Ship of Fools Study Guide

Ship of Fools by Katherine Anne Porter

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The idea for *Ship of Fools* (Little, Brown and Company, 1962) originated in a voyage that Katherine Anne Porter took from Mexico to Europe in 1931. Some of the passengers she encountered on the ship became the models for the characters in *Ship of Fools*. Porter began work on the novel in 1941 and it took her twenty years to complete.

The title is taken from a moral allegory published in Latin in the fifteenth century. Porter wrote that the title of her novel symbolizes "the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity." The wide cast of characters includes German, Swiss, Spanish, Cuban, Mexican, Swedish, and American firstclass travelers. In steerage, there are 876 Spanish workers who are being deported from the sugar fields of Cuba.

Ship of Fools is notable for its pessimistic view of the human condition. In particular, the Germans are portrayed in a harshly negative light. They are mostly anti-Semitic and contemptuous of races other than their own, with an arrogant sense of their own superiority. Critics have remarked on how accurately Porter conveyed the German mentality on the eve of the rise of Nazism. However, the other characters, with few exceptions, are unsavory also. The one Jew on the ship is filled with hatred for all Gentiles; the Spanish, who are members of a dancing troupe, are presented as amoral thieves, pimps and prostitutes. There is little genuine human love present in the novel, although there is much comedy and satire.

Ship of Fools is the only novel Porter wrote. It was an immediate bestseller and was made into a movie in 1965. Critical judgment, however, was sharply divided over the merits of the novel, a debate that continues today.

Author Biography

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russell Porter on May 15, 1890, in Indian Creek, Texas, the daughter of Harrison and Mary Alice Jones Porter. Porter's mother died in 1892, and the family moved to Kyle, Texas, to live with Porter's grandmother. In 1901, the grandmother died and the family moved to San Antonio.

Porter married John Henry Koontz, a railway clerk, at the age of sixteen; she left him after seven years and was divorced in 1915. Also in that year, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent two years in sanatoriums. In 1917, Porter began her journalism career, writing for the *Critic*, a weekly newspaper in Fort Wayne, Texas. The following year she wrote for *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver. She also caught influenza and was dangerously ill.

In 1919, Porter moved to New York, where she worked for a motion picture magazine and wrote children's stories. In the early 1920s, she traveled twice to Mexico, where she studied Mexican art. Returning to New York in 1922, she wrote her first mature story, "Maria Concepción." In 1930, her first book, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, which included the well-known story, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," was published.

From 1931 to 1932, Porter sailed from Mexico to Europe, where she lived in Berlin and traveled around Europe. In 1939, her volume of stories, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, was published; *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* followed in 1944.

From 1949 to 1962, Porter lectured at various institutions, including Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Virginia. Her unorthodox teaching style made her popular with the students. In 1952, she published a collection of essays, *The Days Before*, and her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, which she had been working on for twenty years, followed in 1962.

In 1966, Porter received a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for her *Collected Stories*, which had been published the previous year. Her final publication was *The Never-Ending Wrong* (1977), a reminiscence of the Sacco and Vanzetti case of the 1920s.

Porter married Ernest Stock in 1926, but they were divorced within a few years. In 1933, she married for the third time, to Eugene Pressly, and that marriage also ended in divorce, in 1938. In the same year, Porter married Albert Erskine Jr.; they were divorced in 1942.

Porter died on September 18, 1980, in Silver Springs, Maryland.

Plot Summary

Part 1

Ship of Fools begins in the Mexican port town of Veracruz, where a group of travelers is about to embark on a twenty-six day voyage to Europe. The August weather is hot, and the local people, who dislike the travelers who pass through their town, try to exact as much money from them as possible. The travelers are hot, tired and frustrated at the bureaucratic delays that are put in their way. All they want is to get on the German ship *Vera* that waits in the dock and hurry away from the unpleasant town where there is labor unrest and the threat of social revolution.

The travelers are introduced at first as a collective, anonymous group, and then gradually they are individualized, but still nameless, described only in terms of their physical appearances. The exception to this is Dr. Schumann.

The passengers are a mixture of Germans, Swiss, Spaniards, Mexicans, Americans, and one Swede. As they embark and the ship sets off, they discover who their cabin mates are, and most of them are ill-matched. Almost everyone reacts negatively to everyone else, and it becomes clear that there are sharp racial divisions among the passengers; the northern Europeans despise the southern Europeans as well as the Latin Americans. The smug, nationalistic Germans, who all dine together at the Captain's table, are presented in a particularly negative light.

On the third day of the voyage, the ship puts into port in Havana, Cuba. A half-dozen Cuban students join first class, and nearly nine hundred Spanish unemployed sugar workers who are being returned home squeeze onto the steerage deck.

Part II

The ship heads for the high seas, and the travelers begin to live out their frustrations, animosities, and small adventures. On the first day or so, for example, Ric and Rac plot mayhem; Johann insults his uncle; David and Jenny quarrel; the Spanish dancing troupe mock the other travelers; Frau Hutten expresses her sentimental feelings over her dog; Jenny strikes up a friendship with Freytag; and Hansen pursues the dancer, Amparo. Each incident reveals something of the character of the participants, and often the narrator provides information about how the character's attitudes and motivation have been shaped by their experiences of life up to this point. Gradually, the reader learns more about this heterogeneous band of not very appealing travelers.

Soon the passengers' routine gets established. They spend their time strolling around the deck, lolling in deck chairs or hiding out in their cabins. They drink, gossip at gala dinners, and dance. In the evening, they play cards and chess and occasionally attend movies ("moving pictures"). On Sunday, there are church services. On the first Sunday, after Father Carillo has given morning mass on the steerage deck, a fight breaks out

between one worshiper and a fat man who insults him. Amongst the first-class passengers, who have their own services, wild rumors spread about the fight, until the little scuffle has become magnified into a free-for-all between dangerous criminals.

During the early part of the voyage, Dr. Schumann becomes acquainted with La Condesa, who flirts with him and then declares that she loves him. Dr. Schumann gives in to her desire for drugs, and keeps her well supplied with them, even though there is no medical reason for him to do so. He is disturbed by his own amorous feelings towards La Condesa. Rumors spread on the ship about the nature of their relationship.

The more educated among the travelers often have discussions about worldly affairs. The Germans' contempt for other races is never far from the surface, and anti-Semitic views are rampant, particularly those expressed by Siegfried Rieber. The Captain hears a rumor that there is a Jew dining at his table. This is in fact Freytag, who is not Jewish, although his wife is. Freytag has confided this information to Mrs. Treadwell who foolishly passes it on to Lizzi, her cabin mate. At the Captain's dinner table, there is a nasty discussion about the Jews, and Lizzi blurts out what she knows about Freytag. Freytag immediately leaves the table. He is not allowed to return. Instead, he is allocated a small table near the service entrance, facing a blank wall. This also happens to the table of Löwenthal, the only Jew on the voyage. He and Freytag quarrel, after which Freytag always tries to dine alone. He also confronts Mrs. Treadwell about her betrayal of him, and they manage to achieve some kind of a reconciliation.

The chain of petty incidents continues. David and Jenny continue to squabble; the Spanish dancers plan a festive dinner in honor of the captain, and even sell tickets for it, in spite of Frau Rittersdorf's careful explanation that this is a serious breach of ship etiquette. Denny pursues a dancer named Amparo, but is put off by the fee she tries to charge him. Little Hans reports that Ric and Rac threatened to throw him overboard. Rieber continues his lustful flirtation with Lizzi. At dinner at the Captain's table, Frau Hutten dares for once in her life to express opinions that are directly opposite to those of her husband.

The most dramatic moment comes when Ric and Rac toss Bébé, the bulldog, overboard. A man from steerage jumps into the water to try to save him, but he is drowned. The dog survives. Ric and Rac get their comeuppance when they are caught after stealing La Condesa's pearls. They are severely punished by their parents.

Part III

In September, the ship docks for a day at Santa Cruz de Tenerife, one of the Canary islands. For many of the steerage passengers, as well as La Condesa, this is the end of their journey. Dr. Schumann bids La Condesa a fond farewell. Some of the other passengers go ashore for sightseeing. The group of Spaniards busy themselves shoplifting; David, Jenny, Frau Otto Schmidt, Professor and Frau Hutten know what is going on but can do nothing to stop it.

The voyage resumes, and the gala evening in honor of the Captain takes place, with dinner, music, and dancing. The Spanish company take their seats at the Captain's table and offer effusive tributes to him, much to his embarrassment and displeasure, since he despises them.

The evening produces a lot of drunkenness and violence. Hansen breaks a beer bottle over Rieber's head and there is a scuffle. Lizzi, whom Rieber has been trying to seduce, runs away screaming. The drunken Denny pursues Amparo the dancer to give her a beating, while David discovers Jenny in an embrace with Freytag. The Baumgartners have a vicious quarrel that drives him to suicidal despair. Then Herr Baumgartner strikes his wife across the face, and this is followed by reconciliation. Mrs. Treadwell, who has also had too much to drink, encounters Denny and beats him about the face with the heel of her shoe.

The ship reaches Vigo, where the Spanish dancers disembark, and then heads for Gijón, Spain, and then to Boulougne, where Mrs. Treadwell and the Cuban students disembark. After stopping at Southampton, the *Vera* finally arrives in Bremerhaven, Germany, where all the Germans, as well as the Americans Denny, Jenny, and David, disembark.

Embarkation

Embarkation Summary

Ship of Fools is Katherine Porter's novel of prejudice, hatred, and racial discrimination among the passengers of a ship bound from Mexico to Germany in August 1931. The novel explores the personal dynamics among strangers confined in close quarters and the friendships and animosities, which are heightened.

The novel begins in August 1931 in Veracruz, Mexico, where an assortment of people of different nationalities is waiting to board the German ship *Vera* bound for Bremerhaven, Germany. The local people view the travelers with resentment and try to extract as much money from them as possible in this brief window of time before they depart. Most of the passengers are happy to be leaving Mexico, which is in a state of uprising as evidenced by today's news of the attempt on the life of the Swedish Consul.

Although the passengers have mixed nationalities, they are similar in that they weary of the maze of official offices they have had to visit in order to obtain their travel papers. The heat is oppressive and the travelers are weary and irritable, as they begin their month long journey to the cooler climate of Germany.

The ship's doctor, Dr. Schumann, watches the unidentified people, whom he will soon come to know board the ship. The German people include Herr Professor Hutten, Frau Professor Hutten, and their bulldog, Bebe. Herr Hutten had been the head of a German school in Mexico, and he and his wife now are returning to their native country. The Huttens are both very overweight, as is their pampered and overfed dog. Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Otto Schmitt are traveling alone.

Herr Siegfried Rieber publishes a ladies fashion trade magazine and Fraulein Lizzi Spockenkieker works in the garment business in Hanover, Germany. Herr Karl Baumgartner, an attorney from Mexico City is traveling with his wife, Frau Greta Baumgartner, and their eight-year-old son Hans Baumgartner. A hunchback named Herr Karl Glocken is returning to his native Germany after selling his newspaper and tobacco shop in Mexico.

Herr Wilibald Graf, a dying religious zealot convinced of his own healing abilities is traveling with his nephew, Johann. Herr Wilhelm Freytag is a thirty-year-old man associated with a Mexican oil company, who is returning to Germany to get his wife and mother. The final German passenger is Herr Julius Lowenthal, a Jewish man, who sells artifacts for Catholic churches.

Three of the passengers are from Switzerland and include Herr Heinrich Lutz, who had owned a hotel in Mexico for fifteen years. Accompanying Herr Lutz are his wife, Frau Lutz and their eighteen-year-old daughter, Elsa.

The Spanish passengers consist of an eight-person zarzuela dance troupe including the women, Amparo, Lola, Concha, and Pastora. The men of the troupe are Pepe, Tito, Manolo, and Pancho. Lola's six-year-old twins, Ric and Rac, are also with the group. A nobler Latin woman named La Condesa, who is a Cuban political exile, is traveling to Tenerife.

The Mexican passengers include a newly married couple on their way to Spain for a honeymoon. The wife of the attachy of the Mexican Legation in Paris, Senora Esperon y Chavez de Ortega is traveling with her newborn son and nanny Nicolasa. Also traveling to Spain are two Mexican Catholic priests, Father Garza and Father Carillo. There is also an unnamed political agitator, who is recognized only by his cherry red shirt and his singing.

A Swedish man named Arne Hansen, who has a long-standing feud with Herr Rieber, boards alone.

There are four Americans on board. William Denny is a young Texan chemical engineer, headed for Berlin. Mary Treadwell is a forty-five-year old divorcee traveling to Paris. David Scott and Jenny Brown are artists and lovers on their first trip to Europe together.

As the ship gets underway, the passengers find their cabins and meet their cabin mates, most agreeing to themselves that the roommate selection seems to make the journey ahead extend out even longer than thought possible. The call to dinner on the first night provides an opportunity for the passengers to segregate by nationality, which seems to be the only time they are comfortable.

The second day of travel passes relatively comfortably and there is a stir of excitement on the third day, because the ship will be docking in Havana, Cuba. Some of the passengers debark for sightseeing and other entertainment and are met with a disturbing sight when they return to the ship. A large group of eight hundred and seventy six dirty and ragged Spanish people are waiting to board the *Vera.*

The original passengers on the ship learn that these people are being shipped home to Spain, because the Cuban sugar market has dropped, eliminating what meager employment they had, and Cuba does not want them living off the system since they are not native to Cuba. The ship's passengers are worried about dirt and disease from being in such close quarters with these unclean people and vow to speak to the ship's captain.

