

**Katherine Anne Porter's Women and the Institutions that Ensnare Them:  
Confinement and the Will for Freedom in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories***

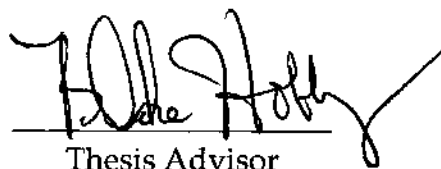
Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Literature at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Fall 2008

By *Maggie Harvin*



Thesis Director  
Deborah James



Thesis Advisor  
Blake Hobby

---

In *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, Katherine Anne Porter creates female characters who look, on the surface, like objects. In "Martyr," the female character acts as the model for the male painter. Many of the women, including the protagonist in "Theft," find themselves trapped by men who try to control their lives by paying for things, not listening to their opinions, and trying to dictate how women should live their lives. By the men's controlling actions, women appear as objects that the men can mold into what they desire. As the female characters face controlling men, they make pivotal decisions in an attempt to choose their fate. Even though they make these choices, their fate is ultimately determined for them by men. Porter wrote these stories in the 1920s, a time when society still objectified women. At the same time women, especially women writers, attempted to make their voices heard. As with many modernist writers, Porter uses symbols to illustrate the plight of her characters. In several stories in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, Mexico serves as a revolutionary setting, reflecting these women's desire to rebel against their oppressive living situation. Porter further places her characters within the confines of the religious structure that keeps the women oppressed, evident in the titles, "Virgin Violeta" and "Maria Concepcion." The women in Porter's fiction, specifically Violeta, María Concepción, and the unnamed protagonist in "Theft," act as the "other" while the surrounding male characters dominate as the "subject." The web of societal and religious structures keep

---

the women entangled and confined, resulting in the inability to control their own fate even though they make pivotal decisions

Since the publication of six short stories in *Flowering Judas* (1930) and the expanded collection *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1935), Katherine Anne Porter has been praised for her unique style and attention to detail. *The New York Times* review in 1930 claimed that Porter's work was "technically perfect...carefully wrought, devoid of clichés, and distinguished for their technical originality" (6). Another reviewer the same year, Louise Bogan, credits Porter's straightforward writing that "rejects tricks that wind up style to a spurious intensity" by "patience in detail and to thorough imaginative grasp on cause and character" (210). In "A New Star," Allen Tate claims she "neither overworks a brilliant style...nor forces the background of her material into those sensational effects" (25). It is her eye for detail that ensures each word has a purpose. Since its original publication, critics have praised and further examined Porter's work for its unique style and form.

In the early part of the twentieth century, critics "treated her in a manner befitting an exquisite southern belle, vying in their praises" (Givner 223). Because most of Porter's friends were leaders in the New Criticism movement in the United States, criticism revolved around close readings of her stories, which, for the most part, meant that there was very little difference in the interpretations of her text (223). The New Criticism focused mainly on her symbolism and did not consider other approaches. In

---

an interview with Barbara Thompson, Porter discusses how symbolism, like style, happens naturally:

You work, and develop yourself; your style is an emanation from your own being. Symbolism is the same way. I never consciously took or adopted a symbol in my life...When reading back over ["Flowering Judas"] I suddenly saw the whole symbolic plan and pattern of which I was totally unconscious while I was writing. (18)

These symbols, whether intentional or organic, gave critics much to talk about, one even equating it to an "intellectual parlor game" in which people looked to find the "most abstruse symbols in 'Flowering Judas'" (Lieberman 225). Similarly, Ray West's essay "Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas'" (1947) offers a New Critical look at several themes within "Flowering Judas," including love, religion, and secular concepts. For West, it is the examination of the images Porter presents in relation to their meaning in other known contexts that provides an understanding of her text. West examines the love-symbols – divine, secular, and erotic. He argues that the main character, Laura, is unable to be part of any of these forms of love. She cannot be a "divine lover" because she cannot keep a "divine passion" as she only occasionally allows herself to "sneak" into the church to pray. Laura also does not possess secular love, love for her fellow humans because she lacks the fervor of the movement like those surrounding her have. Finally, West also argued that Laura could not be an erotic lover because she does not

---

seek out her three suitors. She “thoughtlessly throws one of them a rose,” which is “the symbol of erotic love,” but contradicts that act by not attempting to be the erotic lover (124). While these close readings of Porter’s works continue today, after her death and the publication of her biography, other types of interpretation of her work became more prominent.

