The Grave Study Guide

The Grave by Katherine Anne Porter

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Grave" was first published in 1935 in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, although it would receive more attention as part of a collection of stories published in 1944, *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*. That collection was generally well received by critics, who admired Porter's elegant, understated style, although her light touch won praise for subtlety even as it was criticized for lacking warmth and vitality. "The Grave" appears as part of a group of stories within *The Leaning Tower* called "The Old Order." Taken as a whole, the stories present the family history of a young girl named Miranda: each very short tale depicts a scene from their past in a nostalgic, poetic tone that is nonetheless tinged with a vague sense of darkness. The last story of the group, "The Grave" begins with Miranda, nine years old, playing with her brother Paul in the empty graves that formerly contained many of the relatives from the earlier stories.

The earlier stories are not necessary to understanding "The Grave," however. In fact, although it is last in "The Old Order," it was the first "Miranda story" to be published. Even without the added context of the family's aristocratic, slaveowning Southern past, the story touches lightly on issues of race, gender, and class. In its portrayal of Miranda and Paul's discovery of unborn baby rabbits within the womb of a rabbit they shoot while hunting, "The Grave" also offers a feminine coming- of-age story. Through the eyes of Miranda, the story not only conveys a sense of the changing social standards for women in the first part of the twentieth century, but also transcends its historical setting with its nuanced understanding of the wonder and the worry inherent in learning about the reproductive powers of one's own body.

Author Biography

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russell Porter in Indian Creek, Texas, on May 15, 1890. As with her pen name, Porter frequently embellished, exaggerated, or entirely fabricated biographical facts, so the precise truth of her life story remains uncertain. She took her name from her paternal grandmother, Catherine Anne Porter; Porter's grandmother cared for her son Harry's family at her Texas home following the death of Porter's mother. Some critics have observed similarities between Porter's life and the life of Miranda, the principal character in "The Grave." Thomas F. Walsh suggests that the story is influenced by how "Porter's own father had created in her the desperate need to cling to the innocence he ironically had denied her by plunging her into early guilt over her mother's death."

Porter's writing career began in journalism, and she worked in Denver, New York, and Mexico—the latter often providing a setting for her short stories. Her time as a journalist undoubtedly contributed to her realistic style and her use of "truth-telling" as a literary technique. Porter's first collection of short stories, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, was published in 1930.

From 1933 to 1936, Porter lived abroad on a Guggenheim fellowship; her time in Berlin provided the foundation for her short story "The Leaning Tower," which was published along with "The Grave" in a 1944 collection of stories. In 1945, Porter began work on her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, which won her both popular and critical acclaim when it was published in 1962.

Not until 1965, however, did Porter receive serious recognition for her achievements in the genre for which she is now famous. That year, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* was published, and subsequently received the Gold Medal for Fiction awarded by the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Award. In 1966, Porter was appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

In her later years, Porter's political interests became a more important focus of her writing. In 1977, three years before her death, she published *The Never-Ending Wrong*—a kind of personal memoir about the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and execution. The work received mixed reviews, but even her harshest critics acknowledged the importance of her earlier work. Porter died September 18, 1980, in Silver Spring, MD, of cancer.

Plot Summary

The story begins in the family cemetery of the heroine, Miranda. Then nine years old, she and her twelve-year-old brother, Paul, pass through the cemetery on their way to go hunting; they set down their rifles and climb the fence to explore the now-empty graves. The bodies had been removed to the public cemetery so the small plot of land, a portion of Miranda's grandmother's farm, could be sold to provide money for other relatives. Miranda and Paul play among the graves with little thought of the coffins and dead bodies they once held. Digging in the grave of her grandfather, Miranda discovers a small silver dove—she announces proudly to Paul that he must guess what she has found. Paul, too, has found something, and they play at guessing what the other has unearthed. Unable to guess, each reveals their treasure: Paul displays an engraved gold ring, Miranda shows him the dove, and they trade. Paul is especially pleased; his silver dove is the screw head for a coffin.

Miranda is satisfied with the ring, and they decide to leave, continuing the hunt for rabbits, birds, and other small prey. Miranda has never been particularly interested in hunting—a trait that her brother finds exasperating—and she is not attentive today either. Her brother tells her that the first dove or rabbit should be his to shoot, and she asks without concern whether she can have the first snake. Her mind is on the ring, which contrasts sharply with her overalls, straw hat, and sandals. Despite criticism from neighbors for wearing boys clothes, Miranda had never been bothered by it, and had always accepted her father's explanation: the overalls were perfectly suited to playing on the farm, and wearing them would save her dresses for school. The ring seems to change Miranda's mind: she begins to think about turning back, going home for a bath, and dressing up in her finest dress. She nearly turns back without telling Paul, she has fallen so far behind him in their walk, but decides to catch up with him and inform him that she is going home.

As she catches up to Paul, they spot a rabbit, and he shoots, killing it with one shot. Paul begins skinning the rabbit; Miranda's Uncle Jimbilly could turn the skin into a fur coat for one of her dolls. Miranda admires her brother's skill in skinning the animal. Then Paul lifts the rabbit's belly—it was pregnant. He cuts the tiny rabbits from the mother's womb, and Miranda is rapt with wonder and excitement. Touching one of the unborn bunnies, Miranda feels vague stirrings about her own body's reproductive abilities. She feels as though she has discovered something that she had, in another way, always known. The more she thinks about it, the more troubled she becomes. She tells Paul she doesn't want the fur, so he puts the little rabbits back inside their mother's body, then wraps the fur around them and hides them in the bushes. At some length, Paul commands Miranda never to tell anyone about what they have seen. Miranda, unnerved by the incident, never tells a soul.

Miranda eventually forgets the rabbits entirely, and does not remember them for nearly twenty years. Then, while in a foreign marketplace, a vendor presents her with a tray of sugared candies shaped like little animals, including lambs, birds, and rabbits. She is startled by the sudden remembrance of the dead rabbits and is briefly frightened by her

recollection. That memory fades, and instead she pictures her brother, standing in the sun and admiring the silver dove she had found.

Summary

The protagonist in *The Grave* is a girl named Miranda who, as the story progresses, discovers a link between her adult life and a childhood memory. The story begins with a briefly recounted history of Miranda's grandparents. Her grandfather, who has been dead more than thirty years, has been moved from his grave twice. Each time his widow moves she uproots his grave and reburies him close to her, hoping one day that they will be buried side by side. The first move was to Louisiana and the second move was to Texas. The narrator states that the grandmother's constant relocation makes it seem as though she is searching out her own burial place.

In Texas the grandmother sets up a small cemetery in a corner of her farm. Over the years the family connection grows and relations migrate from Kentucky to settle in Texas. The cemetery contains about twenty graves. After the grandmother's death, some of the farmland is to be sold for the benefit of the children. The cemetery happens to be located in the area to be sold. For this reason, the graves must be dug up and moved to a public cemetery. In the public cemetery, the grandmother and grandfather are buried side-by-side, just as the grandmother had wished.

