Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction forces readers to question characters’ morality. Porter deals with “human frailty, human limitation, and the human capacity for evil” (Unrue 7). Many of her characters fail to understand their own weakness. As Janis P. Stout points out, “the troubled complexity [of Porter] makes her, at times, a difficult or even disturbing object of study. It also makes her a deeply human one—not one of the Olympians, but a flawed, irritating, and often appealing human being much like oneself” (266). Many of Porter’s works end without a clear message; posing questions without apparent answers for her readers. Porter continuously shows that following the moral path is often choosing the most difficult path.

This article will examine Porter’s novel Ship of Fools and her short stories “Flowering Judas,” “He,” “Maria Conception,” and “Noon Wine” to illustrate how personal responsibility and altruism are central to Porter’s definition of morality.

Porter spent her lifetime dealing with depression: “At many points in her life she fell into deep depressions or emotional breakdowns. There were times at which she apparently contemplated suicide” (Stout 12). Porter’s fiction often discusses an individual’s search for morality, but it is important to note Porter’s own moral search, as it played a role in her fiction.

Porter believes that an individual must think outside the influence of religion, society, and government in order to be moral. She questions the idea of religion:

‘Grant that the idea of God is the most splendid single act of the creative human
imagination…it is impossible not to conclude that this mystical concept has been…made to serve the ends of an organization which, ruling under divine guidance, has ruled very little better, and in some respects, worse, than certain rather mediocre but frankly manmade systems of government….And it has seemed at times not to know the difference between Good and Evil….committing the most savage crimes against human life for the love of God.’ (Qtd. in Unrue 9-10)

Conversely Porter believes in the importance of human responsibility for one’s own actions. She connects the hypocrisy of forgetting one’s own moral voice by blindly following the predetermined rules of religion, with the present political shortcomings of society. She shows that religion is oftentimes merely a voice of the majority in government and society; as Stout points out, “The linkage between Porter’s expressions of religious skepticism and her laments over the world’s griefs was typical of her thinking….I sometimes wish there were a God, and that he really would avenge some of the wrongs and putrid nonsense of such criminal morons as are ruining the world now” (273).

Porter also points out the falseness within other institutional organizations. As Unrue states, “Porter speaks often of distrusting systems of government, either economic or theocratic. Even the most nobly inspired revolutions in art, religion, or politics eventually become corrupt” (10). Porter saw clearly beyond systems in which humans delineate their own responsibilities. As Debra Moddelmog states, “Porter suggests that…people must have—and must act on—the right to resist a legal system that they find unjust, especially, perhaps, when they did not establish that system themselves”
Her fiction, again and again, reveals characters that oftentimes are trapped in their illusions. Porter believes that adhering to societal systems is the death of the self, a dangerous process that causes much of the world’s problems. Porter’s works criticize “illusions to which persons cling. Often these are ideals that seem in themselves to be truths, and they are clutched as obsessively as if they were the end-all of human life” (Unrue 10).

Porter’s “truth” is subjective. She places the individual’s search for “truth” as central to attaining morality. In a letter to Donald Sutherland, she writes, “‘None of us…since we got up on our hind legs and started looking for the Truth, has ever been sure he has found it. No matter what they say, and no matter how much blood they are willing to shed in defense of their belief. I intend to go on looking for my little fragment, though, with my entire sensory and intellectual being, coming up once in awhile with some finding or other…what else did anyone else ever do’” (Qtd. in Unrue 6-7).

