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PREVIEW

**University of Texas at El Paso**  
**Thesis no. 190**

**Author: Council, Mary Jane**

**Title:** *The collected fiction of  
Katherine Anne Porter: a  
doubter's world in miniature*

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THE COLLECTED FICTION OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER:  
A DOUBTER'S WORLD IN MINIATURE

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John L. Waller  
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THE COLLECTED FICTION OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER:  
A DOUBTER'S WORLD IN MINIATURE

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English  
Texas Western College  
of  
the University of Texas

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Mary Jane Council  
August, 1957

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## ABSTRACT

Though Katherine Anne Porter has produced only three published volumes of short stories and short novels in a lifetime of writing, her work is of such excellence that her place among the top-ranking contemporary writers of fiction is secure. Her breadth of experience, supplemented by an extraordinary sensibility and "historic memory," has resulted in an artistic perfection and a universality of theme which satisfy even when her negative philosophy does not.

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Notes for Mrs. Mary <sup>J</sup>ane Council. 30 July 1957

Biographical data in WHO'S WHO.

Latest published essay "NOON WINE: The Sources" autobiographical Yale Review  
Autumn number 1956 address 28 Hillhouse Avenue New Haven Connecticut. Send  
\$1.00

Present Title of novel, now nearly finished, "Ship of Fools." publisher Little,  
Atlantic Monthly Press.

Brown, Left Harcourt Brace nearly two years ago. First announced as Promised

Land. Next as NO SAFE HARBOR. Have returned to my first choice, SHIP OF FOOLS

Cotton Mather chapter "A Goat For Azazel" appeared 1939 or 1940 I think in  
Partisan Review. Also in Perspective no. 7 American edition 1953 or 1954

THIEVES' MARKET was my first try at a novel, long since abandoned and destroyed.

MANY REDEEMERS was my first title for that mss. It will never be written under  
either title.

I have read all my life and have admired a great many authors, and my influences  
are so varied and so many they may just be put down to a general absorption of  
literature of the world into my <sup>mind</sup> ~~mind~~. I have no influences that I can name.  
Resemblances to other writers do not prove influences. We can all be classified.

My subject was literature and the art of writing in all of the <sup>nearly</sup> ~~about~~ two hundred  
colleges and universities here and in Europe where I have appeared for readings or  
stayed on to teach temporarily... What else?

Connecticut is not my home. I have none that I know of. My "colonial country  
home" is a very simple little white house with small pillars on one side, which I  
have rented for three years.

Send to New York Public Library for copy of their bulletin containing  
Edward Schwartz's bibliography, Vol. 57 No 5 May 1953. I think it cost ~~75~~ 75  
cents, but that was then. I am not sure, better ask.

A writer writes out of his own bloodstream that carries his WHOLE experience  
of life, no matter what or from what source. That is the answer as to autobiography.

Sorry, I am trying to finish a novel, and am burdened to death with letters  
asking for this sort of thing. Please look up things for yourself— go to libraries  
and consult files of magazines — do the kind of research <sup>only</sup> you can do for yourself.  
Don't ask authors to write essays on their work for you! If I had the time, I'd write  
one and publish it! But good luck to you, and with my best wishes

Katherine Anne Porter

Katherine Anne Porter

Collection of occasional writings, "The Days Before" comes  
tell you a great deal about me!

## INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter is recognized as a top-ranking artist in the twentieth-century development of two literary forms, the short story and the nouvelle. The following are typical comments of critics about her work:

Katherine Anne Porter moves in the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Henry James.<sup>1</sup>

Katherine Anne Porter. . .has been frequently referred to as "the American Katherine Mansfield."<sup>2</sup>

Miss Porter should demand much of her talent. There is nothing quite like it, and very little that approaches its strength in contemporary writing.<sup>3</sup>

A half dozen of her stories equal the best written by any twentieth-century American.<sup>4</sup>

Miss Porter has set her special signature on this form [the novelette], as Hemingway has on the contemporary practice of the short story.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Rosenfeld, "An Artist in Fiction," The Saturday Review, XIX (April 1, 1939), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Bennett Cerf (ed.), Modern American Short Stories (New York, 1945), p. 173.

<sup>3</sup>Louise Bogan, "Flowering Judas," Selected Criticism, (New York, 1955), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Charles A. Allen, "Katherine Anne Porter: Psychology as Art," Southwest Review, Vol. 41 (Summer, 1956), p. 223.

<sup>5</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, "That True and Human World," The Responsibilities of the Critic (New York, 1952), p. 68.

