

ANALYSIS

“Rope” (1928)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“‘Rope,’ which verges on the *tour de force* because of its mastery of the adroit, insinuating tone, is an astonishing illustration of how a minor difference of opinion can develop into a quarrel which reveals all the cracks in a marriage. The young couple in ‘Rope’ hardly realize the meaning of their charges and counter-charges, for they are completely caught up in the mechanism of their quarrel, but, all the while, the sickness of their marriage magnifies itself in their inadvertent accusations. ‘Rope’ is primarily notable for the control of its tone; read in one way, it is a diverting social comedy with a happy end, and, read in another, it is a disturbing revelation of the malice stored beneath the blandest surfaces of life.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 48

“‘Rope’ (1928) is a satirical picture of a marriage between two quarrelsome, irrational, and confused bohemians, a penniless young couple who move into a remote country house to save their money and then bicker continuously over the small annoyances of their primitive life. In the end love conquers; the young people make up, and the cycle starts over again. This story presents in embryonic form a theme later to be developed more fully in ‘That Tree’.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 320

“The contrast between ‘Magic’ and ‘Rope’ makes particularly striking their underlying thematic similarity. The bitter tie that binds is symbolized in the first story by the black magic of spiritual subjugation and in the second by rope, which binds, lashes, and strangles.... A quarrel between a harried young husband and wife need signify nothing more than the instability of human emotions; yet the deep antagonism uncovered by this gratuitous argument, with its traded taunts of barrenness and infidelity, casts a baleful light on this marriage.

‘Rope’ is a *tour de force*, a delicately graphed record of a verbal duel between a generic ‘he’ and ‘she.’ There is a masterful manipulation of elements—setting, accident, masculine and feminine mentality. The distinctive technical instrument employed is a kind of dialogue which hovers between direct and indirect, reproducing speech almost exactly but without the usual dialogue signals. It has subtle and powerful effects, the most obvious of which is the speed and smoothness resulting from the absence of retarding punctuation and the seamless blending of dialogue with narrative. This acceleration gives the story a sort of hectic intensity. A more important effect of the dialogue technique is the impression that the author is constantly present, governing tone and unobtrusively commenting with quiet irony; or better, providing a steady line of reference by which each evil and irrational word of the characters judges itself. Never do the characters appear in the complete freedom of direct speech.

The disproportion between effect and apparent cause draws attention to the major thematic impact of the story: awareness of the free-floating hatred in the marriage. It may be argued that the cessation of hostilities at the end is meant to show that quarrels are only passing storms on the calm sea of matrimony, but even superficially the evidence points the other way. The readiness with which the opponents use their deadliest weapons and the familiarity of many of their grievances argue that the enmity that fills most of the story is more natural to them than the brief, timid geniality of the conclusion. The wounds inflicted and reopened are too deep to be healed by an evening’s reconciliation over steak and coffee. Even if the provoking causes

be taken as adequate explanation of the quarrel, the emotional weight of the story remains undeniably on the bitterness of the union.

The sense of oppression is built up by emphasis on the stifling heat of the day and the clutter in the house. The husband sums up this feeling as he leaves the second time for the store, after the violent separation which was needed to end the conflict... His escape is only temporary, and indications are that both he and she continue to stagnate in this destructive marriage. But then, neither of the two is a fully developed character, nor does either have the intelligent self-awareness and intensity of spirit with which Miranda will confront the deep mysteries and painful complexities of life.... 'Rope' may be classed as a fine...short story, carefully designed, self-contained, stylistically brilliant."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 16-18

"The he and she of 'Rope' (1928), never identified by name, are tied together in marriage; but, in their love-hate relationship, they are hanging each other, giving one another enough rope for hanging, forcing the other on the ropes, and each is at the end of his rope. The story is another of Miss Porter's examinations of marriage, of love, hate, and frustration. Unlike her other stories dealing with marriage—such as 'That Tree' or 'The Cracked Looking-Glass'—the exact time, place, and setting and the background of the characters are not known. By implication we know it is late fall, that the setting is in the country, and that both he and she earn money, his income being larger.