*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* by Joan Givner opened up the criticism to include feminist approaches as well as biographical approaches to her works (Givner 223). The new biographical information on Porter showed how she interacted with men in her life, both in her romantic and family relationships. This knowledge allowed for the growth of biographical criticism. Katherine Anne Porter first married a Catholic man at the age of sixteen. Though she converted to her husband’s religion at the age of twenty, she did not remain with her husband; however, she remained a very devote Catholic for the remainder of her life (Givner 225-226). Her Catholicism shows in her works through the many religious symbols. Also in Givner’s *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Porter, she examines Porter’s relationships with various male friends, revisionists, artists, and lovers. She states that “Porter allowed her lovers to take advantage of her, but she did have many loyal friends who frequently offered to help her out” (231). Porter had, in all, four failed marriages and many more failed affairs. All of these relationships affected her portrayal of men and women and their relationships within Porter’s stories. Even though Porter suffered through many failed relationships and

---

emotional difficulties, she remained an independent woman capable of surviving on her own which is reflected in her stories by the female protagonists' struggles and perseverance. According to Givner, Porter's novel, *Ship of Fools*, is the "culmination of the theme which [runs] through her work as a powerful undertow since the beginning – the plight of women trying to live and express themselves in a patriarchal society" (244). Givner thus asserts that the female characters actively try to take control of their lives in a society that consistently tries to keep them confined to their "womanly" role as prescribed by a patriarch. Yet, even in this oppressive environment, the women live and express themselves because of their spirit and their desire to be heard.

Similarly Harry J. Mooney argues that there is a theme of the "natural human spirit" in Porter's work. This spirit is a universal idea that represents "the very substance of life and endurance, hope and belief" and this spirit can be "threatened or killed" as well as "defended and preserved" regardless of location (53). He examines each of the central characters in her short stories and the emotional and physical troubles that each endures. It is through the "natural human spirit" that they are able to endure the hardships that they face. This spirit does not always succeed but even in defeat the spirit is strong and dynamic. Mooney believes that Porter captures her characters in a "lonely plight of the individual" that leads the characters to "frustration, hatred, destruction and defeat. This in turn shows "human resourcefulness and complexity" (53) which reflects Givner's assertion that Porter's narrative focus is on

---

women who desire to escape. Thus, Mooney concludes that it is only through the “natural human spirit” that they are able to attempt to survive.

This theme women persevering against the obstacles they face is further examined in Willene and George Hendrick’s *Katherine Anne Porter*. They assert that “Maria Concepción” presents a series of oppositions that are seeking to find a balance: “buried life versus the present, light versus dark, Christianity versus paganism, Indian versus American, love versus duty, walking versus stumbling, [and] honey versus thorn.” Through these oppositions the reader can see that order comes from “reordering or destroying the order-disorder of others” (20). This order forms only after the female character is able to defeat a weak man. Similarly, in “Virgin Violeta” the “controlled images – the furry eyebrows, the drowsing catlike mother, the young lovers observed by the inexperienced, desirous, but fearful Violeta” are mixed in a small room to create tension (24). Conflicted by her ideas of love as well as the ideas of love others taught her, Violeta finally acts only to find herself more confused over how she can both love but also remain virtuous. The oppositions that the female protagonist in “Theft” faces are internal. This character faces alienation, physical and emotional emptiness, concluding with the realization of “self-betrayal” (82).

Hiroko Arima further examines this struggle of isolation of Porter’s characters in his book, *Beyond and Alone!* He draws on not only the character’s struggles within the story but also on Porter’s own struggles and failures in various relationships that led

---

others, including Arima, to believe she was aloof and isolated. This, in turn, affects her stories. Arima argues that in "Flowering Judas," Laura, "having chosen to be passive, ...has completely lost emotional and mental strength and energy" (22). Laura, however, actually chooses her passivity as an attempt of self-preservation. She believes that by not attaching herself to anything, she can walk safely through life. As in other observations, the final dream scene demonstrates her change where she "perceives the longings and fears of another human being" (23). Thus, only in the dream does Laura's isolation lessen. When examining a marriage, Arima points out that María Concepción is more concerned with the outward appearance of her marriage than her actual relationship with her husband, Juan. Even though Juan and María Concepción are married and are trying to start a family with María Concepción's pregnancy, they are isolated by their own views of marriage. Juan does not desire to be in a formal marriage nor does he fall in love with María Concepción again after she killed his mistress; he merely acts from fear and shock (37) attempting to create an alibi for his wife and himself. Each decision María Concepción makes comes from her own ideals on the "perfect" household and marriage, which leads her to remaining isolated. When she recognizes and responds to her emotions she is "sitting alone, without being seen by anybody...she is immobile, unseen, and speechless" (37). Arima further examines the theme of isolation in its relation to feminine independence. He argues that a woman who surrounds herself with self-centered men "caters to a male-chauvinist social

---



structure" which "causes her own gender and herself to suffer and be isolated" (63).

