

## ABSTRACT

RINEY, ERIN KELLY. *Feminist Re-Visioning And Women's Writing: The Second Wave's Effects On Katherine Anne Porter's Literary Legacy*. (Under the direction of Michael Grimwood.)

Unquestionably, second-wave feminism's influence on American literature positively changed the canon by forcing the inclusion of women's expressions. As part of their efforts to counter networks of discrimination in common culture, second-wave feminists addressed literary representation to challenge institutional and informal reproduction of sexism. However, much like many feminists of color and third-wave feminists who questioned the negative effects of the second-wave feminists' unqualified power to define female voices in literature, so too does this thesis suggest that feminists of the 1970s, revisioning women's literature, may have inadvertently but unnecessarily stifled some female authors' contributions.

Using Kate Chopin's fiction as a comparative lens, I examine why second-wave feminist scholars adopted some women's literature while displacing other talented women writer's works. Specifically, this thesis explores the reasons for which Katherine Anne Porter's works have not received the feminist consideration that Kate Chopin's have. I discuss the links between criticism of Porter's works and the influence of this critical attention on Porter's perceived incompatibility with feminist ideology and goals of the 1970s. Examining the authors' depictions of their female protagonists' perceptions of their sexuality, I provide explanations for feminists' adoption of Chopin as a representative of women's contributions to literature and their lack of recognition of Porter's merits.

By examining a selection of each author's short stories, the form to which both authors dedicated their greatest efforts to refine as a craft. I trace the reception and popularity

of Chopin's stories to the feminist movement's need for consciousness-raising literature, focusing on Chopin's portrayal of female sexuality in two of her most anthologized works, "Desirée's Baby" and "Athénäise." I then discuss the critical literature of three of Katherine Anne Porter's most anthologized and analyzed short stories—"Theft," "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and "The Grave," provide interpretations of the works based on depictions of female sexuality, and suggest explanations for feminists' reluctance to adopt Porter's literature for their cause. By examining the reasons many feminists neglected to apply feminist literary criticism to Porter's works, modern feminist scholarship may progress to include more of the still unheard voices that are necessary for society's progress. While feminists' promotion of Chopin's works starting in the 1970s clearly benefited the movement, this thesis asserts that Porter's short stories offer much to contemporary women readers and perhaps more to today's feminist interests than Kate Chopin's works.

**FEMINIST RE-VISIONING AND WOMEN'S WRITING: THE SECOND WAVE'S  
EFFECTS ON KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S LITERARY LEGACY**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

North Carolina State University

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

**English**

Raleigh, NC

May 15, 2007

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## DEDICATION

For three generations of matriarchs—Grandmama, Mamaw, and Mom—and their legacies of compassion, self-sufficiency, intelligence, resiliency, silliness, and sass. I couldn't ask for better models.

## BIOGRAPHY

Erin Riney grew up in Daviess County, Kentucky and graduated from Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky in 2000 with a bachelor's degree in Sociology and minors in English and Women's Studies. Professionally, she worked in HIV/AIDS policy in Kentucky and Washington, D.C. before pursuing her interest in literature and teaching. She currently lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but plans to begin her teaching career in Louisville, Kentucky after graduation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm indebted to my committee, Dr. MacKethan, Dr. Hooker, and Dr. Grimwood, for their guiding wisdom. My chair, Dr. Grimwood, pushed and poked to help me uncover the thesis I wanted to write. Thank you for your encouragement and help in developing this work from inception to completion. Also, a big thanks to Keith for all the meals cooked, dishes washed, and rooms cleaned as I sat hour upon hour, week after week writing, reading, and revising. Your patience and encouragement meant everything these last few months. Mom and Dad, thanks for your support and interest in the things I do, and for all that you've done to help me get to this point. Finally, Katherine Anne Porter once remarked that she never wrote as well as when she had a cat in her lap. I have to agree. Thanks to my constant writing companion, Hammie J. Bears.

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## Introduction

In “The Subjection of Women” published in 1869, John Stuart Mill argued that, for a society to advance, both men and women must come to understand women’s experiences more fully. Mill asserted that only one means could provide this understanding that would lead to a more ideal society: women must write their lives (26-27). Kate Chopin’s and Katherine Anne Porter’s works answer this Utilitarian call. Although certainly neither writer began her literary career in response to Mill’s edict, both Chopin’s and Porter’s fiction have received recognition not only as well-crafted contributions to the literary canon, but as works by women who have something to say about women’s lives.

However, the authors have not drawn equal acknowledgment for providing lenses through which to view women’s experiences. While many have regarded Kate Chopin’s works as insightful studies of women’s quests for identity and freedom, and even as both prophecy of and catalyst for the second wave of the American feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, most scholars and lay readers have not read Katherine Anne Porter’s works as discourse on women, nor have they adopted Porter’s works to support their cause. Neither has Porter enjoyed the same degree of public popularity or readership as Chopin, whose novel *The Awakening* ranks among the top five novels of required reading for college students in the United States (“Kate Chopin”).

These readership trends prove curious considering the dates of the authors’ publications and the time spans of their literary prominence. Porter remained a literary and public figure through much of the twentieth century, publishing from the 1920s through the late 1970s. Chopin’s legacy, however, temporarily disappeared with her death in 1904. Not

until Per Seyersted's dissertation on Chopin and his subsequent publication of her collected works in 1969 did Chopin's works regain notice.

At this time, a cultural movement to address women's oppression was gaining momentum. The first American feminist movement began in the mid 1800s; this first wave of feminists achieved its largest goal—women's suffrage—in 1920. However, the American feminist movement largely lay dormant after this success until the 1960s. A new organized effort to address gender inequality, the second wave, gained recognition and support with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. While the first wave of American feminism sought the end of *de jure* discrimination—that is, the denial of women's equal treatment with men in national, state, and local laws—this second wave strove to end *de facto* oppression, the inequity American women faced in social institutions, customs, and attitudes that they experienced in their daily lives. In combating less acknowledged forms of discrimination, these feminists addressed inequality in common domains, such as family, work, health, and education. As part of this effort, feminists concentrated on disparities in academia, including the absence of literary works by women from the recognized canon of American literature and within the classroom. Both academics and the general public limited their appreciation of female authors' works to less respected genres (such as sentimental novels or local color) that were not as well esteemed as better known, male-dominated domains of literature, and consequently, these female authors and their works often faded beyond potential readers' awareness because of their fringe status in literature curricula and academic attention. As part of this effort to reclaim women's rightful appreciation, feminist scholars began to investigate bias within literary criticism that privileged male authors and unfairly limited female authors' well-deserved acknowledgment.

Feminist literary critics, trying to redefine the American literary canon, embraced the idea Judith Fetterley verbalizes in her 1978 book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, that “literature is political” (xi). These feminist scholars sought to include women’s voices in the canon in order to diversify the portrayal of the American experience that had previously almost exclusively been defined by male experiences because of male writers’ dominance of American literature. Feminist scholars inserted women authors into the literary canon both by “mining the literary tradition to ‘rediscover’ the so-called lost women writers, women who were perhaps known and widely read in their time but [lost] to succeeding generations” and by “re-seeing” established women writers as respected authors with contributions fully worthy of literary analysis and distinction (Payant 2).

As a result of these efforts to re-envision the literary canon, feminist critics came both to rediscover and to re-see Kate Chopin’s works. Over a half century after her works had first been published, feminist scholars unearthed Chopin’s published and unpublished works for reprinting; armed with a newly forged feminist consciousness, they interpreted her well-written stories through this nascent lens. The accessibility of Chopin’s works also ensured their embrace, beyond scholarly circles, by non-academic feminists. Leaders within the second wave realized the utility of feminist attention to fiction within the more popular-culture women’s movement; literature could advocate for their cause, supporting feminist efforts through another medium of persuasion. In fact, many regard Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* as the literary equivalent of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in mobilizing readers for the women’s movement. As feminist Elizabeth Fox-Genovese recounts, “The rediscovery of *The Awakening* came as a Godsend, the most incredible gift to the women's

movement” (“Kate Chopin”). The number of studies of Kate Chopin’s work subsequently exploded in the 1970s.