The first and last paragraphs emphasize the tranquility of the rural scene. They had only been in the country three days, and already he had told her she looked like a country woman, and she told him he resembled a rural character in a drama. But the hayseedish characters were completely deceptive, and the tranquility soon disappeared, not to return until he came from the store the second time. Ostensibly, she began the quarrel because he forgot to buy coffee, and she had not had coffee that day. He had instead bought a rope, and the rope soon became the center of the argument; he had bought it impulsively, could think of no real use for it.

The indirect quotations emphasize the bitterness of the quarrel which was unraveling their marriage. The rope had broken the eggs; she had no ice to keep them until the next day; she would not have the rope in her pantry. He didn't know what tied them together, why he shouldn't just clear out. She reminded him of the casual affair he had the summer before. Like Miranda's grandmother, she was too busy organizing the house to enjoy the country; he, paraphrasing Emerson, didn't think the house should ride them. He returned to the store, two miles away for her coffee, for her laxative, and for the other items she suddenly remembered. He took the rope to exchange it, but secretly hid it behind a rock.

When he appeared again, rope in hand, masculine pride still intact, she had completely changed; she was waiting serenely for him, supper ready, not concerned at all that he had 'forgotten' to exchange the rope. She was playful, kittenish, talking baby talk. The last paragraph derives much of its poignancy from the veiled reference to Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" in which the he-bird sat calling for the never-to-return she-bird. Miss Porter's use of he and she may have been influenced by Whitman's poem, although she also uses the names to give a universal, an Everyman-Everywoman effect. They heard a whippoorwill, still there out of season, sitting in a crab-apple tree—fittingly sour fruit—'calling all by himself. Maybe his girl stood him up. Maybe she did. She hoped to hear him once more, she loved whippoorwills... He knew how she was, didn't he?' She projected her own feelings onto the sad song of the bird, imagining that his mate had jilted him, wanting to hear the bird's song again.

The story ends with a note of tranquility masking the terrible battle which had just been fought. They had both said too much that could not be forgotten, and many of the threads of the rope holding them together had been unraveled. The final line indicates that the husband was also aware of the implications of the quarrel and of her interpretation of the bird's song: 'Sure, he knew how she was.' The disastrous quarrel in 'Rope' is similar to the corrosive Jenny-David affair in *Ship of Fools*."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter

(Twayne 1965) 95-96

“In ‘Rope,’ a young city couple summering in the country fall into a bitter quarrel over the husband’s selfish absent-mindedness. On a shopping trip into town, he forgets to buy the coffee that his wife repeatedly reminded him to get. But, indulging an absurd whim, he buys a large coil of heavy rope, for which he has not definable use, and tires himself carrying it on the walk home. The rope, of course, symbolizes the invisible bond of their destructive but probably unbreakable union. They are ‘at the end of the rope’ of their patience with each other; they have ‘enough rope’ with which to hang themselves. But they cannot work free of each other. At the end of the story, exhausted by a long exchange of recriminations, they are temporarily reconciled. But it is plain that they are doomed to resume the quarrel once they have rested. Referred to only as ‘he’ and ‘she,’ they have all but lost their personalities in the degrading, continuous struggle that is their marriage.... [The story has a] varied technical brilliance...[and a] complex use of symbolism.”

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 46-47

“Ernest Stock [was] a twenty-five-year-old Englishman who had worked for a firm of interior decorators and subsequently decided to be a painter. For all his current Bohemian affectations, Stock was very much like the men Porter had previously recognized as too staid to make her happy. In fact, he was considerably duller...but his dullness was not immediately apparent to Porter or to the other women he married. His English accent, public-school education and service in the Royal Flying Corps, which he talked about frequently, all gave him a deceptive air of distinction. He was, moreover, very good-looking: one woman remembered him from the war years as ‘devastatingly handsome,’ especially in his RFC uniform. Porter found him particularly attractive because in coloring and stature he resembled her father. Stock was slender and tall, crisp-looking, with reddish hair and a debonair mustache. He was eager to be married, and since Porter had no hesitation it was quickly done and they moved to the country. There they joined a congenial group of artists and writers who had settled in Merryall Valley, Connecticut....