If one attempts, on a daily basis, to dispel illusions, whether they be caused by society, religion, government, etc., then, according to Porter’s fiction, “truth” may be glimpsed. Her stories concentrate on:

‘the necessity for moral definition, and the difficulty of moral definition.’ Each of her stories and her novel are about…deception of systems and the illusion of ideals which we embrace as we attempt to find truth….The greatest affirmations in her work are found in her statements about the power of love that gives a glimpse of the Unknowable, or God, as she says, and in the vision of truth that emerges in our small acceptances of our multiple nature of ourselves and the universe. (Unrue 10-11)
As evident in her works, Porter’s moral “truth” is often found in altruism. Though many of Porter’s stories deal with failure and anger, Eudora Welty points out, Porter’s “anger is pure, the reason for it evident and clear, and the effect exhilarating. She has made it the tool of her work; what we do is rejoice in it. We are aware of the compassion that guides it, as well. Only compassion could have looked where she looks, could have seen and probed what she sees” (Katherine 50). Again, Porter’s fiction forces the reader to question his/her own morals. The reader walks away, hopefully, a better person, a person who embraces empathy and compassion towards others. Welty commends “Porter’s deep sense of fairness and justice, her ardent conviction that we need to give and receive in loving kindness all the human warmth we can make—here is what her stories come from” (Katherine 50).

_Societal Criticism in Ship of Fools_

Human frailty, weakness, and falseness permeate Katherine Anne Porter’s one novel _Ship of Fools_. Porter creates a microcosm of the pre-World War II world with characters on a ship heading to Germany throughout the great majority of the novel. Porter even names the ship that they travel on, Vera, which “means truth.” The novel, written after World War II, centers on the individual’s responsibility for the atrocities that occurred during the war. All of the characters in this novel fail in some way to reach any sort of individual “truth,” as much as they fail to find the importance of kindness. As Unrue points out, Porter regards “the search for identity as the search for truth, because to know oneself was to know humanity….All the passengers have multiple opportunities for finding truth. Within themselves are the universal truths to be discovered, and the voyage
itself ought to suggest to them metaphorically the destiny of life in this world. And yet most ignore the truth available to them and pursue illusions that they mistake for truth” (171-172). This novel repeatedly shows that the characters’ failure to find individual truth lies in the fact that they constantly embrace falseness.

Porter shows the hypocrisy of religion in this novel, and the danger of hiding behind religion to release one from personal responsibility: “resolutely she turned her mind to higher things” (Ship 86). The characters are constantly arguing about their conflicting religious views or judging someone for his/her spiritual beliefs: “‘can you guess what they find to fight about? Religion. My God. They give each other bloody noses because one man kneels and another does not’” (160). Some of the characters speak against this hypocrisy but, in the end, all of the characters’ beliefs turn out to be only abstractions: “How could anyone have an honest opinion about religion?...People love the right to hate each other with moral sanction. The real basis of the religious question is political’” (161). This theme of religion is especially important to the novel because of the real implications of religious bigotry in the second World War. Porter points out so many instances of religious bias because she is trying to show how this behavior not only did result in the death of millions of Jewish people, but that it could easily happen again with any different sect of religion. Porter does show the evolving hate for the Jews aboard the Vera. There are two characters that are segregated as Jews aboard this ship; one is isolated from the beginning because he stands out physically as being Jewish. No other passenger gives him any attention, unless it is negative, for almost the entire duration of the book. The other passenger, Freytag, is not Jewish, but is married to a Jewish girl. He hides this fact throughout most of the book. He claims that
he loves his wife very much; he claims that he sees the hypocrisy of religious
discrimination, but he does not, until he is forced, go and sit by the Jewish man who is so
blatantly discriminated against.

Many of the characters have a chance to learn some sort of individual truth while
aboard this ship, but in the end they all fail because they choose to embrace their false
ideals. As Louis Auchincloss points out, “there is no feeling in the book that the fools are
doomed to be fools. They can be what they wish” (Critical 40). Mrs. Treadwell has been
raised “in luxury, which she mistook for love…. [She] spends her life searching for
meaning in a place that is idealized to the point of being an illusion. Her ideal is Paris”
(Unrue 197). But Mrs. Treadwell does seem to get the opportunity to change. She stands
up for an assaulted young girl by knocking a man unconscious, but she doesn’t grow
from her altruistic action; she simply resorts back to her class-conscious snobbery.