The theme of isolation acknowledges both Porter's life and male and female characters throughout the collection of works, merging a New Critical approach with biographical information.

As more biographical information came forward, the literary Feminist movement also grew, creating a tighter focus on Porter's work—that of her female characters. Jane DeMouy's *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eyes of Her Fiction* argues that "womanhood" is the subject of Porter's work because, after all, Porter is "first and foremost a woman" (5). Porter presents "a universal, an Everywoman, an archetypal female who feels her vulnerability but acts as... [a] tower of strength" (14). Each story presents this woman but presents her in various forms:

She sometimes appears in the guise of Mother (Granny Weatherall, the Grandmother), Virgin (Violeta, Amy), or Artist-Creator (the protagonists in "Theft" and "Hacienda").... Laura carefully balances herself among all three roles by playing teacher, immovable object, and revolutionist at one and the same time. (14)

Thus, through the female characters, the theme of the need for both love and an autonomous sense of self appears in various forms and spans from young girls to dying women. DeMouy examines the psychological territory of Porter's women (4). This psychological examination of the texts reveals that in each story there is a conflict

---

within the protagonist—the desire to be independent versus the desire of love and security obtained through traditional female roles (6).

Mary Titus, in her article “The ‘Booby Trap’ of Love: Artist and Sadist in Katherine Anne Porter’s Mexico Fiction” and later in her book *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*, explores the importance of the female characters and their struggles within the stories. “The Booby Trap,” like DeMouy’s book, argues that the women must make difficult decisions in determining their role; for Titus however, this decision is between choosing to be an object and choosing freedom. In Porter’s Mexico Fiction it is a “sexualize[d] struggle of dominance and submission” where the male characters “subject women to their will, consume them as sexual objects, or use and then discard them in the service of some creative artists” (235). Titus examines the complexity of women’s reactions to the male advances:

The passive women respond in a complex manner. They do not imagine a different, active existence; rather their desires are either for safety, escape from or protection against the controlling male gaze, or, more frequently, pleasure. (235)

The relationship between the men and women offer perspective on the ideas of romantic love and how it can seduce women into desiring their own objectification. If this seduction frightens them then they seek safety, away from the male gaze; however, this seduction often entices women because it is pleasurable. Titus believes that the

---

Mexico fiction explores not only the “violence underlying the symbolic, erotic objectification of women” but also “the ways in which women have been attracted to or participate in their own objectification” (242). Titus’s book, *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*, expands her argument on the young women in Porter’s work. Titus uses not only Porter’s life but also the social culture of the time to discuss the complexity of “female sexuality and gender identity” (2). Titus maintains that Porter questions and examines “cultural arguments about female creativity, a woman’s maternal legacy, romantic love, and sexual identity” (8). Female writers of this period were under social pressures to stay within the confines of the “heterosexual path of marriage and childbearing” (5). Yet, Porter begins to question the role of the female in art and society in her fiction. “Beautiful Objects,” a chapter within the book, explores “women’s attraction to and rejection of the culturally available roles of beautiful object and muse/inspiration for the creative labor of the male artist” (11). Titus suggests that the women in Porter’s fiction find “masochistic pleasure... [in] self-objectification” (51). There is a power struggle between the men and women and their changing positions of dominance and submission. The sadomasochism that Porter’s male and female characters display affects their position in society and their status in relationships.

As Porter’s women struggle within dominating male relationships in the patriarchal culture, they also have an internal conflict of whether to accept or reject the notion of motherhood. In Susana Jiménez-Placer’s article, “Motherhood as Conflict in

---

Katherine Anne Porter's *Short Fiction*," she argues that this conflict usually affects the identity of the character as they find the balance between "true self" and "own human nature." "The "mother's unconscious rejection of herself and her assumption of a self-deceiving attitude" is one of the consequences of successful motherhood (77). Rejecting herself leads to frustrating experiences because it requires her to suppress her own identities. This frustration becomes a sexual tension, which often leads to sterility:

The perversion of the sterile sexual lives of [Porter's] characters is the main consequence of an unnatural selfishness that stems from an excess of self-protection: they are so self-centered that they cannot accept the reality of the other which destroys the possibility of achieving sexual satisfaction in their relationships. (77-78).

