Now, "the names of many things are changed, nearly always with the view to an appearance of heightened well-being, but all creatures" (p. 135), so that only an outsider, or a realist can name what is true about this society.

The narrator is both, and her cleverly ironic portrait of Kennerly, which dominates the beginning of the journey, emphasizes the need for skepticism in this environment. Kennerly, like the Mexican government, is excessive. He exaggerates and deals in outrageous hyperbole. Nothing, nothing, realizes the narrator, should be taken at face value - not the language that is spoken, not the history of the revolution, not the appearance of social conditions, not Kennerly, and not even Andreyev. Andreyev is anything but open and direct. He keeps his own counsel so that what can not be observed can only be guessed.

The narrator understands this too. Everything is not as it appears with her either, and just like the others, incorporates
more in character and position than meets the eye. Kennerly and
Andreyev provides insight here. The first thing apparent is that
they view her differently. Kennerly knows nothing of her and
makes a quick surface judgment. She is a lady something of a
responsibility, requiring a modicum of ritual deference. She
must have a decent place on the train, her skirts must be tucked
in around her knees, and she must not be exposed to sexual
speculation. Andreyev, on the other hand, treats her as an asexual
creature and deals with her as an artist rather than a female.
He discusses his film and his homeland with her and does not
forbear to tell her about the sexual liaisons at the hacienda.
In fact, their attitudes focus attention on the two identities
she tries to keep in balance, and make it apparent that her
appearance - asexual artist - is only one part of her real
character. She is also a woman who feels alone. Once we
recognize this, it is easy to understand that, the detailed
portrait of Kennerly, who is, after all, only a bit player in the
drama of the hacienda, is important because it provides insight
into the hidden fears and psychological needs of the narrator,
who is only apparently as cool and collected as Andreyev. In
actuality, she is insecure, and wants a certain amount of
protection that her asexuality does not afford.

From the train, the ancient pyramids, the maguey fields and
the blue clouds dissolve into rain and fade before the sharp
image of the Mexican woman calling "mournfully" the fresh maguey
worts and the pulque they produce for sale. They cry "in despair
above the clamor of the turning wheels, waving like magueys the
real bags, slimy and lumpy with the worms they had gathered one
at a time from the cactus whose heart bleeds the honey water for
the pulque" (p. 146). The hidden implication of this sentence, is
that in the Mexican mind the woman is the maguey and when she is
penetrated in her core by the male her sexuality produces such
pleasure as to make man forget himself entirely. The woman like
the pulque robs him his strength, his vitality and he forgets his
identity and his honor. Because of women, man is forced to
acknowledge that life is full of dark instinctual forces -
irrationality - which both attract and terrify him.

In the train the narrator and Andreiev pour over the
photographs of the timelessly unchanged culture stylized in the
hacienda. The picturesque portraits are images of dots inherent
in the Mexican landscape as well as the "almost ecstatic death -
expectancy which is in the air of Mexico" (p. 146). Andreiev's
photos, the making of the film itself, and the camera imagery
used here ironically emphasize the degree of distortion possible
in this society even in the face of the camera, an instrument
which doesn't lie, according to wisdom. The Indians, says
Andreiev, are no picturesque "we shall be accused of dressing
them up" (p. 143). Yet another irony lies in the fact that despite
their being unable to "dress up" like their masters, they never-
theless are not exactly what they appear to be. Apparently proud
and arrogant, the Indians suggest classical art: lovers are "two
sculptured figures inclining towards each other" (p. 142); young
girls seem like carayatis, walking in rows "like dark
statues...... their mantles streaming from their smooth brows,
water jars on their shoulders", faces are "smoothed and
polished" (p. 142) like marble. But the central and most telling image of the Indian is of the man "in his ragged loose white clothing, weathered and molded to his flat-hipped, narrow-waisted body, leaning between the horns of the maguey, his mouth to the gourd, his burro with the casks on either side waiting with hanging head for his load...." (p. 142). This image projects, too, a "formal traditional tragedy" (p. 142), which is beautiful but "hollow." Like the maguey and all that it represents, the Indians are, despite appearances, hollow and corrupt precisely because they are entombed to the servile work of farming the cacti and enslaved by their passions for sex, for violence, for "senseless excitement" (p. 143).