The family cemetery is an abandoned garden with tangled rose bushes, ragged cedar trees and cypress. The grave spots lay open and empty. The protagonist explains that when she and her brother Paul were young they would hunt small game together. The protagonist describes a memory of when she was nine and her brother was twelve. They stumble upon the gravesites during a hunting expedition. On this hot day, the two carefully place their rifles against a fence as they explore the open grave pits. For Miranda this is mysterious place. The graves smell like sweetness and corruption. Filled with wonderment, Miranda climbs into the pit where her grandfather once rested. She finds a tiny silver carved dove that is no bigger than a hazelnut. She runs out of the pit to show her brother Paul. Paul has found treasure also. He shows Miranda a gold ring that is intricately engraved with flowers and vines. The siblings trade their treasures. Miranda wears the ring. It fits perfectly on her thumb.

They decide they should leave; they are aware that the land has been sold and they are not supposed to be there. They pick up their rifles and continue their hunting expedition. On these trips Miranda always obeys Paul's instructions about how to handle her gun, how to wait for the right time to shoot, and how to stand properly so that the gun does not go off by mistake. Miranda hardly ever hits a mark. She has no proper sense of hunting. When Paul makes a kill he wanted to be certain of it. Miranda always claims any game they shoot when firing at the same time. Paul is sick of this. He often claims the first game they see as his, allocating the second to Miranda. As Miranda admires her ring this day, she loses interest in shooting. She also feels suddenly uncomfortable in her usual tomboy clothes of overalls, a blue shirt, and thick brown sandals. Miranda's attire was scandalous throughout the countryside. It is 1903. Her father has been criticized for letting his girls dress like boys. Miranda's big sister Maria is the most independent and fearless of all the children. She can ride a horse astride with nothing but a rope knotted around the horse's nose.

The children grew up without their mother and now, with their grandmother gone, the family is getting run down. Miranda's father has money problems. The grandmother had discriminated against him in her will. Some neighbours relish this with vicious satisfaction. Miranda knows all this because she would meet the old women that had admired her grandmother. They would tell her she should be ashamed of herself because it goes against the scriptures to dress the way she does. During these encounters Miranda does fell ashamed. She is being raised to believe that it is rude and ill bred to shock anyone. Still, Miranda has faith in her father's judgement. He allows her to wear tomboy clothes on the farm in order to save her dresses for school. This sense of thriftiness is in both his and Miranda's nature.

The ring Miranda finds turns her against her tomboy clothes. She longs to go back to the farmhouse, take a bath and put on a fancy dress. The ring makes her long for luxury and a grand way of living that she has not experienced but has heard stories about as part of a legend of her family's past wealth. Miranda lags behind Paul, who is still hunting. She wants to take off for home without telling him. But he would never do this to her, so instead she catches up with him to tell him she is going home.

As Miranda approaches her bother a rabbit leaps in front of him. Miranda lets him have the kill without dispute. He kills it in one shot. He leans over the rabbit and examines the wound, a shot through the head. Paul takes out his bowie knife and starts skinning the animal. Miranda recalls her uncle Jimbilly, who knew how to prepare skins to make fur coats for her dolls. Both of the children knell over the dead rabbit. Paul notices its oddly bloated belly and says it is pregnant. Paul cuts the animal's stomach open to release the babies. He pulls off the thin scarlet veil that covers each bunny. Their blind faces are almost featureless.

Miranda is used to the sight of dead animals. But she is filled with both pity and delight for the eight baby rabbits. She sees blood running over them and trembles although she is not sure why. Miranda wants to see and know everything about this experience. The memory of her former ignorance fades in this moment. Her brother may have seen this before, now she knows what he knows. It is partly the intuition in her mind and body that has prepared her for this moment, in a manner ever so gradual that she has been unaware of a change happening.

Paul says that the babies were ready to be born. Miranda says that she knows this and refuses to take the skin from the dead animal. Paul buries the babies in their mother's body. He wraps the skin around the rabbit and carries it to a sage bush to hide it away. He tells Miranda not to tell anyone because he will get in trouble. He tells her, as he always does, that he is leading her into things she should not do. Miranda did not tell. She did not want to tell anyone. The disturbing image of that day was burned into her mind for the next few days. But finally it sank deep into her mind behind other memories.

For the next twenty years Miranda does not think about the event. She only remembers it as the day she and her brother found treasure in the grave pits. But one day as she walks through the market of a strange city in a strange country, the memory leaps back.

A street vendor notices Miranda's glazed over, horrified look. He offers her a tray of sugar candies that are shaped like baby animals and smell like vanilla. It is a hot day in the market and the smells of raw flesh and wilted flowers that surround the vendors reminds Miranda of that same smell of sweetness and corruption she smelled at the grave pits. For the first time in years she remembers what her brother's face looked like in childhood. In her vision she sees him standing in the blazing sunshine with a pleased sober smile in his eyes, as he turns the silver dove around in his hands.

Analysis

Katherine Anne Porter's *The Grave* is a story about the transition to adulthood and a loss of innocence. The protagonist Miranda traces this change from childhood to womanhood back to one specific day and one event. The story told by the narrator is wrapped in the history of Miranda's family, beginning with her grandmother. Miranda's grandmother moves from place to place after her husband dies. With each of these moves she uproots her dead husband's coffin to bring it with her. When she dies she wants to be buried next to him. In the description of her moving, the narrator says it is as though the grandmother moved around looking for her own burial spot. This is symbolic to the idea of a restless woman who is looking for a final place to settle and rest. This also foreshadows Miranda adulthood; she too moves around in exploration of exotic places.

Miranda losses her innocence when her brother kills a pregnant rabbit. In this moment Miranda discovers that her intuition has prepared her for the horrific mistake. Without ever having been told, she suddenly understands to process of life and death. This is symbolic of the way that life and death are connected. Miranda, in her adolescent way, realizes this fact. Ironically, although her brother is the one who forced the early education on her, he tries to protect her by saying that he is leading her into things she ought not to be doing. He cautions her to keep the tragic event a secret. Miranda does just this, and frets over the day alone until she is finally able to push the memory out of her head. Of course in the end the repressed memory pushes its way back to the surface. Twenty years later Miranda recalls the event in detail again.

Another important theme in the story is individuality and oppression. Miranda and her sister cause scandal throughout the countryside because they are tomboys; which, during 1903, was unacceptable in society. The ring Miranda finds serves as a symbol of her wanting to be accepted in society. It is juxtaposed with her feelings of shame when the elderly neighbouring women reprimand her for dressing like a boy. But near the end of the story, on the day Miranda recalls the childhood tragedy, the author describes the setting as a strange town in a strange country. The vendor that offers the adult Miranda sweets is described as Indian, marking that Miranda has travelled to India. Alike to her childhood longing for adventure, she is still out on expedition.

Shaped like baby animals, the candies the vendor offers Miranda are a symbol of the baby rabbits that died when she was young. The smells of the market remind Miranda of the sweet and corrupt smells of the gravesite she explored as a child. This smell does

not represent the graves themselves. The smells foreshadow the horrible scene Miranda will witness. For this reason she smells the same scent when the memory of that day is triggered.

