Holiday Study Guide

Holiday by Katherine Anne Porter

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Holiday□ by Katherine Anne Porter originally appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1960 but received more attention when it was included in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* in 1965. The story, however, had much earlier origins; Porter first wrote □Holiday□ in the early 1920s, based on a personal experience she had had several years earlier. Unsatisfied with the story, she set it aside and did not rediscover it until 1960, when she enlisted a friend to help her organize her personal papers. As she wrote in her introduction to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, □the story haunted me for years and I made three separate versions, with a certain spot in all three where the thing went off track. So I put it away . . . and I forgot it. It rose from one of my boxes of papers, after a quarter of a century, and . . . I saw at once that the first [version] was the right one.□ After a few minor changes, she sent it to the *Atlantic Monthly*. She won an O. Henry prize for the story in 1962.

□Holiday□ tells the tale of a young woman who, seeking to escape her troubles, takes a holiday to a rural Texas farm owned by a very traditional German family. The story centers on her relationship with the family's deformed and crippled servant girl. Later she discovers the girl is actually the eldest daughter of the family, though she is virtually a slave in the household. The main character's fascination and identification with this girl allows Porter to explore themes of alienation, isolation, and the complete sacrifice of an individual for the good of the greater community (in this case, the family). Like much of Porter's work, the story is drawn from her own experiences, and many critics believe that the main character (whose name the reader never learns) is Porter herself, describing her own alienation as a woman artist in a patriarchal society.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1890

Deathdate: 1980

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russell Porter on May 15, 1890, in Indian Creek, Texas, and lived a life that rivals any fiction. In her ninety years, she endured poverty, hardship, and severe illness; married and divorced four husbands; spent time with revolutionaries, literary giants, and powerful politicians; and traveled extensively. She witnessed two world wars, the Great Depression, and at age 82, covered the launch of the first mission to the moon for *Playboy* magazine.

Porter's life matched her flamboyant personality; she was gregarious, flirtatious, and quick to anger. Her lively social life often stalled her work, and she had many years in which she produced nothing but reams of correspondence. She lived much of her life in different countries, including Mexico, Germany, France, and Belgium.

Her mother died when Porter was just two, after which she was raised by her strict grandmother, who died when the child was eleven. Her father sank into depression after her mother's death and showed little interest in his children. Mired in poverty, she was eager to escape by marrying. At fifteen she married John Henry Koontz, the twenty-year-old son of a wealthy Texas family. But the couple was unhappy. Still, Porter remained legally married to Koontz for nine years, making this the longest of her four marriages.

Porter's first writing job was on the *Fort Worth Critic*. After a couple years in the newspaper business, she moved to New York and in 1920 published her first short stories. During the 1920s she wrote many stories that remained unfinished until much later in her life, including □Holiday.□ She also lived in Mexico for a time. Stories she published during this time include □Virgin Violeta,□ □Magic,□ □The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,□ and in 1929, □Flowering Judas,□ which was her most acclaimed work to date. In 1927, while in Massachusetts, Porter joined many other literary figures in protesting the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian anarchists who had been convicted of a brutal murder in Boston in 1921.

Porter began the 1930s with an unproductive (though lively) two years in Mexico where she met her third husband, Eugene Pressly. (Her second, Eugene Stock, she had married in 1924 and divorced in 1926.) In 1932, Porter and Pressly sailed to Europe on the *S.S. Werra*. Porter later used many of her experiences on the ship for her one and only novel, *Ship of Fools*. The couple lived briefly in Germany then in Paris, before returning to the States. In Paris, Porter published several stories, including □The Grave,□ □That Tree□ and □Hacienda.□ In 1935 the collection *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* was published. In 1937 Porter's stories □Noon Wine□ and □Pale Horse,

Pale Rider□ were published in small literary magazines; in 1939 they were published along with □Old Mortality□ in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels*, which drew great critical acclaim. Porter left Pressly and then married Albert Erskine, a young graduate student, in 1938, which quickly proved to be a mistake. In 1940 Porter and Erskine separated, and Porter took up residence at Yaddo, the artists' colony in New York, where she wrote □The Leaning Tower.□

The 1940s were unproductive. Porter contracted with publishers for many projects but finished few. In 1945, she accepted a position as a screenwriter. Though she was highly paid, she found the censorship intolerable. In 1948 she taught one year at Stanford University then returned to New York.

In 1953, Porter taught at the University of Michigan, and the next year, she taught at the University of Liege, Belgium. In 1955, she returned to the States and completed her novel in the fall of 1961. *Ship of Fools* made Porter wealthy for the first time in her life. The 1963 movie further increased her fortune. In 1966, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, which included □Holiday,□ won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1970, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings* was released. Her last work was □The Never-Ending Wrong,□ an essay on the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. On September 18, 1980, Porter died at the age of ninety.

