

## **Alienation and Identity Crisis in the Apocalyptic World of Katherine Anne Porter**

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*The article explores Katherine Anne Porter's existential concerns reflected in her fiction. Applying the tools of biographical and historical criticism as well as textual analysis, the study delves into the disintegrating apocalyptic fictional world of the American South in the tumult of the Great War and the Spanish influenza that constitutes a mirror of the author's own personal tribulations in the context of social and personal upheavals. Strands of Existentialism represented by both Christian and atheist thinkers have been adopted as a background against which Modernist anxieties could be best understood and analyzed. The recurrent motif of time with its elusiveness and relativity tends to combine the seemingly dissimilar voices of selected Existentialists, fictional characters and the author herself in their search for truth, identity and meaning, emphasizing subjectivity as the essential element of cognition. As human anxieties are impossible to be encompassed and cast in the clearly defined borders, spiritual concerns outlined in the article tend to remain a riddle open to a multitude of explanations. However, indirect and implied inclinations towards Christian theology alluded to both in the writer's works and life suggest the adoption of a Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith' by the existential sceptic into an orderly essentialism of the Catholic religion as a solution to all anxieties and uncertainties of life.*

### **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to present an introspective study of Katherine Anne Porter's fictional characters in their search for transcendence and an organizing power, based on the selected stories. Applying different aspects of biographical and historical criticism as methodological tools of literary textual analysis, as well as selected strands of broadly perceived Existentialism, the study unfolds different layers of understanding of the author's fiction which appears to be intricately interwoven into its specific social, cultural and political context instead of being an autonomous project created in a cultural void. Renowned in the genre of Southern Literature for her best-selling novel *Ship of Fools* in 1962 and a Pulitzer Prize winner for Fiction in 1966 for *The Complete Stories*, Katherine Anne Porter established her literary place in the circle of other Southern female writers, including Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers or Ellen Glasgow. Alienation in the surrounding reality, isolation of characters in the crowd as well as search for truth and preoccupation with individual identity of characters are the main themes pursued by Porter in her fiction revolving around the concept of

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subjectivity and isolation of individual experience and its fluid interpretation. This existential approach appears to be even more relevant in the contemporary context where the threat of war, the pandemic or an overwhelming fear and isolation tend to recur more frequently and haunt the illusory stability and power of the 21-st-century rational mind. Painting an in-depth psychological study of individuals, Porter overtly alludes to her preoccupation with her own confused self. Consequently, the reader, disturbed by the autobiographical undertones in the author's numerous works, is induced to experience the psychological tribulations of the characters' minds. Moreover, the employment of such literary devices as interior monologue, blending dream and reality, or blurring the linear structure of the plot in its spatial and temporal dimension, only reinforces the effect of the author's existential concerns.

While Porter's numerous works reveal a variety of themes and a wide-angled perception of existential dilemmas of individuals thrown in the Heideggerian Dasein, the study of the short novel collection - *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* emphasizes a modernist perception of individuals facing the reality of the postbellum American South and apocalyptic implications of the First World War, so deeply inscribed in the consciousness of the "lost generation" writers, including T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, E.E. Cummings and others. A microcosm of personal introspections with reference to the question of truth, relativity of time, mythmaking and memory, along with numerous allusions to autobiographical details provide a rich background to an existential examination of the inward dissolution of human personality. The problem of subjectivity further developed in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" extends the scope of analysis by a religious dimension in its direct relation of the dying individual to personalized God. Instantaneous insight into the wholeness of time juxtaposed with its fragmentariness reinforce the picture of disrupted communication between individuals and the elusiveness of the Absolute. The study thus shows that both works turn out to reflect the human struggle for self-definition in the face of the ineffable and longing for totality in a world threatened by the abyss of existential nothingness.

The collapse of traditional values and the power of the rational mind as well as distrust to any objective truths and authorities (including God) that were brought to light in the era of Modernism, gave rise to the generally felt sense of loss and insecurity in the chaotic and irrational world. Alienation and despair, experienced especially acutely after the outbreak of World War I, seemed to reflect the moods characteristic of broadly perceived Existentialism – both represented by its Christian and atheistic propagators. Following Daniel Joseph Singal's assertion that "Existentialism is the culminations philosophic expression of Modernism"<sup>1</sup>, one may further conclude that Modernism and Existentialism

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1. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within. From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 360.

were inherent in the southern spirit, and especially in the Southern literature at that period. The ineradicable feeling of defeat after the Civil War, successive industrialization and unavoidable modernization of the region, which instead of bringing prosperity deepened poverty and economic backwardness, all these factors contributed to literary interests revolving around existential issues, so typical of Modernists. Alienation, being at the heart of early twentieth-century Southern literature, is the effect of the protagonist's struggle with encroaching materialism of the modern era. Disintegration of the family and traditional values as well as haunting memories of the past constitute the price that one has to pay for 'progress'. Shattered identity of an individual together with the undermined identity of the region must again be restored and redefined if the existence in the new, hostile order is ever to be possible.