In addition to the Spaniards, six Cuban college students board as first-class passengers and provide some rowdy singing and dancing, as the third day of the ship's journey comes to an end.

Embarkation Analysis

The story is told from the third person omniscient point of view, which means that the narrator not only tells the actions of the plot line, but also has access to the characters'

emotions and thoughts. This provides the reader with more insight to character motivation and attitudes to help explain behavior and activities throughout the story.

The author is establishing differing political views on the world stage through her introduction of characters representing the Americas and Europe. It is also symbolic that the ship is German, headed for Germany, and has several German passengers. At this point in time, the early 1930's, Adolf Hitler is beginning his rise to power and the ship is a vehicle upon, which a microcosm of global events will be enacted.

High Sea

High Sea Summary

Ric and Rac, the twins of Spanish dancer, Lola, are up early and creating havoc on board the ship by overturning a bottle of ink in an area reserved for writing and tossing overboard the down filled deck chair of Frau Rittersdorf. The twins are interrupted in their pranks by a sailor, who chases them off toward their cabin.

As they run away, the twins encounter the dying man, Herr Graf, and his nephew, Johann. Johann is weary from attending to his dying uncle and longs for the company of some of the young women on board. Herr Graf reminds Johann that he will inherit Graf's entire estate for accompanying the old man on this trip back to see his native Germany so Johann must bide his time.

At the same time, David Scott and William Denny have awakened in the cabin they share with Herr Glocken, the man with the humpback. David lies in his bunk and tries to ignore the morning rituals of the insensitive Denny. Herr Glocken asks for his medicine, which he carries in a flask. David hands it through the curtain, which separates the man's sleeping quarters from the main room. David's repulsion with Glocken's physical appearance is exacerbated by a fight he had with Jenny the day before. David cannot understand Jenny's need for closeness and exuberance to meet and engage with all types of people, because David prefers solitude for his artistic endeavors.

Back on deck, Herr and Frau Hutten tend to the ailing Bebe who is stricken with seasickness once again. Frau Hutten is furious at the Spanish dancers, who laugh at the dog's illness. He does not like to be around this group of leering young people, who look at all the other passengers with such animosity. The Huttens are anxious to return to their native Germany after living in Mexico for so many years.

Suddenly, Herr Hutten is struck with a wave of nausea from seasickness too and Frau Rittersdorf witnesses the man's discomfort from her position not far away. Frau Rittersdorf cannot find her beautiful deck chair cover and suspects Ric and Rac, who are taunting her nearby. Frau Rittersdorf asks one of the young sailors for help in locating her pillow and sits down to record her thoughts in her journal. The old woman makes notes about the other passengers and then muses about her beloved husband, Otto, and rises to take her walks around the ship just like she and Otto used to do before he died.

Jenny has risen early and left the cabin she shares with the gawky big Swedish girl, Elsa. Jenny sits on deck with her morning coffee and sketches little portraits of some of the passengers from her memory. Wilhelm Freytag approaches Jenny and the two engage in conversation over coffee. Freytag politely asks about her relationship with David because he had thought the two were married. Jenny is sensitive about her

relationship, because it is not as healthy as it had once been, and she disengages from Freytag when his probing questions get too personal.

Nearby the newlywed couple sit comfortably in their deck chairs looking out to sea, as Lizzi Spockenkieker runs into Captain Thiele. Lizzi apologizes and the Captain moves on oblivious to Herr Lowenthal, who has timidly greeted the Captain with no reply. Herr Lowenthal sits down to brood over the slight when he is approached by Denny, who wants to make casual conversation.

Herr Lowenthal reveals that he manufactures and sells artifacts to Catholic churches all over the world. Denny thinks it ironic that a Jewish man would sell Catholic articles, but Herr Lowenthal is a businessman, who seizes a lucrative opportunity.

Earlier this morning in the Lutz cabin, Frau Lutz is provided advice to her daughter, Elsa, on how to become more attractive to men. The Lutz family is traveling back to Europe after living in Mexico for fifteen years while Herr Lutz ran a successful hotel. Since Elsa is eighteen, her parents want her to be able to meet European men with the ultimate objective of marriage. Elsa, who is clumsy and not very attractive, has been very sheltered in Mexico, and her parents want to integrate her into the proper Swiss society for the purpose of husband hunting.

Now Elsa is walking awkwardly with Arne Hansen, the only Swedish passenger on board, who happened to dine with the Lutz family for breakfast. Arne would prefer the company of Amparo, one of the Spanish dancers, but is temporarily locked in to this tedious stroll around the deck with the Lutz family.

Soon it is lunchtime and the dining room falls silent with the arrival of the Cuban exile, La Condesa, dressed in expensive clothes and jewels, much too showy for a noon meal. The other passengers watch, as La Condesa engages her lunch partners and later other people on deck with her impassioned speeches about her personal tragedy of her sons and her being forced out of Cuba and not knowing when she will see them again.

After lunch, Dr. Schumann strolls on the deck and catches sight of Ric and Rac about to throw the ship's cat overboard. Running to retrieve the distressed feline, Dr. Schumann chastises the twins and sends them on their way. Dr. Schumann is forced to sit down and rest, because the incident with the twins has caused his weak heart to race. The doctor takes his medicine and rests for a while knowing that he has averted a heart attack one more time.

Later that evening, Dr. Schumann is called to the cabin of La Condesa, who tells the doctor that she feels she is going to die. The doctor determines that La Condesa has been ingesting ether as a stimulant because of her depression over the death of her husband, and the exile of herself and her sons from Cuba. La Condesa thinks that her exile to Tenerife will be worse than death and Dr. Schumann tries to console the woman. Dr. Schumann also destroys the ether he finds in the woman's cabin and gives her an injection of a sedative so that she can sleep.

The ship provides social activities for the passengers each evening and one night Jenny tries to encourage David to dance with her at one of the events. David resolutely declines and leaves Jenny to partner with Freytag much to David's chagrin. Arne Hansen finally connects with Amparo in some dancing followed by a little time in her room, where he pays handsomely for her services as a prostitute.

The next morning David remembers that he and Jenny had fought, but he cannot remember all the details due to his hangover. Jenny does remember, though, and chastises David for his insolent behavior during the trip. The couple argues once more about their European destination, Jenny preferring to see France while David wants to go to Spain.

Mrs. Treadwell leaves the combative company of David and Jenny to have breakfast with Freytag, who tells the divorcee that he is returning to Germany to retrieve his wife, Mary, and her mother to get them out of Germany before the political upheaval that he has heard about. Freytag is not sure that his friends in Mexico will accept Mary and he thinks about the problems the couple has had in their own families when he married Mary, a Jewish girl.

When Sunday morning comes, one of the Catholic priests on board, Father Carillo says Mass for the Spaniards held in the steerage area. At the end of the Mass, the man in the cherry colored shirt initiates a fight with one of the congregation and rumors of a mass uprising circulate among the first class passengers. The other Catholic priest, Father Garza, celebrates Mass for the first class passengers while the Captain conducts Lutheran services for the remaining passengers, who want to participate.

The only Jewish man on board, Herr Lowenthal, practices his religious rites privately and worries about the increasingly hostile actions of his cabin mate, Herr Rieber.

Later that evening, tempers have cooled and the passengers meet on deck once again for the nightly dance. Elsa has become attracted to one of the Cuban students and is distressed to see him dancing suggestively with one of the Spanish dancers. Elsa's sour mood prompts her mother to suggest a purge tomorrow to rid her daughter of whatever is bothering her.

Elsewhere on deck, Herr Graf is lost in his own thoughts about his failing health and remembers circumstances, where his healing powers have restored critically ill people. Herr Graf wonders why he cannot heal himself and thinks that possibly he has given all his recuperative powers to others. Johann is still irritated with being his uncle's aide and losing his temper, pushes Herr Graf's wheelchair into his cabin and joins the party on deck.

Dr. Schumann finds a quiet spot on deck and takes an after dinner nap from, which he wakes to find La Condesa smiling at him from the next chair. La Condesa flirts outrageously with the doctor and tries to get him to loosen up, but he cannot forget his position of responsibility even when La Condesa laughs heartily at the latest prank of Ric and Rac. Dr. Schumann has been instructed by Captain Thiele to spend time with

La Condesa to keep her in a subdued mood and the doctor finds himself falling in love with the Cuban exile.

Mrs. Treadwell is biding her time, her arrival in Paris, and she lies on her bed in her cabin and dreams of the things she will do when reunited with her friends. The divorcee also relives the history of her life, how she regrets her choice of a husband in a marriage that ended poorly, and how she wishes that her deceased parents never had to know about her failure. Mrs. Treadwell drinks wine and plays solitaire hoping that her crass cabin mate, Lizzi, will not return any time soon.

Unfortunately, Lizzi enters the cabin shortly after Mrs. Treadwell has turned out the light to sleep. Lizzi is oblivious to Mrs. Treadwell's hope to sleep and launches into a series of anecdotes about Herr Rieber, whom she considers a clever and smart businessman, as well as a charming male companion. Lizzi shares with Mrs. Treadwell that she and Herr Rieber think that Freytag may be Jewish and has the audacity to sit at the Captain's table for meals. Mrs. Treadwell tells Lizzi that it is Freytag's wife, not Freytag, who is Jewish and Lizzi's sense of intrigue is significantly heightened.

Below deck, Amparo's boyfriend, Pepe, waits for her to conclude another hour spent with Arne Hansen. Although Amparo sees Arne in the capacity of a prostitute, Pepe is extremely jealous of the Swede for some reason. Finally, Arne leaves Amparo's room and Pepe collects the money while Amparo thinks about how Pepe would beat her if he found out that she holds some money back each time to fund her dreams of becoming a performance artist one day.

In addition to the rumor that a Jew sits at his table each evening, Captain Thiele also worries about the talk concerning La Condesa and the Cuban students spending so much time in her cabin. The Captain approaches Dr. Schumann about the situation and the doctor assures the Captain that La Condesa is staying in her cabin to read. The Captain sends two bottles of German champagne to La Condesa's cabin, which she later breaks into a sink because of her distaste for the Captain and his treatment of her.

Later that evening, the conversation at the Captain's table turns to anti-Semitic topics and the importance of ridding Germany of Jews. The conversation turns heated. Finally, Freytag admits that his wife is Jewish, a fact which Lizzi delightedly exclaims that Mrs. Treadwell told her. Freytag leaves the table and the next morning, attempts to arrange for his meal seating to be changed, and he discovers that the situation has already been revised and that he will be sitting at a small table with Herr Lowenthal for the remainder of the trip.

At the next meal, the remaining chosen few at the Captain's table commend him for taking such swift and sure action to remedy the situation with Freytag. The Captain assures the diners at his table that "To put people in their proper places and keep them there cannot be called severity, nor defense. It is merely observing and carrying out the natural order of things."

After the removal of Freytag from dining at the Captain's table, it occurs to Herr Rieber that he does not want to share a room with Freytag any longer either. Attempts to have Freytag reassigned are futile, though, as none of the other men is willing to have the current cabin assignments changed in spite of earlier discontent with their present roommates.

Mrs. Treadwell is in a moderately pleasant mood, as she lies in her deck chair and muses about the fact that it is her forty-sixth birthday. Mrs. Treadwell views Freytag on deck and asks him to join her, but he confronts her instead about telling his secret about his wife being Jewish. Mrs. Treadwell affirms that she meant no harm and is able to salvage the friendship she has with Freytag.

Frau Rittersdorf sits in her deck chair and writes in her journal about the situation involving Freytag and his improper behavior of sitting at the Captain's table during the journey. Suddenly Frau Rittersdorf is approached by Tito, one of the Spanish dancers, informing her of an impromptu fiesta the dancers are planning in honor of Captain Thiele.

The dancers are also selling raffle tickets for prizes, but Frau Rittersdorf declines all of Tito's overtures informing him that a dinner to honor the Captain is traditionally held two nights before the end of the trip. The Spaniards will be leaving when the ship docks in the Canary Islands soon and want to honor the Captain, but Frau Rittersdorf wants no part of this deviation from protocol.

At the Captain's table for dinner, the conversation turns to the question of the existence and the origin of good and evil. Dr. Schumann offers that he abides by the decisions of his religion as his guide in the matter. Frau Hutten deviates from her normal position of agreeing with her husband on all matters and contends that evil people do exist and in greater numbers than most people may realize. Catching a glimpse of her husband's cold stare at her, Frau Hutten suddenly realizes what she has done and thinks to herself that she has ruined his life by making such a bold scene in front of the others at the table.

Herr Hutten rises and escorts his wife from the table toward their cabin, where he chastises her for making such a scene by voicing opinions, which conflict with his own. Frau Hutten does not recede from her husband's verbal attack and defends her right to her own opinions. Suddenly Frau Hutten realizes that their cabin door had been left open and that Bebe is gone from the room. The Huttens, still at odds with each other, head back to the main deck to look for Bebe.

Herr Rieber contemplates his next approach in the seduction of Lizzi Spockenkieker, as they stroll after dinner. Spying a dark spot, Herr Rieber pushes Lizzi against a wall and kisses her violently while she responds in shock waving her long arms frantically. The couple almost falls over Bebe, who is wandering around deck loose. Lizzi is able to deflect Herr Rieber's advances one more time.