No list of the greatest American story writers would be complete without her name.<sup>6</sup>

Miss Porter has often been called the greatest living American woman writer.<sup>7</sup>

Vernon A. Young, after commenting upon Miss Porter's "flawless" realism, "enthraling subject matter," and "lucid, flexible style," states that one would expect her reputation to be as generally accepted as that of Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, or Erskine Caldwell (which acceptance he admits does not exist); and he concludes by making the unequivocal statement:

Her short stories have already placed her beyond anyone now working in that genre.<sup>8</sup>

One can see from the foregoing remarks--and these are only a sampling (adverse criticism being almost non-existent)--that the name of Katherine Anne Porter has assumed considerable importance in the present-day world of letters.

This almost unanimous acclaim by the critics is strangely at variance with Miss Porter's unfamiliarity to

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<sup>6</sup>George Sessions Perry (ed.), Roundup Time (New York, 1943), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>Editor's note to Katherine Anne Porter's "The Gift of Women," Woman's Home Companion, Vol. 83 (December, 1956), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Vernon A. Young, "The Art of Katherine Anne Porter," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XV (Autumn, 1945), p. 341.

the general reading public. This fact is attested to in the statement of one of her former associates, Robert Penn Warren, who says, "The fiction of Katherine Anne Porter, despite the wide-spread critical adulation, has never found the public which its distinction merits."<sup>9</sup> An interested investigator has no trouble in confirming this fact. Even persons whose livelihood depends in some way upon acquaintance with the field of literature display little knowledge of the work of Katherine Anne Porter.

Another proof of her lack of popularity is the fact that she has sold few books--she has not made much money. Miss Porter herself has stated from time to time that she has gained very little financially by her writing. When asked in 1939 if she had found it possible to make a living by writing the sort of thing she wanted to, she answered, "No, there has not been a living in it, so far." When asked if she thought there was any place in our present economic system for literature as a profession, she answered, "If you mean, is there any place in our present economic system for the practice of literature as a source of steady income

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "Katherine Anne Porter (Irony with a Center)," The Kenyon Review, IV (Winter, 1942), p. 29.

and economic security, I should say no."<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note also that the extravagant praise which critics have heaped upon the efforts of Katherine Anne Porter is out of proportion to the amount of work that she has produced. What are her actual literary achievements? She has written and published short stories, novelettes, essays, and poems. Although she has engaged in many kinds of writing to earn a living--newspaper, movie, magazine, etc.--it is in the field of the short story and short novel that she is recognized as a master. Her published books of fiction are these:

Flowering Judas and Other Stories, 1930  
(Short stories, reprinted in 1935 with four added stories)

Pale Horse, Pale Rider, (1939  
(Three novelettes)

The Leaning Tower and Other Stories, 1944  
(Short stories)

The Old Order, 1955  
(Paper-bound volume of stories of the South reprinted from The Leaning Tower and Pale Horse, Pale Rider)

The first three books of fiction listed above represent the main body of Miss Porter's total published work in that field, and the collection of non-fiction called

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<sup>10</sup> Katherine Anne Porter, "Three Statements about Writing, 1939: The Situation in American Writing," The Days Before (New York, 1952), pp. 126-127.

The Days Before (1952) contains the main part of her work in the field of the essay. The pattern has been for her stories to be printed first in periodicals and then later included in collections. These four books represent a total of sixteen short stories, six short novels, and twenty-nine essays. This is not an impressive amount of work in total number of words for a professional writer who has spent more than forty years practicing her art. A critical examination of this work, however, will show that it is of such uniformly high quality that it merits the laudatory comments of the critics.

Truly then, as has been said by numerous critics, Katherine Anne Porter is a "writer's writer." How can one explain a writer's widespread enthusiastic acceptance by professional critics and his almost complete neglect by the average reader? Finding the answer to this question will involve a detailed study of the work of the writer, her special skills and significances, as well as her limitations.



## CHAPTER I

### BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY INFLUENCES

A study of the personality, life, literary influences, and work of Katherine Anne Porter will reveal, not only outstanding literary achievement, but an unusual degree of correlation between personal characteristics and life experiences on the one hand and the form and substance of the final literary production on the other. Having been born into an interesting family background, Miss Porter has subsequently lived a rich, varied life in many parts of the world. Being endowed by nature with an unusual sensitivity to the life forces around her and their implications, and being endowed with a remarkable capacity for "historic memory," she has been able to record with clarity and beauty the most fundamental experiences involved in man's struggle for existence.