Katherine Anne Porter's rich symbolism, a thorough insight into human consciousness, employing a stream of consciousness technique in fiction, and caricatured portrayal of characters that are often stricken with the sense of loss or alienation categorized her as a Modernist writer. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks point out in *The History of Southern Women's Literature* that Porter "combines the modernist concern for craft with pastoral tensions and an emphasis on interior landscapes of grief, longing and desire."<sup>2</sup> Paul Giles, on the other hand, in *American Catholic Arts and Fiction* turns his attention to the question of the artist's perception of Catholicism. According to him, Catholicism in Porter operates as an aesthetic fiction or a beautiful idea.<sup>3</sup> Adopting a spectatorial position towards institutionalized and ritualized religion, the writer expresses a sense of detachment not only in her fiction but also in some of her essays or interviews. Porter's challenging approach towards the Southern religious heritage is reflected partly through her rebellion against the apparently comforting status quo of tradition and partly through the simultaneous paradoxical attachment to the order that seems to be no longer viable in the modern world. Nevertheless, the existential questions that permeate the writer's fiction seem to indicate the inescapable urge to redefine her own identity in reality where Southern heritage is constantly confronted with modern values.

### ***Pale Horse, Pale Rider* Trilogy – Time and Self-discovery**

*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, a collection of three short novels, seemingly unconnected, illustrates Katherine Anne Porter's attempt to deal with the interpenetration of the past, present and future as inseparable in the process of self-discovery. The

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2. Carolyn Perry, and Mary Louise Weaks, *The History of Southern Women's Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 256.

3. Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fiction. Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 353.

main arising questions, suggested by Mark Schorer in the *Afterword* to the Collection may be put this way: "What were we? What are we? What will we be? Or: From where did we come? Where are we at this moment? Where are we going? The individual is his past, his present, his future,"<sup>4</sup> he concludes. The above questions strike the existential chord and imply the evolutionary way one's identity must trace until it reaches its wholeness.

### "Old Mortality" – Between Myth and Reality

"Old Mortality," the first in the collection spans the time between 1885 and 1912. Miranda, the main protagonist and the literary *alter ego* of the artist, observes the world around her through the prism of stories and legends passed down from generation to generation by her relatives. As a small girl, and then a young woman, she is shaped by idealized images aiming at sustaining the beguiling myth of the idyllic South. However, in the course of Miranda's maturing to adulthood, the myths are getting dispersed and what appears to the girl's sight is an intricate fabric of the family history woven out of lies and confabulations. The legends of the angelic beauty of Aunt Amy do not in fact expose her fickleness and infidelity. Uncle Gabriel, her tragic suitor, presented as full of gallantry and chivalry, later turns out as a bulging, embittered drunkard, dissatisfied with his current wife. Cousin Eva, a single middle-aged woman, embittered by not conforming to the idealized picture of a Southern belle, only reinforces the role that myth played in the identification of the Southern families as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century. The past shaping the present is best evident in the old spinster, who due to the lack of a chin, resolves to combat the patriarchal order by taking an active part in feminist activity with the aim of abolishing the values she herself is inherently driven by.

The truth abruptly revealed to Miranda by Cousin Eva during their travel to Uncle George's funeral evokes the feeling of sudden repulsion towards the "living corpses, festering women stepping gaily towards the charnel house, their corruption concealed under laces and flowers, their dead faces lifted smiling."<sup>5</sup> Miranda, once feeling a constituent part of her family ancestry, now feels an outcast, a stranger in the world of the dead. "It is I who have no place,"<sup>6</sup> she ponders. The past, so much cherished by her relatives, and imposed as an inherent element of the present identity becomes a burden for the young girl who desires to break the blood ties that strangle her and limit her freedom. As a result, she longs for self-definition on her own terms in the tangible present.

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4. Mark Schorer, *Afterword, Pale Horse, Pale Rider. Three Short Novels* (New York: A Signet Classic, 1962), 167.

5. Katherine Anne Porter, "Old Mortality," *Pale Horse, Pale Rider. Three Short Novels*, 56.

6. *Ibid*, 59.