After dinner, dancing is in progress on deck and Elsa is being pushed by her mother to dance with some of the ship's officers, who quickly attend to their social duties and release Elsa, as soon as possible. Elsa retreats to a dark corner to sit by Herr Graf, who offers to heal Elsa's wounded spirit, but the girl is leery of the old man after he touches her face and lets his hands linger too long on her breasts, as he lets his hands drop.

Mrs. Treadwell dances with the most handsome of the ship's officers in the manner in, which she was instructed as a girl. In contrast, Arne Hansen and Amparo gyrate together and Amparo quickly tires of Arne's awkward physical presence. Freytag again dances with Jenny while David watches with jealousy although he will not dance with Jenny himself. While they dance, Freytag tells Jenny about how he met his wife, Mary, at a dance and how Mary knew the moment she saw him that she wanted to marry him.

Ric and Rac are dancing in an animalistic way, as they mimic some of the motions they have seen from their parents and the other Spanish dancers. Concha dances seductively with Johann and lures him with offers of intimacy if he will kill his uncle, Herr Graf, so that Johann can get the money of his inheritance. Concha wants Johann to smother Herr Graf with a pillow in his sleep, because that will be Johann's true test of manhood, but Johann will not agree to such a horrific act.

Denny is lingering near the dancers hoping that Pastora will look his way and out of the corner of his eye sees Ric and Rac throw something white overboard. In his drunken state, Denny cannot identify what has happened, but the rush of people toward the evil twins pushes him toward the site of all the activity. As Denny moves closer, he realizes that Ric and Rac have thrown Bebe overboard and that one of the Spaniards from the steerage area has jumped in the water to save the drowning dog.

Below deck, Dr. Schumann has encountered La Condesa, who has escaped from her room. La Condesa tries to lure the doctor back to her cabin, but the doctor is summoned to the main deck to tend to the man, who has died in an attempt to save the dog. Bebe is still alive and turned over to the Huttens, who take him back to their cabin to tend to him. Dr. Schumann later stops at the Hutten cabin to advise massage and warm beef broth for Bebe's full recovery.

The next morning, the dead man is buried at sea after a Catholic mass attended by many of the Spaniards and the curiosity seekers from first class. David cannot understand Jenny's need to attend, but her compassion overrules his practicality. Once more, he is perplexed by her misplaced compassion for strangers.

The Spanish dancers continue to harass the passengers to buy tickets for their fiesta raffle and post derogatory notes on the public bulletin board about those people who refuse.

Later that day Denny happily runs on deck telling the other passengers that they will reach land that evening. This news quickens the spirits of all the other passengers too, as they will be able to debark for almost a full day tomorrow before leaving for the balance of the trip to Germany.

Ric and Rac spot La Condesa at one end of an abandoned hallway below deck, steal her pearl necklace, and then run upstairs to the main deck, where they toss the necklace overboard. Some of the ship's officers are able to identify the twins as the perpetrators. Ric and Rac are punished severely by their parents, Tito and Lola, not because they stole the necklace, but because they thwarted the dancers' master plan of robbing La Condesa after she leaves the ship tomorrow.

High Sea Analysis

The author has written the book in three sections with no chapter breaks with this section being the longest. This technique mirrors the seemingly endless days at sea for the characters without any interruptions to break the monotony of being surrounded by strangers, who become more unsavory, as the long trip extends.

The author uses foreshadowing from the beginning of the section when describing Ric and Rac, who share a hatred of all people and animals. Ric and Rac soon attempt to throw the ship's cat overboard and succeed in tossing Bebe, who almost drowns. It is interesting to note that more attention is given to the drenched bulldog than to the man, who died in the rescue attempt.

The author positions Ric and Rac as symbols of enacting the minor terrors that the adults wish they could affect. The twins' real names are Armando and Dolores. They have taken the names of the cartoon terriers, who are "not real dogs of course, but to their idolaters real devils such as they wished to be - made fools of even the cleverest human beings in every situation, made life a raging curse for everyone near them, without a blow."

As the relationships among the adult passengers intensify, so do Ric and Rac's crimes, and they terrorize the crew and passengers, as if they are a visible sign of the animosity and hate flowing among the adults.

The strongest symbol and theme of hate is the overriding sense of superiority enjoyed by the German passengers led by Captain Thiele, who symbolizes the imminent terror stemming from Hitler's rise to power. Captain Thiele is able to keep his feelings to himself and congratulate himself on his superiority in his race and in his professional conduct, until one night at dinner, when he feels it is duty to share his position. "To put people in their proper places and keep them there cannot be called severity, nor defense. It is merely observing and carrying out the natural order of things."

Freytag, who is ostracized by having a Jewish wife, feels his own sense of superiority by his fortunate German birth. "No matter what he might say for the sake of politeness about his mixture of nationalities, he knew he was altogether German, a legitimate son of that powerful German strain able to destroy all foreign bloods in its own veins and make all pure and German once more."

Freytag's thinking mirrors that of Hitler's goal to produce the perfect Aryan race. Freytag's sense of superiority allows him to marry a Jewish woman, because her

marriage to him negates her being a Jew and that her tainted Jewish blood will be purged in their children by the overtaking of his own German blood.

The German passengers feel particularly superior to the Spanish people and do not understand why the dance troupe has been allowed first class passage. When Captain Thiele explains that the Mexican government paid to have the dancers exiled, the Germans understand the need for such purging. Frau Schmitt exhibits un-Christian behavior toward the dancers even at Mass when she moves away from them, as she kneels in prayer and resents their intrusion on her spiritual experience.

When there is a disturbance among the Spanish people traveling in steerage, the first class passengers take their typical arrogant stance. The men make jokes about the Spaniards slitting each other's throats and then doing the same to the first class passengers. Frau Lutz insensitively passes off the incident as a food riot, which would make sense, because their own dinners have not been of the best quality lately.

In addition to the major themes of race superiority and hatred, the author also uses literary techniques to add dimension to the characters' thoughts. For example, when the cool and distant Mrs. Treadwell remembers her girlhood spent in European schools, she cannot remember the name of an old friend. They had been close at the time, and she passes her lack of memory off as inconsequential, when she thinks, "As if she could even invent a regret for a bond that had no more substance than a drift of cigarette smoke." The comparison of the importance of a relationship to cigarette smoke adds drama, which lets the reader instantly understand her meaning.

In another example, the author uses a metaphor to describe Freytag's scare at considering suicide to eliminate the problem of harassment by others, who do not understand his marriage to a Jewish woman. "That easy way out was not for him. His way was clear - the road ran all the way in, and through, and out again on the other side; all he had to do was to keep going, and not lose his head, and not let Jew or Christian bedevil him into losing his temper and playing into their hands." Obviously, there is no road running through Freytag's head, but the author uses figurative language to describe the rush of thoughts that torment him.

The author uses a simile when describing Herr Hutten's anger at Frau Hutten's contradictory opinions at dinner. "Her husband sat like something molded in sand, his expression that of a strong innocent man gazing into a pit of cobras." By the use of visual imagery the author provides a very clear picture of Herr Hutten sitting in shock and dismay, as his wife embarrasses him publicly.

The Harbors

The Harbors Summary

At last the ship docks at Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, where the *Vera* passengers are happy to debark and spend a day on land. Most of the Spaniards in the steerage compartment are getting off at this port. Their joy is almost palpable, as they crowd down the gangplank. Included in this group are the man in the cherry red shirt, who is nursing a head wound garnered in a fight, as well as seven new infants born during the passage.

Dr. Schumann watches this departure for a short while and then heads below deck for the less pleasant task of informing La Condesa that the authorities are waiting at the dock to accompany her to her new living quarters. Dr. Schumann assures La Condesa that he and the Captain have spoken with the officers and that they will follow discreetly behind La Condesa, never touching her and never making it appear that she is a prisoner.

Dr. Schumann tries to encourage La Condesa to have hope in her new life, but she is depressed by the exile with no family or money. The doctor gives La Condesa another sedative injection with a prescription and a note for a doctor on the island, so that La Condesa can continue getting the medication, upon which she has come to rely.

The doctor sits by La Condesa for a few minutes of tenderness while she tells Dr. Schumann to remove her from his mind and not think about the hardships she is about to endure. Dr. Schumann accompanies La Condesa to the gangplank and watches her depart in a small carriage with the authorities following closely behind.

Most of the other passengers have decided to spend the day on the island sightseeing and shopping, but Dr. Schumann decides to remain on board, where he encounters Herr Graf. The elder gentleman's frail health prohibits his going ashore in his wheelchair so the doctor stops to chat for a few minutes on the topics of good vs. evil, justice, and love. The doctor is struck by the gravity of the conversation, and he realizes that he has done an injustice to La Condesa by taking advantage of her imprisonment to tease her with love but never fully give himself over to her.

Dr. Schumann retires to his cabin and writes a hurried letter to La Condesa in, which he provides his home address contact information along with the address of the International Red Cross headquarters in Geneva. The doctor closes the letter with a request that La Condesa write to him and let him know her own mailing address so that he may communicate with her. The doctor requests a reply before the ship sails at four o'clock and dispatches the letter with a steward, but a reply from La Condesa never arrives.

On shore, the passengers are fascinated by the group of young local women, who run up and down the hills carrying jugs of water on trays on their heads. One girl in particular catches Denny's eye, and he runs after her for quite awhile before realizing that she is literally leading him on a futile chase.

The Spanish dancers are moving as a group through the shops and creating disturbances so that the various shopkeepers will be distracted while some in the group steal items, which will later be used in their raffle on board ship tonight. Some of the shopkeepers enlist the help of the German and American passengers to help them monitor the dancers, because they are indiscriminately stealing from every shop they enter.

Frau Rittersdorf has gone ashore but sits in the shade to update her journal with the sights and sounds of the island. Frau Rittersdorf views the scene of random people and animals with disdain for their poverty and turns her thoughts to her own vulnerability since the death of her husband, who did not provide well for her. The poverty strikes too close for comfort and Frau Rittersdorf returns to the ship well ahead of sailing time.

The Lutzes and Baumgartners stroll together through the town and anticipate the exit of the Spanish dancers at the next port. The other passengers on the ship have never warmed to the leering and antagonistic dance troupe and the recent shoplifting episodes of the dancers leaves the respectable people feeling even more disgust for these immoral people.

David and Jenny continue to verbally spar over their final destination, David still preferring Spain while Jenny wants to visit France. In exasperation for David's obstinate attitude, Jenny joins Freytag and some of the others for some shopping. Finally, it is time to board the ship for departure and Jenny notes that everyone looks as tired as they did upon boarding in Veracruz with the same disdain for the strangers next to them. That night, the passengers retire early and Dr. Schumann makes his nightly visit through the steerage area of tend to medical needs of the remaining Spanish passengers.

The next morning, the passengers realize that they are moving past the coast of Africa and Elsa notes that the early morning mist reminds her of Europe and it feels good to be heading home again.

On deck, Amparo and Lola display the stolen goods as the prizes for tonight's raffle during the fiesta for the Captain. The other passengers either pass by the vulgar display or buy tickets depending on their level of deflection of the obnoxious dancers. Denny has cornered Pastora, who has been luring him with promises of intimacy for several days and determines that he will bring the situation to closure tonight.

The other passengers begin to prepare for the fiesta in spite of the ill-gotten gains offered by the Spanish dancers. More out of courtesy for the extension of a social invitation and the honor of the Captain, the passengers reluctantly resign themselves to this evening of what must surely hold vulgar entertainment.

As Mrs. Treadwell descends toward the dining salon, she muses about her still attractive physical appearance but bemoans her soon-to-be-fading youth and her fate of paying escorts for social functions. Mrs. Treadwell determines to fight off the ravages of old age with ferocity and decides to buy a more youthful wardrobe immediately upon her arrival in Paris. Mrs. Treadwell would have returned to her room to nurse her melancholy mood had David not intercepted her and escorted her into the party.

In another part of the ship, Herr Rieber has determined that he will make his moves on Lizzie tonight, because the journey will soon be over and his opportunities are becoming fewer. Herr Rieber cannot pursue Lizzie after the trip, because he is married, although separated, from his wife, who will not grant a divorce. Herr Rieber finds a secluded spot on deck, where he will later waltz Lizzie into his private lair.

The passengers begin to arrive in the dining salon and find that their normal seats have been changed by the Spanish dancers, who will occupy seats at the Captain's table tonight. The Captain is appalled when he realizes the order of things but determines to act with the dignity of his position and ignore the upset as best as possible. What the Captain cannot ignore, though, is the fact that the dancers are waiting to make a dramatic entrance into the dining room, leaving him alone at the table to order dinner in such an awkward situation.

At last, the passengers have found their new seat assignments and the dancers enter the room with a flourish of music and seductive gyrations on their way to the Captain's table. With Amparo now on one side and Lola on the other, the Captain bears the effusive tributes of these people, whom he detests especially when they launch into speeches about the partnership of Spain and Germany symbolized in their presence here tonight.

As soon as socially possible, the Captain leaves his table and escapes to the bridge of the ship for the balance of the evening. The band continues to play their alternating selections of Spanish and German music and the passengers drink and have a good time in spite of their dislike for the Spanish dancers, who are hosting the garish affair.

Mrs. Treadwell's mood has lifted, as she dances with the handsome young ship's officer again but declines Denny's invitation to dance because of his crass nature. The whole nature of the party changes for the worse when the Cuban students begin to grab the Spanish dancers amid drunken shouts. Elsa is destroyed when she sees the Cuban boy she likes dancing provocatively with one of the dancers.