However, Katherine Anne Porter’s works did not garner such a cult following within the women’s movement. Porter’s works have commanded the focus of a steady stream of scholarship, but her short fiction has not generated the volume that Chopin’s has prompted. Nor has Porter criticism garnered the same feminist interest that Chopin analysis has; while scholars often focus on gender and female sexuality in analyzing Chopin’s stories, critics of Porter more often evaluate her form (symbolism, point of view, and narrative chronology) or the relevance of Porter’s own unorthodox biography to her characters and plots. Some more recent critics do consider gender in Porter’s works, but feminist readings do not dominate Porter scholarship as they do Chopin’s.

The lack of early feminist attention to Porter’s work affects both her lay readership and her academic profile. Because of the feminist critics’ nearly absolute role in determining the works to represent women’s literature within the canon, Kate Chopin’s novel and short stories became widely anthologized and consequently frequently taught in the classroom while Porter’s works largely moved to the periphery. For decades now, students have read Chopin’s short stories and novel in the light of gender while the few short stories by Porter that are included in anthologies are largely taught in terms of form. Past modes and models of interpretation greatly influence current pedagogical approaches to literature, and until critics undertake a substantial revisioning of Porter’s works from a feminist perspective, students and lay readers alike will continue to see Porter primarily as a stylist, neglecting her witness to female experience.

Because of the similarities between these women and their works, the discrepancies in their reception warrant attention. Both women spent their childhoods under the influential guidance of matriarchs and used these strong females to inform characters in their works. Both authors spent significant years living independently, supporting themselves and/or family members through their writing. Both Porter and Chopin dabbled in writing music, poetry, novels, translations, and essays. Despite their prolific productivity, both women's short stories constitute their best fiction, and critics have regarded them both as masters of this form. Both enjoyed literary circles and the support and stimulation of well connected, talented, and famous friends. Chopin and Porter also chose females for their protagonists almost exclusively, and focused their writing on women's identity formation and the factors shaping self-perception and social roles. Finally, both often wrote stories at the ends of which the female protagonists confront abrupt, life-altering events or earth-shattering epiphanies, and these realizations result in, at best, an unsatisfying or hopeless ending, and at worst, a tragic fate for the female characters.

Katherine Anne Porter's complex style and public persona, trends in literary theory, and critics' insistence on her protagonists' culpability in their own unhappiness overshadowed these similarities for feminists of the 1970s. This thesis explores the question of why Katherine Anne Porter's works have not received the feminist consideration that Kate Chopin's have. Specifically, I will discuss the links between criticism of Porter's works and the influence of this critical attention on Porter's perceived incompatibility with feminist ideology and goals in the 1970s. Examining the authors' depictions of their female protagonists' perceptions of their sexuality, I will provide explanations for feminists' adoption of Chopin as a representative of women's contributions to literature and their lack

of recognition of Porter's merits. While feminists' promotion of Chopin's works starting in the 1970s clearly benefited the movement, Porter's short stories offer much to contemporary women readers and perhaps more to today's feminism than Kate Chopin's works.

Unquestionably, the second wave's influence on American literature positively changed the canon by forcing the inclusion of women's expressions. As part of their efforts to counter networks of discrimination in common culture, second-wave feminists addressed literary representation to challenge institutional and informal reproduction of sexism. As Maria Lauret argues, "There can be little doubt that literature is one of Second Wave feminism's greatest success stories" (74). However, much like many feminists of color and third-wave feminists who acknowledged the negative effects of the second-wave feminists' unqualified power to define female voices in literature, so too does this thesis suggest that feminists of the 1970s, re-envisioning women's literature, may have inadvertently but unnecessarily suppressed Porter's contribution to understanding women's experiences. By examining the reasons for which feminists neglected to apply feminist literary criticism to Porter's works, modern feminist scholarship may progress to include more of the still unheard voices that Mill asserted were necessary for society's progress.

Although Chopin has become well known for *The Awakening*, both she and Porter gained fame primarily as masters of the short story; in fact, each author published only a single novel. This thesis will examine a selection of each author's short stories, the form which both authors dedicated their greatest efforts to refine as a craft. I will trace the reception and popularity of Chopin's stories to the feminist movement's need for consciousness-raising literature, focusing on Chopin's portrayal of female sexuality in two of her most anthologized works, "Desirée's Baby" and "Athénäise," each from a separate

collection of her short stories published during her lifetime but largely ignored until the 1970s.

I will then discuss the critical literature of three of Katherine Anne Porter's most anthologized and analyzed short stories (Givner, *Life* 71, 510), provide interpretations of the works based on depictions of female sexuality, and suggest explanations for feminists' reluctance to adopt Porter's literature for their cause. I chose these stories—"Theft," "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and "The Grave"—because they depict characters who comprehensively represent womanhood: they trace woman's development from girlhood on the cusp of adolescence ("The Grave"), to adulthood confronting middle age ("Theft"), to the senescence of a grandmother on her deathbed ("The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"). In addition to comprising a holistic view of womanhood, the protagonists of these works display a psychological complexity that conforms with the generally accepted standards of the feminist canon. Porter's "descent into the psyche...provides an intense view" of women's struggles with identity (DeMouy, *Eye* 16). The critical response to these well known works is typical of the reception Porter's works have elicited and exemplifies feminist neglect of her works, despite their popularity during a time of increased feminist attention to literature.

## Chapter 1: Kate Chopin's Short Fiction: "Athénaïse" and "Desirée's Baby"

Many feminists adopted *The Awakening* and Kate Chopin as emblems of feminist awareness in the early 1970s, an association that affected readings of Chopin's other works. In particular, the role of sexuality in Chopin's works constitutes a central subject of scholarly analysis, in part because of *The Awakening's* immense influence. The women's liberation movement brought attention to sexual politics, and the consciousness-raising literature read at the time echoed this sexual revolution (Hogeland 54-5). *The Awakening*, most late-twentieth-century readers' introduction to Chopin's body of work, depicted Edna Pontellier's awakening as largely sexual since the spark for her realizations arises from her affair with Robert Lebrun. As Kathie Sarachild asserts, consciousness-raising's strength lay in women's sharing this first-hand knowledge of their personal experiences with oppression in everyday roles, including those associated with their sexuality such as mother, wife, and lover (146). In her short fiction, Chopin portrayed women who similarly were confined or limited in these intimate roles because of their sexuality, and, unlike Katherine Anne Porter's short fiction, critics often examined these sexual connotations within Chopin's works. Both "Athénaïse" and "Desirée's Baby" exemplify such sexualized readings of Chopin's works.

Kate Chopin's short fiction came to be known through the lens of her only novel, *The Awakening*. Circulated at antiwar protest marches of the early 1970s and reprinted in *Redbook* in 1972 as a "classic underground novel" (Toth, *Kate Chopin* 9, 404), *The Awakening* was politicized from the beginning of its rediscovery. One of Chopin's best known biographers, Emily Toth, remembers that she and other women in the early 1970s "whose feminist consciousness was growing" were "astonished that a woman in 1899 had

asked the same questions that we, in the newly revived women's movement, were asking 70 years later" (Toth *Kate Chopin* 9, 404).