This continues the idea that women within Porter's fiction are struggling with choosing between independence and the love that comes through relationship. Jiménez-Placer exemplifies this idea of sterility by referencing the female protagonist in "Theft." She claims that the female's "destructive passivity and lack of volition constitutes a selfish attempt to protect herself against others" (79). Thus, the female character's destructive behavior is a form of self-denial as it is a "negation of her creative female nature" (79). By bringing in Porter's own experiences, growing up without a mother and not having children, Jiménez-Placer states that "motherhood requires a balance between the self and the other" (89), which in Porter's fiction rarely is achieved because of the self-

---

centered male characters and the female characters' inability to full accept the "natural order" of being a wife and a mother while at the same time maintaining a personal identity. This natural order, according to Jiménez-Placer, would allow the female character to find this balance and live a full life even within the confines of a patriarchal society.

As critics explore the female characters and their struggles in male dominated settings, questions are raised over the idea of their "otherness" and "objectification." An examination of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, makes it possible to further understand these notions—"other" and "object"—in reference to Porter's female characters. Even though *The Second Sex* was published originally in France in 1949 after the publication of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, it presents the radical notion that there is not a "feminine nature" which leads to the question, if women have no physical or psychological difference from men, why are women constantly viewed and represented as "second class?" Using ideas on feminine identity that have existed from early philosophers, de Beauvoir quotes several ancient philosophers on the female identity, specifically the female body. Aristotle wrote, "we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness," (xvi) while St. Thomas called a woman "an imperfect man" (xvi). Most useful in the consideration of Porter's women are the notions presented by Benda in his *Rapport d'Uriel* says, "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man" (xvi). De Beauvoir concludes

---

that since a woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he reference to her” thus “he is the Subject, he is Absolute – she is the Other” (xvi). This notion of “other” that De Beauvoir asserts is a prominent aspect of Porter’s novels as her female characters are never in total control of their lives and positions. According to De Beauvoir, women may never become the “subject”:

A Woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role of other. (xxi)

When reading Porter’s short stories the idea of women as the “Other” closely links to the idea of women as an “object.” As the “Other,” women are placed in at a lower status, which often leads to their objectification. As de Beauvoir claims this complex situation makes it difficult for a woman to fully escape because if she becomes the “Subject” she must make the man the “Other,” a task that requires immense power.

Examining three of Porter’s female characters, Violeta, María Concepción, and the unnamed protagonist in “Theft,” shows the struggle of being the “other” under the powerful male gaze. These women are closely tied with the men in their life because of the patriarchal society, religious structure, and the strong willed male characters themselves. At the same time these women often appreciate their “otherness” because it offers protection and attention. As these women struggle to escape the confinements of

---

their position, they make pivotal decisions in determining their status; however, these decisions are not as strong as the outside situations and characters that in the end truly determine their fate.

The youngest of these female characters in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* is Violeta in "Virgin Violeta." Violeta is almost fifteen and sits watching her sister, Blanca, and cousin, Carlos, reading poetry together. As she watches them she attempts to make herself look older, hiding the "ugliness" of her brown sandals. Carlos looks at the painting, "The Most Holy Virgin Queen of Heaven and Her Faithful Servant St. Ignatius Loyala," gazing over Violeta, not noticing her. St. Ignatius was originally hated because of his humility; however, through his humble lifestyle he founded the Jesuits and was beatified. The contrast between Violeta, who longs to be noticed, and St. Ignatius, who worked quietly and from his humility was granted sainthood, exemplifies the idea that a woman cannot think of herself without reference to a man, while a man can work through life without needing recognition, especially by a woman. Violeta longs for his gaze to shift down to her and fantasizes about that happening. As she thinks about being recognized as a woman, she sits up "prickling all over with shyness for fear the others would know why she had hidden her face on Mamacita's lap. But no one saw" (25). Since no one noticed Violeta, she has not become an object like the older women in Porter's stories.