Johann has joined the party late, as he had had a confrontation with his uncle, Herr Graf, in their cabin earlier. Johann has demanded some money from his uncle, because he is tired of acting like the frail man's slave. Herr Graf knows that Johann wants the money for illicit purposes and reminds the young man about God's judgment of immoral behavior. Johann is intractable though, and ultimately Herr Graf reveals the location of his wallet, instructs Johann to bring it to him, and gives the boy a hand full of cash. Johann leaves the cabin joyfully, because he can now approach Pastora and pay for her services and some champagne tonight.

Herr Hansen is in a particularly combative mood tonight and watches the drunken Herr Rieber and Lizzie dance by him so closely that at one point, Herr Rieber steps on Herr Hansen's foot. Although the move was unintentional, Herr Hansen rises and smashes a beer bottle over Herr Rieber's head. The two men engage in a physical confrontation, until they are separated by one of the musicians, who then escorts Lizzie to her cabin.

Denny and David had been keeping company, until Denny decides to make his move on Pastora, which prompts David to leave the party altogether. On the walk back to his cabin, David spots Jenny and Freytag in an intimate embrace and hurries on to his room in humiliation.

Still at the party, the Baumgartners have yet another fight about Herr Baumgartners drinking problem, which he contends is necessary to counter the pain of ulcers. Herr Baumgartner threatens suicide to end his physical and emotional distress, but Frau Baumgartner is unmoved even when her husband moves to the deck and contemplates jumping overboard. Herr Baumgartner cannot stand the thought that should he die, his wife will remarry and another man will raise his son so he retreats from the deck and returns to the cabin, where he and his wife make amends through physical intimacy.

In the meantime, Mrs. Treadwell has received a tour of the ship with her handsome officer before retiring to her cabin alone. Mrs. Treadwell is in an odd mood and applies heavy makeup to the point that she resembles one of the garish Spanish dancers. Lizzie soon bursts into the room and tells Mrs. Treadwell that she is too late to apply a mask for the party, which has ended.

Suddenly, someone begins beating on the cabin door. Lizzie recoils in horror, thinking that it is Herr Rieber in his unrelenting pursuit. Mrs. Treadwell opens the door to reveal Denny, who mistakes Mrs. Treadwell for Pastora and begins clutching at her nightclothes. Mrs. Treadwell is able to push Denny away, and he falls to the floor, where Mrs. Treadwell begins to hit Denny's face with the heel of her high-heeled slipper. A passing steward intervenes and Mrs. Treadwell returns to her cabin, where she throws the slipper out the porthole.

Dr. Schumann has a full night tending to the wounds suffered by Herr Rieber and now Denny with the heel marks all over his face. The doctor has seen such marks before and assumes that it had been Pastora who did it, until the steward informs him otherwise.

The next morning dawns with hangovers and regrets, as the passengers once more face each other, as if they are strangers. Later that day, the ship pulls into the port at Vigo, where the Spanish dancers, and some of the other Cuban passengers debark. Jenny and David try in vain to have their visas changed to exit in Spain, but the consul officer informs them that he is unable to make the change so they are resigned to traveling on to Germany with the rest of the passengers.

At the Captain's discretion, the ship then stopped briefly in Boulougne, where Mrs. Treadwell and the Cuban students depart the ship. No one enters or leaves at

Southampton and finally the *Vera* docks in Bremerhaven, Germany, where the Germans, Swiss, Swedish, and American passengers leave the ship for the last time.

The Harbors Analysis

The author is more interested in themes than a plot, because the action almost entirely consists of personal dynamics among strangers, as opposed to a definite story line. For three weeks, a group of people is closed in with people of varying nationalities and the ensuing friendships and animosities that develop are the basis for the novel. Reading the book can be a tiresome proposition, as it seems to move without direction at times, landing only during conversations relevant to one of the major themes of racial superiority, prejudice, and hatred.

The author does provide many instances of descriptive language to help define characters. For example, when describing the Cuban students disembarking for the day in Tenerife, she writes, "The students piled into a larger conveyance, in a tangle of arms and legs, their heads clustered like a nest of noisy birds."

Another metaphor occurs when Dr. Schumann recalls the sight of La Condesa's carriage taking her away from the dock in Tenerife. "... the island he would never see again, had not in fact seen at all, except as a steep road from the dock with a small white carriage climbing away slowly taking with it all the vanities and illusions of his life." Obviously, vanities and illusions are not elements that can be transported, but the author uses the metaphor to describe Dr. Schumann's regrets of his short relationship with La Condesa.

The author also points out the disparity between the Germans and the Latin people when she describes Frau Rittersdorf viewing a Spanish mother and child on Tenerife. "The woman's neck, face, and hands were like old leather, all her side teeth were gone, she mangled and tore her food with her front teeth, yet ate like a wolf. The baby climbed out of her lap, and stood up. He wore a single dirty shirt that reached barely to his navel. He squared himself off on his feet and spread legs, his infant male tassel rose and pointed acutely skywards and a very energetic spout of water ascended in a glittering arc, pattering in the dust not three feet from Frau Rittersdorf's immaculate light-colored shoes and gossamer stockings." The Spanish woman and child are presented as animalistic to the pristine Frau Rittersdorf, who recoils in horror at the contrast.

The author also uses irony as noted in the case of the Spanish dancers, who are outraged that a carriage driver charges for each passenger, as opposed to one flat fee. "'Look, Senor, this carriage is for six persons, you are ten; you will pay me for ten. I charge by the passenger.' 'That's mere robbery,' said Pancho, 'I will not pay it.'" The Spanish dancers have spent the day shoplifting without conscience and yet cry foul when an honest carriage driver attempts to charge his normal rate.

The significance of the novel's title is finally understood at the end of the journey when the passengers leave the ship and their brief acquaintances behind. All the prejudices

and acts of superiority exhibited on board will no doubt perpetuate in the lives of the characters, as they move forward, now individuals, and no longer on a passenger list for the Ship of Fools.

Characters

Amparo

Amparo is one of the group of Spanish dancers on the ship. She is beautiful but often ungracious. She has sex with men for money, which she then hands over to her lover, Pepe.

Frau Greta Baumgartner

Frau Greta Baumgartner is Karl Baumgartner's wife. She is unable to halt her husband's decline and watches disapprovingly as he sinks further. Sometimes, she takes out her frustrations on their helpless son.

Hans Baumgartner

Hans Baumgartner is the timid and delicatelooking eight-year-old son of Karl and Greta Baumgartner.

Herr Karl Baumgartner

Herr Karl Baumgartner is a sickly looking German lawyer, who practiced law in Mexico City. For some years, his practice flourished, but then he developed a drinking problem; he could not resist his longing for brandy. His career went into a decline, and he lost three important cases in the Mexican courts. The stress of failure gave him stomach pains, and this is the situation as he and his longsuffering wife board the ship. He continues to drink to assuage the stomach pains.

Jenny Brown

Jenny Brown is a young American artist, the girlfriend of David Scott. She is black haired and attractive, with a bold manner, but she is also restless, dissatisfied, and superficial. Jenny enjoys getting involved with radical political causes, such as joining strikers on a picket line, but for her this is just a lark. She and David have a love-hate relationship, and she enjoys tormenting him, although she also believes that, in spite of everything, she loves him. However, she knows in her heart that their relationship is doomed. Jenny shares a cabin with Elsa Lutz and is pleased to share her views about love with the naive young girl.

Father Carillo

Father Carillo is one of the two Mexican Catholic priests on the ship. He has a hatred for atheism and political radicalism, which he believes lead the lower classes astray, and he regards the poor travelers in steerage with suspicion. However, he is a gentler man than Father Garza.

La Condesa

La Condesa is a fifty-year-old Spanish noblewoman who has lived many years in Cuba. She became involved in revolutionary politics and is now being deported from Cuba to Tenerife. Slender, with short, reddish hair, she wears expensive-looking clothes and exudes a kind of faded glamour. She is addicted to drugs. The Captain is informed that she is a dangerous revolutionary, but he thinks she is just an idle rich lady who likes excitement. La Condesa flirts with the young sailors and also with Dr. Schumann, who falls in love with her and accedes to her desire for drugs.

William Denny

William Denny is a young American chemical engineer from Texas, who is on his way to Berlin to work for a manufacturing firm. Tall and shambling, he is a bigoted man, who regards people from a class, nation, or race other than his own as inferior and refers to them by insulting names. According to David Scott, who shares a cabin with him, Denny thinks only of three things: sex, money (largely his determination not to be cheated by anyone), and his health.

Herr Wilhelm Freytag

Herr Wilhelm Freytag is connected with an oil company in Mexico and is returning to Germany to fetch his Jewish wife, Mary, and her mother. The thirty-year-old Freytag is good-looking and well dressed, and he comes from a solid Lutheran family. He is self-confident and feels that there is no barrier to his future success. However, he dreads introducing his Jewish wife to the German community in Mexico City, where he is emigrating because of the growing anti-Semitism in Germany. When it is discovered that Freytag has a Jewish wife, he is removed from the Captain's table for meals and instead is given a table with Herr Löwenthal, the only Jew on the voyage. Freytag forms a friendship with Jenny Brown, but he regards her as a flirt.

Father Garza

Father Garza is one of two Mexican Catholic priests on the ship. He has a cynical view of human nature (he doubts the genuineness of the expressions of pity at the funeral of the drowned man), and he can be argumentative and outspoken.

Herr Karl Glocken

Herr Karl Glocken is a hunchback who has sold his tobacco and newspaper stand in Mexico and is returning to Germany. He is only four feet tall and has a long, sad face, but he has a pleasant, good-humored nature.

Herr Wilibald Graf

Herr Wilibald Graf is a dying man who is pushed around in a wheelchair by his nephew, Johann. Graf is a former teacher of philosophy who has become a religious fanatic. He believes that God has given him the power to heal others by touching them. He is also a miser and refuses to give his nephew any money before he dies.

Arne Hansen

Arne Hansen is a big and clumsy Swede, with huge hands and feet, who was in the dairy business in Mexico. He is morose and argumentative, with strong opinions about religion and politics. He is often mistaken for a Dane, much to his annoyance. Hansen spends much of the voyage having sex with Amparo, for a fee. He also feuds with Herr Rieber, and they get into a scuffle at the final dinner.

Frau Professor Hutten

Frau Professor Hutten is Professor Hutten's wife. Like her husband, she is overweight. She is overly fond of their seasick white bulldog, Bébé, and spends an inordinate amount of time cleaning up after him. Frau Hutten has spent her marriage obeying her husband and being attentive to his needs. This has involved giving up her teaching career, but she did so because her husband told her that a woman's sacred mission was to create a happy home. Once at the dinner table during the voyage, Frau Hutten expresses her disagreement with her husband's views, and he rebukes her fiercely.

Herr Professor Hutten

Herr Professor Hutten is the former head of a German school in Mexico. He is a pedantic scholar, who is utterly convinced of the rightness of his views, which he expounds at length to anyone who will listen. He dominates his wife and expects her total and unwavering support. When Professor Hutten speaks in a group, it is not to make conversation but simply to announce his own thoughts and opinions. He struggles to uphold a view of the basic goodness of man, but there are strong hints that this opinion is at odds with what he really feels.

Johann

Johann is the nephew of Wilibald Graf. He takes care of his uncle, pushing him around in his wheelchair, but he does it with bad grace, believing his uncle to be a pious old hypocrite. Tall, with glittering golden hair, Johann is waiting for his uncle to die so that he can receive his inheritance. Eventually, he persuades his uncle to give him some money, and he uses it to pay Concha, one of the Spanish dancers, for sex.

Herr Julius Löwenthal

Herr Julius Löwenthal is a Jewish manufacturer and salesman; he is returning to his home in Düsseldorf to visit his cousin Sarah. His business takes him to all parts of Europe, South America, and Mexico, where he sells rosaries and plaster and wooden saint statues to Roman Catholics. Wherever there is a Catholic church, he can make money. Even though he hates Catholics, he is happy to do business with them. Löwenthal is conscious of being persecuted because he is a Jew, and he frequently expresses his distaste for all Gentiles. For meals, he is put at a table by himsel until Wilhelm Freytag is forced to join him.

Elsa Lutz

Elsa Lutz is the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Lutzes. She is a big, ungainly girl, who fears that she may never fall in love or be loved. She conceives a romantic fantasy about a tall, darkhaired, handsome student on the ship, just because he once happened to smile at her. But when he finally asks her to dance at the final gala dinner, she is so frightened she says she cannot dance.

Frau Lutz

Frau Lutz is Heinrich Lutz's wife. She is plain and dumpy and more serious than her husband. According to her daughter, Frau Lutz is unable to laugh. She is fond of giving motherly talks to her daughter about how she should conduct herself towards men, and she unsuccessfully tries to set Elsa up with Hansen.

Herr Heinrich Lutz

Herr Heinrich Lutz is a Swiss hotelkeeper from Mexico, who is returning with his family to Switzerland after fifteen years to start their own hotel business. He has an extremely limited outlook on life and is interested only in the narrowest of practicalities. According to his daughter, he is happy by nature and loves to have a good time.

Rac

Rac is one of the six-year-old twins of the Spanish dancer, Lola. Rac, and her twin brother Ric, are continually up to no good. They deliberately pour ink onto the carpet in the writing room, toss Frau Rittersdorf's pillow overboard, and try to do the same to the ship's cat. They do succeed in throwing the Huttens' bulldog, Bébé, overboard. They also steal La Condesa's pearl necklace and throw it overboard. The other passengers refer to them as little devils.

Ric

Ric is the twin brother of Rac. He and his sister enjoy pulling pranks on the passengers and are always getting into trouble.