Independence that Miranda announces, however, entails taking responsibility for her own decisions. She asks herself a multitude of questions:

What is life? (...) What shall I do with it? (...) What was good, and what was evil? (...) There are questions to be asked first, she thought, but who will answer them? No one, or there will be too many answers, none of them right. What is the truth, she asked herself as intently as if the question had never been asked, the truth, even about the smallest, the least important of all the things I must find out? And where shall I begin to look for it?<sup>7</sup>

The sudden dread that descends upon her arises from the existential fear one encounters when presented with the infinitude of possibilities. Freedom with no direct aim or no solid base of reference is a terrifying vision for the girl who enters adulthood renouncing the experience of her ancestors. Miranda's rejection of the past, just like Jenny Archbald's from Ellen Glasgow's *The Sheltered Life*, might originate from her immaturity and inexperience. The rebellion against one's heritage, the belief in self-reliance and stubborn insistence on independence typical of each young generation, seem like a perverse self-denial and an attempt to drown out one's inner call of conscience.

What is worth noting is the fact that Miranda's rejection is not so much of the past but of the myth itself. Porter herself ascribes much value to the past, claiming that "of the three dimensions of time, only the past is 'real' in the absolute sense that it has occurred."<sup>8</sup> However, as Cheryl D. Coleman states in "'No Memory is Really Faithful': Memory and Myth in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Old Mortality,'" <sup>9</sup> it would be unwise to expect Miranda to find some objective truth both about her past and present. As each myth contains some grain of truth, Miranda should search for her own truth, relying selectively on the inherited legacy, as no absolute truth is to be learned about her ancestors or about her future.

### **"Noon Wine" and the Kierkegaardian "Knight of Faith"**

Though seemingly unrelated in terms of plot, "Noon Wine" penetrates the existential dimension of subjectivity and examines the social aspect of the suspension of the ethics. To what extent is it possible to ascertain the objectivity of truth concerning both the perception of one's true identity and of the apparent murder committed by Mr. Thompson on Mr. Helton? Observed from two contradictory angles, Mr. Helton appears as a two-faced person. Perceived from

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7. Ibid, 61.

8. Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 449.

9. Cheryl D. Coleman, "'No Memory is Really Faithful': Memory and Myth in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Old Mortality,'" *The Mississippi Quarterly* 62, no 1-2 (2009).

the perspective of Mr. Thompson, he is a diligent worker, slightly taciturn and mysterious, yet peaceful and reliable. When taking Mr. Hatch's version into account, we come across a mentally disturbed psychopath, a murderer, and an unassimilated outcast from a foreign, i.e., hostile culture. As M. K. Fornataro-Neil aptly observed:

Helton is so firmly embedded in the counternarratives of Thompson and Hatch that it is impossible to uncover any sense of his personal identity. We are given conflicting evidence, both hearsay and actual. Porter so carefully subverts the validity of each narrative that Helton's reality remains a complete enigma.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, Helton turns out to be a tragic hero, alienated from the American society on the grounds of his foreign descent and his lack of will to conform to the specific cultural intricacies of the South. What Porter depicts as a powerful tool of both uniting and separating people from one another is language. Mr. Helton's inability to communicate fluently in English bars the process of mutual understanding and deprives him of the opportunity to define himself, thus condemning himself to be defined by others.

Apart from the problem of self-definition, the story serves the opportunity to examine the question of truth in relation to Mr. Thompson's case. Recalling the moment of killing Mr. Hatch, he himself emphasizes his personal version of events, justifying his point in committing the deed. The discrepancy between his own persistently repeated version of acting in self-defense and the community's silent belief in his guilt lies in the subjective perception of truth by the protagonist and a distanced, apparently more objective view of the disengaged crowd of spectators. The third-person narration informs the reader that Mr. Thompson "saw the fat man with his long bowie knife in his hand (...), he saw the blade going into Mr. Thompson's stomach."<sup>11</sup> It turned out, however, upon catching Mr. Helton and investigation, that "there wasn't a knife scratch on him."<sup>12</sup> The memory started playing a trick on Mr. Thompson as he "couldn't remember hitting Mr. Hatch. He couldn't remember it. He couldn't. He remembered only that he had been determined to stop Mr. Hatch from cutting Mr. Helton."<sup>13</sup> Mr. Thomson's inability to persuade the villagers of his innocence evokes the disconcerting anxiety and isolation. The truth maintained by the protagonist makes him a lonely fighter against the community and even against his disbelieving wife.

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10. M.K. Fornataro-Neil, "Constructed Narratives and Writing Identity in the Fiction of Katherine Anne Porter," *Twentieth Century Literature* 44, no. 3 (1998): 349.

11. Katherine Anne Porter, "Noon Wine," *Pale Horse, Pale Rider. Three Short Novels* (New York: A Signet Classic, 1962), 98.

12. *Ibid.*, 105.

13. *Ibid.*, 105.

