AN EXAMINATION OF CHARACTERS IN THE FICTION OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

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AN EXAMINATION OF CHARACTERS IN THE FICTION

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PREFACE

My interest in the fiction of Katherine Anne Porter began when I read one of her short stories in an American literature anthology. I thought about this story for days, puzzling over how this writer, in an apparently simple story, could create such powerful effects. And as I am interested in the craft of fiction writing, and especially interested in characterizations, I determined at some time to analyze her fictional characters in an attempt to evaluate the part characterizations play in the worth of her fiction. That is what I am attempting to do in this paper.

The characters which I have chosen for analysis appear in the Miranda stories, the novelettes, "Noon Wine" and "The Cracked Looking Glass," and in the short stories, "The Downward Path to Wisdom," "Maria Concepcion," and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." I have chosen these stories because I believe they are the heart of Miss Porter's fiction. Although a novel, No Safe Harbor, was announced for publication in 1942, as yet she has not actually published a full length novel. The technique of characterization includes much detail, but in this paper I have used as a basis for my analysis only the criteria which seemed to me most important.

For his help and guidance in the preparation of this thesis, I should like to thank my adviser, Dr. Clinton C. Keeler. To Dr. Cecil B. Williams as second reader and to others of the graduate faculty I should like also to extend my appreciation.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Katherine Anne Porter began her professional career as a fiction writer with the publication of the short story "Maria Concepcion" in Century magazine, December, 1922. Since that time many critics have praised her fiction highly in an abstract way, but they seem content to make statements of high praise which contain little specific critical analysis. Bradley, Beatty and Long, compilers of a recent anthology of American literature, include one of Miss Porter's short stories and introduce it by saying, "The reputation of Katherine Anne Porter in contemporary literature probably has no parallel."[1] Mark Schorer says Miss Porter "is truly one of our most gifted women of letters."[2] Laura Z. Hobson says there is no argument that "Katherine Anne Porter is one of the subtlest, most skilful of American writers."[3] Lodwick Hartley says, "At any point in her art she is one of the most talented of living American writers."[4] Malcolm Cowley places her alongside Thomas Wolfe,

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[1]Sculley Bradley, R. C. Beatty, and E. H. Long, eds., The American Tradition in Literature (New York, 1956), p. 1360.

[2]Mark Schorer, "Biographia Literaria," New Republic, November 10, 1952, p. 19.

[3]Laura Z. Hobson, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review of Literature, September 13, 1952, p. 6.

[4]Lodwick Hartley, "Katherine Anne Porter," Sewanee Review Quarterly, April-June, 1940, p. 215.

William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.[5] And there are many other general references to Katherine Anne Porter as one of the literary great of twentieth century fiction.

Other critics such as Edmund Wilson have attempted to analyze the reasons for Miss Porter's high place in the field of fiction, but have only come to the conclusion that "Miss Porter is baffling because one cannot take hold of her work in any of the obvious ways."[6] Wilson, after fumbling with generalities of high praise and excuses for his inability to analyze her work, concludes by saying, "But I said this review would be clumsy."[7] And one agrees that he has contributed little to an understanding of this author's high ranking place in contemporary fiction.

But despite the fact that one critic says, "...none of our eminent contemporary critics of any school has successfully elucidated or even written about Miss Porter's work"[8] there are a few who have attempted to analyze parts of her fiction and formulate their reasons for its worth. And these, although they are in disagreement as to wherein her true greatness lies, have contributed to an understanding of her work. The London Times Literary Supplement praises Miss Porter for her poetic prose as used in "Old Mortality," "Noon Wine," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and says, "What gives distinction to Mrs. Porter's work

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[5]Malcolm Cowley, "Twenty-Five Years After," Saturday Review of Literature, June 2, 1951, p. 6.

[6]Edmund Wilson, "Katherine Anne Porter," Classics and Commercials (New York, 1950), pp. 219-223.

[7]Ibid., p. 222.

[8]Harry John Mooney, Jr., The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter (Pittsburgh, 1957), p. 3.

is the strain of poetry in it."[9] Ray B. West, Jr. has made a study of symbol and theme in "Flowering Judas," which is both interesting and informative. He adds to the understanding of this story as he explains that Laura's enforced eating of the flowers of the Judas tree is symbolic of her betrayal of the people whom she thinks she is helping.[10] Harry J. Mooney, Jr. has written an excellent little booklet in which he attempts to analyze the meaning of Miss Porter's fiction.[11]

One must agree with the London Times and with those others who have commended it that Miss Porter's style is worthy of much praise. There is a strain of poetry threading through her fiction which reminds one somewhat of Emily Bronte's in Wuthering Heights. And few could refuse to concede that her style is one which fulfills Aristotle's famous requirements for clarity and beauty:

> Style to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do. It must also be appropriate, avoiding both meanness and undue elevation.[12]

That there is symbolism in the fiction of this author one cannot deny. As one reads "Flowering Judas," "The Leaning Tower," and "Noon Wine" he feels that Miss Porter, like Hawthorne, believes there is a blackness at the core of man's being which he neither recognizes nor

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[9]The Times (London) Literary Supplement, reprinted in American Writing Today, Allan Angoff, ed. (New York, 1957), p. 400.

[10]Ray B. West, Jr., "Katherine Anne Porter: Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas,'" Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, John W. Aldridge, ed. (New York, 1952), pp. 217-223.

[11]Mooney, pp. 1-55.

[12]The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle, Friedrich Solmen, ed. (Random House, Inc., 1954), p. 167.

understands and that she uses symbols, to a certain extent, to portray this to the reader.

All fiction, to be of worth, must be meaningful; and surely Mooney is correct in describing Miss Porter as an artist with something to say. Her themes are the universal ones of life, death, the need for love, and the confusion that faces man in his struggle for existence. Of the need for love she has said:

> It is hardly possible to exaggerate the lovelessness in which most people live, men or women: wanting love, unable to give it, or inspire it, unable to keep it if they get it, not knowing how to treat it, lacking the humility, or the very love itself that could teach them how to love: it is the painfullest thing in human life.[13]

One sees this great human need portrayed in such of her stories as "The Cracked Looking Glass," "The Downward Path to Wisdom," "He," and others.

Of the confusion that is prevalent in the life of man in the twentieth century, Miss Porter has said, "...most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in an effort to...understand...this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world."[14] And one can see this theme in such of her stories as "The Leaning Tower," "Hacienda," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

But Porter herself has said that she is chiefly interested in human character. She once said, "I have a peculiar antipathy to thinking of anyone I know in symbols or mythical characters..."[15] And at another time she said, "I think one of the greatest troubles is that too many

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[13]Katherine Anne Porter, "Orpheus in Purgatory," The Days Before (New York, 1952), p. 88.

[14]Porter, "Introduction to Flowering Judas," The Days Before, p. 130.

[15]Porter, "Reflections on Willa Cather," The Days Before, p. 68.

persons are going around painfully trying too hard to understand. I wish we could relax a little."[16] But of character delineation she has said, "I have never known an uninteresting human being, and I have never known two alike; there are broad classifications and deep similarities, but I am interested in the thumbprint."[17] And in advice to writers she says:

> ...get so well acquainted with your characters that they live and grow in your imagination exactly as if you saw them in the flesh; then finally, tell their story with all the truth and tenderness and severity you are capable of.[18]

It is generally conceded that an artist who creates great fictional characters is worthy of a high place in fiction. Fred B. Millett puts it thus: "Characterization may be considered the flesh and blood that makes the story not a bare skeleton but a living organism."[19] And Henry James says, "The only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not."[20] And how else can fiction attain life but through its characters?

A test of a character's vitality is his ability to move the reader emotionally, for fiction, like all art, has as its object the creation of emotion in the beholder. For the reader to respond emotionally to the character he must be interested in what happens to that character. And this is the test of a fiction writer: can he create characters whom

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[16]Mark Van Doren, ed., New Invitations to Learning (New York, 1944), p. 217.

[17]Porter, "Three Statements About Writing," The Days Before, p. 127.

[18]Porter, "No Plot, My Dear, No Story," The Days Before, pp. 135-136.

[19]Fred B. Millett, Reading Fiction (New York, 1950), p. 44.

[20]Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The House of Fiction (London, 1957), p. 35.

his reader intensely cares about? The methods by which characters are delineated may be broadly divided into three parts, no one part of which is more important than the other. (1) The character must be vested with universal traits: the natural traits that are familiar to all, the universal emotions of hope, fear, despair, natural affections, love, physical appetites, that are shared by all mankind. If the character is endowed with universal traits the reader can identify himself with that character, and will consequently care about what happens to him. (2) The character must have distinguishing traits of mind or character that stamp him as a distinct personality, traits as individual as his thumbprint. It is this which makes him infinitely and endlessly surprising, and a delight to the reader. (3) He must be allowed to reveal himself objectively. The reader will not be moved emotionally by being told about the character. He wants to be able to see the character's physical appearance, hear his voice, watch his actions, and feel his emotions. He wants to know what effect the character has upon others; and above all, he wants to understand the workings of the character's mind. This last is done by the author's taking the reader into the character's mind and showing his inner life; and because of this the fictional character often seems more real to the reader than his own friends.

If a writer endows his characters with both universal and individual traits and allows them to present themselves objectively through self-revelation, the emotional content will be "present as implicitly as the germ in a grain of wheat."[21] As the art of writing is really all of one

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[21]Porter, "The Art of Katherine Mansfield," The Days Before, p. 86.

piece and every aspect is interwoven with the others, one cannot entirely isolate the different elements of a story. However, since some limitation is necessary, this study will be limited to an analysis of some of Miss Porter's characters on the bases of their universality, originality, and objective presentation, in an effort to determine what contribution they make to the worth of her fiction. It is hoped that this analysis of character will provide a more specific basis for judging this author's fiction than has been available up to the present time.

CHAPTER II

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND THE MIRANDA STORIES

Katherine Anne Porter

In looking at the life and fiction of Katherine Anne Porter one can see that the two are inseparably related and that Miss Porter's fiction involves the sum of her experiences. There are two distinct threads running through all her stories. One shows the influence of her physical environment, the other the influence of the great writers whom she has read since early childhood.

Of her physical environment she said, "I am the grandchild of a lost war, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation."[1] She grew up listening to stories of the past, and one sees this environment reflected in many of her pieces of fiction. Her grandmother had brought the family from Kentucky to Louisiana, then on to Texas shortly after the Civil war, when Miss Porter's father was a small boy. To the grandmother, to the old Negroes who had been her former slaves, and to the relatives of the generation preceding Miss Porter, this past, softened by the illusions which only time can create, was more vivid and more real than the present. These stories which Porter heard and the environment in which she lived color everything she writes.

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[1]Katherine Anne Porter, "Portrait: Old South," The Days Before (New York, 1952), p. 155.