Toth's experience with *The Awakening* was not unique. Many women in the early 1970s found the novel's depiction of Edna Pontellier's illumination both compelling and accessible, perhaps more so than messages from contemporary feminist groups that some saw as radical. In contributing to the growing awareness of and allegiance to the women's movement, *The Awakening* belongs to a body of fiction feminists identified as consciousness-raising literature. Lisa Maria Hogeland defines consciousness-raising literature as writing that "depict[s] the protagonist's process of consciousness-raising explicitly," "transact[s] consciousness-raising with its readers," or "shap[es] its narrative according to the structure of consciousness-raising, the process by which participants come to see the personal as political" (ix).

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier realizes that a fulfilling, autonomous life driven by her desires would be impossible because of her socially prescribed roles of mother and wife. Chopin's depiction of Edna's identity struggle meets two of Hogeland's qualifications as consciousness-raising literature both by depicting Edna's "awakening" and by transacting a similar awareness with Chopin's readers. Perhaps the novel's incompatibility with Hogeland's third component of consciousness-raising explains why Chopin's protagonist wades into the ocean to her death in the final scene; without realizing that the personal is political, without realizing the greater forces acting upon her life and feeling capable of addressing them, Chopin's character can neither imagine nor achieve an alternative and instead chooses her only available recourse, death. The novel's stark ending exemplifies

what happens when women fail to realize the social or political sources of their personal unhappiness and do not act to confront it.

By portraying the narrative of one (fictional) woman's oppression, Chopin provided 1970s readers with a compelling motivation to embrace the women's liberation movement: they, too, could suffer unnecessarily if they failed to confront their oppressors. Couched in the experience of a character who often elicits great sympathy, *The Awakening's* example provided one of the great services of consciousness-raising literature to the early feminist movement, that of enabling "a wider circulation of ideas from the Women's Liberation Movement by moderating those ideas, by softening their political edges, by personalizing and novelizing feminist social criticism" (Hogeland ix). By making feminist messages more accessible, consciousness-raising literature such as *The Awakening* stimulated greater action for women's equality. As Maria Lauret explains,

Without raised consciousness no understanding of the world, and without understanding no agency to change it. Generalisations would lead women to a new understanding of their history and subjectivity, no longer in the self-blaming terms of popular psychology, but in a theoretical framework of male power and institutionalized sexism....[C]onsciousness-raising was...the royal road to revolution. (63-64)

Aware of *The Awakening's* consciousness-raising power, many feminist scholars and readers then turned to Chopin's short fiction, reading her works through their newfound feminist lens. Since critics largely had ignored Chopin's short fiction for decades, feminist reviews of Chopin's works did not have to contend with established receptions. Feminist scholars' monopoly on interpretation of Chopin's works allowed them unrivaled license to

determine the standard in interpreting Chopin's works, setting a theoretical framework for examining Chopin's portrayal of women's identity and sexuality which other later Chopin scholars had to acknowledge in situating their readings in relation to this precedent. The critical receptions of "Athénaïse" and "Désirée's Baby" reflect the feminist perspective.

In "Athénaïse," Chopin portrays the dangers of female sexuality to a woman's intellectual desires, and critical responses have readily interpreted the story's emphasis on the power of female reproduction over a woman's life. In the beginning of "Athénaïse," when Chopin introduces us to the new marriage of Athénaïse and Cazeau, the free-spirited young wife has run away to her parents' house and refuses her husband's order to return. Cazeau does not beat or mistreat her, and Athénaïse admits her grievance is not against Cazeau—the disciplined, practical, but caring husband—but rather against married life, for which Athénaïse feels "a constitutional disinclination" (431) because she considers it "a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls" (434). When her husband comes to retrieve her from her parents' house, to "bring her back to a sense of her duty" (428), his "looks, his tones, his mere presence, brought to her a sudden sense of hopelessness, an instinctive realization of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution" (432). For all her quixotic ideals, even Athénaïse can see the reality of married life for a woman.

Chopin roots Athénaïse's malaise in the spiritual oppression of marriage by depicting Athénaïse's discomfort with the physicality of sexual relations between a husband and a wife. Athénaïse's subordination means she must bear unwelcome treatment, including startling, intimate intrusions into her otherwise private, autonomous world, as symbolized by Cazeau's wearing of his spurs in the house, the imposition of a domineering male image into the woman's domain (427). Athénaïse cries that she "can't stan' to live with a man; to have

him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!” (431). This exclamation, along with her feeling that Cazeau loved her “passionately, rudely, offensively” (449), epitomizes Athénaïse’s discomfort with sex. Chopin characterizes Cazeau’s domination as corporeal. His body “craves” sleep, food, and even Athénaïse; “[H]er absence” is “like a dull, insistent pain” to Cazeau (427). Only the lock securing the food in the cupboard controls Cazeau’s voracious appetite, symbolic of his sexual drive, and while he scarfs down his food, Athénaïse “ha[s] little heart to eat, only playing with the food before her, and she fe[els] a pang of resentment at her husband’s healthy appetite” (435). Athénaïse feels offended, even disgusted, by the expectations of sexual activity and physical intimacy in the marriage because they threaten her own desires for a detached, individual, and unregulated life (A. Stein *Vows* 181).

For all of Athénaïse’s fickleness, Chopin justifies her overwhelming unhappiness with the limited options available to her. In Chopin’s depiction, the world holds few options for a woman disinclined to subordination and few, if any, supporters of an unconventional life for a woman. Athénaïse garners little sympathy for her unhappiness; even her free-spirited parents want her to return to Cazeau as they had hoped he could be the “master hand,” the “strong will that compels obedience” in Athénaïse (434). Friends, family, marriage, and the church fail to allow Athénaïse the self-possession she desires, and she flees again, this time to her last available alternative—the life of an urban, independent woman—which also comes with limitations.

Arriving in New Orleans to begin this self-sufficient life, Athénaïse takes a room in a boarding house. Here she tries to establish herself as an autonomous individual, but soon realizes that this ideal is also a fantasy as she cannot completely escape her constraints.

Athénaïse depends upon her brother Montéclin for her month's rent, and she discovers she has little prospect of making enough money to pay rent on her own. Bouts of extreme loneliness plague Athénaïse, and the one person who does offer companionship, Gouvernail, hints that he too would assume a "proprietaryship" (447) and sexual domination of Athénaïse.

Athénaïse's momentary reprieve from her subordination collapses at the moment she realizes her pregnancy. Instantaneously, Athénaïse wants to return to Cazeau and the life she had detested. Chopin roots this drastic change of plans in Athénaïse's physical body as a function of her sexuality. The news of her impending motherhood takes over her body "in a wave of ecstasy" and

[a]s she thought of him, the first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her.

She half whispered his name, and the sound of it brought red blotches into her cheeks.

She spoke it over and over, as if it were some new, sweet sound born out of darkness and confusion, and reaching her for the first time. She was impatient to be with him.

Her whole passionate nature was aroused as if by a miracle. (451)

Athénaïse's sexuality—her erotic desire, pregnancy, and maternity—compels her to return to a fate she had detested and avoided through great effort. Athénaïse's reason for returning to Cazeau illustrates the limited agency of a woman's intellectual desires to combat socially and biologically determined roles antithetical to her personal aspirations. In the end, a willful, rebellious woman submits to her husband, as the language of the reunion conveys with her "yielding" to Cazeau as she returns to his "keeping" (454). Chopin illuminates the irony of Athénaïse's return and change in disposition through her brother's thoughts on Athénaïse's circumstances, which he feels had "taken a very disappointing, an ordinary, a most

commonplace turn” (454). Chopin’s protagonist advanced to the cusp of freedom, only to acquiesce to a life of servitude because of an internal physical force.

Chopin thus depicts the futility of a woman’s quest for self-possession. In doing so, she elucidates the source of the obstruction as not only social mores and institutional discrimination based on ideas of gender, marriage, family, and propriety, but also an internal source, her own sexuality. Her biology ultimately betrays her, trumping the last vestiges of hope of achieving her intellectual and spiritual desires, by compelling her to return to her husband and submit to what Athénaïse felt were doleful expectations of wifedom and motherhood.