His situation resembles the plight of the Kierkegaardian “knight of faith” who must persevere against all odds and rational premises just to defend his right cause. Just like Abraham, who with the faith of a lonesome knight has to abandon conventional ethics in fight for the intimately revealed truth, so is the state of Mr. Thompson, who getting enclosed within his interiors, resolves to stick to his personal beliefs. The pangs of conscience stemming from the Christian ethics punishing any form of killing, however, evoke the feeling of dread and unbearable remorse: “Mr. Thompson felt he was a dead man. He was dead to his other life.”<sup>14</sup> Unable to carry the burden of his own guilt in the eyes of the others, he commits suicide.

Eventually, the question of truth seems to be unresolved. Man’s inability to objectively understand what is going on with oneself results in the inner tension deriving from the clash between the social or ethical code of justice and the subjective perception of the right choice. Unlike in “Old Mortality,” where the truth about one’s identity is tinted by the shades of the past, “Noon Wine” focuses on the present, the “here and now” as determinant in searching the truth about oneself. Mark Schorer mentions the significance of “the sudden unexpected horror of the present, the horror whose truth one could not know until one was inextricably in it, when it proves to be an absolute doom to which one’s own nature, however trivially expressed before, now commits us.”<sup>15</sup> Only being in the middle of things, is one committed to taking responsibility for the decisions one takes. The intensity of the here and now enfolds the whole spectrum of freedom, which the human being encounters especially in extreme situations. Taking action, one writes the truth, but its interpretation seems yet too complex to undertake.

### **Trauma and Identity Crisis in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”**

Out of the three stories in the trilogy, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” seems to be the most evocative in terms of symbolism, and functions as a unifying coda to the problems mentioned in previous works. Miranda, who is twenty-four years old now, appears once again in this story and becomes the central point of psychological insight. Instantaneity of action is achieved by breaking up with linearity of time and change of perspective. Sudden shifts from third-person- to first-person narration, an interplay of conscious thoughts with unconscious dreams, the chaotic intermingling of the past, present and future, extensive streams of consciousness jumbled with abrupt dialogues only reinforce the tension experienced by the delirious mind of sick Miranda. Intensifying symptoms of influenza immerse the heroine into an overpowering state of mental anxiety,

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14. Ibid, 108.

15. Schorer, *Afterword, Pale Horse, Pale Rider. Three Short Novels*, 1962, 174.

where the acuteness of harsh reality pierces her consciousness even more severely in the dream-like state of a near-death experience.

Obsessed by the continuing war and afraid of the loss of her beloved, Adam, Miranda experiences apocalyptic visions of death and suffering. The terrifying dream of a pale rider accompanying her is like a premonition of death she is bound to encounter:

The stranger rode beside her, easily, lightly, his reins loose in his half-closed hand, straight and elegant in dark shabby garments that flapped upon his bones; his pale face smiled in an evil trance, he did not glance at her. Ah, I have seen this fellow before, I know this man if I could place him. He is no stranger to me.<sup>16</sup>

Miranda's vision alludes to the Biblical description of the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse, the horseman of Death:

When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.<sup>17</sup>

Miranda's familiarity with the horseman of death might be interpreted as the foreshadowing of her own death, both in a material or spiritual sense, as well as the death of her husband. The war she has been inevitably entangled in through Adam, has imposed a burden of constant dread and fear for his life. The multifaceted character of war as a source of chaos and destruction of family bonds as well as degeneration of human impulses lies in its deceptiveness. Whether it be an "elegant," smiling figure of the Apocalyptic horseman or an evil face of a bony skeleton, war sets humankind in the Danse Macabre of deadly self-demise. The omnipresence of death Miranda experiences in her illness makes her the warrior herself. Mounting her imaginary horse, Graylie, she spurs him to the race and urges him in the words: "we must outrun Death and the Devil."<sup>18</sup>

Miranda's delirium sharpens her senses of perception. Bodily suffering and internal anguish make her realize the power of her love to Adam and the futility of war and separation, which Adam seems to be negligent of. As a result, lost for words in the face of horrors of war, both Miranda and Adam hide their true feelings, putting on masks of casual indifference and duty. As Sarah Youngblood observes, "war conditions (...) the necessity for a 'code' or 'system' among the

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16. Katherine Anne Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," *Pale Horse, Pale Rider. Three Short Novels* (New York: A Signet Classic, 1962), 114-115.

17. *The Holy Bible, New International Version, The NIV Minister's Bible*, Revelation 6: 7-8 (Hendrickson Publishers, LLC: Peabody, MA: 1984), 946.

18. Porter, "Pale Horse,...," 114.



younger generation (...), a proper existentialist formula of casualness and flippancy for maintaining cynical control: because the situation is absurd, behave as if it were amusing."<sup>19</sup> Hence, the only logical reaction Miranda comes up with is laughter at the thought of war: "'My, it's a funny war,' she said; 'isn't it? I laugh every time I think about it.'"<sup>20</sup> The atrocity of war exceeds Miranda's ability to bear it with existential courage. As if pushing the awareness of Adam's imminent death back to the unconscious, she develops defense mechanisms that enable her to cope with their parting and her own helplessness in the face of overwhelming reality.

