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THE VICTIMS AND DESTROYERS OF RESPECTABILITY IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S SHORT FICTION

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School

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SHORT FICTION

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Juanita Keller Stock

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE VICTIMS AND DESTROYERS OF RESPECTABILITY IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S SHORT FICTION. (June, 1983)

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Respectability is a subject that informs much of Katherine Anne Porter's short fiction. Throughout her short stories and nouvellas, one is repeatedly confronted with individuals for whom preserving the right appearances is paramount. What consequences ensue because of this emphasis is the basis of this paper.

By concentrating on five representative Porter works--The Old Order, Old Mortality, "That Tree," "He," and Noon Wine--this study explores the impact of respectability on Porter's fictional world. It identifies the characteristics of respectability and addresses five specific questions: What are the destructive tendencies of respectability? How far will an individual or a family go to preserve his or their good name? What sacrifices are made and endured for the sake of respectability? To what extent does a desire for public approval encourage a life of self-deception and superficiality? Can anyone actually be free of respectability's demands and influences?

The conclusion reached is that adherents and opponents of respectability alike invariably end up being consumed and even destroyed by its claims. In Katherine Anne Porter's short fiction, respectability, rather than providing a beneficial atmosphere, victimizes almost all who come within its shadows, and it encourages a life of pretense and selfishness.

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INTRODUCTION

In what she called her "first speech," given in 1914 before the American Women's Club in Paris, Katherine Anne Porter talked about the process of writing and of the writer becoming an artist:

> The value of a writer can be measured best, probably, by his capacity to express what he feels, knows, is, has been, has seen, and experienced . . . . He cannot do this, indeed he is not an artist, if he allows himself to be hampered by any set of conventions outside of the severe laws and limitations of his own medium. No one else can tell him what life is like to him, in what colors he sees the world. He cannot sit down and say, Go to, I will be a writer because it's an interesting career! . . . He cannot even worry about whether the publishers are going to accept his work or not . . . .
>
> Simply stated . . . it is the writer's business first to have something of his own to say; second, to say it in his own language and style. . . . A writer may be inspired occasionally: that's his good luck; but he doesn't learn to write by inspiration: he works at it. . . . Writing is not an elegant pastime, it is a sober and hardworked trade.[1]

These words sum up well Porter's own career as a writer. A scrupulous craftsman, Porter continuously tried to maintain her artistic integrity throughout her long writing career. Extremely selective about what she would allow to be published, she testified to burning "trunksful" of manuscripts.[2] By 1944, her literary reputation was firmly established on three slim volumes of short fiction, yet she refused to succumb to the temptation to write for a quick profit. She spoke of her artistic commitment in intensely proud terms:

> "I have tossed a good many things considered generally desirable over the windmill for that one intangible thing

> that money cannot buy, and I find to my joy that I was right. There is no describing what my life has been because of my one fixed desire to be a good artist, responsible to the last comma for what I write."[3]

This quest for artistic purity has had its limitations. Porter has never enjoyed wide-spread popularity with the general reading public. For the average person whose reading is determined by Book-of-the-Month-Club selections or best-seller lists, the name of Katherine Anne Porter may recall only Ship of Fools, her one novel. Few would recognize her as one of America's greatest contributors to the modern short story. Commenting on this situation, John Hagopian says:

> Katherine Anne Porter has been the most highly praised writer of American short stories among professional American critics and the least read great writer among the general public.[4]

Her craftsmanship has earned her the reputation of being a "writer's writer." Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, F. O. Matthiessen, Cleanth Brooks, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and Robert B. Heilman are just a few of the distinguished authors who have praised her work. In addition, she has been compared to Henry James in her craftsmanship and style,[5] to Thomas Hardy in her vision of the tragic element in men's lives,[6] and to William Faulkner in her perception of how the past impinges upon the present.[7] As if these comparisons were not impressive enough, Porter has been placed on a literary pinnacle with such greats as Chekov, Maupassant, Mann, Turgenev, and Flaubert.[8] Her talents gained further recognition in 1966 when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter.

Considering the sparsity of her canon, its range and diversity are remarkable. As Eudora Welty has said, Porter doesn't waste "precious time repeating herself."[9] Porter sets her reader down in locations as different as Mexico, Germany, New York, Texas, and the Old South in, as Lodwick Hartley and George Core note, a "fictional output containing fewer words than a single long novel of William Faulkner or Ernest Hemingway."[10] Nor does she limit the people who inhabit these places. Portraying a broad spectrum of humanity, her characters include school teachers, film makers, prostitutes, housewives, peasants, artists, revolutionaries, newspaper reporters, poor farmers, and the idle rich. For Porter, according to H. E. Bates, "there are no fences, either territorial or social, technical or psychological."[11]

Why, then, is Porter often regarded as a regional author and a representative of those writers who had their beginnings in the period between the two World Wars, later known as the "Southern Renascence"? Born and raised in Texas, Porter might more accurately be called a Southwesterner. Her work shows little evidence, as Barbara Thompson points out, "of the peculiarly Southern preoccupation with racial guilt and the death of the old agrarian life."[12] Yet, by her own definition, Porter is "a Southerner by tradition and inheritance."[13] Moreover, a closer examination of her work shows that, although her stories may not take place in the South *per se*, she does indeed share an interest in some of the concerns of the Southern Renascence movement.

A central consideration of this movement, what Richard Gray calls a "founding principle," is its sense of history.[14] Among the writers of the Southern Renascence, there is an impulse to reexamine the past, its myths, legends, values, and traditions, and to explore the relationship of the past to the present.[15] One finds this same impetus in Porter. In talking about her own creative process, Porter often spoke of the value of personal history.

> 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.[16]

An entry written in her journal in 1936 strikes a similar note:

> I must very often refer far back in time to seek the meaning or explanation of today's smallest event . . . This constant exercise of memory seems to be the chief occupation of my mind . . . Now and again thousands of memories converge, harmonize, arrange themselves around a central idea in a coherent form, and I write a story.[17]

Porter's revelatory essay on the composition of Noon Wine further illustrates the extent to which her fiction is based upon a myriad of remembered incidents, molded and reshaped into an artistic whole.[18]

Not surprisingly, memory, legend, and tradition have a significant place in Porter's short fiction. The past, as it creates, shapes, and defines the present, is an integral part of such diverse works as Old Mortality, "The Cracked Looking-Glass," Noon Wine, and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." The journalist in "That Tree," Michael Halloran in "A Day's Work," Nannie and Sophia Jane in "The Journey," and Miranda in Pale Horse, Pale Rider

and "The Grave" all have to contend with their memories. Myth-making as a means of interpreting and re-forming the past is illustrated in such stories as "Hacienda," "The Martyr," and Old Mortality. In the latter work and in The Old Order, traditions are challenged and found wanting, while in "Flowering Judas" and "That Tree," the protagonists attempt unsuccessfully to free themselves from values which are, in their opinion, untenable and useless.

Porter's continual interest in the past naturally leads her into a subject which has tradition and established values as its very basis, a subject which perpetuates and supports the old way of life--respectability. It offers security and order in a fluctuating world. It demonstrates the endurability of cherished beliefs and customs. Above all, it testifies to man's need and compulsion to attach himself to a theory of life.

However, while acknowledging the efficacy of respectability in her fiction, Porter offers at the same time, what Walter Sullivan calls, a "correcting view."[19] Ever challenging restrictive and one-dimensional thought, Porter shakes the very foundations of respectability by asking such iconoclastic questions as--What are the destructive tendencies of respectability? How far will an individual or a family go to preserve the good opinion of others? What sacrifices are made and endured in the name of respectability? To what extent does a desire for public approval encourage a life of self-deception and

superficiality? Can anyone actually free himself of respectability's demands and influences?

Porter provides some startling answers. Nonconformists are rare in her fiction, but among those who manage to reject conventional values, few are capable of leading lives of conviction or resolution. Laura in "Flowering Judas" and the journalist in "That Tree" are rebels of sorts, but neither can escape the influences of her or his middle-class background to live a fully satisfying life. Likewise, self-deception is a recurring theme in Porter's work. Almost without exception, Porter's characters share, as John E. Hardy points out,

> a consuming devotion to some idea of themselves--of their own inestimable worth and privilege--which the circumstances of their lives do not permit them to realize in actuality but which they are powerless to abandon.[20]

Royal Earle Thompson in Noon Wine and Mrs. Whipple in "He" are the most notable examples of such individuals. Because Thompson thinks "It don't look right" for a respectable farmer such as he to be milking cows and chasing chickens, he sets in motion a series of events that bring about the deaths of three people. Because Mrs. Whipple prizes respectability above honesty, she denies her true feelings towards her retarded son, thus barring any meaningful relationship between them.

The entrapment of respectability looms ever present throughout Porter's short fiction. It fosters grievances and misunderstandings. It restricts freedom of choice and action. It alienates individuals and disrupts families. It creates victims who find life intolerable without it. It develops neurotics whose lives

are bent on destruction. It is the cultivating ground for wasted and impoverished lives.

Using a select group of Porter stories as its basis, this study will examine the subtle yet tremendous influence that respectability has on Porter's characters. It will explore the sources of respectability, its origins and proponents. How the desire for esteem and approval--a seemingly harmless enough principle--creates both willing and unwilling victims is a powerful theme in Porter's work. Conversely, this analysis will look at the ways respectability cultivates destruction and at the subsequent equivocacy of destroyer and victim. Finally, I will offer a different perspective on Porter's fiction, one that has been largely overlooked but that is nonetheless crucial to a complete understanding of her work.

Although the subject of respectability is present throughout Porter's writing, I will limit my study to two short stories and three novellas: "That Tree," "He," The Old Order, Old Mortality, and Noon Wine. These selections are representative of Porter's short fiction in several ways. First, their plots center around the themes of betrayal, self-delusion, entrapment, and alienation--themes common to Porter. Second, in each of these stories, a number of characters experience a time of uncertainty and self-doubt. They undergo what more recently has been termed an "identity crisis" and what, Robert Penn Warren suggests, lies "at the heart" of all of Porter's short fiction.[21] Third, Porter depicts few successful male/female relationships--"the failure of

love and marriage," as some critics have called it.[22] The selections chosen further illustrate this contention. Last, these works show the range of Porter's sensibilities and artistry. "That Tree," although it is one of her weaker and least known short stories, points to the abiding interest Porter had in the people and culture of Mexico. "He," which is finally getting the critical attention it deserves, is an excellently condensed portrait of frustration, anxiety, and rejection. Old Mortality, The Old Order, and Noon Wine, whose settings are all in the Southwest, exemplify Porter's supreme mastery of the short novel or novella. In the first two works, the focus is on Miranda, the semi-autobiographical heroine of Pale Horse, Pale Rider. In Noon Wine, Porter transports us from a world of refined Southern gentility to a world of sudden murder on a poor South Texas farm. Taken together, these three novellas testify to the diversity of Porter's artistic skills, for she records, in the words of H. E. Bates, "the angry and harmless ruminations of old ladies with the same smooth skill as she throws off this drama of peasant violence."[23]

In her introduction to the first edition of the Flowering Judas collection, Porter offered a personal statement of her motivations for being a writer.

> For myself, and I was not alone, all the conscious and recollected years of my life have been lived to this day under the heavy threat of world catastrophe, and most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of those threats, to trace them to their sources and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world. In the face of [this] . . . the voice of the individual artist may seem perhaps of no more consequence than the whirring of a cricket in the grass; but the arts do live continually, and

> they live literally by faith . . . they outlive governments and creeds and the societies, even the very civilizations that produced them. They cannot be destroyed altogether because they represent the substance of faith and the only reality. They are what we find again when the ruins are cleared away. And even the smallest and most incomplete offering at this time can be a proud act in defense of that faith.[24]

The stories analyzed within this paper reflect this commitment. Porter reminds her reader that, although he may feel overwhelmed by a world of "almost pure chaos," he, as well as the artist, is responsible for his own life and for bringing order to it. Finding order amidst confusion begins with each person setting aside the props of self-delusion and self-justification by which he supports the illusions about himself. It begins with each individual developing a sense of personal integrity and abandoning the perpetual craving for acceptance by others. Failure to do this, as Porter's fiction attests, can lead only to a life of pretense, estrangement, and self-betrayal.

CHAPTER I

The Old Order is comprised of a group of seven short stories, six of which were first published together in 1944 in *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*. At that time "The Fig Tree" was not included in the collection--in fact it was not published until sixteen years later, after Porter discovered it hidden away in a box of unfinished manuscripts.[1] In that same year, the six stories were rearranged and published, along with three other stories, under the title *The Old Order*. Porter named the novella after one of the pieces in that group. In 1965 *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* appeared, and it was at this point that Porter changed the name of the story "The Old Order" to "The Journey" and included "The Fig Tree" in "its right place in the sequence of *The Old Order*."[2]

Besides being published collectively, most of the stories have appeared individually. Consequently, each piece is complete within itself and can be read apart from the others without confusion. Their sequential arrangement is a result not so much of time but of focus. It is true that *The Old Order* begins with a look at the past in the person of Grandmother Rhea and that it ends about twenty years later with a telescopic view of Miranda, her grandaughter, a grown woman. The reader gets, however, little idea of the order of events as they occur between these periods.

Instead, the emphasis, as Charles Kaplan observes, is upon how "the past and the present are embodied in the two major figures of the Grandmother and Miranda: [how] as one recedes into the background, the other comes to the fore."[3] It is appropriate, then, for this chapter to consider The Old Order in its entirety rather than to discuss each story individually.