Plot Summary

The main character of □Holiday□ begins the story by telling readers that this was a time in her life when she was □too young for some of the troubles□ she was having (though she never specifies exactly what the troubles are). Wanting to escape these troubles, she decides to take a holiday to the country. She confides this desire to her friend Louise, who exclaims that she has the perfect place: a Texas farm run by a traditional German family. While the narrator is skeptical of Louise's idyllic description of the farm (□Louise had . . . something near to genius for making improbable persons, places, and situations sound attractive□) she agrees to the idea, and a few days later she arrives at the Müller farm.

When she arrives at the station and surveys the □desolate mud-colored, shapeless scene,□ she feels justified in her skepticism. A boy of about twelve arrives and drives her to the farm in a ramshackle old wagon. At the farm, she meets the busy Müller family, including Mother Müller, a sturdy, imposing woman with a face □brown as seasoned bark.□ The oldest daughter is Annetje, the middle daughter Gretchen, and the youngest is Hatsy. The narrator is shown to her attic room by Hatsy, and after seeing her charming room□□For once, Louise had got it straight□□her attitude towards her holiday begins to improve. She enjoys the sounds of German being spoken in the home, because she does not speak German, and no one will expect her to understand or respond.

At dinner, the men of the family□Father Müller, his two sons, and the husbands of his daughters, who all live together at the farm□sit at the table, while the women stand behind them and serve them. The narrator, being a guest, is seated at the men's side of the table. It is at dinner on her first night at the farm that she first encounters Ottilie, a badly deformed and mute servant girl who cooks and serves the meal. She is ignored by the Müllers as she serves their dinner: □no one moved aside for her, or spoke to her, or even glanced after her when she vanished into the kitchen.□

It does not take long for the narrator to settle into the daily rhythm of life at the Müllers. She helps out with chores, entertains the many children of the Müller daughters, and enjoys watching the landscape come to life as spring arrives. One evening she is so enchanted by this natural beauty that she does not return to the farm until late in the evening, after the Müllers have already had their dinner. Hatsy calls for Ottilie to come and serve her dinner. As the narrator is waited on by the servant girl, for the first time she notices that Ottilie has the same slanted blue eyes and high cheekbones as the Müllers.

The family works the entire day on the farm, especially the women, who are constantly scrubbing the floors, milking the cows, and tending the children. While Father Müller is the wealthiest farmer in the community, this wealth does not translate into a life of leisure for his family. On Sundays, however, they all dress up to go dance to the music of a brass band at the Turnverein, a pavilion in a nearby clearing. Here all members of the little German community meets to socialize. One Sunday, the community comes

instead to the Müller house for the wedding of Hatsy and her fiancé. After the wedding, a huge feast is served by the unfortunate Ottilie, who continues to toil while the rest of the Müllers celebrate the happy event. □[N]othing could make her seem real,□ the narrator observes, □or in any way connected with the life around her.□

One morning shortly after the wedding, the narrator encounters Ottilie on the porch, peeling potatoes. Suddenly Ottilie jumps up, dropping the knife, and beckons to her. She grasps the narrator's sleeve and pulls her into the house, into her little bedroom, and shows the narrator an old photograph of a young child, about five years old. Ottilie pats the picture and then her own face and points out the name written on the back of the photo: Ottilie. The narrator then realizes that Ottilie is actually the eldest daughter of the Müllers. Ottilie begins to sob, and the narrator, for the first time, no longer finds her strange or distant, but feels a connection to her: □for an instant some filament lighter than cobweb spun itself out between that living center in her and in me . . . so that her life and mine were kin, even a part of each other.□

Life goes on at the Müller home; Gretchen gives birth to a baby boy one rainy evening, and the next day neighbor women stop by to see the newborn and do a little socializing. An impending storm sends them home early, and soon the Müller clan is laboring to save their farm and animals from torrential rains. In the downpour Mother Müller goes out to the barn, saves a newborn calf, and milks all the cows. She returns to the house, soaked to the skin, and barks out orders to the rest of the family as though nothing unusual has happened.

The next morning, however, it becomes clear that Mother Müller is not as indestructible as she seems. She takes to her bed with a fever, and as she becomes less and less responsive, the family begins to panic. They cannot send for the doctor because of the continued rain and flooding. By the afternoon, Mother Mueller is dead.