Miss Porter was born in Indian Creek, Texas (a small town near San Antonio), in 1894. And she, like Miranda in the stories, was reared by her grandmother until the death of the grandmother when the little girl was almost nine. She says in relating this in "Portrait: Old South," that the grandmother had "brought up a houseful of the worst spoiled children in seven counties, /then/ started in again hopefully with the motherless grandchildren."[2] The parallels between the life of the fictional character Miranda and Katherine Anne Porter are obvious when one reads her autobiographical sketches and compares them with the events in the life of Miranda. One frequently meets the same character in these sketches that he meets in her stories. And once when, in speaking of "Old Mortality," she was discussing Miranda's father her tongue slipped and she said, "My father."[3]

The characters in the Miranda stories are not only based on those in Porter's actual environment, but they sometimes have the same names. Old Uncle Jimbilly, the former slave who is the central character in "The Witness," was a servant of Miss Porter's grandmother and had come with the family from Kentucky to Louisiana and Texas. And one feels there can be no doubt that Miranda's grandmother evolved from Miss Porter's grandmother. Porter has said, "The artist can do no more than deal with familiar and beloved things....All of the things I write of I have first known, and they are real to me."[4] And in another

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[2]Ibid., p. 159.

[3]Ray B. West, Jr., "Katherine Anne Porter and 'Historic Memory,'" Southern Renascence, edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), p. 280.

[4]Katherine Anne Porter, "Why I Write About Mexico," The Days Before, p. 242.

statement she says, "All my past is usable, in the sense that my material consists of memory, legend, personal experience, and acquired knowledge. They combine in a constant process of re-creation."[5]

One finds constant verification that Miss Porter follows the above concepts in writing her fiction. The Miranda of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and Katherine Anne Porter both worked as reporters on Colorado newspapers during World War I, and both had a duel with death in the dread influenza epidemic of 1918. There is no full length biography of Miss Porter, but on the basis of many facts one feels safe in assuming that all of the Miranda stories are roughly autobiographical; and they give a much clearer picture of the artist up to the age twenty-four than any biographer could paint.

Miss Porter's other fiction, too, bears the stamp of her own experiences. Laura of "Flowering Judas" is modeled on a close friend of Miss Porter's when the two girls were teaching English in Mexico and working for the Revolutionary government.[6] "The Leaning Tower," with its powerfully portrayed atmosphere of fear and hatred in the Germany preceding World War II, shows that Miss Porter, while she was a student in Berlin on a Guggenheim fellowship in 1931, was sensitively alive to conditions around her and that she is using her own actual sense impressions when she writes this story. And "Noon Wine," with its setting on a small Texas farm, portrays characters whom Miss Porter has seen and situations based on her actual experiences.[7]

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[5]Katherine Anne Porter, "Three Statements About Writing," The Days Before, p. 123.

[6]Malcolm Cowley, "Twenty-Five Years After: The Lost Generation Returns," Saturday Review of Literature, June 2, 1951, p. 7.

[7]Katherine Anne Porter, "Noon Wine: The Sources," The Yale Review, September, 1956, pp. 22-39.

Katherine Anne Porter has always been a prolific reader, and one sees in her fiction the influence of this environment as clearly as he sees that of the physical. Of this aspect of her life she says, "I could write an autobiography based on my reading until I was twenty-five."[8] The great writers of fiction whom she mentions as influencing her are all English; and these include the outstanding writers of both the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. But her fiction seems most clearly to show the influence of an outstanding few. And the statements which Miss Porter makes about the fiction of these, her favorites, seem especially applicable to her own writing. Of Thomas Hardy she says, "His characters...have living flesh and blood in them. He makes the reader feel that he was there....In the end his work was the sum of his experiences and backgrounds."[9] Of Henry James she says, "...he could convey mysterious but deep impressions of individual characters."[10] Of Virginia Woolf she says, "...she ranged freely under her own sky, speaking her mother tongue fearlessly."[11] Of Katherine Mansfield she says,

> With fine objectivity she bares a moment of experience, real experience, in the life of some human being; she states no belief, gives no motives, airs no theories, but simply presents to the reader a situation, a place, and a character, and there it is; and the emotional content is present as implicitly as the germ in a grain of wheat.[12]

But although Miss Porter's fiction is based on her environment,

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[8]Porter, "Three Statements About Writing," The Days Before, p. 123.

[9]Porter, "On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy," The Days Before, pp. 33-35.

[10]Porter, "The Days Before," The Days Before, p. 18.

[11]Porter, "Virginia Woolf," The Days Before, p. 115.

[12]Porter, "The Art of Katherine Mansfield," The Days Before, p. 86.

she has taken the many strands and woven a pattern all her own. She is an extremely conscientious artist who will burn a work rather than publish something which fails to come up to her standards. She has burned four novels and countless short stories.[13] Because of these high standards she has published only four books, but these have taken their place with the works of such authors as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Herman Melville.[14] And two of her books have been translated into Japanese and one into Arabic.

The Miranda Stories

When one thinks of Miss Porter's fiction he usually thinks first of the Miranda stories. There are six short stories and two novelettes in this series, and they are nearly as closely related as the chapters of a novel. The events and the characters of each are inextricably interwoven with those of the others, and to be fully enjoyed they should be read as a whole. It is Miranda herself (although she is not the central character in every story) who is the protagonist of this series and who provides the unity for this "novel."

We first meet Miranda when she is little more than a baby, and she is immediately stamped as an individual personality who also has the universal traits of excitement and curiosity of any small child attending the circus for the first time. We see this skinny, "quick flighty" little girl, with a snub nose covered with freckles and with

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[13]Robert Van Gelder, "Katherine Anne Porter at Work," Writers and Writing (New York, 1946), p. 42.

[14]Miss Porter's novelette, "Noon Wine," appears in a compilation of Six Great Modern Short Novels (New York, 1954).

speckled gray eyes, holding tightly to the hand of Dicey, the colored nursemaid, as the two enter the large billowy circus tent and find seats on the long planks rising one above the other under the white sagging canvas of the big top. Miranda, as any small child would do, looks all around with eyes bulging, trying to see everything at once. And we are taken into her mind and experience her fearful excitement as her inner emotions are mingled with her outward expressions:

> An enormous brass band seemed to explode right at Miranda's ear. She jumped, quivered, thrilled blindly and almost forgot to breathe as sound and color and smell rushed together and poured through her skin and hair and beat in her head and hands and feet and pit of her stomach. "Oh," she called out in her panic, closing her eyes and seizing Dicey's hand hard.[15]

We experience all the excitement of the circus through Miranda's senses. The blaring of the band was the introduction for the entertainment to get under way, and Miranda watches breathlessly as a white-clad clown prances along a tightly stretched wire high above the crowd. We feel her terror as he staggers and wobbles and catches the wire with his heels, then hangs one heel over the wire and swings back and forth like a scarf in the breeze. At this point Miranda's terror has reached the stage of actual pain. She shrieks, "...clutching at her stomach with her knees drawn up."[16] And as the acrobatic clown continues to hang by one heel and blow kisses to the audience Miranda clasps her hands over her eyes and screams, the tears running wildly down her cheeks. This ends Miranda's visit to the circus. The grandmother orders Dicey to take Miranda home and Miranda leaves in disgrace, but not before she slaps the dwarf who leers at her as they go out.

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[15]Porter, "The Circus," The Leaning Tower (New York, 1944), p. 23.

[16]Ibid., p. 24.

In the above passage Miranda has shown the reader by her gestures, her actions, her screams, and her tears that she is experiencing complete terror at the clown's flirtation with death. This attitude continues to be reflected in her chastened behavior as Dicey, snatching her along home, grumbles and berates her, calling her, "little ole meany...little ole scare-cat...gret big baby."[17] Miranda, who is used to retorting in kind, only keeps silent. And that night the reader is again shown her terror of death when in a vivid nightmare she sees the tight-wire walker hurtle to his death. She wakes up screaming and is again berated by Dicey, but she only hugs Dicey with both arms, crying, "Don't leave me. Don't be so angry! I c-c-can't bear it!"[18]

There are other vivid portrayals of Miranda as a tiny girl. We see her as a "quick flighty little girl of six"[19] listening to the stories of slavery days as told by Uncle Jimbilly while he whittles a tombstone for her pet jackrabbit. And we see her impulsive generosity when she pulls up an entire mint bed and gives it to a strange young woman who, passing by, asks for a sprig of mint.[20]

We see another side of Miranda's character when she is eight. Here she is living in the shadow of the legends of the past as she listens to the stories of the dead Aunt Amy, whose picture smiles forever from its walnut frame on the parlor wall of the Texas farmhouse. And we

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[17]Ibid., p. 25.

[18]Ibid., p. 28.

[19]Porter, "The Witness," The Leaning Tower, pp. 13-16.

[20]Porter, "The Old Order," The Leaning Tower, p. 34.

are taken into her mind as she reflects that in spite of all the legends of Aunt Amy's great beauty she only sees her as a ghost in a frame, still a fascinating ghost of whom she never tires hearing, and she frequently requests, "Tell me again how Aunt Amy went away when she was married."[21] At other times she sits by the side of the grandmother on the floor of the lumber room as the grandmother examines and cries over the relics of the past, and here, too, the reader is taken into Miranda's mind and shown these keepsakes through her eyes:

> Such dowdy little wreaths and necklaces...such moth-eaten bunches of pink ostrich feathers for the hair; such clumsy big breast pins and bracelets of gold and colored enamel; such silly-looking combs, standing up on tall teeth capped with seed pearls and French paste. Miranda, without knowing why, felt melancholy. It seemed such a pity that these faded things, these yellowed long gloves and misshapen satin slippers... should have been all those vanished girls had to decorate themselves with. And where were they now, those girls, and boys in odd-looking collars?[22]

At this stage of her life Miranda no longer feels a terror of death, but a sad melancholy that this is all that remains of what were once live boys and girls, even as she is now.

This eight-year-old Miranda is also a day-dreamer. By the revelation of her inner life we know that this skinny, freckled, snub-nosed little girl believes that by some miracle she will grow up to be a tall cream-colored brunette, and she decides she will always wear a long trailing satin gown.

The reader sees two phases of Miranda at nine. First he sees the hoydenish tomboy, hunting rabbits and doves with her brother Paul. The grandmother is dead and the motherless family is running down. He sees Miranda on a burning hot mid-summer day as she and Paul interrupt their

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[21]Porter, "Old Mortality," Pale Horse, Pale Rider (New York, 1939), p. 8.

[22]Ibid., p. 7.

hunting to explore what had been the family burial plot on a corner of the farm. This plot of land has been sold, and the bodies of the relatives who were buried here have been dug up and reburied alongside the grandmother in the big public cemetery. The graves are now lying open and empty in the small neglected garden of tangled rose bushes and ragged cedar trees and cypress, their simple flat stones rising out of the uncropped grass.

We watch Miranda's actions, see her appearance, and experience her emotions as she and Paul carefully lean their twenty-two Winchester rifles against the rail fence that encloses the former burial spot and climb the fence to explore the empty graves. Miranda is wearing dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man's straw hat, and thick brown sandals on her sockless feet. We see her as she leaps into the pit that had held her grandfather's bones and digs around in the loamy crumbly earth, sifting it through her grimy fingers. Suddenly she is tremendously excited. She has a small silver dove with spread wings in her hand, and she scrambles over the edge of the grave shouting to Paul that she has found "something." Paul, peering out over the rim of another grave, answers that he, too, has found a treasure. Paul's treasure is a thin gold ring. He and Miranda strike up a trade and each feels that he has gotten the best of the bargain.

