

Discipline and Resistance: A Foucauldian Study of *Noon Wine*

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Abstract: Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine* profoundly reveals the complexity of human nature and the operational logic of social power. Using Foucault's theory of disciplinary power as an analytical framework, this paper explores the dynamic interaction between discipline and resistance in the novel, examines how power permeates daily life, family, and the labor field to shape individual behavior, and analyzes how characters resist through covert resistance and overt rebellion. The novel presents the individual's existential struggle and self-identity construction within the power structure, offering an important literary reference for understanding the relationship between power and the individual in modern society.

Keywords: Discipline; Resistance; Power Theory; *Noon Wine*

1. Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter is a major writer of twentieth-century American Southern literature, renowned for her concise and profound short stories and novellas that express her reflections on humanity and society. As a representative work of her Southern themes, *Noon Wine* embodies the writer's deep life experiences and social insights. The novella revolves around the bounty hunter Hatch's pursuit of Helton, an escapee from a mental hospital, and culminates in Thompson killing Hatch, Helton being captured and dying, and Thompson committing suicide. To date, scholarly interpretations of *Noon Wine* have been conducted from various perspectives, including psychoanalysis, feminism, the Southern myth, the evil of text, and narrative point of view. However, studies from the perspective of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power remain relatively limited. *Noon Wine* constructs a multi-layered, interwoven network of disciplinary power, concentrated in the xenophobia of the American South, the stigmatizing discipline imposed on marginalized groups, and patriarchal gender discipline, reducing the characters to constrained and subjugated objects of power. Therefore, using Foucault's theory of disciplinary power as an analytical tool, this paper explores the state of being disciplined and the forms of resistance of the main characters in the novella, offering a new scholarly approach to the interpretation of the work.

2. The Discipline of American Xenophobia

Foucault states, "Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility. At the same time, it imposes a principle of compulsory visibility on its objects"[1]. This invisible power does not rely on overt violence or direct coercion, but quietly penetrates into daily life, social cognition, and interpersonal interactions, turning the monitored into self-disciplined subjects without conscious awareness. Between 1870 and 1914, approximately one million Swedish immigrants poured into the United States, most of them peasants displaced by the enclosure movement and famine. Under the prevailing discourses of eugenics and the "melting pot", Nordic Germanic peoples were regarded as a high-quality ethnic group. Helton demonstrated this through his efficient labor upon first arriving at the farm: he not only excelled at farmwork and tidied up the milk shed but also gradually revived the bankrupt Thompson farm. Within a few years, he helped Thompson pay off his debts and accumulate savings, eventually becoming an indispensable pillar of the farm.

However, despite the surface-level harmony, an estrangement of identity always persisted. Swedish immigrants represented by Helton were never truly accepted. On their first meeting, Thompson questioned Helton about his nationality. Even though he acknowledged Helton's white identity, he insisted on emphasizing the label of "foreigner". Helton responded calmly, "I am a Swede[2]", while silently accepting meager wages. This passive submission was precisely the internalized result of long-term xenophobic discipline. Lacking discursive power and space for resistance, immigrant groups could only acquiesce to the notion that dissent would only lead to worse circumstances.

The bounty hunter Hatch, who saw himself as a "defender of law and order", was deeply influenced by xenophobia and eugenic discipline, targeting fugitives and the mentally ill for capture. He was deeply prejudiced against outsiders. Upon learning that Helton was playing a Swedish drinking song on his harmonica, Hatch arbitrarily concluded that "in that Norse country, everybody carries a bottle along with him as a matter of course[2]", deliberately distorting the folk song to confirm the social stereotype that "Swedes are alcoholics and insane". Hatch clung to an obsession with "pure bloodline", completely

excluding stigmatized outsiders like Helton from the identity of “American”. This extreme xenophobic mindset ultimately led to the tragedy in which he was killed by Thompson with an axe.

3. Society’s Discipline of Marginalized People

At the time, American society held a widespread stereotype of Swedish immigrants as “insane”. Rooted in nativist anxiety, ethnic prejudice, and cultural misunderstanding, this stereotype was not only casually circulated in daily conversations but also reinforced by popular media, local rumors, and even biased social comments, gradually turning into a solidified collective cognition that was hard to break.

Helton was taciturn yet possessed an almost obsessive love for his harmonica, a trait that resonated with the social stereotype. His quietness was easily misread as strangeness, eccentricity, or even mental abnormality, rather than a simple personality trait or a way to cope with cultural alienation. Moreover, Helton stabbed and killed his brother after the latter destroyed his harmonica and refused to compensate him. This act further reinforced social prejudice, and Helton was logically deemed a “madman” and sent to a mental hospital. The earliest mental hospitals in the United States were built at the end of the 18th century. Before the establishment of asylums for therapeutic purposes in the 1840s, most mental hospitals lacked medical functions and were essentially “prisons” for confining the mentally ill, who often suffered inhumane treatment[3]. In the novella, Helton is forced to wear a straitjacket: “When he got wild, they put him in a straitjacket and left him alone, and he lay there contentedly, singing his drinking song[2]”. Disciplinary power manipulates and tames the individual body in a refined, micro-scopic manner, shaping the individual into a conforming being through hierarchical surveillance and normalizing examination. Bentham’s Panopticon serves as the typical vehicle of disciplinary power: its circular structure and central watchtower keep prisoners constantly visible and under surveillance[1]. The mental asylum, perfectly aligned with the logic of the Panopticon, is an ideal site for disciplining the marginalized group of the “mad”. The straitjacket physically restrains the patient and enables constant surveillance, thereby accomplishing psychological discipline. This inhuman treatment, devoid of any medical value, exposed the brutal oppression of marginalized groups by society at the time, accompanied by a marked tendency toward stigmatization. Helton’s motive for killing was not rooted in evil, but merely in anger over the destruction of his beloved possession. Yet, because of his identity as the “silent Swede”, he was demonized and ultimately defined by society as a thorough “madman”.

