

# **A Daughter of the Land Short Guide**

## **A Daughter of the Land by Gene Stratton Porter**

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# Characters

Kate Bates, Porter's least conventional protagonist, may most accurately reflect the author's attitudes. Kate not only rebels against, but openly denounces an unfeeling parent. Resentful of the way her family treats her, she admires only her sister-in-law, whose personal wealth makes her independent of the family's whims. Ignoring the advantages of a wealthy and adoring husband, she rejects John Jardine because he has neglected his education in the pursuit of wealth. When George Holt proves to be incompetent, she assumes the management of the family as well as the business. After George's death, she works with her son to regain prosperity. She admits that she cannot really love her daughter, and thoroughly disillusioned about marriage, she sees no need to remarry.

At times, however, Kate resembles Porter's other heroines. Her goodness wins the friendship of the townspeople, whom she teaches primarily by example. Likewise her kindness saves Mariette Jardine's life, and her fortitude gains her the respect of the townspeople. Like Porter, Kate insists that motherhood is her most important role, and she is convinced that all the problems in her sister's marriage arise from childlessness. Finally Kate is allowed the conventional happy marriage, as she and Robert Gray realize their compatibility.

While the minor characters exhibit varying degrees of complexity, generally they are stock characters. Nancy Ellen is Kate's slightly older and slightly prettier sister who has all the advantages Kate lacks but still is not happy; Robert Gray is the honorable young man who meets the wrong sister first and so marries Nancy Ellen instead of Kate. Adam Bates, Sr. is the tyrannical father, Mrs. Bates the submissive wife who blossoms when freed from subjugation. Adam Bates, Jr. is the wellmeaning but ineffectual brother, his wife Agatha the kindhearted pedant who assists Kate, and their son Adam III the loving nephew who manipulates his parents on Kate's behalf. George Holt is the charming wastrel and his mother the prying landlady who becomes the troublemaking mother-in-law. Adam Holt is the dutiful son, and his twin Polly is the rebellious daughter. Mariette Jardine is the helpless old lady who amply repays Kate's kindness, and John Jardine is the self-made man who has provided for his mother's physical comfort but neglected his own aesthetic development.



## Social Concerns

A Daughter of the Land, more than other Porter novels, is concerned with social issues. Most important is parents' treatment of their children.

The daughters of Adam Bates, Sr. work to help secure two hundred acres of land for each of their seven brothers, but none of the sons is given a recorded deed to his land, and the daughters receive nothing more than their trousseaus. In addition, as the youngest daughter, Kate is expected to forego her education, remaining at home as unpaid domestic help so that her father can acquire even more land; when she rebels, her father disowns her.

A second concern is the proper role of women in marriage. Throughout her marriage, Mrs. Bates avoids conflict by yielding to her husband's will, but by acquiescing in what she knows are injustices, she loses the respect of her children. On the other hand, Kate's control of the family business gives her husband an excuse to behave irresponsibly.

Porter also deals with the superiority of agrarian life to industrialization.

Horrified by the poverty and depersonalization of John Jardine's factories in the city, Kate insists she will not marry him unless they can live on a working farm. Later, farming not only enables Kate to feed her children, but actually heals her spirit after the loss of her illusions, her money, and her daughter.

## Techniques

In *A Daughter of the Land*, Porter achieved her greatest sophistication and mastery of novelistic technique; the faults of the other novels are muted here. The choice of an unconventional heroine lessens Porter's customary sentimentality, allowing her to portray family life realistically, with parental favoritism and squabbles and jealousies, as well as affection, among the siblings. Agrarian life is clearly valued, but descriptions of nature are less intrusive, and there is less anthropomorphism. Because the purpose is less didactic, the effects of Kate's actions are presented almost objectively. The plot is less melodramatic, and while it still turns upon coincidences, there is more sense of inevitability, less plot manipulation. In fact, in her increased detachment and her use of an episodic, rather than continuous, narrative, Porter achieved the greater maturity and realism that she erroneously claimed for later novels such as *The White Flag* (1923).

# Themes

A major theme is the destructive effects of vanity. Vanity causes Kate's father to retain possession of the land and money due his children, with the result that they all hate him. Likewise Kate's vanity leads her to lose her favorite hat, refuse her most eligible suitor, and ignore both her own instincts and her friends' warnings about George Holt. Vanity also causes George to undertake tasks he is incapable of performing and so to destroy the lumber mill and himself. Another important theme is the character-building effect of adversity.

Kate's struggles increase her ingenuity, compassion, and strength of character.

Her failures teach her the value of work as an antidote for grief.

An underlying theme is the value of independence. Kate is admirable because she thinks for herself and asserts her right to an education, a career, and a business. Mrs. Bates meets criticism with humor, commenting that the neighbors will always gossip, so she will please herself.

# Adaptations

Displeased with Paramount Pictures' movie of Freckles, Porter formed her own production company, which released movie adaptations of Michael O'Halloran, A Girl of the Limberlost, Laddie, The Keeper of the Bees, The Magic Garden, The Harvester, and one of the three versions of Freckles. In all, more than twenty films have been based upon Porter's novels.

# Literary Precedents

The story of the isolated woman who must struggle against parental injustice, marital unhappiness, and poverty was a staple of domestic dramas like Steele MacKaye's *Hazel Kirke*.

Kate's greater independence may also suggest some influence of literary naturalism.



## Related Titles

Because of their similarities in plot and theme, all of Porter's novels are related. On the basis of subject matter, they may be divided into four groups: novels about the woods: *The Song of the Cardinal* (1903), *Freckles* (1904), *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), *The Harvester* (1911); novels about rural Indiana: *At the Foot of the Rainbow* (1907), *Laddie* (1913), *A Daughter of the Land* (1918); novels about the city: *Michael O'Halloran* (1915), *The White Flag* (1923), and novels about California: *Her Father's Daughter* (1921), *The Keeper of the Bees* (1925).



# Copyright Information

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