We see the second phase of Miranda in this same scene, and we see her change from the hoydenish tomboy to a quiet awe-filled youngster speculating over mysteries of life and death. She and Paul resume their hunting, but Miranda is no longer interested in the shooting. She is wearing the gold ring on her grimy thumb and waving it about gently to enjoy its glitter in the blazing sunlight, and by revelation

of her inner life the reader knows that "she is suddenly filled with an aversion toward her overalls and sockless feet, toes sticking through the thick brown leather straps."[23] She longs to rush back to the farmhouse, take a good cold bath and dust herself with sister Maria's violet talcum powder and dress herself in her own nicest dress. In this state of mind, she lets Paul shoot the rabbit that leaps into their path, and as she stands watching him remove its soft fur and looks on its bag of tiny unborn young her transition is complete. When Paul says, "They were just about ready to be born," Miranda says, "I know," and she was "quietly and terribly agitated, standing again with her rifle under her arm, looking down at the bloody heap."[24] This is not the Miranda of "The Circus" who looked on death with terror. It is not the eight-year-old who looked on death with unexplainable melancholy. For now Miranda, standing in the presence of birth and of death, feels that they are inextricably linked and that both are a great and awe-inspiring mystery. And she herself reveals this to the reader by her quiet agitation as Miss Porter harmonizes her inner emotions with her speech and her actions.

The reader next sees Miranda at ten. She and Maria are "immured" in a New Orleans convent where they are "trying to avoid an education."[25] Miranda finds this life extremely dull, but she tries to enliven it by likening her own existence to that of past imprisoned martyrs. In spite of her excursions into the world of make-believe, life is gloomy,

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[23]Porter, "The Grave," The Leaning Tower, p. 74.

[24]Ibid., p. 77.

[25]Porter, "Old Mortality," Pale Horse, Pale Rider, p. 40.

and its only bright spots are the Saturday afternoons when she and Maria are taken to the race tracks by some visiting member of the family. On this particular Saturday afternoon we see the little girls' physical appearance and are taken into their minds as they sit in the parlor of the Convent, "hats in hand, curly hair plastered down and slicked behind their ears, their stiffly pleated navy-blue skirts spread out around them, waiting with their hearts going down into their high-topped black shoes" for someone to arrive to take them to the races.[26] They never know if that someone will appear, so they never put on their hats until the last minute. On this afternoon the Father appears. He has come all the way from Texas, and Maria expresses her delight, but Miranda shows her independent impulsive nature as she reprimands him: "Why didn't you send word yesterday? I could have been looking forward all this time."[27]

At the race track this ten-year-old Miranda is as excited as the tiny Miranda had been when she first entered the giant circus tent. Surrounded by the great crowd with its beautifully dressed ladies and elegant gentlemen with yellow gloves, the blaring bands and the wildly beautiful horses careening around the track with tiny monkey-shaped boys on their backs, limbering up for the races, we are taken into her mind as she plans her career as a jockey. Why does she have to study arithmetic? To ride better is what she needs. This dream has supplanted her earlier dream of becoming a great beauty, dressed in a trailing satin gown; and today she makes her plans as to how she will

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[26]Ibid., p. 41.

[27]Ibid., p. 42.

train in secret, then one day ride out, surprising the family and winning a great race.

She comes back to reality when Uncle Gabriel's mare, Miss Lucy, on whom she has bet her dollar, wins the race and pays off a hundred to one. We feel her emotions as they are portrayed in her actions and her appearance as she and Maria "leap up and down screaming and clapping their hands, their hats falling back on their shoulders, their hair flying wild."[28] But when she sees Miss Lucy, bleeding at the nose, her eyes wild, her knees trembling, and snoring with each breath, something again happens to Miranda:

> Miranda stood staring. That was winning, too. Her heart clinched tight; that was winning, for Miss Lucy. So instantly and completely did her heart reject that victory, she did not know when it happened, but she hated it, and was ashamed that she had screamed and shed tears for joy when Miss Lucy, with her bloodied nose and bursting heart had gone past the judges' stand a neck ahead. She felt empty and sick and held to her father's hand so hard that he shook her off a little impatiently.[29]

Miranda is no longer the excited winner at a horse race. As she watches the victorious Miss Lucy with bloody nose and trembling knees, Miranda is filled with a great compassion for suffering. She feels the terrible emptiness of such a victory as Miss Lucy's; and the reader, as he watches her actions and is taken into her mind, also feels the emptiness and waste of such a victory. In holding so tightly to her father's hand Miranda expresses something of the same terror which she expressed following her nightmare of the circus when she clung so desperately to the colored Dicey. All this is set forth vividly and objectively with no subjective intrusion of the author.

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[28]Ibid., p. 48.

[29]Ibid., pp. 49-50.

Eight years elapse between this day at the race track and our next meeting with Miranda. In this scene she is on the train coming home for Uncle Gabriel's funeral. She finds a seat by the side of a fierce-looking old lady in black, with large buck front teeth. Miranda infuriates this lady by unwittingly sitting on her hat. After apologizing, she learns that this lady is the Cousin Eva of her childhood, the ugly duckling of the family who has always been the scapegoat and the butt of jokes. And we get another picture of the young Miranda of some years previous as Cousin Eva remembers her as a very opinionated little girl who was planning to be a tight-rope walker and a violin player at the same time. We learn that Miranda is still a dreamer when she tells Cousin Eva that she now plans to be an air pilot. As the conversation continues Miranda tells Cousin Eva that she has eloped the year previous and that her father has not forgiven her.

As Cousin Eva and Miranda become quite friendly, Cousin Eva tells her version of the life and death of the high-spirited Amy. Miranda, as she sees the hatred in Cousin Eva's eyes, realizes that Eva's version of the past is no more true than is the glamorized legend which she has heard throughout childhood; it is colored by hate and suffering as truly as the other was colored by love. Miranda, as she makes this discovery, reveals that she has the same strong compassion for suffering as she had eight years ago at the race track when she saw Miss Lucy come in with a bleeding nose and broken heart. Her inner emotions are expressed in her actions: "Miranda reached out and took Cousin Eva's hand and held it..../She/ pulled herself together,

feeling limp, and stood up....She hesitated, then quite suddenly kissed her Cousin Eva on the cheek."[30]

At the station next morning Miranda is met by her father, who, in his resentment at her elopement, ignores her and gives his attention to Cousin Eva. But Miranda arrogantly ignores the slight, thinking, "I will make my own mistakes, not yours..."[31] And she feels like an alien in the presence of these her relatives as she rides toward her old home, seated in the front seat of the conveyance by the side of the Negro boy, Skid. And as she sits listening to her father and Cousin Eva again going over the events of the past the reader is taken into her mind:

> She did not want any more ties with this house, she was going to leave it, and she was not going back to her husband's family either. She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred....she was not going to stay in any place with anyone that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said "No," to her.[32]

As she continues to muse: "Oh, what is life....and what shall I do with it?"[33] the reader shares her deep emotions and stands with her at the threshold of her new life as she determines to sever the cords that bind her to the past and learn for herself the answer to the riddle of mortality.

It is six years later when we again meet Miranda and learn what she is doing with her life in 1918. She is now twenty-four. At this time she is working as dramatic critic for the Blue Mountain News,

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[30]Ibid., pp. 81-82.

[31]Ibid., pp. 84-85.

[32]Ibid., p. 87.

[33]Ibid.

and trying to live on $18 a week. The reader gets a vivid picture of her attitude toward the war and toward the Liberty Bond salesmen who plague her to buy a bond. These two salesmen, seated on her desk with their well-dressed and over-fed look, are threatening her with the loss of her job if she doesn't buy a bond. Miranda, who has only twenty-seven cents left after she pays for food and lodging each week, begins to be nervous and afraid. She took the cover off her typewriter, then put it back again. They continue to threaten; she remains silent, but she thinks:

> Suppose I were not a coward, but said what I really thought? Suppose I said to hell with this filthy war? Suppose I asked that little thug [the youngest bond salesman] what's the matter with you, why aren't you rotting in Belleau Wood? I wish you were...[34]

Miranda has been working on this morning newspaper for three years, keeping unnatural hours, eating at dirty little restaurants, smoking too many cigarettes, drinking gallons of bad coffee, and now she is tired and disillusioned and on the verge of influenza. Adam, the young soldier on leave, is the only bright spot in her life. We see her on the day following the encounter with the bond salesmen, in a cheap little restaurant, drinking her sugarless coffee and preparing to go to work: "She slipped from the high seat, leaned against it slightly, glanced at her face in her round mirror, rubbed rouge on her lips and decided she was past praying for."[35] And as Chuck, the sports editor, goes with her to cover her assignment, she tells him, "I'd like to sit down here on the curb, Chuck, and die, and never again see...I wish I

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[34]Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Pale Horse, Pale Rider, p. 186.

[35]Ibid., p. 202.

could lose my memory and forget my own name."[36] In the theater where Chuck writes her review for her, she slips down in the seat and leans her head against the dirty plush, closes her eyes, and faces for one instant "the overwhelming and awful knowledge that there was nothing at all ahead for Adam and for her. Nothing."[37]

We later see the ill Miranda in her shabby, cold room, nursed by Adam as her mind travels between delirium and reality. Sitting up in bed, she tells Adam, "Let's sing, I know an old spiritual." She begins in a hoarse whisper, "Pale horse, pale rider, done take my lover away--"[38] She and Adam sing this song of death together. Following this, in her delirium, she sees Adam dead from an arrow that has passed through her own heart; and she jumps from bed, screaming, but Adam catches her and returns her to her bed.

The reader finally sees Miranda in the hospital after a long sojourn in the world of delirium. She is returning to life:

> She opened her eyes and saw pale light through a coarse white cloth over her face, knew that the smell of death was in her own body, and struggled to lift her hand....She saw the doctor and nurse glance at each other with the glance of initiates at a mystery, nodding in silence, their eyes alive with knowledgeable pride. They looked briefly at their handiwork and hurried away.[39]

But to Miranda restored life is no victory:

> There was no light...compared as it must always be with the light she had seen beside the blue sea that lay so tranquilly along the shore of her paradise....opening [her eyes] she saw with a new anguish the dull

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[36]Ibid., p. 214.

[37]Ibid., p. 217.

[38]Ibid., p. 240.

[39]Ibid., p. 255.

world to which she was condemned...ah, dead and withered things that believed themselves alive.[40]

And when she learns that Adam has died of influenza, although she has been spared, she calls it "the last intolerable cheat of her heart."[41]

The characterization of Miranda in this last story, which covers a few months in her life when she is twenty-four, is much more subtle than in the other Miranda stories. The stream-of-consciousness method as developed by Henry James is employed much of the time, and the reader is taken backward and forward in the character's mind as this mind itself is the stage for the action. Throughout these stories, however, the reader frequently has been taken into Miranda's mind, as well as shown her actions and emotions. And at the conclusion of this series he feels that he knows her intimately. He has seen her individuality (her thumbprint) displayed at the circus when she was little more than a baby. He has seen it as, clad in the regalia of a tomboy, she explored her grandfather's grave. And he has seen it in the adult Miranda who scoffed at fake patriotism and the "glories" of war. He has seen her universal traits from the time she looked with bulging eyes at all the wonders of her first circus until she comes from her brush with death filled with disillusion at the emptiness of life. He has seen her change from a little girl, terrified at the impending presence of death, to a youngster filled with great awe at its mystery, and finally to an adult, who sees death as the only true reality and preferable to life with its "dead and withered things that believed themselves alive."[42]

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[40] Ibid., p. 259.