---

Violeta sits stagnant, watching those just a few years older than herself enjoy their interactions with the opposite sex. She feels bound by the society and religion that has taught her “modesty, chastity, silence, [and] obedience” (23):

She wanted to stretch her arms up and yawn, not because she was sleepy but because something inside her felt as if it were enclosed in a cage too small for it, and she could not breathe. Like those poor parrots in the markets, stuffed into tiny wicker cages so that they bulged through the withes, gasping and panting, waiting for someone to come and rescue them. (26)

Confined by the societal notions of womanhood and girlhood, Violeta is in a powerless position. Symbolically, the cage suggests that even if it is not Carlos looking at her, Violeta is merely there for display. Like the parrot, she is expected to mimic the teaching of those around her. However, Violeta demonstrates that even in this confinement she has the power to make a pivotal decision to capture Carlos’s attention. When Carlos and Blanca cannot find the poetry book, Violeta speaks up, stating that she knows where the book is. “At the sound of her own voice she felt calm and firm and equal to anything” (28). Thus, Porter allows a female character to exercise her agency. Violeta knows something that those around her do not, so she not only is equal to them but also surpasses them in her knowledge.

---



However, like most Porter stories, Violeta is unable to control her fate entirely. As she walks down the hall Carlos follows her and she is “frightened at the soft *pad-pad* of his rubber heels so close behind her” (28). Once alone, what Violeta longed for— recognition as a woman by a man – happens as Carlos kisses her softly; yet, it scares and hurts Violeta:

Violeta opened her eyes wide also and peered up at him. She expected to sink into a look warm and gentle, like the touch of his palm. Instead, she felt suddenly, sharply hurt as if she had collided with a chair in the dark.  
(29)

Violeta had longed for this moment, thinking about it during prayers, church, and as she watched Carlos and Blanca early that day; however, she feels like she lost something in the kiss from Carlos. She is a “virgin violated” as the title of the story suggests. Angrily she turns away and tells him “Shame on you for kissing me” (29). Carlos calls her a “nice baby, freshly washed with white soap” (29); showing that he believes Violeta is nothing more than a child, unable to enact with any power. The white soap represents her innocence and the purity with which the church beliefs had washed over her. As they reenter the room with Blanca and Mamacita, Violeta still feels ashamed and attempts to explain this to Mamacita who ignores the emotions of the young Violeta. Mamacita claims that Violeta just needs to “learn to control [her] nerves” (31). Violeta longs to sit up and cry that “Something dreadful happened to me—I don’t

---

know what" (31), but only a whimper comes. This statement shows that she cannot take the role of "subject" because she lacks the knowledge and resources to understand her own identity without its association to a man. As the story closes, Violeta complains to her mother that she "hate[s] the convent," where she attends school, as there is "nothing to be learned there" (32). Violeta spoke up so many times in this story, from capturing the attention of Carlos to crying out to her mother; yet, society consistently suppresses her cries by calling her a baby or claiming she did not have control over her nerves. Thus, Violeta is left with "a painful unhappiness...because she could not settle the questions brooding in her mind" (32). The answers to these questions would give Violeta some freedom but instead she remains trapped in the role prescribed by society of the early twentieth century.

Though only a few years older than Violeta, the title character in "María Concepción" seems to possess more strength and independence than Violeta in the opening lines of the story; however the cautiousness of María Concepción is simultaneously evident:

María Concepción walked carefully, keeping to the middle of the white dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus had not gathered so profusely...Her straight back outlined itself strongly under her clean bright blue cotton rebozo...she walked with

---

the free, natural guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. (3)

María Concepción is aware of the dangers surrounding her as evident by her confining herself to the middle of the road. This keeps her away from the “treacherous” plants growing on either side of her. Though she is pregnant and carrying a heavy load, she walks erect showing her strength. Her walk is “guarded” because she knows that even if she believes herself strong, there are more powerful agents around her that try to ensnare her. As she approaches the home of Lupe, the medicine woman, and the fifteen year old beekeeper, María Rosa, María Concepción believes she is a “good Christian” as she does not purchase the “messes and ointments sold by Lupe” but rather trusts in “simple herb teas” or “bought her remedies bottled, with printed directions that she could not read” (4). The medicines that she cannot read show her blind trust in society, specifically her faith. María Concepción’s Catholic faith shapes her view of herself and of how her life should be. To be married inside the church, as opposed to behind it, couples had to pay extra money. María Concepción insisted on paying this extra fee for the “potent bit of stamped paper” which allowed her and Juan to be married by the priest inside the church. Juan, on the other hand believes that “to be married in the church is a great misfortune for a man. After that he is not himself any more” (10), which suggests that something in their marriage is more powerful, be it his wife or religion. María Concepción began her marriage “correctly” according to the religious

---

structure. Since her marriage María Concepción had worked to continue to be the “good” wife and soon hopes to be the “good” mother. María Concepción cannot think of herself as an individual; she only sees herself according to her role in her relationships.

