

## 论文摘要

凯瑟琳·安·波特创作了一系列出色的中短篇小说，在美国短篇小说家的行列中独树一帜。对波特的研究多数集中于作品主题的探讨或文体风格、写作技巧的研究。本文则试图描绘出一幅波特精神领域的图画，呈现出波特的自我矛盾的宗教观及其在文本中的表现。

本文首先追溯凯瑟琳·安·波特的宗教背景，为她颇为复杂的宗教观寻求根源上的佐证。童年和少年时代的波特深受其父亲和祖母以及他们的相互矛盾的宗教观点和态度的影响。在她的第一个丈夫的家庭的引导下，波特皈依了天主教，而且一生在名义上都是个天主教徒。第二部分分析了波特的部分短篇小说和信件。在这些文本中，波特常常对她的宗教信仰表示批评和讥讽，甚至把天主教当成自己的敌人。她意识到宗教在拯救人类上的无能为力，以及宗教对社会造成的伤害和犯下的种种罪行。从父亲身上继承而来的叛逆精神使波特奋起反抗宗教，成为宗教的背叛者。下面一部分则描绘了一个虔诚于宗教的波特，尤其是她后半生的宗教经历，证据来自她的短篇小说、信件和传记。波特晚年的宗教生活表明了她对天主教的信仰和驯服，宗教成为她的精神寄托和支柱。这里显示出波特的祖母在其个人经历和写作生涯中的影响是深刻存在的。

造成波特这种矛盾宗教观的原因可能有很多，其中她的悲观主义的世界观是主导因素。波特的悲观来源于世俗生活中的悲惨遭遇，以及作为一个高度敏感的作家，她对于世界面临的种种灾难性威胁的痛苦意识。波特投身于宗教以寻求慰藉，但是宗教腐败只能加深她的悲观。她终生都在尝试其他方法与悲观做斗争却没有成功，直到晚年回归天主教。波特对她的宗教信仰持有一种相当矛盾的态度，她是一个驯悍的天主教徒。波特从来没有完全解决这个自我冲突的难题，大半生都在她祖母的宗教虔诚和父亲的不可知论这两种矛盾的宗教观之间摇摆、挣扎。

关键词：凯瑟琳·安·波特，宗教，天主教，矛盾

## Abstract

Katherine Anne Porter is a distinguished author of stylized short stories and novels. While most efforts of literary inquiry are devoted to such topics as Porter's thematic concerns or stylistic techniques, this paper attempts to present a general picture of Porter's religious life as a Catholic.

Firstly, it tries to trace Katherine Anne Porter's religious background for a justification for her complicated attitude towards religion. Porter was deeply influenced in her childhood by her grandmother and father; she was introduced into Catholicism by her first husband's family and remained all her life a professed Catholic.

It goes on to present Porter as her speaking critically and satirically of religion and even regarding Catholicism as an enemy. The rebelliousness inherited from her father dictated that Porter rise against it as a betrayer. The next part is devoted to the presentation of Porter as a loyal follower of religion, which reveals Porter's devotion to Catholicism. The influence of her grandmother asserted its presence in the development of her personal history and writing career.

There may be many causes of Porter's ambivalence, but her pessimistic outlook is a prominent factor. The sufferings in her secular life and her inborn sensitivity to moral and spiritual threats of the world shaped her pessimism. Porter converted herself to religion hoping for consolation but evidence of religious corruption only strengthened her pessimism. Porter then tried all her life by other means to fight off the pessimism but in vain until eventually she had lost hope of temporal salvation and turned to religion again for final peace. Katherine Anne Porter held an ambivalent attitude towards her religious faith; she is a rebellious devotee of Catholicism.

Key words: Katherine Anne Porter, religion, Catholicism, ambivalence

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# **Katherine Anne Porter, A Rebellious Devotee of Catholicism**

## **Chapter One Introduction**

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is an American woman short-story writer of remarkable longevity. During her long life of nearly a century, she wrote a number of best American short stories and short novels. She has been hailed as one of the finest stylists who have ever written in English. Lodwick Hartley commented that "As a stylist she has been mentioned in the same breath with Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Maupassant---At any point in her art she is one of the most talented of living American writers." (Lodwick Hartley: 216) Paul Rosenfeld spoke highly of her: "Katherine Anne Porter moves in the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Henry James." (Paul Rosenfeld: 7) Edmund Wilson, America's foremost man of letters in the twentieth century, praised Porter this way: "She is absolutely a first-rate artist, and what she wants other people to know she imparts to them by creating an object, the self-developing organism of a work of prose.---Miss Porter writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary fiction."(Edmund Wilson: 72-4) Robert Penn Warren, one of the most distinguished modern American writers, talked about her *The Collected Stories* this way: "It is a beautiful and deeply satisfying book; and it promises to be a permanent and highly esteemed part of our literature." (Robert Penn Warren: 290) Born into a family in the Old South, Katherine Anne Porter is a writer of the South and more of the South; her short stories are committed to the universal and she an author flavored with local color but little of local colorism.

Porter critique started as far back as in early 1930's when her first stories came

out. When her collection of short fiction *Flowering Judas* came out, critic Allen Tate commented that "-----, her style is beyond doubt the most economical and at the same time the richest in American fiction. ---*Flowering Judas* is not a promising book; it promises nothing. It is a fully matured art." Tate hailed Porter as "A New Star". (Allen Tate: 53) Ever since then, considerable critical efforts have been devoted to this woman writer and volumes of criticism published. The first substantial critical article on Porter's work, Lodwick Hartley's "Katherine Anne Porter," appeared in 1940, when she had developed the Miranda cycle and her second collection of fiction, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels*, already had made its appearance to an enthusiastic critical reception. Articles on Porter's work continued to appear at regular intervals, and in 1957 the first book on Porter, *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*, by Harry John Mooney, Jr., was published. In 1965 her popularity on both fronts of critics and readers intensified with the publication of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, which in 1966 won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

Katherine Anne Porter is found by many critics to have written basically about conflicts in her fiction. The spectrum of her thematic or motif dichotomy range from betrayal/loyalty, life/death, new/old, man/woman, old/young, slavery/freedom, order/chaos, obedience/rebellion all the way to illusion/disillusion, civilization/savagery, identification/alienation and communication/ estrangement, etc. James William Johnson in an essay arranges Porter's stories according to four basic themes: the controlling power of an individual's background, "cultural displacement," "the survival of individual integrity," and "man's slavery to his own nature." (James William Johnson: 598-613)

Katherine Anne Porter is crowned the best stylist writer in English. Her grand design and secondary themes are dramatized by recurring characters and supported by her style, which has been described consistently as pure, simple and beautiful; it is also decidedly classical. Such aspects as her plain vocabulary, classical rhetoric,

stream of consciousness, irony and symbolism have been discussed time and again by quite a few critics. The purity of her literary language and her employment of symbolism has become critical consensus. It is the language of the poet and the writer, exact, exquisite and elegant. During the 1940's, it was as a symbolist that Miss Porter was most effusively praised by critics. The greatest difficulty of her style is her system of symbolism, which has generally presented readers with enigmatic interest. Much critical controversy has surrounded the symbolic meaning of various objects in her fiction, such as the dove, ring and grave, the flowering Judas tree, the cracked looking-glass, the leaning tower, the purse and the dreams in many stories.

Aside from the above two areas of intensive critical inquiry, efforts have also been devoted to such topics as the South legacy of Porter, focusing on the ambivalent relationship between Porter and her native South and asserting her strong sense of root in American South however she might deny or reject it. Critics have not missed the feminine consciousness present in her works and in particular, parallel drawn between Miranda, the autobiographical protagonist in her stories and Porter the woman writer herself. As a woman author, she definitely had certain aspects of the patriarchal social system represented in her texts from a perspective that may not be of a deliberate feminist, but certainly is naturally feministic characterized by man-like women who are strong, decisive and even prevailing over their male counterparts.

An overview of Porter canon and biography, however, reveals that religion is an element that we can not afford to miss in our studying Katherine Anne Porter and her literary contribution. The history of Porter critique seems to lay bare a comparatively blank area of critical inquiry. As an integral part of her ideological constitution that determined her outlook on life and even her way of literary creation, a study of the relationship between Porter and her religion is certainly worth our while. This paper is an attempt to make an analysis of Porter's religious conception and her ambivalent attitude towards her spiritual support, Catholicism.

Lu Jin summarized in his preface to the Chinese version of Porter's short fiction collection that perhaps the key characteristic of Porter's art is her voicing her attitude towards things through her short stories. As Porter's biographer stated in the preface to *A Life: Katherine Anne Porter*, it is in and through her fiction that any intuitive motivation of and actual truth about Porter must be sought. Katherine Anne Porter's fiction remains, perhaps, the best source of her biography in the deepest sense. We may get an idea of her attitude towards religion from reading many of her short stories, such as "Maria Concepcion", "Old Mortality", "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", etc. Her fictional work is certainly our first source of information.