[41] Ibid., p. 264.

[42] Ibid., p. 259.

In all these stories her experiences and her emotions are those of mankind; still she colors them with the distinctive rays of her own individual personality. This universality and individuality are always expressed by her own actions, appearance, speech, effect upon and attitude toward others, and especially by the revelation of her inner life and its subtle but sure relation to her outward forms of expression. From the beginning of these stories until their end the reader hears her voice, sees her actions, feels her emotions.

The Grandmother

Although Miranda is the protagonist in this series of stories one of the most important characters in her early life was her grandmother, and we feel that Miranda, both through inheritance and environment, bears the stamp of this sturdy Southern pioneer. In "Old Mortality" she spoils the grandchildren and tells them countless legends of the past, but we come to know her best in "The Source" and "The Old Order." We meet her first, and instantly see her thumbprint, when very much against the wishes of her son Harry and the grandchildren, Maria, Paul, and Miranda, she is preparing for her annual trek to the farm.

> She wore...a stiffly starched white chambray bonnet, with a round crown buttoned on a narrow brim; it sat pertly on the top of her head with a fly-away look, the long strings hanging stiffly. Underneath this headdress, her pale, tightly drawn, very old face looked out with stately calm.[43]

It is this Grandmother (Miss Sophia Jane to the Negroes) who holds the family together. She spoils her grandchildren, defies her sons, and bosses the Negroes. The reader gets a clear picture of her through her actions as she arrives at the farm with the strings of her widow's

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[43] Porter, "The Source," The Leaning Tower, p. 4.

bonnet flapping in the breeze, and immediately begins her tour of inspection. She goes through the yard, observing everything and making plans for immediate changes. Down through the cane-brakes and past the hayfields she goes until she arrives at the row of Negro huts stretched along the bois d'arc hedge. She goes into their kitchens, glances into their meal barrels, ovens, and cupboards; she sends into town for whitewash, kerosene, carbolic acid, and insect powder. She puts every Negro to work with lye soap and disinfectant. Every mattress cover is emptied of its corn husks and boiled, every chair and bedstead varnished, every filthy quilt boiled and stretched in the sun.

And we see another picture of her at the farm when, at the conclusion of this visit and with her "work" all finished, she mounts her old saddle horse for a ride before returning to town:

> She would have Fiddler brought around under her old side-saddle...and mount with her foot in Uncle Jimbilly's curved hand...and off she would go with her...old-fashioned riding skirt flying. They always returned at a walk, the Grandmother sitting straight as a sword, smiling, triumphant. Dismounting at the horse-block by herself, she would stroke Fiddler's neck before turning him over to Uncle Jimbilly, and walk away carrying her train grandly over her arm.[44]

At other times she and old Nannie sit in the shade of the house (where she can keep an eye on Miranda and the other grandchildren), sew their brightly-colored patchwork, and reminisce of the past. At these times we learn what the Grandmother was like in her youth. We see her at five with tight black ringlets and stiffly pleated lawn pantalettes, looking at the half-starved Negro baby which her father has just bought,

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[44]Ibid., p. 9.

and telling him, "I want that one to play with."[45] And from that time Nannie, the small Negro with the pot belly, and the prissy spoiled Sophia Jane had been mistress and slave, playmates and friends.

We see her at ten, concerned over the fact that Nannie has no birthday, closing her eyes, opening a calendar at random, and marking a date with a pen, then causing a furor in her family by recording the name of Nannie Gay and this birthdate under her own in the family Bible: "'Nannie Gay,' she wrote, in stiff careful letters, '(black).'"[46]

And we see her in young womanhood nursing Nannie's baby alongside her own when Nannie has the fever, not favoring the white baby over the black. "Her husband was shocked, tried to forbid her; her mother came to see her and reasoned with her. They found her very difficult and quite stubborn."[47]

This Grandmother is a many-sided character whose individuality, vitality, and warmth are felt throughout the series of stories that deal with Miranda's childhood. The reader sees this individuality expressed in the imaginative, strong-willed ten-year-old, who, moved by affection for her colored companion, gives her a birthdate, then defies the family by recording it in the Bible alongside her own. He sees it in her stubborn insistence on nursing Nannie's black baby at her own bosom when Nannie is ill. And he sees it again as she renovates the Negro huts on her annual visit to the farm. But there are also endearing traits of warmth and tenderness and loyalty

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[45]Porter, "The Old Order," The Leaning Tower, p. 40.

[46]Ibid., p. 37.

[47]Ibid., p. 46.

interwoven with her strong individuality. She spoiled her children and her grandchildren; and she had a life-long friendship and affection for Nannie Gay. When she went to the farm, the Negroes, although they knew she would work them mercilessly for the two weeks of her visit, still greeted her with affection and called her Miss Sophia Jane. And she listened to their grievances and administered justice with the same impartiality that she had shown when, in her youth, she had not favored her own baby over Nannie's black one. Throughout this story we see her "thumbprint" as she herself reveals her character through her appearance, her actions, her effect upon all around her, and through the innermost thoughts of her mind. The reader, through this objective portrayal, is able to associate his life with her own, as he hears her voice, watches her actions, and feels her emotions.

Aunt Amy

There are other vivid characterizations in this series. The legends of the dead Aunt Amy bring her alive for the reader and portray with life-like clarity her recklessness and daring. An example of this is seen through her actions on the evening of the fancy-dress ball during Mardi Gras when she copied her costume from a small Dresden china doll which stood on the mantelpiece. When she appeared in this costume her father took one look at "her white ankles shining, bosom deeply exposed, two round spots of paint on her cheeks,"[48] and went into a frenzy. He demanded that Amy cover her bosom, let down her skirts, and wash the paint off her face. She demurely complied

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[48]Porter, "Old Mortality," Pale Horse, Pale Rider, p. 24.

and left for the ball modestly attired, but when she appeared from the dressing-room for her first dance "the lace was gone from her bodice, her skirts were tucked up more daringly than before, and the spots on her cheeks were like pomegranates."[49]

Amy is the belle of the ball. Brother Harry (Miranda's father) begins to become uneasy as "young men make beelines across the floor, eyes fixed on those white silk ankles." Amy, although she is engaged to Gabriel, is enjoying her popularity immensely, and when a young Creole gentleman to whom she had been engaged two years previous appears and asks her to dance, "Amy, with a face of delight, cries out, 'Raymond!' as if to a lover."[50] She danced with him four times, then disappeared from the floor on his arm. This results in Gabriel's challenging Raymond to a duel and in Harry's taking a shot at Raymond. We see Amy's attitude toward this affair when, later that night at home Gabriel keeps asking her, "Did he kiss you Amy?" and Amy, taking off her shepherdess hat and pushing her hair back, answers, "Maybe he did, and maybe I wished him to."[51]

The above are only a few instances of the reckless abandon which characterized Amy's short life as remembered by those who loved her; and at death the ghost of her vibrant personality still hovered over the lives of the living, influencing their actions and molding their futures. Her individual "thumbprint" is seen in her defiance of conventions; still one is attracted to her by her warm human qualities.

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[49]Ibid., p. 25.

[50]Ibid., p. 26.

[51]Ibid., p. 29.

Throughout all eight of the Miranda stories the reader meets characters whose individuality excites his curiosity, imagination, and admiration; and whose universality and objective portrayal enable him to mingle his emotions with their own. He experiences the trembling awe-struck wonder of the nine-year-old Miranda as she looks on the bag of tiny unborn rabbits and muses on the mystery of life and death; and he feels her disillusion and despair at the emptiness of life when she emerges from her long illness and finds her lover dead. He thrills with admiration for the stubborn, warm-hearted grandmother as she nurses the Negro baby alongside her own. And he delights in the adventures of the high-spirited Amy as she defies conventions and creates constant excitement in the lives of all who know her.

CHAPTER III

THE NOVELETTES

In addition to the Miranda novelettes there are four others. Two of these, "Hacienda," and "The Leaning Tower," are political stories and the settings are in foreign countries. "Hacienda" is the story of an American business man and a group of Russian communists who are filming a motion picture on a hacienda in Mexico. "The Leaning Tower" depicts the rotten political structure of Berlin in 1931, as seen through the eyes of Charles Upton, a young American artist. The other two novelettes, "Noon Wine," and "The Cracked Looking Glass," are stories with a domestic setting, and it is from these two that I have chosen characters for this analysis.

"Noon Wine"

The three chief characters in this story are Mr. Royale Thompson, Mr. Olaf Helton, and Mr. Hatch. The three are inextricably interwoven, but Mr. Thompson is the protagonist. The plot of the story is briefly as follows: Mr. Thompson, a noisy, proud, shiftless man, with a sickly wife and two small boys, lives on a small rundown dairy farm in Texas. The story begins when a strange Swede comes to the farm asking for work. Mr. Thompson hires this stranger, Olaf Helton, who soon turns the farm into a prosperous, well-kept place. The Thompson family come to accept this lean, silent, harmonica-playing Swede as one of the family, although they know nothing of his past.

After nine years another stranger comes to the Thompson farm. This stranger, Mr. Hatch, tells Thompson that the Swede is an escaped lunatic who has killed his own brother for meddling with his (the Swede's) harmonicas, and that he (Hatch) has come to take him back to North Dakota so as to collect the reward money. When the Swede suddenly appears on the scene Mr. Thompson thinks he sees Hatch drive at Helton, knife in one hand, handcuffs in the other, and he thinks he sees the knife going into Helton's stomach, so he jerks the axe out of the log and brings it down with all his might on Hatch's head. Helton gets away, but the police catch him and injure him so seriously that he dies. Mr. Thompson is tried for the murder of Hatch and is found "not guilty," but he is completely confused as to why his eyes deceived him and caused him to think that Hatch had attacked Helton; for Helton did not have a scratch on him until he was injured by the police. Mr. Thompson is equally disturbed about what the neighbors think, and he takes Mrs. Thompson with him and goes from farmhouse to farmhouse trying to explain something which he does not understand himself: why he killed Hatch. The neighbors seem friendly, but Mr. Thompson knows that underneath this assumed friendliness they think him guilty of murder; and when he learns that Mrs. Thompson and his sons also believe him to be a half-crazed murderer, he takes his own life.