The novella begins with "The Source," in which Grandmother Sophia Jane Rhea longs to fulfill her perennial urge to spruce up and put in order her property in the country. Accordingly, she packs up her grandchildren for the trip and, reaching her farm, receives a mixed response to her arrival, for no one escapes the thoroughness of her spring cleaning. Inside and outside, big house and Negro quarters--all are subjected to her unsparing industry. Her mission accomplished, the Grandmother sets off for her next project. The second sketch, entitled "The Journey," takes the reader on a kind of journey back through Sophia Jane's girlhood and womanhood. When only five years old, she acquires a black female servant, about the same age as herself. "Nannie" grows up in the same house as Sophia Jane and is her inseparable companion. Subsequently, their lives become inextricably linked. When Sophia Jane marries, a marriage is also arranged for Nannie so that she and her husband can be given as a wedding present to Sophia Jane. Even their pregnancies coincide so that it appears they are involved in a "grim and terrible race of procreation."[4] Their later years are spent reminiscing about the past--their adolescence, their disappointments in raising children, their longings for days gone

by--and reconciling themselves to the uncertainties of the future. The close of the story recalls the first piece. Sophia Jane takes another one of her annual trips to set things in order. To her daughter-in-law's dismay, she decides that a fifty-foot adobe wall has got to be moved. Having accomplished this feat, she steps inside her son's house, "quite flushed and exhilarated" (p. 340), and falls dead over the doorstep. Sophia Jane's journeying has come to an end.

The third and briefest story in the collection concerns Nannie's husband, Uncle Jimbilly. It is appropriately titled "The Witness," for it stands as a testimony of slavery's debasement of the black race. In imagery that will be repeated in two later stories, the animal gravestones that Uncle Jimbilly carves for the Rhea grandchildren recall from the burial place in his mind the suffering of his people. Consequently, the horror tales he recounts to the children express his repressed feelings of outrage at the brutality of slave owners. His stories reveal the darker side to the myth of the Old South.

"The Circus," the next story in _The Old Order_, lets the reader see events for the first time from Miranda's perspective. It is Miranda's and her grandmother's first circus. Although her exact age is unstated, it is clear that Miranda is chronologically old enough to attend a circus; it is her emotional readiness that comes into question. As she and her family wait for the performance to begin, Miranda notices, from her high perch, some boys on the ground below, looking up into the stands. In her innocence, she doesn't

realize what they are doing. Seeing them, Dicey, a servant, calls them monkeys and admonishes Miranda to keep her legs together. Miranda's initiation into the cruel ways of humor has begun. Then, in a spectacle reminiscent of the circus scene in Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Miranda recoils in terror at the high-wire act. She screams uncontrollably and must be taken home by a most reluctant Dicey. As they leave the grounds, Miranda and Dicey confront a dwarf dressed as a gnome. His "kind, not-human golden eyes" (p. 345) meet Miranda's, and his mouth forms a grimace, mirroring Miranda's own. Striking at him irritably, Miranda sees his look change to that of an antagonistic and disdainful adult. To Miranda he personifies the entire distorted and nightmarish experience. Even when she is safe at home she cannot erase the dreadful visions from her mind and begs Dicey to spend the night in her room. Her generous nature overcoming her original irritation at Miranda's behavior, Dicey stays to comfort her.

The fifth story, "The Last Leaf," seems somehow out of place in the collection's sequence. It, like "The Witness," attests to the endurance and resourcefulness of a subjugated people. Together the two stories place in perspective the values and standards of the antebellum South and juxtapose the life-style of the Southern landlord to that of his Negro servants. Placed next to each other and after the two stories which focus on Grandmother Rhea, they would serve as transitional pieces, anticipating the New Order in the person of Miranda. But apart from its placement in The Old

Order, "The Last Leaf" is a brief but sensitive portrayal of Nannie in the years after Sophia Jane's death. In a declaration of personal independence, "Aunt" Nannie, as she is called by the Rhea children and grandchildren, moves into an abandoned house after her mistress's will sets her free from any further obligations to the family. But the years of self-sacrifice and self-effacement have taken their toll: Nannie refuses any further demands upon her as wife, nurturer, or servant. She lives strictly to please herself and achieves a status worthy of "an aged Bantu woman" (p. 349). In her old age, she is truly liberated from the bonds of both marriage and slavery.

With "The Fig Tree" the focus is, once again, on Miranda. It is summertime and the Rhea household is getting ready for a trip to the Grandmother's farm, Cedar Grove. Miranda wanders off to play while the grown-ups finish packing. Looking for something to amuse her, Miranda stumbles upon a dead baby chicken under the old fig tree. She promptly decides to hold a burial service for the chick. She furtively goes back into the house and gathers up the proper equipment: a small white box and some tissue paper. But soon after she buries the chick she hears a plaintive "weep weep" coming from the ground. At that same moment she hears her name being called--it is time to leave for the farm. Torn between her fear of being left behind and her concern that she has buried the chick alive, Miranda unwillingly gets in the buggy. All the way to the farm she worries and cries over what she has done, but once there, she forgets the incident. The Grandmother's sister,

Great Aunt Eliza, has preceded them to Cedar Grove. Miranda is fascinated by Eliza's immense size and by the fearless way she stands up to Grandmother. Eliza has a probing mind, and, the night before they leave, she takes the children up on the rooftop to look at the stars through her telescope. They are left speechless by the awesome sight. Walking back to the house, they pass through a fig grove. Once more Miranda hears the cry, "Weep weep, weep weep." Miranda's earlier fright comes rushing back. Perceptively, Great Aunt Eliza senses Miranda's alarm. She reassures her that the sound is made by some small tree frogs and is a sign of impending rain. Miranda's guilt is assuaged.

Of all the stories in The Old Order, "The Grave" has received the most critical attention. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, singles it out from among other Porter works as evidence of her genius as a writer,[5] while Edward Schwartz calls it a "triumph of recovery, of remembering."[6] A number of critics have commented upon the story's mythological implications and have praised its epiphanic conclusion.[7] None of the studies mention, however, the story's artistic function within The Old Order. Its placement at the end of the collection indicates that Porter intended "The Grave" as a satisfying and effective conclusion to the whole piece. That it does just this is evident when the work is read in its entirety. Most of the themes of the previous stories are present in this one--the loss of innocence, the initiation into the mysteries of life and death, the awakening of self to its own identity, the inescapable influence of the past upon the present. Some passages

recall particular images the reader has come upon before--the Grandmother as the authority figure who will not let even the dead escape her love for rearranging, the importance of maintaining the right appearance in life, Uncle Jimbilly's role in the children's lives, the mind as a burial place for memories both beautiful and ugly.

When the story opens, the Grandmother has died and has stipulated in her will that some land be sold in order that the proceeds might go to her heirs. There are about twenty graves on the land, and the bodies must be moved to a family plot in a nearby cemetery. Miranda, age nine, and her brother Paul, age twelve, are out hunting rabbits and doves when they come upon these empty graves. Looking for "treasures," they find a coffin screw head in the shape of a dove and a thin gold ring. Miranda persuades Paul to let her have the ring, and, as she puts it on her finger, her latent femininity is aroused. She is awakened from her reverie of being dressed up in the "thinnest, most becoming dress she owned" (p. 365) by Paul's shooting a rabbit. When Paul starts to skin the rabbit so Miranda may have the fur to make into a doll's coat, the children discover the rabbit was pregnant. Miranda is "filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures" (p. 366). At that moment all the doubts and questions she had never been able to formulate about birth and reproduction resolve in her mind. Paul, sensing that he may have led her into things she might not be ready for, swears Miranda to secrecy: "Don't tell a soul. Don't tell Dad because

I'll get into trouble" (p. 367). Complying, Miranda keeps the secret and buries the memory so deeply in her mind that she seemingly forgets the incident completely. Then one day, twenty years later, she is in a Mexican market when the memory comes flashing back to her when a vendor holds out to her a tray of candies in the shape of small animals. Instantly Miranda remembers the dead rabbits and the day "she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves." But then the "dreadful vision" fades and once more she sees Paul, "again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands" (p. 368).

The very title of this novella itself draws our attention to an important word in any discussion of respectability--the word _order_. The primary reference is to a class or social position, and, like its historical counterpart, the South of _The Old Order_ is a class-conscious society.[8] Here, as in many other Porter works, knowing one's place and dutifully maintaining that place is a significant part of being respectable. But _order_ means something in addition to this. One of man's most fundamental urges as a social animal is the need to find order amid chaos. Therefore, man formulates rules of conduct, or laws, by which to govern his life. Not all of these laws are written, however. Some become a part of society's social code--conventions that, in "The Journey," Porter calls the "important appearances of life" (p. 329). In _The Old Order_, respectability is equated with the maintaining of the social order through observing the conventions that society has delegated.

One is respectable if one has an awareness of place and abides by the written and unwritten rules of conduct.

In The Old Order, the Grandmother embodies this concept of respectability. She is the guardian of morals and manners and the judge of what js and is not acceptable. As Anne Scott's study reveals, her situation is no different from that of other married women of her era.[9] As a wife, she has little if any financial resources of her own: her property is subject to her husband's control. Accordingly, he uses Sophia Jane's money to buy a sugar refinery in Louisiana. When her husband dies, Sophia Jane finds herself propelled into a position of authority, "with all of the responsibilities of a man but with none of the privileges" (p. 336). Left a widow with nine children, the youngest of whom is two, she feels compelled to see his sugar cane venture through and subsequently moves her entire household from Kentucky to Louisiana. But the business fails under her direction, and she is forced to sell at a loss and move to Texas. Once again enormous responsibilities are placed upon her. Resolutely she accepts them, carrying out her duties and raising her children with "undeviating devotion." Considering these circumstances, it is no wonder that the Rhea family becomes a strongly matriarchal household. Knowing her ways are "not only right but beyond criticism" (p. 335), Sophia Jane tenaciously maintains her authority even when her children are grown:

> The Grandmother's role was authority, she knew that; it was her duty to portion out activities, to urge or restrain where necessary, to teach morals, manners, and religion, to punish and reward her own household according to a fixed code. Her

> own doubts and hesitations she concealed, also, she reminded herself, as a matter of duty. (p. 328)

Such lifelong service is not rendered, however, without a price, in this instance, a frustrated and restricted life. As a young woman, Sophia Jane engages in daydreams in order to escape her humdrum existence. Acutely aware that in the society in which she grew up it is the men who lead exciting lives, she envies their sexual freedom:

> She had heard that her cousin Stephen was a little "wild," but that was to be expected. He was leading, no doubt a dashing life full of manly indulgences, the sweet dark life of the knowledge of evil which caused her hair to crinkle on her scalp when she thought of it. Ah, the delicious, the free, the wonderful, the mysterious and terrible life of men! She thought about it a great deal. (p. 335)

Accompanying these thoughts are equally disturbing ones, at least in Sophia Jane's time when the word *sex* was sufficient to make any "lady" blush:

> She dreamed recurrently that she had lost her virginity (her virtue, she called it), her *sole claim to regard, consideration, even to existence*, and after frightful moral suffering which masked altogether her physical experience she would wake in a cold sweat, disordered and terrified. (p. 335, italics mine)

In addition to commenting upon the values of the Old South,[10] these passages provide a great deal of insight into Sophia Jane's character. In that society, a young unmarried woman's respectability hung by a single thread--her virginity--while a man's honor was determined by quite different standards. Envy and longing give way eventually to an open contempt for men when Sophia Jane realizes, in later years, the full import of this double standard:

> There were so many young men about the place, always, younger brothers-in-law, first cousins, second cousins, nephews. They

> came visiting and they stayed, and there was no accounting for them nor any way of controlling their quietly headstrong habits. She learned early to keep silent and give no sign of uneasiness, but whenever a child was born in the Negro quarters, pink, worm-like, she held her breath for three days . . . to see whether the newly born would turn black after the proper interval. . . . It was a strain that told on her, and ended by giving her a deeply grounded contempt for men. She could not help it, she despised men. She despised them and was ruled by them. (p. 337)

But to Sophia Jane, sexual promiscuity is only one of the flaws in the male character. Men are irresponsible, undependable, squanderous, and spoiled. They have the power to make "all decisions and dispose of all financial matters" (p. 337), yet they are incompetent, self-centered, and short-sighted. This indictment is based on personal experiences. Her second cousin, Stephen, whom she marries, squanders her dowry and her inheritance in "wild investments in strange territories" (p. 337) while she stands helplessly by. After his death, she is able to provide for her family and salvage their self-respect, but only through considerable self-sacrifice and hard work. Her reward for all this labor is, ironically, children and grandchildren who, because she has both dominated and indulged them, resent her authority and possess the very weakness of character she found so detestable in her husband. Confused and hurt by their behavior, Sophia Jane spends her later years lamenting their ingratitude.

Respectability becomes her guarantee of security in a world of uncertainties. There is comfort in knowing one's place and one's duty. In the Old Order the formulas are well-established; the rules of conduct are seemingly inviolable and infallible. Sophia Jane and Nannie might quarrel with the oppressiveness of such a

system, but, doggedly, they hold on to their basic belief in its justice:

> They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly, but by the mysterious logic of hope they insisted that each change was probably the last; or if not, a series of changes might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known. Who knows why they loved their past? It had been bitter for them both, they had questioned the burdensome rule they lived by every day of their lives, but without rebellion and without expecting an answer. This unbroken thread of inquiry in their minds contained no doubt as to the utter rightness and justice of the basic laws of human existence, founded as they were on God's plan; but they wondered perpetually . . . . how so much suffering and confusion could have been built and maintained on such a foundation. (pp. 327-328)

Since they cannot find satisfactory answers, Sophia Jane and Nannie confine their talks to religion, to the rearing of children, and to the moral laxity of the world. Above all, they stifle their doubts, for if they were to lose faith in the Old Order, life would become impossibly unstable and confused.