Two days later, just after the family has left the house to bury Mother Müller, the narrator, who is in her attic room, hears a terrible howling. Thinking something has happened to the family dog, she runs downstairs and discovers Ottilie in the kitchen, moaning and howling in her grief. The narrator goes outside and hitches up the pony to the rickety wagon that brought her there to the Müller house, and begins driving Ottilie to join the funeral procession. Once riding in the wagon, however, Ottilie begins to laugh. The narrator realizes that what Ottilie really needs is □a little stolen holiday, a breath of spring air and freedom on this lovely, festive afternoon.□ They head off for a drive together, to return in time for Ottilie to prepare a meal for the mourners; □They need not even know she had been gone.□

Characters

Louise

Louise is the narrator's friend, who recommends the Müller farm as the ideal spot for her holiday escape. Louise has a gift for describing people and places in exaggeratedly positive terms, and she describes the Müller farm as a pastoral, homespun paradise. The narrator, who is skeptical of Louise's descriptions, finds it to be considerably less appealing at first.

The Müller Family

The Müller family itself is such a cohesive unit that it functions as one character in the story. The members of the Müller family sacrifice their individual hopes and desires (assuming they have any) for the good of the family. Married couples do not go off on their own but are simply absorbed into the family; before Hatsy is even married, a new room has been added to the house for her and her husband. Every family member labors daily on the farm: □everybody worked all the time, because there was always more work waiting when they had finished what they were doing then.□ The only member of the family who stands out as having his own opinions and interests is Father Müller. The Müller sons and sons-in-law are mentioned only in passing, in large part because they spend their day in the fields, and the narrator spends her time either alone or with the other women.

Annetje Müller

Annetje is the eldest of the Müller daughters (next to Ottillie.) She has four children (one a newborn) and is hoping for a fifth. Annetje has a special affection for the baby animals on the farm; □The kittens, the puppies, the chicks, the lambs and calves were her special care.□ Of all the Müller daughters, Annetje has the gentlest nature, but even she treats Ottilie with indifference.

Father Müller

If Mother Müller is the brawn of the family, then Father Müller is the brains. While there are descriptions of Mother Müller engaged in strenuous physical activity on the farm□carrying heavy pails of milk on a yoke over her shoulders, carrying a calf on her back to safety during the storm□the readers' only indication of Father Müller's labor is in concert with the other men of the family: □The men . . . went out to harness the horses to the ploughs at sunrise.□ Father Müller is an atheist, who likes to sit in the parlor in the evening and read *Das Kapital* or play chess with his sons. Father Müller wields not physical but financial power: he is the wealthiest man in the German community, from whom almost all the other farmers rent land. His money allows him to overcome the

community's objections to his atheism. When the townsfolk will not elect his son-in-law as sheriff because of Father Müller's beliefs, Father Müller threatens to raise their rent. Mother Müller raises some mild objections, afraid that the pastor will not christen the family's babies; Father Müller dismisses these by telling her that if he pays the pastor good money, the pastor will christen them. His faith in the power of money is tested, however, when Mother Müller is dying: □A hundert tousand tollars in the bank . . . and tell me, tell, what goot does it do?□

Gretchen Müller

Gretchen, who is pregnant at the outset of the story and then gives birth to a son, is the □pet of the family, with the sly, smiling manner of a spoiled child.□ The reader learns little else of Gretchen, who exists mainly in the story as another example of the Müller daughters' fecundity. In fact, the name Gretchen is a German pet form of Margaret; St. Margaret is the patron saint of expectant mothers.

Huldah Müller

Huldah, whose nickname is Hatsy, is the antithesis of Ottilie in every way. Nimble and full of energy, she is the quintessential Müller daughter, and everything that Ottilie can never be. Hatsy even earns praise from stern Mother Müller (□she's a good, quick girl.□) With her wedding just around the corner, Hatsy is just beginning her life, whereas Ottilie's future is one of continued toil and suffering.

Mother Müller

Though the traditions and community of the Müllers are patriarchal, Mother Müller is the true center of the family, their □rock□ (at one point she is described standing behind Father Müller □like a dark boulder.□) This is not really a paradox, because Mother Müller's character is not at all feminine; she is as manly, if not more so, than Father Müller. Louise, in her initial description of Mother Müller, calls her a □matriarch in men's shoes.□ The narrator says she has □the stride of a man,□ and □[strides] about hugely, giving orders right and left.□ Noting that none of the children looks like Mother Müller, the narrator also states □it was plain that poor Mother Müller had never had a child of her own.□ Literally, of course, this is untrue, but the description serves to further de-feminize her. Mother Müller is more the foreman of the family than the mother, the engine that keeps the daily operation functioning smoothly. Even when she is on her deathbed, the rest of the Müllers futilely await her orders: □The family crowded into the room, unnerved in panic, lost unless the sick woman should come to herself and tell them what to do for her.□