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Characters

Miranda

Miranda is the main character in the story; through most of it, she is nine years old, but the story concludes with the adult Miranda, perhaps nearing thirty, reflecting on her memories. She lives on the farm of her grandmother, now dead, with her father, Harry, her brother, Paul, and her older sister, Maria. Although her family once had money and social status, her grandmother had slighted her father Harry in her will, leaving them "in straits about money." Miranda thus has an awareness of both her family's grand past and their current difficulties; she has a "powerful social sense, which was like a fine set of antennae radiating from every pore of her skin." Lacking the guidance of a woman—either her mother or grandmother—Miranda's father dresses her in boys clothes: "dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man's straw hat, and thick brown sandals." To neighbors, Miranda's odd dress reflected both their family's fall from grace and the disorder of a motherless household, and Miranda senses their scorn. At the beginning of the story, Miranda seems innocent, "scratching around aimlessly and pleasurably as any young animal." When she sees the bodies of unborn rabbits, pulled from the womb of the mother rabbit her brother had shot, she feels she has received forbidden knowledge—a feeling that haunts her even twenty years later, when she suddenly recalls the incident.

Paul

Paul is Miranda's twelve-year-old brother. He takes Miranda hunting with him reluctantly and instructs her on how to handle her gun, although she listens poorly and displays little interest. By contrast, Paul is almost too involved with the sport: "She had seen him smash his hat and yell with fury when he had missed his aim." When Paul discovers the unborn rabbits in the body of a rabbit he kills, he seems surprised, although Miranda suggests that he is not as innocent as she was: "Her brother had spoken as if he had known about everything all along. He may have seen all this before." Nonetheless, Paul seems concerned about exposing Miranda to this new knowledge of the birth process. Usually impatient and condescending toward Miranda, he approaches her "with an eager friendliness, a confi- dential tone quite unusual in him," instructing her never to tell what they've seen. When Miranda remembers the image of the rabbits as an adult, immediately it is replaced by a vision of Paul, "whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands."

Themes

Coming of age

Only nine years old during the main part of the narrative, Miranda is not yet interested in the stuff of womanhood, like her older sister Maria's violet talcum powder or wearing pretty dresses. When she puts on the ring her brother Paul finds among the empty graves in their family's cemetery, however, she begins to feel differently. Before, she had been content to play in overalls and a hired-man's hat, "scratching around aimlessly and pleasurably as any young animal"; now, wearing the ring, she suddenly feels an urge to "put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees." It is as if she starts the transformation from child to woman.

That transformation is pushed further along when Miranda sees the pregnant belly of the rabbit her brother shoots. Paul takes the unborn baby rabbits from their mother's womb, and Miranda is filled with curiosity and excitement. Looking at the babies, she learns more about what it means to be female: "She understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and so steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she had to know." Although Miranda won't be a woman for several years, she is already changed by the incident. Before, she might have wanted the skin of the rabbits for her dolls' fur coats, but not anymore. Without fully knowing why or what has happened, Miranda puts a part of her childhood innocence away forever.

Redemption

Although the story begins in a grave and ends with the death of a pregnant rabbit, it also celebrates a triumph over the grave, especially through the use of Christian symbolism. It begins with empty graves, no longer the resting place of dead bodies, but a playground for young children—new life in the face of death. In the grave of her grandfather, Miranda finds a silver dove—the screw-head for a coffin. Even in the context of the story, the dove acts as a Christian symbol of rebirth, for that is why it is used to decorate the coffins of the dead.

Playing among the graves, Miranda and Paul seem to be in a kind of Eden; they are in a "garden of tangled rose bushes and ragged cedar trees and cypress." We can guess that there will be a fall, however, when Miranda asks if she can "have the first snake" in their hunt, suggesting the snake that led Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. Shortly thereafter, Miranda has her first taste of forbidden knowledge, as well. Upon seeing the bodies of the unborn baby rabbits, Miranda's innocence transforms instantly into an irreversible awareness of both birth and death: "Having seen, she felt as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always just known this."

If the story of the rabbits suggests a kind of fall for Miranda, the end of the story holds out the possibility of redemption. When, twenty years later, she remembers the event, it happens like a resurrection: "the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place." Then, the vision of dead rabbits fades into a memory of Paul, "standing again in the blazing sunshine—the silver dove over and over in his hands." The image of Paul in the bright light suggests a revelation—perhaps even the epiphany of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. The focus of that revelation is the dove, another symbol of rebirth; resurrected from her memory, Miranda's fall from innocence and her vision of death are redeemed by the possibility of salvation.

Social order

Without a mother to guide them, Miranda's family adopts practices that contradict prevailing social standards. Miranda's boyish dress—"dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man's straw hat, and thick brown sandals"—raises eyebrows among the neighbors. "Ain't you ashamed of yoself, Missy?" they ask her. "It's aginst the Scriptures to dress like that." Her older sister Maria "rode at a dead run with only a rope knotted around her horse's nose." As the story explains, such unfeminine behavior is a serious affront: "it was making a scandal in the countryside, for the year was 1903, and in the back country the law of female decorum had teeth in it."

Behavioral standards determined by gender are closely tied up with other kinds of social order in "The Grave." Although the neighbors ask Miranda about her clothes, they are at least as concerned with her father's slipping social status, the result of being snubbed in Miranda's grandmother's will: "Some of his old neighbors reflected with vicious satisfaction that now he would probably not be so stiffnecked, nor have any more high-stepping horses either."

Thus when Miranda puts on the old ring, she feels a desire not only for feminine trappings, but also for a return to her family's grand past: "she had vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure." At once, the ring seems to symbolize a standard of femininity and an aristocratic social status, suggesting that perhaps the two ideals are closely related.

Style

Symbolism

"The Grave" is rich with symbolism that can be interpreted in many different ways; such symbols can be called "multivalent." For example, the ring Paul finds in the empty graves and gives to Miranda seems to symbolize for her both an ideal of femininity and the now-lost wealth of her family. The rabbit Paul shoots was pregnant; her dead body thus reflects both death and life, and for Miranda, it marks both a fall from innocence and an initiation into womanhood. Finally, Miranda's visit to the foreign marketplace twenty years later suggests the power of symbolism. Seeing a tray of sugar sweets shaped like baby birds and rabbits—animals she and Paul hunted that day—the full force of that incident immediately returns, making her temporarily immobile. The symbolic power of those little candies brings the entire incident to life for her again.

Modernism

Porter's writing style in "The Grave" shares some characteristics with modernism, a literary movement that occurred after World War I. While not as radically experimental as the works that frequently are associated with modernism—James Joyce's *Ulysses* or T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example—"The Grave" exhibits modernist tendencies in its spare but poetic style, its avoidance of a strictly linear plot, and its emphasis on fluid boundaries. Modernism was not only a literary but also a cultural movement, which stood in opposition to older Victorian social standards and practices, particularly its rigid hierarchies of class, race, and gender. Modernism was particularly important in the American South, which was also engaged in a conflict between its plantation past and a newly developing, less stratified social order. In this sense, too, Porter's writing shares modernist concerns: in her depiction of Miranda's transgression of feminine standards, in allusions to her family's fall from a grand past, and in the graphic and ambiguously positive representation of feminine reproductive power.

