

MEMORY AND VISION IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S "THE JILTING OF GRANNY WEATHERALL"

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to investigate the nature and quality of the memories and visions stated by the limited third person narrator and the protagonist of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (1930). The central questions of the study are: how do the various memories and visions embedded in the stream-of-consciousness narrative, through which the plot is unfolded, expose the protagonist's personality and her wishes, concerns, and fears and how has Porter tied them up to one another and loaded them with recurrent motifs and thematic clues. To answer the question, the researcher first offers a general digest on the writer and the plotline of the story and then explores the semantic, metaphorical, and figurative thrust of the presented reminiscences and images. This narratological analysis reveals that most of the limited third person narrator's descriptions and portrayals are realistic and objective; in addition, they predominantly deal with the present state of things and people. Those represented by Granny, on the other hand, are imaginary and subjective and they deal with the past. Also, it shows that what connect the stated accounts and visions, some of which are hallucinatory and delirious, are the two key words of title, namely, jilting and withering/weathering.

KEYWORDS: Memory, Vision, Imagery, Jilting, Weathering/Withering, and Narratology

INTRODUCTION

One of the leading contemporary American short story writers, Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), was born in Indian Creek, Texas. She changed her name, Callie Russell Porter, after her grandmother, a dominant and puritanical lady who was a great story-teller and who aroused her interest in family history (Givner, 1982, 33). In addition to her grandmother, Porter says, other major influences in her youth were Shakespeare and Dante, particularly Shakespeare, whose sonnets she began to memorise as early as the age of thirteen, and the 19th century novelists, Emily Bronte in particular, whose *Wuthering Heights* she read once a year for fifteen years (in Davis, 1975, 2). Her favourite 20th century novelist was admittedly Virginia Woolfe. According to Givner, another important influence was "her association with a group of Southern writers in New York including Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate [who] helped her maturation as a writer by making her see her background as a source of material rather than a liability" (1982, 179). Porter began her professional vocation in her twenties by ghostwriting, writing children's stories, and selling publicity texts to film companies in New York. In her thirties and forties, she published articles in several well-known magazines in the United States, Mexico, which she describes as her "much-loved second country" (1969, 1), and Europe. The turning point in her career as a short story writer was the publication of her first collection of short stories, titled *Flowering Judas* in 1930. The stories, a number of which are set in Mexico, won her immediate reputation and were praised for their psychological depth and narrative qualities. Her next short story collections are *Hacienda* (1934), *Noon Wine* (1937), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), and *Collected Stories* (1965), for which she was awarded the 1966 Pulitzer Prize in fiction. She published her only

novel, *Ship of Fools*, in 1962 and her *Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* in 1970.

Porter married four times, but all of her marriages soon ended in divorce (and she mothered no child); this may justify why the main characters of her stories (like Granny in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall") are usually obsessed with family disintegration and suffer alienation in their own house. Many of her stories are, at least partly, based on her personal experiences and it appears that the recurrent character Miranda is actually her fictional alter-ego. As Ciuba has contended, "Porter wrote her ambivalence about enacting southern womanhood into her fiction about Miranda Rhea, her quasi-autobiographical counterpart" (2011, 56). Hendrick, too, has asserted that "Porter's stories were consistently and closely based on incidents she heard, people she knew and personal experiences" (1988, 1). Similarly, Tanner holds that Granny in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is a marvelous portrayal of Porter's grandmother – Aunt Cat (1990, 47). He goes on saying that after being jilted by her fourth husband, Erskine who was twenty-one years her junior, she "must have felt a bit like Granny Weatherall" (Ibid., 50). However, her feelings of rejection and jilting are perhaps best captured in her "The Cracked Looking Glass." Having said that, despite numerous autobiographical threads in Porter's fiction, one can observe, to quote Harry J. Mooney, "natural human spirit ... the very substance of life and endurance, hope and belief" (53). In her feminist analysis of Porter's women characters, Jane DeMouy praises Porter for her use of intricate imagery and symbol and contends that most of Porter's protagonists are female. She views these protagonists as archetypal women who are resolute and yet vulnerable. A typical ordeal they have to face is to find a way to challenge and shake off the shackles of traditional roles defined for them by social norms (2010, 5-6). In her feminist reading of Porter's "The Grave," Beth Martin Birky argues that the story "traces Miranda's negotiation of the inner and outer forces of female experience and extends the same possibility to its readers" (2002, 55). In the same vein, in her feminist study of Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," Erin Kelly has contended that