Ottilie Müller

Ottilie is the key figure in □Holiday,□ as she represents both an unfolding mystery and a symbol of the narrator's own alienation. Though at first she is presented as a crippled servant girl, the reader later learns that she is actually a member of the family, the eldest Müller daughter, deformed in childhood by an unnamed illness. Ottilie is largely ignored by the family, except when being given orders. Her need for connection and recognition surfaces when she shows the narrator her childhood portrait; she wants someone, anyone, to recognize that she is a member of this family. Because Ottilie cannot speak or bear children, the family sees her ability to work as her sole worth as a human being. The ability to bear children is key to the Müllers; all the Müller daughters are in some stage of giving birth. Annetje has a newborn, Gretchen is pregnant and gives birth during the story, and Hatsy has her wedding, which, in this community, means that babies are soon to come. It is inferred that the narrator herself is alone and without children; at the dinner table, as the family guest, she is seated with the men. Her inability to speak German makes her almost without voice in this household, just as Ottilie is. As a fellow outsider, the narrator finds herself drawn to Ottilie and finds herself both pitying her and empathizing with her.

The Narrator

The nameless narrator who tells the story of her visit to the Müller farm is a somewhat mysterious character. At the outset readers learn only that she is a young woman who is going through a difficult time in her life and is looking for an escape, a holiday from her troubles. Little other concrete information is revealed, but through her thoughts and actions she demonstrates kindness, compassion, and a love for nature. The story is told in a detached, observational way, and because the family speaks mostly German, there is very little dialogue and almost none involving the narrator herself. The reader gets the impression that the narrator herself feels detached and alienated from the world, and though she is running from the world, what she really wants and needs is connection. She offers to help Hatsy with chores, she plays with the children, and she reaches out to Ottilie, with whom she identifies as a fellow outsider.

Themes

Alienation

The most obvious example of alienation is that of Ottilie, the crippled Müller daughter. The fact that she is made to labor intensively for the rest of the family is not in itself evidence of alienation, because all of the Müllers work hard. However, by being responsible for cooking and serving all the family's meals, Ottilie is automatically prevented from taking part in the key social events of the Müller family life: the daily meals, the wedding celebration, even her own mother's funeral. Being unable to speak isolates Ottilie from the rest of the family. This alienation is intensified by the Müllers's attitude towards her: unable to deal with their feelings about her and her condition, they simply ignore her. More attention is lavished on the cows and sheep than on poor Ottilie, who is only spoken to when a meal is being requested.

The narrator is also alienated from the family; first, because she is an outsider, second, because she does not speak German. Her childless, husbandless status makes her even more of an oddity in a house fairly bursting with babies. A woman on her own in the early 1920s, when this story was originally written, was looked upon with both curiosity and suspicion. As though to emphasize this unfeminine condition, she is seated on the men's side of the table at dinner.

Because the majority of Porter's work is drawn from personal experience, this story can also be seen as a comment on the alienation Porter experienced as a woman artist on her own in the 1920s, and throughout her life. A woman devoting her life to her work, in this era, was seen as unnatural, someone who has turned her back on the kind of life embraced by the Müller women: serving a man, having his children, and caring for them. The narrator's obvious affection for the Müllers and their way of life shows her ambivalence about this choice.

Sacrifice

Whatever individual opinions, ambitions, and desires of separate family members, the Müllers have sacrificed for the collective family good. They have sacrificed so much of their individuality, in fact, that they all act as parts of one homogenous whole. As the narrator says, □I got a powerful impression that they were all, even the sons-in-law, one human being divided into several separate appearances.□ Even their appearance is not that separate; they all have the same high cheekbones and □slanted water-blue eyes.□ Ottilie, whose deformity has rendered her inescapably unique, still shares these features with the rest of the family. Even the boy whom Hatsy marries □resemble[s] her brothers enough to be her brother,□ maintaining the homogenous nature of the group.

No one has been forced to sacrifice more than Ottilie; she has been reduced to the state of a slave. Both literally and figuratively, she has no voice in the family. Worst of

all, she has been forced to sacrifice human connection, by being banished from family gatherings and celebrations. She is completely ignored.

Parallels can be drawn between the Müller family and communist societies. One of the basic tenets of communism is the equality of all citizens, and the equal distribution of the products of labor. This equality necessitates, of course, a quashing of personal ambition and a greater dedication to the progress of the whole than to the advancement of the individual. Father Müller is a devotee of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, but only to the point that it is practical. As Marx did, he rejects religion; however, he cannot resist the temptation to use his power and wealth to get what he wants. In this way, he is illustrative of one of the main weaknesses of communism: its failure to account for the self-serving desires that are a part of human nature.