Herr Siegfried Rieber

Herr Siegfried Rieber is the publisher of a ladies' garments trade magazine. He is small and fat, with a crude manner, and is of a lower class than the other Germans on the voyage. He is violently anti-Semitic and includes anti-Semitic propaganda in his magazine. At one point, he demands that he should not have to share a cabin with Löwenthal the Jew, whom he loathes because he is Jewish, but he cannot find anyone else who is willing to share with him. Rieber flirts throughout the voyage with Lizzi Spockenkieker, but on the night he plans to seduce her, he is thwarted by Hansen, who breaks a beer bottle over his head at the gala dinner.

Frau Rittersdorf

Frau Rittersdorf is a widow whose husband Otto was killed in the First World War. She comes from an humble background. Her father was a shoemaker and her mother a seamstress, and she lives on a modest inheritance passed to her by her husband's parents. However, she is vain and has become a snob. While in Mexico, she was expecting a Spanish nobleman to ask her to marry him. Since he did not, she convinces herself that a German woman should not marry outside her race. Frau Rittersdorf has a poor memory, so she writes every detail of her daily life in a diary, which is full of her jaundiced observations about life. On observing Glocken the hunchback, for example, she writes that she is in favor of euthanizing defective children, as soon as it is clear they are "unfit."

Frau Otto Schmidt

Frau Otto Schmidt was widowed in Mexico only six weeks before the voyage began. Her husband's coffin is traveling in the ship. Frau Schmidt was a teacher in the German

school in Guadalajara in Mexico, and she is returning to Nuremberg. She is a timid woman, full of self-pity, and she often feels snubbed, ignored, or neglected.

Dr. Schumann

Dr. Schumann, one of the few admirable characters in the novel, is the ship's sixty-year-old doctor. He is amiable, well bred, dignified and handsome, with two dark dueling scars on his left cheek□a mark of distinction. He also has a heart condition that could kill him at any time. Dr. Schumann is a Catholic and a religious man, with a developed sense of his moral responsibilities. He is the only one of the Germans at the Captain's table who does not express anti-Semitic views. He has also thought deeply about the destiny of man and concludes that it is a mystery known only by God. However, against his will, Schumann allows himself to succumb to the charms of La Condesa, with whom he falls in love. He feels guilty about this, first because he is a married man and second because he prescribes for her the drugs she craves, although she has no medical need for them. After she disembarks at Tenerife, Schumann sends her a respectful note, but she declines to reply. This leaves him despondent at the end of the voyage.

David Scott

David Scott is a young American artist who lives with Jenny Scott. They are on their first trip to Europe, but they do not much enjoy each other's company. They are perpetually quarreling and seem to take delight in saying cruel things to each other. David does not trust Jenny and does not like or trust anyone else either, reacting very coolly to Denny, his cabin mate. He is also jealous of the friendship Jenny forms with Freytag. David thinks of himself as an outsider, and he does not seem to know how to enjoy himself□he refuses to dance, for example. He blames his morally strict Quaker upbringing for ensuring that he never really enjoys his life. Always restless, he habitually wants to be somewhere other than where he is.

Fraulein Lizzi Spockenkieker

Fraulein Lizzi Spockenkieker comes from Hanover and is in the ladies' garment business. In Mexico, she has been visiting her aunt and uncle. Tall and thin with close-cropped hair and a shrill voice, she carries on a constant flirtation with Siegfried Rieber. According to Mrs. Treadwell, with whom she shares a cabin, Lizzi's topics of conversation consist entirely of perfume, clothes, shops, and men.

Captain Thiele

Captain Thiele is the ship's captain. He is an arrogant man, completely sure of his own authority and superiority. He regards the poor people traveling in steerage as little more than cattle and threatens to lay in irons anyone who causes a disturbance. Captain Thiele believes that as captain he is the representative of a higher law that he must

enforce to prevent a moral breakdown. He is fascinated by American gangster films and has violent fantasies in which he acts like a hero in putting down rebellions by lawless mobs. Thiele always feels somewhat disgruntled, and his general state of anger and ill-humor causes him to suffer often from digestive problems.

Mary Treadwell

Mary Treadwell is a divorced American of forty-five who is returning from Mexico to Paris. Mrs. Treadwell had a privileged upbringing and went to the best schools, but she married a man who had fits of jealousy and beat her. She tends to blame herself for the failure of the marriage, which lasted ten years. She has now been divorced for ten years and is bored with her life, which she thinks of as "shady, shabby, lonely, transient, sitting in cafes and hotels with others transient as herself," although she tries to shut this unpleasant truth out of her mind. On the ship, she drinks too much wine and spends a lot of time playing solitaire or dancing with a handsome young officer. (Mrs. Treadwell is still slender and pretty.) One of her faults is that she is too emotionally detached. She refuses to get close to people, in part because she feels their troubles too keenly.

Themes

Anti-Semitism and Nationalism

The voyage takes place in 1931, only two years before Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany, and in the novel, the Germans display a deep-seated anti-Semitism. The worst offender is Herr Rieber, the proto-Nazi. He uses the journal he publishes to disseminate anti-Semitic propaganda and proudly tells Lizzi that one the topics discussed is the idea that "if we can find some means to drive all the Jews out of Germany, our national greatness will then assert itself and tomorrow we shall have a free world." Rieber warms to the subject of the Jews over dinner at the Captain's table, talking (in the way Nazis did) about cleansing the blood of Germany from the Jewish poison. No one dissents from this except Dr. Schumann, who represents a moral sensibility well above that of the others.

Rieber may be alarming, but fanatics with extreme racist views exist in many societies. What is most disturbing in the novel is how so many of the others go along with him. The empty-headed Lizzi, for example, absorbs Rieber's opinions and finds them congruent with her own. She says the Jews in her business are "trying to control everything and everybody"; they are unscrupulous and will try any trick. When Mrs. Treadwell suggests mildly that all business is like that, Lizzi counters firmly that no, it is only the Jews.

A similar acquiescence occurs when Freytag is expelled from the Captain's table because he has a Jewish wife. None of the Germans protest this petty act of injustice□quite the reverse, they praise and justify it. Frau Rittersdorf congratulates the Captain on how tactfully the deed was done; Professor Hutten praises the Captain for his decisive leadership, which helped to remind them all of their principles. Hutten's anti-Semitism is of the intellectual type. He is the sort who would within a few years be justifying Nazi anti-Semitism under a veneer of scholarly objectivity.

Even Freytag, the victim in this situation, is not free of the assumptions of his fellow Germans. Thinking of Mary, his Jewish wife, he shows that he too has absorbed German ideas about the superiority of their race, musing that "our children's blood will flow pure as mine, your tainted stream will be cleansed in their German veins."

Anti-Semitism is only one manifestation of the Germans' nationalistic belief in the sacredness of their "mystic Fatherland" and their racial superiority. They despise all races other than the Nordic, and all classes other than their own. Freytag, for example, regards the poor as spawning "like maggots in filth, befouling the air around them," and Captain Thiele holds a similarly contemptuous view of the steerage passengers. Herr Rieber would prefer it if the low-life traveling in steerage were put in a gas oven instead. The Spanish are also despised as being of a lesser breed, and so are the Americans, whom the Germans regard for the most part as a coarse, vulgar, racially "impure" people. Frau Rittersdorf gives expression to this view when she complains of "The

gradual mongrelization of that dismaying country by the mingling of the steerage sweepings of Europe and the blacks [which] had resulted only in a mediocracy of feature and mind impossible to describe."

The Germans are not the only ones to express intolerant, racist views. One of the Americans, Denny, is equally dismissive of anyone from another country, and of certain categories of people within his own. David Scott observes Denny's "vulgar habit of calling all nationalities but his own by short ugly names."

Love

The portrayal of love in *Ship of Fools* is a pessimistic one. Many of the characters are involved in relationships that should embody love, but almost none of them have been able to attain a mutually satisfying intimate relationship. There is only one example of a love that appears happy and full of promise, and that is between the unnamed Mexican bride and groom. This couple are given no dialogue of their own; they are simply viewed from time to time strolling around the deck, obviously deeply in love. But there is a hint that their idyllic private world will not last. After Jenny observes how lovely they look together, Freytag comments that the look on the bride's face is like "Eden just after the Fall. That little interval between the Fall and the driving out by that tricky jealous vengeful old God." What he means is that such love can last only for a short while; soon the couple will be exposed to the harsh realities of the world, which have distorted the love of many of the couples depicted on the *Vera*.

The love between Jenny and David, such as it is, is of quite another kind, and it is hard to imagine them ever attaining the serenity of the Mexican bride and groom. They are constantly quarreling. Jenny gets a clear insight into the essence of their relationship when she dreams of a vicious fight to the death between a Mexican man and woman that she once caught sight of from a passing bus. Gradually in the dream the faces of the man and woman change to those of David and herself. She holds a bloody stone in her hand; he has a knife poised to stab her already bleeding breast. Jenny then realizes that, metaphorically speaking, that is what David and Jenny are doing to each other in the name of love.

In her better moments, Jenny does in fact possess a higher, more idealistic vision of love: "She believed the thought of love as tenderness and faithfulness and gaiety and a true goodness of the heart to the loved one." But she has little idea of how to realize this love with David. As for David, he has a similar romantic idealism but like Jenny no practical skill in making it work in daily life.

The other couples on the ship are for the most part a sorry bunch. The Baumgartners, for example, are driven apart by the husband's alcoholism. He and his resentful wife experience only one moment of reconciliation, and that is when they make love after a vicious quarrel. But even this is not presented in a positive light, because it is shown through the frightened eyes of their little son Hans, who has just witnessed their quarrel.

The best explanation that Frau Baumgartner can manage is to tell Hans that "Sometimes we are crossest with the ones we love best."

If the Baumgartners are mostly hostile to each other, the Huttens are complacent. They made a bargain long ago that the price of love was the wife's complete submission and obedience to her husband.

Of the other characters, Mrs. Treadwell is too damaged by her abusive marriage that ended ten years ago to allow herself to get close to anyone; Frau Rittersdorf lives, as far as love is concerned, in the past with her dead husband Otto, whom she lauds as a war hero but also resents for dying prematurely. Dr. Schumann, for all his worldly wisdom and moral rectitude, sinks into a sentimental, hopeless affair with La Condesa even as he reproaches himself for doing so. Freytag might seem a more promising example since he clearly loves his absent wife, but when he fully realizes how difficult their life will be because she is Jewish, the seeds of resentment are sown.

At the lowest level of the scale are Denny, Hansen, and Rieber, and even young Johann, for whom love has no meaning at all; their pursuit of women is entirely for the purpose of sex.

Style

Animal Imagery

Porter frequently uses animal and bird imagery to refer to the passengers on the ship. Much of this occurs in Part 1, as the travelers are first introduced. The implication is that this particular group of humans lacks some essential quality that would make them fully human, an implication that is often confirmed as their characters unfold during the course of the voyage.

Some examples of the imagery include Lizzi, who is likened to a "peahen"; Rieber, who is both "pig-snouted" and a "little short-legged strutting cock"; and Jenny, who is likened by some of the hostile local people to a mule or a monkey. The locals also observe that poor little Hans has been made into a "monkey" by the leather riding costume his parents force him to wear even in the hot weather. The Spanish girls are as "noisy as a flock of quarreling birds"; David Scott is like "a willful, cold-blooded horse."

The point is amusingly brought home by the fact that Bébé, the white bulldog that belongs to the Huttens, is presented in a more flattering light than his overweight, self-indulgent owners. Although Bébé has just spent an uncomfortable night tied up on a kitchen patio, it is clear from the following description that as far as human and animal qualities are concerned, the roles of Bébé and his owners have been reversed:

> Bébé the bulldog had borne his ordeal with the mournful silence of his heroic breed, and held no grudges against anybody. His owners now began at once to explore the depths of the large food basket they carried everywhere with them.

Point of View

The story is told by a third-person omniscient narrator. This means that the narrator has total knowledge of the actions of all the characters and also knows their thoughts and motivations. This applies to minor as well as major characters. The fact that there is an omniscient narrator also enables the author to constantly shift the point of view. A scene will be described from the point of view of one character, and then after a few pages, another scene takes place and another point of view takes over.

Sometimes this technique produces interesting contrasts in perception between different characters. For example, when the reader is first introduced to Mrs. Treadwell, it is explained that the bruise on her arm was the result of being hit by a beggar woman for refusing to give alms. But several pages later, when the point of view has switched to that of Dr. Schumann, he makes the assumption that the bruise was caused by a lover's pinch.

Structure

The novel is split into three parts of unequal length; there are no chapters. Instead, there are multiple small sections, or scenes. Each scene shows two or more characters interacting, or focuses on the inner life of one character. The scene unfolds for a few pages, and then another scene, involving different characters, takes its place. There is little plot in the traditional sense of the word, in which a series of interrelated actions leads to conflict and complications before reaching a climax and a resolution. Nor is there much in the way of character development; at the end of the voyage, the characters are much the same as they were when they embarked. This is unlike many novels, in which the main characters are changed in some meaningful way by the end of the story.

Irony and Satire

The grimness of the novel is relieved by the satirical approach of the author, who is always ready to poke fun at her characters, and allow them to reveal how small-minded and prejudiced they are. Porter's stance is one of ironic distance. As the lofty authorial voice, she manages to find a way of passing negative judgment on her characters through her careful choice of words and details. The effect is often humorous. The obnoxious Herr Rieber, for example, as he encounters some obstacles to his goal of seducing Lizzi Spockenkieker, decides that he must not be discouraged:

> After all, this was only another woman□there *must* be a way, and he would find it. He thought with some envy of the ancient custom of hitting them over the head as a preliminary□not enough to cause injury, of course, just a good firm tap to stun the little spirit of contradiction in them.