Epilogue

The final scene in "The Grave," in which an older Miranda suddenly recalls the image of the dead rabbits, functions as a kind of epilogue to the story. Normally, we might expect the epilogue to assist the reader in interpreting the events of the story better, particularly since we first understand them through the eyes of Miranda as a nine-year-old child. This epilogue is remarkable in that it seems to make the meaning of the story less clear, or more ambiguous; Porter's conclusion emphasizes Miranda's contradictory feelings —"like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day"—rather than providing a kind of closure. Similarly, the epilogue contrasts two very different images from Miranda's memory of the day: "the bloody heap" of the rabbits and "her brother—again in the blazing sunshine—turning the silver dove over and over in his

hands." The epilogue thus compels the reader to consider the relationship between these two images, and to wonder what that day really meant to Miranda.

Setting

The Southern setting of "The Grave" provides the reader with a great deal of background information not explicitly stated in the story. Porter announces that the year is 1903, so the story happens in Texas not long after the Civil War and Reconstruction had devastated the South. Thus the "family legend of past wealth and leisure" evokes images of plantations and a Southern aristocracy destroyed by both the war and the economic decline it caused. Miranda's "powerful social sense" and concern with seeming "ill-bred" reflect not merely an individual personality trait, but a Southern sense of humiliation and disgrace. The Southern setting also colors Porter's depiction of feminine stereotypes. When she describes Miranda's desire to "put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees," the story evokes not just any ideal of womanhood, but a Southern belle. As a result, Miranda's desire to return to the house suggests a nostalgia for the South's pre-War greatness, although the ambiguity of the story does not allow that nostalgia to remain.

Historical Context

Reconstruction Era in the South

The period following the Civil War in the South was a tumultuous one. Although Abraham Lincoln had favored a more forgiving approach to reuniting the states, following his assassination more radical Republicans took over, eventually managing Southern state governments by military rule. Already defeated in the Civil War, the South was further humiliated by the continued forcible domination of the North. By 1890, just a decade before the setting of "The Grave," the South was ranked last in every category when compared to other regions: lowest in per capita income, lowest in public health, lowest in education. For Southerners who could remember the glory of the South before the Civil War, this was a great blow to their pride.

Women's Movement

In the early twentieth century, the women's movement picked up steam with the push to give women the vote. The suffrage movement had been growing since the mid-1800s, beginning with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention on women's rights headed by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. That movement was closely related to the abolitionist movement—women who supported civil rights for African Americans also began to demand civil rights for themselves. Not until 1914, however, did the voting rights amendment have any realistic chance of succeeding, and from then until its eventual ratification in 1920 the question of women's rights was one of the most hotly debated topics in public discourse. Having gained the right to vote, women were still considered second-class citizens in both domestic and professional life, although some outspoken women—who were often vehemently chastised—continued to work for increased freedom for women. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt, during her twelve years as First Lady (1933- 1945), insisted that only female reporters cover her, to extend opportunities for female journalists.

Socialism

In the 1920s and 30s, as Porter began her fiction-writing career, artists and intellectuals in the United States increasingly moved to the left politically, allying themselves with socialism, communism, and sometimes the Communist Party, and with the growing labor movement of the early twentieth century. Communism was also a force in the political upheavals of Mexico, which Porter documented as a journalist, marked by a concern for the Indian laboring classes. Socialist rhetoric of the area was characterized by class antagonism and frustration with the power of an entrenched establishment—an old order—versus laborers and smallscale farmers, such as Porter's father. Flirtation with radical politics was quite common among the cultural elite of the period, but by the end of the 1930s it was waning significantly; the surge of patriotic sentiment occasioned

by World War II then struck a decisive blow. For Porter personally, the corruption of the new government established in Mexico, which she felt had betrayed the lower classes of Indian Mexicans, contributed to her disillusionment.

Literary Trends

Although specific dates are difficult to determine, the artistic movement referred to as modernism began in earnest after the First World War and "ended," or was supplanted by, postmodernism after the Second World War. Major works in the modernist canon were published in 1922, including James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*. Other artists associated with modernism include authors Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound, painter Pablo Picasso, and composers Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. Because the features of modernism vary with the artists, a cohesive definition is impossible to create, but it can be characterized by the attempt to break from traditions of the past, especially those of social structures and conventional morality. Formally, modernist art of all genres tended to violate norms of realistic representation, coherence, straightforward structure, and proper syntax.

Critical Overview

"The Grave" was first published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1935, but it did not receive much critical attention until it was published again in 1944 as part of a collection of stories, *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*. In this collection, "The Grave" was grouped with a smaller collection of short stories focusing on the character of Miranda, called "The Old Order."

Early reviews of *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* were mainly positive, hailing Porter as a careful stylist and an important contributor to the genre of the American short story. In *The Saturday Review*, Howard Mumford Jones admired the stories' "smooth literary texture" and the "exquisite rightness" of her style. However, he also criticizes her for an "approach [that] sometimes reminds one of a cat stalking its prey with unnecessary caution," suggesting that her roundabout storytelling methods decrease the stories' dramatic power. Similarly, Joseph Warren Beach, while admiring Porter as a "truth-teller" who was "refreshingly free from self-consciousness," cautioned that the "deceptive quietness in her tone . . . may lead us to do less than justice to her writing." Writing for the *Kenyon Review*, Marguerite Young claimed that "Miss Porter's great service to the short story has been . . . that in her hands it acquires a new stature and significance."

Later critics would most frequently discuss symbolism in her work, finding "The Grave" in particular a story amenable to a formalist approach—a critical approach that emphasizes studying the story as a discrete whole, apart from considerations of the author's biography or her other works. Such critics therefore considered "The Grave" without considering the context of "The Old Order" or any of the other stories in which Miranda was a central character. The ring and the dove found in the graves, the rabbits, and the grave itself have each been explained by a variety of different interpretations. William Prater interprets Miranda's exchange of the dove for the ring as "symbolizing her unconscious willingness to trade her childhood innocence for the knowledge that the gold wedding ring represents," adding that the grave represents "the 'burial place' of her mind in which she represses an unpleasant but meaningful experience." In response to scholars' attempts to fix meanings for the various symbols in the story, Dale Kramer suggests that the symbolism of "The Grave" works on both intellectual and subliminal levels. His reading of the story thus emphasizes the unconscious, and he argues, like others, that the form and symbolism of the story indicate Miranda's psychological repression of "the fuller implications of sexual knowledge" contained in the vision of the unborn rabbits.

Some critics suggested that despite Porter's alleged atheism (alleged because some say Porter was Catholic), the symbolism of "The Grave" was predominantly Christian, and subsequently offered Christian interpretations of the story. In a defense of his formalist methodology, George Cheatham dismisses the importance of Porter's own beliefs to argue that the story should stand on its own. In that context, Cheatham proposes that the dove "unquestionably symbolizes the resurrection of man's immortal soul through the power of the Holy Spirit." In a later essay, Cheatham adds to this

reading of the symbolism of the grave, arguing that "Miranda rejects all inherited structures of meaning— the past, the mythic, and the sacred (all suggested by the silver dove)—for the freedom of existence unmediated by structure—for the present, the personal, and the profane (all suggested by the rabbit)." Constance Rooke and Bruce Wallis also interpret "The Grave" in terms of Christian symbolism, claiming that "criticism [of the story] has continued to neglect the story's paradigm of our most primal racial myth, that of the fall of man, which is itself the pattern of a primal experience in the life of each individual." They see Miranda's grandmother's garden as the fallen Garden of Eden, a reading they buttress with Miranda's mention of the snake, Miranda's and Paul's names, the neglect of the trees and rose bushes, and more. Thus they do not read Miranda's later vision of the rabbits, quickly replaced by a vision of Paul, as a symptom of repressing sexual knowledge, but rather as a sign of her knowledge of the possibility of redemption and resurrection. "With its end in the 'blazing sunshine' of such new knowledge, this is decidedly not the story of a willful self-blinding, but rather of an epiphany of the first water."