Katherine Anne Porter's non-fictional works, her essays, reviews and transcribed speeches, etc., offer us another aspect of her graceful writing, especially the essays collected in *The Days Before* and *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter*. "All my letters, yours, too, are autobiography in a very pure sense," Katherine Anne Porter writes to her friend James Powers this way. As a prolific letter writer, Porter wrote thousands of letters all her life to her friends and relatives. In quite a few of these letters, she expressed explicitly and directly her attitude towards religion. These letters have thus become resourceful and informative in further investigation of this topic.



## Chapter Two

### Porter's Religious Background

Porter's actual religious background is rather complicated and involved, at least not as simple as the definitions that many biographical introductions gave of her religious conviction as either a born Christianity or a converted Catholic have been; her religious roots should be traced and sorted out with more patience and meticulousness.

Katherine Anne Porter's parents are Alice Mary Porter and Harrison Porter. They moved in the 1880s to settle in the community of Indian Creek, Texas where she was born. Alice's parents and the Harrison Porters were among the founding members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1886, and when a Sunday school was organized Harrison became the superintendent. Like all the children the eldest son of the family Paul was dedicated to God and the Methodist Creed in the Indian Creek church. This is the early association with religion on the part of the Porters. Katherine Anne Porter was born on May 15, 1890 into this southern family and her rearing was shared by her father and grandmother after losing her mother at the age of two.

Although Porter said publicly that her part of Texas was an iron-clad Protestant region still untainted by "petty middle class Puritanism" and that "the petty middle class of fundamentalists who saw no difference between wine-drinking, dancing, card-playing and adultery had not yet got altogether the upper hand," in private she admitted that it was "poxed with teetotalitarians who seemed to hold that every human activity except breathing was a sin." (Joan Givner: 184-185) The actual South of her childhood is Calvinistic, poverty-stricken, and pregnant with violence. Affected profoundly by the atmosphere, Porter was haunted always by her childhood memories—by the tangible devil, by the revival meetings. Such occasions left Porter with a deep interest in mass hysteria and became her touchstone for political and

religious frenzy. When she watched a Hitler rally in Berlin, she said it reminded her of a Methodist revival meeting.

Some biographies have it that Porter was sent to several convent schools after the death of her grandmother, Porter, however, had only one-year formal schooling. After Porter and her family, headed by her father, moved to San Antonio in her adolescence, she acquired her only useful academic training. Her father used some money to buy one year in a good school for his daughters. Porter and her sister received their formal education at the Thomas School, which was advertised as Christian and nonsectarian, but it had a strong Methodist flavor. The school is a small private establishment for girls founded by Professor Asa Thomas, who had built up a fine reputation as a teacher and an administrator, and run by himself and his wife. Professor Thomas took it upon himself to instruct his students in religion and Bible history; he told his girls there was enough in such verses as Matthew 7:12 and John 3:16 to carry any student through this life and land her in the better world. (Joan Givner: 80-81) This is actually as much formal religious education as Porter had ever received.

Porter had been from her early childhood deeply influenced by two persons in terms of attitude towards religious conviction and commitment: her father and her grandmother, each representing one polarity in her conflicting religious life: father the rebellious rejector who constantly fights a battle against religion and grandmother the devoted follower who sticks to religion as her spiritual support all her life.

Katherine Anne Porter drew her religious resources more from Protestant than from Roman Catholic because her grandmother Cat Porter, who raised and shaped Porter as an earliest source of religious influence, was a severe Protestant who as a rule went to Methodist Church. Besides feeding and clothing, grandmother Cat instilled moral and religious principles in her granddaughter. A life-long member of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Cat Porter was strong-willed, puritanical, repressive and firmly convinced of her own infallibility; her domineering presence

had a paralyzing effect on the men about her. Katherine Anne Porter records in her fiction the contempt for men felt by Sophia Jane Rhea, the character modeled on her own grandmother. Any intractability on the part of the granddaughter was seen as the natural inheritance from such a grandmother. Some residents in their neighborhood remember Aunt Cat's intransigence in church matters. The Baptist and Methodist congregations joined for services in the church building they shared, but the Baptists preferred to have their own communion. One story has Aunt Cat leaning across two communicants to get her share, announcing loudly that she was as much a child of the Lord as anyone else. On another occasion, there was some consternation in the church when the members of the Mexican colony attended a revival meeting. The congregation mistrusted them because they spoke Spanish, ate strange food, and were Catholic in an iron-bound Protestant region. When the deacon asked them to leave, Aunt Cat was furious and led the Porters out of church in the wake of the Mexicans. (Joan Givner: 53) While Cat Porter was a highly moral character, notorious for her good works in the community, her rectitude was forbidding. One of her brothers said that if God were anything like his sister thought he was, he wanted no part of him. She was extremely pious and Porter said she ground the fear of God into the children's very bones, while they were too young to protest. Grandmother Cat believed that it was her duty to be a stern, methodical disciplinarian, and she made a point of raising her children as she herself had been raised. In her childhood the grandmother, for all her faults, represented the only source of security Porter had; grandmother's fixed outlook on the world, her fundamentalist religion, her unwavering system of values, no matter how strict and repressive they were, had been the one constant in the confusions of Porter's younger years.

However deep and far-reaching the impact of grandmother might be, her philosophy of life or religious teaching should have passed away when she died. That it did so was the work of Harrison Porter, Katherine Anne Porter's father. Porter's mother died early when Porter was only two years old; Alice Porter was overburdened with childbearing, but her husband's words suggest other reasons for her early death.

Harrison Porter complained in a letter to his oldest daughter of the hardships of the early years, asking, "What could I have done in the drouth-stricken west with one of these stream-lined modern lip-stick pushers for a partner? Her lot was hard but she never complained nor blamed me for it."(Joan Givner: 39) Katherine Anne Porter had an unhappy childhood, deprived of a caring mother and other material comforts or even security. She lived in poverty and social discomfort, yet her family did not offer any consolation to her. The family, and especially her father, added considerably to the misery of her childhood.

One of the obstacles to presenting an accurate portrait of Harrison Porter is his daughter's ambivalence towards him. Katherine Anne Porter struggled all her life, unsuccessfully, to understand him, and her puzzlement is reflected in many contradictory statements among her papers. This key figure in her life is enigmatic. According to the biography of Porter, he was evidently endowed with gifts well above the average. His letters show intelligence and sensitivity and there is evidence of his physical attributes in photographs and verbal descriptions. In appearance he was impressive—tall, slender, and strikingly handsome, with an assured bearing and pleasant manners. And yet his character seems to have belied the impression he gave. He was a man of no substance, ineffective in his personal relationships, incapable of finding steady work and looking after his family. As he grew older and more aware of his own deficiencies, his character deteriorated. Always vain and irascible, he became hostile, violent, and uncontrolled. The complete collapse of his will to live and work apparently began with the death of Alice. In the family he was generally explained as a "one-woman man" who had been crushed by the death of his wife. And even before her death his attempts to make his own way in the world were conspicuously unsuccessful. He failed in his career ventures time and again. It is inexplicable why an intelligent, well-educated man of impressive appearance should have retreated into hopeless self-pity, ceased to work and provide for his family, and in his last years should have become paranoid and almost mad. Porter knew that she had been fundamentally affected by her relationship with her father.

After the death of his wife in 1892 and his mother in 1901, Harrison Porter, added to his general fecklessness an even more cruel blow—he set about stamping out systematically all that the grandmother had inculcated, so that if Katherine Anne Porter had earlier felt that she was torn between two adults, the conflict was intensified by the death of one of them. She remembered her shock and horror when her father bluntly refuted the dogma of the virgin birth, telling her that there was only one way for babies to come into the world and that was by the natural way. Exactly when Harrison Porter's rejection of orthodox religion occurred is not known. "It seems in retrospect that he was influenced in his religious attitudes by his womenfolk; his faith had seemed strong in his married days, when he was the superintendent of the Indian Creek Methodist Church Sunday School. His later abandoning his religious habits would seem that they were not the result of strong inner convictions." (Joan Givner: 37) Perhaps his agnosticism developed gradually as an underground rebellion against his mother's teaching in the days when he and his children lived with her. If it did, he waited until her death to express it, and it is hard not to see his sudden undermining of the faith of his bereaved children as a cowardly and malevolent act. Naturally in the course of a lifetime each child of the family reacted differently to such contradictory religious experiences. The eldest child Paul remained devout and moral, and to the end of his life he could not bring himself to tell a lie. The eldest daughter Gay changed one religious denomination for another and, in the face of personal tragedies in her later life, turned to spiritualism. As for Porter, this rebelliousness has decisively insinuated itself into Porter's attitude towards life in general and religion in particular.