Cycles of Life and Nature

In escaping to the Müller farm, the narrator has placed herself with a family and a community living in harmony with nature and the natural cycles of life. This has a restorative effect; the narrator says, □It was easier to breathe, and I might even weep, if I pleased. In a very few days I no longer felt like weeping.□

In her one month at the Müllers, the narrator witnesses a birth, a death, a wedding, a violent storm, and the rebirth of the landscape that is barren when she arrives. In other words, in just one month she witnesses the complete cycle of life, both for the Müllers and for nature. Only Ottilie seems to be out of sync with these natural rhythms, with her unsteady gait and indeterminate age: □The blurred, dark face was neither young nor old, but crumpled into criss cross wrinkles, irrelevant either to age or suffering.□

Gender Roles

Accepted as part of nature's way are the strict gender roles adhered to by the Müllers. The married women stand behind their husbands at the dinner table and serve them. All childcare, of course, is the women's responsibility, as is the milking of the cows. Hatsy's new husband is harshly rebuffed when he offers to help Hatsy with the heavy pails of milk that Mother Müller brings into the house after milking the cows in the storm. □The milk is not business for a man,□ she tells him.

The narrator, as a guest, is seated on the men's side of the table at dinner. Ottilie does not sit on the women's side of the table, because she is too busy serving the meal. Ottilie and the narrator are also the only two women in the family without children or husbands. In this household, they are almost genderless, and as such their role is uncertain. Ottilie's job is well defined, but the family seems unable to relate to her in any other way. She is not a mother, she is not a wife, she is not a child; like the narrator, she is a grown woman alone, a role for which the Müllers (and much of society in the early 1920s) have no references.

Style

Point of View

□Holiday□ is told in the first person point of view. This viewpoint ordinarily gives the reader intimate insights into the main character's feelings, motivation, and character, but in □Holiday□ there are only a few scenes in which this is true, mainly those scenes involving Ottilie. The rest of the story is told in a detached, objective style, describing the family and their daily life. For instance, the narrator describes the entire deathbed scene in which the panicked, bewildered Müller family watches Mother Müller die, without expressing a single emotion of her own. Indications of the narrator's state of mind are given more indirectly. For example, when she first arrives, she is disappointed with the landscape, frightened by the dog (□of the detestable German shepherd breed□) and begins to write an angry letter to Louise for recommending the farm so highly. After meeting the family and seeing her room, however, she scraps her angry letter and begins a new one: □I'm going to like it here.□ Her descriptions of the blossoming landscape parallel her own transformation: □Almost every day I went along the edge of the naked wood, passionately occupied with looking for signs of spring. The changes were so subtle and gradual I found one day that branches of willows and sprays of blackberry vine alike were covered with fine points of green; the color had changed overnight, or so it seemed.□

The first person point of view also serves to keep the story centered on the lives of the Müller women, because the Müller men leave the house to work in the fields each day, and the narrator, as a woman, would certainly not be asked to go along.

Setting

□Holiday□ is set in a German farming community in rural Texas, near the Louisiana border. Though the landscape may be Texan, everything else□the language, dress, traditions□is decidedly German. As the narrator says of the Müllers, □never in any wise did they confuse nationality with habitation.□

Because the Müllers's livelihood and prosperity depends on it, the land figures prominently in the story. The narrator and the family view the land in very different ways, however. The narrator comments frequently on the beauty of the land, the spring flowers, the fireflies in the orchard. The family rarely comments on or stops to appreciate the beauty of nature, but sees the land strictly in economic terms.

When the narrator first arrives, she is disappointed by the □soaked brown fields□ and □scanty leafless woods□ and finds the Müllers's house unwelcoming: □It stood there staring and naked, an intruding stranger.□ Clearly she is describing not just the house, but herself, emotionally drained and vulnerable from her troubles, and a stranger to the Müller family. Later descriptions of the house are more appealing: □we ate breakfast by

yellow lamplight, with the grey damp winds blowing with spring softness through the open windows.□ Her attic room is described as □homely and familiar.□ Similarly, as the days go on, she is no longer an □intruding stranger□ either, as she comes to know the family and their daily routine.

Dialogue

There is very little dialogue in □Holiday,□ partly due to the fact that the family speaks mainly German. After the narrator arrives at the Müller farm, she rarely speaks directly in quotation marks; what little she says, she paraphrases for the reader: □I tried to tell her that I was not hungry□; □I told her indeed I did like it so.□ Ironically, the only direct quotation from the narrator after she arrives at the farm is, □Thank you,□ which she says to Ottilie when she serves her dinner. This lack of dialogue from the narrator reminds readers of the language barrier and the fact that the narrator has come to the Müller farm for contemplation and solitude, to sort out the troubles of the life she has left behind. As she says, □I loved that silence which means freedom from the constant pressure of other minds and other opinions and other feelings, that freedom to fold up in quiet and go back to my own center.□ Her chosen silence contrasts dramatically with that of Ottilie, for whom silence has been imposed as a handicap.