If there is tragedy in "the closed dark faces....full of instinctive suffering" (p. 142) or in the servitude of such a proud race, it is tragedy without substance, because while they suffer, they do so with "only the kind of memory animals may have" (p. 142), which is "common memory of defeat" (p. 143). Their proud posture is a "mockery" not only because they have been in pain and subjection for so long, that they have made of their doom a god, but because they participate in the duplicity which keeps them subservient. They manufacture their own opiate, pulque, which keeps economic power in the hands of their masters. In addition, as we shall see, because they give themselves up totally to their sexuality, they lack the common discipline and restraint such price implies.

Inside the corrupt and hollow haciendas the Spanish ruling class lack even the semblance of pride the peons manage. Everything here is reduced to grasp, greed and power. The physical
emptiness of the place is captured in the cold temperature, inadequate lighting, "the chill gloom" (p. 151) of empty room after empty room, and the "nast incurable boredom" (p. 151) which is the very sin of the place. In their attempts to escape that boredom the people who live in the place chase thrills with fast cars, the excitement of the film and sexual games, which expose their decadence. All the people of the hacienda affect a theatrical appearance, showing that in yet another way things are not what they seem. Luella, the actress from the level theater makes her living by adopting the appearance of another time and another person. Even Julia, in spite of being the lady of the hacienda, behaves and looks like a lady of the theatre, wearing a Chinese dress fashioned by a Hollywood designer and with a live dog for the piece. She does not look her father-in-law who knows a loose woman when he sees one. In fact the ruling class as a group is "theatrically insane" (p. 145). The Spanish overseer has ordered a new costume for himself made of deer skin and silver embroidery. Klaustro, the half Mexican, Government advisor to Depundy and French educated, wears the correct costume for a movie director.

The Russians are capable of observing the duplicity in Mexican society but they too are men capable of accommodating Mexican censorship and相关内容 to accomplish their own propaganda. They are prepared not to be too particular about truth. In fact they use the Mexicans as their partners in agreeing to the corruption of reality with falsehood. Their dress may not be theatrical but they are capable of creating their own brand of illusion
with camera, light and film. Falsehood and distortion breeds corruption and perversion which is obvious everywhere. Valerda practices extortion, bribing and exploitation; the local courts demand pay-offs from Don Genaro; the judge offers live persons to be shot in the movie. The sexual games of the Spanish ruling class are shown in the "gay" story of Lolita and Dona Julia. Don Genaro makes love to Lolita. Dona Julia abused by her husband's infidelity, not out of love or even pride, since she is very modern and expects him to be promiscuous, but, because he has abused her territorial rights by bringing Lolita into his wife's house, cultivates Lolita. Lolita's masculinity shows in the deep throaty voice with which she wooed Dona Julia. Don Genaro who has no idea of a husband's behaviour in such a predicament pretends he is jealous of Valerda.

Among the Indians at the hacienda, the Indian male lead of the movie tries hard to behave like a matinee idol but the "pose" would not hold. Justino, one of the actors has been playing with a gun and has shot his sister Rosalita. It is nobody's fault but even Justino's. When he runs to the mountains he is inexplicably and tortuously brought back by a man who is his own friend Vincente. Justino is now in jail.

While the narrator asks relevant and obvious questions, such as how the gun came to be loaded in the first place, the others implicitly understand the sexual circumstances of this story which obviously has a double meaning. The making of the film has lent a sense of daring and machismo to the Indian males. Thus Justino has "borrowed" the pistol which killed his sister from the firearms being used in the picture.
If the pistol in the story is seen for the Freudian symbol that it is, then the sexual analogy in Justino's story becomes transparent:

It was true he was not supposed to touch the pistol, and that was his first mistake. He meant to put it back at once, but you know how a boy of sixteen loves to play with a pistol. Nobody would blame him...... The girl was nineteen years old (p. 120).

translated in terms of Mexican patriarchal mentality, then, the boy should not have touched his penis and given rein to his sexual appetite, for he did so in innocence, and of course it is not reasonable to expect a young male to control his sexuality, that is, to "put the pistol back" (p. 120). In addition, there was the added temptation of the girl, who, despite being his sister, was ripe-sixteen and obviously so much of a sex object that it overshadowed her being a close relative. Now that she is a victim of her own anatomy and appetite, her body has been sent to the village for burial.