More recent essays have taken a turn away from the formalist practice of basing an interpretation only on the story itself, and have looked at "The Grave" in terms of the other "Miranda" stories, emphasizing the theme of truth. At the same time, recent criticism has also focused on gender issues. Janis P. Stout looks at the Miranda stories together, finding Miranda, like Porter, to be a "truthteller in a world of false speakers." Kaye Gibbons looks at how Miranda's sense of truth develops throughout the stories, seeing "The Grave" as a kind of conclusion. In it, she argues, Miranda learns to stop digging beneath the surface for the truth and allow it to come to her instead. Judith Kegan Gardiner asks how Porter's writing in "The Grave" might reflect a "female esthetic," arguing that the story illustrates "wider possibilities for the female artist than initially seem to be available to the [story's] hero."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Strohmer has a Ph.D. in English literature and has written widely on English, European, and American literature. In the following essay, she discusses Porter's use of the grotesque in "The Grave."

Many of Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda stories present grotesque images, especially grotesque interpretations of female bodies. In those misshapen and sometimes tortured bodies, we can see the results of restrictive and sometimes fatal cultural codes for Southern women. However, these stories also depict grotesque images of women that suggest the possibility of escaping these roles by re-creating the grotesque, not as deformed or unspeakable, but as beautiful and worth celebrating. In these stories, Porter inverts grotesque images of women that have suppressed them and reinvents those images to give women power.

"The Grave" provides a clear example of how Porter adapts the grotesque to her own unique purposes. In this final story from "The Old Order," Miranda and her brother Paul are hunting rabbits when Paul discovers that he has killed a pregnant mother rabbit:

Brother lifted the oddly bloated belly. "Look," he said, in a low amazed voice. "It was going to have young ones." Very carefully he slit the thin flesh from the center ribs to the flanks, and a scarlet bag appeared. He slit again and pulled the bag open, and there lay a bundle of tiny rabbits, each wrapped in a thin scarlet veil. The brother pulled these off and there they were, dark gray, their sleek wet down lying in minute even ripples, like a baby's head just washed, their unbelievably small delicate ears folded close, their little blind faces almost featureless.

The body of the pregnant rabbit conforms closely to the interpretation of grotesque bodies outlined by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, in his important and widely read *Rabelais and His World*. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a body in the process of rebirth and renewal, a body that contains multiple bodies—just like the body of the pregnant rabbit. Yet for Bakhtin, the pregnant body is a degraded body. In the passage above, however, Porter's description of the pregnant body of the rabbit re-creates it as an elevated body. The children treat the body with reverence, kneeling before it in near-religious awe. Miranda seems even to receive an almost divine revelation from her vision of the mother rabbit: "She understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she needed to know." The image of the grotesque female body attracts Miranda. She wants to see, she wants to know; she is filled with "shocked delight" when confronted with the power of her own body. She embraces the ambiguous, multifarious nature of the rabbit body for herself.

Yet the framing of her revelation suggests what she leaves behind in order to claim that grotesque— really, her own feminine power. Just before she sees the rabbit, Miranda decides she wants to return to her family's legendary aristocratic past. She has been wearing masculine clothing—overalls and a hired man's hat—but looking at the ring she

found earlier makes her want to take them off. For Miranda, the ring symbolizes the mythic Southern past, in particular mythologized Southern womanhood, as the ring shines "with the serene purity of fine gold." The qualities of serenity and especially purity represent the essence of what it was to be an ideal Southern woman. The gold evokes a memory of a golden age from Miranda's family's past, an age from which the South has fallen, and its incongruity with Miranda's "grubby" appearance suggests the impossibility of truly returning to that age. The image of the ring itself—a closed, encircling band—also suggests the confinement inherent in the gender roles of the old order.

Nevertheless, Miranda begins to long for a lost Southern past upon looking at the ring, almost instinctively:

She wanted to go back to the farmhouse, take a good cold bath, dust herself with plenty of Maria's violet talcum powder . . . put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees. . . . These things were not all she wanted, of course; she had vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure.

Miranda wants to feminize herself, but in this passage, she must achieve that feminization by being clean, white, bounded, and unmoving. She wants to become feminine by becoming the statuelike ideal of Southern mythology. In the context of Bakhtin's theories of the body, she envisions herself as a classical, closed body. Covered in talcum powder, Miranda cannot even sweat. She is bound by a sash, a symbol of femininity much like the ring that precipitated this feminine fantasy. But the origin of the ring—the grave—implies again the impossibility of achieving this ideal. The ring comes not only from the past, but a past that is dead and buried. It is a part of the old order.

Although Miranda thinks of "turning back," to both a mythic past and home, she stops and realizes that she must continue moving forward for now, if only to catch up with her brother, Paul. At the moment Miranda decides to keep going, she comes upon the rabbits, and is confronted with a very different image of what it is to be female. In this interpretation of femininity, the color of female is not ghostly white but bloody scarlet: the rabbits' flesh is scarlet, the womb is scarlet, the rabbit fetuses are each wrapped in a "scarlet veil." The female body is not bounded, but open. Where the living female of the old order seems nearly dead in her statuesque classicality, the dead female here contains the process of life. By employing grotesque imagery that depicts the mother rabbit as more natural than the Southern feminine ideal, Porter inverts the hierarchy of classical and grotesque bodies to establish the grotesque female body as an ideal in itself.

Miranda does not celebrate her revelation, however; her delight in recognizing the rabbit's feminine power is cut with a fear of having transgressed the boundaries of acceptable knowledge. She begins to tremble without knowing why, and she realizes she now knows something that Paul had known all along. Miranda has taken

possession of a knowledge that had traditionally been held by men. Porter's description of Paul's response to the scene confirms his control of this knowledge: he speaks in a low voice, "as if he were talking about something forbidden." He tells her, "They were just about to be born," dropping his voice on the last word. By Paul's placing a kind of reverse emphasis on the word "born" through the low, passive voice, Porter suggests that the female body made grotesque by childbirth is considered by male authority to be unspeakable and an inappropriate sight for a woman. Finally, when they are leaving the woods, Paul confronts Miranda about her transgression of this gendered boundary of knowledge: "Don't you ever tell a living soul you saw this. Don't tell a soul. Don't tell Dad because I'll get into trouble. He'll say I'm leading you into things you ought not to do. He's always saying that." Paul's admonitions also reveal the masculine possession of sexual knowledge, for their father controls it. Yet Paul also implies that his own knowledge is acceptable, as long as he does not share it with Miranda. Consequently, Miranda does not tell anyone, fearing punishment for her transgressive knowledge.