Jenny and Dr. Schumann come the closest to undergoing a positive transformation
while aboard the Vera, but they resort back to what they’re comfortable with in the end.
Jenny is in a long-term relationship with David. They constantly fight, but always seem
to come together again. She is probably the character who searches herself the most.
Jenny is somewhat independent, first introduced as wearing pants when getting on board
the ship, and insults many of the other passengers because of this. She also does not
believe in marriage and openly lives with David. Jenny realizes that her relationship with
David is dying, built upon false things; she enjoys other men’s company, but always
remains tied to David. Jenny was “losing confidence in her whole life…. It was very hard
to admit to herself that she was a fool, but everything in reason pointed to the fact…. I’m
not lost, I never have been, I never will be, unless this is being lost here and now. No,
I’m not lost” (88, 93). At the close of the book, she does not believe in love; she stays with David, both of them admitting it will only be for an indeterminate amount of time, and what she chooses with David, at the close of the novel, seems, again, shallow and false.

Dr. Schumann also seems to come close to a transformation via his experiences with La Condesa: “from the moment of her appearance on board the ship she is an enigma and an affront to all Dr. Schumann’s values. Through her, however, he learns about himself” (Unrue 205). Though La Condesa is a drug addicted, political prisoner being exiled to a small island, Dr. Schumann still, slowly, finds himself falling in love with her. He gives her unwarranted medication out of kindness and sympathy for her hard life. When the ship stops to drop off their political prisoner, he does not decide to stay with her or commit himself to helping her in any way: “He had refused to acknowledge the wrong he had done La Condesa his patient,…he had tormented her with his guilty love and yet had refused her—and himself—any human joy in it. He had let her go in hopelessness without even the faintest promise of future help or deliverance. What a coward, what a swine” (373). He does come close to learning, but he also fails:

He had lived on flattering terms with the delusive wickedness of his own nature; comfortable in the doctrine that no man may be damned except with his own consent…and when he does evil he knows what he is doing….He was so horrified his words of denial took shape, sound, he could hear himself speaking within his skull. ‘No,’ he was saying, ‘I did not harm her. (350)

There is only one instance of altruism aboard this ship; it happens when a low class man jumps overboard to save the life of a dog owned by higher-class passengers.
The man dies, and the dog lives. The owners of the dog and the other passengers on board the ship only mock this ultimate sacrifice: “‘An unbalanced savagely individualistic people…with their weird untraceable language and their pagan Catholicism…what would one expect? His name was Etchegaray’” (318). The owners, Herr and Frau Hutten, dismiss the incident: “‘Ah, of course he expected a reward!…Well, it can’t be helped,’ she said, almost cheerfully, ‘it is done now, it is out of our hands’” (320). This scene is particularly important to the novel; once this action has occurred, all hope for these people, and the rest of the world with the coming war, is lost.

A stewardess seems to offer Porter’s view of such a world that could have allowed World War II to occur. The stewardess witnesses the Huttens giving the dog broth that was intended for humans:

Think of all the innocent starving poor in the world, the little babies—down the gullet of a worthless dog! And who in that stinking steerage was beside him when the man who saved this beast was strangled to death on sea water, what did he get but a little dry wafer from the hypocrite of a priest, and a wicked parody of God’s word….’One should be a dog in this filthy world! A rich man’s dog drinking broth made from the bones of the poor. (321)

Porter is making a statement about human responsibility. This novel ends without any of the characters, except for the man who dies saving the Hutten’s dog, realizing the importance of altruism. The novel ends with this group of people in Germany at the beginnings of war. She blames the individual for the outcome of the war. The characters of Ship of Fools are strangers to each other because they choose to be strangers: “they were no longer interested in anything the others had to say—their minds were closing in
and folding up once more around their own concerns” (493). As Unrue states, the characters’ “self-absorbed isolation combined with an arrogant pride explains many of the moral flaws seen in the passengers on the Vera. It lies behind class-consciousness, narrow-minded regionalism, nationalism, religious intolerance, and sexism—in short, it expresses itself in the myopic belief in the superiority of one group of persons and in the wrongness and inferiority of others” (185). They are not altruistic towards one another because they choose not to forget their own “importance.” As Auchincloss states, Porter’s characters “cannot communicate because they reject communication…they must reject, even hate the persons who seem to offer friendship or love. But their plight is not pitiable. Selfishness and egotism are not pitiable” (Critical 40).