With the recent influence of feminist and queer theory, "Jilting" has come to provide a powerful feminist message in its criticism of patriarchal supremacy: men and even God may fail women and even harm them in their dependency, but motherhood affords women fulfillment and power, resulting in a position that resists compromise. (2007, 63)

Porter has been commended by critics and writers alike for her writing style; for instance, while comparing Porter to Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren admires her for her ability to make the reader feel the experience, explore the dark side of him/herself, and see characters with a mixture of pity, sympathy, and humour (1979, 12). Admiring Porter's characteristic narrative style, Maggie Harvin explains that since "the publication of six short stories in *Flowering Judas* (1930) and the expanded collection *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (1935), Katherine Anne Porter has been praised for her unique style and attention to detail" (2008, 2). Graham Green has argued that her stories were the best since early Hemingway (in Unrue, 1997, 2). Viewing her as a brilliant stylist, Givner likens her to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James and Hendrick compares her stories with those penned by James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Sherwood Anderson (in Heichel, 2014, 5).

As the title of the present paper suggests, the key concepts to be discussed in the pages to come are memory and vision. They constitute a substantial portion of the plotline and provide the reader with significant clues about Granny's life, her personality, her past, her present, and her nightmares. Porter skillfully uses multiple point of view (limited third person and first person) and interior monologue (i.e. Granny's) to shed light and comment on eventful incidents in granny's life as they are reviewed and reshuffled by Granny in her last hours. The seemingly disparate but carefully arranged details, which are intended to show the reader the highlights of Granny's life in a few passages, are predominantly gloomy and

depressing, as after all, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is mainly about 'jilting' and 'weathering/withering.' Memories and visions, through which the plot of the story is unfolded, are both described by Granny and the limited third person narrator; this helps the reader to look at Granny both from within and from without, and normally the descriptions of the objects and people around granny, supplied by third person narrator, are comparable, or compatible with, the descriptions and memories supplied by granny. The present research tries to study the nature and significance of the memories and visions stated by Granny and the third person narrator and to discuss their interconnectedness and their relevance to the overall themes of the story. The central question, therefore, is what the numerous images, imageries, memories, visions, and hallucinations tell us about Granny and how they expose the meanings of the narrative. To answer the question, first a brief synopsis of the story is provided and then each and every imagery and memory – in the same sequence it appears in the plotline – is examined and explored in an attempt to discover pivotal and unifying elements and motifs.

DISCUSSIONS

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" was first published in 1929 in Paris in a magazine titled *transition* (non-capitalised). A year later, it was included in Porter's *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. As the title of the book suggests, and as discernible in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," betrayal and abandonment are stable leitmotifs. The story opens with Granny's expression of disgust with being examined by Doctor Harry; she denies being ill and prefers to be left alone. She imagines herself spanking the doctor and her caring daughter, Cornelia, with whom she lives. On her death-bed, the eighty-year-old Granny (Ellen Weatherall) thinks about the daily chores that needed to be done and the letters from and to George, who jilted her on their wedding day, and John, her dead husband. She remembers that she had to fence in a large piece of land, dig postholes, raise her four children, and keep the house neat and tidy all by herself. The most persistent and painful memory of all, however, is of the day she was getting married to George, the love of her life.

Granny recalls Hapsy – her favourite and long deceased child – in labour. (In "He," too, the mother, Mrs Whipple, loves "her second son ... better than she [loves] the other two children put together.") She looks around the room and sees John's picture, a candle, a crucifix, and a lampshade. She hears thunder and frets over an approaching storm and her impending death. Twice she asks God for a sign, but none is given; the disappointment is more heartbreaking than the absence of George and Hapsy. Filled with sorrow and frustration, she succumbs to death.