As she passes María Rosa’s house, María Concepción hears laughter. Assuming María Rosa has found herself a man, María Concepción smiles until she sees Juan is the man. “María Concepción did not stir nor breathe for some seconds. Her forehead was cold, and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her spine” (5). Everything María Concepción works to create appears to be falling apart, but she remains silent and hidden from Juan and María Rosa. María Concepción comes out “of the heavy cloud which enwrapped her head and bound her throat” and finds herself “walking onward, keeping the road without knowing it, feeling her way delicately” (6) continuing with her task of delivering lunch to Juan’s boss, Givens. María Concepción does not let anyone know that she witnessed her husband’s infidelities because she believed that between her faith and her own strength she could handle it. Even after Juan leaves with María Rosa to join the army and even after her baby dies four days after birth, María Concepción continues to appear strong by not weeping. She does not allow anyone to pray for her or pity her:

Afterward everyone noticed that María Concepción went oftener to church, and even seldomer [*sic*] to the village to talk with the other

---

women.... "She is wrong to takes us for enemies," said old Soledad, who was a thinker and a peace-maker. "All women have these troubles. Well, we should suffer together." But María Concepción lived alone. (9-10)

The women in the village represent the societal views. They expect María Concepción to *need* help from her fellow women, because they believe that since they all suffer they should suffer together making them stronger. As Hiroko Arima suggests in his book, María Concepción in creating her feminine independence, forms her own isolation. However, this independence is destroyed when Juan and María Rosa return to the village.

When Juan returns to the village, Givens questions him on how he will handle both María Rosa and María Concepción. Juan claims, "Women are good things, but not at this moment...Let us forget María Concepción and María Rosa. Each one in her place. I will manage them when the time comes" (12). Juan is confident in his power to control those he views as beneath him, the women. He returns to his own house where he attempts to "beat María Concepción by way of reëstablishing [*sic*] himself in his legal household" (13), though he had earlier claimed that he would "not harm María Concepción because [he] married her in the church" (12). The reference to "his legal household" as opposed to "his home" suggests that he considers himself, not as part of a family, but as head of a political organization. To his surprise María Concepción does not yield to his power display; rather, she stands her ground and "resists; she even

---

struck at him" (13). María Concepción maintains the life she has worked to create by immediately returning to binding her fowls' legs to sell in the market. Again, this shows that while María Concepción is a powerful woman, she still cannot think of her life without a man. Yet, internally she struggles with intense emotions just as Violeta did:

All her being was a dark confused memory of grief burning in her at night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her very tongue tasted bitter, and her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the rains. (14)

María Concepción here decides that in order to restore her life to the family ideal she must eliminate María Rosa from both her and Juan's life.

After killing María Rosa, María Concepción returns home to Juan. He realizes what his wife has done and attempts to "protect" her. Even after having killed a woman, María Concepción is viewed as a powerless woman in need of a man's protection. Juan directs his wife to clean the knife, cook some dinner, and change her clothes in order to convince the officials in the town that the two of them had nothing to do with the death of María Rosa. María Concepción finds herself answering the officials without hesitation, much like Violeta speaking out to draw Carlos's attention. She claimed "she was a church-married woman and knew her place" (19). Here María Concepción removes her own power in order to save what she viewed as most important—the appearance of her family. As suggested by her name "Concepción," she

---

creates her belief with her power; however, her creation places her within the confines of a patriarchal society where feminine agency is suppressed.

Like María Concepción, the unnamed female protagonist in "Theft" must attempt to survive within the patriarchal ensnarement. She faces several "thieves" in the story but by the end she realizes that the main thief in her life is herself. The story begins by flashing back to the previous night where the protagonist and Camilo, a gentleman friend, are finishing their evening together. She intends to take the Elevated and pay her fare, instead of allowing Camilo to drop the coin into the turnstile, noting that "Camilo by a series of compromises had managed to make effective a fairly complete set of smaller courtesies, ignoring the larger and more troublesome ones" (59). While society expects that women allow men to pay for such things, she feels that this small courtesy masks Camilo's other, larger actions that control her life. In saying good-bye to Camilo at the base of the steps, she eliminates the opportunity for Camilo to control her by the simple action of paying her fare. As she watches Camilo leave in the rain, she sees him stop to remove his new hat so it does not get wet and damaged. In watching this action, she feels like "she had betrayed him by seeing, because he would have been humiliated if he thought she even expected him of trying to save his hat" (60). In this respect, she robs him of his secret—his vanity over his clothing. Her new knowledge gives her power over Camilo; however, she does not want this power, she

---

only wanted to pay her fare. In attempting to regain her feminine independence, she, in her opinion, betrays a friend.