As a result, both Miranda and Adam aiming for divergent goals seem to occupy different, independent territories, inaccessible to one another. Although physically together, the young people feel lonely and alienated from their common world and unable to comprehend each other's values. Miranda's realization of them being drawn apart and her ominous visions of Adam stepping "into the blue mist"<sup>21</sup> of death deepen her anxiety and fear, which is illustrated by the following line: "There was only the wish to see him and the fear, the present threat, of not seeing him again."<sup>22</sup> Physical pain accompanied by the existential suffering reaches the climax when Miranda, virtually on the brink of death, experiences her own dying.

The pale horseman of the Apocalypse spreading the seeds of the Spanish influenza brings Miranda to the edge of death. Working as a reporter for *The Blue Mountain News* in Denver during the Great War, she cannot escape falling victim to the sweeping pandemic. The near-death experience that plunges her in the "jungle" of death, "creeping tangles of spotted serpents, rainbow-colored birds with malign eyes, (...) fleshly leaves that glowed with sulphur-colored light and exuded the ichor of death (...)"<sup>23</sup> is like a descent into hell. The recurrent dream of perpetual death and resurrection haunts her, as she envisions the arrows striking her and Adam's body, killing him and leaving her alive.

The story seems to allude to Porter's own life experiences. Soon after the arrival in Denver where Porter was supposed to write for the *Rocky Mountain News*, she soon fell prey to the great influenza epidemic, popularly called "Spanish flu." With the death toll of several dozen million people all over the world, the pandemic was perceived by some Christians as a fulfilling of the prophecy in Revelation of the end of the world. It seemed that Katherine Anne Porter's end of the world was indeed approaching. Funeral arrangements for her burial were in progress, while an experimental dosage of strychnine turned out to

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19. Sarah Youngblood, "Structure and Imagery in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*," in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter* (ed.) Darlene Harbour Unrue (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997), 195.

20. Porter, "Pale Horse,....," 128.

21. Ibid, 138.

22. Ibid, 138.

23. Ibid, 145.

be salutary, and miraculously the woman was gradually rising from the dead. This event, however, left the artist transformed forever. As she recalls it later in an interview for *The Paris Review*:

It just simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready. It took me a long time to go out and live in the world again. I was really "alienated," in the pure sense. It was, I think, the fact that I really participated in death, that I knew what death was, and had almost experienced it. I had what the Christians call the "beatific vision," and the Greeks called the "happy day," the happy vision just before death. Now if you have had that, and survived it, come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there's no use deceiving yourself that you are.<sup>24</sup>

Risen from the ashes of her former self, with completely white hair that grew in place of the old raven-black curls, Katherine Anne Porter struggled to come to terms with her own distinctiveness that alienated her from other people. Observing the world from the perspective inaccessible to most people, and full of determination to defend her own ground, the artist set out to New York to actively participate in the intellectual and political life, and finally embarked on a challenging escapade to Mexico to participate in the Obregon Revolution in 1921.

Affected by the author's own traumatic recollections, the story boldly explores the problem of death. It is thus presented as expectation, the future prospect. Although ahead, it is constantly present with us. The expectation of death as the breaking moment, is paralleled to "a long march beset with all evils, and the heart fails little by little at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step, the mind sets up its own bitter resistance and to what end?"<sup>25</sup> The unique experience of the presence of death Miranda undergoes through the clinical death, endows her with the coveted knowledge of cognition expected at the ultimate moment of one's existence. Enchanted by the overflowing radiance of the blue morning sky and surrounded by the familiar human beings with beautiful "transfigured faces," Miranda experiences a beatific vision, whose completion and perfection is marred by the lack of Adam. As if summoned by the sense of obligation, she resolves to return to the world of "the dead" only to learn that Adam has died of influenza, leaving her lonely in the imperfect existence of the living "corpses."

Miranda's unique experience, inspired by Katherine Anne Porter's similar encounter, irrevocably changes her outlook on life. The reversal of order, where the living are perceived as the dead, alienates a person from the environment. The knowledge exceeding the capabilities of human perception turns out to be a

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24. Barbara Thompson, "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview," in: *"Flowering Judas."* Katherine Anne Porter (ed.) Virginia Spencer Carr (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 70-71.