In addition to her grandmother and father, Katherine Anne Porter received strong religious influence from another person and his family: her first husband John Henry Koontz. John Henry Koontz had a German-Catholic family; they were devout Catholics who introduced Porter into Roman Catholicism. Her conversion to Catholicism was perhaps the most important legacy of Porter's time with the Koontz

family. Describing the religious conflicts of her early years she said that she cried, dramatized her struggles, questioned priests and prayed because they told her to. Porter had ample opportunity to talk with priests at the Koontz home because there was usually one in residence. There being no rectory in the parish of Inez where the family lived at that time, the priest lived at the Koontz house, which stood conveniently beside the church. It was not, however, in Inez that Porter was instructed and baptized but in Houston, because she found her favorite priest there. He was Father Thomas Hennessy, the pastor of Annunciation Church. Irish by birth, he had come to the United States, married the daughter of a Baptist minister, and been ordained in the Catholic Church after he was widowed. This varied background must have made him especially sensitive to Porter's problems. She took instruction from him and was baptized on April 5, 1910, with her sister-in-law, Beatrice Hasbrook, as her sponsor. Porter never forgot Father Hennessy, and to the end of her life, when she read what seemed to her to be misrepresentations of Catholic dogma, she wondered "did my good Sister Borgia or Fr. Hennessy tell me wrong?"(Joan Givner: 100) Katherine Anne Porter was converted to Catholicism in 1906 after marrying John Koontz and though her first marriage lasted for nine years, she remained a professed Catholic until the end of her life.

The influences from her grandmother, her mother and then her husband's family converged to constitute the background of religion against Katherine Anne Porter. So complicated and varied, it had in turn exerted decisive influence upon Porter's outlook on religion and basically conditioned her religious life.

## Chapter Three

### Porter's Skepticism and Criticism of Religion

A professed Catholic from adolescence to the end of her life, Porter, however, had for the greater part of her life been an enemy to religion. Porter's questioning and challenging of religious faith is implicitly or explicitly rendered in many of her essays, short stories and personal letters, a careful research into which reveals convincing evidence of Porter's attitude towards religion. The following is a religion-conscious re-reading of some of her essays, short stories and letters with a view to sorting out the non-religious and even anti-religious elements present or inherent in her literary and daily creation which is true representation of her ideological picture.

In her short stories Katherine Anne Porter portrayed quite a few Catholics and religion was undoubtedly a visible part of the lives of her Catholics. In quick summary, Maria Concepcion's ("Maria Concepcion") Catholicism is a façade that collapses under the weight of her primitivism; Laura's ("Flowering Judas") Catholicism has been discarded in favor of the religion of revolution; Granny Weatherall's ("The Jilting of Granny Weatherall") Catholic faith has not provided satisfying answers for her; the Protestant fundamentalism of the Thompsons ("Noon Wine") and the Whipples ("He") has offered no solutions to life's mysteries or solace for life's suffering; the Lutheranism of the Mullers in "Holiday" is surface only. To put it in more detail, in "He" (1930), the capitalizing of "He" shows that the pronoun has come to be his name, but it also ironically suggests the Deity and draws the reader's attention to the great distance between Mrs. Whipple's surface piety and her un-Christian treatment of her idiot son. The mother seeks to fulfill herself by having her neighbors recognize the extent to which she has sacrificed herself to care for the boy. This inadequacy of endurance divorced from love is realized in this story and stories like "A Day's Work," in which the demands for social recognition and religious devotion are used by Mrs. Whipple and Mrs. Halloran as substitutes for

self-knowledge and love of another. In "A Day's Work"(1944), although part of Mr. Halloran wants Connolly to escape the G-men who are after him for the numbers racket, another part of him enjoys telling his wife that a man she had always admired for being a good Catholic is corrupt. Mrs. Halloran, on the other hand, attempts to enforce Christian virtue on her husband by way of Catholic observance without liking him at all. In "Theft" (1930), the woman protagonist "she" and all her friends of the modern wasteland are hollow people of the twentieth century, substituting ritual and withdrawal for commitment and vitality. They all try to escape the rain, a symbol of growth and renewal, and that coffee and alcohol are the communal potions of their false sacrament, their religion of non-life. "The Cracked Looking-Glass"(1930) is about a Catholic woman Rosaleen living by illusions and fantasies; she has created illusions by which she lives because her present reality is intolerable. The life of Catholics in her stories is generally miserable, in terms of its spiritual fulfillment as well as financial privation; they live either in illusion or disillusionment because reality is too harsh for them. Porter once remarked on Thomas Hardy's Angel Clare in Lucy Halloran's case: "His failure to understand the real nature of Christianity makes a monster of him at the great crisis of his life." (Joseph Wiesenfarth: 94) Throughout her fiction there are more empty religious characters who merely go through the forms of religion than there are truly good religious characters. Porter's Catholics don't live a proper Christian way of life; they betray their religious faith and more importantly, betray themselves and therefore they can't obtain salvation from their religion. Here Porter seems to justify the legitimacy of Christianity itself and attribute the failure of her characters to their misunderstanding, misinterpretation or mispractice of religious principles. The characterization of false Catholics indicates Porter's contempt and attack at the hypocrisy on the part of the self-claimed devout followers of religion.

In February 1947, Porter wrote to her friend Robert Penn Warren: "--medical science which pulled me together and balanced my tottering chemistry and shored up my wavering teeth and kept my waistline intact, and I may be a born heathen but all



this gives me a consolation and pleasure which no religion I ever heard of has ever been able to afford.” (Porter: 333) It is no doubt that Porter found religion could do nothing to relieve her from her physical sufferings. She points out a simple truth here: religion is impotent; it is not capable of healing wounds or curing pains. In her first published short story “Maria Concepcion”, Porter extends the theme of the impotence of religion to the spiritual realm. Porter in this story artfully presents a subconscious confrontation between religion and instinct, and the final overwhelming of primitivism over religious civilization. Maria Concepcion of the story is an Indian woman converted to Christianity the conqueror’s religion, which is alien to her culture and to her nature, but when the test comes, the savage ways prevail over the civilized religion’s forms. When she discovers the love affair between her husband and Maria Rosa, as a “good Christian” woman, she senses that she must avoid the destructive element within herself but she can not repress it. The first sentence of the story runs like this: “Maria Concepcion walked carefully, keeping to the middle of the white dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus had not gathered so profusely.” The cactus is described a little later as being like bared knife blades, foreshadowing Maria Concepcion’s killing of Maria Rosa with a knife. The thorns of the cactus are an implicit connection to the pattern of Christian imagery and symbolism in the story, linked to the crown of thorns, Christ’s crucifixion, and betrayal.

Porter did not stop at the futility of religion to provide its believers with consolation or cure them of their hurts, be it physically or mentally; she went on to unveil the devastating harm religion is capable of in both secular and sacred matters. In many letters and stories, she points out pungently how detrimental religion or things in the name of religion can be to human beings and the world.

Katherine Anne Porter regarded Mexico as her “family country” and visited it many times during her lifetime. Actually her early firing at religion took place in 1920s when she paid her first visit to Mexico, which was seeing a nationwide

revolution. Porter was found a determined and enthusiastic opponent of religion during the period of Mexican revolution, when she made efforts to disclose the corruption of the Church in her essays and stories and expressed outrage at the oppression of the Mexican Indian, whom she felt to be the life of the country. In an essay entitled "The Mexican Trinity" (1952) she asks if any country had as many enemies within its own gates as Mexico did; she describes how Mexican capitalists united with American capitalists to oppose the revolutionaries, and how the Catholic Church united with the Protestant to subjugate the Indian and acquire his land. She firmly believes that the country was dominated by a triumvirate of powerful forces, those with land and oil interests and the Church.

In her short stories, Porter lays bare the harmful influence religion has exerted upon the younger generation. Her short story "Virgin Violeta" (1965) is about the conflict within Violeta between her idealized view of love and her own awakening sensuality, which she represses. While the ironic conflict between the idealized and the sensual remains the most important theme of the story, she presents as secondary themes the disservice of the Catholic Church in fostering an unrealistic view of love, that is the Church's adulation of the Virgin, and the paternalism of the Church and the Mexican society that promotes sexism. Violeta is confused because she cannot understand "why things that happen outside of people were so different from what she felt inside of her." Moreover, the "something inside her" feels as if it is "enclosed in a cage too small for it," and it is the Church which is the "terrible, huge cage" that seems "too small". Violeta rejects both the ideal and the real; she makes ugly caricatures of Carlos who steals her a kiss, and leaves the convent, declaring there is "nothing to be learned there."