In light of this, Sophia Jane's actions are understandable. Since she cannot alter the larger social order, she tries to bring order and discipline to her more immediate world. Much like another Porter heroine--Granny Weatherall--she concentrates her energies on matters over which she has some control. Her frequent trips to visit her children and to Cedar Grove are her method of dealing with a world in disarray. Overseeing and guarding her family's integrity gives her a sense of fulfillment and helps to put at rest the doubts in her own mind. So seriously does she take her role that should her own judgments come in conflict with society's conventions, she stubbornly holds her ground, confident that her

way of thinking is right. For instance, when Nannie almost dies of puerperal fever and is unable to nurse either her own or Sophia Jane's baby, Sophia Jane, despite the protestations of her husband and mother and the conventions of society, nurses both children.

Yet when it comes to others asserting their own individuality, she is not so generous. She is horrified by her sister Eliza's behavior--her table manners and her habit of climbing on rooftops to look at the stars through a telescope. "There is such a thing as appropriate behavior at your time of . . . life," she tells Eliza. Unintimidated by Sophia, Eliza retorts:

> "So long as you can go bouncing off on that horse of yours, Sophia Jane, I s'pose I can climb ladders. I'm three years younger than you, and _at your time of life_ that makes all the difference." (p. 358)

Usually Sophia Jane is not so easily silenced. She is shocked, for example, when her youngest son's bride talks of spending their honeymoon following the round-up and helping with the cattle-branding.

> Of course she may have been joking. But she was altogether too Western, too modern, something like the "new" woman who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living . . . .
>
> The Grandmother's narrow body shuddered to the bone at the thought of women so unsexing themselves. (p. 333)

There is irony, of course, in this observation. Sophia Jane, who secretly yearned to live the "delicious" and "free" life of men, cannot sympathize with young women who actively seek a less restrictive life. She who so fiercely fought for her own right to be self-sufficient and independent resents her new daughter-in-law's willful and energetic determination.

Her attitude reinforces a point made earlier. Sophia Jane has led an essentially frustrated and restricted life. Engaging in "incredibly exalted daydreams" as a young woman, she becomes quickly disillusioned by the harsh realities of marriage. In addition to finding her husband irresponsible and weak-willed, she finds sex a disappointment, her "marriage bed" a failure. Unable to find fulfillment as a wife, she channels her energies into other acceptable forms of behavior. She develops early her habit of trying to dominate and reform others. Barbara Carson notes:

> Her marriage to the dashing cousin had been, no doubt, motivated at least in part by the hope that it would grant access to the mysterious, exciting world that seemed to be his. Instead, marriage had revealed that the "wild" Stephen was spineless and self-indulgent, having neither ambition nor adhesiveness. Sophia Jane's true character began to develop as she tried to change his, her strength growing . . . in proportion to his weakness.[11]

When her husband dies, she takes over his role as head of the family, acquiring a degree of power and influence she would not have had as a married woman. Drawing the conclusion that Sophia Jane's situation was not that uncommon for the women in Porter's early life, Jane Flanders says:

> Miranda's grandmother illustrates the only kind of freedom or self-sufficiency a woman could achieve in Porter's childhood world, yet she achieved it only after long obedience to the conventional role of wife and mother, slowly surmounting the limitations of that role, and finally freed from it only by her husband's death. A woman must be alone to be free.[12]

Whether or not one accepts all of Flander's conclusions, one must agree that Sophia Jane essentially lives in a world ruled by men. Once again that revealing comment comes to mind:

> She found herself with a houseful of children, making a new life for them in another place, with all the responsibilities of a man but with none of the privileges. (p. 336)

Ultimately her sphere of influence is limited. She never oversteps the bounds of propriety. She must always act like a "lady," for to do otherwise would mean that she has "unsexed" herself and lost respect. Thus it is particularly tragic that a woman of Sophia Jane's ambition, determination, energy, and courage is continuously constrained by a social order which she believes is right and just. She who is respectability's faithful proponent is also its victim.

There are, of course, other victims of the Old Order. The Negro servants and slaves whose very existence supports the antebellum South's sense of class and privilege suffer under the injustices of a "respectable" society. The most notable examples are Aunt Nannie and Uncle Jimbilly. Nannie begins her life with Sophia Jane when they are both small children. Sophia Jane sees her at a slave and horse auction and demands that her father buy Nannie, much as a spoiled child demands a toy. She is bought for only twenty dollars. Later, Nannie learns from her mother that, among themselves, the slaves take pride in the price they bring. A slave's status is directly proportional to his or her monetary value. Because Nannie is bought for only twenty dollars, she is generally regarded as being worthless. Her "price" and the fact that she lives in the big house is a source of estrangement between Nannie and her parents. Nevertheless, Nannie enjoys life with her mistress:

> She thrived on plentiful food and a species of kindness not so indulgent, maybe, as that given to the puppies; still it more than fulfilled her notions of good fortune. (p. 332)

In fact, Nannie's situation is described so favorably that one might miss the subtle reference to puppies, but the implications are present. Nannie is bought like a head of livestock, treated like a cute puppy, and delegated to a position where she has no identity of her own. This lack of identity is evident on several occasions. She is denied a sense of personal history by the fact that her birthdate is unknown. Sophia Jane decides one day to pick a date at random from the calendar to be Nannie's "birthday." Consequently, she is assigned June 11. Even when she is grown, she is, as a slave, given no right of self-determination. She is conveniently married off soon after Sophia Jane's marriage so that she and her husband can be given as a wedding present to Sophia Jane. That this proves to be an unhappy marriage is seen in "The Last Leaf."

Furthermore, no matter how old she gets, she is never free from being subjected to coarse remarks and insults. When, as grandmothers, Nannie and Sophia Jane meet Nannie's first owner in Texas, Nannie is humiliated by his talk:

> The judge by then eighty-five years old . . . was rearing to talk about the good old times in Kentucky. The Grandmother showed Nannie to him. . . . "For God Almighty's sake!" bawled the judge, "is that the strip of crowbait I sold to your father for twenty dollars?" (p. 332)

Nannie expresses her resentment to Sophia Jane later: "Look lak a jedge might had better raisin'," she said, gloomily, "look lak he

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didn't keer how much he hurt a body's feelings (p. 332). As Robert Penn Warren points out,

> The episode, in its very mutedness, is more telling than a catalogue of atrocities. And how complex are the ironies in the fact that Nannie impugns the "raisin" of the judge--a point on which the Old Order, at any social level, would have had most pride.[13]

Although they never seem to realize that their situations are similar, Sophia Jane and Nannie share a common struggle. While both fulfill the roles assigned to them by their families and by society, neither is appreciated for her individuality. Each reaches a degree of self-reliance and independence, but at considerable cost. Nannie is, however, exploited to a far greater degree than Sophia Jane. She has had to be a mother to both black and white and has never enjoyed the respect accorded to Sophia Jane. Until her last years, she is totally subject to the demands of the social order. Her life has been so intertwined with Sophia Jane's that when she dies, Nannie is "prepared to start her journey" into the next life as well. But with Sophia Jane gone, her children rely more than ever upon Nannie:

> Years afterward, Maria, the elder girl, thought with a pang, they had not really been so very nice to Aunt Nannie. They went on depending upon her as they always had, letting her assume more burdens and more, allowing her to work harder than she should have. The old woman grew silent, hunched over more deeply . . . . They could hear her groaning at night on her knees beside her bed, asking God to let her rest. (p. 348)

When she finally asserts her independence and goes to live by herself in an abandoned Negro cabin, Sophia Jane's children are shocked. As Carson notes, they "had thought of her only in terms of their needs."[14] They never considered that her lifelong devotion

to them has been anything but personally fulfilling for Nannie. Nannie, as "an aged Bantu woman of independent means, sitting on the steps, breathing the free air" (p. 349), is free at last of the respectable society that bound her. But this independence has its price. Carson writes:

> Nannie's spirited self-emancipation is not unequivocal. Her coming to her "honest self" is late; it is limited; and even in her total emotional self-sufficiency there is great irony. Others had always meant burdens for Nannie; now in rejecting those externally imposed burdens she rejects, too, their sources. She does not care, we are told, whether her children loved her or not; she wants only to be alone. . . . This reduction to the core of self--this recognition of one's ability to survive alone and of the validity of one's desires --is a good starting point . . . . But as a conclusion it is nihilistic, grim in its lack of connection with others, barren of emotions and of productivity. All Nannie has left to look forward to is restful night, both the immediate and the final one.[15]

Uncle Jimbilly's case is similar. Although his character is sketched only briefly, the reader has some insight into his feelings of fear and intimidation as a slave. He may not be able to get personal revenge on the persecutors of his race, but he can scare the Rhea grandchildren with his gruesome tales. He tells his stories with such gory detail that it is obvious he is acutely aware of what others have suffered, even though he may have never experienced such atrocities himself. Like Nannie, Jimbilly gains a sense of independence and individuality only when he is aged and too old to threaten any white man's position in the Old Order.

The stories do have, however, an iconoclast. With her inquiring mind and unconventional behavior, Great Aunt Eliza challenges traditional values. In the antebellum South, women could conceivably run a farm, but they were not scientists with

a microscope and telescope always at hand. Clearly Eliza cares little about being a "lady." She climbs ladders in great, billowing skirts; dissects potato peelings at the table; and, worst of all, takes snuff.

> Miranda had heard of this shameful habit in women of the lower classes, but no lady had been known to "dip snuff," and surely not in the family. (p. 359)

Eliza is willful, obstinate, independent, and authoritative--much like her sister, Sophia Jane. But they differ on a crucial point. Sophia Jane takes pride in being respectable; Eliza does not. Moreover, one gets the impression that Eliza is too busy investigating the natural world even to wonder if she is acting properly or not. She may undermine society's codes, but she does it unselfconsciously and indeliberately.

On the other hand, Harry, Sophia's son and Miranda's father, subverts the social conventions more consciously. The reader never learns exactly what he does to lose his mother's favor, but something causes Sophia to discriminate against Harry in her will. Sophia does disapprove of Harry's wife because she is "delicate and hopelessly inadequate at housekeeping" (p. 339), but she dies when Miranda is born. The Grandmother helps to raise the children and provides them with "the only reality in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge" (p. 324). This passage may help explain why Harry earned Sophia Jane's displeasure. As the male head of his household, he is expected to fulfill his responsibilities, particularly in regard to his three children. Sometimes his authority comes in conflict with his mother's, as is seen in

"The Fig Tree." At other times he relinquishes his parental duties, as in "The Grave":

> Miranda's father had been criticized for letting his girls dress like boys and go careering around astride barebacked horses. . . . It was said the motherless family was running down, with the Grandmother no longer there to hold it together. It was known that she had discriminated against her son Harry in her will, and that he was in straits about money. Some of his old neighbors reflected with vicious satisfaction that now he would probably not be so stiff-necked, nor have any more high-stepping horses either. Miranda . . . had met along the road old women of the kind who smoked corn-cob pipes, who had treated her grandmother with most sincere respect. They slanted their gummy old eyes side-ways at the grandaughter and said, "Ain't you ashamed of yoself, Missy? It's aginst the Scriptures to dress like that. Whut yo Pappy thinkin about?" (pp. 364-365)

There is a suggestion here that Harry lives beyond his means, spending his money on expensive horses. The reference to his "stiffneck" attitude implies that he is opinionated and inflexible --traits that would put him in direct conflict with his mother. A more relevant point is made about his personal laxity. A toothless crone who smokes a pipe--obviously no "lady" herself--knows that God and the social order forbid girls to wear overalls. If Miranda and Maria are allowed to dress like boys and to ride horses, how can they be expected to grow up to be ladies? They will become "unsexed," not knowing the proper way to dress or act. Harry's attitude here stands in marked contrast to his attitude in Old Mortality. In that work he is particular to the point of prudishness about his daughter's appearance, refusing to hold them on his knee unless they are "prettily dressed" and have "nicely scrubbed fingernails" (p. 184). His permissiveness in "The Grave" indicates that the old values are being questioned. Miranda and Maria are

harbingers of a New Order where even respectability will be challenged.

The modern reader might view the social infractions of Eliza and Harry as amusing and as hardly a threat to the social structure. But in a society where social, racial, and sexual lines are clearly drawn, where social conformity, familial duty, and order are highly valued, their disregard for the "important appearances of life" is of no small consequence. They, too, along with Nannie, anticipate a new social structure in which a person's worth is based on more than his price on the auction block or his social standing. In the Old Order where judgments are based on appearances, respectability is all too often revealed to be a sham.

CHAPTER II

Old Mortality, first published in the spring of 1937 just after The Old Order, is considered a companion piece to that earlier work. The two complement one another in several ways. Porter used much of her own family history and personal remembrances for both, initiating perhaps more autobiographical readings of these works than is prudent.[1] Each chronicles events occurring within the Rhea family, particularly as those events affect Miranda, a prominent character in both works. Thematically, they are also similar. Both comment upon the ability of the past to dominate and control the present. Memory acts ambivalently, causing pain or bringing comfort to those who dwell in its shadows. Furthermore, each portrays the tragic element inherent in lives that are bound by their own or by others' concept of respectability.

At the same time, the two works are quite distinct. Unlike The Old Order, Old Mortality is not a series of sketches. It is divided into three chronological sections, each of which must be read in order to understand the full implications of the story. In addition, a few discrepancies exist in time and characterization between the two novellas. Mention has already been made in the last chapter about Harry's divergent views in child-rearing. But the most notable difference in characterization concerns Sophia Jane. In Old Mortality she is not the same dominating, authority

figure she is in _The Old Order_, nor is there evidence in _Old Mortality_ of the discontent or disappointment that plagues her in the earlier work. In _Old Mortality_ she fills the maternal role to perfection, understanding and consistently defending her daughter's capriciousness, providing support where needed, and acting as a peacemaker when Amy's behavior gets out of hand. The reason for this marked difference lies, of course, in an important deviation that Porter made in _Old Mortality_. One will recall that in _The Old Order_, Sophia Jane's husband dies in Kentucky. In _Old Mortality_, he is still alive when his children are grown and living in Texas. Consequently, he acts as the head of the house and plays the part of the disgruntled parent. A more important distinction can be made, however, between the two works. In _The Old Order_, most of the pressure to conform appears to come from the larger community; in _Old Mortality_, the real champion of respectability is unveiled. The family, which ostensibly is supportive and solicitious of its members, is in fact, more interested in protecting and perpetuating its own myth.

