

Between Good and Evil: Deconstructive Interpretation of *Noon Wine*

Ru Wang¹ & Yunyun Tian¹

¹ Jiangxi Normal University, Jiangxi Province, China

Correspondence: Ru Wang, Jiangxi Normal University, Jiangxi Province, China. E-mail: 13804582603@163.com

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Abstract

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is an eminent novelist in the history of American literature, especially famous for her short novels. *Noon Wine* is her important masterpiece, its plot and motif always lead to reader's deep meditation, and researches focus more on its narrative art, myth archetypes and themes. This paper tries to interpret *Noon Wine* from the perspective of deconstruction and selects several important characters to combine with the subversion of binary opposition in deconstruction, which aims to conclude that the relationship of good and evil in this story is consistent with Derrida's definition for the relation of binary opposition---supplementation. Therefore, when people interpret things or person, it would be better to be more multiple, after all, between good and evil, there is not merely an arbitrary line but space for more possibilities.

Keywords: *Noon Wine*, deconstruction, binary opposition, good and evil

1. Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is the pseudonym of Callie Russell Porter, who has a great reputation in the history of American literature, especially for her rich and varied short stories and novels. She was born in a declined aristocratic Catholic family on May 15 1890 in Texas of American south. Not until 1922, Porter published her first short story *Maria Conception* in *Century Magazine*. In the same year, her first short story collection *Flowering Judas and other stories* came out, in spite of its mediocre sales, Porter was rewarded with the financial aid of Guggenheim in 1939 and revisited Mexico, then set off to Europe. After *Flowering Judas*, her writing career began to blossom: novella *Noon Wine* in 1937, another excellent collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in 1939, *The Leaning Tower and other stories* in 1944, *The Old Order: Stories of South* in 1955. By this time, Porter was so reputable for her wonderful short stories.

Katherine Anne Porter's exalted status and glorious reputation in American literature is beyond of all doubt. Her success relied on partly her delicate, concise, elegant language, her unique, exquisite style and her meaningful, profound motives. "There is a kind of magic about everything Miss Porter writes" (*N. Y. Times*). "She wastes not a word and each word has a purpose. This is simply to state that her stories stand up as...works of art."(*NEW YORKERS*) Another indelible influence related closely to those above is from her breeding and experience background; she was always haunted with or affected by her southern complex, religious altitude, political view and her traveling experience; like what she said herself her works are "the fragments from a much larger plan", and she wrote from memory, thus, many of her works can be regarded as her personal biographic fiction; the readers can always feel about Porter's time, culture, society as well as her inner feelings. Based on all of these information we can interpret Porter's works more comprehensively and deeply.

Noon Wine was a novella firstly published in 1937, then after it was edited into the collected short novels *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in 1939, it grasped much attention. "Miss Porter has contrived to achieve an emotional effect that few, if any, of her contemporaries would have been able to match. Her reputation was not gained by chance or sleight of hand, the *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (including *Noon Wine*) confirms it."(*N. Y. Times*) The story was set in a little farm in southern Texas during 1896-1905. One day, a Swedish, Olaf Helton came to Mr. Thompson's depressing farm and asked for a job with the payment of 1 \$ each day, but Mr. Thompson provided him only 7\$ a month with accommodating and food. Mr. Helton is quite taciturn, his only interest is playing his harmonica and he plays only one piece of music---a toasting song of his homeland---noon wine. Soon, Mr. Helton's capability and diligence made him to be the hope and pillar of the farm; Mr. Thompson paid off his debt even deposited some money in a short time. When everything was getting better, a bounty hunter Mr. Hatch came to

this village in the name of arresting the fleeing insane---Mr. Helton. Affected by the potential danger from Mr. Hatch, Mr. Thompson killed him with an ax in the excuse of defense for Helton, and Helton died of the outrageous people's blow. At the end, nevertheless, Mr. Thompson was judged as innocent by the jury, he committed suicide due to the unbearable indifference and suspect from his neighbors as well as his family. Researches about *Noon Wine's* studies mainly concentrated on its characters' images, its narrative strategies, or its archetypes.

2. Deconstruction and Binary Opposition

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a French philosopher and teacher, whose essay *structure, sign, and play in the discourse of human science* he shared at a symposium in John Hopkins University in 1966 virtually inaugurated a unprecedented critical theory---deconstruction. Derrida pointed out that there was paradoxical tradition in the western philosophy since Plato, thus, the concept of "structure" presupposing a kind of center meaning like that in structuralist. That sort of structure providing a center seems self-reliance instead of complying the principle that meaning originates from the difference from the other sign, like what Derrida said in his "*structure, sign and play*": "thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. That is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it." (Derrida, 1966). He defined this philosophical tradition of contradictory in fountain as metaphysics of presence.