25. *Ibid*, 156.

burden too heavy to carry throughout the remaining time of earthly existence both for fictional Miranda and Porter herself, which is emphasized by the author many a time in her non-fictional accounts. Misplaced, Miranda ponders: "the body is a curious monster, no place to live in, how could anyone feel at home there? Is it possible I can ever accustom myself to this place? she asked herself. (...) Miranda looked about her with the covertly hostile eyes of an alien."<sup>26</sup> She suddenly feels deprived of the truth to which she had been given access through the fulfillment of her death-wish. Misunderstood by others and disconsolate, she resolves to devote the remainder of her life to expectant longing for the lost personal paradise.

According to David A. Davis, trauma survivors usually do not return to their previous identity and instead create "an identity that incorporates the pre-traumatic identity with the traumatic experience."<sup>27</sup> Memory, as he maintains, plays here a crucial factor in maintaining the remains of the shattered bond between the original identity and the post-traumatic identity. He claims further that "when memory fails, the new identity becomes distorted or dysfunctional."<sup>28</sup> In Porter's novel, the excessive usage of "forgetting" and "remembering" language phrases, as well as recurring flashbacks and sudden shifts of spatial or temporal perspective might indicate the identity crisis on both a biographical and an aesthetic level. The disintegration of Miranda's personal identity after her traumatic near-death experience is also interpreted by Davis as a reflection of the collective memory of the pandemic, which though apparently overshadowed by the atrocities of The First World War, seemed, in Freudian terms, repressed to the deepest layers of the unconscious. Existential angst of the loss of the individual self obtains here a social dimension and its paradoxically universal character is not in any way connected with a system or an ideology of the times, but is a collection of personal traumas that spring from the passionate involvement in an attempt to reestablish one's identity threatened with the ultimate collapse.

Miranda's personal journey to the depth of her being might thus be sketched against the broader socio-historical background of The First World War. In "Nightmare and Apocalypse in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider,'" <sup>29</sup>Jewel Spears Brooker points to the religiously-biblical and archetypically-mythological inspirations stemming from Porter's recreational visit to Basel in 1932, where she became immersed in the medieval atmosphere of the historical city. The illustrated Bibles of the Reformation, Albrecht Dürer's wood engravings of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1498) and "The Knight, Death and

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26. Ibid, 161.

27. David A. Davis, "The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Traumatic Memory and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918," *The Southern Literary Journal* 43, no. 2 (2011).

28. Ibidem.

29. Jewel Spears Brooker, "Nightmare and Apocalypse in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 62, no. 1-2 (2009).

the Devil" (1513), Dante's *The Divine Comedy* as well as James Joyce's narrative method, all constituted inspiration for Porter's modernist story. All these inspirations, however, seem to be embedded in the author's personal existential tribulations stemming from her war experiences, beatific vision and Catholic faith that add to the story a personal character of an individual search for self-discovery.

### Existential Perception of Time

The interweaving of the past, present and future in the story with an emphasis on the mode of expectancy is embedded in the larger perspective of the whole trilogy and reflects Porter's emphasis on the role of time in human endeavors. As each of the stories in the collection changes focus, starting from the past in "Old Mortality" to the present in "Noon Wine" to the future in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," one realizes how the shift in the perception of time influences the shaping of individual identity of the protagonists. Human inability to escape the interdependent dimensions of time places the individual in a position of suspension and expectation for an indeterminate state of wholeness which is unachievable in terrestrial existence. Porter's preoccupation with the question of time echoes the perennial interest in the inconceivability of time among existentialist thinkers, such as St. Augustine, Martin Heidegger or Jean Paul Sartre, to name but a few. St. Augustine's reflections on time are aptly presented in *Confessions*:

For if future and past exist, I wish to know where they exist. If I cannot yet know this, I know at least that wherever they are, they are not future or past there, but present. If they are future there also, they do not yet exist there, and likewise if they are past there, they no longer exist there. Wherever and whatever they are, if they exist, they must be present.<sup>30</sup>

Memory of the things past and prediction of the future events are all carried out in the present state of mind, which is constantly fleeting. The quick succession of present moments prevents us from grasping their flow. Hence the perception of human life as holistic unity escapes our capabilities of cognition. As if to counter Socrates' famous quote: "I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance,"<sup>31</sup> St. Augustine confesses: "I am still ignorant as to what time is. (...) Alas for me! I do not even know the extent of my own ignorance."<sup>32</sup> Relativity of time implies also the relativity of one's identity. Only stepping beyond time and consequently beyond human existence, which in Augustinian terms implies

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30. St Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, 18, 23 (ed.) Philip Burton, 274.

31. Socrates, *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, volume I.

32. St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Ch. XXV, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* (tr. and ed.) Albert C. Outler, 2006.

eternity, may one intuit the possibility of definite self-cognition and complete self-fulfillment. For the time being man is condemned to perennial becoming and embeddedness in the state of constant searching.