That myth-making is at the very heart of the novella is apparent from its title. Amy's husband, Gabriel, whose infatuation with Amy knows no bounds, immortalizes her in a poem which apparently gives the novella its name. George Hendrick points out, however, the probable source of the title--Sir Walter Scott's novel _Old Mortality_.[2] Also noting the connection between Scott's work and Porter's, Hank Lopez explains the relationship in his

recent Porter memoir. Scott's novel is about a "deeply religious man" who roams about rural Scotland looking for the graves of fellow Covenanters who had been killed in the Stuart reign.

> Nicknamed "Old Mortality," he searched for the most obscure and neglected graves, cleaning moss off the tombstones, renewing wornout inscriptions, and repairing damaged emblems. He felt this was his sacred mission, and many people superstitiously believed "his graves" would never decay again.[3]

The similarity seems obvious. Both works deal with persons who are anxious to preserve the memory of individuals who represent, for the living, the attitudes, values, and romance of a by-gone era. It is Amy, as S. H. Poss points out, "who provides vicarious life for the adults of Miranda's world, for around her are grouped a complex cluster of attitudes and ideals and associations which make up the myth of the Past: she is its synecdoche."[4]

Old Mortality is divided into three periods: 1885-1902, 1904, and 1912. Part One opens with a description of the haunting photograph of Amy as she is perceived by her two nieces, Miranda and Maria. Amy died before the girls were even born. Subsequently, all that they know about Amy has been told to them by other family members. According to the stories that Miranda and Maria hear, no one has ever compared to Amy's grace and beauty. She was the ideal Southern lady who knew how to walk, dance, and ride better than anyone else. But somehow the girls simply cannot reconcile the accounts they hear with the Amy in the picture. How can the Amy who is "only a ghost in a frame" (p. 173) be the same beautiful and vibrant creature who lives in family legend? Their confusion is somewhat resolved when they remember discrepancies in other

family stories they have heard. Their father, for instance, persists in believing there are no fat women in the family when the girls know this is untrue. Miranda and Maria wonder about the adults around them, their endless fascination for the past, their love of legend, and their refusal to alter their stories in the face of conflicting evidence.

In Part Two, Maria and Miranda meet another legendary figure --Uncle Gabriel. The girls are now fourteen and ten and are "immured" in a convent school in New Orleans. Because they have been "good" girls during the week, their father comes all the way from Texas to take them to the horse races. It is there that they meet Gabriel. Once again there is a conflict between reality and fable. The handsome, dashing Gabriel of the girls' imagination turns out to be a slovenly, overweight, pathetic drunk. Although he is remarried, Gabriel is still devoted to the memory of Amy. Upon meeting the Rhea grandchildren, he instantly makes a comparison between them and Amy--to the girls' disadvantage. Moreover, he continues to name his race horses after Amy's favorite horse, Lucy. After Lucy IV wins the race against tremendous odds, Gabriel insists that Harry and the girls accompany him home to bring the good news to Honey, Gabriel's second wife. But their reception is less than enthusiastic. In a shabby and cheerless tenement room they confront an equally drab and unaccomodating Honey. Her obvious contempt for Gabriel and all his former in-laws indicates to what extent Amy's memory has dominated and inhibited her own life.

Miranda is eighteen and married in Part Three when she boards a train to return to Texas for Gabriel's funeral. Revering Amy to the end, Gabriel is to be buried next to her. On the train, Miranda meets Cousin Eva, a "chinless" old maid who devoted most of her life to the women's suffrage movement. When their talk turns to family remembrances, the subject of Amy once more arises. But Eva's perspective is startingly different from what Miranda has heard before. Eva speaks of an Amy that was spoiled, shallow, self-centered, and sex-ridden. Suspecting that Eva is only being spiteful and jealous, Miranda thinks, "'This is no more true than what I was told before, it's every bit as romantic'" (p. 216). When Miranda's father greets them at the station, Miranda becomes aware again of how estranged she is from him and his generation. He has not forgiven Miranda her elopement. As Harry and Eva reminisce about the past, Miranda thinks once more of all the untruths she has been told. She resolves to find her own truth by which to live, promising herself to be free of all ties that might threaten to bind her.

Old Mortality is centered around Miranda. Because Porter structured the story to begin and end with Miranda's reactions to her family's "truths," the reader's attention is riveted on how events affect Miranda's development. At the same time, the character of Amy haunts the reader's imagination as much as her ghost plagues the memory of the story's characters. An intriguing question arises. Why would a young woman such as Amy, who is reportedly an unequalled beauty; who, at social functions, is the

center of male attention; who is the object of her family's love and devotion; who has everything to life for--why would such a person be so intent on self-destruction? One could adopt Cousin Eva's assessment and say that Amy was driven by vanity and the sexual power she had over men:

> "She always got herself up to be looked at, and so people looked, of course. She rode too hard, and she danced too freely, and she talked too much, and you'd have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to notice her. I don't mean she was loud or vulgar, she wasn't, but she was too free." (p. 215)

Yet her freedom had a price. According to Eva's bitter memories, the rivalry among the young women was intense. To miss a party or dance could drastically lessen one's chances in the marriage market. Therefore, a high premium was placed on appearances. Even when Amy's health was threatened, she had to maintain an image of invulnerability:

> "If they had made her take proper care of herself, if she had been nursed sensibly, she might have been alive today. But no . . . . She lay wrapped in beautiful shawls on a sofa . . . eating as she liked or not eating, getting up after a hemorrhage and going out to ride or dance, sleeping with the windows closed; with crowds coming in and out laughing and talking at all hours, and Amy sitting up so her hair wouldn't get out of curl." (p. 215)

Eva's analysis is that such behavior led Amy to disaster. Quite candidly Eva informs Miranda that Amy committed suicide, though Eva can only speculate why:

> "What I ask myself, what I ask myself over and over again . . . is what connection did this man Raymond . . . have with Amy's sudden marriage to Gabriel, and what did Amy do to make away with herself so soon afterward? . . . Amy wasn't so ill as all that. . . . Amy did away with herself to escape some disgrace, some exposure that she faced." (p. 214)

It is doubly ironic that a champion for women's rights and freedom should accuse Amy of being "too free"--particularly when Amy was anything but free. Apart from revealing her own sexual frustrations, Eva's judgment shows her own lack of perception and to what extent she herself is trapped by the narrow perspective of her day. For, as a young woman living in the Old South at the turn of the century, Amy was very much bound by rigid conventions. She, like most young women, had few options open to her. The general expectation was that she would marry and settle down with a family. Amy's mother thinks marriage will "cure" her of everything. Marriage and motherhood, as Rosemary Hennessy observes, was part of the Cinderella myth to which every girl was to aspire:

> Historically, a young girl's initiation into adulthood required no search for identity. She merely waited to be discovered by a husband who represented the fulfillment of her destiny. . . . A woman's destiny involve[d] a one-to-one correlation between personal fulfillment and the reproductive and nurturing functions of wife and mother.[5]

Once married, a woman's place was clearly, if paradoxically, defined. She was expected to bear numerous children, but not to enjoy sex; to be faithful to her husband, but to ignore his sexual indiscretions; to manage a house filled with servants, but to defer in all important decisions to her husband. She was expected to fill, as Jane Flanders notes, an impossible role, "upholding the moral, religious and cultural standards of the household, while remaining submissive to her husband and the traditions of society."[6]

The alternative was equally unattractive. The unmarried woman was an anomaly, an embarrassment, who bore the brunt of many a joke.[7] Harry scoffs at his sister's suggestion that she may never

marry. Being an old maid is for people like Eva who have no chin. When a woman is so plain that she can't win a husband, she has to compensate by giving her life to some worthwhile cause. As Amy's Uncle Bill bluntly puts it, "'When women haven't anything else, they'll take a vote for consolation'" (p. 183).

Restricted by the prospects of a stifling marriage on the one hand and of spinsterhood on the other, it is little wonder that Amy finds life so "dull." Accordingly, she abandons herself to wild escapades, outrageous flirtations, and indiscreet rendezvous. Unlike her mother, Sophia Jane, she is not content only to dream about the "dashing life" of men; she boldly partakes of it. Realizing that her freedom is closely linked with her single status, she breaks one engagement after another. Flander comments:

> Amy's only arena was the social one, and her only way of gratifying her passion for excitement was by exploiting her sexual charm and flouting the conventions of genteel female decorum.[8]

Unwilling to accept the role of passive and submissive female which both society and her family demand, Amy rebels against all authority and convention. When her father orders her to dress more modestly for a masquerade ball, she openly defies him by coming downstairs with her bodice lower and her skirts higher than they were before. For five years she refuses to marry Gabriel because, besides representing another authority figure, he is her family's choice for a husband.

Later, she abruptly changes her mind after Gabriel loses his inheritance. The fact that Gabriel has become a "worthless poor relation" appeals to Amy. He is less respectable. Now there might

be an element of surprise and adventure in her marriage. Perhaps Amy also thinks she can maintain a degree of independence if Gabriel is less financially secure. In any case, her wedding preparations indicate how unenthusiastic she really is about the prospect of marriage. She choses a gray, as opposed to the traditional white, wedding dress: "'I shall wear mourning if I like,' she said, 'it is my funeral, you know'" (p. 182). As Amy prepares to give up her right to independence, she makes a defiant gesture, the same gesture which will be repeated in her married life. Most significant, her rebellion is finally reduced to a choice between decorous and suggestive attire. This is particularly ironic in light of the fact that the one likeness of Amy remaining shows her in a prim and proper dress.

Whatever expectations Amy may have had for her marriage, they are soon demolished. In spite of Gabriel's devotion and kindness, Amy continues to need the stimulation of parties and horse races. She cannot fit herself into the role of "a staid old married woman" (p. 192). But her health, which has always been precarious, does not allow her to continue her frenetic pace. Prone to hemorrhages before her marriage, she suffers a relapse and is confined to bed. Her death, which results from an overdose of medication, is a desperate act, the immediate cause of which is unclear. Amy could never tolerate restrictions on her freedom. Perhaps she became despondent over her confinement. Or perhaps Eva was correct in her view that Amy discovered she was pregnant

and could not face the constraints of motherhood. In any case, she sees death as the only means of escape from the demands upon her.

The larger irony of Old Mortality is that, even in death, Amy cannot evade the clutches of respectability. Thwarted by their efforts to control the living Amy, her family envelops her in myth once she is dead. Their memories recreate her so that her instability is deemed flightiness; her depressions, passing phases; and her suicide, an accidental death. She becomes a romantic figure: beautiful and charming, pursued by many, and tragically cut down in the bloom of life by a debilitating illness. In the words of Barbara Carson,

> Forgetting Amy's rebellion, her cries of boredom, the hints of suicide motivated by a deep dissatisfaction with their kind of life, the family transformed her in their memories into the ideal belle. But there is more here. The family was involved in an ancient protective ritual. Like primitive people who worship what they fear and so regulate its powers, Amy's family reasserted its control over the woman who challenged it, by declaring her an "angel." They negated what her life and death really mean by worshiping what they said she stood for. By mythologizing her, they restored the woman to her "proper" place. The rebellious one was reintegrated . . . and Amy now became the pattern by which future generations of young girls could measure themselves and be measured.[9]

With Amy's family, Porter makes a devastating comment on familial relationships. The family is not the supportive and loving body it purports to be. It is in reality restrictive, narrow-minded, insensitive, oppressive, and self-serving. As Carson observes:

> Her [Amy's] great enemy was the monolithic family, the family as viceroy of society and tradition, which determines how the individual will act and which, indeed, squeezes individuality out and makes the person . . . just a unit expressing the larger whole.[10]

That the family's actions are prompted in their own minds by a sense of love and a desire to protect makes resistance to their efforts all the more difficult. One remembers Eva's bitter denunciation:

> "All my life the whole family bedeviled me about my chin. My entire girlhood was spoiled by it. Can you imagine . . . people who call themselves civilized spoiling life for a young girl because she had one unlucky feature? Of course . . . it was all in the very best humor . . . no harm meant--oh, no, no harm at all. That is the hellish thing about it. It is that I can't forgive. . . . Ah, the family . . . the whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. It is the root of all human wrongs," she ended, and relaxed, and her face became calm. She was trembling. (p. 217)

In light of all this, Miranda's repudiation at the end of the novella of those two respectable institutions--marriage and the family--seems less a case of histrionics than a sensible declaration of independence. Miranda need only recall her observations of both to justify her rejection. Marital and familial ties enclose and imprison, whether the walls that encase be physical or mental. This idea is supported by the many images and objects of confinement within the novella--the "motionless image" of Amy held within a "dark walnut frame"; the trunks and boxes holding all the mementos; the convent in New Orleans where Maria and Miranda are "immured"; the dingy tenement room where Miss Honey cloisters herself; marriages which suppress personal freedom; minds that fix on half-truths and cherish wornout values.

Moreover, Miranda's experiences are not unlike her Aunt Amy's. Thomas Walsh draws some interesting comparisons between the two:

> The similarities between Amy and Miranda are so deep that both seem to unite to become the composite heroine of the story. . . . Although the adult Miranda loses faith in the romanticized version of Amy, she becomes almost a reincarnation of the real Amy, as if Amy's restless "ghost in a frame" were

> doomed to live her unhappy life all over again by taking possession of her niece.[11]

One might argue with the dramatics of Walsh's final conclusion, but the similarities between the two women are apparent. Both find life "dull"--Amy, trapped in her role as a desirable young woman, Miranda as a child and later as a young woman shut up in a convent. Each is spirited and independent and oppressed by her family's expectations. Both impulsively enter into marriages which further restrict them and then view these marriages, Walsh notes, as an illness.[12] Both try to escape the constraints of respectability--Amy, by her suicide; Miranda, by her disavowal of love and family ties at the end of the novella. Each is placed in the paradoxical position of being both a victim and a destroyer of respectability.