She had to acknowledge that the trouble lay in her and no one else and she was losing hope, denied the bright fantasy of blaming her unproductiveness on other people. The chief obstacle to her productiveness was her husband. It did not take Porter long to realize that his charm was very superficial and that he was a naïve, humorless, and indecisive man. He had no real vocation, no occupation, and his desire to be a painter was based neither on training nor on natural talent. By the end of the summer she was calling him ‘Deadly Ernest.’ Later she claimed that she based her short story ‘Rope’ on this summer of listening to the quarrels of the other couples...but actually the story contains more of the Stocks than the others. One detail suggests her continuing disappointment at her inability to have a child.

By the end of the summer Ernest was annoying not only his wife but everyone else. Eight years later Josephine Herbst published her own story of the Stocks’ marriage... She described Ernest’s refusal to do his part of the household chores, his jealousy of Porter’s ability to hold an audience spellbound with a story, and his resentment of her loving recollections of a past in which he had no part. He often drank too much and became maudlin and self-pitying, particularly on the subject of his war wound.... Herbst’s story also contains a description of the acute sense of sterility which the breakdown of this marriage, her failure to have children, and her inability to work had produced in Porter....

The final outrage was her discovery that he intended at the end of the summer to return to the city without paying his bill at the local grocery store. As from her first marriage, she resolved to avoid arguments and recriminations by slipping away without warning. Early one morning while Ernest was still sleeping she rode in a milk truck to the station and caught the train to New York. There was a brief, angry scene when Ernest arrived one day in an abusive mood and took back all the little gifts he had given her, but she managed successfully to disentangle her life from his.”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 172, 174-75

“In ‘Rope,’ several critics have found an example of Porter’s penchant for portraying unhappy marriages, and the rope which is the center of the couple’s quarrel becomes an ironic ‘tie that binds,’ an image of the constriction of their union. The man and the woman in ‘Rope’ are unnamed and undescribed. The burden of the quarrel rests with the woman; she initiates it and she ends it. The man has to be goaded into fighting and tries several times to make peace. In the face of his patience and passivity, it is tempting to call his attacking wife a classic bitch and let it go at that.

Once again, Porter treats the conflict in the woman objectively, no omniscient narration or psychological penetration provides insight into her character. What can be said of these people must be said on the basis of their accumulated statements to each other. The story moves forward on their verbal threats and parries. While the quarrel does not reveal much about their background, it does reveal a great deal about their emotional states and their views of each other. In ‘Rope,’ Porter inverts the ordinary pattern of narration, making her two characters and the narrator speak in the third person and the past tense... This technique has a distancing effect, as if the reader were watching a film of the incident rather than experiencing the quarrel from the emotional standpoint of either husband or wife. The narrator’s objectivity may suggest that the woman, removed from the time and place of the quarrel, with the advantage that hindsight always brings, is the teller of the tale. On the other hand, in the moments after the woman runs upstairs, as the man prepares to return to town, his frustration is penetrated briefly....

Since the woman’s feelings are never similarly illuminated, this...may suggest that the story is told by the husband, in which case his inability to understand his wife’s frustration contrasts with the reader’s comprehension of it, resulting in dramatic irony. In any case, ‘Rope’ is the story of her frustration and his inability to comprehend it. The wife in this story wants comfort, order in her life, and time to do the work she thinks is important. She is restricted by their lack of money, by the clutter of an unorganized household, and by the mundane chores of housework. Like other women...she cannot express her dissatisfaction plainly and directly. She deals in subterfuge, which is why the rope becomes such a bone of contention. The quarrel must reach a certain pitch before she will name her specific complaints, but a close reading of her comments reveals the way her irritation moves rapidly from one detail to the next, baffling her husband.