The timeliness of feminist consciousness-formation and *The Awakening’s* influence both appear in the critical reception of “Athénaïse.” The women’s movement influenced early critiques of the story in the 1970s, as evidenced in references to patriarchal power, female objectification, and conditions that pit a woman’s desire for independence against inflexible cultural and institutional systems of oppression (Leary, “Introduction” 1970; Peterson 1972; Seyersted, “Introduction” 1974). Some scholars of this period even openly characterize Chopin’s depiction of Athénaïse as “feminist” (Peterson 1972). Likewise, the prevalence of continued comparisons of “Athénaïse” to *The Awakening* reveals the influence of Chopin’s earlier reception in examinations of this short story (Peterson 1972; Arner, “Chopin” 1975; Jones 1981; Skaggs 1985; Ewell 1986; Lattin, “Athénaïse” 1988; Taylor, *Gender* 1989; Brown 1991; Bryan 1993; Dyer, “Beginnings” 1993; Thomas 1996; Walker, “Letters” 1996; McCullough 1999).

These associations likely explain why Chopin scholars, unlike Porter scholars, extensively acknowledge the role of Athénaïse’s sexuality in the protagonist’s identity

struggle. The attention to sexuality in “Athénaïse” criticism has not wavered in the critical reception of the story since that focus first emerged in the early 1970s. While scholars disagree on the significance of Athénaïse and Cazeau’s reconciliation, most critics recognize the transformative power of female sexuality as the reason for the story’s resolution, a trend prevalent since Chopin’s rediscovery (Peterson 1972; Seyersted, “Introduction” 1974; Lattin, “Childbirth” 1978; Taylor, “Introduction” 1979; Wolff, “1851-1904” 1979; Dyer, “Sleeping” 1980-81; Dyer, “Night” 1981; Bonner, “Tradition” 1983; Lohafer 1983; Rogers 1983; A. Stein, *Vows* 1984; McMahon 1985; Ewell 1986; Martin 1988; Inge 1989; Taylor *Gender* 1989; Papke 1990; Brown 1991; Toth, “Mothers” 1992; Shurbutt 1993; Walker, “Introduction” 1994; Bender 1996; Berkove 1996; Walker, “Letters” 1996; McCullough 1999). From analyzing finer details—such as interpreting Cazeau’s bare feet as symbols of unrestrained male sexuality that Athénaïse finds threatening (Koloski, *Study* 37)—to larger character analysis—such as assertions that Athénaïse seems “to regard marriage and sex as violations of her personal identity” (Inge 102)—scholars resoundingly agree that analyzing female sexuality proves central to understanding the story. While critics have not reached a consensus on whether Chopin attacks or affirms marriage through the story, the body of critical work on “Athénaïse” consistently appraises a woman’s sexuality as a powerful agent capable of undermining a woman’s intellectual will.

Even when scholars do not find that sexuality comprises the primary focus of a story, as with “Désirée’s Baby,” a story in which race is often asserted to be the primary theme (Koloski, *Study* 24-6), scholars consistently attend to sexuality and woman’s oppression in Chopin’s short fiction. From the beginning of “Désirée’s Baby,” Chopin portrays Désirée as lacking a personal identity, rendering her a tabula rasa upon which others project their

“desires.” Abandoned as a toddler, Désirée has no background, stature, or individual qualities when Monsieur Valmondé discovers her. Madame Valmondé enthusiastically welcomes Désirée as God’s fulfillment of her fervent wish for a child. Readers learn nothing of Désirée’s development, and other characters do not treat Désirée as an autonomous individual. In fact, Chopin does not describe Désirée’s personality, instead characterizing her by others’ treatment of her as a possession. Her parents objectify her as “the idol of Valmondé” (1). The overbearing and demonic Armand Aubigny stumbles upon her one day and claims her for his wife, acquiring her from her father like new property and then pridefully branding her with “one of the oldest and proudest names in Louisiana” (1-2), thereby giving her a place of honor and providing her an identity within a highly regulated Creole society

Chopin suggests that Désirée’s sexuality performs a social function, as Désirée appeases Armand, diffusing his usual heavy-handedness with the slaves into a more humane treatment. The story suggests that Désirée placates Armand by fulfilling his unbridled desire for sexual domination, for Désirée “awoke” a “passion” in Armand that “swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles” (1). Chopin depicts Armand’s sexuality as a destructive force that threatens the physically vulnerable Désirée and others on the plantation. Through Armand’s suggested sexual relationship with his slave La Blanche, Chopin emphasizes Armand’s voracious eroticism and further characterizes his sexuality as rampant and violent. But Désirée’s sexuality pacifies Armand, curtailing his violent proclivities. Armand can barely contain himself until his wedding, out of his desire for Désirée, and after their wedding, he treats his slaves better

by softening his “strict” rule (2). Désirée’s reproductivity further assuages Armand when she bears his son:

Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny’s imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. (3)

Chopin indicates that Désirée happily accommodates Armand’s desire because Désirée lives to please Armand sexually and otherwise; however, her own sexual functioning ironically challenges the soundness of her complete devotion and service to Armand.

At three months of age, Désirée and Armand’s son develops darker skin, indicating miscegenation and suggesting that one of his parents passes as white. Within their pre-Civil War plantation and community, such a child disgraces the Aubigny name and indicates a breach of social decorum: either Désirée or Armand has a black ancestor. However, the consequences for this perceived immorality depend upon socially determined views of race and sexuality. If Armand’s ancestry included a black parent, their community would see the child as proof of a violation of Désirée’s sexual purity, since a black man had taken advantage of a white woman sexually, a significant transgression in this culture. However, this same culture permitted white men to rape black women without censure. Armand (with his assumption of whiteness) likely fathered the quadroon boy by La Blanche, and suffers no public ridicule for taking advantage of a black woman sexually. Through the predicament of the child’s lineage, Chopin draws attention to the varying codes of female sexuality. A woman’s identity, security, and community protection depend upon social interpretations of her sexuality, including cultural filters based on race and class. Chopin again emphasizes the

vulnerability of woman's sexuality in a patriarchal society in which men define social standards. In this way, a woman's sexuality functions not at the will of the individual woman, but as a culturally determined tool of social order.

Chopin also draws attention to Désirée's sexuality by registering Désirée's realization of the significance of her baby's dark skin corporeally rather than intellectually: "The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face" (3). Like Athénaïse, Désirée experiences the news of her life-altering circumstances through a physical sensation. As she mentally becomes aware of the reason for her body's response, the shock arrests her speech. When she recovers her voice, Désirée pleads with Armand to explain the significance of their child's skin color. Brash and prideful, Armand blames Désirée for the racial transgression, rebuking her for the race no one suspected of her, and casts her out. Instead of accepting her adopted mother's offer to return home, Désirée commits suicide and infanticide by walking into a bayou with her child. Weeks pass and in the final dramatic scene Armand discovers that his wife was not the one guilty of possessing the black blood he so despises, but that his own mother "belong[ed] to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (5), meaning that he descended from a black heritage and therefore bears the responsibility for his child's dark skin.

Through Désirée's suicide, Chopin conflates birth and death, exposing the threat of a woman's sexuality to her own aspirations. The child, a product of Désirée's reproductivity, becomes the catalyst for her own displacement and death. Although Désirée wants nothing more than to please Armand, the product of her reproduction, her child, prevents the fulfillment of her desire. As in "Athénaïse," the function of a woman's sexuality proves inimical to her individual wishes and undermines her limited power. Désirée's extreme

affection for Armand and his denial of this faithfulness result in her suicide more than her dismay at breaching appropriate race or gender norms.