Perhaps Miranda's victimization is not as obvious as Amy's, but it is present nonetheless. Like Amy, Miranda is pressured into conformity by paternal disapproval and rejection. She and her sister Maria are continually threatened with being "immured" in the convent for the weekend if their behavior is less than exemplary during the week. Their father's love and attention are conditional:

> He was a pleasant, everyday sort of father, who held his daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well behaved, and pushed them away if they had not freshly combed hair and nicely scrubbed fingernails. "Go away, you're disgusting," he would say. . . . He noticed if their stockings seams were crooked. . . . When they behaved stupidly he could not endure the sight of them. (p. 184)

Harry continues to use love for purposes of intimidation even after Miranda is grown. The disgrace of her elopement looms between Miranda and her father when they are reunited at the train station. His cool reception of Miranda makes it clear he has neither

forgiven nor accepted what she has done and that he will withhold his love accordingly.

But as injurious as these experiences may be, their import is beyond the immediate moment. Stung by her father's rebuff while feeling outcast and displaced, Miranda privately rejects him and the world he represents:

> "It is I who have no place," thought Miranda. "Where are my own people and my own time?" She resented, slowly and deeply and in profound silence, the presence of these aliens who lectured and admonished her, who loved her with bitterness and denied her the right to look at the world with her own eyes, who demanded that she accept their version of life and yet could not tell her the truth, not in the smallest thing. "I hate them both," her most inner and secret mind said plainly, "_I will be free of them, I shall not even remember them._" (p. 219)

This bitter denunciation shows how much, yet how little, Miranda has learned from the adults around her. She perceives, on the one hand, all the embittered and wasted lives that have occurred as a result of respectability's restrictions, while, on the other hand, she fails to learn the lesson those lives have to teach her. In her determination to be free "of the bonds that [smother] her in love and hatred," Miranda mistakenly rejects all love. "I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it" (pp. 220-221). With Amy's and Eva's example still fresh in her mind, she deludes herself into thinking her life will be different. She will be able, she promises herself, to live her life freely, beyond the demands and influences of the family and its past. She becomes, in the very act of her rejection of romanticism in her life, most romantic:

> Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises. I won't have false hopes. I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (p. 221)

She condemns the adults around her for erecting their own myths about life at the very moment she begins constructing her own. Until Miranda realizes the limitations of her nihilistic stance, she can only repeat, in "her hopefulness, her ignorance," the failures of the past.

CHAPTER III

"That Tree" and "He" are altogether different types of stories from the "Miranda" nouvellas, although they too are centered on the theme of respectability. In these stories, the narrator is closely tied to each of the story's protagonist so that in both there appears to be no narrator. "That Tree" is almost a monologue. The main character, a journalist and frustrated poet, has lived in Mexico a number of years and has become something of an authority on Latin American revolutions. As the journalist sits and talks with an unidentified companion in a Mexican cafe, he reveals himself, all to unflatteringly, to the reader. "He" uses a similar technique. Mrs. Whipple's insistence that she loves her second son more than her other two children combined only casts doubt upon the authenticity of her assertion. Moreover, as M. M. Liberman notes, the antagonist of "He" is unable to speak for himself.[1] The same thing could be said of the antagonist in "That Tree." Although we hear, through the journalist, how Miriam reacted to given situations, our perception of her is always filtered through the journalist; she never actually tells her side of the story. Furthermore, the main characters of both these stories make an interesting pair. On the one hand is the journalist who, ostensibly, cares nothing for respectability. On the other hand is Mrs. Whipple, who cares for nothing but respectability. Both

deceive themselves into thinking they are something they are not, with the result that they act uncompassionately and blindly. Likewise, both suffer from a good deal of "moral and emotional confusions."[2]

When he first comes to Mexico, the journalist (who remains unnamed throughout the story) has a romanticized conception of what it means to be a "true" artist. To him, being a poet involves flouting society's conventions, rejecting the values on which one was raised, and living an uninhibited life. The "tree" in the title and in the story is a symbol of this romantic ideal:

> He had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry. . . . He would have enjoyed just that kind of life: no respectability, no responsibility, no money to speak of, wearing worn-out sandals and a becoming, if probably ragged, blue shirt, lying under a tree writing poetry. That was why he had come to Mexico in the first place. (p. 66)

It is obvious from this passage that the journalist is dedicated to being, for the sake of art, a rebel, a destroyer of respectability. But two words in the quote are particularly enlightening: "cheerful" and "becoming." They indicate how unrealistic his dreams are. He imagines that the life of a poor poet will be no more than a minor inconvenience, cast on and off as easily as his apparel.

Enamored with this romantic notion of the carefree artist, the journalist plunges into the role. He cultivates the friendship of other "starving" artists, takes an Indian woman as his mistress, and teaches in a technical school in order to support his artistic life-style. When Miriam agrees to come all the way

from Minnesota to marry him after an extended and long-distance courtship, he assumes his new bride is as eager as he is to adopt the Bohemian way of life. He imagines her as "palpitating to learn about life" (p. 73), eagerly sharing in his artistic quest. To his undisguised disappointment, Miriam is unassailable:

> His intention to play the role of a man of the world educating an innocent but interestingly teachable bride was nipped in the bud. She was not at all teachable and she took no trouble to make herself interesting. In their most intimate hours her mind seemed elsewhere. . . . She was not to be won. . . . She was not interested in his poetry. . . . She let him know also that she believed their mutual sacrifice of virginity was the most important act of their marriage, and this sacred rite once achieved, the whole affair had descended to a pretty low plane. She had a terrible phrase about "walking the chalk line" which she applied to all sorts of situations. One walked, as never before, the chalk line in marriage. (p. 73)

Miriam's moral and social convictions remain intact. At the same time, her opinion of artists is disconcerting and severe. Disdainful of the opportunistic artists who take advantage of their hospitality, she shows little respect for the artistic temperament. Her husband's reproof that these are the "best painters and poets and what-alls in Mexico" fails to impress her:

> Why didn't they go to work and make a living? It was no good trying to explain to her his Franciscan notions of holy Poverty as being the natural companion for the artist. She said, "So you think they're being poor on purpose? Nobody but you would be such a fool." (p. 76)

This passage focuses on the central conflict of the story: the conflict between two different standards. This conflict between the journalist and Miriam is, however, only a manifestation of the greater conflict going on within the journalist himself. As William Nance points out, the writer's conflict with his unhappy marriage to Miriam is "an allegory of the conflict within the

protagonist's own mind. His wife is an embodiment of repressed traits within himself."[3] She acts as his superego, inhibiting and condemning his attempts to escape from "old-fashioned" morality.

He and Miriam come from the same sort of middle-class background where such things as the work ethic, devotion to one's family, responsible citizenship, and marital fidelity are valued. His only knowledge of artists has been through what he has read in books. Consequently, the journalist has an idealized and overromanticized concept of what the artistic life entails. He thinks an artist must avoid all appearance of comfort and respectability. He takes life easy, but must be uncompromising in his art and uncorrupted by worldly demands. Naively thinking that all artists are "a race apart, dedicated men much superior to common human needs" (p. 76), he sets out to become a poet merely by living the part: "He had been trying to live and think in a way that he hoped would end by making a poet of him" (p. 77).

Enter Miriam. An obvious question is "Why does he marry her in the first place?" She is rigid, a snob, and unsympathetic to his calling. She has only contempt for the Mexican culture. She holds her nose when she goes to market, cooks "civilized American food," refuses the help of a "dirty" Indian servant, and despises housework. By the journalist's own analysis, Miriam isn't even all that beautiful or intelligent. But there is something about her that retains his loyalty and admiration, even after she has left him. He claims it was his second wife's disparaging remarks concerning Miriam that eventually led to their divorce. Why does he still get so angry when he thinks of how "abominably, obscenely

right" Miriam was about all the artists who converged on their house?

As noted before, Miriam personifies the side of him that is a middle-class conservative, the part of him that yearns for security, comfort, and success. When he marries Miriam, the journalist testifies to the fact that he has been unable to divorce himself from those standards by which he was raised. His relationship with her is an indication of the divisiveness within himself. That this is true is supported by his subsequent actions of turning to journalism as a means of earning a "respectable" living. In his way of thinking, a journalist is a considerable step above a newspaper reporter. As evidenced by his behavior in the Mexican café, he is somewhat snobbish himself. His move into journalism is a direct result of his attempt to prove to Miriam that he is not worthless, not a failure:

> He had spent a good deal of time and energy doing all sorts of things he didn't care for in the least to prove to his first wife . . . that he was not just merely a bum, fit for nothing but lying under a tree . . . writing poetry and enjoying his life. (p. 78)

By gaining Miriam's approval, he will quiet his own nagging doubts about his writing talents, thereby bolstering his flagging self-esteem.

This is partly why he agrees to take Miriam back after she writes to him, asking for a second chance. Miriam hasn't changed. She is just as much the middle-class snob as she was before. Now that he is a respectably published writer and is famous, she is eager to share the limelight. But he hasn't changed either. Poor unsuspecting Miriam is about to be castigated once again for the

journalist's failures. She will be the means by which he punishes himself for his self-betrayal.

Porter's unsparing treatment of the journalist provides some critics with material for their charge that her fiction is filled with weak and contemptible men. The criticism is, at best, one-sided. For every impotent and despicable male there is an equally contemptible and insensitive female. Porter is concerned with the emotional and psychological barriers all of her characters erect in order to preserve their concept of their own worth. In her portraits of self-centered men and women, she attacks the limiting vision in us all.

Few better examples exist of the self-indulgent attitude than in Porter's treatment of Mrs. Whipple in "He." Here is a woman in whom is combined the worst traits of the characters in "That Tree." Like Miriam, Mrs. Whipple is bound to an image of respectability. Like the journalist, Mrs. Whipple is adept at self-deception, at cherishing a notion of herself that is at odds with reality. Critical opinion differs, however, as to Mrs. Whipple's culpability.[4] Some critics such as Harry Mooney are totally sympathetic of Mrs. Whipple, seeing her as being "altogether committed" to her retarded son.[5] Others, such as William Nance, find no one in the story "with whom the author or reader is inclined to identify sympathetically."[6] Robert Penn Warren talks about "the tortured complexities of Mrs. Whipple's attitude,"[7] while M. M. Liberman warns the reader against self-righteousness:

> A sentimentalist and a hypocrite, there is nothing about Mrs. Whipple for us to like but everything for us to take seriously,

> for although it is clear that Miss Porter would have had her treat Him differently, the burden of the story is the terrible question of how many of us could have succeeded in giving love where Mrs. Whipple failed.[8]

As the story begins, the Whipples are lamenting their bad "luck." No matter how hard they try, the Whipples are unable to live above subsistence level. The exact cause of their ill-fortune is unclear. Mr. Whipple suggests it is his wife's extravagance: "No wonder we can't get ahead," he complains when she insists on killing the suckling pig for her brother's visit (p. 52). Mrs. Whipple, on the other hand, implies it is her husband's poor trading habits that are at fault. This proclivity for blame-shifting prompts Paul F. Deasy to maintain:

> The Whipples consider themselves subject to occurrences rather than responsible cause of them. . . what they <u>do</u> is seen as happening to them. Their life, then, is not really "hard" but is seen as such because their concern is to escape as much as possible.[9]

There is underneath, however, the unspoken complaint that "He" is to blame for their misfortunes. He is their retarded son whose existence is at once the cause and symbol of their shabby life. The neighbors, while appearing to be supportive to the Whipples' faces, talk "plainly among themselves. 'A Lord's pure mercy if He should die,' they said. . . . 'There's bad blood and bad doings somewhere'" (pp. 49-50). Although they seek to hide their feelings behind a profusion of public declarations of love and devotion, the Whipples treat Him inhumanely. They never refer to Him by name--for all the reader knows, He has none. They frequently allow and even encourage Him to jeopardize His safety, indicating they too wish He were dead. They give Him a minimum of care so that it is

through their own negligence that He becomes ill. But most harmful of all is their denial of their feelings of resentment and anger toward Him. They convince themselves they have His well-being at heart, thus precluding any honest relationship.

Much emphasis is placed in the story upon talk, feelings, and thoughts. Mrs. Whipple is consistently preoccupied with what others might think and say. Even Mr. Whipple, in response to his wife's constant reiteration of love for Him, replies, "'You needn't keep on saying it around . . . you'll make people think nobody has any feeling about Him but you'" (p. 49). In addition, the reader is frequently told how Mrs. Whipple feels. Repeatedly, she feels "badly about all sorts of things" (p. 52). She is tormented with thoughts of something happening to Him. She gets "sick" of hearing people talk about Him. After she boxes His ears, His face hurts "Mrs. Whipple's feelings" (p. 53). When her brother praises her cooking, she feels "warm and good," but when Mr. Whipple reminds her that anyone can be polite for a free meal, she feels "a hard pain" in her head (pp. 53-54). This emphasis is ironic in light of the fact that the story focuses on a character who cannot speak and whose thoughts and feelings are completely disregarded.

Not surprisingly, then, His affinity to animals is mentioned numerous times. He is allowed to eat, "squatting in the corner, smacking and mumbling" (p. 50). Bees don't sting Him or, if they do, He doesn't seem to mind. He climbs a tree just like "a regular monkey" (p. 50) and fearlessly leads a bull three miles home without any harm coming to Him. When everyone else is afraid to try to get

the suckling pig away from its mother, He snatches it from the pen, oblivious to any danger. His resemblance to an animal is so marked that when Mrs. Whipple slits the pig's throat, one feels it could almost as easily be His throat. His horrified response to the slaughter certainly indicates that He identifies with the pig's helplessness.