First, it is clear that she is generally dissatisfied with this man and their life together, and that her aggravation smolders just below the surface. Consequently, when he forgets to bring home the coffee she has been looking forward to, she takes his oversight personally, as proof that he doesn’t care for her well-being. When she objects to the rope he has bought, she is objecting to a superfluous item that is tangible evidence of his carelessness toward her. The rope then simply becomes a touchstone for all the complaints she has against him, particularly the unhappiness she has felt since they came to the country three days before. The place itself is too primitive, too disorderly, not ‘decently fit to live in.’ They have no money to spare. It is hot and they have no ice to store perishables. She doesn’t want to live with ‘second best and scraps and makeshifts, even to the meat!’ His response indicates that this is not the first time they have been in such circumstances: ‘He rubbed her shoulder a little. It doesn’t really matter so much, does it, darling?... He was getting ready to say that they could surely manage somehow when she turned on him and said, if he told her they could manage somehow she would certainly slap his face.’

What emerges in the next sequence of the argument is that she feels burdened by the clutter and chaos of the new place, hemmed in by the necessity to create order out of it, and overwhelmed by the excessive work it will require. It is only an added aggravation that her husband doesn’t need the order she does. She expresses her sense of isolation by accusing him of leaving her alone to do all the work, and further suggests that he has been unfaithful to her. Feeling persecuted by her bitter remarks, he tells her that ‘the whole trouble with her was she needed something weaker than she was to heckle and tyrannize over. He wished to God now they had a couple of children she could take it out on. Maybe he’d get some rest.’ He thus echoes the cliché that women who are kept barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen are no trouble. She is particularly stung by this remark, and her frustration mounts.

Resorting to sarcasm, she evidences her bitter anger and repressed hostility. Because she needs to control her life, she feels thwarted by her husband’s inflexibility. When he asks her if they are going to live in the house or let it ride them to death, she turns pale, then livid. Her reaction seems an excessive response to his question, and she again substitutes the thing that is really bothering her for a direct answer to his

question: ‘...she looked quite dangerous, and reminded him that housekeeping was no more her work than it was his: she had other work to do as well, and when did he think she was going to find time to do it at this rate?’ His response is meant to put her in her place: ‘She knew as well as he did that his work brought in the regular money, hers was only occasional, if they depended on what *she* made—and she might as well get straight on this question once for all!’ She brushes aside the suggestion that her work has no value or seriousness because it cannot command money. The question, she says, is their division of labor. She scoffs at the idea that he has ever been a help to her, stressing again her sense of isolation. Then she bursts into tears... Her husband reacts to her hysteria by trying to douse her with water. She wrenches free and runs upstairs.

What emerges from this quarrel is a woman who is not very flexible; she needs to control, ‘to make her plans,’ to bring order out of chaos so that she can cope with living. Thus she can’t manage broken eggs in the grocery basket because she has already planned to have steak for supper; she must have the rope, hammer, and nails out of the kitchen because they are underfoot; she jumps from one job to the next, saying in almost the same breath that she is going to wash windows, and then that it is important to air the mattresses. Through it all, she wishes for her husband to keep her company, to share her fears, to value her difficulty, and to remember her desire to focus on more important work.

For his part, he is an easy-going man who cannot see her dilemma; he doesn’t feel the house is his responsibility and consequently doesn’t feel overwhelmed by it. His role is defined since he brings in ‘the regular money.’ Furthermore, his wife’s anxiety is to him a capricious display of her feminine nature. In his view, her desire for order is an ‘insane habit of changing things around and hiding them’; she makes ‘a complete fool of herself’ by complaining to him; her comments are ‘silly,’ or else she is ‘raving’; she is a ‘hopeless melancholiac’ whose coffee-drinking is making ‘a wreck’ of her. Seeing her hysteria, he is not worried about what has brought it about, but thinks how she works herself ‘into a fury about simply nothing’; she has ‘not an ounce of reason,’ and he is tired of ‘humoring’ her. He clearly thinks she has no rationality and that her emotions rule her. It is interesting to note, though, that in their exchanges, she is the one who names specific problems, even if circuitously. He resorts to name-calling and points out her ‘real’ role to her.