Ship of Fools “is basically about love” (Katherine 40). But love is not found within this novel. The characters may all need unconditional love: “Love me, love me it spite of all! Whether or not I love you, whether I am fit to love, whether you are able to love, even if there is no such things as love, Love me” (Ship 480). But the characters do not find it. And, even if they did ever get the love they need, it is evident that they would not appreciate it, or return it. This novel portrays a failure of society; it even seems a warning to the world, in regards to the war that destroyed the world’s innocence, of what comes from grasping onto false ideals and ignoring personal responsibility within the present moment.

A Life Lost to Apathy in “Flowering Judas”

In “Flowering Judas” Laura is not altruistic because she is apathetic, a trait Porter continuously condemns. As Eudora Welty states, “many of her characters are surviving
today only for the sake of tomorrow….Laura in “Flowering Judas” is ‘waiting for tomorrow with a bitter anxiety as if tomorrow may not come’” (Katherine 48). Porter is particularly harsh with apathetic characters. As Unrue points out, “Apathy particularly terrified Porter because she had seen the same kind of motiveless existence not only in her generation but in her own father…‘I had to find the courage to outlive and outgrow him’” (70).

Laura is in the midst of the Mexican Revolution. She lives with a Mexican general, Braggioni, whom she does not admire. Braggioni is married, but he cheats on his wife, and she is expected to accept it without comment. Laura works for Braggioni, running political errands, passing along messages, visiting and catering to the needs of political prisoners. But it becomes evident that Laura does not believe in what she is doing. Braggioni likes to sit up with her at night and sing to her, sometimes revealing intimate things about himself, his past, or his revolutionary ideas. Laura has learned that he is not someone to admire; instead, he is little more than a political figure, only pretending to be a man of the people, when he is really out for his own interests. Yet, she stays with him: “it would require courage…for it is dangerous to offend him, and nobody has this courage” (91). It is said, early on, that Laura once was a romantic, believing in abstract ideals: “She is, her comrades tell her, full of romantic error, for what she defines as cynicism in them is merely ‘a developed sense of reality’….But she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be, and at times she is almost contented to rest in this sense of grievance as a private store of consolation” (91-92). Porter does condemn Laura for her self-pity, for her desire to hold onto idealized versions of life. Laura, throughout
the story, wallows in her apathy. She longs to escape but lacks the courage, until even her desire to escape fades. She goes through the monotony of her life, doing actions that might seem very kind, like listening to and feeding the political prisoners. When they talk too much about their situation, she never repeats what they say; she keeps their secrets. She is also fearless, willing “to knock on any door in any street after midnight, and enter in the darkness, and say to one of these men who is really in danger: ‘They will be looking for you….Go to Vera Cruz and wait’” (94). But these actions seem to not count according to Porter.

It is later revealed, through certain young men that seriously court Laura, just how cold and aloof she is. Specifically, two men court her; at times she seems to consider accepting their flirtations, but then she always completely turns them down because of her political ties, which she has already made clear that she doesn’t care about. Laura is letting life pass her by because she is, again, a character who is tied to a political system: “She persuades herself that her negation of all external events as they occur is a sign that she is gradually perfecting herself in the stoicism she strives to cultivate against that disaster she fears, though she cannot name it” (97). Laura is not an individual searching for her own meaning of “truth.” Instead, she is already dead. As Thomas F. Walsh points out in “The Making of ‘Flowering Judas;’” Porter wrote in her journal about Laura, her “‘detachment from people and groups is a mark of her selfishness, is a sin against human solidarity….What you need is love. Your body will wither without it’” (Critical 133).

The ending of this story reveals not only Laura’s fault, but Porter’s affirmative message. The ending is quite symbolic. Braggioni leaves Laura, after she discusses how
Eugenio, a political prisoner she visited, took all the pills she brought him, to help him sleep, at once and refused to have her get the doctor. She tells Braggioni that Eugenio took the pills because he was “bored” and “did not want to wait” for Braggioni to help set him free (100-101). Braggioni’s response is, “‘He is a fool and we are well rid of him’” (101). Laura feels, again, at this moment that she should escape, but she does not.