Sartre's exhaustive study of temporality exhibits the paradoxical nature of time with its relativity and intangibility. In *Being and Nothingness* he argues that: "the past is no longer; the future is not yet; as for the instantaneous present, everyone knows that this does not exist at all but is the limit of an infinite division, like a point without dimension."<sup>33</sup> The elusive nature of time prevents one from encompassing each of the dimensions separately. On the one hand, there is the inaccessible past, seen as a complete entity that consumed its possibilities, enclosed in-itself. On the other hand, the future is perceived as one's "possibility of presence to being beyond being,"<sup>34</sup> which is merely a project of one's present For-itself. The present, being the least tangible of all temporal dimensions is perceived as For-itself, which is "present to being in the form of flight."<sup>35</sup> Being in fact a negation of being, Sartre contends that "the Present is not."<sup>36</sup> Hence, according to the philosopher, "the only possible method by which to study temporality is to approach it as a totality."<sup>37</sup> This, in Heidegger's view is not possible in the state of Dasein, which as a potentiality-for-Being, lacks totality.

The thrownness of Dasein manifests itself in temporality perceived as possibility. In *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that "the future, the character of having been, and the Present, show the phenomenal characteristics of the 'towards-oneness', the 'backto', and the 'letting-oneself-be-encountered-by.'"<sup>38</sup> These three dimensions of time are called by Heidegger as "ecstases" of temporality. Temporality, according to the thinker, "is not an entity which first emerges from itself; its essence is a process of temporalizing in the unity of the ecstases."<sup>39</sup> Unable to grasp the totality of time, one perceives it as a "pure sequence of 'nows', without beginning and without ending."<sup>40</sup> Being-towards-death constitutes the longing for the totality of the three-dimensional structure of time.

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33. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 159.

34. Ibid, 185.

35. Ibid, 179.

36. Ibid, 179.

37. Ibid, 159.

38. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 329.

39. Ibid, 329.

40. Ibid, 329.

### **Lady on a Deathbed – Agony of an Alienated Soul in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall”**

Porter's preoccupation with the mystery of time and subjective experience also finds an outlet in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1930), considered one of the finest short stories in her oeuvre. The author paints a psychologically intimate picture of an eighty-year-old woman on her deathbed. With the use of modernist techniques, like stream of consciousness, sudden flashbacks, foreshadowing, unexpected shifts of time and place, omniscient third-person narration intermingling with interior monologue and dialogue, rich religious imagery and symbolism, Porter manages to capture the subjective perception of the dying process. The last minutes of Granny Weatherall's life are a stream of jumbled recollections from her past, interwoven with present sensations, interpreted confusingly by the dying woman.

What strikes the reader is her intense anxiety originating from the obsession with some moment in Granny's past when she had been jilted by her would-be husband, George. Although she got married with another man, John, by whom she had children and who guaranteed her a relatively satisfying life, her mind now shifts reproachfully to the distant moment of betrayal. The past, present and future get blurred in Granny Weatherall's mind, smoothly floating from her hospital bed to the past events, like childbirth, household duties of a young mother, hard times of a widowed woman as a sole breadwinner and Cornelia's house. The time span of half a century seems to have shrunk to one minute, whereas tomorrow is extended to eternity. The focal point for Granny being jilted by her fiancé seems like a recurrent deathblow that with redoubled strength haunts her on her deathbed. She constantly evokes the moment which irreversibly turned her life into endless misery. Granny bitterly asks herself:

What does a woman do when she has put on the white veil and set out the white cake for a man and he doesn't come? (...) That was hell, she knew hell when she saw it. For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell.<sup>41</sup>

The significance of Granny's predicament lies in her anxious waiting for that transitory moment of her life and the repetition of the predetermined failure that leaves Granny's soul disconsolate and forever doomed to isolation. As if to reverse the past, she still awaits her beloved fiancé to marry him. In the woman's mind, George is interchangeably replaced with the vision of Hapsy, Granny's youngest daughter. The mother's anxious longing for her child, suggestively alludes to some mysterious bond that joins the three characters together. As

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41. Katherine Anne Porter, “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,” in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (San Diego: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 84.

David and Madeline Barnes speculate in "The Secret Sin of Granny Weatherall," Hapsy might have been conceived as an illegitimate child of Granny and George.<sup>42</sup> Acceptance of John's marriage proposal could have absolved Granny of the shame of illegitimacy, yet not of the sense of guilt.<sup>43</sup> The pangs of conscience bring back the reminiscences of the painful truth, which once repressed now returns with redoubled strength.