Irony

One form of irony is the difference between what is expected and what actually happens. In this story, the narrator takes a much needed holiday by visiting the Müller farm. She gets away from her unidentified troubles and for awhile lives as a guest, not having to work or make her own way. The title of the story becomes ironic in the final paragraphs when the guest gives the handicapped daughter and servant, Ottilie, a little holiday. The family are off at the funeral of the mother. Ottilie expresses her grief for her mother, and at first the narrator assumes she wants to attend the funeral with the other family members. But then she realizes the only thing she can do for Ottilie is give her a little holiday, a ride in the countryside. Ottilie cannot escape her handicap or her place as servant in her own family, but for this brief outing she is treated as a guest and given a reprieve. Thus the word has two applications and is handled ironically.

Historical Context

Communism and the Red Scare

Though □Holiday□ was first published in 1960, the influences that shaped the story come from the time at which it was written, the early 1920s. Just a few years earlier, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had overthrown the czar in Russia. The revolution fostered increasing paranoia about communism in the United States, especially for business tycoons who feared the organization of labor. This paranoia, dubbed the Red Scare, led to the enactment of some dubious laws, including the Sedition Act of 1918, which prohibited citizens from making public remarks critical of the government and its policies. Union organizer and socialist Eugene Debs was tried and convicted under this law in 1918 (he was later released when the Sedition Act was repealed in 1921.) Katherine Anne Porter claimed on more than one occasion that she herself was a communist in the early 1920s, when this story was written. Because communism in Russia was still in its early stages, many Americans□especially workers oppressed by the business giants created by the industrial revolution□were sympathetic to its ideals of equality. Later, Porter became disillusioned with communism and abandoned it.

Devaluation of the German Mark

There is some irony in the great prosperity of the Müllers, who live in a German community virtually untouched by American culture, because at the time this story was written the value of the mark in Germany was plummeting to record lows. Before World War I, one U.S. dollar was worth about four German marks; by the end of 1923 one U.S. dollar was worth four *trillion* German marks. The precarious state of the German economy set the stage for Adolf Hitler's rise to power.

New Freedoms for Women

The 1920s were years of unprecedented freedoms for women in the United States. In 1920, women finally achieved the right to vote, a cause that Katherine Anne Porter had championed for many years. Women were also entering the workforce in greater numbers than ever before. However, the woman who worked away from home was still an anomaly, the exception rather than the rule.

Critical Overview

A common criticism of Katherine Anne Porter's work is simply that there is too little of it. In the *New York Times Book Review* in 1939, in a review of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Edith H. Walton writes, □One wishes, only, that she could manage to be more productive.□ In a 1965 review of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, a *Time* magazine critic states, □An author who in 71 years has published only 27 stories and one novel can scarcely be considered a major writer.□

Though the critics were disappointed with the quantity of her work, most were very pleased with the quality. In a *New Republic* review of *The Collected Stories*, Joseph Featherstone writes, □Few writers in America or anywhere else have matched the purity of her English, her powers of deep poetic concentration, her intelligence, her responsiveness to the inner life of her characters, her sharp sense of the pressing forces of history, nationality, and social atmosphere.□ Walton puts it more succinctly: □There is, in short, a kind of magic about everything that Miss Porter writes.□ Howard Moss, in a review of *The Collected Stories* in the *New York Times Book Review*, calls Porter □a poet of the short story.□

Though negative reviews of Porter's short stories were in the minority, not everyone was charmed by her often grim view of life and human nature. In the *Time* magazine review of *The Collected Stories* mentioned earlier, the reviewer writes, □She sees her characters less as people who must live than as problems to be solved. There is too little warmth and softness in her art.□ Bitterness and cynicism crept into some of her later work, especially her novel, *Ship of Fools*. As Mary Gordon writes in a 1995 article on Porter's work in the *New York Times Book Review*, □To act with malignity would seem, in Porter's mind, to be as natural to humans as drawing breath.□

However, in this same article, Gordon praises the short story □Holiday□: □Lost in the bitterness and cynicism with which Porter wrote *Ship of Fools* is the joy in nature and in simple living that marks her greatest short stories. This pleasure suffused the breathtaking □Holiday□ (1960), which took her more than 30 years to write.□ She mentions Porter's gift for detail: □Porter earns her right to speak about humanity, about life and death, because she has so firmly rooted her perceptions in the soil of the particular.□ Howard Moss, in the review mentioned earlier, agrees; he describes her stories as □firmly grounded in life; and the accuracy and precision of their surfaces . . . hold in tension the confused human tangle below.□