In "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," to quote Erin Kelly Riney, the protagonist, Ellen Weatherall, wavers between conscious thoughts and involuntary memories as she nears death. Porter's stream-of-consciousness mixes past and present, reams and reality, privileging the reader to travel with eighty-year-old Ellen in her seemingly incoherent remembrances and revelations as she lies on her deathbed. (2007, 50)

Granny's physical and emotional distress is shared by Porter's many other protagonists including Miranda (in the so-called Miranda stories, Violeta – the 'violated girl' – in "Theft" and "Virgin Violeta" or Laura in "Flowering Judas"). The progression of the plot in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is very much in line with the pattern Mooney has discovered in Porter's fiction; it represents the "lonely plight of the individual" and subsequent "frustration, hatred, destruction and defeat (1976, 53). The chronology of the narrative is quite clear, although there are numerous flashbacks, succinctly reviewed both by Granny and the narrator, which are not arranged sequentially. The story contains explicit allusions to two poems by Emily Dickenson, namely, "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a Fly buzz when I died" (1985, 438). Another allusion, according to Harold Bloom is T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion" (2001, 9). Certain lines and

phrases in the poem, such as "Here I am, an old man in a dry month," "A dull head among windy spaces," " 'We would see a sign,' " "An old man in a draughty house," and "I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch" (Eliot, 1963, 29-31) justify the claim. The story can also be said to echo Eliot's motifs of "memory and desire" which keep reappearing in his "The Waste Land." The time span of the story is less than a day, terminating in night (a metaphor for death), but the memories and visions cover about sixty years of Granny's life.

The first voice we hear is that of the narrator who focalises on Granny, but the focalisation immediately shifts from the narrator on Granny to Granny on Doctor Harry, thereby providing the reader with the first memory that pops up in Granny's mind – Doctor Harry in "knee breeches" as a school boy. The implicit contrast here is between youth (the past) and senility (the present). The shift of focalisation is repeated a few lines further down the page, where the narrator's brief account on Granny is immediately replaced by her hallucinations about the doctor, whom she envisages as floating in the room. (In effect, the paradigm is sustained throughout the story; all details about Granny are soon taken over by descriptions given by Granny.) The vision is replaced by another memory; she remembers that some forty years ago she survived "milk-leg and double pneumonia" (Porter, 1969, 79). The vision of floating pillows suffocates the memory. In these passages, floating implies her weakness and approaching death; the implications is intensified in the macabre comparison the narrator draws between Granny's eyelids and a "dark curtain drawn around her bed" (80). In her next vision, Granny sees herself "spanking Cornelia," simply because Cornelia is "so good and dutiful" (80). As a proud and self-confident woman who had undergone so many upsetting experiences in her life, she is clearly reluctant to be nursed. Cornelia may be said to bring into the mind the "good and dutiful" Cordelia – the mother-like daughter in Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Granny's next visions are realistic as they concern the present and the daily chores around the house – cleaning, folding, brushing, and dusting. The provided details suggest that she has always been a meticulous housewife (like the unnamed protagonist in "Rope") and a caring mother. Also, it connotes Granny's love for home and family. On the ubiquity of motherly responsibility in Porter's stories, Mary Titus comments that

Porter's finest work records her efforts to draw on her maternal legacy to create meaning and order, a secure home in a world characterized by disorder and absence. Memory, making the lost past present, and homesickness, a longing for a people, a place, and a childhood peace that precedes loss [as in "The Grave"], proved to be her richest resources. In all of her writing, memory, home, and – at a deepest level – the lost mother are interchangeable, for memory takes her back to home, to a place that can be either terrifying and empty – the grave – or full of comforting presence. (2005, 75)

She goes on saying that "Porter loads her narrative with imagery of maternity: women marry, give birth, care for human and animal offspring, milk cows, and feed men in a landscape moving from winter to spring" (Ibid., 105). As Janis P. Stout has observed, Porter typically combines "estrangement with nostalgia and links the necessity of escape as an act of self-definition with the yearning for home as a symbol of secure identity." He ascribes such nostalgia to the fact that Porter left home early in her life (in Machann and Clark, 1990, 97). In the same vein, Thomas F. Walsh has contended that many stories in *Flowering Judas* show that "Porter, feeling cut off from her own family and her Texan past, discovered in foreign culture of Mexico total estrangement, just as she had discovered there perfect Edenic bliss" (Ibid., 83). In the passage, the word "dust," is the second reference to Granny's imminent death. The passage also contains the first overt references to George and John; the reminiscence makes her feel more bashful than sentimental.