Whereas, as far as the Whipples are concerned, He "doesn't seem to mind" anything, Mrs. Whipple is bothered about everything. She can do nothing for fear the neighbors will "come nosing around." Her life is "a torment for fear something might happen to Him" (p. 50), not because she fears for His safety but because she fears people will accuse her of being a negligent parent. Above all, Mrs. Whipple cannot "stand to be pitied."

> "Don't ever let a soul hear us complain. . . . No, not if it comes to it that we have to live in a wagon and pick cotton . . . nobody's going to get a chance to look down on us." (p. 49)

Mrs. Whipple's ultimate and overriding consideration, the standard by which all is measured, is "What will people say?" and "What will people think?" She desperately desires to be respectable. She, like the grotesques in Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, embraces this belief, this "truth," to the exclusion of all others and, as a result, becomes, in Nance's words, "emotionally retarded."[10] All feelings of pity, fear, sympathy, and even love are ultimately directed toward herself.

She cannot, in fact, love Him, however much she asserts to the contrary, because His very existence is a blight upon the family's name. Try as she might, Mrs. Whipple cannot keep Him

presentable. His crude eating habits, outlandish behavior, and dirty clothes infuriate her, for they all undermine her attempts to be respectable. To put Him away in the County Home would somehow acknowledge their disgrace. In addition, people would pity them for accepting "charity." Wishing to be rid of Him but afraid of what people will say, Mrs. Whipple convinces herself she loves Him. She overstates her affection in her efforts to hide her "unnatural" feelings. Thus, it is somewhat implausible to suggest, as some critics do, that Mrs. Whipple is devoted to her son. Debra Moddelmog is nearer the mark when she says:

> Mrs. Whipple's relationship with Him is dictated by what others would think, not by motherly love or tenderness. . . . For when Mrs. Whipple is alone with Him and does not expect the neighbors to visit, eavesdrop, or spy, her true attitude toward Him becomes apparent, at least to the reader. . . . When Mrs. Whipple tells her neighbors, "I wouldn't have anything happen to Him for all the world, but it just looks like I can't keep Him out of mischief" (p. 50), we search for the reality behind that seemingly loving, but defensive assertion. We quickly realize that, unconsciously or subconsciously, she desires His death, provided she cannot be blamed for it.[11]

Only when His health becomes critical and their economic condition reaches crisis proportions does Mrs. Whipple consent to send Him away. Having made the decision, she indulges in a vision of the future. Things are certain to get better; respectability will at last be theirs:

> "We'll all work together and get on our feet again, and the children will feel they've got a place to come to." All at once she saw it full summer again, with the garden going fine, and new white roller shades up all over the house, and Adna and Emly home, so full of life, all of them happy together. (pp. 57-58).

Noticeably, her plans do not include Him. In her high spirits, she forgets about Him and His feelings. But then on the way to the Home, she is confronted with His suffering:

> He sat there blinking and blinking. He worked His hands out and began rubbing His nose with His knuckles, and then with the end of the blanket. Mrs. Whipple couldn't believe what she saw; He was scrubbing away big tears that rolled out of the corners of His eyes. He sniveled and made a gulping noise. Mrs. Whipple kept saying, "Oh, honey, you don't feel so bad, do you?". . . for He seemed to be accusing her of something. (p. 58)

The dramatic impact of this last scene is considerable. Up until this moment the reader's perspective has been directed through Mrs. Whipple. Consequently, her revelation coincides with the reader's. He is conscious of what is happening to Him, and He is overcome with sadness. For one brief instance she realizes her culpability. This epiphany lasts, however, only a moment. The next minute she retreats into her old habit of making excuses:

> She began to cry frightfully, and wrapped her arm tight around Him. . . . She had loved Him as much as she possibly could, there were Adna and Emly who had to be thought of too, there was nothing she could do to make up to Him for His life. (p. 58)

Mrs. Whipple is speaking the truth in a way she doesn't realize. When one considers her absolute devotion to the right appearances, she has loved Him about as much as she is capable. In the creation of her public image, she comes to believe in it herself. In her determination that no one think poorly of her she is like Mr. Thompson in <u>Noon Wine</u>. She sacrifices everything to a concept and in the process becomes dehumanized. She victimizes Him and becomes a victim herself.

CHAPTER IV

In Noon Wine, what is perhaps Porter's most admired work, the theme of respectability reaches a new height and intensity. Gone is the more subtle approach to the subject that is found in Old Mortality, The Old Order, and "That Tree." If, after reading "He," the reader has any doubts as to the lengths to which an individual might go to preserve the veneer of respectability, Noon Wine puts all such doubts to rest. Respectability, at first, incapacitates Royal Earle Thompson. Later, it drives him to violence and death. But, unlike Mrs. Whipple, Mr. Thompson is motivated not so much by others' opinion of him as by his own limiting vision of what respectability means.

Royal Earle Thompson suffers from what Jules de Gaultier diagnoses as "the weakness of the modern mind"--Bovarysme.[1] He misconceives his role in life, imagining he is something he is not. Both he and Emma Bovary are romantic dreamers, captive to some illusory concept of themselves and others. Like Emma, Thompson marries someone slightly above his own social station, but, like Flaubert's heroine, his marriage fails to live up to his expectations. Consequently, both seek to escape, through others, from their mundane existences--Emma through her two lovers, Thompson through Olaf Helton. Neither ever comprehends the essential truth about him or herself, with the result that each is exploited

by opportunistic people--Emma by Monsieur Lheureus, Thompson by Homer T. Hatch. Finally, like Emma, Thompson resorts to suicide as a means of escape from his shattered life.

His name represents the absurdity of his situation--Thompson, a common, ordinary name; Royal Earle, pretentious and affectatious. He runs a dairy farm where there is nothing for him to do because all that needs to be done is beneath him:

> In spite of his situation in life, Mr. Thompson had never been able to outgrow his deep conviction that running a dairy and chasing after chickens was woman's work. He was fond of saying that he could plow a furrow, cut sorghum, shuck corn, handle a team, build a corn crib, as well as any man. . . . But from the first the cows worried him, coming up regularly twice a day to be milked, standing there reproaching him with their smug female faces. Calves worried him. . . . Wrestling with a calf unmanned him, like having to change a baby's diaper. Milk worried him, coming bitter sometimes, drying up, turning sour. Hens worried him, cackling, clucking, hatching out when you least expected it. . . . Slopping hogs was hired man's work, in Mr. Thompson's opinion. Killing hogs was a job for the boss, but scraping them and cutting them up was for the hired man again; and again woman's proper work was dressing meat, smoking, pickling, and making lard and sausage. All his carefully limited fields of activity were related somehow to Mr. Thompson's feeling for the appearance of things, his own appearance in the sight of God and man. "It don't <u>look</u> right," was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do. It was his dignity and his reputation that he cared about, and there were only a few kinds of work manly enough for Mr. Thompson to undertake with his own hands. (pp. 223-224)

By itself, this passage would seem to support some critics' contention that Thompson is only lazy and uses his assumed position of "boss" as an excuse to himself and others to get out of work. Reading further, however, one sees it is more than laziness. Mr. Thompson is serious about his role. He is a simple farmer who, as Porter describes him, has "by a hair's breadth outmarried himself."[2] With her good looks and popularity as a Sunday School teacher,

Ellen Bridges must have appealed to Thompson's fondness for the "important appearances of life" (p. 329). He is, in his own mind, all that a respectable citizen should be. He simply lacks the vision to understand that it is his own misplaced values that have led to the deterioration of his farm:

> Head erect, a prompt payer of taxes, yearly subscriber to the preacher's salary, land owner and father of a family, employer, a hearty good fellow among men, Mr. Thompson knew . . . that he had been going steadily down hill. God almighty, it did look like somebody around the place might take a rake in hand now and then and clear up the clutter around the barn and kitchen steps. The wagon shed was so full of broken-down machinery and ragged harness and old wagon wheels and battered milk pails and rotting lumber you could hardly drive in there any more. Not a soul on the place would raise a hand to it, and as for him, he had all he could do with his regular work. He would sometimes in the slack season sit for hours worrying about it . . . wondering what a fellow could do, handicapped as he was. (p. 234)

Thompson's world consists of clearly defined compartments in which everyone has his proper place. He knows, as Porter's initial description of him makes clear, that his place does not include sitting behind a butter churn. His handling of the churn is a visual testimony of what it means to be on "one's high horse" and to think oneself too good for a task. According to Robert Penn Warren, "his very gesture has a kind of childish play acting."[3] As Porter pictures him,

> He was a noisy proud man who held his neck so straight his whole face stood level with his Adam's apple. . . . The churn rumbled and swished like the belly of a trotting horse, and Mr. Thompson seemed somehow to be driving a horse with one hand, reining it in and urging it forward; and every now and then he turned halfway around and squirted a tremendous spit of tobacco juice out over the steps. The door stones were brown and gleaming with fresh tobacco juice. (p. 222)

Churning butter, in Thompson's mind, is the last thing he should be doing, but his wife is sick and so he indulges his fancy. Warren sums up the scene in his own inimitable way:

> Somewhere in his deepest being, he is reminded of the spanking horse with the belly swishing in the trot, the horse such a fine manly man ought to have under his hand, if luck just weren't so ornery and unreasonable, and so he plays the game with himself. But he can't quite convince himself. It is only a poor old churn, after all, woman's work on a rundown and debt-bit shirt-tail farm . . . and so he spits his tremendous spits of masculine protest against fate . . . .[4]

Thompson's notions of man's proper sphere are not confined, of course, to himself. His conversation with Helton when the stranger inquires about a job reveals his biases on a larger scale. Scoffing at Helton's suggestion that he be paid a dollar a day, Thompson offers to pay him twice what Thompson paid the "two niggers" who had worked for him. Then, in a magnanimous gesture, Thompson adds that Helton will be able to "eat at the table with us" and "be treated like a white man" (p. 224). These comments give further proof of Thompson's restrictive thinking. In this way Thompson anticipates, as Louis Leiter points out, Hatch and Hatch's way of looking at things:

> Thompson's remark that "one man's as good as another, so far's I'm concerned," analyzes and belies his attitude to foreigners, Negroes, Irishmen, etc., and points to Hatch's dislike of foreigners and the irrational Helton. His "Scandahoovian" implies an attitude like Thompson's use of "niggers."[5]

Nor does Thompson's opinion of Helton change much over the years. If anything, he develops a basic scorn for Helton and his ways. Helton doesn't seem to know what work a respectable man should and should not do:

> Judging by his conduct, Mr. Helton had never heard of the difference between man's and woman's work on a farm. . . .

> Sometimes Mr. Thompson felt a little contemptuous of Mr. Helton's ways. It did seem kind of picayune for a man to go around picking up half a dozen ears of corn that had fallen off the wagon on the way from the field, gathering up fallen fruit to feed to the pigs, storing up old nails and stray parts of machinery, spending good time stamping a fancy pattern on the butter before it went to market. Mr. Thompson . . . sometimes thought that Mr. Helton was a pretty meeching sort of fellow; but he never gave way to these feelings, he knew a good thing when he had it. (p. 235)

In light of these passages, one finds it difficult to agree with Elmo Howell's assessment that Mr. Thompson admires and loves Mr. Helton despite Helton's queer ways. "Open-natured and incapable of deceit, Mr. Thompson presents in ragged outline the qualities of manhood that command respect."[6] In truth, Mr. Thompson is, at the very least, self-centered and opportunistic. He sees it is to his advantage to allow Helton to have his way. So while he enjoys the results of Helton's hard labor, he arrogantly looks down upon the means by which that prosperity comes. John Hardy's analysis is almost too severe, but there is some truth in it:

> He has enjoyed the fruits of Helton's labor all these years, but secretly he has despised the man, despised as "meeching" and unmanly the very frugality of the hireling that is the basis of the family's new-found prosperity. From time to time he has thrown a sop to his unacknowledged bad conscience with a small increase in wages. Under the disguise of a philosophy of tolerance for eccentricity, he has steadfastly resisted all his wife's urgings that he get to know Helton; "letting him alone" was actually his way of refusing Helton human companionship.[7]

What Hardy fails to emphasize is Thompson's self-deception. He thinks he is being generous in putting up with Helton's "queerness" when, in reality, he is protecting his own position. At long last his dreams are becoming a reality, and he is not about to make them evaporate with inexpedient objections. These points are crucial to

the story--Thompson's illusions and his desire to preserve, at all costs, his self-esteem. They help one better understand his later attitude and behavior toward Hatch.

To ignore this side of Thompson, as Marvin Pierce does, and to see him, in his murder of Hatch, as acting purely out of a sense of "loyalty" to Helton is to misunderstand Thompson's character.[8] He is not a tragic figure, as Pierce would have it, because "the honesty and simplicity of his motives are not appreciated by his neighbors--nor, evidently, by whatever cosmic powers dispense rewards and punishments among men."[9] He is a tragic figure because he lives and dies never really understanding the kind of man he is. Misjudging his moral and social stature, he lacks insight into his own deficiencies. His dreams of respectability hinge upon Helton's industry and the good opinion of his neighbors. He is, in Joseph Wiesenfarth's words, "a man without any form of self-reliance based on self-knowledge."[10]

Leiter has commented upon the "symbolic duty" of the terms "strange" and "stranger" in the novella.[11] Beyond the fact that the people in Noon Wine fail to communicate, understand, or know each other is the fact that Royal Earle Thompson is basically a stranger to himself. He ignores, to his own peril, the destructive inclinations of his personality. He never realizes that his conception of himself is self-indulgent and unrealistic. It is no accident that this man who is so fond of cherishing illusions about himself should ultimately be a victim of them. His propensity for self-deception leads him to imagine he strikes at Hatch in defense

of Helton. When the truth becomes known, he can neither resolve nor justify the discrepancy in his mind.