"Old Mortality" (1939) also touches upon the passive impact religious education can make upon children. It is divided into three parts. The beginning of part II refers to a vacation on their grandmother's farm, where they discover and read "forbidden reading matter," obviously Gothic novels of the pulp variety, which exploit the

protestant fear of Roman Catholicism. It is this literature that provides Miranda and Maria with the proper metaphor for their own existence in the Convent of the Child Jesus, the boarding school in New Orleans, where the girls try "to avoid an education". They think of themselves as "immured," like the unlucky heroines of the novels, even though the objective description of the school shows it to be dull rather than sinister. At the end of part II, when Miranda and Maria return to the convent school, they pick up their romantic game and think of themselves as "immured" for another week. Porter does not write favorably of the convent school which she did not find agreeable to the natural development of children.

"The Martyr"(1965) contains a religious structure (Ruben "adores" Isabel and dies a martyr, even if to gluttony) that serves as a reminder of the distance of the ideal from the story's events. It is built around an ironic center; Porter's irony is very apparent. The unrequited love kills an artist, as religious devotion may do to its adorers. His morbid attachment to Isabel is like a devotion to religion; he commits himself to an obsession with an impossible object until he dies a martyr to love (though actually to gluttony). Religion takes its toll on its devotees until they die victims to an illusory faith.

Katherine Anne Porter was clearly aware of any kind of harm religion might do to human beings. Although she held belief in God and found beauty and power in some religious rituals, she was often critical of what she regarded as the abuses of institutional religion, which she said provided unsatisfactory answers to the most basic questions about life. At its worst it strengthens the malignity of ignorance. The following episode suffices to illustrate this point of view. During her first visit to Germany and stay in Berlin in early 1930s, she associated with quite a few friends there. One of her friends was Herb Klein, a young correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. Klein remembered her attitude towards religion, recalling her telling him, "We are groping around in the dark, like a cellar, with only the feeble flame of our reason to aid us. And along comes the theologian and blows out the light." (Joan

Porter also spared no efforts to disclose the evils and wrongdoings of the Church in terms of its oppression of women. Being strong-willed and independent and very conscious of being deprived, as a married woman, of certain rights, Porter was something of a vocal feminist. She berated her brother when he spoke disparagingly of his girl friends and she was a strong advocate of woman's suffrage. Accordingly, she was sensitive to the Church's attitude to women and quick to resent, then and later, the antifeminist tendencies of the Church Fathers and of individual priests whom she met. (Joan Givner: 101) To Edward Schwartz who compiled her critical bibliography in March 1958 she wrote: "-----and the condition of women in the western world has been lowered abysmally since the Jewish heresy, Christianity, slowly inundated the west, bringing its terrible tide of Oriental custom and superstition." (Porter: 549) Porter in fact contends that evil expressed as hate, cruelty, and malice, often is committed in the name of religion. She blamed the Church's attitude to women on its Jewish origins and said that the Adam and Eve myth was a wild, silly story about a Jewish God which neglected to say why God created male and female if he meant to have only two persons in the world. She hated St. Jerome, though he would have been a very successful thug, and deplored his statement that death came through Eve. Of St. Paul's attitude to women she said that he began as Saul and that the idea of sex as evil as a Jewish poison foisted on Christianity. She thought that contempt for women had been the great evil of the Jewish influence upon Western religion.

In more than one letter, Porter talks about her fear at the growth and spread of the power of the Church and expresses her worry at the destructive effects it might bring the world. To short story writer and novelist James F. Powers she wrote in a letter dated 5 November, 1947 that "As a Catholic, I was always anti-clerical; as one who left the church for purely political and moral reasons, I am horrified at the growth of power of the church in this country in the past twenty five years, coinciding perfectly with the growth of Fascism everywhere. ---I fear Fascism most, for it has the Pope at

its head, and is Protean in its forms, and I hear people talking Fascism and acting it without knowing what name to call it by. ---I have no mystique of my religion, no division of loyalties between church and state, but only a purely human, secular, reasoning system of political, moral and ethical beliefs for my support, and I assure you I know well this is a frail superstructure built over the bottomless pit of natural evil.” (Porter: 350-351) On another occasion she wrote in March 1949 to Elizabeth Ames, head of an institute maintained for the benefits of artists: “At this moment, I have the radio going, and the Catholics are holding a public radio meeting against Communism, telling of miraculous appearances of the Blessed Virgin, and praying in chorus for the whole world to come to God, that is, to the Catholic Church. And they chill my blood as much, in a way more than the Communists, because the Church is Fascist, and somehow, religion and totalitarianism seem more popular in this country than atheism and totalitarianism---Militarily, we may be in danger from Communism, but morally we are deeply in danger of being taken over by Catholicism---It is growing incredibly impudent in this country---” (Porter: 372) Here Porter identifies Catholic power with Fascism and condemns it as a most threatening menace to the human world.

It is Porter’s deep belief that religion, far from being capable of saving human beings from their physical and spiritual sufferings, only worsened the condition of mankind’s living and contributed to the deterioration of the world. It may be safely presumed that Catholic Church as an evildoer successfully deprived Porter of her belief in religion. It fundamentally changed Porter’s basic views on her religious faith and made Porter an enemy of religion; the rebelliousness inherited from her father dictated that Porter rise against it as a betrayer.

The theme of betrayal is dominant in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1930). Although Granny’s deathbed memories keep dredging up the humiliating and traumatic events, the focal point of the story is not the jilting of Granny in her girlhood by her fiancé George, who fails to show up for the wedding. It is rather the

disillusionment with which Granny ends her life. This short story calls into questions the value of an ordinary religious life. Granny identifies the bridegroom George with the bridegroom Christ of the parable and as she dies declares that the second bridegroom, Christ, has not appeared, that God has not sent the sign she expected, and that this grief wipes all other sorrow away. She has followed the rules of the Church (she "went to Holy Communion last week"); she has lived the life of a devoted follower to God but she is in the end jilted. The central fact of Granny's life has been her jilting at age of twenty; the remaining sixty years of her life constituted her attempt to reorder life through marriage, rearing a family, and devotion to her religion. Granny had her religion: "She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her." It is only fitting that Father Connolly should come to her deathbed to minister to her: "the table by the bed had a linen cover and a candle and a crucifix." This reminds Granny of an altar and of the day that she was left at it by George: "What if he did run away and leave me to face the priest by myself?" ---Granny, who had so carefully controlled life, cannot control death: "Oh, my dear Lord, do wait a minute. I meant to do something about the Forty Acres, Jimmy doesn't need it and Lydia will later on---" But death will not wait for Granny to put the last shreds of her life in order. She is once again left to face the priest alone. Granny is forced to a final decision: she blows out the light of her life. Here, at the moment of death, she learns that neither marriage, nor religion suffices to bring her a peace of soul and human wholeness that can reconcile her to the once unfaithful George. At this moment of death a question earlier posed is answered for Granny: "Oh, no, oh, God, there was something else besides the house and the man and the children. Oh surely they were not all? What was it? (Joseph Wiesenfarth: 47-55) Granny Weatherall is betrayed time and again during her lifetime by her faith and it is towards the end of her life that she begins to question. Porter however had long since awakened to the fact that she could not rely upon God; she had turned a skeptic and critic of religion.

"On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy"(1940) is an essay that is more important for

its contribution to an understanding of Porter's moral philosophy than it is for its assessment of Hardy. Porter launches a passionate attack on moralistic critics who confuse religion and art. She says, "Of all the evil emotions generated in the snake-pit of human nature, theological hatred is perhaps the most savage, being based on intellectual concepts disguised in the highest spiritual motives". She states in the essay that the mystical concept of God "has seemed at times not to know the difference between Good and Evil, but to get them hopelessly confused with legalistic right and wrong". In this essay she attacks both theocracy and institutional religion, describing two kinds of people, the Believers and the Inquirers, and comes down on the side of the Inquirers. (Darlene Harbour Unrue: 144-146)

If in her essays and stories, Porter indirectly expresses her attitude towards religion, in some of her letters, she brings up the subject of religious faith and states clearly what her religious viewpoint is. In November 1932, she wrote to her third husband Eugene Pressly: "I spent some time last night, after I had worked on Lizardi, about midnight, trying to clarify my ideas about God. And I decided one thing: that he has no concern whatever with our human affairs, with this body of our death. Therefore, one does not pray for mortal benefits, because he takes no part in them-----" (Porter: 86) In her letter of August 30, 1953 to Andrew Lytle, she expresses her skepticism about God by way of a poem. "One evening after I had been reading poetry at the YMWA, Red and Eleanor came home with me, and we were repeating verses to each other, and I said Sir Walter Raleigh's sad little poem ending with 'But from this grave, this earth, this dust, My God shall raise me up, I trust.' And Red said, 'There is a certain amount of doubt there. I think he meant, 'I guess.' So I revised it: 'From this unholy, sordid mess/ My God shall raise me up, I guess.' But alas, I don't believe even that." (Porter: 442) While in a letter dated 5 October 1948 to Rev. John F. Fahey, then a student for the priesthood, who wrote to Porter about his work on "The Writer and His Religion", she even denied that she was a Catholic and argued openly in favor of religious freedom: "To answer your question: I am not a Catholic and cannot be judged as such; and have made it a rule never to discuss

religious differences with any one, for I believe firmly in absolute freedom of religious faith and expression for every human being of every known and (to me) unknown denomination; and I am truly disturbed by any threat from any source to this freedom.” (Porter: 358) In this letter Porter puts it across that she could not be enslaved to religion and shows us the bones of a rebel, just as her father might have probably showed her during her impressionable years by his side.