□Holiday□ did not receive a great deal of critical attention in its first release in 1960 and was overshadowed by some of Porter's more acclaimed stories when it was released in *The Collected Stories* in 1965. Some reviewers did make mention of it in their review of the book; Joseph Featherstone writes that in addition to her previously released work, □Miss Porter has added four uncollected stories, one of which, □Holiday,□ ranks with her best.□ Howard Moss writes in his review, □The author has added . . . a magnificent new long story, 'Holiday.'□

To summarize, many critics agree that Porter was unarguably a master of the short story, whose one outing as a novelist was admirable, but not of the same quality as her shorter works.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a bachelor of arts from University of Michigan and twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In this essay, Pryor examines the ways in which Porter likens the Müller family to animals in nature, and the implications this comparison has for their treatment of Ottilie.

When the nameless narrator of □Holiday□ comes to the Müller farm, she encounters a family living such a natural, basic existence, in harmony with the land about them, that they are almost like a group of animals. Yet they are not living like animals in the negative sense of the phrase; they simply lead their lives in an instinctual, physical manner, never questioning the hard and fast rules that govern their way of life. To emphasize this natural, animal existence, Porter weaves animal similes and metaphors throughout the story, both likening people to animals and vice versa. When Hatsy and Mother Müller milk the cows, for example, their first task is □separating the hungry children from their mothers.□ After Hatsy pulls the calves away from the cows, the calves bawl □like rebellious babies.□ Later in the story when Gretchen gives birth to a son, Porter turns the comparison around: □The baby bawled and suckled like a young calf.□

The Müller daughters care for their children much like animals in nature. The babies are carried constantly; there are no mentions of playpens or cradles: □Annetje, with her fat baby slung over her shoulder, could sweep a room or make a bed with one hand, all finished before the day was well begun.□ When caring for their children, the Müller daughters are described as being □as devoted and caretaking as a cat with her kittens.□

It is not just the Müllers's actions that are subject to these comparisons, but the Müllers themselves. The whole family shares an □enormous energy and animal force.□ Gretchen is described as a kind of young lioness: □the tawny Gretchen . . . wore the contented air of a lazy, healthy young animal, seeming always about to yawn.□ Towards the end of the story, when Ottilie begins to howl with grief, the narrator first believes it is the family dog caught in a trap. This is the only animal comparison used in describing Ottilie; though the family has excluded her from the funeral, they cannot deny her this natural connection with the rest of the family: her grief.

Even the Müllers's dinner customs have parallels in nature. In a pride of lions, for example, the males are always allowed to eat first, even though it is the lionesses that hunt for the food. Similarly, the Müller men eat first while their wives stand behind their chairs and serve them.

Following the same customs and rules they have for generations, the Müllers's life would be a harmonious, unquestioning one, if it were not for Ottilie. On the straight and narrow path that the Müllers tread, life has thrown them an unexpected curve. In nature, weak or injured animals that cannot keep up with the pack or herd are often abandoned, as they constitute a burden and a threat to the livelihood of the group. Ottilie, in her

capacity as a tireless servant, has found a way to □keep up.□ The narrator rationalizes the Müllers's □use□ of Ottilie: □they with a deep right instinct had learned to live with her disaster on its own terms, and hers; they had accepted and then made use of what was for them only one more painful event in a world full of troubles.□ This rationalization, however, begs the question: what would have happened if no □use□ could have been made of Ottilie? Then what would the Müllers's instincts have guided them to do? Would they have followed the ways of nature and abandoned her? Or would they have been forced to □evolve,□ to embrace the idea that a human life could have an inherent value without achievement or contribution?

Society has answered these questions in different ways throughout history. For years the mentally and physically disabled were placed in institutions that were little more than warehouses, relieving families of the burden of their physical care but providing little emotional or intellectual stimulation (a so-called civilized form of abandonment). Gradually efforts to include the disabled in the mainstream of society increased, allowing them new freedoms and enabling them to contribute in their own ways.

The narrator of □Holiday,□ finding the complications of her own life burdensome, is drawn to the Müllers's simple way of living, the natural rhythms, the clearly defined roles. Yet even while attempting to escape her unnamed troubles, she is confronted with new ones. Her experience with Ottilie forces her to face the fact that no matter how simply people try to live, they will still be confronted with situations that are inherently complicated and problems that have no easy solutions or no solutions at all. She realizes this at the end of the story: □Drawing the pony to a standstill, I studied her face for a while and pondered my ironical mistake. There was nothing I could do for Ottilie, selfishly as I wished to ease my heart of her.□ She and Ottilie can only enjoy □a little stolen holiday□ from the harsh reality of their problems.