Derrida acknowledged the existence and the working of Binary opposition (such as God/Humankind, self/other, truth/deception, raw/cooked, etc.) in our thinking model. Binary opposition is the foundation of structuralist criticism, as the opinion of western metaphysics, structuralists hold that people think and read on the base of binary opposition model, they construct their knowledge, their world and every through binary opposition. Derrida agreed with this cognitive and thinking pattern of knowing from difference, but he did not approve the information attached with it. The old understanding of binary opposition conveys that the positive pole of the opposition has the dominant and advantageous power to the negative pole, though the former comes into being with the premise of the later. Derrida called the unequal state of the two opposition as violent hierarchy and he questioned why can not we understand them in a contrary way. As soon as this doubt was came up with, the subversion of binary opposition seems natural and smooth. However, the behavior of subverting is not simply to replace the old order with a reverse new one, it contains complex and abundant logical play and connection. First, Derrida owed the thinking model of western world to the Non-contradictory principle of Aristotle, in line with which nothing can have the incompatible features of both of the two opposition simultaneously, one thing can only be true or false but can not be both true and false at the same time. But in our real life innumerable things contain the paradoxical elements even more than two, for instance, many things seem false but imply the true particular meanwhile. Then, Derrida defined the unstable and reversible relation between the binary opposition as supplementation, thus, the supposed inferior pole can not only give an addition to the privileged pole but also has the ability of substituting it, in lots occasions, the false takes the place of the true in homely or unexpected ways. The subversion of binary opposition provide the different and novel possibility to understand works and the multifarious characters.

3. Good and Evil in *Noon Wine*

Good and Evil is the most popular opposition in literary works, we can also see that easily in Porter's stories. Readers always incline to trust their judgment about what is right and what is wrong, besides, they are quite sure about the purity of the two extreme poles. But let's scrutinize it more discreetly by dating back its origin in the Bible, we may find another kind of fact. At the very beginning, there is no good or evil, then God's ban for the forbidden fruit occurs, the subsequent event is Adam and Eve's sin, that serpent is merely an alterable factors. If we think backwards, it is can be said that evil was conceived in the Prohibition to Eden of God, and Adam's first Good act is showing his love for fallen Eve, the pure goodness or evil is just reachless, even there is none moment of good without evil. The various figures in Porter's fictions have huge space to analyze their complicated personalities, through reading we might be not so definite about their nature of good or evil. Regards to author's characterization, good co-exists with evil and evil is both addition and substitution to good over the people in *Noon Wine*.

3.1 *Good or Evil: Helton and Hatch*

In *Noon Wine*, Helton and Hatch are the representative to manifest the impossibility of pure and ultimate goodness and evil as well as the fallacy of people's determination about others' real quality. Helton is totally a stranger from a strange place to this village, due to his sparing of speech, the natives do not really know about this stranger though after 9 years, even his employer family gets nothing about his past. From his coming here, in

the eye of Thompson family, Helton is a good employee of hard-working, finish and do well in all kinds of farm work, he even seems restrained in diet perhaps for not annoying his hirer though he does not have to do like that, he is considerate at bottom. Through his diligent and effective labor, Helton brings thriving to this depressed little farm and the family short of money, Mr. Thompson has spare money for deposit gradually. The arrival of Mr. Hatch gives a devastating blow on Thompsons, he accused Helton as a runaway insane who one got mad to kill his own brother. But even though Hatch disclosed Helton's history as a lunatic, Mr. Thompson still could not believe that readily with his 9-year observation and Helton's benefit. As Hatch told more about Helton, Mr. Thompson was more definite about his intuition for Hatch's danger and his trust on Helton's kind. Mr. Thompson knew that Helton never spent his income except for his only favorite harmonicas, then by Hatch's account, he realized Helton saved nearly all of his salary to send to his old poor mother in his homeland. Many readers will be touched suddenly and deeply when they come to this part of the story:

“Well, sir, about two weeks ago his old mother gets a letter form him, and in that letter, what do you reckon she found? Well, it was a check on that little bank in town for eight hundred and fifty dollars, just like that; the letter wasn't nothing much, just said he was sending her a few little savings, she might need something, but there it was, name, postmark, date, everything... Mr. Helton said he was getting along all right and for her not to tell nobody”.

Readers can easily build the image of a filial man form the Hatch's narration with contemptuous and unconcern tongue. Nobody can deny Helton is good though he once committed a terrible crime of killing his brother in a loony way only because the brother borrowed and lost his harmonica. From the above extract, we know that Helton himself understood it is dangerous for him to send her mother, but he still did it and expose his shelter naively. In Hatch's view, Helton is only a idiot, a crazy man may get mad any time, but we can say he is only a poor and simple kind person to show his goodness in a honest but clumsy way. Helton is kind to everybody as long as he or she does not touch his beloved harmonica, but deliberately, he once got mad to killing out of control. Therefore, Helton is not purely good anymore, at the end, he was attacked to dead by the people who only know his insanity but ignore his goodness. In the final analysis, the unwitting masses do an actual evil thing from a good starting point they reckon.