Porter did not assert her spiritual freedom in words only; though a professed Catholic, Katherine Anne Porter had never attended Mass regularly and according to her friends her attitude towards her chosen faith was often playful. Porter was not likely to be an orthodox Catholic any more than an orthodox anything else. In her marginal notes she observed that her opinions were so heretical that she would never have survived the Inquisition and that it was only an accident of her birth date which prevented her from burning at the stake. When her views did coincide with orthodox Catholic ones, she would preface her comments with the remark that it pained her to agree with the Holy Office on anything. (Joan Givner: 101-102) There is no much doubt why Porter chose to be a rebel against religion. Besides the numerous crimes of the Church that enraged Porter, there were conceivably many aspects of church dogma which offended her, and her disagreements are understandable in view of her natural tendency to dissent.

In a letter dated 15 Sept. 1947 to writer Andrew Lytle, Porter articulately and eloquently expresses her attitude towards religion. This document is valuable in that it is literally Porter’s declaration of religious skepticism. She disagrees with Andrew as to the causes of the present disintegration of what we have looked upon as civilization. “To begin with, I cannot possibly consider Western European Christianity as the highest civilization this world has seen. It has been most horribly bastard, a badly assimilated mess of Egyptian, Judaic, Greek sifted through Rome, mixed very imperfectly with tribal beliefs and customs of the ancient western world; every religious notion of the entire old world seeped into Christianity in Europe and has



roiled and stank there ever since like maggots in a corpse. -----I shall here leap over a long train of reasoning, for I don't want to put you to sleep, and conclude: 'modern' man (man is always modern) in trying to *be* God has merely reached the reduction and absurdum of his original absurdity in *creating* a God in his own image. -----All systems of religious belief and social systems founded on them are trivial, downright silly, compared to the limitless grandeur of the plan of which, only now and then, the spirit is given some tremendous and consoling surmial. God as conceived by man is a purely human invention, what can you expect of him other than what we do get? And as for the special disasters of our times, I cannot see that man is behaving much worse than he always has, in any religion, any system of society, only at millennial changes you may have observed that there is an added shamelessness and desperation due to his knowledge, forced upon him by events and yet hardly acknowledged by him, that *he has failed again* because of his refusal to take upon *himself* the responsibility for his own acts. His God has failed him again; that is, his attempts to identify the will of God with his own human desires and willful beliefs has thrown him again into utter confusion. At this point, even more than the outright criminals now in power, I fear those petty theologians who are preaching a "return" to blind faith, to religion, to what they call God, frantically assuring us that our only salvation is to put our heads back in the noose. They are trying to avoid true issues, and make us swallow again the old stale theological messes we have vomited up once, after two thousand years of being poisoned by it. At a time when the world situation is on the point of breaking up into fragments, (only to be re-assembled in a slightly different shape, but of the same materials) because of the division in our minds between spirit and substance, we are urged to make this division absolute, so that religion will have no responsibility for human wrongs, no earthly concerns; in fact, it condones and supports the most awful human crimes so they are committed in defense of religion. I know nothing about the true nature of God, and I have never known or heard of any one who did: but I have a private theory. He is not a petty criminal on the human order. And if he is concerned with human individual souls, he does not know the difference between the Pope and the beggar sitting on the church step. And as for the putrid little

social snobbisms of this world, it is an insult to the very idea of Divine omnipotence to attempt to justify them or support them by claiming they are based on a caste system ordained by Him.” (Porter: 341-342)

In this important letter, Porter derogates Christianity in particular as a bastard that has brought disasters to the human world; she finds religious belief in general most absurd, unreliable and confusing. Porter relentlessly accuses theologians of deceiving people into believing in religious salvation that is impossible. She further argues that religion should be held responsible for human wrongs and crimes. This ironical document can therefore be regarded as a vehement condemnation of religion, where Porter has made her attitude towards religion explicitly conveyed.

## Chapter Four

### Porter's Religious Ambivalence and Final Return to God

An investigation of her fictional and non-fictional works reveals that although already converted to Catholicism, Porter was more of a skeptic of religion than a believer, speaking of the Church almost always in terms of criticism and even hostility. One may easily conclude from the previous part that Porter was a pure opponent of religion, just like her father turned out to be, but the influence of her grandmother asserted its presence in the development of her personal history and writing career, so impressive that it is mistaken to draw a quick conclusion without looking into this other polarity of her attitude towards religion. Her grandmother was a devoted Protestant, Porter, however, a Catholic; though the effects of Cat Porter's repressive Puritanism were deep and lasting, the influence of her grandmother was more of the attitude of devotion and loyalty than of the appellation of religion itself.

It seems unbelievable that, in spite of her skepticism and criticism of religion, Porter should still hold belief in God. Self-conflicting as it may appear, Porter did express at other times her strong faith in God. Porter identifies as obstacles civilized men's and women's ingrained distaste for the primitive that coexists with the intellectual in the human psyche, their grasping at systems, rituals, or romantic ideals as a substitute for truth, and their failure to acknowledge that at the heart of the universe stands a mystery, the answer to which, Porter says, may be God, or love. (Darlene Harbour Unrue: 8) In "On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy" (1940), though she attacks and criticizes religion, Porter also makes clear in this essay that she is not an atheist, even if her idea of God is unorthodox: "Scientific experiment leads first to skepticism; but we have seen in our time, how, pursued to the verge of the infinite, it sometimes leads back again to a form of mysticism. There is at the heart of the

universe a riddle no man can solve, and the end, God may be the answer". They seem to offer contradictory evidences of her religious standpoint but as a matter of fact, Porter was all her life on the quest journey for truth and she saw religion as one of two possibilities (the other was art) for pointing people in the general direction of truth, a belief Porter had always maintained.

Even in her short fiction, Porter never leaves out positive elements of religion that she could not possibly do without. Her intimate knowledge of religion and her familiarity with its canon has found its way into many story titles and the names of her characters, almost pervasively and usually significantly. There are a great many allusions to and associations with the Bible and other religious literature; religion has weaved itself exquisitely into the very texture of the body of her fiction.

In "The downward Path to Wisdom" (1944), little Stephen significantly chooses an "apple-colored" balloon for his school friend Frances when the girl comes to visit. This balloon is an allusion to Adam and Eve. He takes further risks to please Frances when he sneaks a lemon, sugar, and a china teapot to make lemonade for himself and Frances in a scene suggestive of the Garden of Eden, redolent with both sexual and religious imagery. (Darlene Harbour Unrue: 85-86) "Rope" (1930) begins with "On the third day," a phrase that should be linked to "He arose from the dead" in the Bible, an essential statement in Christian theology that confirms the validity of the spiritual life. In "The Cracked Looking-Glass"(1935), Rosaleen's pleasure trip to recapture her childhood is reassuring and provides spiritual composure and comfort, and Porter seems to indicate that religion is after all something to fall back on even in the most terrible miseries. She goes to pray for Honora in a church richly dressed in candles and flowers and the fragrance of incense, which is an important part of her solacing journey from Connecticut to New York. In "Flowering Judas" (1930), Perhaps Laura's "strength" as well as her weakness may be more clearly seen against her Catholic upbringing: dedication to a cause transcending a personal view of the world. But even as Laura feels she has severed her last tie with the church, she is still the prisoner of

her own emotional necessity of her past. She must still occasionally slip into a “crumbling little church” to whisper a clandestine Hail Mary! (Sam Bluefarb: 256-262) Laura can not do without the support of religious commitment, which is true to Porter herself.

The title “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” (1939) is from Revelations 6:8: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” (Darlene Harbour Unrue: 111-112) The title presents the major symbol of the story, which appears in Miranda’s first dream in a kind of double vision. Miranda is pursued by the pale rider, “that lank greenish stranger,” but she is also herself the pale rider on Graylie, the pale horse, since she carries the seeds of death within her. Adam’s name is symbolic since he is “committed without any knowledge or act of his own to death,” and since he is a vessel of innocence, golden “purity,” as Miranda calls it: “Pure, she thought, all the way through, flawless, complete, as the sacrificial lamb must be.” In this remark she views him simultaneously as Adam, Unfallen Man, and Isaac, the victim offered to propitiate the wrath of God. That she realizes the idealism of her view of Adam is made clear in the irony of the line immediately following her thought of him as a sacrificial lamb: “The sacrificial lamb strode along casually, accommodating his long pace to hers, keeping her on the inside of the walk in the good American style---” Related to this religious imagery associated with Adam is Miranda’s remark about the epidemic of influenza: “It seems to be a plague---something out of the Middle Ages,” since this calls into focus two sets of religious associations: the plague as a sign of God’s wrath, and the danse macabre (in which the “lank stranger” symbol of death is also operative). The influenza epidemic is also the physical counterpart of the illness of society at war. (Sarah Youngblood: 344-352)

In the second section of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”, Miranda in her talk with Adam

speaks as if she were already dead: "Let's tell each other what we meant to do," and her review of her life and attitudes is carefully kept in the past tense, except for her impulsive outburst about the sensuous delights of being alive: her love of weather, colors, sounds. In this conversation the religious theme again occurs, here introduced in an explicit discussion of religion between the characters.