When he returns from his second trip to the village that evening, she is waiting to greet him as she had that afternoon, but this time she is cool, refreshed, and expansive. She offers an apology, saying she wouldn’t have behaved that way earlier if she had had her coffee. It is undoubtedly true that she wouldn’t have behaved that way if there had been no match to set off the powder, but the tinder is still piled there and will ignite again easily. She asks for reassurance: ‘He knew how she was, didn’t he?’ and he replies, ‘Sure, he knew how she was.’ The varieties of irony in that last line underscore the fragility of this relationship. If he means he knows how she is when she doesn’t have her coffee, then he really doesn’t know how she is at all, because he takes the coffee for the real issue. If he means that he knows her emotional makeup is precarious, he is right on one count, but he doesn’t seem to really know why. If he means he knows how she is—a bitch who cares more about winning her point than his feelings, then he is mistaken; he really doesn’t know how she is.

In any case, the story ends with the suggestion that the relationship is fated. Although husband and wife are reconciled, the cool evening will give way to another hot day in the confused household, and, like the rope the husband has carried to town and back with him, their burdens are still with them. Finally, there is the hint of things not right in the image of the lone whippoorwill, ‘clear out of season’ and left ‘all by himself’ by his mate, surely the fate of the woman who insists on having things her own way. In the next group of stories, Porter begins to examine why women trapped by circumstance choose to remain so.”

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter’s Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 40-44

“‘Rope,’ the first story Porter wrote reflecting her mature experience, was published in...1928. It was written near the end of her brief marriage to Ernest Stock, and it reveals the connection between the surface, incidental bickering of a husband and wife and the deeper, more serious breaking apart of their

union.... The first and last paragraphs of 'Rope' present idyllic scenes, framing a bitter quarrel between an unnamed husband and wife and providing a standard against which the relationship is measured. As in other Porter stories, vague allusions to the Bible or literature help define the ideal that exposes the emptiness of the present experience.

The first sentence illustrates how Porter's classical style depends on the shock value of the periodic sentence. It begins with 'On the third day,' a phrase that the reader should link to 'He arose from the dead' in the Bible, an essential statement in Christian theology that confirms the validity of the spiritual life. But Porter's sentence ends with the puzzling clause 'he came...back...carrying...a twenty-four-yard coil of rope,' which conjures up images of violence or work. The question of why he bought the rope is never truly answered, but discerning the symbolic meaning of the rope is necessary to an understanding of the story.

He says he thought they might use it 'to hang clothes on, or something,' but she points out that they already have a fifty-foot line 'right before his eyes.' Clearly the rope means something different to each of them. For the husband, it symbolizes masculine country work, which he, a vacationing city dweller, has little understanding of. However, his refusal to exchange it at the store for something more practical represents his attempt at asserting himself in his marriage. To the wife the rope symbolizes his impracticality and lack of cooperation in domestic matters. As the story progresses, however, the rope comes to mean more than these early subjective representations. Critics have suggested that the rope is the marriage itself, which is unraveling, and that Porter is hinting at various puns on marriage such as 'tying the knot,' the 'tie that binds,' and 'being roped in.'

In her essay 'The Necessary Enemy,' Porter provides an important clue to the symbolism of the rope. She says that both love and hate are natural, interwoven parts of every human relationship and that marriage is no exception. To illustrate her point, she describes a hypothetical lovers' quarrel that is an abstract summary of the quarrel in 'Rope.' The rope then is the intertwining of love and hate that make up a marriage.... It is the disproportion between effect, the bitter quarrel, and apparent cause, the purchase of the rope, which draws attention to the story's major theme, 'the awareness of free-floating hatred in marriage.' Porter's method of presenting the dialogue indirectly in this story is the most startling of its technical effects.... An important effect of the technique is the impression that the author is constantly present and 'providing a steady line of reference by which each evil and irrational word of the characters judges itself.'

The final paragraph, which describes an illogical return to a former idyllic state, without the issue of the rope resolved, contains an apparent allusion to one of Whitman's most beautiful and spiritual poems, 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.' In the poem a 'he-bird' whose mate has died sings a succession of arias that reflect the states of his spiritual understanding and acceptance of death. One of the most poignant of the arias is sung by the still hopeful he-bird calling desperately upon the elements to bring back the 'she-bird.' The she of 'Rope' reduces a whippoorwill's out-of-season song to the vulgar speculation that 'maybe the girl stood him up,' showing the reader in the final paragraph the disparity between the heroic and the trivial, the ideal and the actual, and also the delusion with which the wife is regarding the marriage."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 91-94

"'Rope' is a comic masterpiece in the tradition of Washington Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' and James Thurber's 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.' The efficient, proud wife must deal with a passive, ineffectual male who cannot fulfill his masculine responsibilities and who therefore *must* be henpecked if he is to amount to anything at all. The fact that it is the female from whose point of view the story is narrated is significant. The 'rope' is both phallically symbolic and evocative of the umbilical cord binding mother and child. The male in this story is as useless as teats on a bull.