Porter also has some fun with Lizzi, the object of Rieber's desire. Early in the novel, she accidentally bumps into the Captain, almost knocking him over: "He threw an arm about her stiffly, his face a dark furious red; and Lizzi, blushing, whinnying, cackling, scrambling, embraced him wildly around the neck as if she were drowning."

At other times, the irony takes the form not of humor but of icy condemnation, as when at the dinner table the subject of Jews comes up:

> They then exchanged a few customary remarks about the Jews and their incomprehensible habits, a sort of small change of opinion which established them once and for all as of the same kind of people without any irreconcilable differences.

Historical Context

The Germany that the travelers in *Ship of Fools* were bound for was a nation on the brink of accepting the rule of Adolf Hitler's National Socialist Party. In September 1930, a year before the *Vera* arrives, six and a half million Germans had voted for the Nazi Party. This was an increase from 810,000 two years earlier.

The increasing strength of the Nazis was a consequence of Germany's desperate economic straits. In 1931, there were five million unemployed, the middle classes were facing financial ruin, and the unpopular government was unable to find a way out of the morass.

In March, 1932, Hitler won over eleven million votes□30 percent of the total□in the presidential election, denying President Hindenberg an absolute majority. In a second election, Hitler in- creased his vote by two million. In July, 1932, the Nazis became the largest party in the Reichstag, the German parliament. Following months of political intrigue in the wake of another round of elections in November 1932, Hitler was appointed chancellor in January, 1933.

Hitler immediately set about reconstructing the German state in accordance with Nazi ideology. All other political parties were banned, and economic and cultural life was brought under the control of the central government and maintained by sophisticated propaganda. Hitler assumed the presidency on the death of Hindenberg in August, 1934.

The persecution of the Jews, along with other minority groups, was not long in coming. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 deprived Jews of their German citizenship and forbade marriage between Jews and Aryans. More anti-Semitic laws were passed over the next few years, enough to satisfy the many Herr Riebers (the proto-Nazi in *Ship of Fools*) who were now occupying government positions and promoting anti-Semitic propaganda, as well as others in the novel, like Frau Rittersdorf and Lizzi Spockenkieker, who believe firmly in the inferiority and corrupting influence of the Jews. In Nazi Germany, Jews were banned from professions such as medicine, law, the civil service, journalism, and teaching. They were not allowed to trade on the stock exchange. By 1936, it is estimated that about one half of German Jews were without a means of livelihood.

It was then only a few steps to the concentration camps and the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust during World War II.

During the 1930s, the rest of the world was slow in waking up to the threat to Western civilization that the Nazis represented. When the Olympic Games were held in Berlin in 1936, many of the worst aspects of Nazism were hidden from the world. Even David Lloyd-George, an astute statesman who had led Britain during World War I, was fooled. He visited Hitler in 1936 and declared him to be a great man. This ignorance is reflected in the novel, in which the Americans and some of the Europeans mildly disapprove of

the anti-Semitism they observe on the ship, but have no inkling of the depth of the evil that is brewing in Germany. Mrs. Treadwell in particular has no knowledge of international politics and no desire to acquire any.

Critical Overview

When it was first published, *Ship of Fools* received near universal acclaim from reviewers. Leading the admiring chorus was Mark Schorer, in the *New York Times Book Review* (reprinted in *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*), who called the book "a unique imaginative achievement." He praised Porter's "perfectly poised ironical intelligence" and "the brilliance and variety of characterization." Louis Auchincloss, in the *New York Herald Tribune* (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*) was equally enthusiastic, commenting that Porter was able to sustain the reader's interest in a collection of unattractive characters such as the Germans "because this vivid, beautifully written story is bathed in intelligence and humor," and the reader is able to "feel how easy it would be for anyone to turn into even the most repellent of these incipient Nazis." For Moss Hart in *New Republic* (quoted in Givner's *The Life of Katherine Anne Porter*), "[The novel's] intelligence lies not in the profundity of its ideas but in the clarity of its viewpoint; we are impressed not by what Miss Porter says but by what she knows."

There were a few dissenting voices, including Granville Hicks, in *Saturday Review* (quoted in the Hendricks' *Katherine Anne Porter*), who thought that although Porter

> is one of the finest writers of prose in America . . .
> the novel, for all its lucidity and all its insights, leaves
> the reader a little cold. There is in it . . . no sense of
> human possibility.

Commercially, the novel was a huge success. It was number one on the best-seller list within weeks of its publication in April, 1962.

However, after a few months, there was a backlash from critics who regarded the novel in a less than favorable light. Chief of these was Theodore Solotaroff, in *Commentary* (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*), who wrote of crucial weaknesses in the novel:

> The main such weakness is that no effective principle
> of change operates on the action or on the main
> characters or on the ideas, and hence the book has
> virtually no power to sustain, complicate, and intensify
> either our intellectual interests or emotional attachments.

Solotaroff concluded that *Ship of Fools* revealed "little more than misanthropy and clever technique."

This emphasis on the lack of development in plot or character was the basis of much subsequent criticism. Porter was also attacked for presenting only the darker side of human nature, a charge she denied.

In spite of these criticisms, however, the novel has many defenders. It occupies an important place in post-World War II American literature, even though today it attracts fewer readers than Porter's short stories and short novels.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, he discusses Porter's novel in terms of the self-deceit of many of the characters.

Perhaps it is not too obvious to remark that *Ship of Fools* is aptly titled. The sum total of human wisdom assembled on the *Vera* is heavily outweighed by the accumulation of folly, ignorance, vice, and sheer evil. If this novel is a portrait of the human condition, as some critics take it to be, it gives little cause for comfort.

The human failings presented in the novel are varied and numerous: the hateful rantings of Herr Rieber, the contemptuous authoritarianism of the Captain, the alcoholism of Herr Baumgartner, and the cheating and thieving of the Spanish dancing troupe, to name only a few. One fault that afflicts many of the characters is self-deceit. Perhaps because the truth is unpalatable, these are characters who tell themselves stories about their own lives and then convince themselves the stories are true.

For example, it is likely that Herr Graf is only able to come to terms with the fact that he is dying by inventing the notion that God has given him power to heal others. Professor Hutten, the intellectual, thinks he believes in the innate goodness of man, but later it transpires that this is a sham, a cover he has invented to hide his real, less acceptable beliefs. The stability of the Huttens' marriage also rests on a lie that they both conspire to believe, that Frau Hutten is the perfect, devoted wife, completely fulfilled by serving her husband.

Another example is Frau Rittersdorf, for whom small deceits have become a way of life. This is conveyed early in the novel, when she sends flowers to herself, with accompanying cards supposedly from two of her friends, both of whom happen to be dead. She convinces herself that this is not deceitful because they would have sent the flowers had they been alive. Frau Rittersdorf is so thoroughly mired in false appearances that she makes the Catholic gesture of crossing herself, even though she is Lutheran, simply because she thinks the gesture becomes her. Sometimes her self-deceit reaches comic proportions, as when she mistakenly writes in her diary that David Scott's last name is Darling and Jenny's is Angel (because that is how they always address each other) and congratulates herself on her own cleverness in analyzing the derivation of the names. Most seriously, her inflated idea of her own social standing makes her one of the most intolerant and snobbish of the German passengers.

Lizzi Spockenkieker is another shining example of self-deceit□the lack of an accurate perception of oneself. She thinks she is beautiful, despite much evidence to the contrary, and she also believes that she has legions of male admirers who are just waiting to marry her, which sounds highly unlikely, to say the least, for a woman whose shrill laugh sounds like "a long cascade of falling tinware."

Sometimes the self-deceit takes on more subtle forms, as with the character of Mrs. Treadwell. She is an interesting character because she is one of the few who is not subject to the author's scathing irony. Mrs. Treadwell does not share the ignorant prejudices of many of the others: they are bigoted and unhappy; she is merely unhappy. And yet in spite of the sympathetic manner in which she is presented, Mrs. Treadwell's capacity for self-deceit may be the most thoroughgoing of all. If anything bad happens to her, she refuses to believe in it, as if it is only a bad dream. When she is attacked by the beggar woman who bruises her arm, Mrs. Treadwell convinces herself that this is not a thing that really happens to anyone, least of all her. Because her life has been full of emotional pain, she tries to turn her back on it and deny it. The voyage itself is just another thing to flee from, and her desire is to disappear entirely from view: "moment by moment she would find a split second of relief from boredom in the very act of flight which gave her the fleeting illusion of invisibility." For Mrs. Treadwell, who is forty-five years old and has a birthday while she is on the ship, even her age is something temporary that she can somehow put off.

Mrs. Treadwell's great fantasy is that she can be happy in Paris, her destination, but the reader suspects that this is just another illusion. Paris is her Shangri-La, her mythical paradise that always beckons in the distance but is never found. There is also an irony in her choice of Paris because the reader knows what Mrs. Treadwell does not□that within a decade, Paris will be occupied by the Nazis. The horror that is in incipient form all around her on the voyage, and to which she is largely oblivious, will eventually envelop her in her hiding place.

Even the most admirable character in the novel, the dignified, humane Dr. Schumann, falls victim, at least temporarily, to the vice of self-deceit. The doctor clearly represents a higher form of morality, as can be seen in the very first description of him, in which his eyes have an "abstract goodness and even sweetness in them." He is dignified and well bred and is recognized as such by the other Germans, and he has the gift of making others think that he will understand them. Deeply religious, he is constantly measuring his conduct against a moral law that he knows from his Catholic faith, and he does not share the prevailing anti-Semitism.

But even Dr. Schumann cannot avoid sinking into behavior that is not worthy of him. His undoing lies in his relationship with La Condesa, the flighty, drug-addicted noblewoman. When he first meets her, he recoils in moral disgust at her addiction, but he is drawn in by her shamelessly intimate manner. Although he repeatedly tries to put what he regards as an "unruly relationship" back in order, something passes between them that he is unable to resist. Eventually, he gives way to her desire and supplies her with the drugs she craves. Although he has fallen from his high professional standards and betrayed his role as a doctor, for a while he convinces himself that he has done nothing wrong, that he was merely being merciful to her. He even gets Father Garza to agree that he was only doing what he could with a difficult patient.

But Dr. Schumann cannot sustain this lie for long. He soon feels shame and humiliation at having fallen in love with La Condesa□he, a married man. He realizes that he has abused his power and has used against her the vice that harms her most. The

experience seems to unnerve him completely, and for a while he blames her, giving way to a bout of anger against women, which is uncharacteristic of him although common in virtually all the other male characters. The language he uses to himself about her is vitriolic:

> He had a savage impulse to strike her from him, this diabolical possession, this incubus fastened upon him like a bat, this evil spirit come out of her hell to accuse him falsely, to seduce his mind, to charge him with fraudulent obligations to her, to burden his life to the end of his days, to bring him to despair.

The violence of this suggests that underneath the even, calm temperament that usually characterizes the doctor, there may be much darker impulses. But at least he finally has the insight to recognize this, and he is horrified by what he regards as the presence of evil in his own nature. He even believes that he has ruined his own life because of her and that she will always be a burden on his conscience. For a man of his deep religious and moral convictions, the upset in his world has cosmic implications:

> The whole great structure built upon the twin pillars of justice and love, which reached from earth to eternity, by which the human soul rose step by step from the most rudimentary concepts of good and evil, of simple daily conduct between fellow men, to the most exquisite hairline discriminations and choices between one or another shade of faith and feeling, of doctrinal and mystical perceptions□this tower was now crumbling and falling around him.

It might seem to the reader that Dr. Schumann punishes himself more than is necessary, but the point the author wishes to make is surely that even the man who has the highest level of moral and spiritual development on the ship is not immune to bouts of immoral, selfish, self-deceiving behavior. If Dr. Schumann can fall, Porter seems to say, what hope is there for any of the others, or for us?

The sad truth is that there is only one noble, selfless act in the entire novel, and only one moment of true beauty. The selfless act is when one of the passengers from steerage, a man named Etchegaray, jumps overboard in an effort to save the Huttens' bulldog, Bébé, who has been thrown into the water by Ric and Rac. Bébé survives, but Etchegaray drowns. The Huttens wonder what prompted Etchegaray's actions. As might be expected, they look for some self-serving motive. The man must have expected a reward, says Frau Hutten, while Professor Hutten thinks he must have wanted to attract attention to himself, or to become a hero. The more likely explanation, as the reader well knows, is that Etchegaray, who was an artist who carved little figures of animals in wood, loved animals and wanted to save the dog's life simply because it needed saving.

The moment of beauty comes immediately after the fight that breaks out in steerage in the aftermath of Etchegaray's funeral at sea. Three whales are spotted, and all the passengers stop what they are doing and stare at them:

> [T]hree enormous whales, seeming to swim almost out of the water, flashing white silver in the sunlight, spouting tall white fountains, traveling with the power and drive of speedboats, going south□not one person could take his eyes from the beautiful spectacle until it was over, and their minds were cleansed of death and violence.

Unfortunately for the travelers, the beauty of the whales is quite alien to the human world, which sails on regardless, a ship of self-deceiving, smallminded fools heading for Germany, to its historic appointment with Nazism and a world plunged into war and evil.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Ship of Fools*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kirkpatrick explores the common link among the characters in Ship of Fools *the various social masks they wear to cover their base natures.*

When you read Katherine Anne Porter's novel, you will find yourself already aboard her *Ship of Fools*, not overtly, not through the usual identification with one of the characters, but through a more subtle involvement with a familiar action.