"Do you remember any prayers?" she asked him suddenly. "Did you ever learn anything at Sunday School?"

"Not much," confessed Adam without contrition. "Well, the Lord's Prayer."

"Yes, and there's Hail Mary," she said, "and the really useful one beginning, I confess to Almighty God and to blessed Mary ever virgin and to the holy Apostles Peter and Paul—"

"Catholic," he commented.

"Prayers just the same, you big Methodist. I'll bet you *are* a Methodist."

"No, Presbyterian."

"Well, what others do you remember?"

"Now I lay me down to sleep—" said Adam.

"Yes, that one, and Blessed Jesus meek and mild—you see that my religious education wasn't neglected either. I even know a prayer beginning O Apollo. Want to hear it?"

"No," said Adam, "you're making fun."

"I'm not," said Miranda, "I'm trying to keep from going to sleep. I'm afraid to go to sleep, I may not wake up. Don't let me go to sleep, Adam. Do you know Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Bless the bed I lie upon?"

"If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Is that it?" asked Adam. "It doesn't sound right, somehow." (The collected stories of K. A. Porter: 302-303)

Miranda is revealed to be a Catholic, and her preoccupation with religion, anticipated by her earlier allusions, is emphasized here and will recur in later crises.

Caught with severe influenza, Miranda is on the brink of fainting. She tries to talk with Adam about religious prayers to prevent her from going to sleep, which she fears as death. It is religion that Miranda as a Catholic resorts to at the critical moment of her life. It is also a symbol of Porter's inseparable relationship with religion: it is something she may depend on at fatal moments of life.

Porter could not do without religion not only in her literary creation, but more in her daily experiences. Though not very regularly, Porter still made a point of attending churches and going to Masses during her life as a token of observation and celebration of religious rituals. In a couple of her letters, she describes to her friends her church experiences. In 1944 Porter arrived in Washington, meaning to find a place where she could concentrate on writing, and took up her residence in the house of Marcella Comes Winslow. She was delighted with both the house and the family. She took great interest in the Winslow genealogy, which included Anne Hutchinson, and she never got tired of hearing of the "big ancestor" whose sword hung in the dining room and who had been commander of the *Kearsarge*, which in the Civil War had sunk the Confederate vessel *Alabama*. In this Catholic household Porter quickly returned to Catholicism. She sent for her rosary and heavy crucifix, and when she poured out her life story to Marcella she spoke so feelingly of her Catholic childhood and convent education—and so disparagingly of converts to the faith—that Marcella never dreamed she was not a "cradle Catholic." (Joan Givner: 332)

Another fact also bears witness to the close relationship between Porter and her religious faith. Woman writer Flannery O'Connor had long before sensed the embarrassment of religious skepticism in Porter. There was indeed an unwavering enthusiasm in her spiritual life, represented by her indispensable bedside text, replaced numerous times during her life, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Printed in February 1936, this book kept her company when she was alive and went to her private library room after her death. Porter inscribed on its cover "God bless those who pursue Him." (Janis P. Stout: 271)

The religious experiences of Katherine Anne Porter in her later years reveal more of Porter's devotion and commitment to her religious support. Having obtained financial security and social status and everything already settled and guaranteed, Porter had at last reached reconciliation with fate and realized her final return to God. Through a friendship which developed between her and the nuns of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, in Baltimore, she turned once again to the Church. The College of Notre Dame had wanted to give her an honorary degree and later came to her house for a private and moving little ceremony. The degree was bestowed upon her in her apartment by Sister Maura and Sister Kathleen, who was president of the college. At a late afternoon liturgy in the college chapel, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, she walked slowly back from receiving Holy Communion at the altar, leaning on Sister Kathleen's arm. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. It was a moment of deep emotion for her, to be back in a convent chapel receiving Holy Communion on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. (Joan Givner: 494) Close friends who were themselves nonbelievers, like her niece, found it difficult to believe that she ever took religion seriously. In the company of nuns and priests, on the other hand, she was very devout and they never questioned her strong faith. Porter maintained reassuring association with other religious people, too. She found great relief and solace in the frequent visits paid by abbot Mr. Feely and Father Gallagherde. She filled a book of prayers such marginal notes as her inquiry and expectation to God, including "Please help me overcome my weaknesses and my dread at sufferings and unknowns!" The association with people of the Church continued to the end of her life and was deeply satisfying to her.

During her last years, when she was "very much taken up with dying," Porter found her greatest consolation in the Church. Joan Givner gave a detailed description of Porter's religious life at this stage in her biography *A Life: Katherine Anne Porter*. Though she had earlier talked unfavorably of institutional religion, Porter told Rhea Johnson that she was "charmed" by Catholicism. She delighted in the rituals and



observances of the Catholic Church; she cherished the beautiful rosaries from her Dubuque friends David Locher and Raymond Roseliep; she loved the High masses at Christmas and Easter; and she enjoyed the literary qualities of the prayers and the saints' lives. Best of all she liked confession. The sense of unburdening herself, confessing her sins, and gaining forgiveness brought her serenity and peace. And she was always soothed by the presence of priests and the gentle nuns. Knowing this, Paul asked Sister Kathleen and Sister Maura of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland to visit her. They did so faithfully and also brought a priest who regularly heard her confession and gave her the Eucharist. Besides this, she received telephone calls that never failed to make her happy from Father Romond Roseliep with whom she sustained a friendship for over two decades. Flannery O'Connor had long before sensed a terrible need under her friend's bantering remarks about the Church. Now as Porter neared death that need became more evident. She longed to believe in God and in life after death. She told Sister Maura, "Death is beautiful. I long to die. I love God. I know that he loves me." And when Father Roseliep assured her that eternity would be better than this world she told him, "Oh yes, I know that." He said that those five words expressed the Christian faith of Katherine Anne Porter as he had known it: "A faith as indestructible as the love." (Joan Givner: 508-509)

Porter may be found a woman of inconsistency because of her early rejection and later embracement of religion, in one matter, however, she was quite consistent. Even when she wavered in her ability to believe in God, she never wavered in her preference for Catholicism over every other religious creed. She usually kept a rosary beside her bed, and on many occasions when she hovered near death she received the last rites of the Catholic Church. Catholicism was the faith of her fictional family and she indicated that it was the religion of her actual family until researchers established that Porter's parents and grandparents were Methodists and Presbyterians. She never regretted her decision to convert to Catholicism and said at the end of her life that no other religion had ever attracted her. Joan Givner in her biography of Porter explores the reasons for Porter's attraction to Catholicism. Givner suggests that Porter had

been attracted to Catholicism for its historical and aesthetic associations. There were many aspects of Catholicism which appealed to Porter. In the first place, it provided the security of her childhood faith without recalling any of the disagreeable memories associated with it. There was none of her grandmother's repressive morality; no long list of prohibitions against dancing, drinking, card playing, or other activities that she enjoyed; there were no wild scenes of unleashed emotion such as she witnessed at revival meetings. On the other hand, there was a great deal that appealed to her aesthetic sense. She loved the dramatic qualities of the Mass, the beauty of the liturgy, the sound of the church music and the Latin words. She liked the atmosphere of the churches, with their ornate windows, high altars, intricate vestments, and she was moved by the symbolism inherent in word and gesture. What appeals to Porter, we may presume from Joan's formulation, is something extrinsic from religion rather than religion itself. That can in turn explain why Porter failed to behave as an orthodox follower of Catholicism; she could only identify herself with the Church in terms of its ascetic and moral appeal rather than its essential doctrines.

Katherine Anne Porter often satirized and criticized religion mercilessly, but she was not rejecting religion in the true sense of rejection. On the contrary, she hoped badly for a religion she could rely upon. The above evidence witnesses a Porter relying on her religious faith as a major spiritual support, especially her return to God during the last part of her life. Unlike a true atheist who denies and dismisses religion as totally nonsense, Porter never distanced herself clearly from the Church, but clung to it all the time and sought consolation from it at crucial moments of her life.