Although the setting is not made explicit, the story has clear autobiographical references, and 'Rope' should be classified as a Texas story because of its rural setting as well as its restatement of Porter's continual theme—the passive male (like Porter's Texas father) incapable of meeting domestic responsibility. The absolute unpredictability of love, especially woman's love, is one of its themes.... The

story no doubt owes much to Porter's rural upbringing and knowledge of rural folklore. The male is, of course, given enough 'rope' to hang himself as far as his relationship with the female is concerned."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 117-18

"A lesser story but a very good one, 'Rope,' presents what might well be called a distillation of the swirling tangles of false emotions and hidden hostilities constituting a marital quarrel. This story manages to make its readers distinctly uncomfortable with very little narrated action and little elaboration of its succinct ironies.... Porter...practiced an art that was at times murderous. She sometimes, in fact, drew quite competent sketches and caricatures of herself—of her lover Luis Hidalgo, who was himself a caricature, of John Herrmann, Gertrude Stein, and others... More significant, however, are the deft verbal caricatures she drew in her fiction—of Diego Rivera and Lupe Marin in 'The Martyr,' of her husband Ernest Stock in 'Rope,' of Hunter Kimbrough in 'Hacienda.' Even when her characterizations cannot be labeled caricatures they are often rendered with a similar abbreviated deftness in which a minimally detailed appearance reveals an uncomfortable inner truth. Her familiarity with caricature as practiced by her acquaintances in Mexico...was an element in the fullness of her techniques of characterization."

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 86, 252

In the tradition of objective Realism the author of "Rope" selects representative subjects, characters and situations to dramatize universal truths about human nature in society. To emphasize the autobiographical sources of the story, as most critics do, is to shrink it from universal to personal, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Porter's hair turned white after she died of influenza in 1918 and it always looked perfectly coifed. She differentiates herself from the woman in this story by making her hair opposite to her own public image: "Her unmanageable funny black hair was all on end."

Universality is implied by not naming the protagonists. "Rope" (1928) is an allegory of modern gender relations like the abstract Expressionist play *Him* (1927) by e. e. cummings, in which Man and Woman are archetypal figures. Allegory and archetypal symbolism are characteristics of Modernism, beyond Realism. In order to convey that it is universal human nature for couples to bicker and blame each other, frequently for petty reasons, whether married or not, Porter withholds the fact that this couple is married until the fourth page of the story. By withholding specifics, Porter makes the couple more representative. He and she express criticisms of each other common to their genders, both get their feelings hurt and both think the other unreasonable, insensitive and foolish. She thinks he is lazy in refusing to help around the house, he thinks she is tyrannical and expecting too much.

As the story progresses and specificity increases, universality diminishes to what is common to many couples in the modern world. She "reminded him that housekeeping was no more her work than it was his: she had other work to do as well, and when did he think she was going to find time to do it at this rate?" This becomes the story of a woman trying to liberate herself from traditional expectations of a wife in order to have a career as well as a marriage—an allegory of women's liberation in the 1920s before the movement got taken over by radical Feminists in the late 20th century. Her husband embodies male resistance to the liberation of women. All her criticisms of him are valid. He is satirized throughout, giving the story the ironic tone characteristic of Porter, as when he pities himself: "Imagine anybody caring more about a piece of rope than about a man's feelings."

The story opens "on the third day," evoking the day Christ rose from the dead. Most critics would not make such an inference because they do not see the consistent Christianity throughout Porter's fiction. She was a Catholic. The setting here is the country, associated with the heart and pastoral values including love. The Man goes out into the world—to the village—as the provider while the Woman is the homemaker. He brings back groceries and a rope. He thinks "she looked like a born country woman," identifying her with the values of the country, including love. But she thinks "he looked like a rural character in a play," a city Man out of place in the country, merely acting a role.