Therefore, “*Désirée’s Baby*” expresses not only complicated racial discrimination, but also women’s oppression, and particularly a woman’s lack of legitimate and recognized agency within this culture. Social rules of gender and race require *Désirée’s* acquiescence to Armand’s rebuke, and the power her sexuality afforded her in her marriage to appease Armand ultimately cannot contend with the force of social definitions of worth. Her one source of potential power—her sexuality—works against her in this patriarchal culture, becoming a tool for her denunciation rather than her emancipation. As Anna Elfenbein asserts, “the one indisputable fact—*Désirée’s* total powerlessness—is the result of the life-and-death power of the husband in her society” (120). Stripped of her one possible instrument to achieve fulfillment, *Désirée* proves incapable of creating an identity separate from her husband, and without him to define her, she simply ceases to exist: “*Désirée* has no concept of herself as a person apart from her husband, she considers her life not worth living after he shuns her....Chopin [shows] us that a woman who views herself solely as wife seriously limits her options should her husband choose to discard her” (McMahan 34). Armand seeks redemption of his spoiled name and personal affront by inflicting emotional pain upon *Désirée*, and without legitimate agency or self-determined identity, *Désirée* obediently complies, fulfilling his final desire.

Despite the story’s complexity, which provides numerous potential focal points for analysis that could compete for scholarly consideration, critics have still given attention to the role of sexuality in “*Désirée’s Baby*.” While early critics exhibited a “tendency to dismiss [“*Désirée’s Baby*”] as little more than local color...old habits died hard” (Wolff,

“Limits” 35) and some contemporary scholars still focus on the story’s regional focus (Seyersted, “Introduction” 1974; Bonner, “Survey” 1988; Koloski, “Anthologized” 1994; Baxter 1996). Others, especially those before 1970, emphasize Chopin’s skill, noting her economy of language, foreshadowing, twisting conclusion, diction, tone, subtlety, irony, or other techniques in creating what they see as one of the best short stories ever written (Patee 1923; Rankin 1932; Reilly, “Stories” 1937; Reilly, *Of Books* 1942; Seyersted, *Biography* 1969; Rocks 1972; Taylor, *Gender* 1989; Fusco 1994; Castillo 1995).

However, as Wolff asserts,

[i]n the final analysis, these judgments are no more satisfactory than those that grow from the more narrow definition of Chopin as ‘local colorist’: if significant effects are seldom achieved merely through a deft management of dialect and scenery, it is also the case that a ‘trick’ or ‘surprise’ conclusion is almost never a sufficient means by which to evoke a powerful and poignant reaction from the reader. (“Limits” 36)

Ultimately, Chopin’s depiction of Désirée’s oppression and her sexuality compels the reader and provides the story’s most significant and complex crux, as noted in many scholars’ post-1970s interpretations, which analyze Désirée’s lack of firm identity, her domination by Armand, her objectification by her society, family, and husband through feminine ideals, and/or Chopin’s linkage of the oppression of slaves to the oppression of women (Arner, “Pride” 1972; Solomon 1976; Lattin, “Childbirth” 1978; Jones 1981; Toth, “Convention” 1981; McMahan 1985; Skaggs 1985; Elfenbein 1989; Inge 1989; Papke 1990; Guidici 1991; Shurbutt 1993; Toth, *Unveiling* 1999; A. Stein, *Autonomy* 2005). Other criticism since 1970 more specifically attends to sexuality, including Armand’s aggressive sex drive, the role of childbearing in creating marital tension, Désirée’s unrestrained affection for Armand which

significantly contributes to her eventual suicide and infanticide, and the manner in which Chopin links birth and sexual passion with a woman's death and lack of identity (Leary, "Excursions" 1971; Arner, "Pride" 1972; Lattin, "Childbirth" 1978; Wolff, "Limits" 1978; Davis 1982; Fluck 1982; McMahan 1985; Rosenblum 1986; Elfenbein 1989; Erickson 1990; Peel 1990; Toth, *Life* 1990; Lundie 1994; Benfey 1998; McCullough 1999; Toth, "Secret" 1999).

Both "Désirée's Baby" and "Athénaïse," stories from two different Chopin short story collections that depict women with dissimilar ambitions during varying historical times, attract critical attention to the role of the female protagonists' sexuality in shaping the narrative. For all the differences between the stories, critics have found elements of compatibility in their depictions of the complex relationship between sexuality and women's identity and autonomy. Such a link did not exist before the women's movement's consciousness-raising in the early 1970s. To many women noticing oppressive powers for the first time and understanding how conceptions of gender limited their lives, the sting of Athénaïse's failure probably felt all the more bitter because of her near success, and while not overly moralistic or didactic, "Désirée's Baby" exemplified the repercussions of a lack of self to emerging feminists who were gaining greater awareness of the limitations oppression caused in their lives. In this way, Chopin's short stories served the primary role of early consciousness-raising literature within the feminist movement as described by Kathie Sarachild: "the first job now was to raise awareness and understanding, our own and others," an activity that would eventually lead to an "awareness that would prompt people to organize and to act on a mass scale" (145). Many early feminists embraced Chopin's writing for inspiring them to recognize systems of oppression in their own lives.

However, the same qualities of Chopin's fiction that drew many to the feminist movement also limited its service to women seeking to enact social and personal change. While Chopin's work roused women's feminist consciousness during the early stages of the second wave, Chopin's stories do not provide an alternative to the oppression women came to recognize because her stories do not illustrate a path to performing the actions one's consciousness-raising inspires. "Désirée's Baby" and "Athénaïse" both provide motivation for understanding ways in which culturally and biologically determined roles could prohibit a woman from fulfilling her dreams, but neither story provides an example of a woman successfully combating these social forces. Instead, Chopin's female protagonists tend to meet what some have determined to be tragic ends. Contemporary writer Jill McCorkle's alternate ending to *The Awakening* illustrates the limitations of Chopin's utility to modern feminists:

At the end of Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, who is swimming out into the ocean with every intention of drowning, realizes she has made a terrible mistake. She thinks of her husband, and how dull and controlled her life with him has been; she thinks of Robert, her young lover, who awakened her sexually and then left with his brief "goodbye—because I love you." What an easy line. She imagines the two of them discovering her drowned body. Her husband would say, "How could she have gone swimming without anything on? What will everyone say?"

It is as if Edna is now, finally, again, really waking up. She doesn't want to die over those two. What a waste. She starts swimming back toward shore, thinking of all the things her new life will bring: a divorce, a job, birth control, single parenthood,

shorter skirts. Edna, swimming with strong steady strokes, is convinced that she's on to something, and she would rather be a pioneer than dead. (McCorkle 52)

Edna, like other Chopin protagonists, recognizes her limited agency and unhappiness, but cannot change her context. Chopin elucidates the problem women face, but her stories offered little to women who were then seeking the means to forge their own identities in self-determined ways. Chopin's works provided a great inspiration for launching a movement in the early 1970s, but they do not provide an example for women trying to integrate their feminist ideals into their lives.

In many ways, Katherine Anne Porter's women pick up where Kate Chopin's left off. While *Désirée* and *Athénaïse* could not start a new, fulfilling life, Katherine Anne Porter's women struggle with the realities of living within a world that limits their options; as they forge their own identities, pursue self-determined goals, and resist the oppressive forces early feminists recognized, Porter's female characters elucidate the difficulties of enacting a feminist consciousness. In this way, Katherine Anne Porter's fiction, too, qualifies as consciousness-raising literature because "new knowledge is the source of consciousness-raising's strength and power" (Sarachild 149). After the initial awakening to women's oppression, feminists could have found Porter's fiction to show new ways to frame and understand women's problems as they began to act on their feminist consciousness. Sarachild asserts that "[i]n consciousness-raising, through shared experience, one learns that uncovering the truth, that naming what's really going on, is necessary but insufficient for making changes. With greater understanding, one discovers new necessity for action—and new possibilities for it" (150). Porter's fiction often portrays women who attempted to achieve independent and fulfilling lives, but were contained and unhappy in ways that still

need to be addressed. However, Porter's potential contribution to feminists was quashed because her work was not helpful in starting a movement, and without being embraced by second-wave in the 1970s who were selecting the women's literature to become part of the canon, Porter was pushed to the fringes of American literature.