We meet Mr. Thompson in the beginning of the story and immediately recognize him as a unique personality as we see him on the side-porch of his ramshackle Texas farmhouse, pushing a big swing churn back and forth and spitting tobacco juice. In this one short passage he is characterized by his personal appearance, his mannerisms, and his actions:

Mr. Thompson was a tough weather-beaten man with stiff black hair and a week's growth of black whiskers. He was a noisy proud man who held his neck so straight his whole face stood level with his Adam's apple, and the whiskers continued down his neck and disappeared into a black thatch under his collar....and every now and then he turned halfway around and squirted a tremendous spit of tobacco juice out over the steps.[1]

Mr. Thompson, who hates to pay decent wages, is further characterized in his interview with the Swede, who is applying for work. When he expects to drive a hard bargain he is always especially jovial, and as he talks to Mr. Helton we see him as he laughs and shouts his way through the deal: "'Now, what I want to know is, how much you fixing to gouge outa me?' he brayed, slapping his knee. After he had kept it up as long as he could, he quieted down, feeling a little sheepish, and cut himself a chew."[2]

At another time the reader is taken into Mr. Thompson's mind and shown how he felt about operating a dairy farm:

Mr. Thompson had never been able to outgrow his deep conviction that running a dairy and chasing after chickens was woman's work....cows worried him, coming up regularly twice a day to be milked....Calves worried him, fighting the rope and strangling themselves until their eyes bulged, trying to get at the teat. Wrestling with a calf unmanned him, like having to change a baby's diaper....Hens worried him, cackling, clucking, hatching out when you least expected it and leading their broods into the barnyard where the horses could step on them...[3]

To Mr. Thompson it just did not look right for a man to have to do such things as look after cows and chickens, and this extreme concern over the appearance of things is his outstanding individual trait:

All his...activity was related somehow to Mr. Thompson's feeling for the appearance of things, his own appearance in the sight of God and

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[1]Porter, "Moon Wine," Pale Horse, Pale Rider (New York, 1939), p. 94.

[2]Ibid., p. 96.

[3]Ibid., pp. 112-113.

man. 'It don't look right,' was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do."[4]

It was this searching for the "right thing" and finding the issue infinitely confused that caused him to go from house to house trying to justify himself with the neighbors after he had killed Hatch.

Mr. Thompson's universal traits are seen in his physical appetites: his liking for his tobacco, his weakness for a "drop" of liquor. But he is made appealing by his love for his family and his deep need for their love and understanding. We see his love for Mrs. Thompson in his living on a dairy farm because that is the desire of his "Dear wife Ellie"; we see it in his doing all the despised chores (before Mr. Helton came) that he considered women's work. And we see it in the way he frequently talked everything over with Ellie. An example of this is when he has just given Mr. Helton a raise in wages and is telling Mrs. Thompson about it: "The man's worth it, Ellie....He's made this place pay, and I want him to know I appreciate it."[5] And his love for his sons is seen in his tender feelings that "They were such good boys Mr. Thompson began to believe they were born that way..."[6] This was in spite of all their mischief when they were growing up. But it is his deep need for love and understanding that is his predominant universal trait. This is the basis of his individual trait of such extreme concern over what others think of him. This need for love and understanding is what causes him finally to take his own life.

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[4]Ibid., p. 113.

[5]Ibid., p. 117.

[6]Ibid., p. 128.

It is nine years after the opening of the story when Mr. Hatch appears at the Thompson farm and the seeds of the tragedy are planted. Mr. Thompson instantly disliked this fat man with "rabbit teeth brown as shoe leather." He disliked his appearance, his mannerisms, his hypocritical joviality; and he especially disliked the fact that Hatch says Helton is an escaped lunatic who should be returned to the asylum. The two men argue over everything. Hatch, with continued joviality, makes it appear that they are arguing over their tastes in tobacco. Thompson feels his resentment steadily mounting from somewhere deep inside him, but he does not understand his own emotions. The two men are sitting on stumps down at the woodpile, and we are taken into Mr. Thompson's mind:

> Mr. Thompson didn't like it, but he couldn't get hold of it either. He wanted to turn around and shove the fellow off the stump, but it wouldn't look reasonable. Suppose something happened to the fellow when he fell off the stump, just for instance, if he fell on the ax and cut himself, and then someone should ask Mr. Thompson why he shoved him and what could a man say? It would look mighty funny, it would sound mighty strange to say, Well, him and me fell out over a plug of tobacco.[7]

Mr. Thompson's chief concern is still over what people might think and Mr. Hatch seems to know this intuitively, for he tells Mr. Thompson as Thompson defends Helton, "It won't look very good to your neighbors that you was harboring an escaped loonatic who killed his own brother ....It will look mighty funny."[8]

Mr. Thompson considers Mr. Hatch's statement, and he knows it <u>will look</u> mighty funny to the neighbors, but here he reveals another

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[7]Ibid., p. 143.

[8]Ibid., p. 151.

side of his nature. His loyalty to Mr. Helton even outweighs his concern over what the neighbors may think and he orders Mr. Hatch off the place. Hatch refuses to leave; then something happens that Mr. Thompson never did understand, and we are again both taken into his mind and shown his actions:

> He saw the fat man with his long bowie knife in his hand; he saw Mr. Helton come round the corner on the run....[He saw] the fat man drive at him, knife in one hand and handcuffs in the other. He saw the blade going into Mr. Helton's stomach; he knew he had the ax out of the log in his own hands, felt his arms go up over his head and bring the ax down on Mr. Hatch's head as if he were stunning a beef.[9]

The reader later sees Mr. Thompson as he takes Mrs. Thompson with him and makes his weary rounds from house to house trying to explain why he killed Hatch. And we see him on the last day of his life as he comes into his house, "...eyes hollowed out and dead-looking, his thick hands gray-white and seamed from washing them clean every day before he started out to see the neighbors to tell them his side of the story."[10] And that night in his bed, going over and over everything again and again in his mind, he can bear it no longer. The reader is taken into his mind as he thinks, if only Ellie would say anything to comfort him. If the boys would not look at him with hostile eyes and treat him as if he were a stranger. In his agony he bounds from the bed screaming, and in the ensuing scene it becomes clear to him that Mrs. Thompson is afraid of him and the boys hate him. And we watch him as he prepares to end his life:

> Mr. Thompson began pulling on his best pants; he put on his socks and shoes....He put on his shirt and coat....He went out...through the kitchen. There he lighted the lantern, took a thin pad of scratch

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[9] Ibid., pp. 152-153.

[10] Ibid., p. 158.

paper and a stub pencil from the shelf where the boys kept their schoolbooks. He swung the lantern on his arm and reached into the cupboard where he kept the guns. The shotgun was there to his hand, primed and ready....He went out of the house without looking back.... He passed his barn without seeing it, and struck out to the fartherest end of his fields....Finally he came to the last fence; here he sat down, back against a post, lantern at his side, and with the pad on his knees, moistened the stub pencil and began to write...[11]

He writes the note carefully and signs his full name; he folds the paper and puts it in his outside pocket. Then we watch the actions and share the emotions of a man facing death:

Taking off his right shoe and sock, he set the butt of the shotgun along the ground with the twin barrels pointed towards his head. It was very awkward. He thought about this a little, leaning his head against the gun mouth. He was trembling and his head was drumming until he was deaf and blind, but he lay down flat on the earth on his side, drew the barrel under his chin and fumbled for the trigger with his great toe. That way he could work it.[12]

Throughout this story Mr. Thompson is objectively portrayed. We know him through his personal appearance, actions, mannerisms, speech, attitude toward and effect upon others, and especially by sharing his thoughts and emotions. He has universal traits that are familiar to all men and individual traits that stamp him with a distinctive thumb-print. His weakness, expressed in his extreme concern over what the neighbors think of him, and coupled with his strong sense of responsibility toward what he considers "the right thing," results in a terrible conflict in his mind. The reader, as he watches this conflict and sees his great need for understanding and love, identifies himself with Mr. Thompson and is moved by a powerful emotion as Thompson prepares to end his life.

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[11]Ibid., pp. 173-174.

[12]Ibid., pp. 175-176.

Mr. Helton is not as fully characterized as is Mr. Thompson. The reader is never taken into his mind, and he remains a mystery figure until Mr. Hatch appears on the Thompson farm. But he does reveal himself by his personal appearance, his habits, his actions, and his effect upon others. And he is stamped as a distinct personality by his extraordinary industry, his extreme silence, and his fierce love for his harmonicas. We like him because of his industry and his appealing affection for his old mother.

We know something of his personal appearance when he first comes to the Thompson farm and we meet him as "...a tall bony man with straw-colored hair....[who] clumped down his big square dusty shoes steadily, like a man following a plow."[13] We see him through Mr. Thompson's eyes as "...a narrow-chested man with blue eyes so pale they were almost white." And on this same day we see him again through Mrs. Thompson's eyes: "She saw a long pale-haired man in blue jeans sitting in the doorway of the hired-man's shack, tilted back in a kitchen chair, blowing away on a harmonica with his eyes shut."[14]

Mrs. Thompson is ready to reprimand him for his indolence, but when she goes into the milk house she sees that he has scrubbed the wooden molds and shallow pans, skimmed the cream, swept the floor, and put everything in the milk house in complete order. This industry is seen throughout the story as Mr. Helton gets up at five in the morning, boils his own coffee, fries his bacon and goes about the chores. He gathers fallen fruit to feed the hogs, picks up stray ears of corn

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[13] Ibid., p. 93.

[14] Ibid., pp. 100-101.

when they fall from the wagon as he brings in the corn, mends broken machinery and stamps fancy patterns on the butter so that it will sell for a better price in the market.

We see both his silence and his attachment to his harmonicas from the beginning of the story to his death. When he first appears at the farm he makes no response to the small Thompson boys when they say "Hello" to him; and when Mrs. Thompson, after discovering his industry in the dairy house, tries to engage him in conversation by commending his work and complimenting his harmonica playing she only meets with silence: "Mr. Helton sat humped over, long legs sprawling, his spine in a bow, running his thumb over the square mouth-stops [of the harmonica]; except for his moving hand he might have been asleep."[15] As Mrs. Thompson's eyes wander about the shack she sees five other shiny expensive-looking harmonicas standing on a shelf beside his cot. And when she tells him that he should keep them out of reach of her little boys, he says no word, but with one wide gesture of his long arms, sweeps them up against his chest and transfers them to the ledge where the roof joined the wall.

We again see his love for his harmonicas when the Thompson boys are caught playing with them. In this scene he shakes the boys with fierce hatred in his eyes. Later we learn that it was love for his harmonicas that had caused him to kill his brother; and it finally causes him to lose his life, for it was his stooping to recover one which had fallen from his jumper pocket that enabled the police to overtake and capture him.

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[15]Ibid., p. 103.

Throughout the nine years the Swede remained a mystery figure. He was always silent, always industrious; and his only recreation was playing one of his harmonicas. Mrs. Thompson, at times, was curious about his past, but Mr. Thompson said, let him alone until he gets ready to talk. He is characterized through his personal appearance, his actions, and his effect upon the Thompson family in this passage:

> ...Mr. Helton never got ready to talk. After his work was finished for the day, he would come up from the barn or the milk house or the chicken house, swinging his lantern, his big shoes clumping like pony hoofs on the hard path. They [the Thompsons], sitting in the kitchen in the winter, or on the back porch in summer, would hear him drag out his wooden chair, hear the creak of it tilted back, and then for a little while he would play his single tune on one or another of his harmonicas....At first the Thompsons liked it very much, and always stopped to listen. Later there came a time when they were fairly sick of it...At last they did not hear it any more; it was as natural as the sound of the wind rising in the evenings, or the cows lowing, or their own voices.[16]

It is from Mr. Hatch that we learn of the silent Swede's past, and it is also Hatch who reveals Mr. Helton's tender affection for his old mother. Mr. Hatch is a character without a single admirable quality. He is the villain, and his dominant traits are those of selfishness and trickery. He attempts to trick Thompson. He has tricked the Swede's old mother. He is completely obnoxious in every way. We are never taken into his mind, but he is characterized through his appearance, speech, actions, mannerisms, and his effect upon others. When he first arrives at the Thompson farm he tells Mr. Thompson that he has come to buy a horse, and Thompson tells him that he has no horse for sale.