As for the abrupt visitor, the bounty hunter Mr. Hatch is the flash-point of the whole tragedy. Nevertheless, he came to arrest Helton in the name of securing the society, from Mr. Thompson's mind, we know that Hatch is a cunning, abominable, and contemptible guy. He took advantage of the simple men outrageously to achieve his mean goal. From the conversation between him and Mr. Thompson, we come to know his trick from deception and threatening, especially when he talked about Helton sending money to the poor ole mother and how he took trick on her, readers can deeply get the understanding about his evil:

“the more I got to thing about it, the more I just come to the conclusion that I'd better look into the matter a little, so I talked to the old woman. She's pretty decrepit, now, and half-blind and all, but she was all for taking the first train out and going to see her son. I put it up to her square---how she was too feeble for the trip, and all. So, just as a favor to her, I told her for my expenses I'd come down and see Mr. Helton and bring her her back all the news about him. She gave me a new shirt she made herself by hand, and a big Swedish kind of cake to bring to him, but I musta mislaid them, though, he prob'ly ain't in any state of mind to appreciate'em”.

How abhorrent that Hatch trampled the moving love between the poor mother and son underfoot, he cheated her even abused the gift containing sincere love—the best one the mother could give in a difficult situation. But the weak and innocent can not reject it, because Hatch did all the evil in a decent disguise of justice and right, in his own words “the law is solidly behind me.”(*Noon Wine*, P96). Evil seems operates in the protection of goodness.

We can say Helton is good but he may become crazy in a trigger anyone not knowing about him may touch off, goodness is not pure and absolute, including the evil factors instead. We can defined as evil but which is under the shelter of the law of good quality, goodness became the accomplice of evil even substitute evil to become the contrary itself, and then both good and evil are not what they suppose to be. Therefore, if we view men and things from the established perspective and haste to decide what is good and what is evil in the hope of access to a pure binary opposition, we will drop into a trap and make lot of fallacies and regrets. However, if we try to interpret things and people in a angle of deconstruction and reverse the binary opposition, we can see more about the nature of them, at least avoid to be arbitrary, stubborn or intolerable.

3.2 *Thompson Couple's Good and Evil*

Over Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Thompson, good and evil peculiarities are so distinctive as that over Hatch and Helton, though Mrs. Thompson who is a ordinary with nearly unnoticed personality and humbleness we can

trace the subtle relation of good and evil on her. Mr. Thompson indulges in comfort and lazy, but he is at the same time of the typical chauvinism in American south. So he overtakes the main work in his decaying farm and lets his weak wife to rest. He has lots of little flaws, such as mean to his employee, addicted to alcohol and boasting, but he undertook the due obligation for his family. When Hatch came, Mr. Thompson felt averseness and crisis instinctively form him. After he finally got to know Helton's past and confirmed Hatch's hatefulness, he was irritated by Hatch and killed him with an ax in a wrong idea of the moment. It was too late when he calmed down and became clear-minded, he was frightened and anxious to defend himself hastily that he attacked Hatch in order to protect Helton, but in fact, Helton is not near them at that time. Although he was convicted innocence and got free by the justification of self-defense his lawyer exerted, he was fearful and uneasy in deep inner even afraid of remembering Helton who died poorly and tragically, therefore he explained everyone he know about his killing and his innocence. But people seemed not to care about the process and the reason but the fact he did killing, they started to avoid him and saw him in strange eyes. What's worse, his family alienated him consciously or unconsciously. His wife who witnessed the terrible scene with her own eyes was afraid of him as a monstrous murderer. His wife's altitude is the last straw that breaking the camel's back to lead him to committed suicide. Is Mr. Thompson good or evil? He is not saint or devil but just a ordinary human being who easily makes mistake and gets stuck in wrong thought to do regretful action only for a moment.

Mrs. Thompson was weak physically, she cared much about her family and worried about the farm, she attended her beloved ones and was confident for the future, especially after Helton's arrival. She always friendly and kind to others, but after she saw his husband killing Hatch, she could not face him anymore. She tried to remain strong and tranquil to save and keep her family, but she at last can't overcome the fear and misery to burst into overexcited, by and large, she directly caused Mr. Thompson to terminate his own life. But can we blame her? Can we require others to be saint with the premise that all humans can not to be? We must realize that good and evil rely on each other to survive, they interweave with each other on every thing in the world.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzing the good and evil elements on some characters in *Noon Wine* does not intend to deny the value of advocating goodness and punishing evil, but tries to remain people to interpret them form deconstructive perspective, thus, do not judge things with an absolute attitude about good and evil. Dating back their arche, between good and evil, there is no opposition privileged. In addition, mapping their relation to the idea of supplementation in deconstruction is appropriate, because, good and evil are depend upon each other and go together. Further, in some situation, good and evil will change their place to become the contrary appearance. The diverse and multiple interpretation of deconstruction is more vigorous, fresh, and reasonable than those arbitrary ones. Though the shallow study of this paper, it proves more that deconstructive reading is valuable and feasible.

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