## Chapter II: Katherine Anne Porter's "Theft"

Overall, Katherine Anne Porter's "Theft" has not garnered much critical attention since its publication in 1929 (Unrue, "Introduction" 11). Critics of the late 1920s and 1930s focused on Porter's style and symbolism in evaluating her works (Stout, *A Sense of the Times* 282), and early recognition for "Theft" followed this pattern. As with "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" and "The Grave," interest in "Theft" waned after this early critical reception. In the late 1950s a resurgence of interest in Porter began, gathering momentum until it climaxed in the 1960s. This increased readership attracted a renewed attention to her short fiction but did not result in diversified analyses. Instead, scholars continued to limit much of their critical attention to Porter's style. Literary politics, especially New Criticism's backlash against prior forms' over reliance on contextualization, affected readings of mid-twentieth-century fiction, including Porter's works. New Criticism influenced many scholars to focus on close readings of a text's form (symbolism, style, structure, and other literary devices) and to shun analysis based on influences external to the text, such as historical and biographical contextualizations and reader response approaches. While New Critical approaches provided astute analysis of Porter's stories, overwhelming adherence to this orientation precluded analytical responses that rely on other theoretical perspectives.

Such a predominance of one critical orientation creates a theoretical mold that proves difficult to abandon; as Frank Lentricchia asserts, New Criticism exerted "powerful pressure" even on the "wittily independent and self-confident" critic (5). Although theorists began to criticize New Criticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, substantial changes within literary scholarship did not follow until later (Lentricchia 3, 30-31, 64-65). Cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s, such as those manifesting in the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist

movements, increased attention to power dynamics both in texts and within the historical moments within which works were written. However, without feminist adoption of her works, significant changes in theoretical approaches to Porter's short fiction have not been as prevalent, and her stories continue to be read for style with little critical contextualization, a trend that some recent critics have begun to change, although this new limited feminist attention greatly varies among her works.

For example, since the late 1950s, most critics have continued to focus their discussions of "Theft" on its style. Only with the publication of Porter biographies in the 1980s has scholarship also attended to the autobiographical qualities of Porter's texts. The predominance of formal and biographical analysis has limited the diversity of the story's readings. In particular, few scholars consider the unnamed protagonist's sexuality an important factor of analysis, and even those few critics who do discuss the role of her sexuality within the story provide only perfunctory remarks that they seem to mention only in passing. Feminist attention to "Theft" likely would have led to readings that considered the protagonist's gender and sexuality. However, prior readings of "Theft" likely deflected feminist attention to the work in the 1970s; the narrative's incrimination of the protagonist in her own oppression, as well as the bleak ending for a protagonist who struggles to assert her independence, would not have appealed to most feminists, nor would it have served their needs as they sought persuasive motivation to gain momentum and support for their movement. As well, Porter's public persona, and specifically her outspoken statements contradicting ideals of the feminist movement, also likely discouraged feminist inquiry. However, a feminist reading illuminates the value of Porter's "Theft" to women struggling to incorporate their feminist beliefs into their lives by asserting their self-defined identities.

“Theft” has been available to readers since its publication in *Gyroscope* in 1929 and was even more widely circulated through its inclusion in the 1935 edition of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. While Kate Chopin enjoyed a rebirth in readership during the early 1970s because of feminist interest, the increased curiosity about “Theft” in the 1960s arose not from feminist attention, but instead from Porter’s publication of other works. The release of her much anticipated first novel, *Ship of Fools*, in 1962 and its subsequent successful movie adaptation starring Vivien Leigh three years later regenerated interest in the author’s works.

Moreover, Porter herself landed in the spotlight. She enjoyed her greatest elevation within literary circles at this time with the 1965 publication of *The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, for which she received the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The gregarious Porter also escalated her social engagements during this time, attending John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961 (Givner 439) and other White House events during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (“Katherine Anne Porter”). Porter’s other publications and her public exposure increased many people’s interest in reading her earlier works, helping put “Theft” on the critics’ radar once again.

However, new attention in the 1960s did not equate to new approaches to Porter’s “Theft.” Like the early reviewers who praised Porter as a stylist, scholars continued to evaluate her form at the expense of thorough analysis of other elements, such as theme and representation (Prager 1960; Nance 1963; Wiesenfarth, “Structure” 1971; Givner, *Life* 1982; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983; Unrue, *Understanding* 1988; Unrue, “Freud” 1997; Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 2005). More recently critics have also examined biographical elements in “Theft” (Givner, *Life* 1982; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Unrue, *Understanding* 1988; Unrue, “Politics” 1993; Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 2005; Unrue, *Life* 2005), but, for the most part, not in

a way that provides significant changes to existing readings of “Theft.” The few interpretations of “Theft” that do stray from this compelling standard of attending to her style and life examine her political (Unrue, “Politics” 1993) and religious symbolism (W. Stein 1960; Givner, *Life* 1982; Unrue, *Truth* 1985; Unrue, *Understanding* 1988).

Even with the feminist movement’s attention to women’s writings in the 1970s, “Theft” remained largely untouched; in fact, apart from M. M. Liberman’s and Joseph Wiesenfarth’s 1971 articles, significant scholarship on “Theft” subsided for the entire decade. Actually, apart from nominal references in books devoted to Porter’s life or her collective works and Darlene Harbour Unrue’s publications in the late 1980s and 1990s, “Theft” has received scant focused critical attention since the 1960s. Two more recent critics have analyzed the role of the unnamed protagonist’s gender and sexuality in the story, but these critiques of “Theft” have not been as thorough or well publicized as necessary to attract attention to the story’s value. One of these two recent analyses of the woman’s sexuality remains unpublished (Stacie Hankinson’s 1997 dissertation), and the other, Esim Erdim’s 1990 analysis, appears not in a literary text, but in an examination of women and war. This relative neglect seems odd since an influx of attention to women’s literature began in the 1970s. The subject of “Theft” seems compatible with feminist interests; as Roseanne Hoefel observes “many critics...note in various ways that Porter heroines search for identity and independence, [but] their arguments are not developed from a feminist perspective” (1991 10). Porter and her works were well known and regarded during a crucial moment of feminist adoption of women’s texts, yet her fiction did not attract feminist concentration and consequently, her work waned in popularity as other authors became the voices of twentieth-century women’s writing. Despite earlier acknowledgment of the dearth of feminist attention

to Porter's works, such as Hoefel identified in the early 1990s, only recently have applications of this feminist perspective occurred in readings of "Theft."

Thus, the criticisms of the 1960s largely still stand as the critical interpretation of "Theft." However, these analyses of the unnamed protagonist tend to emphasize her culpability in her unhappiness or otherwise to judge her misfortune as a product of her personal failure or character flaw. For example, Joseph Wiesenfarth finds the woman incapable of loving others because of "some self-interest" which has "put an end to the ideal" of love (68-69). William Bysshe Stein (1960) does briefly link the image of the purse to the woman's sexuality, but only for the purpose of showing that Porter "connects this malady of personal unrelatedness with the betrayal of the holistic ideal of Christian love" (223), framing any discussion of the character's sexuality in what appears to be a judgmental religious analysis. Stein implies that the woman has substituted sexual promiscuity for traditional women's behavior. His moral indictment of the protagonist is barely veiled: "the protagonist suffers from a dissociation of sensibility. Unable to enact the natural roles of woman in society, she substitutes passion for love, bohemian careerism for marriage and motherhood" (W. Stein 223).