Before she is able to act on her intentions of taking the Elevated, another gentleman friend, Roger, guides her to a taxi to share. As the taxi winds in and out of the Elevated posts, she says to Roger, "The more it skids the calmer I feel, so I really must be drunk" (60). While this could simply be inebriation, it also shows some deeper meaning. Her life keeps deviating from her intentions, like the taxi skidding on the road. It is important to note that in both of these representations – the changes in her life and the skidding taxi – the protagonist is not the one in control. She allows people to affect her life, just as she is allowing the taxi driver to drive her home. As Roger explains about the difficulties he is having in work and in his relationships, she states, "It's absolutely a matter of holding out." To which Roger acknowledges, "holding out's the tough part" (61). The protagonist *knows* how to maintain control of her life as evident in her statement that one must hold out; yet, she is unable to act upon this knowledge.

As she reaches her apartment building she runs into another male friend, Bill, who invites her up for a drink. As they share drinks, Bill laments over his financial hardships caused by his wife's extravagances; yet, at the same time he admits that he purchased an extravagant rug that "once belonged to Marie Dressler" (62). He claims that with the stain on the corner of the rug, it was a "good price." As he is discussing his

---



financial situation, the protagonist knows that she too faces difficulties because she would not receive her pay for a few more days. She knows that she must ask for payment from Bill for the work she performed for him, even if he too does not have much money:

It's no time to speak of it, but I've been hoping you would have by now that fifty dollars you promised for my scene in the third act. Even if it doesn't play. You were to pay me for the work anyhow out of your advance. (62)

The protagonist again attempts to take control of her own life, this time more directly than with Camilo as she tells Bill that she needs the money owed to her. Yet, the statement is still weak as she begins by saying "it's no time to speak of it" (62). So when Bill asks her to "forget about it" as he cannot because of the "fix [he's] in," she replies "let it go then...almost in spite of herself" (63). Here it is evident that she cannot claim a status of "subject" but must instead remain in a lower status, allowing others to control her.

The interactions with these three men, Camilo, Roger, and Bill, demonstrate how entangled the protagonist is in the patriarchal world where men are expected and do control the women around them. These men each have a name unlike the female protagonist who is only referred to as "she." This further establishes the inferred power they possess because a name separates them from anyone else. The unnamed

---

protagonist, on the other hand, could be anyone—she lacks an identity. The “subject” requires a unique identity; however, since the protagonist lacks this quality she is confined to the position of “other.”

When the protagonist comes out from the bathroom in the morning to find her purse missing, she feels completely powerless and at first decides to “let it go” even though she is certain the janitress took the purse when she came in to examine the radiators. She does not want the “great deal of ridiculous excitement” that would come with demanding the return of the purse; however, as she makes the decision not to protect her belongings “there rose coincidentally in her blood a deep almost murderous anger” (63). Like María Concepción, with the strong and intense emotion came the power to act and take control of her life. She demands the return of her purse from the janitress expressing that the purse was a gift. The protagonist’s power again is deflated as the janitress denies the accusation and the protagonist simply walks away feeling completely powerless:

In this moment she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things whether material or intangible: things lost or broken by her own fault, ... words she had waited to hear spoken to her and had not heard, and the words she had meant to answer with...the long patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love—all

---

that she had, and all that she had missed, were lost together, and were twice lost in this landslide of remembered losses. (64)

The protagonist remembers all that she lost from not taking the initiative in her life. She begins to realize that the only one she can blame for her oppression is herself. When the janitress changes her mind and returns the purse, the janitress states, "My niece is young and needs pretty things... You're a grown woman, you've had your chance, you ought to know how it is" (65). The janitress' words resonate with what the protagonist had just realized: she had lost her chance. The protagonist "laid the purse on the table and sat down with the cup of chilled coffee, and thought: I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing" (65). While the story does not clearly state the outcome of the protagonist's life, in this statement the protagonist is not defeated. By claiming that she need not fear anyone but herself, she declares herself powerful—someone to be feared. Though the men in the story demonstrate power over her, her realization gives her more power than the men.