In the next passage, Granny ponders about her death and concludes that like twenty years earlier when she had given up hope after a long fever, she will convalesce yet again. After a short dialogue with Cornelia, she envisages the time when she will be on her deathbed like herself. The phrase "thin glass cage" denotes her desperation and fragility. In another shift of focalisation, first the narrator talks about Granny's strong and charismatic personality, and then Granny nostalgically recalls the old days when her children were "sweet" and "little." She also remembers all the responsibilities she had to shoulder both before and after her husband's death; "digging post holes" and "sitting up nights with sick horses, sick negroes, and sick children," she observes, incapacitate a young wife who used to have a "peaked Spanish comb in her hair and a painted fan" (82). She resolves to get up and finish off the domestic tasks, but in her hallucinations, she sees a fog that rises over the valley and looms over her house like "an army of ghosts" (Ibid.). She remembers how she used to warn her children not to "stay out in the night air" (83). The narrator says that at stormy nights, Granny lit a lamp, which made the frightened children feel secure and well-protected.

The rising "pillow" in Granny's next hallucination takes the narrative back to the opening paragraphs, as if the pillow were the inexhaustible reservoir of her memories. She feels being smothered by it and soon the reader realises the reason for her agony; it is the recurring and traumatising memory of being jilted by George. In her delusions, she sees a dark and menacing smoke that covers their carefully cultivated "bright field" and anything in it on her wedding day. She recalls all the humiliation, the anger, the nightmares, the tears, and her futile struggles to cope with the wounds that left permanent scars on her soul. In Mary St. Peter Smith's words,

The irksome thought which will not leave her is the memory of her being jilted on what was to have been her wedding day. No thoughts of the hard but full life she has led can efface that memory, and now as she lies dying she fears that for the second time the priest is in the house but the bridegroom is not coming. (1959, 32)

Granny now loses all sense of time as she cannot remember when she was visited by Doctor Harry for the last time. Before she is given a shot by a nurse and the doctor, she begins to sink into her visions and hallucinations; she sees ants in her bed and wishes, yet again, to see Hapsy.

The next paragraph contains the most poetic imagery of the whole narrative. Granny sees Hapsy "standing with a baby on her arm" (84) and feels that Hapsy, Hapsy's baby, herself, and John were all one and the same person. Almost immediately, Hapsy begins to melt from within and the baby turns into a "gauzy shadow." The image of a mother holding her baby is a plain reference to the Madonna and the Child, but here the reference is tainted with an ironic and bitter twist. Hapsy is dead and neither she nor her vague and feeble child can possibly offer any consolation; in effect, what Hapsy stands for is death and frustration, not salvation or hope. In her illusions, Granny tries to reassure herself by convincing herself that she married a better man than George and she lived a happy and full life. The illusion is soon shattered by her sense of realism and the realisation that it was George whom she loved more than anything and anyone else. The unbearable pain that follows reminds her of her last labour and the phrase "my time has come" both refers to her last delivery and death, which is made more sinister when Cornelia announces that Father Connally has come to visit her.

In her next train of memories and visions, she recalls the priest's previous visits, his off-putting patronising inquisitions, and his stories. The priest's unwanted presence reminds her of the wedding day, the stupor and nothingness she was flung in, and the priest's useless reassuring. She remembers that several years after the day, she felt invincible and the only things she could not possibly fend off were her children's nightmares and her child pains. She looks around her and in her hallucinatory visions she sees dark colours and shadows that rise "toward the ceiling in long angles" (86). She

also sees a tall black dresser, John's picture, a cheap candle, and a crucifix. The dying candle and the crucifix, which foreshadow her death, give a morbid edge to her descriptions. The morbidity is underscored by the repetition of the words "black" and "dark."

Granny begins to lose her sense of hearing as her daughter's voice now staggers and bumps "like a cart in a bad road" (Ibid.). "Bad road" here suggests both her hard life and the hardship she had to put up with when she had to take her sick children to a doctor. The cart also reminds her of her marriage to John who was driving it in a road whose "trees leaned over and bowed to each other" and where the "birds were singing a Mass" (Ibid.). Religious notions, saints, darkness and shadow are the chief motifs of the last passages of the story. The word "Mass" is soon followed by "God" and "St. Michael." This implies that Granny has given up hope of reunion with George and Hapsy and of is now seeking protection in divine grace.