Miss Porter's ship is a real, not purely symbolic, ship traveling from Vera Cruz to Bremerhaven during the early thirties and is peopled with passengers talking and traveling in that troubled time, but as the journey aboard the *Vera*, truth, continues the passengers tend to develop more towards caricature than characterization. And this is very close to Miss Porter's point. She has no clearly identifiable protagonist or antagonist. Her subject is too large to be shown through a central character; for as the ship progresses from the "true cross" to the "broken haven" she shows us how each passenger journeys not only to Bremerhaven but through life. In so doing she shows us the common manner in which we make the voyage, and she shows us the necessarily concomitant subject of what she views life to be.

Since the reader cannot identify himself with one of Miss Porter's characters, just how does she involve his heart? She has chosen to locate the novel aboard a ship, to limit her action within the confines of a sea voyage where the characters for the most part are strangers to one another. With the ship-board opportunity for new friendships and fresh self-appraisals it is important to look at what the passengers bring with them on their journey. As the title says, the voyagers are all fools. The nature of their foolery is what the passengers bring aboard with them, and Miss Porter reduces the foolery to the oldest mark of the fool, the one thing that all fools in all time have had in common: the mask. She shows how intricately contrived are the masks. Each man wears not one but many. He peers at his existence from behind the various masks of nationality, age, sex, creeds, social rank, race, wealth, politics, and all other existential distinctions made by both the elemental and civilized man.

At times the masks are as pathetically simple as that of Frau Baumgartner, who in the tropic heat is momentarily too angry with her small son to heed his pleas to remove the buckskin suit in which she has wrongly encased him. She taunts him over his inability to endure the riding costume meant for mountain coldness and even begins to enjoy her cruelty and the pleasant feeling of hurting the pride of the boy sitting on the divan ". . . yearning for kindness, hoping his beautiful good mother would come back soon. She vanished in the frowning scolding stranger, who blazed out at him when he least expected it, struck him on the hand, threatened him, seemed to hate him." But in the next moment she "sees him clearly" and is filled with pity and remorse and tenderness.

At other times the intricacy of the masks is nearly as confusing as it is to Denny the Texan, whose bible is *Recreational Aspects of Sex as Mental Prophylaxis A True Guide to Happiness* and whose consuming passion on the voyage is to buy, at *his* price,

the wares of Amparo, a dancer in the zarzuela company. Sitting in the ship's bar Denny has an atheist on one side speaking like a bolshevik and over here a Jew, criticizing Christians and meaning Catholics. He didn't like Jews *or* Catholics and knew if he said, "I think Jews are heathens," he would be accused of persecuting Jews. He wished himself home in Brownsville ". . . where a man knew who was who and what was what, and niggers, crazy Swedes, Jews, greasers, bone-headed micks, polacks, wops, Guineas and damn Yankees knew their place and stayed in it."

Denny wants the mask simple and set and Miss Porter shows the results of a mask settling into reality through Mrs. Treadwell, an American divorcee, to whom the past is so bad, as compared to a future full of love she had expected as a child, it seems something she has read in newspapers. Denny in his final determination to conquer Amparo confuses the door and drunkenly mistakes for the face Amparo the face of "unsurpassed savagery and sensuality" which Mrs. Treadwell in drunken idleness painted on herself following the failure of the young ship's officer to arouse any feeling in her. She shoves Denny to the deck, and using her metal capped high heel beats in the face of the fallen and stuporous man with "furious pleasure" and is afterwards delighted at the sight of her "hideous wicked face" in her mirror. When worn as a reality, the mask comes close to covering insanity, which becomes a terrifying comment on all the Brownsvilles in the world.

Usually, though, the masks shift and change like the postures of a dance. Jenny and David, the American painters who have been living together but are now traveling in separate cabins, approach each other with feelings of love only to have their feelings turn suddenly into hatred and the hatred as it shows itself on their faces evokes the love again. They can no more decide their emotional destiny than they can decide their physical destination. One wants to visit Spain; the other, France. In the course of their constant argument they even swap positions but always the change is in reaction to an action or reaction in the other. And here Miss Porter takes the breath away with her absolute genius. Never, not once in the seemingly unending continuum of emotional and rational action and reaction, whether between total strangers operating behind the complicated masks of their civilized pasts or whether between selves almost submerged in old marriages, never, no matter how abrupt may be the reversal of a position or of a thought pattern, is there anything but complete belief that, yes, this is the way it would really be.

This constant change is the reason the passengers tend towards caricature. Exactly when is the passenger undergoing the final unveiling to his ultimate truth? Amparo and her pimp, Pepe, steal, swindle, and blackmail behind a flurry of costumery and poses and when at last they are left together, away from their victims, Amparo still full of the strange smells and heats of the recently departed liberal Swede, Arne Hanson, the final truth of these two seems about to be revealed. And the truth is beautifully revealed of them as pimp, whore, and lovers; but the scene ends with the revelation that both parties have long before planned, and even now are working towards, their mutual betrayals.

Perhaps the truth of the characters lies not in revealing the total man facing an action as large as life itself (perhaps no man can) but in the manner or the method with which the characters face life. If in this or that situation they wear this or that ready-made mask and in the next situation wear yet another of the thousand faces molded by the forms of civilization and elemental men, then perhaps we really are caricatures with our true selves forever unrealized. Certainly the passengers behind their masks hide from each other their love. Mrs. Treadwell says the passengers are all saying to each other, *"Love me, love me in spite of all! Whether or not I love you, whether I am fit to love, whether you are able to love, even if there is no such thing as love, love me!"*

The Germanic mask of discipline and family is so stolid on the face of Dr. Schumann, the ship's doctor, that even though he loves the beautiful Cuban Condesa, who has forsaken herself to ether and self-caresses, he degrades her and wants rid of her. In horror of himself he renounces all human kinship and in his own drugged sleep the Condesa's death-like, bodiless head danced before him still smiling but shedding tears. "Oh, Why, Why?" the head asked him not in complaint but wonder. Tenderly he kissed it silent. This was probably the last opportunity for love in his life.

The one unmasked act of love aboard the ship, an act nearly performed earlier by Dr. Schumann when he risked overtaxing a weak heart by stepping forward to save a cat, was performed by a man in steerage, a wood carver who cries like a child when his knife is taken from him and who, when the white dog is thrown overboard into the night sea, leaps after the white object without hesitation or knowledge of whether it is a man or a dog and is drowned saving it. In the lean raggedness of this "worn but perhaps young" wood carver, who cannot but bring to mind another worker in wood, and in his unselfish act, is an opportunity for the passengers to see behind man's facade. But even the parent-like owners of the dog want only to forget the wood carver's name, and they lose themselves in the carnal interest the act has rediscovered for them.

The wood carver's burial ends with the priests turning their backs while their Catholic flock in steerage nearly kills a taunting atheist. The final results of the wood carver's act are that the dog is saved and fun is had by Ric and Rac, the twin children who threw the dog overboard in the first place.

If La Condesa can say of the Cuban students, "They are just their parents' bad dreams," then certainly this can be said of Ric and Rac even though their parents are in the zarzuela company and are almost bad dreams themselves. Ric and Rac have named themselves for two comic cartoon terriers who "made life a raging curse for everyone near them, got their own way invariably by a wicked trick, and always escaped without a blow." And this is Ric and Rac. They steal, kill, destroy, and hurt not for gain but from some profound capacity for hatred which with the capacity and need for love lurks always behind the mask. It is almost as though this capacity for hatred is the reason of being for the masks of civilization, and Miss Porter is writing of civilized men. She is writing of the passengers living in the upper decks, and they are terrified of the masses of humans traveling in animal misery in steerage. All weapons are taken from the masses, even the wood carver's knife. The elemental man is too apparent. Jenny is haunted by the memory of two Mexican Indians, a man and woman locked in a swaying

embrace, both covered with blood and killing each other with cutting weapons. "They were silent, and their faces had taken on a saintlike patience in suffering, abstract, purified of rage and hatred in their one holy dedicated purpose to kill each other." In her dreams she is horrified to see that this is she and David.

And no matter how tightly the passengers may be enclosed in their formalized attitudes the zarzuela company reveals how thinly surfaced they are. By subverting the masks the whores and pimps make the passengers pay them to usurp the Captain's table, toast confusion, send the pompous Captain fleeing, and in their hatred mock the passengers by parodying them on the dance floor. The dance itself being a formalization, the parody by the whores and pimps becomes not only a parody of the individual passenger but of everything he considers civilized.

And the parody is meaningful because the passengers themselves are parodies, fools. Fools because behind all the masks and the love and the hatred is a selfishness, and the most selfish of all is the old religious zealot. His final prayer is that he be remembered for one merciful moment and be let go, given eternal darkness, let die forever□be the one man in all time released from the human condition, which must be lived to whatever its ends may be.

The novel comes to no conclusions, answers no questions; its ending is the end of the journey. But these masks are our masks; this is the way we cover our naked selves for the swift passage; this life is our lives moving steadily into eternity, the familiar action in which we are all involved. And the novel is a lament for us all, a song artistically resolved, sung by a great artist of the insoluble condition of man.

Source: Smith Kirkpatrick, "*Ship of Fools*," in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*, edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue, G. K. Hall & Co., 1997, pp. 233-36.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Moss provides an overview of Ship of Fools*, concluding that it "is basically about love, a human emotion that teeters helplessly between need and order."*

Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* is the story of a voyage□a voyage that seems to take place in many dimensions. A novel of character rather than of action, it has as its main purpose a study of the German ethos shortly before Hitler's coming to power in Germany. That political fact hangs as a threat over the entire work, and the novel does not end so much as succumb to a historical truth. But it is more than a political novel. *Ship of Fools* is also a human comedy and a moral allegory. Since its author commits herself to nothing but its top layer, and yet allows for plunges into all sorts of undercurrents, it is disingenuous to read on its surface alone and dangerous to read for its depths. Miss Porter has written one of those fine but ambiguous books whose values and meanings shift the way light changes as it passes through a turning prism.

Except for the embarkation at Veracruz and a few stopovers at ports, all the events occur aboard the *Vera*, a German passenger freighter, on its twenty-seven-day journey from Mexico to Germany in the summer of 1931. There is no lack of passengers; the cast is so immense that we are provided with not one but two keys at the beginning, so that we can keep the characters clearly in mind. The passenger list includes many Germans; a remarkable company of Spanish zarzuela singers and dancers□four men and four women□equally adept at performing, thieving, pimping, and whoring; the satanic six-year-old twins of two of the dancers, and four Americans: William Denny, a know-nothing chemical engineer from Texas; Mrs. Treadwell, a divorcée in her forties, who is constantly thwarted in her attempts to disengage herself from the rest of the human race; and David Scott and Jenny Brown, two young painters who have been having an unhappy love affair for years, have never married, and quarrel endlessly. There are also a Swede, some Mexicans, a Swiss innkeeper and his family, and some Cubans. The Germans are almost uniformly disagreeable□an arrogant widow, a windbag of a professor named Hutten, a violently anti-Semitic publisher named Rieber, a drunken lawyer, an Orthodox Jew who loathes Gentiles, a dying religious healer, and a hunchback, to name just a few. Each suffers from a mortal form of despair□spiritual, emotional, or religious. At Havana, La Condesa, a Spanish noblewoman who is being deported by the Cuban government, embarks, and so do eight hundred and seventy-six migrant workers, in steerage. They are being sent back to Spain because of the collapse of the Cuban sugar market.

In the little world of the *Vera*, plying across the ocean, the passengers become involved with one another not from choice but by proximity. Because of this, not very much happens, from the viewpoint of conventional drama. Miss Porter is interested in the interplay of character and not in the strategy of plotting. Her method is panoramic□ cabin to cabin, deck to writing room, bridge to bar. She has helped herself to a device useful to a natural short-story writer: she manipulates one microcosm after another of her huge cast in short, swift scenes. Observed from the outside, analyzed from within,

her characters are handled episodically. Place is her organizing element, time the propelling agent of her action. The *Vera* is a Hotel Universe always in motion.

As it proceeds, small crises blossom into odious flowers and expire. There are three major events. An oilman, Herr Freytag, a stainless Aryan, is refused the captain's table once it is learned that the wife he is going back to fetch from Germany is Jewish. A wood carver in steerage jumps overboard to save a dog thrown into the sea by the twins, and is drowned. And the zarzuela company arranges a costume-party "gala" whose expressed purpose is to honor the captain but whose real motive is the fleecing of the other passengers. The characters, seeking release or support in one another, merely deepen each other's frustrations. Often these random associations end in violence□a violence always out of character and always revealing. Hansen, the Swede, who talks about a society in which the masses are not exploited, clubs the publisher with a beer bottle. The source of his immediate anger is his disappointed passion for one of the Spanish dancers. The funeral of the wood carver, the gentlest of men, becomes the occasion for a religious riot. Mrs. Treadwell, a carefully contained woman, well aware of the pointlessness and danger of meddling in other people's business, emerges from behind her bastion and beats up Denny in a drunken frenzy with the heel of a golden evening slipper.