Rich religious symbolism that reinforces the powerful image of dying might imply a deeper level of Granny Weatherall's anxious anticipation. Persistently returning to the moment of betrayal, the woman seems to sense the dread about being jilted by God at the moment of death. Just like a bride expecting her fiancé to arrive at the altar to become one flesh and one blood, so is now Granny expecting to be embraced by God embodied by her youngest and beloved child. Realizing that time is running low, her hope gradually vanishes, and instead the feeling of overwhelming abandonment descends upon Granny's desperate mind, which is illustrated by the following excerpt:

Granny made a long journey outward, looking for Hapsy. What if I don't find her? What then? Her heart sank down and down, there was no bottom to death, she couldn't come to the end of it.<sup>44</sup>

The groundbreaking moment of jilting triggers off yet another possibility of interpretation. Hurt by her fiancé, Granny might have simultaneously directed her anger and resentment at God, who remained silent in the face of the woman's suffering. Now abandoned not only by her fiancé, but also by God, she resolves to govern her further life on her own terms. Granny Weatherall thus seems to represent the mind of an existentialist, who, having rejected any external point of reference, adds meaning to her life, relying purely on her strong will and perseverance. For sixty years she seems to have "weathered" all the hardships of everyday struggles. Nevertheless, the moment of dying restores her suppressed faith, which still flickers in the depth of her own interior. Just like the love to George, which cannot be smothered despite his infidelity and the seemingly ordered and satisfying life with another man, neither can Granny renounce her bond with God, despite His apparent absence and ignorance about her plight. The moment of death merges with the wedding day, and the overwhelming fear of being jilted once more reappears. Granny anxiously cries: "God, give a sign!"<sup>45</sup> The acute silence pierces through the remains of her consciousness and the woman seems to sink in the abyss of existential nothingness:

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42. This, however, contradicts the evidence that Hapsy is Ellen's last child.

43. Daniel R. Barnes, and Madeline T. Barnes, "The Secret Sin of Granny Weatherall," *Renascence* XXI, no. 1 (1968): 162-165.

44. *Ibid*, 88-89.

45. *Ibid*, 89.

Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house. She could not remember any other sorrow because this grief wiped them all away. Oh, no, there's nothing more cruel than this – I'll never forgive it. She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the candle.<sup>46</sup>

One might wonder, whether the message of existential void is the ultimate interpretation of the highly evocative denouement of the story. Adopting Granny's perspective, one identifies with a human, limited point of view. Her inability to perceive God by means of imperfect senses, does not exclude God's appearance in a more concealed way. Shortly before her death, Granny seems to indeed see Hapsy, whether truly or just as the figment of her imagination, "standing by the bed in a white cap," as if her head was surrounded by a luminous halo, like that of a saint or even God Himself. The reassuring image seems to disperse the hopelessness of existential nothingness of the apparently pessimistic ending of the story.

### Conclusions

As presented in the discussion, Katherine Anne Porter's fiction appears to be inseparable from her turbulent life characterized by ebbs and flows of religious courage and passion advancing her to the discovery of the elusive truth. The interpretation of her stories, novels and essays brings to the fore her preoccupation with the question of time in its existential dimension. Relativity of its perception simultaneously accentuates the problem of the subjective truth that both her characters and the author herself must tackle at certain stages of life. The reality sketched by Porter appears as a collage of illusory myths of the past and aspirations of the contemporary generations. Clashing values of the past and present as well as subjectivity of experience lie at the core of the author's fiction. A unique experience of death within the span of Dasein reinforces the intensity of the "here and now" in the self-discovery process, opening the whole spectrum of freedom in (re)creation of one's identity. Being-towards-death is demonstrated as man's ultimate goal and inescapable prospect. Paradoxically, expectation of death in Porter's fiction comes into view as longing for totality in which three-dimensional time mingles into wholeness along with the vastness of space, eventually merging one's fragmented identity into an authentic Being.

Another crucial concern in Katherine Anne Porter's fiction is an Apocalyptic vision of the wartime world with its existential undertones of destruction, alienation or absurdity. The way Porter deals with God's silence reveals the abyss of existential nothingness experienced by an individual in their quest for order and inner comfort. Poses of cynicism or stoicism suggested as imperfect tools of

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46. Ibid, 89.



overcoming a sense of existential anxiety and entanglement in enslaving (inter)personal relationships in fact reveal man's powerlessness in transcending one's plight. Porter's rebellious dialogue with an absent God that reappears throughout her life and fiction is a succession of retreats and forward movements on the way to personal maturation towards the acceptance of God as the source of inner peace and a cure to existential grievances. Analyzing both Katherine Anne Porter's life and fiction one can detect a circular movement in her search for true Existenz and genuine identity. The acceptance of the Catholic faith and Southern heritage by the end of Porter's life might be interpreted as the (re)discovery of the writer's own selfhood and could provide a reply to the unanswered questions raised in her fiction.

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