Thus Miranda finds the female grotesque body both terrifying and appealing. She can hardly bring herself to voice her understanding of it in human terms. When Paul explains to her what she has seen, she asserts that she knows, but she hesitates to relate her knowledge to her own body: "'I know,' said Miranda, 'like kittens. I know, like babies.'" Both Miranda's phrasing, first making the analogy with kittens before extending it to her own species, and Porter's writing, inserting a dialogue marker ("said Miranda") in her assertion, slow Miranda's process of accepting what she knows. When she finally does accept it, she becomes "quietly and terrible agitated." Notably, the once delicately beautiful, feminized rabbit is transformed into a "bloody heap." Having seen the positive but transgressive potential for a female grotesque, having internalized and acknowledged it, she allows Paul to bury the evidence— of her potential and of her knowledge. She seems to reject that view of feminine power. Yet she also refuses the rabbit's skin, which she would normally give to Uncle Jimbilly to make fur coats for her dolls. In that, she seems to reject traditional forms of feminine adornment—forms she might associate with the old order.

Thus through Miranda, Porter reclaims the grotesque as a sign of feminine creative power, but she does so ambivalently. Through that ambivalence, Porter can both embrace and deny the freeing yet frightening changes in gender roles that accompany the downfall of the old order.

Source: Shaun Strohmer, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

The following excerpt describes the relationship between Porter and the character of Miranda in "The Grave."

In "The Grave," through her fictional representative Miranda, Porter describes an incident which had happened about the time her grandmother died in 1901. Porter was accompanying her brother on a rabbit-shooting expedition when he shot and eviscerated a female rabbit carrying young. In the story Miranda is just experiencing the first stirrings of her female destiny. She is growing tired of being a tomboy and yearns for the trappings of femininity: pretty clothes, jewelry, and perfumes. The knowledge thrust upon her so crudely and abruptly when her brother lays open the womb of the dead rabbit is a shock. Yet this knowledge of the other, more dangerous, side of female destiny seems something she has really known all along (Miranda's mother, like Porter's own, had died as a result of childbearing).

The rabbit incident is powerful enough to stand alone as a complete story, but Porter adds another dimension by placing it in the context of Miranda's whole life, showing that the effects of this small event are neither trivial nor transient and that the past is not easily sloughed off. She tells of Miranda years later walking through the marketplace of a strange city in a strange country; a Mexican-Indian vendor shows her a tray of dyed sugar sweets. Suddenly the sights and sounds converge to bring back to her mind, from where it has long lain buried, the memory of her brother and the rabbit. The memory horrifies her, reinforcing the frightening nature of the incident and showing the capacity of past experiences to lie dormant and make an unexpected ambush.

Source: Joan Givner, "Katherine Anne Porter," in *DLB*, Gale, Vol. 102, 1991, pp. 223-47.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, DeMouy examines Miranda's inner conflict in "The Grave."

In "The Grave," all the ghosts of the Old Order are gathered up and Miranda begins to understand what ancestry will require of her. In a paradigm of the separation from the bosom of her family that she will eventually achieve, this story focuses on the removal of several caskets from the family graveyard, which are then laid to rest "for eternity" in a public cemetery. After the coffins have been disinterred from the farm's graveyard, Miranda and her brother Paul play in the empty trenches and find treasure in the pungent soil, a legacy from their dead ancestors. Later, Paul shoots a rabbit, and together they discover tiny fetuses in the dead rabbit's womb.

Once again the mysteries of birth and death revolve around the matrix of sex; the conjunction of these creates an epiphany so fearsome to nine-yearold Miranda that she will repress it for many years. Once again a story is a window on a psychological trauma, although most readings emphasize the initiation itself and ignore the fact that the adult Miranda remembers the experience only with horror and dread. "The Grave" focuses on Miranda's stifled fears about her womanhood, raising a simple story about sexual knowledge to the social and philosophical level, as Cleanth Brooks has pointed out. On the social level, we can observe again a fragile, traditional femininity approved by Miranda's society warring with the sturdy individualism in Miranda's psyche. Sex complicates this struggle. Miranda's dim awareness of sexuality and fertility among the farm animals expands to include an understanding of the reproduction of human life. For both her and Paul, birth is a forbidden knowledge. After carelessly intruding on this mystery they both feel guilt and shame. But Miranda is not traumatized until her quick mind sees the link between her femaleness and the precarious, bloody ritual of birth. Giving life means risking death. This is her true legacy from her grandmother and her society.

The personal story related here achieves philosophical significance because it parallels Adam and Eve's archetypal fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden. Miranda's first sexual knowledge is not only forbidden and shocking, but carries with it guilt and the danger of expulsion as well as the sure knowledge of her own mortality. Remembering that some ethnic versions of Genesis make the sin of Adam and Eve a sexual one, we can better appreciate how the primal images here create the story of one young girl's repulsion at sexual knowledge or ultimately the story of male/female disaffection.

The use of symbols which invoke simultaneously— and often ironically—all three levels of meaning is, as always, deft. The central symbol of the grave is a good example. It is, of course, a burial place and most often associated with death. However, placed in context with the death of the pregnant rabbit, the grave is also a womb, suggesting a beginning rather than an end. It connotes not only burying, but the possibility of unburying, of resurrecting. This becomes particularly significant in its third meaning, for the grave also suggests the subconscious, where Miranda constantly buries and unburies her secrets and fears.

Aside from the overriding significance of the grave as symbol, Porter uses the Eden archetype to underscore the primal importance of the children's experience in the graveyard. First of all, the story begins with one of the narrator's infrequent references to her grandfather, whose bones her grandmother has unearthed three times to ensure that they will be buried together. It is the only time we are reminded that Miranda is descended from a male as well as a female ancestor. This pairing reminds us therefore that "male and female He created them," as does the pairing of Miranda and her brother Paul as they play in the open graves. In every other mention of Miranda's siblings, her older sister Maria is also included. Maria's absence from the graveyard reinforces the pairing essential to the continuation of life.

In addition, the cemetery is secluded, a small plot "in a corner" of their grandmother's first farm. It is a pleasant if neglected "garden of tangled rose bushes and ragged cedar trees and cypress, [and] uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass," Edenic in an unpretentious way. The earth smells "sweet" and "corrupt," suggesting not barrenness and death, but fruitfulness and continued life, which the children also represent, as the second generation to issue from the dead whose graves they play in. The children are themselves ignorant of the potency of the earth and find the graves rather commonplace: "when the coffin was gone a grave was just a hole in the ground."

Nevertheless, Miranda and Paul find silver and gold in these graves, in the form of a dove-shaped coffin screw head and a gold wedding band, "carved with intricate flowers and leaves," redolent of the peace and natural beauty which is the real value of the garden graveyard. Miranda and Paul echo the first man and woman, too, in that they owned the garden formerly, but no longer do. Thus, when they pocket their talismans, Miranda suggests they ought to leave before somebody sees them and tells; feeling like trespassers where they were once at home, they quit the place to hunt.

The act of hunting joins the Edenic images in the first part of the story and the sexual symbolism that occurs throughout. The earth, of course, is nurturing and feminine, and the open graves in the fecund soil suggest the womb, as we have noted. When Miranda and Paul leap in and out of the holes, they unwittingly mimic the birth they have received from the ancestors whose bones have rested in the graves.