If the relationships are not violent, they are damaging. Schumann, the ship's doctor, falling suddenly in love with the drug-addicted and possibly mad Condesa, risks his professional, spiritual, and emotional identity. The American painters hopelessly batter themselves in an affair they cannot resolve or leave alone. And the most solid of *Hausfraus*, Professor Hutten's wife, speaks up suddenly, as if against her will, to contradict her husband at the captain's table, an act doubly shameful for being public. Unable momentarily to put up with her husband's platitudes, to support a view of marriage she knows to be false, Frau Hutten, in her one moment of insight, undermines the only security she has. As character after character gives way to a compulsion he has been unware of, it becomes evident why Miss Porter's novel is open to many interpretations. Through sheer accuracy of observation rather than the desire to demonstrate abstract ideas, she has hit upon a major theme: order vs. need, a theme observable in the interchange of everyday life and susceptible of any number of readings□political, social, religious, and psychological. Every major character is magnetized in time by the opposing forces of need and order. Mexico is the incarnation of need, Germany the representative of an order based on need. At the beginning, in Veracruz, there is a hideously crippled Mexican beggar, "dumb, half blind," who walks like an animal "following the trail of a smell." And the very last character in the book is a German boy in the ship's band, "who looked as if he had never had enough to eat in his life, nor a kind word from anybody," who "did not know what he was going to do next" and who "stared with blinded eyes." As the *Vera* puts in to Bremerhaven, he stands, "his mouth quivering while he shook the spit out of his trumpet, repeating to himself just above a whisper, *'Gruss Gott, Gruss Gott,'* as if the town were a human being, a good and dear trusted friend who had come a long way to welcome him." Aboard the *Vera*, there is, on the one hand, the captain's psychotic authoritarianism, with its absolute and rigid standards of behavior, menaced always by human complexity and squalor; on the

other, the Condesa's drug addiction and compulsion to seduce young men. Both are terrifying forms of fanaticism, and they complement each other in their implicit violence.

Dr. Schumann is the mediating agent between these two kinds of fanaticism. Suffering from a weak heart, he is going back to Germany—a Germany that no longer exists—to die. He is the product of a noble Teutonic strain, the Germany of intellectual freedom, scientific dispassion, and religious piety. He is a healer equally at home in the chaos of the steerage and in the captain's stateroom. But the Condesa shatters his philosophic detachment. He goes to her cabin at night and kisses her while she is asleep; he orders six young Cuban medical students to stay away from her cabin because he is jealous. Both acts are symptoms of a progressive desperation. First he refuses to express his need openly, out of fear; then he masks it by a display of authority. He becomes, finally, a conspirator in the Condesa's addiction. Since he is not able to separate the woman from the patient, in Dr. Schumann need and order become muddled. Mrs. Treadwell, an essentially sympathetic character, is drawn into Freytag's dilemma the same way—casually, then desperately. It is she who innocently tells her anti-Semitic cabinmate that Freytag's wife is Jewish, not knowing the information is meant to be confidential. He is bitter, forgetting that he has already blurted out the fact at the captain's table in a fit of anger and pride. Mrs. Treadwell wisely points out that his secret should never have been one in the first place. This is odd wisdom; Mrs. Treadwell has a few secrets of her own.

It is from such moral complications that the texture of *Ship of Fools* evolves—a series of mishaps in which both intention and the lack of intention become disasters. The tragedy is that even the best motive is adulterated when translated into action. Need turns people into fools, order into monsters. The *Vera's* first-class passengers stroll on deck gazing down into the abysmal pit of the steerage—pure need—just as they watch in envy the frozen etiquette of the captain's table and its frieze of simulated order. Even dowdy Frau Schmitt, a timid ex-teacher who cannot bear suffering in others, finally accepts the cruelty of Freytag's dismissal from the captain's table. If she does not belong there herself, she thinks, then where does she belong? A victim, she thus becomes a party to victimization—a situation that is to receive its perfect demonstration in the world of Nazi Germany, which shadows Miss Porter's book like a bird of carrion. Through the need to belong, the whole damaging human complex of fear, pride, and greed, a governing idea emerges from *Ship of Fools* that is rooted in the Prussian mystique of "blood and iron." It is the manipulation of human needs to conform to a version of order.

The flow of events in *Ship of Fools* is based on addiction (sex, drugs, food, and drink) or obsession (envy, pride, covetousness, and the rest). Yet even the most despicable characters, such as the Jew-hating Herr Rieber, seem surprisingly innocent. It is the innocence of ignorance, not of moral goodness. The humbug and misinformation exchanged between the passengers on the *Vera* are voluminous. Each person is trapped in that tiny segment of reality he calls his own, which he thinks about, and talks about, and tries to project to a listener equally obsessed. Not knowing who they are, these marathon talkers do not know the world they are capable of generating. Love is the sacrificial lamb of their delusions, and though it is pursued without pause, it is

always a semblance, never a reality. Though they are terribly in need of some human connection, their humanity itself is in question.

Only the Spanish dancers seem to escape this fate. They transform need into a kind of order by subordinating it for financial gain or sexual pleasure, without involvement. They are comically and tragically evil; they have arranged a universe of money around sex and fraud. Consciously malignant, they are outdone by the natural malice of the twins, who throw the Condesa's pearls overboard in a burst of demoniacal spirits. The pearls are a prize the Spanish dancers had planned to steal. The evil of design is defeated by natural evil□a neat point. Even in this closed, diabolical society, in which the emotions have been disciplined for profit, the irrational disturbs the arrangement of things.

At one point, Jenny Brown recalls something she saw from a bus window when she was passing through a small Indian village in Mexico:

> Half a dozen Indians, men and women, were standing together quietly in the bare spot near one of the small houses, and they were watching something very intently. As the bus rolled by, Jenny saw a man and a woman, some distance from the group, locked in a death battle. They swayed and staggered together in a strange embrace, as if they supported each other; but in the man's raised hand was a long knife, and the woman's breast and stomach were pierced. The blood ran down her body and over her thighs, her skirts were sticking to her legs with her own blood. She was beating him on the head with a jagged stone, and his features were veiled in rivulets of blood. They were silent, and their faces had taken on a saintlike patience in suffering, abstract, purified of rage and hatred in their one holy dedicated purpose to kill each other. Their flesh swayed together and clung, their left arms were wound about each other's bodies as if in love. Their weapons were raised again, but their heads lowered little by little, until the woman's head rested upon his breast and his head was on her shoulder, and holding thus, they both struck again.
>
> It was a mere flash of visions, but in Jenny's memory it lived in an ample eternal day illuminated by a cruel sun.

This passage could be the center from which everything in Miss Porter's novel radiates. The human relations in it are nearly all reenacted counterparts of this silent struggle. Inside and out, the battle rages□the devout against the blasphemous, the Jew against the Gentile, class against class, nation against nation. The seemingly safe bourgeois marriages □of solid Germans, of stolid Swiss□are secret hand-to-hand combats. It is no

better with lovers, children, and dogs. The dog thrown into the sea by the evil twins is at least rescued by the good wood carver before he drowns. But on the human level the issues are obscure, the colors blurred; the saint is enmeshed with the devil. Struggling to get at the truth□*Vera* means "true" in Latin□the passengers in *Ship of Fools* justify its title. What truth is there for people who must lie in order to exist, Miss Porter seems to be asking. Against her insane captain and her mad Condesa, Miss Porter poses only the primitive and the remote□an enchanting Indian servant aboard ship, the appearance of three whales, a peasant woman nursing a baby. They are as affecting as a silence in nature.

Miss Porter is a moralist, but too good a writer to be one except by implication. Dogma in *Ship of Fools* is attached only to dogmatic characters. There is not an ounce of weighted sentiment in it. Its intelligence lies not in the profundity of its ideas but in the clarity of its viewpoint; we are impressed not by what Miss Porter says but by what she knows. Neither heartless nor merciful, she is tough. Her virtue is disinterestedness, her strength objectivity. Her style is free of displays of "sensitivity," musical effects, and interior decoration. Syntax is the only instrument she needs to construct an enviable prose. But the book differs from her extraordinary stories and novellas in that it lacks a particular magic she has attained so many times on a smaller scale. The missing ingredient is impulse. *Ship of Fools* was twenty years in the writing; the stories read as if they were composed at one sitting, and they have the spontaneity of a running stream. *Ship of Fools* is another kind of work□a summing up, not an overflowing□and it is devoid of one of the excitements of realistic fiction. The reader is never given that special satisfaction of the drama of design, in which the strings, having come unwound, are ultimately tied together in a knot. Miss Porter scorns patness and falseness, but by the very choice of her method she also lets go of suspense. She combines something of the intellectual strategy of Mann's *Magic Mountain* (in which the characters not only are themselves but represent ideas or human qualities) with the symbolic grandeur of *Moby Dick* (in which a predestined fate awaits the chief actors). Her goodbye to themes of Mexico and Germany (two subjects that have occupied her elsewhere) is a stunning farewell, but it lacks two components usually considered essential to masterpieces□a hero and a heroic extravagance.

Ship of Fools is basically about love, a human emotion that teeters helplessly between need and order. On the *Vera's* voyage there is precious little of it. The love that comes too late for the Condesa and Dr. Schumann is the most touching thing in it. But the Condesa is deranged, ill, and exiled; the dying Doctor is returning to a Germany that has vanished. The one true example of love□a pair of Mexican newlyweds□is never dwelt upon. We are left with this image of two people, hand in hand, who have hardly said a word in all the thousands that make up Miss Porter's novel. In *Ship of Fools*, every human need but one is exposed down to its nerve ends. Love alone remains silent, and abstract.

Source: Howard Moss, "No Safe Harbor," in *Katherine Anne Porter*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views series, G. K. Hall & Co., 1997, pp. 35-41.

Adaptations

Ship of Fools was made into a movie in 1965. It was directed by Stanley Kramer, and starred Vivien Leigh as Mrs. Treadwell, Simone Signoret as La Condesa, José Ferrer as Siegfried Rieber, and Lee Marvin as Denny.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the causes of anti-Semitism. Why were the Jews so persecuted in Europe for hundreds of years?

Why have Jews fared better in the United States than in Europe, as far as persecution is concerned? Is there anti-Semitism in the United States? If so, what form does it take?

In the novel, Denny, the American, expresses contempt for other races and classes□for everyone who is not like him. Are attitudes like Denny's still common in America? Why do people so often despise people who are different than they are? What are the results often produced by this kind of thinking? What can be done to combat these seeds of racism?

Are the passengers on the *Vera* representative of the whole range of humanity? If not, what is missing? Is the author too pessimistic about human nature, or is she merely being realistic?

Which character in the novel repels you the most, and why? Which character or characters do you feel sympathetic towards, and why?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Hitler's Nazi party takes over in Germany; Mussolini's Fascists rule Italy, and the world is plunged into war.

1960s: The world is divided into two power blocs, the United States and the Soviet Union, and the cold war is at its height. Germany remains divided into East Germany, which is communist, and West Germany, which is a member of NATO.

Today: A reunited Germany is at the heart of the European Union; the Soviet Union is a thing of the past, and the United States is the sole remaining superpower.

1930s: A voyage from Mexico to Europe in a passenger/freight ship like the *Vera* takes twenty-six days. Ocean liners are the most common form of long-distance transportation across the ocean.

1960s: The bulk of long-distance travel is by jet aircraft. Many of the large ocean liners are retired; new passenger ships are built for the purpose of luxury cruises rather than essential transportation.

Today: A flight from Mexico to Germany takes approximately twelve to thirteen hours.

1930s: In America, particularly in the south, African Americans, as well as other people of color such as Mexican Americans, face hardship and discrimination at the hands of the white, Anglo majority. Public facilities are often designated for the use of whites only.

1960s: The civil rights movement, which began in the south in 1955, produces concrete results, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Today: America is still troubled by issues of race and racism. Overt discrimination is less than it was thirty or forty years ago, but subtler forms of discrimination, including corporate "glass ceilings," still exist.

What Do I Read Next?

The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (1965), which won for Porter the formal awards that had eluded *Ship of Fools*: a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Gold Medal for Fiction awarded by the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Letters of Katherine Anne Porter (reprint edition, 1991) edited by her friend Isabel Bayley, contains many of the thousands of letters Porter wrote during the period 1930 to 1963.

Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (1997), by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, is an extremely controversial book. Using extensive research, Goldhagen argues that Hitler was able to carry out the Holocaust because vast numbers of ordinary Germans, not just the Nazis, supported it.

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (1960), by William L. Shirer, is a classic account of Germany during the Hitler years, by an American journalist who lived and worked there during the 1930s.

Further Study

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

This work studies Porter's work from the viewpoint of feminine psychology. *Ship of Fools* is seen in terms of the physical and psychological separation of men and women.

Givner, Joan, ed., *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations*, University Press of Mississippi, 1987.

This is a collection of interviews with and articles about Porter covering a period of sixty years.

Hartley, Lodwick, and George Core, eds., *Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*, University of Georgia Press, 1969.

This work contains sixteen essays on Porter's work, including three on *Ship of Fools*.

Mooney, Harry J., Jr., *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*, University of Pittsburgh Press, rev.ed., 1962.

This concise overview seeks to understand the meaning of Porter's work and the particular kinds of experiences in which she is most interested.

Nance, William L., *Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection*, University of North Carolina Press, 1963.

Like Unrue, Nance attempts to find a thematic unity in Porter's work. He finds it in a pattern of behavior he calls rejection, which governs the emotional effect of the work.

Unrue, Darlene Harbour, *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*, University of Georgia Press, 1985.

This study emphasizes the underlying thematic unity of Porter's works, which reflect an arduous, always incomplete discovery of truth. Knowledge comes from apprehending universal laws in oneself and in nature.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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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