Though this story was written in the 1920s, before the rise of Hitler, there are some parallels between the Müllers's predicament and Hitler's plan for Germany and the rest of Europe. The Müllers are all homogenously Aryan, the Hitler ideal: blond, strong, and forceful. Yet in Hitler's Germany, Ottilie would have been exterminated; Hitler had no tolerance for the weak, deformed, or mentally deficient. Hitler's □survival of the fittest□ value could also be described as being □in harmony with nature.□ The German people's desire for a simple answer to their problems, a scapegoat, allowed a despot to rise to power and kill millions of innocent people.

The narrator finds that a □simple□ life that emulates the ways of nature has both its attractions and limitations. Still, in the end it is nature that provides her and Ottilie with solace as they drive down the lane of mulberries to the river, leaving their troubled lives behind, if only for a few moments.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on □Holiday,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

How would this story have been different if the narrator could speak German? If Ottilie could speak? Write a conversation between the narrator and Ottilie.

Research the meanings of some of the German names used in the story. Do the meanings of the names correlate to the personality or role of the characters? Explain any connections you discover.

Research the percentage of American women in the workforce in 1920, 1960, and today. Draw a graph charting the difference. Now research the average wages of women in these three years compared to the average wages of men, and chart your findings.

What kind of □troubles□ do you think the narrator is trying to escape by going on her holiday? Write a □prequel□ to this story that describes the problems she is leaving behind and how they came about.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Early in 1920, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) has about 60,000 members. However, the □Red Scare□ period, during which Woodrow Wilson's attorney general orders the arrest of some 10,000 suspected communists and anarchists, helps reduce the party's membership to 7,000 by 1929.

1960s: The Great Depression and the alliance of Russia and the United States in World War II gave the CPUSA membership a boost in the 1930s and 1940s, but this time it is the scare tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the revelation of Stalin's crimes that diminish membership. By 1960 the party has around 10,000 members, down from an estimated peak of 100,000 during the war. The prosperity of the 1960s means that few are inspired to join the party, and though radicalism has increased in the late 1960s, the Communist Party does not play a significant role, and membership remains low.

1920s: During the 1920s, 21.4 percent of women over the age of sixteen are a part of the labor force. Most of these women have clerical, domestic, or factory jobs. Very few have children.

1960s: In 1960, 37.7 percent of women over the age of sixteen are employed; by 1970 this figure will have increased to 43.3 percent. By 1965, approximately thirty-five percent of mothers with children under eighteen are employed. Women in the workforce are aided by some important legislation in the 1960s. First, in 1963, Congress passes an Equal Pay Act, which requires equal wages for men and women doing equal work. Then in 1964, the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination against women by any company with twenty-five or more employees.

1920s: In 1920, farmers make up 27 percent of the labor force. There are close to 6.5 million farms in the United States.

1960s: In 1960, farmers make up just 8.3 percent of the labor force, and though the population has increased by about seventy-five million, the number of farms in the United States has fallen to under four million.

What Do I Read Next?

The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (1965) includes all the stories from Porter's three collections, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, and *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*, plus four other stories not previously published in book form.

Porter was well known as a prolific writer of letters to her friends and lovers. The book *Letters of Katherine Anne Porter* (1990) provides a selection of her correspondence dating from 1930 to 1963, including letters to Robert Penn Warren and Hart Crane.

Ship of Fools (1962) is Porter's only novel. Though not as critically acclaimed as her short stories, it was extremely popular when it was released. A 1963 movie was made of the book, starring Vivien Leigh.

Porter considered fellow southerner Eudora Welty her protégée, as well as a good friend. Porter wrote the introduction for Welty's first collection, *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941).

Further Study

Brown, Julie, ed., *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Garland Publishing, 2000.

This collection of original and classic essays examines the contributions that female authors have made to the short story.

Goldberg, David J., *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Goldberg examines how the major issues of the decade□women's suffrage, Prohibition, immigration restriction, and racial intolerance□were symptomatic of the postwar generation's discomfort with diversity.

Jordan, Terry G., *German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas*, University of Texas Press, 1994.

Jordan explores how German immigrants in the nineteenth century influenced and were influenced by the agricultural life in the areas of Texas where they settled.

McLellan, David, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* Oxford University Press, 2000.

This collection of Marx's writings includes selections from the *Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, the latter being Father Müller's □bible□ for all his business dealings.

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Walton, Edith H., Review of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, in *New York Times Book Review*, April 2, 1939, p. 5.

Review of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, in *Time*, Vol. 86, November 5, 1965, pp. 122, 125.

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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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