Granny imagines that she heard a storm; this awakens in her deep motherly feelings and all the care she bestowed upon her children. She tries to hold on to her rosary (which is another religious symbol), but to no avail. She knows that she needs something or someone she can relate to on a more tangible level. In her monologues, for the first time in the narrative she talks to God, asking His mercy and promising Him to "finish the altar cloth and send six bottles of wine to Sister Borgia" (87). The narrator now focalises on Cornelia's lampshade, which flickers, winks, flutters, and dwindles. Sensing that the darkness around her was about to cover her like a shroud, for the third time she addresses God, this time asking for a sign. Her final memory is of the jilting bridegroom and the empty chapel, but what is more excruciating than her other agonising memories is the feeling that she was jilted yet again – this time by God. Here, Porter is alluding to The Bridegroom/Jesus Christ; the lamp highlights the allusion and is contrasted with the feelings of safety and security that a lamp sparked in the house: "Lighting the lamps had been beautiful. The children huddled up to her ... the lamp was lit; they didn't have to be scared and hang on to their mother any more. Never, never, never more" (83-84). She used to thank God and Mary immediately after lighting the lamp; the light, however, is now dying out and there is no sign, blessing, or prayer. The last imagery of the story is that of the light being blown out by unforgiving, disappointed Granny. In a letter Tinkum dated May 5, 1941, Porter wrote that "My Catholic training reminds me that it is never too late to mend and God will accept your sincere repentance on your death bed" (in Machann and Clark, 1990, 18). Nevertheless, it appears that in Granny's last moments, there is neither repentance nor acceptance, nor love for any human being. In *Granny*, the reader can behold another Laura, the protagonist of "Flowering Judas," who, in West' words, "is unable to be part of any ... forms of love. She cannot be a divine lover because she cannot keep a divine passion as she only occasionally allows herself to sneak into the church to pray. Laura also does not possess secular love, love for her fellow humans because she lacks the fervor of the movement like those surrounding her have" (in Harvin, 2008, 3). They both seem to attest James W. Johnson's bleak generalisation about Porter's *Noon Wine*: "Miss Porter ... suggests that certain destructive forces – disease, death – are inevitable and inescapable in spite of one's character and she implies strongly that the struggle of mankind goes on before an aloof and indifferent cosmos" (in Hartley and Core, 1969, 94-95).

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed in the previous pages, narrative details regarding the setting and characters of the story are provided both by the limited third person narrator and Granny; however, it seems that there is a significant difference between their descriptions and portrayals. While the narrator's accounts are factual, report-like, and objective, Granny's, or those expressed through her point of view, are a mixture of facts, dreams, and hallucinations. In addition, most of the narrator's

observations and explanations are about the present state of things or people, whereas the ones stated by Granny predominantly concern the past and maternal responsibilities. It appears that she lives, or prefers to live, in the past as she does not seem to be able to let go of some paralysing experiences she had had in her youth.

Also, it can be concluded that most of the visions and memories, either represented by the narrator or Granny, turn around the two key terms of the title, namely, jilting and weathering/withering. Every now and then, Granny recalls the touching details of her first wedding day and the subsequent humiliation and frustration. Words such as "cake," "priest," "bridegroom," and her reminisces of her seemingly endless waiting in the church keep recurring over and over again. Furthermore, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is also the story of aging and shrivelling. Hard work ("she had fenced in a hundred acres once"), sickness ("milk-leg" and "pneumonia"), storms ("Close all the windows. Call the children in"), housework ("all the food she had cooked, and all the clothes she had cut and sewed and all the gardens she had made"), motherly responsibilities ("sitting up nights with sick horses and sick negroes and sick children"), and the death of Hapsy ("the one she had truly wanted") took their toll on Granny. She has clearly matured (or weathered) over the many years she lived and many ups and downs she went through, but she has also withered, both by hardships and particularly by being abandoned by the love of her life. The last straw is the absence of divine intervention, which reminds her of her first wedding day. Her implicit death-wish in the last sentence of the story ("She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light") is quite ironic in that throughout the narrative, she always desperately wished to survive, to live like her father over a century, and to finish off all the things that needed to be taken care of. As John E. Hardy has put it, "Granny's blowing out the light is an act not of final defiance but of final surrender" (1973, 96).

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