Each of these female characters, Violeta, María Concepción, and the unnamed protagonist, is the "other" in the eyes of society and specifically the men in their life; however, the women try to take control of their lives to become the "subject" and more importantly, the author of their lives. Katherine Anne Porter controls the fate of these women. Writing at a time when women were attempting to gain a voice both in the literary world with their writing and in society with the right to vote, Porter creates

---

these female characters who demonstrate some power with their decisions but fall victim to those around them, mirroring the culture of Porter's time. These female portraits offer Porter a justification to her own life, one in which things were less than ideal and relationships with men were short-lived and fraught with complications, while at the same time she shows that, largely through negative example, that women have choices and do not need to feel trapped by societal mores or stock roles.

---

## Works Cited

- Arima, Hiroko. *Beyond and Alone! The Theme of Isolation in Selected Short Fiction of Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006.
- Bogan, Louise. "Flowering Judas." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 101 (1997): 209-210.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.
- DeMouy, Jane Krause. *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Hendrick, Willene and Hendrick, George. *Katherine Anne Porter*. Ed. Kenneth Eble. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall and Co, 1988.
- Givner, Joan. "Katherine Anne Porter." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Short-Story Writers 1910-1945*. Ed. Bobby Ellen Kimbel. Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc. 223-247.
- Jiménez-Placer, Suasana M. "Motherhood as Conflict in Katherine Anne Porter's Short Fiction." *Short Story* 7.2 (1999): 77-90.
- Liberman, M. M. "Symbolism, the Short Story, and 'Flowering Judas'" *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 101 (1997): 224-228.
- Mooney, Harry J. *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967. 48-54.
-

- Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1972.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. Interview with Barbara Thompson. "An Interview." *Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*. Eds. Lodwick Hartley and George Core. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1969. 3-23.
- "A Review of *Flowering Judas*." *The New York Times* 28 September 1930: 6.
- Tate, Allen. "A New Star." *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*. Ed. Darlene Harbour Unrue. New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1997. 25-26.
- Titus, Mary E. *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Titus, Mary E. "The 'Booby Trap' of Love: Artist and Sadist in Katherine Anne Porter's Mexico Fiction." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 101 (1997): 235-242.
- West, Ray B. "Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas.'" *Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*. Eds. Lodwick Hartley and George Core. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1969. 120-128.
-

## Works Consulted

Allen, Charles A. "Katherine Anne Porter: Psychology as Art." *Southwest Review* 41.3

(1956): 223-230.

Brinkmeyer, Robert H. *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development*. Baton Rouge, LA:

Louisiana State University Press, 1993.

Elam, Diane. "Poststructuralist Feminisms." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory*

*and Criticism*. 2nd ed. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman.

Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 311-315.

Givner, Joan. "A Re-Reading of Katherine Anne Porter's 'Theft.'" *Critical Essays on*

*Katherine Anne Porter*. Ed. Darlene Harbour Unrue. New York: G.K. Hall and Co,

1997. 99-102.

Gottfried, Leon. "Death's Other Kingdom: Dantesque and Theological Symbolism in

'Flowering Judas.'" *PMLA* 84.1 (1969): 112-124.

Jefferson, Margo. "Self-Made: Katherine Anne Porter." *Grand Street* 2.4 (1983): 152-171.

Johnson, James William. "Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter." *Katherine Anne*

*Porter: A Critical Symposium*. Ed. Lodwick Hartley and George Core. Athens, GA:

University of Georgia Press, 1969. 83-96.

Kaufmann, Stanley. "Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning Work." *The New Republic*

146.2474 (1962): 23-25

- Messer-Davidow, Ellen. "From Movement Critique to Discourse Analysis." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 299-305.
- Nance, William L. *Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964.
- Stock, Juanita Keller. "The Victims and Destroyers of Respectability in Katherine Anne Porter's Short Fiction." Diss. Appalachian State University, 1983.
- Tolan, Fiona. "Feminisms." *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 319-322.
- Unrue, Darlene Harbour. *Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Unrue, Darlene Harbour. *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985.
- Walsh, Thomas F. "The Making of 'Flowering Judas.'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 12.1 (1985): 109-130.
- Walsh, Thomas F., "Xochitil: Katherine Anne Porter's Changing Goddess," *American Literature* 52 (1980): 183-193.
-



Weedon, Chris. "1990 and After." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*.

2nd ed. Ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore,

MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 321-325.

---