## Chapter Five

### The Causes of Porter's Ambivalence

The exact reasons for Porter's ambivalence are not readily explicable. Here are only tentative efforts to find out something maybe relevant to it. Ideology itself is not something concrete or changeless; shaped and conditioned by fluctuant experiences, a person's ideological orientation may turn as life goes on. It is even truer to Katherine Anne Porter, whose long life of mobility had undergone so many physical ups-and-downs, that they must have much to do with her ideological well-being.

Katherine Anne Porter had developed independently out of the utmost deprivation, fighting a long battle against poverty, disease and suffocating relationships almost all her life. It was a life plagued by illness and distress, suffering miserably and constantly from bad health and financial straits until her last years. Epidemic influenza, gout, bronchitis, angina pectoris and depression etc. are recorded successively in her case history. Sometimes the attack of illness is so severe that she even thought she was going to die. Besides, Porter had always been putting on hard struggles against odds to fight for some fundamental belongings in the world, a house of her own, for instance, but more often than not was thwarted and frustrated. Porter couldn't have a house of her own and had to rent her residence during the former part of her life; it was not until the publishing of her novel *Ship of Fools* in 1962 did she begin to obtain financial security.

On quite a few occasions, Porter confides in her letters to her friends that she is under nervous strain, in the midst of many and great difficulties she has to come through: not enough money, too much work, and no one to do anything to ease her up just a little. In June 1931, when diagnosed as gout, she wrote to her friend woman writer Josephine Herbst: "I have a deep, incurable (apparently) painful melancholy, night and day, which just sits on my neck. Its nobody's fault except my own, if it is

even that. I've had it for years, without any alleviations. So now I sit in the sun as if I hoped that would cure me. I think maybe work will cure me. Maybe not thinking about it will cure me. I cannot imagine what I am waiting for, or looking forward to. The tussle to live has been idiotically, unreasonably hard, and I think this is a let-down when finally I came that I miss the desperate strain, and the muscles of my mind won't let go. (Porter: 44) In January 1941, Porter wrote to her third husband Albert Erskine to reflect upon her miserable life. "Looking back, it seems to me sometimes that I have had a kind of nervous breakdown, and may be just coming out of it. But I feel a little grim towards myself: breakdown or not, sick or well, dead or alive, come hell or high water, the point is to get the work done and try to keep one lap ahead of the bills." (Porter: 186) Her unhappy marriages, four times in all, ending in divorce without exception, brought her conceivably considerable pains.

As an artist, Porter could not be more pained than finding herself unable to write. But as a result of the hard times she had with her material life, she suffered terribly from stagnancy in her literary creation from time to time. In a letter to short story writer Glenway Wescott Porter wrote about her despair resulting from this problem: "Glenway, my dear, with both of us I think this strange self-flagellation about being slothful must stop. I look upon you as a monument of productive energy and richness, and regard myself as virtually a total loss not only to literature, but the most daily and necessary human life. That is, if I don't really watch myself I fall into the most dreadful despair that is like a catalepsy. My mind fixes itself with terrible attention on a dark spot in space and remains cold and moveless, as if I waited for something that I cannot name, but something that I don't really want to happen. It's a matter of nerves and I know it, and when the mood passes and I feel a rise in spirits as immediate and direct as a barometer rising, the past is a mere blank; I have done nothing and thought nothing that I feel is worth remembering. This is a very clumsy statement of a situation that is very real and very difficult to overcome; indeed I do not seem to overcome it at all. When the rise comes, I work, but my energies soon begin flowing backward irresistibly, I am drawn back into that darkness once more. It terrifies me

...except that I know that to give way to terror would be somehow fatal and I rationalize my fears and reason with them and they can be controlled like a willful animal or child; a matter of being more stubborn and more quick than they---It comes to this, that I cannot conquer the causes of my fear, not even the fears themselves, but I do somehow keep the fears within bounds. I think even the word fear is not the right one. It is despair. I can and do dismiss myself as a neurotic, but that does not dismiss the condition nor its causes. After all, I have been like this since I can remember anything.” (Porter: 112)

But the pain of being a writer is more than that; people like Porter are destined to suffer for others than themselves alone. In the preface to *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, Porter remarks to the effect that her life has so far been under the threat of worldwide catastrophes from the age of consciousness and memory up until today; most of her intelligence and energy has always been devoted to understanding the meaning of these threats and tracing their sources, and she finds modern miseries so severe and pressure so heavy. As a sensitive artist, Porter was aware that the Western world was under the threat of worldwide catastrophes and found all around her a grim, despondent and frustrating picture of poverty, greed, despair and chaos. To “the threat of worldwide catastrophes”, however, she could offer no solution. Painful experiences as both a human being living a miserable life and a writer of unusual sensitivity had jointly contributed to the general state of mind of Porter: pessimism.

The pessimistic outlook eventually finds its way into Porter’s fictional works. Porter once summarized her thematic concerns to the effect that her book is about the endless collusion between good and evil; she believes that human beings are capable of total evil, but no one has ever been totally good: and this gives the edge to evil; she doesn’t offer any solution, just wants to show the principle at work and why none of us has any real alibi in this world. The very theme recurs in many of her works, such as “Magic,” “Theft,” “Flowering Judas” and other stories. James Johnson sums up the logos of Porter’s fictional attitude towards life as something like this: The child is

born into a world seemingly ordered and reasonable but it is in fact chaotic, ridiculous, and doubt-ridden ("The Old Order"). He learns at an early age that he is an atomistic creature, often unloved ("The Downward Path"), and that the delightful spectacle of life masks fear, hatred, and bitterness ("The Circus"). He discovers that life and love must end in death ("The Grave," "The Fig Tree"). He must inevitably reject his heritage as lies and his family as hostile aliens ("Old Mortality"); but when he tries to substitute something else in their place, he is driven back by his own weaknesses to what he has been conditioned to ("Maria Concepcion," "Magic"). If he makes the break with the past and tries to replace the lost old love with a new, he is doomed to despair ("Pale Horse, Pale Rider"). If he tries to substitute another heritage for his own, he finds it full of evil ("The Leaning Tower"); or he discovers that he has lost his power to love through denying his own tradition ("Flowering Judas"). There is nothing for him to cling to but his desperate belief in his own courage and integrity ("Theft") and what little of love and certainty he has in life ("The Cracked Looking-Glass"). But life is senselessly cruel ("He"), full of frustration and contention ("Rope," "That Tree," "A Day's Work"); and it ends in annihilation and the extinction of all hope ("The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"). Such is Miss Porter's fictional philosophy. (James William Johnson: 610-11)

When attempting to account for Porter's ambivalent attitude towards religion, it makes sense to first of all associate it with her outlook on life. It can be presumed that Porter amid all her sufferings and tribulations had wanted to seek consolation from her religious faith. But as her character Granny Weatherall, Porter had been jilted by God time and time again. She tried hard almost all along to write and publish her stories but could never get out of economical plight; she found her life a hideous, blind, mad struggle to break her shell and achieve her destiny. Personal worries apart, Porter was time and again convinced by what she saw and heard that God could not offer any salvation. Porter's experiences in Mexico during its revolution affirmed her impression that the corrupted Church was the source of the people's sufferings; she associated the church with the abuse of peasants and Indians in Mexico. In a talk with

her father in 1934, Porter pitied the underprivileged population who were miserably exploited and oppressed and wished that there were a God able to do justice to all the evils in the world and punish those rascals who were destroying the world. She was pessimistic about the presence of such a righteous God and thought that the Nature was a God too blind to discriminate between good and evil, always assisting evil hands to destroy innocent people. Porter's skepticism and pessimism was already established by that time and later experiences only worked to strengthen them. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Porter was growing more and more pessimistic for the future of mankind. She realized that human beings were doomed to corruption and religion was no power to turn the unhappy destiny another way round; she exclaimed that she did not understand what on earth "God" meant. (Janis P. Stout: 274) It was not until the publishing of *The Ship of Fools* in her seventies that Porter began to obtain financial security, social respect and emotional comfort. But her pessimism was already inveterate by then and had dogged her too long to dismiss.