Does Thompson kill Hatch in order to protect his own self-interest? Does Thompson really see Hatch stabbing Helton or is this a figment of Thompson's imagination which he invents after the fact to justify his actions? These questions are not easily answered. Within the sequence of the story, the killing of Hatch is in response to what Thompson thinks he sees at the time. In light of Thompson's past illusions, it is not so incredible to claim that he does indeed visualize Hatch's killing Helton. Although much emphasis is usually placed on Ellen Thompson's poor vision, her husband's sight is at least equally impaired. His ability to blink at the truth simply reaches its culmination in his confrontation with Hatch. To ignore or minimize this aspect of Thompson is to misunderstand the complexity of his character.

Unfortunately, Elmo Howell's analysis falls into this category. He finds artistic confusion in <u>Noon Wine</u> because Porter didn't succeed in her intentions to make Thompson look "ridiculous in his notions about work" and because his sense of guilt after the murder is inconsistent with his character.

> From the first Thompson dislikes Hatch, a different sort of man with a brand of impertinence he is not used to. He brings an attitude of mind and rule of play alien to the simple farmer . . . . When he kills Hatch, his act is the victory of principle over malicious meddling and self-interest.[12]

What Howell doesn't recognize--nor does Thompson, for that matter--is the basic similarity between the two characters. Both Hatch and Thompson use the spectre of respectability to justify

their means of existence--exploitation of others. Both excuse their behavior by referring to a higher motive. Listening to Hatch's justification for being a bounty hunter is not unlike listening to Thompson's excuses for not doing "woman's work":

> "Now fact is, in the last twelve years or so I musta rounded up twenty-odd escaped loonatics, besides a couple of escaped convicts that I just run into by accident, like. I don't make a business of it, but if there's a reward, and there usually is . . . I get it. It amounts to a tidy little sum in the long run, but that ain't the main question. Fact is, I'm for law and order, I don't like to see lawbreakers and loonatics at large. It ain't the place for them. Now I reckon you're bound to agree with me on that, aren't you?" (p. 253)

Thompson is "bound to agree" because Hatch is expounding the same ideas Thompson believes in. Each is convinced of the integrity of his motives. Hatch's modus operandi is the same as Thompson's. In Leiter's words, "Hatch represents Thompson's embodied principles of honoring the narrow letter of the law, of face saving, and of judging by appearances."[13]

Had he known himself better, Thompson might have realized that what he disliked in Hatch was his own reflection. Most of those qualities of Hatch which so irritate Thompson are present in himself --his loud, boisterous manner, his opportunistic behavior, his narrow-mindedness, his condescending attitude. Walsh claims that Hatch even "mockingly reveals Mr. Thompson's misogynist tendencies."[14] Calling Thompson a misogynist may be stretching the similarity between the two men, but certainly Thompson does not think very highly of women's capabilities, else he would not regard their work as so demeaning. Leiter makes the point well:

> Everything Thompson has done, every attitude, gesture, and characteristic of the man stands boldly before him in the stranger Hatch, who grotesquely rehearses Thompson's most jovial public role before his face and then having rehearsed his most cherished cliches, often word for word . . . demands payment in the form of the stranger Helton.[15]

But Thompson fails to recognize himself in Hatch:

> While they are talking, Mr. Thompson kept glancing at the face near him. He certainly did remind Mr. Thompson of somebody, or maybe he really had seen the man himself somewhere. He couldn't just place the features. (p. 244)

Thompson's inability to see his "own destructive follies" in Hatch may be, as Hardy suggests, "because he cannot tolerate the recognition."[16] If this is true, Hardy's subsequent claim has considerable merit.

> Psychologically, it is himself, then, this intolerable image of himself that Thompson strikes at when he takes the axe to Hatch. He sees Helton knifed because he wants it to be so, wants to be rid of this living human evidence of his own mean-spiritedness. . . . He does not, of course, at this point, consciously desire anyone's death--not Helton's, not even Hatch's, certainly not his own. Even later, he consciously wants to destroy not himself, but what he earnestly believes to be a false image of himself--thereby to establish the true image as he conceives it.[17]

For once, Thompson's imagination cannot transcend the actual. He cannot grasp the fact that he murdered Hatch in cold blood. His mind "sticks" on the thought:

> he'd got off, all right, just as Mr. Burleigh had predicted, but, but--and it was right there that Mr. Thompson's mind stuck, squirming like an angleworm on a fishhook: he had killed Mr. Hatch and he was a murderer. That was the truth about himself that Mr. Thompson couldn't grasp, even when he said the word to himself. (p. 261)

He is a respectable man, but respectable men do not put an axe in someone's head. Repeatedly, he tries to recreate the scene in his mind, to imagine how his confrontation with Hatch might have been

different, but his thoughts keep returning to the monstrous fact: he is a murderer. The faces of his family and neighbors say he is a murderer. In a final effort to restore his credibility in his own and others' eyes, he writes a note defending his actions and implying Hatch deserved to die, points the shotgun at his head, and pulls the trigger.

It is noteworthy that each of the main characters adheres to a particular element of respectability which most people would find commendable: Mr. Helton--industrious hard-work, Mr. Hatch--law and order, Mrs. Thompson--personal integrity, Mr. Thompson--conformity. In each case, however, the character's commitment to his or her principle leads to victimization and/or destruction. Respectability is their doom.

It is Thompson's rigid inflexibility in respect to proper conduct which lays the groundwork for his destruction. He is a victim because his reputation is of primary importance to him. He protects it at all cost--even at the expense of Hatch's and his own life. He is a destroyer, ironically, for the same reason. In the very act of protecting his respectability, he destroys it. An examination of the other three characters reveals a similar pattern. They too are inflexible. Like Thompson, they cannot, to quote J. Oates Smith, "overcome the selfish boundaries of their own hearts."[18]

When Olaf Helton walks through the Thompson's unhinged gate, the significance of the act is lost upon the reader until much later in the story when his dual function becomes clear. He

represents order and confusion, prosperity and misfortune, respectability and scandal, redemption and doom. He is, as Liberman says, "quite literally both life and death" to Mr. Thompson.[19] Helton's labor turns Thompson's delusions of respectability into a reality while, at the same time, his presence guarantees the dissolution of Thompson's good name. Before he kills Hatch, Thompson realizes it "will look mighty funny" if people find out he has harbored an escaped lunatic and murderer. Thompson's killing of Hatch is surely partly a response to that threat. But in doing so, Thompson makes Helton, as well as Hatch, his victim. In putting his own interests above Helton's, Thompson denies Helton's humanity, his right to fair and decent treatment, and thus paves the way for Helton's being hunted down "like a mad dog" and his ill-treatment by his captors. Thompson's inability, after the trial, to think about Helton and his fate is proof that Thompson has little, if any, concern for Helton as a human being.

For his part, Helton's unhinged mental state precludes any normal participation in human affairs. He isolates himself with his work and his music and neither expects nor gives amiable small talk. His insularity serves to deny him human understanding or compassion. He becomes as much a victim of his own infirmities as of Hatch's and Thompson's exploitation.

Hatch is, of course, the obvious villian of the story. His offensive manner and pernicious intentions make him a totally unsympathetic character. As with the other characters discussed, he performs a dual role. Ostensibly, he is an upholder of law and

order, of justice and decency, but chaos, violence, and degradation follow in his wake. In Porter's words, he is

> a lover and doer of evil, who did no good thing for any one, not even, in the long run, for himself. He [is] evil in the most dangerous, irremediable way: one who works safely within the law, and has reasoned himself into believing that his motives, if not good, are at least no worse than any one else's: for he believes quite simply and naturally that the motives of others are no better than his own . . . he will always be found on the side of custom and common sense and the letter of the law.[20]

Before one dismisses him categorically as a personification of evil, however, one must remember his affinity to Thompson. Porter herself suggests the connection: Hatch has convinced himself that his motives are at least as good as anyone else's. "He will always be found on the side of custom and common sense and the letter of the law"--fairly accurate descriptions of Thompson's own moral and social stance.

In Hatch's encounter with Thompson, "we enjoy," as Leiter puts it, "watching a loud-mouthed, braying jackass of a man receive his reward from a loud-mouthed, laughing rabbit."[21] Since Hatch is an enlarged replica of Thompson's pretensions and frailities, why does the reader sympathize with Thompson but not with Hatch? Perhaps the answer lies with Thompson's vulnerability. His weakness is his saving grace. One cannot imagine Hatch's being intimidated by what people say or think about him. He goes about his business of bounty hunting with an easy assurance, completely insensible to other people's opinion or their suffering. On the other hand, Thompson's anxiety for approval reveals a chink in his egocentric armor. His swagger and rationalizations to the contrary, he is

basically insecure. His existence literally depends upon people's acceptance of him.

The person on whom Thompson is most dependent for approval is his wife, Ellie. She, more than anyone else, holds her husband's fate in her hands. Ironically, she, who is seemingly so passive through much of the novella, plays a decisive role in his decision to kill himself. Throughout their marriage, Thompson looks to her for support but is continually disappointed. With apparent good reason, she lacks confidence in his handling of the farm. In addition, her weak eyes and poor health keep her from assisting him with any of the strenuous work outside. Even in the raising of their sons she is not much help. She evades situations in which she might have to discipline them, then complains when her husband is too harsh. Her irresolution is best illustrated by that passage in which she catches Mr. Helton methodically shaking her sons. She vacillates as to her course of action:

> Mrs. Thompson tried to imagine what they had been up to; she did not like the notion of Mr. Helton taking it on himself to correct her little boys, but she was afraid to ask them for reasons. They might tell her a lie, and she would have to overtake them in it, and whip them. Or she would have to pretend to believe them, and they would get in the habit of lying. Or they might tell her the truth, and it would be something she would have to whip them for. The very thought of it gave her a headache. She supposed she might ask Mr. Helton, but it was not her place to ask. She would wait and tell Mr. Thompson, and let him get at the bottom of it. (p. 238)

This passage emphasizes Mrs. Thompson's concern for truth-telling and anticipates her later discomfort at having to lie in order to corroborate her husband's story. Her half-hearted support

is not what he needs: he desperately yearns for some private assurance:

> Even Ellie never said anything to comfort him. He hoped she would say finally, "I remember now, Mr. Thompson, I really did come round the corner to see everything. It's not a lie, Mr. Thompson. Don't you worry." (p. 262)

Either her sense of guilt or her resentment of having to lie keeps her from this final absolution. Porter says:

> She commits the, to her, dreadful unforgivable sin of lying; moreover, lying to shield a criminal, even if that criminal is her own husband. Having done this, to the infinite damage, as she sees it, of her own soul (as well as her self-respect which is founded on her feeling of irreproachability), she lacks the courage and the love to see her sin through to its final purpose; to commit it with her whole heart and with perfect acceptance of her guilt; to say to her husband the words that might have saved them both, soul and body. . . .[22]

For Mrs. Thompson, her personal integrity--her claim to respectability--has suffered irreparable harm. It is unfair then to suggest, as Hardy does, that she blames her husband "less for demanding that she perjure herself than for having deprived her of the comfort and order that Helton brought into the life of the family."[23] Rather, Nance is nearer the mark when he says it is her "blind adherence to a strict moral code"[24] that is the source of her pain. Burdened with her sin, she compounds her husband's guilt and contributes to both of their destruction.

Porter observes in reference to these four characters: "There is nothing in any of these beings tough enough to work the miracle of redemption in them."[25] And indeed there isn't. Each of them is too self-centered, too concerned with his own immediate needs, to permit him to extend the sympathetic understanding that might deliver them all from their tragic end. All live under the guise

of respectability, yet all of them contribute, as Porter notes, "one way or another directly, or indirectly, to murder, or death by violence."[26] They victimize themselves and each other. Three of them--Hatch, Mr. Thompson, and his wife--justify their actions on the grounds that they are complying with some moral code. All end by destroying their own or someone else's self-respect. Respectability becomes the breeding ground for disorder and destruction.

CHAPTER V

By now, it should be sufficiently evident that few Porter characters escape unscathed from the demands and perversion of respectability. The gallery runs the full gamut, from rebellious idealists like Miranda, who convince themselves they are above respectability's influence, to conformists like Royal Earle Thompson, for whom the right appearances in life is everything. The essence of respectability that one sees emerging again and again in Porter's world is identified with a sense of place. Knowing one's place and adhering to the social patterns governing it are at the very heart of respectability. Porter attests to this in "'Noon Wine': The Sources." In a passage in which she reflects on her girlhood, Porter appraises the social order:

> It was the grandparents who still ruled in daily life; and they showed plainly in acts, words, and even looks . . . the presence of good society, very well based on traditional Christian beliefs. These beliefs were mainly Protestant but not yet petty middle-class puritanism: there remained still an element fairly high stepping and wide gestured in its personal conduct. . . . It was not really a democratic society; if everybody had his place, sometimes very narrowly defined, at least he knew where it was, and so did everybody else. So too, the higher laws of morality and religion were defined; if a man offended against the one, or sinned against the other, he knew it, and so did his neighbors, and they called everything by its right name.
>
> This firm view applied also to social standing. A man who had humble ancestors had a hard time getting away from them and rising in the world. If he prospered and took to leisurely ways of living, he was merely "getting above his raising." If he managed to marry into one of the good old

> families, he had simply "outmarried himself." If he went away and made a success somewhere else, when he returned for a visit he was still only "that Jimmerson boy who went No'th." There is--was . . . a whole level of society of the South where it was common knowledge that the mother's family outranked the father's by half, at least. . . . If they turned out well, the children of these matches were allowed their mother's status, for good family must never be denied, but father remained a member of the Plain People to the end. Yet there was nothing against anyone hinting at better lineage and a family past more dignified than the present, no matter how humble his present circumstances, nor how little proof he could offer for his claim. Aspiration to higher and better things were natural to all men, and a sign of proper respect for true blood and birth.[1]

Reverberating throughout this passage are strains of all the stories discussed in this study. The relevance of the passage to Noon Wine is obvious. Where a man comes from and the kind of woman he marries are issues of debate and dissension between Thompson and Hatch. Mrs. Whipple's refusal to allow anyone to "look down" on her shows her extreme sensitivity to her social standing. In "That Tree," the journalist's frustration with Miriam's puritanical mind-set and his schismatic rebellion against his "old-fashioned respectable middle-class hard-working American ancestry and training" gives further comment on the difficulties involved in trying to break away from traditional values. As for The Old Order and Old Mortality, discord invariably occurs when a character rebels against or forgets his or her place.