Braggioni goes up to his wife’s room, where she has been without him for months, and Porter creates a sort of Christ-like scene. This scene can either be interpreted as parody or genuine, possibly both. Braggioni obviously mistreats his wife; he cheats on her constantly, but if she ever cheats on him, he will have her killed. Her only option is to lie on the floor and weep constantly. This is how he finds her that night, and

He says to her tenderly: ‘You are so good, please don’t cry anymore, you dear good creature.’ She says ‘Are you tired, my angel? Sit here and I will wash your feet.’…when from her knees she raises her sad eyes under her blackened lids, he is sorry for everything, and bursts into tears….His wife leans her head on his arm and says, ‘Forgive me!’ and this time he is refreshed by the solemn, endless rain of her tears” (101).

Though this scene may at first seem deplorable in the disgraceful, subservient position the wife allows herself to be put in, it is important because of how Laura appears in the following scene. Washing his feet, and the sacrificial asking of forgiveness from the one who has nothing to forgive, is a representation of Christ. And, what is more, Braggioni’s wife is not the only one who is altruistic in this scene. Braggioni’s “tears” and “sobs” are genuine. This scene is about two people who have many faults, but who also appear to be in love, and, more important, who appear to be investing themselves in their
concrete lives. This scene seems not to be completely understood by the reader because it is the personal lives and struggles of two real human beings. Laura would not be a character in this scene because she has not invested herself in tangible life.

The scene that immediately follows is of Laura, being related to Judas. She dreams that Eugenio, the prisoner who killed himself, comes to her and guides her to her death. She keeps repeating that she will not go unless he holds her hand. It would seem that Laura has been damned as a Judas figure for not actually embracing life. But an alternative interpretation could be that through Laura wanting to hold, concretely, onto Eugenio’s hand, she may be battling with her own empty life.

Eugenio tells her that he is taking her to “death,” but she refuses to go unless he takes her hand, which is very different from Laura’s attitude throughout the story, as if she finally understands that anything is worthwhile as long as one shares concrete, physical love. He calls her a “poor prisoner,” which shows a connection between her and him. He did not want to be set free from prison, choosing instead to commit suicide, seemingly because he gave up on life. Perhaps he was just as disillusioned with the revolution as Laura was, and so he became disillusioned with life in general. Perhaps Laura’s dream of Eugenio leading her to her death is her warning to change. He has her eat from the “Judas tree,” holding “the warm bleeding flowers…to her lips,” an act of communion (102). She notices that he is dead, “but she ate the flowers greedily for they satisfied both hunger and thirst” (102). But Eugenio screams, “Murderer!…and Cannibal! This is my body and my blood. Laura cried No” (102)! Laura’s revulsion at finding that she consumed the concrete body of Eugenio is important. Perhaps her former, apathetic behavior throughout the story “satisfied [her] hunger and thirst,” like
the flowers do, but her screaming upon finding that she consumed the concrete body of Eugenio could point to her final revulsion over accepting abstracts.

Laura is repulsed by communion, repulsed by Eugenio’s apathetic attitude towards life, which caused him to commit suicide. Communion usually symbolizes one’s willingness to accept Christ into his/her life, but, again, it seems that the acceptance of Christ into one’s life delegates one’s own responsibility onto another source besides the self. If she allows herself to accept the body of Eugenio, Laura perpetuates the cycle of not accepting her actions.

Perhaps Laura sees her own involvement and responsibility in Eugenio’s death. Perhaps she could have saved him; perhaps if she had performed a concrete action, the equivalent of washing his feet or sobbing over him, he would still be alive. Perhaps she will change and start embracing her life and the lives of others. The last sentence hints at a positive outcome: “at the sound of her own voice, she awoke trembling, and was afraid to sleep again” (102). Maybe Laura will not allow herself to “sleep” through her life again, leading only to death.