The impotence of God to save either her or the world around her further assured Porter of her skepticism about religion. Porter had to look for other ways out but it was certainly not easy. She was for a long time an activist in political affairs and took an active part in political parades, demonstrations and party unionism. She engaged herself in demonstrations against the Second World War and Fascism, in many political speeches delivered on various occasions to university students. As early as in 1920s, she was attracted to Communism prevailing then in America, and sustained her enthusiasm until the 1930s. She visited Mexico on many occasions and was during that period an opponent of social hierarchy and a proponent for social revolution. But as the development of left wing movement gradually grew into a "red terror" and chauvinism, especially towards the end of 1920s and early 1930s after the great depression set in, Porter as many American writers did, turned right and became a critic of communism. During the 1940s, she was still actively involved in social affairs and believed in the power of united action to make the world better; she argued strongly against wars and Nazism and called for the people to rise and act to improve

the world situation. In a letter dated October 22, 1944, Porter told Paul Porter, "So to put it mildly, I felt pretty well, and do now; a great part of it is no doubt because I am actually working too, here and now, not just talking, as I have for so long. I think the talk helps too, but I like to roll up my sleeves now and then and pitch in. You know—you have listened to me too long not to remember—how pessimistic I can be, how bitter about the way things go too often, you know that I have got a good idea of what is going on politically in the world. But my belief is growing that our political and social evils are remediable, if only all of us who want a change for the better just get up and work for it, all the time, with as much knowledge and intelligence as we can muster for it. Half the wrongs of human life exist because of the inertia of people who simply will not use their energies in fighting for what they believe in. And finally the wrongs roll up into world catastrophes and millions of deaths and a terrible set-back for all mankind-----" (Porter: 291) In a telegram of 30 May, 1945 to Edward Stettinius, Porter urged Stettinius to work "as a representative of a Democratic people to use your great strength and influence to oppose the admission of Franco's Fascist regime to the World Security Organization, and to support firmly the Mexican and other delegations who are fighting Fascism on our home territory."(Porter: 305) Porter took notes for "The Never-Ending Wrong" (1977) during the 1920s when she followed the "strange history" of the Italian emigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were accused of a brutal murder and the robbery of a payroll truck in South Braintree, Massachusetts, April 15, 1920. Porter was among those who marched and were arrested in Boston and kept vigil during the execution of the pair. In 1977 when she was in her eighties, she wrote down her notes and thoughts about this trial. It is true that even during her senior years Porter was still paying attention to social events and currents.

Katherine Anne Porter held an inconsistent attitude towards politics as well. She was initially a progressive activist, but, thwarted by the political scenario of communism in America, eventually withdrew into conservatism. Porter's political involvement did not bring about her expected results; she was worried about



prevailing social evils and problems yet could not have them resolved anyway she was capable of. She had lost belief in her original religion, but could not establish faith in any new one, either. This problem of dilemma is reflected in her famous story "Flowering Judas".

In "Flowering Judas" (1930) the allusion to Christ and the Last Supper establishes at once the central paradox of religion vs. revolution and anticipates the theme of betrayal. The revolutionary ideal has replaced Laura's discarded faith, her childhood Catholicism, but Laura has not settled everything because "she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be". Laura feels betrayed by the revolution that did not fulfill the early idealistic aims of the movement. She also betrays the revolution's ideal by stepping into a church to pray, knowing that discovery will cause a scandal. If she feels betrayed by the Church that promised something Laura has not found, she also betrays her religion, which promises spiritual life, by replacing it with the revolution that practices death. The theme of betrayal is focused in the primary symbol in the story, the flowering Judas trees. The symbolism of the Judas tree is completed in the dream when Laura eats the "bleeding" flowers as a ritual of Christian communion, but when she discovers they are Eugenio's body and blood, not Christ's, she awakes "trembling" and "afraid to sleep." What she thought was that an act of contrition proves to be an act of destruction. (Darlene Harbour Unrue: 35-37) In this story, Laura's indifference and alienation are caused by her loss of the Catholic faith of her childhood and her inability to replace it with the worship of social progress and machines of those around her. Although Porter claimed that a teacher friend of hers in Mexico is the model of Laura, many critics still identify Porter with Laura whose life experiences are very much similar to the writer's. Laura's dilemma is a reflection of the same problem confronting Porter when she had lost her Catholic faith yet could not find its replacement available.

Katherine Anne Porter tried other means such as politics in search of salvation

but failed to make any sense out of the chaotic world anyway. Porter once claimed that her political idea was “a liberal idealist illiteracy of politics, a kind of Jeffersonianism”; she was thus in no position of probing the sources of the threat of worldwide catastrophes or predicting a bright future for herself or her readers in a sensible way. Smarting from both personal and social pains, Porter gradually drew back from the outer world to her inner self, from the material to the spiritual, that is, to her religion again. She resumed the belief that at the heart of the universe stands a mystery, the answer to which may be God and that only art and religion are the hope for human beings in the world.

Ms. Wang Xiaoling in a paper on Porter’s political and religious views explores the causes of the wavering ideology on the part of Katherine Anne Porter. The long life of Porter is a long journey in pursuit of truth, but actually she was not sure of what truth is. Porter devoted herself to artistic creation and took an active part in social affairs: she was once a follower of Communism but not long later turned right and grew hostile towards Communism; she was at first sympathetic with feminist movement and identified herself with feminists but later turned her back against it. Porter was always wavering ideologically, following something for a time and then rejecting it for another, and was unable to find a truth capable of being followed all along. Ms. Wang concludes that causes of history, personality and family background have joined to fashion the wavering, inconsistent and often self-conflicting ideology of Porter.

There may be many causes of Porter’s ambivalence, but her pessimistic outlook is a prominent factor conditioning her attitude towards religion. The sufferings and tribulations in her secular life and her inborn sensitivity to moral and spiritual threats of the world shaped her pessimism. Porter converted herself to religion hoping for consolation but evidence of religious corruption and decadency only strengthened her pessimism. She realized from her experiences that religion could do nothing to save the troubled world and the suffering people from their doom. Porter then tried all her

life by other means to fight off her pessimism but in vain until eventually she had lost hope of temporal salvation and returned to her religious faith for final peace.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

This paper has first of all made efforts to formulate the religious background against Katherine Anne Porter, meaning to source justification for her attitude towards religion. It then goes on to present Porter as the enemy of religion with her short stories analyzed and letters quoted as proof. The next part is devoted to the presentation of Porter as a devoted follower of Catholicism, especially her religious experiences during the last part of her life. Efforts are also made to sort out possible causes of Porter's ambivalence towards religion in the following part.

Ambivalence is the key word to characterize Porter's world of sensibilities. She had a fatal ambivalence to her native land Texas; she could not identify herself with her family and yet she craved a sense of identity; she was ambivalent also to people close to her, including her father and her literary friends; Porter had ambivalence as well, never to be resolved, in her attitude towards any husband. In general, she is a torn person, divided constantly between opposite feelings for the same thing or person. We may now add another to the list: this is her ambivalence towards religion. Her biographer Joan Givner stated that "All in all, her attitude to religion, her deep need to believe and her equally deep skepticism, formed another area of ambivalence in her character." (Joan Givner: 102)

It would be simplifying an implicated problem if we jumped at the conclusion that Katherine Anne Porter was for or against religion. Yet it is at least not mistaken to draw the conclusion that Porter had almost all her life been a skeptic of religion, but she could not possibly do without it, either. Porter was often caught speaking critically and satirically of her religious faith and even regarding Catholicism as an enemy. Meanwhile she hoped for a spiritual support capable of being relied upon and consoled with; especially in her later life, she had recourse to the Church more than

anything else as her spiritual support. For Katherine Anne Porter, religion is a beloved enemy. Of herself, Porter said that after her grandmother's death she had on the subject of religion alone ten years of conflict ahead of her. On her remark Joan Givner comments that "her estimate was conservative, for she never really resolved the conflict and for most of her life wavered, torn between her grandmother's faith and her father's agnosticism." (Joan Givner: 102)

Porter's pessimistic outlook has much to do with her attitude towards religion. Her miserable personal experiences and sensitivity as an artist fashioned her basic pessimism and Catholicism as evildoer rather than savoir further strengthened it. She realized that religion was impotent to promise the world and mankind salvation. Porter then tried other means to battle against her pessimism without success; eventually she lost faith in secular consolation and returned to religion for final peace.

It may be further brought forth that Porter's inconsistent attitude towards religion is a reflection of her impotence to face the problem of ideology. Porter sensed the presence of worldwide threats but could not seek out their sources; she was neither able to find a way out nor predict a future, which worsened her pessimism and resulted in her return to religion in the end. The whole process of the change of Porter from a believer in progressive ideology to a pessimist, and from a skeptic of religion to a dependent on it bears witness of the pursuit and perplexity of a generation of intellectuals. Her ambivalence is to some extent true representation of the general dilemma confronting her contemporary men of letters, who were painfully sensitive to social evils and imperfections but could not find any way out to solve these problems. This point may be further researched in the future if chance permits.

Katherine Anne Porter is one of the few women of her time and place who against all odds struggled to survive and create, and left a distinguished body of fiction and a complete record of her struggle. All the shorter fiction and *Ship of Fools* considered together, Porter's principal subject emerges as the journey towards truth,

as she insisted that she herself was a passenger on the ship. Porter is a self-acknowledged seeker, having all her long life been seeking for truth, which seemed to her something definite, concrete and tangible at times and yet something of an attitude towards life at others; she was always traveling towards truth, but arrived only halfway. More often than not, she found herself obsessed painfully with perplexity, self-conflict and even self-divisiveness, unable to keep track of her long-sought-after truth. From time to time Porter had to seek temporary consolation from the company of the sacred until in the very end she returned to Catholicism for final reconciliation with the world and with herself.

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