In this unreal world, the most desirable human qualities, in the scale by which the narrator judges all characters, are those of the true artist - insight, sensitivity, courage and humility. The post-musician Carlos Montes is the only figure who projects all these characteristics. As this name suggests he has the nobility and earthly solidity of a mountain, reminding one of Great Aunt Eliza in "The Big Tree". Carlos, for his part, accepts the narrator at face value greeting her warmly and with truth, giving her the first straight forward assessment of Justino's story. He sings for her his little poem about the affair.

36
Ah, poor little Rosalita
look herself a new lover,
thus betraying the heart's core
Of her impassioned brother...

how she lies dead, poor Rosalita,
With two bullets in her heart...
Take warning, my young sisters,
Who would from your brothers part(p.160).

The phrase "heart's core"(p.160) links the story to the
maguey, corrupted to its heart's core, for its honey water; in
Carlos' song, the female has died with bullets in her heart,
showing that love and sexuality are linked to death. Rosalita is
the victim but her brother guilty of the same sexuality and
incest lives on through unhappily. Which shows that in Mexico,
while men fear loss of power through mysterious sexuality in
reality it is the woman who dies as a result of being sexual.

Aside the ritualistic chanting of the Indians who load the
pulque barrels and the sounds of the procession of the workers to
the maguey fields, the narrator listens to Keumerly and Stepanov
discuss Justino's part in a scene in the film that exactly paral-
lels the shooting of his sister, his flight and his capture by
victoriano. It has been filmed but badly. It has also happened in
reality. It will probably have to be filmed again. These
details induce a sense of unreality and we are led to wonder what
is actually real.

Carlos confirms that what is real in the hacienda is the
pursuit of excitement even if, and probably because death is a
possibility. He tells of a previous Agrarian raid, during which,
"every man on that place had a rifle and a pistol"(p.165) which
meant that asserting and using their manhood is one of the few
ways they can combine excitement with the sense of potency and power. What is also real is the total corruption necessary to the functioning of the hacienda and its link to female fertility. It all has something to do with man’s confused veneration for, and terror of, the fertility of women and vegetation.

The narrator asks Andreyev why Vincente did not allow his friend Justino to escape? Andreyev answers that it was for revenge. “Imagine a man’s friend betraying him so, and with a woman, and a sister! He was furious. He did not know what he was doing; but be... now imagine he is regretting it” (p.107).

Meanwhile

The white flood of pulque flowed without pause; all-over Mexico the Indians would drink the corpse-white liquor, swallow forgetfulness and ease by the riverful, and the money would flow silver-white into the government treasury; don Genaro and his fellow-hacendados would fret and curse, the Catholics would raid, and ambitious politicians in the capital would be stealing right and left enough to buy such haciendas for themselves. It was all arranged (p.108).

A young man with whom the narrator is playing cards tells her that the director has had to say to Justino repeatedly “don’t laugh, Justino; this is death; this is not funny” (p.107). And Doña Julia adds that Justino, being a little more than an animal, will remember nothing; and besides there is a chance he will not come back.

The narrator realizes that she too should not take what she has learnt lightly. It is not funny for it its death, people get shot in the film, it is not real but a camera illusion. But Kusalita was shot and in the prison where Justino is, people are he actually shot and they don’t come back. The stakes are life.
which any one can lose here.

Kennedy starts the whole cycle again by saying that he is returning to Mexico City. The narrator also decides to leave this dangerous world of make believe. Quite simply she can not "wait for tomorrow in this deathly air" (p. 170). She departs.

"Noon wine"

"Noon wine" (p. 222) one of the most objective of Miss Porter's stories is a brilliant work. Hailed by some critics as her best, "Noon wine" is the tragedy of Mr. Thompson, a good-hearted but weak man, brought on him by circumstances and some mysterious defect in himself. Interest centres on the mind of Mr. Thompson, whose conflicting motives are delicately probed. He has good luck, not entirely deserved, but pays a great price for it. His tragic flaw carefully emphasized from the beginning of the story, is, his excessive concern for his standing in the eyes of others, he is a small man but proud.