4. The Discipline of Patriarchy

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out that with the evolution of social history, the methods of disciplinary power and punishment undergo transformation[1]. From violent public execution in the feudal era to subtle, daily bodily discipline in modern society, power no longer needs to rely on bloody repression but turns to invisible, long-term normalization to dominate individuals. In a patriarchal society, the ruling class achieves control and suppression of marginalized groups through refined micro-techniques. This mechanism of automatically taming the vulnerable is precisely the disciplinary system of power. The dominant male group, through micro-discipline, constructs unequal power relations between men and women, as well as between adults and children, reinforcing the subjugation and control of the vulnerable, “making the body more obedient as it becomes more useful”[1].

In the American South of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, patriarchy was deeply integrated into rural family ethics and social customs, becoming a kind of inherent ideological discipline that every member of society must obey. Thompson is the character most deeply disciplined by Southern patriarchy. He clings to a rigid conception of gender division, “Mr. Thompson could never get rid of his stubborn notion that tending cows and chasing chickens were women’s work. He liked to boast that he could hold his own at any job other men did, such as plowing, cutting sorghum, husking corn, driving horses, and building corn cribs. Of course, trading was also men’s work[2]”. This mindset is rooted in patriarchal gender hegemony, where men control family discourse and dignity, while women are confined to trivial household chores. Under this discipline, women’s labor value is downplayed and ignored, while men’s labor is labeled as “important” and “honorable”, forming a solidified gender hierarchy that is difficult to break. Deeply internalized patriarchal discipline ultimately becomes a trigger for Thompson’s suicide: “When he passed the barn he looked the other way, and he went straight to the far end of his fields, half a mile to the east. So many blows, coming at Mr. Thompson from all sides at once, he could not stop to think where he was hit[2]”. When his wife, son, and neighbors no longer trust him, the patriarchal faith he upheld completely collapses, his identity as the patriarch of the Southern family is utterly dismantled, and his life consequently comes to an end.

5. Resistance under Discipline

Where there is power, there is resistance. This core proposition of Foucault’s power theory breaks the stereotype that

individuals are completely passive under power, and reveals the dynamic and relational nature of power operation. Even though disciplinary power is powerful, it inevitably encounters multiple forms of resistance at the social level. “Although we are the results of power relations, we are not helpless objects to be shaped and manipulated by power; rather, we are subjects constructed by governmental power and normative practices. We can choose to respond to or resist these practices”[4]. Resistance coexists with power, and resistance is precisely born within the very field where power operates.

As a social outcast, Helton appears to be immersed in heavy labor and lacking in self-awareness, yet his acts of resistance are clearly discernible. His silence is not numbness, but a kind of latent accumulation of power, and his seemingly irrational behaviors are all directed against the disciplinary system that deprives him of freedom and dignity. Helton’s first act of resistance was stabbing to death his brother, who had destroyed his harmonica and refused to compensate him. Ordinarily, Helton was submissive and reserved, leading his brother to mistakenly believe that “no compensation was necessary”. However, the harmonica was his spiritual solace, and this act of crossing the line made Helton break free from the constraints of discipline and follow his inner will to resist. His second act of resistance took place in the mental hospital: the straitjacket was a form of physical discipline imposed on him, while playing the harmonica was a spiritual resistance against social discipline. Even when trapped in adversity, he still clung to his inner passion, using the harmonica to alleviate physical suffering and seek spiritual comfort. His third act of resistance was his fierce struggle when being pursued: he ran desperately through the scorching fields and woods, surrounded by a crowd armed with ropes, guns, and clubs, yet he picked up stones to fight back and resisted to the death[2]. This flight and resistance were not only an instinct for survival but also a powerful rebuttal to the hypocrisy of the Old South, which, in the name of preserving tradition, privately punished outsiders. Helton’s resistance was weak and ultimately failed to change his tragic fate. Nevertheless, it demonstrated his pure character and his steadfast devotion to what he loved, while also highlighting the cruelty and evil of the Old South society.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of disciplinary power theory, this paper interprets the power relations and individual resistance in *Noon Wine*. By deconstructing the disciplinary mechanisms in the novel, it reveals the individual’s existential struggle for freedom and self-identity under oppression. The novel discloses the pervasive infiltration of disciplinary power into daily life, as well as the individual’s struggle and resistance within the disciplinary system. Although disciplinary measures are multiple and rigorous, Helton’s resistance nevertheless demonstrates humanity’s instinctive pursuit of freedom. Such resistance not only responds to oppression but also defends individual value and dignity.

Disciplinary power is not an insurmountable barrier; even minor resistance carries profound significance. These acts of resistance are sparks in the pursuit of freedom and a driving force for social change. With its unique narrative and profound thematic implications, *Noon Wine* serves as a literary model for reflecting on the relationship between power and the individual in modern society, and for contemplating the balance between discipline and resistance. Literary works are both artistic expressions and mirrors of social culture; *Noon Wine* urges deeper critical reflection on power structures and individual resistance in the real world.

References

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