They are equally unaware of the role identity they exhibit in claiming the treasure they have found in the graves. Paul is "more impressed" with the silver dove Miranda has unearthed, while she is "smitten" by the thin gold ring he has found. His choice of the dove "with spread wings" associates him with the free flight of the bird and the hunt, since doves are one of the prey the children seek. Ambiguity of image is again utilized here since it is live birds that ordinarily entice Paul, but the silver dove he claims is not only without life itself, it is a death emblem, a screw head for a coffin. Signifi- cantly, it is as lifeless as the doves Paul will shoot if he can find them.

The Winchester rifles the children carry are phallic, and the use of them an indicator of masculine potency. Paul has had more experience with the rifle, and Miranda defers to him. He wants a shot at the first dove or rabbit they see; and evoking simultaneously the

primacy of Eden and the phallus, Miranda responds, "What about snakes? . . . Can I have the first snake?"

Miranda's inadequacy with the rifle ensures that she is no threat to Paul's masculinity; it demonstrates as well that her tomboyishness is not a pervasive masculinity. On the contrary, her desire for the gold ring and the fact that it fits her thumb perfectly suggest just the opposite. Miranda is a female through and through, although her appearance—in a period and culture which set store by appearance—might suggest otherwise. The overalls, shirt, and sandals she wears for play are identical to her brother's. She and her sister are accustomed to riding bareback astride their horses. All this seems agreeable and comfortable to Miranda since her father approves.

But her "powerful social sense, which was like a fine set of antennae radiating from every pore of her skin" makes her feel ashamed when she recognizes that her tomboy clothing shocks the old women who respected her grandmother—even if the clothes are practical and comfortable, and the old women themselves backbiting hypocrites. This is perhaps the clearest statement in Porter's fiction of the paradoxical emotions behind Miranda's warring impulses: Grandmother and her social standards can inflict shame even in the face of a rational understanding that a new standard makes more sense.

Now with the gold ring on her dirty thumb, she is linked to everything it symbolizes: the unbroken circle suggests the preciousness of her virginity as well as the security, love, and honor she will derive from a respectable marriage. She wishes to put aside her overalls in favor of a totally impractical—but ideal—femininity: "She wanted to go back to the farmhouse, take a good cold bath, dust herself with plenty of Maria's violet talcum powder . . . put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees. . . . " It is perhaps because her reverie is interrupted at precisely this point that the climactic moment has such an impact for her. In the next instant, Paul kills a rabbit precipitously and with one shot. Miranda's romantic image is supplanted by the realistic one of Paul with a phallic knife, expertly skinning the rabbit's bloated, pregnant body. Miranda is too naïve to consciously register that a male has killed this special rabbit, but the point is not lost on her unconscious mind. Even if rabbits were not fertility symbols, the image of the tiny fetuses, "dark gray, their sleek wet down lying in minute even ripples, like a baby's head just washed, their unbelievably small delicate ears folded close, their little blind faces almost featureless," would be sufficient to suggest burgeoning life aborted.

Accustomed to seeing dead animals, Miranda reacts as she does to Great-Aunt Eliza's telescope: "She looked and looked . . . filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty." However, her reaction shifts abruptly and without explanation when she sees that "there's blood running over them." In that moment of pity and fear, she sees the tragic implications of birth. She begins to tremble with a new insight, understanding at once "a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body," understanding distantly that the female prize she has wished to be could not remain dressed in organdy and seated in a wicker chair; she would be claimed in marriage to bear bloody

babies who are sometimes aborted and who sometimes bring death to their mother, even as they seize life for themselves.

The story does not state that Miranda remembers the death of her own mother in childbirth, but certainly she recognizes for the first time the blood rites of womanhood, even though she does not recognize words like menstruation, intercourse, and parturition. She feels "terribly agitated" and, significantly, has taken the masculine rifle again under her arm. Whereas the fetuses were before "wonderful little creatures," they are now a "bloody heap." Miranda wants nothing to do with the rabbit skin, a prize she usually claims. Paul, whose guilt already shows in his voice, makes a grave of the mother's body for the young and furtively hides them all away. At last he makes a secret of what they have seen, adding to Miranda's agitation the sense that they have trespassed.

She worries, is confused and unhappy, and then finally represses the experience until, twenty years later, she is halted in a foreign marketplace by a vendor carrying a tray of sugar sweets shaped like baby rabbits. It triggers the image of that earlier sight and, we are told, she is "reasonlessly horri- fied" by the "dreadful vision," lest we doubt the psychological shock of the original experience. In repressing her earlier memory, Miranda has refused to relinquish her ghost; and, failing that, she has not been able to exorcise it.

Her reasonless horror is finally dissolved by the thought that she and Paul had, that day, "found treasure in the opened graves." But it is not the gold ring which hangs in her mind's eye nearly twenty years later. It is the image of Paul, his face lit by the sun, full of potency and possibility, handling the silver dove which was hers first, before she ignorantly traded it away.

This time she trades her ignorance, reclaiming the dove in its positive image: the spirit's ability to fly free. With that knowledge, Miranda expects to resurrect her own freedom, but even more complex epiphanies await her.

Source: Jane Krause DeMouy, *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*, University of Texas Press, 1983, pp. 139-44.

Adaptations

"The Grave" was recorded as an audiocassette by Audio Partners in 1989, along with three other stories from *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. The stories are read by Porter's lifelong friend actress Siobahn McKenna.

Topics for Further Study

Although it was initially published on its own, "The Grave" was later published as the last in a group of stories called "The Old Order,"all of which describe the life of Miranda's family. Porter gives fuller descriptions of Miranda's grandmother, her father Harry, and her Uncle Jimbilly, who are mentioned only briefly in "The Grave," and of the family's slave-owning past. Read the stories that precede "The Grave" and see how your interpretation of the story changes. Does knowing the full family history add to your understanding of Miranda's "vague stirrings" for the past? What kind of family memories and secrets were buried in the grandmother's cemetery?

Critics frequently suggest that the character of Miranda, who appears in several of Porter's short stories, is closely related to Porter herself. Read parts of one of Porter's biographies with Miranda in mind. How does Porter compare to the ideal of Southern womanhood Miranda dreams about? Can you make a connection between her interest in creating an illustrious Porter family tree and Miranda's memories of her family's grand past?

Porter's work is often considered as part of a body of literature by Southern women writers, including Eudora Welty and, later, Flannery O'Connor. Read some of their works, comparing and contrasting them to Porter's. How do they depict Southern women? How do they depict the South itself? Are there certain elements of their work that characterizes Southern women's writing?

The Reconstruction period was a particularly dark one for the South. Plantations and families that had relied on free slave labor were often lost, unable to run their farms or their households. Find an account of a family or families that struggled with this transition. What hardships did they face? What hardships did their freed slaves face? How did the fall of the plantation system change Southern society?

Miranda seems shocked but intrigued by the womb of the mother rabbit and her unborn babies. She knows a little bit about reproduction, but Porter suggests that this is forbidden knowledge. What was education for women like in 1903? How do you think Miranda would be likely to learn about sex and reproduction? How has education for women and sex education changed in the last century?

Porter makes much of Miranda's clothing in "The Grave"—both the overalls and sandals she is wearing and the fancy dress she'd like to wear. The old neighbors suggest that Miranda's clothing was inappropriate. What would a young Southern girl be likely to wear in 1903? How would it vary depending on her social status?