Photographs of Katherine Anne Porter show that she is and has been an extremely good looking woman. Throughout the years her pictures have appeared in magazines and newspapers many times along with stories about her. Those taken in the 1930's show a beautiful woman with finely chiseled features and expressive eyes, a woman whose dress and coiffure

reflect a fashionable and sophisticated taste. Her eyes appear blue or green and her hair, dark. Her pictures taken in the 1940's and 1950's show a gray-haired woman whose face reflects the loveliness of her vanished youth and the character drawn from the experience of a full life. Her voice may be heard on recordings of her own stories. It is pleasant and soft, and although it is more a blend of Western and Southern talk than anything else, it does not really have the inflection of any particular part of the country. She makes fine use of her voice for skillful interpretation of the delicate, subtle, and intricate emotional situations presented in her stories. A long-time friend writes of Katherine Anne Porter's "exquisitely distinguished features; and her paleness with the tiniest wrinkles, as of a white morning-glory just opening; and the look of merriment in her eyes." Of her voice he says, it is "a Texas voice inflected by New Orleans, or perhaps it is vice versa; musical and a trifle husky, yet never beclouded or hard to listen to."<sup>1</sup>

One other interesting item about Miss Porter's physical appearance is that in her youthful days in Mexico

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<sup>1</sup>Glenway Wescott, Comment on album, "The Downward Path to Wisdom," An Appreciation, LP recording by Caedmon, TC-1006 (New York, 1952).

her legs were considered so shapely that they were used as models for a cinema short on shoes by Calles' cameraman in Mexico City.<sup>2</sup>

Katherine Anne Porter has lived and worked in many places scattered over a good part of the globe. Her work has been of a literary nature--writing, lecturing, teaching; and she appears to have taken this work very seriously. She has been married and divorced three times. Besides her broad experience in writing and lecturing, she has had many outside interests. In regard to the diversity of her life and certain personal characteristics, Katherine Anne Porter says of herself:

My personal life has been the jumbled and apparently irrelevant mass of experiences which can happen, I think, only to a woman who goes with her mind permanently absent from the place where she is. My physical eyes are unnaturally far-sighted, and I have no doubt this affects my temperament in some way. I have very little time sense and almost no sense of distance or of direction. I lack entirely a respect for money values, and for caste of any kind, social, intellectual, or whatever.<sup>3</sup>

Her interests other than literature appear to be talking, visiting, cooking, sewing, dancing, sailing, horse-back riding, and music. Margaret Marshall says she is

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<sup>2</sup>"Promise Kept," Time, XXXIII (April 10, 1939), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors (New York, 1942), p. 1119.

a person "with extraordinary personal and social charm who likes talk, visiting, and 'plain playing.'"<sup>4</sup>

Katherine Anne Porter further reveals her broad range of interests when she elaborates on her hobbies thus:

I have never cultivated any sports or pastimes except such as might offer themselves in my environment at any given moment: and as my environment has changed quite often, I remember a number of charming interests that disappeared in their time without being missed. I don't care for competitive sports, and am not much of a watcher, but there are two beautiful games I have never tired of: the Basque ball game, jai alai, which I always saw in Cuba, and polo. I swim if I am near water, dance if I'm asked, climb a volcano if I am near it, paddle a canoe or sail a cat-boat when they are available. I was brought up on horseback, but lately, after several years, I rode in the country, and discovered that the horse and I have become strangers. Not enemies, just indifferent. I studied ballet for two years, thirty years ago, when it was the rage to do so; played five versions of Columbine in various Little Theaters at about the same time: painted in tempera on wood panels when I was assisting in Mexico at one of those Art Renaissances we used to have so frequently; did quite a lot of bowling later, when some of us took up bowling, I forget just why.

In Paris in 1933 I had a spinet made and took music lessons and collected records of old music and quite a lot of books about it. My spinet fell apart finally, which ended that, but it was a happy time. About the same time, some one sold me a very fine camera for almost nothing, so for eighteen months, except for intervals at the spinet, I took pictures and spent time, money and

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<sup>4</sup>Margaret Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness III," The Nation, Vol. 150 (April 13, 1940), p. 475.

energy I could not afford furnishing my camera with all the latest devices and fixtures. Then I lost the camera, and the fever left me. I got maybe fifty pretty good photographs out of it.

As a very poverty-ridden beginning author, I learned to cook in self-defense, but it turned out to be fun. I still like to cook up a party for friends. When I lived in California I grew flowers: roses, carnations, irises, gardenias, and I had a whole back yard full of the most wonderful azaleas and camellias. I used to love several kinds of card games, but settled down with poker, and still believe I play a fairly mean game.