Although birth and ancestry is the basis of "good society," of equal importance is a proper regard for one's place. In Noon Wine, The Old Order, and Old Mortality, this means that black slaves or servants, hired hands, women, and children do not overstep their bounds. They keep within their proper sphere unless, as in Sophia

Jane's case, extenuating circumstances propel them into the weightier and grander life of men. At the same time, men understand their role in life as protector and provider for their families. Men's work is determined by their station in life: the wealthier one's family, the more time one may have for leisurely pursuits. Herein is one of the sources of Mr. Thompson's downfall. He elevates himself higher than his circumstances allow. He adopts the habits of the idle rich while being a poor dairy farmer. With Uncle Gabriel in _Old Mortality_ the case is different. No one condemns Gabriel for his interest in racehorses. Rather, it is his dependence upon them for his livelihood that makes for scandal.

Knowing and maintaining one's place, then, is an integral part of being respectable. It promotes order and stability in the public and private realm. When characters forget their place, or disregard it, the result is, at the very least, confusion. If women start dressing and behaving like men, if women become wage-earners, what will happen to the social order? This is Sophia Jane's concern about the new generation of women. Consequently, the Sophia Jane of _The Old Order_, like Eva Parrington in _Old Mortality_, is content to practice her own brand of independence while still acknowledging the efficacy of the social structure. They realize that to overstep one's bounds too drastically, as Mr. Thompson does in _Noon Wine_, can result in utter chaos.

Preserving the proper appearances becomes of utmost consideration. What is done is not nearly as important as how it is done. Indiscretion is censured. Marriage vows are kept and familial

responsibilities are fulfilled, even if the marriage is a sham or the family is disgraced. Above all, one must publicly express devotion. Sophia Jane, Eva, Miss Honey, Mrs. Whipple, and Mrs. Thompson are just a few examples of characters whose marriage or family relationships become cankerous but who, nonetheless, remain loyal because it is expected. This obsession for the "important appearances of life" can lead to frustration, bitterness, dissension, and even murder.

In Porter's fiction, respectability often depends upon hypocrisy, exploitation of others, and maintenance of the _status quo_ for its continuance. Nevertheless, its supporters far outnumber its opponents. There are six people in this study who actively disassociate themselves from society's conventions--Cousin Eva, Aunt Eliza, Amy, Miranda, Nannie, and the journalist. Of these six, only two--Eliza and Nannie--end up being victors over its demands. As much as Amy and the journalist try to reject respectability, neither successfully breaks away from its values. Moreover, despite her modern views on women's rights, Eva remains a firm adherent of the social order. Similarly, Miranda is as unrealistic as the others. She can never be completely free of the "bonds that smothered her." In rejecting them, she is doomed, like the others, to failure.

Respectability's proponents invariably become its victims. Sophia Jane never realizes her full potential as a human being because of its restrictions. Miriam's ties to convention contribute to the failure of her marriage and, finally, set her up to be

victimized again by the story's end. The Whipples live in fear of their neighbor's condemnation. Hatch's insidious manipulation of respectability ultimately leads to his destruction. But the victim _par excellence_ is Royal Earle Thompson. He wholeheartedly believes in the social order and, unlike some others, harbors no doubts as to its propriety. He embraces its tenets only to have them turn against him. He never comprehends that his enemy is not Hatch, but his own respectable self-image.

In these and other Porter stories, we are confronted, then, with a dilemma. One can be an advocate of respectability, adopt its precepts, and live a life of intimidation, conformity, exploitation, hypocrisy, and deception. Or one can reject its principles, seek escape from its influence, and live a life of frustration, resentment, isolation, and failure. In either case, one is invariably its victim.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Katherine Anne Porter, "My First Speech," in The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), pp. 438-440.

[2] Robert van Gelder, "Katherine Anne Porter at Work," New York Times Book Review, 14 April 1940, p. 20;
Joan Givner, Katherine Anne Porter: A Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 310.

[3] Glenway Wescott, "Katherine Anne Porter Personally," in Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium, ed. Lodwick Hartley and George Core (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 45; hereafter cited as Hartley and Core.

[4] John Hagopian, "Katherine Anne Porter: Feeling, Form, and Truth," Four Quarters, 12, No. 1 (1962), 1.

[5] George Core, "The Best Residuum of Truth," Georgia Review, 20 (1966), 278.

[6] Core, p. 290.

[7] Edwin W. Gaston., "The Mythic South of Katherine Anne Porter," Southwestern American Literature, 3 (1973), 81-82;
James W. Johnson, "Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter," Virginia Quarterly Review, 36 (1960), 602;
John Van Zyl, "Surface Elegance, Grotesque Content--A Note on the Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," English Studies in Africa, 9 (1966), 168.

[8] Hartley and Core, p. xix.

[9] Eudora Welty, The Eye of the Story (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 39.

[10] Hartley and Core, p. xiii.

[11] H. E. Bates, The Modern Short Story: A Critical Study (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1972), p. 185.

[12] Barbara Thompson, "An Interview," in Hartley and Core, p. 8.

[13] Thompson, p. 8.

[14] Richard Gray, The Literature of Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 43.

[15] I am indebted to Walter Sullivan's essay, "The Decline of Myth in Southern Fiction," Southern Review, 12 (1976), 16-31 and to Ray B. West, Jr. and his article "Katherine Anne Porter and 'Historic Memory,'" Hopkins Review, 6 (Fall 1952), 16-27, for alerting me to Porter's place in the Southern renascence. Furthermore, Gray's book, cited above, proved to be an invaluable resource on that movement from its beginnings with the Nashville Agrarians to its post-War influences.

[16] Katherine Anne Porter, "Three Statements about Writing" in Collected Essays, p. 451.

[17] Porter, "Notes on Writing" in Collected Essays, p. 449.

[18] Katherine Anne Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," Yale Review, 46 (1956), 22-39.

[19] Sullivan, p. 18.

[20] John E. Hardy, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1973), p. 62.

[21] Robert Penn Warren, "Uncorrupted Consciousness: The Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," Yale Review, 55 (1965), 286.

[22] For the most thorough analysis of oppressive relationships in Porter, one should consult William Nance's Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1964) in which the rejection theme is found to be the "central impulse" uniting all of Porter's fiction. Marriage as "the bitter tie that binds is symbolized," says Nance, by Porter's "Rope" (p. 17), while the Whipples in "He" are caught in an "oppressive union" (p. 18). In his comments on "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," Nance notes that "even in relationships which are obviously intended as loving, irritations and antagonisms are always portrayed much more strongly and convincingly than love" (p. 43). Other discussions of unsatisfying marriages and/or love relationships in Porter include: Rosemary Hennessy's "Katherine Anne Porter's Model for Heroines," Colorado Quarterly, 25 (1976), 301-311; Jane Flanders' "Katherine Anne Porter and the Ordeal of Southern Womanhood," Southern Literary Journal, 9, No. 1 (1976), 47-60; and Barbara H. Carson's "Winning: Katherine Anne Porter's Women" in The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1977)--all of which are quoted in this study.

[23] Bates, p. 186.

[24] Porter, Collected Essays, p. 457.

Chapter I

[1] Givner, p. 434.

[2] Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter, Harvest edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. v. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[3] Charles Kaplan, "True Witness: Katherine Anne Porter," Colorado Quarterly, 7 (1958), 320.

[4] Cleanth Brooks, "On 'The Grave,'" in Hartley and Core, p. 115.

[5] Edward Schwartz, "The Fictions of Memory," Southwest Review, 45 (1960), 215.

[6] Constance Rooke and Bruce Wallis, "Myth and Epiphany in Porter's 'The Grave,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 15 (1978), 269-275;
Daniel Curley, "Treasure in 'The Grave,'" Modern Fiction Studies, 9 (1964), 377-384.

[7] Clement Eaton's chapter, "The Southern Way of Life," in A History of the Old South, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 388-415, has been helpful in giving me a general overview of the social and economic classes in the South.

[8] Anne Firor Scott's The Southern Lady, From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970) is an invaluable resource for any study of the Southern woman's role in history and has been extremely helpful to me in this paper.

[9] "One of the most attractive virtues nourished by aristocratic plantation society was the practice of chivalry. . . . Chivalry led to the formation of a code of gracious manners, slightly formal and artificial it is true, but recognizing the dignity of human personality. . . . The chivalric or romantic ideal dictated that women should be highly feminine and that they should look up to the male as the protector and the oracle of worldly wisdom. They were shielded from hearing profane or sexy language, and convention required them to blush at the mention of sex." Eaton, p. 396.

[10] Carson, p. 246.

[11] Flanders, p. 50.

[12] Warren, p. 284.

[13] Carson, p. 241.

[14] Carson, p. 241.

Chapter II

[1] Undoubtedly, there are parallels between events in Porter's life and in her fictional world, particularly those pertaining to her heroine Miranda. Reading the Miranda stories as autobiographical, however, can be misleading and was something Porter herself deplored. Porter, like many writers, created a mystique about herself. Faulty interpretations can occur when too much fact is read into fiction. Joan Givner, in "'The Plantation of This Isle': Katherine Anne Porter's Bermuda Base," Southwest Review, 63 (1977), 339-351, discusses this tendency and reveals some of the discrepancies "between Porter's early environment and the one recorded in her stories, essays, and interviews."

[2] George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 72.

[3] Enrique Hank Lopez, Conversations with Katherine Anne Porter, Refugee from Indian Creek (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981), p. 220.

[4] S. H. Poss, "Variations on a Theme in Four Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," Twentieth Century Literature, 4 (1958), 23.

[5] Hennessy, p. 301.

[6] Flanders, p. 51.

[7] "A spinster of good family had very few options. Even if she had money of her own, respectability required a family, so she was apt to live with relatives, performing unpaid labor in return for the requisite social sanction." Anne Scott, The Southern Lady, pp. 35-36.

[8] Flanders, p. 57.

[9] Carson, pp. 243-244.

[10] Carson, p. 242.

[11] Thomas F. Walsh, "Miranda's Ghost in 'Old Mortality,'" College Literature, 6 (1979), 60.

[12] Walsh, p. 59.

Chapter III

[1] M. M. Liberman, Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1971), p. 88.

[2] In "'Noon Wine': The Sources," Porter applies this phrase to her novella, but the term is, as Dorothy Redden points out, "appropriate to most of Miss Porter's work." Redden, "'Flowering Judas': Two Voices," Studies in Short Fiction, 6 (1969), 203-204.

[3] Nance, p. 40.

[4] For an overview of most of the criticism written on "He," the reader should consult two recent articles: Bruce W. Jorgensen, "'The Other Side of Silence': Katherine Anne Porter's 'He' as Tragedy," Modern Fiction Studies, 28 (1982), 395-404 and Debra A. Moddelmog, "Narrative Irony and Hidden Motivations in Katherine Anne Porter's 'He,'" Modern Fiction Studies, 28 (1982), 405-413.

[5] Harry Mooney, The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter, rev. ed. (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), p. 47.

[6] Nance, p. 19.

[7] Warren, p. 289.

[8] Liberman, p. 90.

9 Paul F. Deasy, "Reality and Escape," Four Quarters 12 (1963), 28.

[10] Nance, p. 20.

[11] Moddelmog, p. 407.

Chapter IV

[1] Harry Levin, "The Female Quixote," in Madame Bovary and the Critics, ed. B. F. Bart (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1966), p. 111.

[2] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," p. 35.

[3] Robert Penn Warren, "Irony with a Center," in Hartley and Core, p. 58.

[4] Warren, in Hartley and Core, p. 11.

[5] Louis Leiter, "The Expense of Spirit in a Waste of Shame," in *Seven Contemporary Short Novels*, ed. Charles Clerc and Louis Leiter (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1969), p. 198.

[6] Elmo Howell, "Katherine Anne Porter and the Southern Myth: A Note on 'Noon Wine,'" *Louisiana Studies*, 11 (1972), 257.

[7] Hardy, p. 104.

[8] Marvin Pierce, "Point of View: Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine*," *Ohio University Review*, 3 (1961), 108.

[9] Pierce, p. 112.

[10] Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Negatives of Hope: A Reading of Katherine Anne Porter," *Renascence*, 25 (1972), 88-89.

[11] Leiter, p. 190.

[12] Howell, pp. 257-258.

[13] Leiter, p. 198.

[14] Thomas Walsh, "Deep Similarities in 'Noon Wine,'" *Mosaic*, 9, No. 1 (1975), 89.

[15] Leiter, p. 190.

[16] Hardy, p. 103.

[17] Hardy, pp. 104-105.

[18] J. Oates Smith, "Porter's *Noon Wine*: A Stifled Tragedy," *Renascence*, 17, No. 2 (1965), 159.

[19] Liberman, p. 92.

[20] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," pp. 37-38.

[21] Leiter, p. 195.

[22] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," p. 38.

[23] Hardy, p. 106.

[24] Nance, p. 59.

[25] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," p. 38.

[26] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," p. 35.

Chapter V

[1] Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," pp. 27-28.

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