The story begins on a hot summer day in Thompson's farm in South Texas, when he is approached by a stranger looking for work. Accustomed to expecting the worst of all hired help, the lazy, shred Mr. Thompson agrees to take the man on at wages of seven dollars a month, plus lodging, and meals at the family table. The stranger, a Mr. Olaf Heiton, says that he earned a dollar a day in the wheat fields of North Dakota, but accepts Thompson's offer without quibbling.

Mr. and Mr. Thompson soon discover the real bargain they have got in Heiton. He is punctual, hard-working, frugal, and efficient. He methodically tidies up the operations of the farm, which the ramshackle Thompson, blaming fate and his wife's
chronic sickness, has allowed to fall into deplorable disorder.

Melton is dull and taciturn, keeping to himself in his leisure hours, and seems to take no pleasure in anything except the lonely music he makes with his remarkable collection of harmonicas. The title of the story refers to the theme of his favourite tune - a Scandinavian drinking song about a farmworker who improvidently drinks up during the morning the bottle of wine he brought to the fields to have with his lunch. From time to time, Mrs. Thompson makes a final effort to bring Melton out of himself but is always rebuffed.

Once a mild family crisis develops over Melton's strangely violent reaction to the Thompson children's sneaking into his shack to try out the harmonicas. Mrs. Thompson is disturbed when she sees him shaking the frightened boys in a cold and silent fury. One and her husband however are too sensible of Melton's economic value to take sides against the hired man. They are troubled by the incident, but stand behind Melton. And, as the years go by, and the farm becomes more and more profitable under his management, Mrs. Thompson from time to time rewards him with an unsolicited rise.

Then, on another summer afternoon, a second stranger arrives at the Thompsons' gate. There is something oddly and unpleasantly disconcerting about the man, for all his outward joviality, something indescrnibly sinister. He identifies himself as Mr. Brown in match, and, after a good deal of joke-cracking and random tat-showing, tells Thompson that he has come to inquire about that Melton and reveals that he intends to arrest Melton.
The hired man, it appears, is a fugitive from a lunatic asylum in North Dakota, to which he was committed after killing his brother in a fit of rage over the brother's having borrowed and lost one of his harmonicas. Hatch learned of his whereabouts from Helton's mother to whom he sent a large amount of money saved over the years from the wages paid him by Thompson. Helton is greatly shaken by the story of the suicide. He dislikes the spiteful and patronizing hatch, whose authority as well as whose motives he is inclined to question, and resents his sudden intrusion into the peaceful and prosperous state of life on the farm. This order has largely been achieved by Helton, so Thompson is unwilling to let Hatch accomplish his purpose without resistance.

Giving way to his confused feelings, and the dizzying effects of the heat, he seems tarrets at Hatch and orders him off the farm. Helton appears suddenly from around the corner of the house, and rushes in between the other two men, confronting Hatch with his fists raised. Hatch, armed now with handcuffs in one hand and a bowie knife in the other, charges towards Helton. And Thompson, thinking that he sees the knife plunge into the hired man's stomach, picks up an axe and strikes Hatch on the head with it. Helton, it turns out, is not knife though he later dies in jail from the injuries received.

Thompson is tried and acquitted. But the episode breaks him, and he is morbidly convinced that all his neighbours think him a murderer, despite the legal acquittal. For weeks, he secretly carries himself and his wife around the countryside, calling on people to ask them to listen to his story and to believe in his
innocence. Though the neighbors are mostly indifferent, it is obvious that Innes may can never come to terms with the murder.

His conscience is further burdened by the lie he persuaded his wife to tell testifying that she witnessed Hatch's attack on Helen and her husband's justifiable intervention. Finally he feels that there is no one but God to whom he can appeal for understanding and justice.

One night, in the agony of his sleepless thoughts, he slips out of bed, and his wife gets up screaming in fright. He collapses in a faint, and she is trying to attend him when the boys, awakened by her screams, rush into the room. They look at him accusingly, as if they suspect he had smother their mother. He rebukes them for their thoughts.