> The fat man opened his mouth and roared with joy, showing rabbit teeth brown as shoe leather. Mr. Thompson saw nothing to laugh at, for once. The stranger shouted, 'That's just an old joke of mine."

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[16]Ibid., p. 118.

He caught one of his hands in the other and shook hands with himself heartily....His joviality made Mr. Thompson nervous because the expression in the man's eyes didn't match the sounds he was making.[17]

In later passages Hatch discloses the Swede's love for his old mother, as well as much of his own character as he tells Thompson how he located Helton:

"Well, sir, about two weeks ago his old mother gets a letter from him, and in that letter....was a check...for eight hundred and fifty dollars.... and there it was, his name, postmark and everything. The old woman practically lost her mind with joy. She's getting childish....Helton said for her not to tell nobody. Well, natchally, she couldn't keep it to herself, with that check to cash and everything. So that's how I come to know." His feelings got the better of him....He shook hands with himself and rocked, wagging his head, going, "Heh, heh," in his throat.[18]

Then he continues:

"...so I talked to the old woman. She's pretty decrepit, now, half-blind and all, but she was for taking the first train out and going to see her son. I put it 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 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 him, but I musta mislaid them along the road somewhere. It don't reely matter, though...."[19]

The withholding of all admirable qualities in the characterization of Mr. Hatch enables the reader to feel the same intense dislike for him that Mr. Thompson feels. All of the characters in "Noon Wine" are permitted to tell their own story. Miss Porter never intrudes with explanations. She <u>shows</u> us these characters and they become more alive for us than many people in actual life. Each is stamped with an individual personality, and Mr. Thompson and Mr. Helton become our friends because of their universal traits which enable us to identify ourselves

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[17]Ibid., pp. 130-131.

[18]Ibid., pp. 148-149.

[19]Ibid., pp. 149-150.

with them. We feel a sympathy for the hard-working Swede who becomes the victim of Hatch's selfishness and greed; and we experience Mr. Thompson's own varied emotions from the time he burns with resentment toward the hypocritical, selfish Hatch until deaf, blind, and trembling, he prepares to pull the trigger that will end his own life. Miss Porter has truly made the reader hear, made him see, and made him feel, in this story of life on a small Texas dairy farm. And in Mr. Thompson she has created a tragic figure whose fatal flaw of over-concern for what others think of him moves one with a great compassion for the suffering of mankind.

"The Cracked Looking Glass"

This is the story of an Irish couple, Dennis and Rosaleen O'Toole, who live on a Connecticut farm. Rosaleen is forty-five, quick-tempered, warm-hearted, and given to much superstition and many fantastic dreams. Dennis, her husband, is thirty years her senior, serious, grumpy, and factual minded. Rosaleen looks after Dennis as if he were a baby, but life is hard for her on the isolated farm, and in her loneliness she constantly talks to herself, her cats, and to passing salesmen. She has a warm-hearted affection for young Irishmen, who are attracted to her because of her wit, her affectionate nature, and her beauty. Rosaleen is not aware of her attractiveness because the only mirror in which she has viewed herself for the last twenty-five years is the cracked looking glass, which distorts her image.

Finally, Rosaleen in desperation at her barren life, goes to the city on the pretext of finding her sister, and she plans also to buy a new mirror. While in the city she meets an Irish boy who mistakes

her kindness and insults her. She, furious at this treatment, hastily returns home to her elderly husband, forgetting to buy the mirror and resigned to life as reflected in the cracked looking glass.

We first meet Rosaleen in the kitchen of the farmhouse where she is telling one of her fantastic dreams, and coloring it with her own imagination, to a passing salesman. This story is that one of her favorite cats came to her in a dream, telling her of his death and where to find his body. When the salesman leaves and Dennis reprimands her for the tall tale, she retorts, "Well, he wanted a story so I gave him a good one. That's the Irish in me."[20] These dreams, which Rosaleen takes seriously and reports as actual happenings are her outstanding mark of individuality. She dreams of her cats; she dreams of her sister; but chiefly, both awake and asleep, she dreams of Kevin, the Irish youth who had made his home with them until five years previous and whom she now dreams is dead.

Her universal traits are a strong motherly instinct and a deep need for companionship and affection. She finds outlet for the motherly instinct in her tyrannical yet tender attentions to the elderly Dennis, and in her impulsive kindness to young boys. And she is constantly searching for companionship and affection. It is this last which takes her to the city, and brings her back, dejected, to Dennis.

We get our first glimpse of Rosaleen's personal appearance and her attitude toward her life when, on the first evening of the story, she does the milking while the elderly Dennis sits in the kitchen by the fire.

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[20]Porter, "The Cracked Looking Glass," Flowering Judas (New York, 1930), p. 166.

In the barn Rosaleen looped up her purple gingham skirts and sat with her forehead pressed against the warm, calm side of the cow, drawing two thick streams of milk into the pail. She said to the cow: "It's no life, no life at all. A man of his years is no comfort to a woman."[21]

And later that evening as she and Dennis eat the tender goose and the big wedges of cake which she has prepared in celebration of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary we see her through Dennis's eyes as he observes "her red hair and yellow eyelashes and big arms and big strong teeth."[22] He thinks she doesn't look a day older than when he married her twenty-five years ago.

On this same night, as she tries to sleep, the reader is taken into her mind as she reviews her life and fights to console herself for her empty marriage:

...she lay thinking about marriage: not about her own, for once you've given your word there's nothing to think about in it, but all other kinds of marriages, unhappy ones: where the husband drinks, or won't work, or mistreats his wife and children....or take when a young girl marries an old man....If Dennis hadn't been such a good man, God knows what might have come of it. She was lucky. It would break your heart to dwell on it....She wished now she'd had a dozen children instead of the one that died in two days. This half-forgotten child suddenly lived again in her; she began to weep for him with all the freshness of her first agony.[23]

We again see Rosaleen in midwinter. Blizzards are howling about the door of the isolated farmhouse. Dennis sits in the over-heated kitchen, wrapped in his muffler, hovering over the oven complaining of the cold. Rosaleen does all the outside chores in the zero weather, then almost suffocates in the stifling kitchen. We see her smoldering rebellion in her actions, her speech, and her state of mind:

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[21]Ibid., p. 171.

[22]Ibid., p. 176.

[23]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

She would look at some harmless thing around the house, say--the calendar, and suddenly tear it off the wall and stuff it in the fire. "I hate the very sight of it," she would explain, and she was always hating the very sight of one thing or another...[24]

It is in this state of mind that she has another of her dreams--the dreams which she always interprets as reality--she sees her sister in the city, ill and calling for her. She tells the dream to Dennis and insists that she must go to New York. Dennis protests. He is aware of her unhappiness and is afraid she is leaving him. She assures him that she will be away only a few days, and makes plans for her departure. We see her excitement through her actions and her appearance as she bustles about making preparations for her journey, and we also see her concern for the welfare of Dennis as she arranges for his comfort:

...with her hair in curl papers, she worked getting her things together in the lazy old canvas bag. She put a ham on to bake and set bread and filled the closet off the kitchen with firewood....and her eyes were excited as she walked about so briskly the floor shook.[25]

That night she tucks Dennis in with great tenderness, then lingers by his bed several minutes as she puts cold cream on her face. It is this motherly affection for Dennis in conflict with her great need for companionship and affection that gives her the complexity of a living personality.

The reader sees another picture of Rosaleen in New York when she descends from the train at Grand Central station:

She held on to her bag the colored men were trying to get away from her, and stood on the sidewalk trying to remember which direction was

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[24]Ibid., p. 193.

[25]Ibid., pp. 194-195.

Broadway where the motion pictures were. She hadn't seen one for five years; it was high time now![26]

In this picture we see the adolescent-like emotionalism of Rosaleen. She goes to the movie, sits crying over the love scenes, and munches chocolates. After the movie she looks in shop windows at filmy lingerie, considers buying a green glove-silk slip with tea-colored lace, and goes into a drugstore where she eats ice cream with strawberry preserves on it. She then attends her second movie and cries over the love songs. All of these actions of Rosaleen suggest to the reader how incompatible she is with the staid and senile Dennis.

Later, when her half-hearted attempt to find her sister has failed, she sits on a park bench, crying. These tears, however, are not for her sister, but for the failure of her dream. A half-starved Irish youth, with red hair and freckles, sits on the other end of the park bench and offers his sympathy. When Rosaleen learns that he hasn't eaten for two days she takes him to a restaurant, buys him food, and gives him ten dollars: "'That's for luck in the new world,' she said, smiling at him. 'You might be Kevin or my own brother, or my own little lad alone in the world...'"[27] And in this same warm-hearted friendliness she invites the boy to come home with her and live in a "good Irish house." At this the youth stared at her craftily out of green eyes. "'Twould be dangerous,' he said. 'I'd hate to try it.'"[28] Rosaleen instantly understood his meaning, and in the following short passage she is characterized by her thoughts, her speech, and her actions:

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[26]Ibid., p. 199.

[27]Ibid., p. 206.

[28]Ibid., p. 207.

...the blood boiled up in her face until it was like looking through a red veil. "Ye little whelp," she said...."Hold your tongue or I'll tear it out of your head!" and her right arm went back in a business-like way.[29]

Rosaleen left the city without even looking for a new mirror. We see her on the train traveling toward home, reviewing events, and thinking of Kevin and why he went away. It comes to her that Kevin went away because he loved her:

Kevin had loved her and she had loved Kevin and, oh, she hadn't known it in time! She bowed herself back into the corner with her elbow on the window-sill, her old fur collar pulled up around her face and wept long and bitterly for Kevin...[30]

Later, at home, she resumes her dull life. We see her as she sits with Dennis in the evening; she is working her embroidery, but her eyes fill with tears until she cannot see the stitches:

She was wondering what had become of her life; every day she had thought something great was going to happen, and it was all just straying from one terrible disappointment to another....Ah, what was there to remember or to look forward to?[31]

She now knows that Dennis is the only outlet she has for her tenderness and affection; and she determines to make the best of it. We see her great need in this last scene:

She leaned over and put her head on Dennis's knee...."I want you to wrap up warm this bitter weather, Dennis," she told him, "With two pairs of socks and the chest protector, for if anything happened to you, whatever would become of me?"[32]

And she feels the tears rising in her throat.

This story is a poignant one of the near-tragedy of a marriage of

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[29]Ibid., pp. 208-209.

[30]Ibid., p. 210.

[31]Ibid., p. 218.

[32]Ibid., pp. 218-219.

youth with age. Rosaleen has lived such a lonely life that her vision is as completely distorted as that of her image which she sees reflected in the cracked looking glass. Her child-like indulgence in New York City shows the depth of her starvation for life, and her tenderness toward Dennis, in his grumbling senility, makes her a character which arouses sympathy and compassion in the mind of the reader. Throughout this story Dennis is characterized as a grouchy, suspicious old man, resentful of Rosaleen's youth. He frequently hides, listening as she talks to salesmen; and this increases the reader's sympathy for the lonely Rosaleen. It is chiefly the portrayal of her life-like personality that gives this story its unity and its meaning.