Critics often discuss the symbolism of various objects in "The Grave," including the ring. Adrienne Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" also describes a ring that seems to be very symbolic. After reading Rich's poem, can you see any similarities in how Rich and Porter use the ring as a symbol? In what ways does Porter's use of symbolism seem, as critics have suggested, especially "poetic"?

Compare and Contrast

1900s: Natural childbirth—without the use of drugs, anesthesia, or other devices—is the norm for most women. Home birth is common, particularly in rural areas.

1930s: Grantly Dick-Read publishes *Natural Childbirth*, proposing childbirth techniques that would later be adapted by natural childbirth advocates such as Ferdinand Lamaze. Nonetheless, the trend toward increasing medical intervention continues as labor and delivery is treated like an operation.

Turn of the Millennium: The rate of Caesarian— or surgical—birth is at an all-time high of 25 to 30 percent in some hospitals, particularly those serving well-insured white women. At the same time, the increasing popularity of birthing centers and nurse-midwives offers women the opportunity to deliver naturally, with medical assistance standing by in case of emergency.

1900s: In 1902, Elizabeth Cady Stanton dies, never having achieved her lifelong goal of winning the right to vote. In her final years with the National American Women's Suffrage Association, Stanton is censured by the increasingly conservative organization for her radical feminist views.

1930s: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt takes an active, often unpopular role in advancing the status of women. In 1933, she holds the first-ever press conference called by a First Lady, inviting only female journalists. In 1934, she assists her female friend Caroline O'Day in her successful campaign for Congress. Eleanor Roosevelt frequently arranges meetings for civil rights and women's rights leaders to gain access to FDR.

Turn of the Millennium: Although the Equal Rights Amendment was declared dead in 1982, women still make small gains in public life. Elizabeth Dole, wife of former Senate majority leader and Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, becomes one of the serious major-party candidates for president. She drops out of the race frustrated by the pressure to fundraise.

1900s: The South is just coming out of a violent and difficult period of Reconstruction. Meanwhile, the United States as a whole is just coming out of a depression. Redistribution of land ownership and labor shortages following the abolition of slavery keep the South lagging behind the economic recovery of the North, which was fueled by the Industrial Revolution.

1930s: Following the stock market crash of 1929, the whole country plunges into the Great Depression, which peaks in 1933. The labor movement of the industrialized North was echoed in the organizing of poor whites and blacks of the largely rural South, who were hit especially hard.

Turn of the Millennium: Although the South has regained political power, rural areas of the region remain some of the poorest in the country.

1900s: The period from 1865 to 1900 can be termed the Realistic Period in American Literature, marked by novels from such authors as Mark Twain and Henry James. The first decade of the century marks a turn toward what is often called the Naturalistic Period, characterized by such authors as Jack London and Theodore Dreiser. Twain's humor aside, these authors often took a dark view of the natural and cultural challenges confronted by American men.

1930s: Post-war disillusionment contributes the rise of modernism. American modernists of the 1930s often reflected the tumultuous, class-conscious politics of the era, especially William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck.

Turn of the Millennium: Postmodern writing of the late twentieth century is characterized by more extreme manifestations of the counterculture tendencies of modernism. The postmodern movement reflects attempts to supplant so-called high culture with mass media: television, popular music, movies. Postmodern literature demonstrates a resistance to the notion of genre and an interest in popular culture.

What Do I Read Next?

A Curtain of Green and Other Stories, (1941) by Eudora Welty. Porter wrote the foreword to this classic collection of short stories by another major Southern woman writer. Like Porter's work, Welty's stories often deal with women and families, and are Southern in setting and style. One of the most famous stories in the collection, "Why I live at the P.O.," resembles Porter's style in its light touch and its undercurrent of darkness that is never fully explained.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider, (1939) by Katherine Anne Porter. This collection of three "short novels," as Porter calls them, offers more insight into the character of Miranda in "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." In the contrasting characters of Aunt Amy and Cousin Eva from "Old Mortality," Porter offers a striking critique of the ideal of Southern womanhood. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" presents Miranda as an adult; the story is much different in tone from the nostalgic stories of Miranda's childhood.

Katherine Anne Porter: A Life, by Joan Givner. Porter hand-picked Givner to write her biography. Although Givner's is the "official" version, she makes a clear effort to distinguish fact from fiction, despite Porter's admitted penchant for exaggeration, half-truths, and poetic license. The book details Porter's extensive travels, her writing career, her teaching, and her criticism, using extensive quotations from interviews with Porter, her family, and her literary contemporaries.

Recollections of a Southern Daughter: A Memoir by Cornelia Jones Pond, (edited 1999). This memoir recounts the social adjustments that came about as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction in the South, tracing the subject's plantation childhood through to "starting over" in post-war society. As an account of an actual Southern woman, the memoir offers the opportunity for comparison and contrast with Porter's depiction of a fallen South.

The Unvanquished, (1938), by William Faulkner. Set in Mississippi, this fictional story of the Sartoris family follows them through the Civil War, defeat, and Reconstruction. Like Porter, Faulkner was a Southern modernist; his vision of the South after the war provides a kind of masculine counterpart to Porter.

In the Land of Dreamy Dreams, (1989) by Ellen Gilchrist. A contemporary Southern woman writer, Gilchrist demonstrates how the short story and regional fiction have developed since Porter's time.

Further Study

Clark, William and Clinton MacHann, eds., *Katherine Anne Porter and Texas: An Uneasy Relationship*, Texas A & M University Press, 1990.

This collection of essays presents diverse views on Porter's status as a Southern writer. Several essays examine links between Porter's stories and events from her life.

Jones, Anne, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*, Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Jones discusses how the ideal of Southern womanhood was an obstacle to women with literary aspirations. Jones's suggestion that the ideal Southern woman was like a work of art—fragile, lovely, and inanimate— resonates both with Porter's description of Miranda in "The Grave" and with descriptions of Porter by her contemporaries and admirers.

Hilt, Katherine, ed., *Katherine Anne Porter: An Annotated Bibliography*, Garland Publishing, 1990.

This book-length bibliography is current to 1990, and collects interviews, book reviews, and criticism on Porter's works. The first section also offers an extensive list of first and subsequent publications of Porter's fiction, journalism, letters, poems, and more, including foreign language publications.

Singal, Joseph, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*, University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

Singal's book suggests that by the time Porter was writing, "Modernism had been firmly installed as the predominant style of literary and intellectual life" in the South. The study looks at modernism as a cultural rather than a merely artistic movement, making connections between literary style and the historical transformations of the period.

Yeager, Patricia, "The Poetics of Birth," in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, University of Michigan Press, 1992, pp. 262-96.

Yeager discusses birth imagery and the politics of reproduction in "The Grave" and Eudora Welty's short story "The Wide Net."

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Rooke, Constance, and Bruce Wallis, "Myth and Epiphany in Porter's 'The Grave,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 15, 1978, pp. 269-75.

Stout, Janis P., "Miranda's Guarded Speech: Porter and the Problem of Truth-Telling," in *Philological Quarterly*, 1987, pp. 259-78.

Walsh, Thomas, "From Texas to Mexico to Texas," in *Katherine Anne Porter and Texas: An Uneasy Relationship*, Texas A & M University Press, 1990.

Young, Marguerite, "Fictions Mystical and Epical" (review), *Kenyon Review*, 1945, pp. 149-54.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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