When she has recovered from her faint, he instructs them to care of her, and on the pretense that he is going for the doctor,1 he goes to leave the house. Taking along a lantern and loaded shotgun and pencil and paper, he makes his way across the fields to the farthest corner of the farm. There, sitting against a fence post, he carefully composes his suicide note. Then he takes the case and sets off his right foot, props the gun against the fence with the barrel pointing at his head, and grasps for the trigger with his big toes.

The characterization of Mr. Innes, the sin, centers, brilliantly exemplifies Mrs. Porter's power of sympathetic inspiration. The true facts of the crucial event remain obscure to Mr. Innes: "...and then something happened that Mr. Innes cannot afterwards to piece together in his mind, and in fact it never did come straight" (p.255). essen-
ially, it is his own behaviour and his own motives that Thompson finds inexplicable. The social and moral code by which he lives, and the self-image that corresponds to the code, prove inadequate to the reality of his experience.

As we saw Warrens:

Did Mr. Thompson really see a knife in the hand of Mr. Hatch? Did he think the monstrous Hatch to save Mr. Julton's life or to defend the prosperity which Julton had brought him? Or had some other, more mysterious force guided his hand? For Mr. Thompson - he can never know and, not being able to live in this nest of ambiguities, must put the shotgun muzzle under his chin.

Thompson, of course, does not consciously desire any one's death, neither Julton's nor Hatch's and certainly not his own. Later when he commits suicide it is not to destroy himself but what he earnestly believes to be a false image of himself for as it has already been pointed out his tragic flaw is his social pride. While a man less concerned with status-seeking would have kept his guilt obsession on a more personal basis Thompson feels a compulsive need to explain. He has become so accustomed to judging himself through the eyes of others that his self-justification must follow the same path. In his tortured condition he may have enough honesty and awareness to recognize his mixed motives but lacks the strength of character to escape from his moral impasse by accepting it. He is also deeply disturbed, as his suicide note shows by the fact that he has lied and caused his wife to lie in the trial which exonerated him.

But his neighbours - all of whom, of course, are preoccupied with their own lies and confusions - can not help him. Either they will not tell him what they really think, or they prefer to
think nothing. The self-tortured Thompson is an embarrassing
nuisance to them. And his wife is worse than useless to him in
his trouble. He keeps hoping that one day she will tell him, in
private, that she really did witness the killing; and that what
she saw was just what he said happened, but although our sense
of wisely duty parents or compels her to lie in public, she will
not grant him the comfort of private complicity.

Mrs. Thompson's own motives are not clearly clear, perhaps
she is unhappy with Thompson having made her perjure herself or
may be she is employed at all for having deprived her of the
comfort and order that Hitchen brought into the life of the
family, but whatever the truth, in the end Mrs. Thompson notes
Thompson relinquishes his appeal to her as a witness:

Before the jury, the great judge or all
before who I am about to appear, I do hereby
solemnly swear that I did not take the life of
Mr. Homer T. Hatcher on purpose. It was done in
defense of Hitchen. I did not aim to hit him
with the axe but only to keep him off Hitchen.
He aimed a blow at Hitchen who was not looking
for it. It was my belief at the time that
Hatcher would have taken the life of Hitchen
if I did not interfere. I have told all this to
the judge and the jury and they let me off but
nobody believes it. This is the only way I can
prove I am not a cold-blooded murderess like
everybody seems to think. If I had been in
Hitchen's place I would have done the same for
me. I still think I done the only thing, there
was to do. My wife......

Mr. Thompson stopped here to think a while. He
wet the pencil point with the tip of his tongue
and worked out the last two words. He sat a
while blacking out the words until he had made a
near invisible patch where they had been, and
started again:

"It was Mr. Homer T. Hatcher who came to do wrong to
a harmless man. He caused all this trouble and
he deserved to die but I am sorry it was me who
had to kill him." (p. 290).
The act of blacking out his wife's name might be taken to signify a final and terrible realization on Thompson's part, an acceptance of the reality that the last and dearest hope of human understanding has been denied him, and that he must appear before God utterly alone. Thompson's leaving a note indicates that he still hopes to be justified, if not before his neighbours or even before his wife, then somehow before humanity at large.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p. 13.