For the rest, when I am not working or writing in my journal, I read and listen to music. I think highly of conversation with two or three friends over glasses of good cheer. Yet for long periods I submerge in a kind of reverie or interior silence, and can live a hermit's life and the very notion of being amused or doing anything at all except brooding among my mountains of paper is entirely repellant [sic] to me. It is hard to explain why almost anything in life, thought, nature, is interesting to me, and maybe even more so in these times of retreat.

When I finish this [The Days Before], I am going to Luxembourg to see the puppet show. It is just as delightful as it was when I lived in Paris before.

I leave cats to the last. I love them above all animals, and my friendship with them has been the most charming, constant thing, all my life.<sup>5</sup>

In regard to Miss Porter's interest in music, one writer says that she is fond of old stringed instruments and

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<sup>5</sup>"Katherine Anne Porter," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, XXIX (October 12, 1952), p. 8.

likes best the music up to Mozart.<sup>6</sup> Another writer says that it was her interest in writing ballets for Pavlova and other dancers that took her to Mexico in 1920, which project she abandoned in favor of journalism.<sup>7</sup> The earnestness of her interest in music is certainly shown by her publication in Paris in 1933 of her French Song Book, a translation of old French songs.

The foregoing summation of the personal characteristics and interests of Katherine Anne Porter seems to reveal a person who has lived fully and intensely. A study of the events of her life will affirm this conclusion.

Miss Porter was born in Indian Creek, Texas, north of San Antonio, on May 15, 1894. Her father was Harrison Boone Porter and her mother, Mary Alice Jones. Her family, which was Catholic, seems to have been a part of Southern culture and history from early times. Daniel Boone was her most famous ancestor, and the family tree abounds in pioneering Southerners. Their migration can be traced from Pennsylvania to Kentucky, from Kentucky to Texas.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness III," p. 475.

<sup>7</sup>Editor's note to Katherine Anne Porter's "Where Presidents Have No Friends," The Century Magazine, Vol. 104 (July, 1922).

<sup>8</sup>Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness III," p. 473.

As one follows the events in the life of Katherine Anne Porter, he finds there is an unusual correlation between the early life of Miss Porter and the history of Miranda as she appears in "Old Mortality," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and the stories of the South in The Leaning Tower and Other Stories. It is generally assumed by the critics that the character Miranda is autobiographical. Ray B. West, Jr., as proof of this assumption, tells of a time when Miss Porter was explaining how she came to write "Old Mortality" and her tongue slipped and, instead of saying "Miranda's father," she said "my father."<sup>9</sup>

In one of her essays Miss Porter describes the domestic atmosphere of the Texas farm on which she was brought up:

I was one of four children, brought up in a household of adults of ripening age; a grandmother, a father, several Negro servants, among them two aged, former slaves; visiting relatives, uncles, aunts, cousins; grandmother's other grandchildren older than we, with always an ill-identified old soul or two, male or female, who seemed to be guests but helped out with stray chores. The house, which seemed so huge to me, was probably barely adequate to the population it accommodated; but of one thing I am certain--nobody was ever alone except for the most necessary privacies, and certainly no child at any time. Children had no necessary privacies. We were

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<sup>9</sup>Ray B. West, Jr., "Katherine Anne Porter and 'Historic Memory,'" Southern Renaissance, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs, editors (Baltimore, 1953), p. 280.

watched and herded and monitored and followed and spied upon and corrected and lectured and scolded (and kissed, let's be just, loved tenderly, and prayed over!) all day, every day, through endless years of childhood--endless, but where did they go?<sup>10</sup>

She also tells of the tradition of poor respectability in which she was raised by her grandmother, herself a product of the Old South:

Though we had no money and no prospects of any, and were land poor in the most typical way, we never really faced this fact as long as our grandmother lived because she would not hear of such a thing. We had been a good old family of solid wealth and property, and we remained that, even though due to a temporary decline for the most honorable reasons, appearances were entirely to the contrary.<sup>11</sup>

When Katherine Anne Porter talks about her childhood, as she does in her essay, "Portrait: Old South," she does not mention her mother, and the reader assumes the mother is dead. The personality of her grandmother, who migrated with her children to Texas from Kentucky after the Civil War, seems to dominate the scene, just as the matriarchal rule of Miranda's grandmother dominates life in "Old Mortality" and the other stories about the South. Something of the tradition of the proud Old South lives again in the

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<sup>10</sup>Porter, "'Noon Wine': the Sources," The Yale Review, Vol. 46 (Autumn, 1956), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Porter, "Portrait: Old South," Senior Scholastic, Vol. 44 (April 3-8, 1944), p. 14.