Questions of Morality in “He,” “Maria Conception,” and “Noon Wine”

In Porter’s “He,” the reader is forced to question him/herself. Mr. and Mrs. Whipple’s mentally handicapped son is not able to speak, so they don’t know what he wants, fears, loves, needs, etc. The story reveals certain instances where Mrs. Whipple treats her son badly, but throughout the entire story, she struggles with herself with whether or not she is really treating Him cruelly.

She constantly justifies to herself that He probably doesn’t care or notice when He
is mistreated. The Whipples are a poor family, with two other children, and when the money gets tight, they compensate by giving a little less to Him. They dress their two other children warmly enough to walk the four miles to school, but feel that, “He sits by the fire a lot, He won’t need so much” (54). But He becomes ill, and they are forced to take Him to the doctor, who tells them that they must dress Him more warmly: “‘I just took off His big blanket to wash,’ said Mrs. Whipple, ashamed, ‘I can’t stand dirt.’ ‘Well you better put it back on the minute it’s dry,’ said the doctor, ‘or He’ll have pneumonia’” (54). She sends Him into the bull pen to lead the bull out of his pen, knowing that He could get killed or maimed at any moment: “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….’Lord, don’t let anything happen to Him. Lord, you know people will say we oughtn’t to have sent Him. Oh, get Him home, safe home, safe home, and I’ll look after Him better’” (55-56). She worries throughout all of her decisions, yet she still commits them. And the reader doesn’t honestly know what he/she would have done in the same situation, which is the key to the story.

It is hard to blame Mrs. Whipple, but at the end, Porter allows a glimpse into His “otherness.” His parents are sending Him away to a home to be “properly” cared for; she wants to be able to tell herself that He doesn’t even know what’s going on, but He makes it clear that He does. Tears stream down His face. Mrs. Whipple sees His tears:

He seemed to be accusing her of something. Maybe He remembered that time she boxed His ears…maybe He knew they were sending Him away for good and all
because they were too poor to keep Him….She began to cry, frightfully, and wrapped her arms tight around Him…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. (58)

The story ends with Mrs. Whipple crying, but still riding with Him to put Him away. It appears that an existential choice could be for her to decide to be better to her son, to actually realize His importance and respectability as another human being as important as she. But this is a harder question when one is forced to live in the concrete situation which Mrs. Whipple faces.

“Maria Concepcion” is another story where the reader must question his/her own moral sense. Maria Concepcion marries Juan Villegas in a church in Mexico, a rare and thus more sacred act for their small Mexican village, one that should make their marriage more sacred. Maria Concepcion has “a good reputation with the neighbors as an energetic religious woman who could drive a bargain to the end” (4). But early on in their marriage Juan cheats on her with Maria Rosa, and Maria Conception catches them. Maria Rosa and Juan leave together to serve the revolution. Maria Concepcion does not weep for Juan, and she does not weep when their baby is born and dies four days later: “Maria Concepcion lived alone. She was gaunt, as if something were gnawing her away inside, her eyes were sunken, and she would not speak a word if she could help it. She worked harder than ever” (10). After many months, Juan and Maria Rosa come back, with Maria Rosa now pregnant. Juan returns to his old house, “attempting to beat Maria Concepcion by way of reestablishing himself in his legal household” (13). But she
refuses to be beaten: “She did not scream nor implore; she stood her ground and resisted; she even struck at him” (13). Juan stops trying to beat her and falls asleep in a corner, and Maria Concepcion leaves the house “to set off across the plowed fields:”

The thing which had for so long squeezed her body into a tight dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with shocking violence….All her being was a dark confused memory of grief burning in her at night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her very tongue tasted bitter and her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the times of the rains. (14)

She is now seen as a sympathetic individual. She makes a clear decision to go to the home of Maria Rosa and murder her. She comes back home, and Juan immediately has the impulse to save her: “‘Oh, thou poor creature!…Listen to me! I will hide thee away’…Juan felt his vitals contract. He wished to repent openly, not as a man, but as a very small child. He felt too that she had become invaluable, a woman without equal among a million women, and he could not tell why” (15-16).