He had an opportunity to express his love for her by hurrying back from the village with the coffee she has been waiting for “all day long.” But gosh, he forgot it. “She reminded him it was only because he didn’t drink coffee himself. If he did he would remember it quick enough.” He knows he should have remembered the coffee and the role he is playing requires him to provide it. “Lord, now he’d have to go back. Yes, he would if it killed him.” His willingness to go back makes him feel virtuous, in accord with the Lord and willing to sacrifice his life for his Woman. Still, he remembered to get “everything else.” He claims to himself that he is willing to die for her but resents walking back to the village for her. Instead of buying her coffee, he bought a rope simply because “he wanted to.” His desire for it though he has no use for it suggests that the rope is an unconscious symbol.

Although he is the one who desires the rope, he tries to make it something he bought for her—in her role as homemaker: “He thought it might do to hang clothes on, or something.” He is not observant enough to have noticed that they already have a clothesline rope and that she dislikes it as “a blot on the landscape.” Nevertheless, once again she “came out to meet him,” so to speak. She accepts his purchase of the rope, deciding that his wanting it “was reason enough.” However, she remains “a little disappointed about the coffee” and then sees that his heavy rope piled on top in the basket has broken the eggs. Walking on eggs is a common expression and in this case the insensitive Man has broken them with the rope. He blames it on the grocer, then lies, contradicting himself by claiming the rope was not in the basket. The broken eggs are a metaphor of their relationship. He tries to put the broken eggs of the moment together again by gently rubbing her shoulder but “this time she hissed and almost clawed.” He is so predictably insincere she knows that “He was getting ready to say that they could surely manage somehow when she turned on him and said, if he told her they could manage somehow she would certainly slap his face.”

He suggests breaking all the eggs into a bowl and setting them “in a cool place,” but there is no cool place on this summer day and they are both hot. He tries to keep the rope in her kitchen, but she will not have it. “The whole trouble with her was she needed something weaker than she was to heckle and tyrannize over. He wished to God now they had a couple of children she could take it out on. Maybe he’d get some rest.” His wish for children suggests he wants to “tie her down.” Since he is childish himself, it is ironically apt when he exclaims, “What did she take him for, a three-year-old idiot?” Like a little boy, he threatens to run away: “There was nothing he’d like better than to clear out and never come back.” He tries to intimidate her with the fact that as a couple they are financially dependent on his larger income, but it is clear that this is a woman who can take care of herself, like the woman who writes reviews for a living in “Theft.” She is not tied to this exasperating man. On top of everything else, it turns out that he has been unfaithful to her: “Yes, yes, she knew how it was with a man: if he was left by himself a minute, some woman was certain to kidnap him. And naturally he couldn’t hurt her feelings by refusing!” Yet she forgave him for infidelity as well as for everything else.

By now she sees that he will never change and when he claims to have been helping her do housework all along, she bursts into hysterical laughter. He tries to dump water on her head as if she is on fire. “She wrenched away, crying out for him to take his rope and go to hell, she had simply given him up: and ran.” And yet, when he returns from the village with the coffee, she waves to him from a distance and calls out to him. He has kept the rope despite their argument. She encourages him to keep it, since he wants it. She hooks one hand into his belt and jostles him and leans against him. “Wasn’t the air sweet now, and wasn’t it fine to be here?” Forgiveness makes her life sweet and fine. “He was a love, she firmly believed, and if she had had her coffee in the morning, she wouldn’t have behaved so funny.”

The whippoorwill at the end alludes to the lonely male bird in Whitman’s poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” This woman probably will leave her husband eventually, as the critics think. The last line of the story hints that he will continue to take advantage of her as long as he can because he supposes she will always forgive him: “he knew how she was.” Most important here is that on this “third day” she has resurrected herself after telling her husband to go to hell. Her domestic sacrifice is paralleled to the supreme act of forgiveness, Christ rising from death out of love.

Michael Hollister (2017)