The men and women in these novelettes are characterized with all the complexity of flesh and blood human beings; and as they tell their stories and take the reader into their innermost lives his emotions are merged with their own. He experiences the agony of Mr. Thompson from the evening he kills Hatch until the night he tremblingly takes his own life; and he feels the despair of the kind-hearted Rosaleen as she resigns herself to a life on the lonely Connecticut farm with no companion but the elderly Dennis and no future except that reflected from the cracked looking glass.

CHAPTER IV

THE SHORT STORIES

Miss Porter has published ten short stories in addition to the Miranda stories. Some of these have unnamed characters and are little more than sketches. But the stories are always built around the character or the story which the character is relating. "Flowering Judas," "That Tree," and "Maria Concepcion," are set in Mexico. The remaining stories have a domestic setting. The characters vary in age from extreme youth to four score years, and they vary in personality from the ten-year-old feeble minded boy in "He" to the egotistical journalist in "That Tree." But in every instance these characters are alive and make their presence felt as one reads their story. Of these ten stories I have chosen "The Downward Path to Wisdom," "Maria Concepcion," and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" for a study of characters. These characters are widely different from each other. The protagonist of the first is a four-year-old boy; of the second it is a young Mexican woman; and of the third it is an eighty-year-old grandmother. I feel that by choosing such a widely divergent group I can best study Miss Porter's technique for creating live fictional characters.

"The Downward Path to Wisdom"

This is the story of four-year-old Stephen, who is alternately spoiled and abused by the petty, emotionally immature adults of his world. He is a courageous, yet confused youngster who craves love and

desires to give it, but who sees so much of hate in the adult world of his environment that the story ends with his singing his song of hate. The plot, briefly, is as follows: Stephen, in the midst of a bitter shouting quarrel between his parents, is sent for a visit to his grandmother and his Uncle David. Here, Stephen receives much the same treatment that he had received at home: he is both petted and abused. When he takes Uncle David's balloons to give to Frances because he wants her to like him, Uncle David calls him a thief; when he takes a lemon to make lemonade for the "thirsty" Frances, Old Janet calls him a thief. Because of these misdemeanors he is sent home, and as he rides with his mother on his way home he sings his song of hate.

We meet Stephen in the beginning of the story when we see the icy-footed, pajama-clad four-year-old, crunching peanuts as he paddles into his parents' bedroom in the early morning. Instantly they start quarreling over him, each accusing the other of being a poor parent. "Mamma" first takes him into bed with them, then pushes him out because he is spilling peanut hulls on her, and "Poppa" shoves him through the door of the bedroom. As the little boy leaves we see his inner emotions depicted in his actions: "He slunk out, and trotted down the hall trying not to look back. He was afraid something was coming after him, he could not imagine what. Something hurt him all over, he did not know why."[1]

At breakfast he cannot eat and dabbles in his food, spills it on the tablecloth and on the front of his pajamas. When Marjory, the

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[1]Porter, "The Downward Path to Wisdom," The Leaning Tower (New York, 1944), p. 83.

maid, berates him and calls him, "Mean, mean," his inner feelings are again shown in his actions:

> ...[he] took up his yellow bowl full of cream and oatmeal and sugar with both hands and brought it down with a crash on the table. It burst and some of the wreck lay in chunks and some of it ran all over everything. He felt better.[2]

His individuality is seen throughout the story. We see it in his taking Uncle David's balloons and in his secretly making the lemonade for Frances. His universality is seen in his strong desire for human companionship and love.

At Uncle David's he learns that treating his young schoolmates with balloons is a means of winning their friendship and affection. Uncle David had first given him a few balloons, and he had taken these to school and shared them. When he comes home from school that afternoon he furtively climbs upon a chair with the intention of taking only three or four of the balloons from the box on top of the bookcase, but, "He did not take three or four as he intended; once his hands were upon them he seized what they could hold and jumped off the chair, hugging them to him."[3] He gives these balloons to his schoolmates, and for a time has the companionship which he so desperately longs for.

We again see Stephen characterized through his actions when Frances, one of his schoolmates, comes to visit him. He is fearful that she is about to go home and is doing everything possible to prolong her visit. Frances is enthusiastic when he mentions lemonade, but he knows he will get into trouble if he is caught sneaking the "makings." He trembled

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[2]Ibid., p. 84.

[3]Ibid., p. 97.

with the terrors of the adventure before him, but he said boldly, "I'll make some lemonade. I'll get sugar and lemon and some ice and we'll have lemonade."[4] We watch his actions and share his thoughts as he endeavors to carry out his daring maneuver:

> He sneaked on tiptoe to the pantry, took a lemon...a handful of lump sugar and a china teapot...he broke ice with a sharp pick which he had been forbidden to touch. He put the ice in the pot, cut the lemon and squeezed it as well as he could--a lemon was tougher and more slippery than he had thought--and mixed sugar and water. He decided there was not enough sugar so he sneaked back and got another handful. He was back on the porch in an astonishingly short time, his face tight, his knees trembling, carrying iced lemonade to thirsty Frances with both his devoted hands.
>
> A pace distant from her he stopped, literally stabbed through with a thought. Here he stood in broad daylight carrying a teapot with lemonade in it, and his grandma or Old Janet might walk through the door at any moment.[5]

He takes Frances to the privacy behind the rosebushes and they sip lemonade contentedly, taking turns as they drink through the spout of the pitcher. When they can drink no more Stephen forgets his discretion and shoutingly baptizes the rose bushes in the "Name father son holygoat."[6] This reveals his location to Old Janet, who calls him a thief. When Uncle David returns home and misses his balloons, he too calls Stephen a thief and he is sent home in disgrace. He seems to understand that there is no place for love and unselfish giving in his world and on the way home he sleepily sings, "I hate Papa, I hate Mama, I hate Grandma, I hate Uncle David, I hate Old Janet, I hate Marjory, I hate Papa, I hate Mama..."[7]

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[4]Ibid., p. 100.

[5]Ibid., p. 101.

[6]Ibid., p. 103.

[7]Ibid., p. 111.

It is the objective portrayal of the stout-hearted Stephen which makes this story of the emotional immaturity, pettishness, and hate of the adult world so vivid and powerful. He lends a touch of warm humor to the story as everything is seen through his eyes. There is no subjective intrusion of the author. A vivid example of this is seen when Old Janet came to take him to school on his first day, and we see her through his eyes: "She wore a dead cat slung around her neck, its sharp ears bent over under her baggy chin."[8] Porter does not explain to the reader that this is the way she appeared to Stephen. She sets it forth objectively, and in this manner throughout the story one is taken into the mind of the four-year-old, and consequently shares his emotions and lives his life.

"Maria Concepcion"

Maria Concepcion is a young Mexican-Indian who kills the lover of her faithless husband, Juan, then takes their baby to replace her own, which is dead. She is a primitive woman, a professing Christian, who feels no guilt in murdering Maria Rosa, the girl who has been her husband's lover.

Maria Concepcion first appears barefooted and carrying a string of fowls over her shoulder, as she takes lunch to her husband and the American archaeologist. She walks along the path, her straight back outlined under her clean bright blue cotton rebozo, her soft black eyes, almond-shaped and set far apart: "She walked with the free,

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[8]Ibid., p. 91.

natural...ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child."[9] She is further characterized by the effect she has upon others and by her own former actions: The neighbors think of her as a "good Christian." She had not been satisfied with her marriage behind the church, but had bought a license herself and paid the Priest for a Church ceremony. She has the respect of the village and she is "as proud as if she owned a hacienda."[10]

This pride, her stoic behavior in the face of great mental anguish, and her complete absence of guilt feelings following her murder of Maria Rosa stamp her as an extremely primitive personality. Her universal traits are seen in her fierce jealousy, and in the tender mother-love which she has for Maria Rosa's young son.

We first see her fierce jealousy as she, on this trip to the excavation grounds, discovers Juan and the fifteen-year-old Maria Rosa kissing behind the cornstalks. Here her actions indicate her powerful emotions as we are taken into her mind: "Maria Concepcion did not stir nor breathe for some seconds. Her forehead was cold; and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her spine. An unaccountable pain was in her knees."[11] But she does not reveal her presence to the lovers. She must take food to the American archaeologist, and as she trudges along, barefooted and unseeing, we are again taken into her mind:

Juan and Maria Rosa! She burned all over now, as if a layer of tiny fig-cactus bristles, cruel as spun glass, had crawled under her

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[9]Porter, "Maria Concepcion," Flowering Judas (New York, 1930), p. 4.

[10]Ibid., p. 5.

[11]Ibid., p. 7.

skin. She wished to sit down quietly and wait for her death, but not until she had cut the throats of her man and that girl who were laughing and kissing under the cornstalks.[12]

The reader sees her stoicism and her pride in the months that follow. Juan takes Maria Rosa and goes away to war. Maria Concepcion does not weep. Her baby is born dead. She does not weep. She lives alone and she resists all offers of friendship. When old Lupe, Maria Rosa's grandmother, offers her sympathy and her prayers, Maria Concepcion retorts, "Keep your prayers to yourself, Lupe, or offer them for others who need them. I will ask God for what I want in this world."[13]

Then one day Juan deserts the army and he and Maria Rosa return home. On this day Maria Rosa's baby is born. And on this day Maria Concepcion starts to market as usual--but her feet take her in another direction:

> She ran with a crazy panic in her head, her stumbling legs. Now and then she would stop and look about her, trying to place herself, then go on a few steps, until she realized that she was not going towards the market.
>
> At once she came to her senses completely, recognized...what she wanted. She sat down quietly under a sheltering thorny bush....She jerked with the involuntary recoil of one who receives a blow, and the sweat poured from her skin....Drawing her rebozo over her head...She sat in deadly silence...the sweat formed steadily and poured down her face, drenching the front of her chemise, and her mouth had the shape of crying, but there were no tears and no sound.[14]

And when she returns home her clothes are bloody and she carries a bloody knife in her hand.

The inquest is at the home of Lupe where Maria Rosa lies dead.

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[12]Ibid., p. 8.

[13]Ibid., p. 14.

[14]Ibid., pp. 20-21.

Maria Concepcion is the suspect. Juan defends her, and all the neighbors, even Lupe, protect her with their lies. Lupe will only say that she left the house and when she returned "Maria Rosa...was lying all tangled up, and from her neck to her middle she was full of knife holes."[15] The gendarmes know that it is Maria Concepcion who killed Maria Rosa, but even they are not anxious to prove it. We are again taken into Maria Concepcion's mind as she looks upon the corpse of Maria Rosa and feels no guilt:

> Her blood ran smoothly again: there was nothing to fear....She [Maria Rosa] was dead. Maria Concepcion felt her muscles give way softly; her heart began beating steadily without effort....It was all finished. 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.[16]

At the close of the inquest Maria Concepcion takes the day-old son of Maria Rosa in her arms. "'He is mine,' she said, 'I will take him with me.'"[17] And later that night we see her universal trait of mother love portrayed in her actions and in her thoughts:

> She sat against the wall of her house....The child, fed and asleep, was cradled in the hollow of her crossed legs....She felt soft and warm all over; she dreamed that the newly born child was her own, and she was resting deliciously....and even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness.[18]

Juan, too, is vividly characterized in this story. He is the undependable employee of the American archaeologist. He is the army deserter. He is the philandering lover. He is an arrogant boaster, swaggering and picturesque. But he is the loyal husband when Maria

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[15]Ibid., p. 29.