The story now twists, becoming full of confusion. Is it morally right that Maria Concepcion did what she did? Maria Concepcion “is made peaceful by the revenge she has carried out, and ironically she is able to rationalize her deed…She feels no guilt for having killed Maria Rosa but thinks to herself that ‘Maria Rosa had eaten too much honey and had had too much love. Now she must sit in hell crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever’” (Unrue 20). It is too easy to dismiss this work as an uncomplicated story about a woman who is mistreated and goes crazy for revenge. When the police begin to question the female villagers about the murder, they, one by one, defend Maria Concepcion, even though they were not formerly close to her: “Maria
Concepcion suddenly felt herself guarded, surrounded, unborne by her faithful friends. Maria Concepcion looked from one to the other of the circling, intent faces. Their eyes gave back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy” (20). Because the women defend her, it seems that this story is about an unconventional form of morality. As Unrue suggests, “Pure instinct allows the villagers to participate in the enactment, protecting Maria Concepcion under a code far different from that of civil law or church law” (21). And Debra Moddelmog states that in the actions of these women, “Porter suggests that the people must have—and must act on—the right to resist a legal system that they find unjust” (Critical 71). The story ends with Maria Concepcion rocking Maria Rosa’s baby to sleep, feeling very content and happy. This is another story where a definitive answer to what is right is complex. It seems that Maria Conception is wrong to kill Maria Rosa, no matter what wrongs were committed against her. But, why, then, do the village women support her? There is no easy answer. Porter offers a confusing Modernist story that forces the reader to, again, question his/her own moral standards. Stories like this question the existing social systems. They also force the readers to accept the complex situations that others experience.

“Noon Wine” is yet another story where no definitive answer as to what is right forces the reader to question him/herself. This story is about altruism towards others, but the “kind” act that the protagonist does, forces the reader to question the ever-changing definition of morality. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson own on a farm, and Mr. Helton comes to them looking for work. Mr. Thompson treats him fairly, pays him a good wage, and invites him to eat meals with them at the family table. Mrs. Thompson, at first, doesn’t
trust him, but she reexamines her initial reaction and treats Mr. Helton with kindness: “there was nothing she could do to make up for the injustice she had done him in her thoughts but to tell him how she appreciated his good clean work, finished already in no time at all” (227). Mr. and Mrs. Thompson see that Mr. Helton never goes to church on Sunday; Mrs. Thompson thinks it unchristian not to ask him to go with them, but Mr. Thompson reveals a very transcendental/existential outlook on religion: “‘Let him alone,’ said Mr. Thompson. ‘The way I look at it, his religion is every man’s own business’” (236). Mr. Helton apparently does not find the need to believe in religion; he also seems unconcerned with conventions of society. He doesn’t “behave like other people;” he stays away from the rest of society for the most part (237). Mr. Helton enjoys the present moment. He constantly plays the same song on his harmonica, “about starting out in the morning feeling so good you can’t hardly stand it, so you drink up all your likker before noon. All the likker, y’ understand, that you was saving for the noon lay-off” (246).

Nine years later, a man, Mr. Hatch, comes to Mr. Thompson’s farm and tells him that Mr. Helton used to be in an insane asylum. Immediately, Mr. Thompson defends Mr. Helton; “About this Mr. Helton, now…I’ve got nothin’ against the man, he’s always treated me fair. They’s things and people…’nough to drive any man loony. The wonder to me is, more men don’t wind up in straightjackets, the way things are going these days and times” (247, 250). Mr. Thompson stills defends Mr. Helton even after he discovers that Mr. Helton was in the insane asylum because he murdered his brother with a pitchfork when they were harvesting hay. Mr. Thompson even maintains his strong faith in Mr. Helton after Mr. Hatch reveals that is going to capture and handcuff Mr. Helton.
However, Mr. Thompson begins to think about the trouble that Mr. Hatch could cause him if he discusses Mr. Thompson’s past to the rest of the town. He also considers the fact that Mr. Helton could go insane again at any moment, but Mr. Thompson then does something that turns this entire story around. He yells to Mr. Hatch to get off his land: “Get out of here before I knock you down” (255)! Mr. Hatch pulls out a bowie knife, and Mr. Helton runs between Mr. Thompson and Mr. Hatch, “trembl[ing] like a shied horse” (255). Mr. Thompson claims that he can hardly remember what happened next. He remembers that Mr. Hatch lunged at Mr. Helton, stabbing him in the stomach. He also remembers having the ax in his hands and bringing it down on Mr. Hatch’s head. Mr. Helton is later captured and dies. Mr. Thompson turns himself in, is tried, but is set free with a decree of self defense.