Likewise, Leonard Prager (1960) comments on the link between the woman's purse, her sexuality, and her identity, but only vaguely alludes to external influences resulting in her personal sadness: "The protagonist is a woman and the purse which she lost can readily be seen as sexual symbol; her problem of self-identity is concretely presented as the problem of an 'emancipated' career woman who is starving emotionally in the Wasteland of urban anonymity and alienation" (230). Prager focuses more on the protagonist's personal unwillingness to claim ownership of her feelings than on Porter's portrayal of female

sexuality or the social conditions that lead to such an identity crisis and emotional stasis. These critiques from the 1960s attribute the woman's unhappiness to her personal deficiencies. While Porter implies that the woman's personal choices led to her unhappiness, Porter also illustrates the cultural pressures prohibiting her fulfillment. The protagonist seeks an autonomous life, but saddled by cultural expectations of her femininity, her ability to realize this desire for independence is limited.

However, a few more recent critiques have addressed women's sexuality by discussing the symbol at the center of the story: the protagonist's purse. Yet, those that address the woman's sexuality mostly note the purse's role as the unifying element of the story without further elaboration (Hendrick and Hendrick 1988) or provide cursory suggestions about its meaning. For example, Jane DeMouy, in her 1983 book, says the purse symbolizes "repressed femininity" (*Eye* 55) but does not expand upon this assertion to provide an understanding of why the woman's femininity is repressed or how such a depiction affects the story. Similarly, in 2005, Darlene Harbour Unrue notes that one can "hardly miss the Freudian implications of the missing, empty purse, a symbolic empty womb" (*Life* 119), but she does not elucidate the importance of this symbolism to the story; and in her 1997 Freudian analysis of the story, Unrue acknowledges the sexual implications of the hat and furnace in the story, but not the purse, and she does not link these objects' sexual connotations to the woman's sexuality (Unrue "Freud"). These critiques' observations seemingly portray "Theft" as a text ripe for feminist exploration, making the absence of a thorough feminist critical approach to the story curious.

Scholar Esim Erdim observes that Porter's goal in writing centers on an "exploration of self-identity" (58), but the critical literature on Porter has ignored aspects of "Theft" that

relate the protagonist's struggles for a definition of self to her gender and sexuality. Thus, the criticism of "Theft" focuses thematically on the woman's culpability rather than on the reasons she feels psychologically bifurcated. While Porter's work clearly acknowledges the woman's guilt, as conveyed in the character's final thought of the last line, "I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing" (297), the lack of attention to the reasons for the psychological split and the role her sexuality plays in this rift limit the meaning we can gain from the story. As Porter's principal concerns, identity formation and the struggle to know and define oneself demand consideration in analysis of her works. Without critical attention to the protagonist's self-concept and the role of sexuality and gender to this sense of self, many have misunderstood Porter and her short story.

A feminist reading could provide such a discussion of the woman's identity struggle. Porter presents the protagonist as a blank slate, never naming her, never giving her a specific identity of her own. Unlike the male characters with whom the woman socializes and the female janitress who steals her purse, the woman has few distinguishing outward signs. While Porter characterizes the other individuals through their physical appearance and accessories, the unnamed protagonist has no distinguishing markers to indicate her status or personality, save one, her purse. As a symbol of femininity and, in Freudian terms, her womb and reproductive abilities, the purse and these significations are all that distinguish the woman. Readers come to see her not only as an individual in a specific context, but with her gender providing her only distinguishing characteristic, as a symbol of every woman.

The purse's function in the story also elevates her gender and sexuality to a central focus. In the first line, the woman realizes that "[s]he had the purse in her hand when she

came in” and thus the woman sets out to “surve[y] the immediate past and rememb[er] everything clearly” to determine what has happened to her purse that she cannot find (292). The woman cannot recall what she did with her purse, and her carelessness indicates a lack of proprietorship for her belongings, her identity, and her sexuality. The purse provides the impetus for the story and the vehicle for the story’s narrative unity, as the woman recalls the events of the previous night in order to remember where she misplaced her purse. Through the purse’s symbolism, the woman’s gender and reproductivity constitute a central topic of the story.

Porter creates two settings in which the characters of these settings view the woman’s sexuality differently, illustrating the subjectivity of women’s gender expectations, the fragility of a self-determined identity for a woman, much like Kate Chopin’s “Desirée’s Baby” and “Athénäise,” respectively. Porter also portrays the unlikelihood of the protagonist reconciling her multiple interpretations through these different settings. Porter’s protagonist operates in both the male world of artists, in which the woman works and socializes, and in the traditionally female domestic domain of the janitress, who has stolen the purse and with whom the woman has a confrontation at the end of the story. Porter shows that, by ignoring the implications of biology and gender in both worlds, the woman has left herself no sense of self, by failing to define her identity.

Porter portrays the male artists’ world as one of artifice through the three men with whom the protagonist interacts. This male sphere is superficial in its punctiliousness, as exemplified by Camilo’s pretense that compels him to ruin an expensive hat he cannot afford because he wants to appear carefree and chivalrous in escorting the female protagonist to the subway despite the pouring rain and her protests. Porter also portrays this world as false in

what it obscures: as the ignoble Bill, who repudiates the woman's work and value by refusing to pay her for her labor, conceals the cigarette burns in his newly acquired and exorbitantly expensive rug. Finally, Porter also characterizes the male world of working artists as limited by the men's avoidance. Her friend Roger avoids his own art show because he cannot confront the critics' negative responses, despite the fact that their insight could help him progress artistically and sell more works. Roger agrees with the protagonist that "[i]t's absolutely a matter of holding out" (294), of eluding the unpleasant or difficult.

In many ways, the woman seems compatible with this male world. Like the men, she values this effervescent, social world. She revels in an independence seemingly on par with that of her male companions: she lives alone in an apartment, works as an artist for wages, roams the city freely at late hours of the night, and attends lively parties where she drinks to inebriation. Superficially, she appears equal to the men in their autonomy and social status. The protagonist's psychological tendency to ignore the unpleasant befits the males' lifestyle as well. She conceals her concern about her dwindling finances even though "she had meant to be quite firm" about seeking the money Bill owed her (295). Instead, she acquiesces to his request that she "[h]ave another drink and forget about it" (295), thereby participating in the escapist behavior of the men who all three seek inebriation as a form of avoidance.

However, through the third-person limited-omniscient narration, Porter indicates that the woman must deny much of herself to function in this world. Porter's narration of the woman's thoughts illustrates the woman's proclivity for the practical, but also her unwillingness to assert her concerns because of the social repercussions such public acknowledgments will have for the men. For example, she placates Camilo even though she recognizes the impracticality of her impoverished friend ruining his hat and unnecessarily

expending money, all for the show of escorting her to the subway: “If she had not feared Camilo would take it badly, for he insisted on the practice of his little ceremonies up to the point he had fixed for them, she would have said to him as they left Thora’s house, ‘Do go home. I can surely reach the station by myself’” (292). The woman’s predilection for practicality in her interactions with the men peeks through her nonchalant public persona, and through the omniscient narration readers learn one of the ways the woman denies herself within the patriarchal world.

However, her adherence to social rules of decorum results in her passive and tentative behavior, which “obviates the fulfillment of her needs” (Hankinson 236). By revealing the opposition between the woman’s personal desires and social actions, Porter demonstrates that social appropriateness, including concern for the men’s egos, proves more important to the protagonist than her individual ambitions. However, the men do not abide by a similar code of conduct that defers to the preservation of the woman’s social dignity. For example, Bill selfishly refuses to pay the woman for her work even though he had promised the compensation. While the protagonist considers Bill’s ego in “lett[ing] it go” (296), Bill does not reciprocate with a similar consideration of the woman’s financial or psychological needs for her work’s acknowledgment

But because the woman will not address her own needs or concerns, she proves a poor match for this male ethos. The men do not fully respect her or her work, and do not treat her as an equal. Porter links this incompatibility to the woman’s gender. Porter never lets us forget how the woman differs from the men; Porter mentions the purse during each interaction with the three male friends. The woman can function in the male sphere of

illusion in which appearance and pretense define social interaction, but at great cost to herself because of her difference.