[16]Ibid., p. 28.

[17]Ibid., p. 33.

[18]Ibid., p. 35.

Concepcion is in danger of arrest for murder. He is characterized by his appearance, his actions, his mannerisms, his effect upon others, and by his psychological processes. The reader sees his personal appearance, his actions, and his mannerisms as he emerges from court after the archaeologist has saved him from being shot as an army deserter:

> Juan walked out of the stifling atmosphere of the drumhead court, a definite air of swagger about him. His hat, of unreasonable dimensions and embroidered with silver thread, hung over one eyebrow, secured at the back by a cord of silver dripping with bright blue tassels. His shirt was of a checkerboard pattern in green and black; his white cotton trousers were bound by a belt of yellow leather tooled in red. His feet were bare, full of stone bruises, and sadly ragged as to toenails. He removed the splendid hat. His black dusty hair, pressed moistly to his forehead, sprang up suddenly in a cloudy thatch on his crown.[19]

Later we see Juan in his shack which he shares with Maria Concepcion. In this scene we watch his actions, are taken into his mind, and share his emotions as he wakes from sleep as Maria Concepcion returns from her bloody mission:

> Juan awakened slowly....A blur of orange light seared his eyeballs when he tried to unseal his lids....Then he came awake with frightening suddenness, sitting up staring....Maria Concepcion stood in the doorway...."God's name!" cried Juan...for the long knife she wore habitually at her belt was in her hand....She threw it away...and got down on her knees crawling toward him....He watched her approach with such horror that the hair of his head seemed to be lifting itself away from him.[20]

It is the vivid delineation of these primitive characters with their traits of individuality and universality that makes this one of the most memorable pieces of short fiction.

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[19]Ibid., p. 16.

[20]Ibid., pp. 22-23.

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"

Eighty-year-old Granny Weatherall is on her death-bed, but with the fortitude that has carried her through life she refuses to admit to her doctor and her daughter that there is anything wrong with her. Her characterization is by the stream-of-consciousness method. The reader is taken into Granny's mind as it wavers between the present world of reality and the phantoms and shadows of death wherein she relives the vivid emotional scenes of her past life, mingles them with the present, and is unable to distinguish one from the other. Fortitude is her "thumbprint." Her universal traits are shown when, on her deathbed, she relives the heartbreak of sixty years ago. Granny herself gives the reader a vivid glimpse of her personality in the opening passage of the story:

> She flicked her wrist neatly out of Doctor Harry's pudgy careful fingers and pulled the sheet up to her chin. The brat ought to be in knee breeches. Doctoring around the country with spectacles on his nose! "Get along now, take your schoolbooks and go. There's nothing wrong with me."[21]

In these last two days of her life most of her time is spent in the past: "She lay and drowsed, hoping in her sleep that the children would keep out and let her rest a minute."[22] And again, it is John, her husband, who had died in his youth, who enters her mind:

> Sometimes she wanted to see John again and point to them [the children] and say, "Well, I didn't do so badly, did I?"...She used to think of him as a man, but now all the children were older than their father, and he would be a child beside her if she saw him now....Why, he couldn't

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[21] Porter, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," Flowering Judas, p. 121.

[22] Ibid., p. 123.

possibly recognize her. She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman.[23]

And we are shown more of the type woman she has been as she remembers how she has ridden around country roads in winter to sit up with sick women and sick negroes.

Then her mind reverts to George, who had jilted her on their wedding day, and the heartbreak she had suffered because of this returns to augment her present agony: "The pillow rose about her shoulders and pressed against her heart...oh, push down the pillow, somebody: it would smother her if she tried to hold it."[24] And immediately this moment of physical suffering is merged with the image of her intended wedding day:

Such a fresh breeze blowing and such a green day with no threats in it. But he had not come just the same. What does a woman do when she has put on the white veil and set out the white cake for a man and he doesn't come?[25]

Again her mind returns to reality: "That was hell, she knew hell when she saw it. For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell."[26] But now she decides she wants to send word to George: she wants him to know that she has forgotten him, that she had a good husband and fine children, that she never missed him. Illusion, reality, and the phantoms of the past continue to mingle in Granny's mind. We see another example of this as Father Connolly performs the rites of her last Holy Communion, and she

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[23]Ibid., p. 126.

[24]Ibid., p. 128.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

thinks he is tickling her feet:

"My God, will you stop that nonsense? I'm a married woman. What if he did run away and leave me to face the priest by myself? I found another a whole world better. I wouldn't have exchanged my husband for anybody except St. Michael, and you may tell him that for me with a thank you in the bargain."[27]

Throughout this story Granny's mind is the stage on which all of the action is portrayed. The reader by being taken into this mind gets a vivid and moving picture of a strong-willed woman who has silently concealed a heartbreak for sixty years, and he sees Granny, even in death, trying to convince herself that she has not loved George all of these sixty years. Only Miss Porter's first-hand knowledge of how a mind reacts when it wavers between life and death could enable her to so convincingly portray this scene. The reader leaves it feeling that he, too, has stood in the presence of death.

The characters in this group of stories are successful fundamentally because in each instance the author has coupled a penetrating understanding of human nature with a life-like portrayal of the character. The four-year-old Stephen as he delights the reader with his courage and initiative shows Miss Porter's understanding of young children. The primitive Maria Concepcion, goaded by a jealousy so fierce that it leads to murder, shows Porter's understanding of primitive people and customs. And the dying Granny Weatherall shows that Miss Porter has an unsurpassed understanding of the mind as it hovers near death. All of these characters move the reader with powerful emotions as he listens to their stories and lives their lives.

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[27]Ibid., pp. 134-135.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In a study of this length it has not been possible to examine all the characters in Miss Porter's fiction. Enough, however, have been analyzed to show that her characters consistently reveal their own individuality, whether it is four-year-old Stephen baptizing the rose bushes or the eighty-year-old Granny Weatherall sassing her doctor as she lies dying. This individuality moves the reader with curiosity, excitement, and admiration for these fictional heroes.

There is universality, too, in all Porter's heroes and heroines. This enables the reader to identify himself with the hero, participate in his actions, dream his dreams, feel his emotions. One tingles with excitement with Miranda at the race track when she sees her favorite, Miss Lucy, come in ahead of the other racers. One weeps with Rosaleen at the emptiness and disappointment of life as she sits working her embroidery in the isolated farmhouse with only the senile Dennis for a companion. And one cringes with Juan as he watches Maria Concepcion, standing in the doorway with the bloody knife in her hand, after she has slashed Maria Rosa to death. It is through the universal traits of these characters that one comes to feel a kinship with them and with all mankind. The reader feels their excitement, their hopeless desolation, their moments of terror, and their loneliness and fear in the presence of death. It is through these universal traits that

Katherine Ann Porter speaks,

> ...to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation--and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity--the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.[1]

These traits of individuality and universality are always revealed objectively. The reader hears Miranda's hoarse whisper as in delirium she sings the Negro spiritual, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." He watches the mannerisms of Hatch as he shakes hands with himself, congratulating his own cleverness after he has revealed to Thompson how he located Helton. He accompanies Stephen as he furtively procures the "makings" for his treat for Frances. He sees Juan as he emerges from the drum-head court, where he has been acquitted of army desertion, swaggering boldly in his gayly checkered shirt and over-sized embroidered hat. And he shares the emotions of Granny Weatherall as she wavers between life and death; for here he is taken into her mind as she relives the agony of sixty years and mingles it with her present suffering.

It is in the revelation of this inner life that Miss Porter shows her deep insight into human nature. She often goes beneath the surface of the character's conscious mind and reveals to the reader thoughts and emotions which the character himself is not aware of. It is in this that she reminds one of Hawthorne with his theory of a powerful, mystical force at the core of man's nature which causes him to do evil.

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[1]Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the Narcissus (Garden City, New York, 1897), p. xii.

Maria Concepcion had not set out from her home to murder Maria Rosa, but her feet took her in that direction without her being consciously aware of it. Mr. Thompson never understood what really happened when he killed Hatch. In all her stories Porter mingles the concrete aspects of the character (his speech, mannerisms, actions) with the abstract aspects hidden in both his conscious and his subconscious mind, and the result is a character vibrant with life, exhibiting all the complexities of human nature, and capable of moving the reader with powerful emotions.

Miss Porter is little concerned with plot. In advice to writers she says that if one will take care of characters plot will take care of itself.[2] She, like John Galsworthy, believes, that "...a human being is the best plot there is."[3] And after all, what is plot but characters in action?

The settings in her stories are always vivid and lifelike because they are never portrayed editorially. It is Miranda and her friends who show the reader the atmosphere of the Old South in the early twentieth century. It is Rosaleen O'Toole who shows him the desolate setting of the isolated little farm in Connecticut, and the bustling excitement of Grand Central Station in New York City. And it is Juan and Maria Concepcion who transport him to the archaeological village in Mexico. It is through the senses of the characters that the reader is able to experience the setting in all its graphic clearness.

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[2]Porter, "No Plot, My Dear, No Story," The Days Before (New York, 1952), pp. 135-136.

[3]John Galsworthy, "Some Platitudes Concerning Drama," Inn of Tranquility (New York, 1926), p. 193.

It is through the objective portrayal of these characters that Porter sets forth her message. She never states it as author. The great hunger for love and understanding that gnaws at the hearts of mankind is shown through the speech, actions, and the psychological processes of the four-year-old Stephen as he pilfers balloons and appropriates the ingredients of a lemonade in order to win affection. It is through Mr. Thompson's own actions, speech, and psychological processes that we become aware of the great hunger that caused him to take his own life. It is through the objective portrayal of characters that one is made to feel the terrible pathos of man's cruelty as seen in the characterization of Mr. Hatch who, in his selfishness and greed, causes Helton to lose his life and Thompson to become a suicide. It is seen through the senses of Miranda as she suffers at the terrible human waste and uselessness of war. It is only through the objective portrayal of characters that theme can convey its full meaning and its emotional appeal.

Joseph Conrad has said that if a fiction writer makes the reader hear, makes him see, and makes him feel, then he has done everything.[4] Truly, Porter does this throughout the pages of her fiction: her praise of Katherine Mansfield is applicable to her own work:

> With fine objectivity she bares a moment of experience, real experience in the life of some human being; she states no belief, gives no motives, airs no theories, but simply presents to the reader a situation, a place, and a character, and there it is; and the emotional content is present as implicitly as the germ in a grain of wheat.[5]

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[4]Conrad, p. xiv.

[5]Porter, "The Art of Katherine Mansfield," The Days Before, p. 86.

Some critics may be content to laud Miss Porter as one of America's outstanding fiction writers without troubling to analyze the reasons for her greatness. Others may contend that it is through her poetic prose that she has attained her high place in contemporary American fiction; while still others may attribute her high place to her use of symbol and theme. And one grants that her style, her themes, and her use of symbol do contribute to the worth of her fiction. But it is through her living characters with both their individual and universal qualities set forth with the fine objectivity of a great artist that Miss Porter achieves much of her eminence as a writer of twentieth century fiction.

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