But later, Mr. Thompson can’t stop thinking over that day:

it was right there that Mr. Thompson’s mind stuck, squirming like an angleworm on a fishhook: he had killed Mr. Hatch, and he was a murderer. That was the truth about himself that Mr. Thompson couldn’t grasp…He had seen Mr. Hatch go after Mr. Helton with the knife, he had seen the point, blade up, go into Mr. Helton’s stomach and slice up like you slice a hog, but when they finally caught Mr. Helton there wasn’t a knife scratch on him. Mr. Thompson knew he had the ax in his own hands and felt himself lifting it, but he couldn’t remember hitting Mr. Hatch. He couldn’t remember it. He couldn’t. (261)

It would seem that Mr. Thompson did “go crazy…for a change;” he commits murder because he believes that he is saving Mr. Helton. Again, this is another story without a definitive moral answer, seemingly because Mr. Thompson can’t even answer his own
questions: “It seemed to him that he had done, maybe not the right thing, but the only thing he could do, that day, but had he? Did he have to kill Mr. Hatch” (265)? In contrast to “Maria Concepcion,” the neighbors do not believe or stand by Mr. Thompson. Even his wife and boys do not trust him: “so many blows had been struck at Mr. Thompson and from so many directions he couldn’t stop any more to find out where he was hit” (267). So he decides to kill himself. He walks out into his field to shoot himself with his shotgun. Before he commits suicide, he sits against the last fence post and writes his final statement:

“Before Almighty God, the great judge of all before who I am about to appear, I do hereby solemnly swear that I did not take the life of Mr. Homer T. Hatch on purpose. It was done in defense of Mr. Helton….It was my belief at the time that Mr. Hatch would have taken the life of Mr. Helton if I did not interfere….It was Mr. Homer T. Hatch 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.”

(268)

The story is ambiguous. There is no right or wrong answer as to what Mr. Thompson should have done. Just as in “He,” it appears that Mrs. Whipple could have made a transcendental/existential choice to be nicer to her son. And as in “Maria Concepcion,” Maria could have decided to find the good in the present moments in her life without Juan, definitely without killing Maria Rosa. But it seems hypocritical to make these kinds of judgments against these characters, and this seems to be Porter’s intention. She forces the reader to evaluate life situations in which easy answers are impossible to come by. She forces the readers to sympathize with the characters’
situations; this is why “Noon Wine” is such a powerful story.

Mr. Thompson does not even know what actually happened. He believes that he was trying to defend Mr. Helton out of kindness. But his “kind” act ended in death. We, as readers, cannot judge these characters because we cannot know what we would have done if put in their situations. And this is very important because the reader, hopefully, comes away from this story understanding that one must not judge others; one must only look for his/her own responsibility in all actions. Porter defends this interpretation in her statement, “everyone in this story contributes, one way or another directly, to murder, or death by violence” (Unrue 40). One must respect the individuality of others as one respects his/her own individuality; only out of this comes kindness.

Thus, Katherine Anne Porter does not make the choice to live morally an easy one, quite the opposite in fact. She shows that following the moral path is often choosing the most difficult path, but she also shows that it is the most worthwhile, and the only true path. She does not permit any hypocrisy from her readers. With all of her stories, she forces the readers to constantly question the characters’ actions and choices, but in doing so, we are also questioning ourselves.

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