The woman comes to realize the exact price of this denial through her confrontation with the janitress, who occupies the traditional arena for woman that the protagonist has avoided: the domain of family, marriage, and household duties. Porter illustrates through the janitress's activities that this realm sharply contrasts with the men's world of avoidance: the janitress attends to the concrete (such as the furnace that needs to be stocked with coal) and monitors the essentials necessary to the daily running of a household (such as the radiators the janitress must check in preparation for winter). Female domesticity significantly differs from the male world of delusion or artificiality.

Porter posits the woman's fertility as the vehicle through which to achieve a respected and acknowledged authority through her confrontation with the janitress. Upon realizing the theft, the woman's first instinct is to avoid publicly acknowledging what has happened: "Certainly the janitress had taken the purse, and certainly it would be impossible to get it back without a great deal of ridiculous excitement. Then let it go" (295-296). The woman seems to be acting much like her male counterparts in her desire to evade reality. But "[w]ith this decision of her mind, there rose coincidentally in her blood a deep almost murderous anger" that compels her to reclaim her purse from the janitress (296). Here Porter again aligns the woman's biological instincts with her womanhood. Her original impulse to avoid the situation—to "let it go" (295)—mimics the evasiveness of her male counterparts' social actions, their conscious decisions to limit public embarrassment. Porter characterizes the woman's desire to ignore the theft as a "decision of her mind" (296). Conversely, the protagonist's move to confront the woman results from a physical drive, one that "rose...in

her blood” (296). Again, Porter defines the woman and her actions through her biology, linking the woman’s natural physical impulses with a drive to reclaim a traditional feminine identity; the will of her biology and body prevails as she confronts the other woman to reclaim her symbolic purse.

The contents of the purse—a few coins that total forty cents and a letter from a lover, ending their relationship because the woman has pushed him away—indicate the lack of value the woman places in her reproductive capabilities and traditional female roles. When the janitress acknowledges that she stole the purse, she observes that the woman did not seem concerned about its care or value. The woman’s confrontation with the janitress further implies that the woman, in trying to live in the male world, has avoided and devalued an innately powerful agency rooted in her sexuality that could have brought her an identity and fulfillment. The janitress stole the purse for her seventeen-year-old niece, believing it will attract suitors, allowing her to marry well. The janitress also assumes the woman would not miss it because she does not value her possessions: “I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind, you leave things around and don’t seem to notice much” (297). Given the symbolism of the purse and the feminine domestic domain in which the janitress confronts the woman, the conflict recognizes the woman’s lack of attendance to her own sexuality and reproductive abilities which society values for women.

While the woman will not realize full acceptance and equality with the men, she could still find fulfillment through traditional female routes. However, the janitress’s mean-spirited retort to the woman implies that the protagonist’s ability to bear children may be dwindling. Her opportunity to capitalize on her biological powers is diminishing, and, as it does, the janitress asserts that the woman may need outward signs of her femaleness and

maternity to comfort her: The janitress at first pleads, “My niece is young...we oughta give the young ones a chance. She’s got young men after her maybe will want to marry her...you’re a grown woman, you’ve had your chance, you ought to know how it is!” but then finally concedes that the woman “need[s] it [the purse] worse than she does!” (297) since the woman’s hopes of marrying and having a family are limited. The janitress’s observation that the woman has been careless with something precious shocks the protagonist, forcing her to acknowledge what she has ignored. As recent feminist critic Esim Erdim observes, “in the eyes of the janitress the protagonist is just an older woman who has not been able to find herself a husband” and consequently “the purse becomes symbolic of what she [the protagonist] has been missing in life by choosing to be independent” (55);

Porter establishes that the woman does not belong within the traditional female world because she traded marriage and patriarchy for independence and a career. However, Porter also portrays the woman as a misfit in the men’s world, too. The patriarchal world of work and social engagements fails to recognize the woman’s work or provide her with real power. The confrontation with the janitress forces the woman to realize she has neglected to define any place for herself. She recognizes she has not valued her female sexuality because of her professional and social roles, which have also failed to provide her with legitimacy and authority: the protagonist has no means through which to claim and maintain agency. Motherhood would have proven personally limiting for a creative, driven woman like herself, but this role provides social respect and authority. Without this esteemed role, her social acceptance will deteriorate as she loses her looks and sex appeal—an important factor even in her platonic but flirtatious friendships with men—and as she learned with Bill, her work will not provide stability or legitimacy. The woman’s mutually exclusive choices and her

inability to align herself with one leaves her with nothing: “all that she had had, and all that she had missed, were lost together” (296). Porter shows the woman as torn between two worlds, using setting to symbolize the duality of the woman’s psychological identity struggle. As Porter indicates, the protagonist is a woman of both worlds—avoidance and reality, male and female, social and biological—but as the woman comes to realize in the final scene, her choice to straddle these two worlds will leave her nothing. Porter shows the protagonist as torn between these worlds because of her gender, leaving the woman with a feeling of displacement she unfortunately attributes to her own shortcomings rather than to the limitations society places upon her as a woman.

Porter shows the protagonist’s problem to be uniquely a woman’s because of biology’s ticking clock. Men can perhaps delude themselves—and they do here—but women cannot, so easily, because of practical concerns and the reality of her sexuality. The woman then realizes that by not recognizing her natural agency, she has caused her own theft: “I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing” (297). This forces the protagonist to acknowledge that by pushing away her lover, especially as an older woman nearing menopause, she has cut herself off from the one legitimizing power available to her: wifedom and motherhood. Alone, unestablished, and rootless, the woman realizes that she “had never locked a door in her life” (296), had never defined nor defended her space or her domain, and the janitress’s harsh rebuke helps her realize that she will never achieve success or happiness because she did not capitalize on her biological abilities that would grant social acceptance and status.

Porter’s characterization of the woman’s identity struggle would not have ingratiated feminists revisiting women’s literature in the 1970s. Porter portrays female sexuality as a

compelling force that women must not ignore nor devalue. Depicting a woman's biology in such a way would not have corresponded with feminist efforts to expand women's roles beyond traditional domestic or mothering domains. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminists' struggle for equality included a sexual revolution, in part to free women from oppressive definitions of their sexuality that limited it to a biologically determined function. Feminists fought for increased access to birth control and welcomed the 1960 debut of the Pill (*The Pill*) in order to free women from the very link that Porter exemplifies as a recognized and important part of a woman's identity: her biology. Additionally, Porter indicates that women's one natural and stable source of power originates in an innate power that Porter roots in reproductivity. While the woman proved unable to confront Bill about the money he owed her, the distress that "rose coincidentally in her blood" compels the woman to confront the janitress when the woman realizes that she stole the purse from her room. The woman's body, not her mind, grants her the will to recover her purse. By grounding the woman's power in her physicality, Porter may appear to adhere to an essentialist definition of women. Akin to biological determinism, essentialism consists of the idea that a woman's biological functions, especially her reproductivity, define her social roles and responsibilities. The importance of the purse to the story and the agency the woman gains from her body to confront the janitress imply that the woman's physicality grants her her only legitimate power. Porter seems to reduce a woman to her biology, sexuality, and reproductivity, an argument with which feminism's adherents had familiarity, as biologically determined definitions of women were used often to discredit women's fights for increased rights and roles.

However, feminist interpretation of “Theft” elucidates Porter’s allusions to the limitations of this uniquely female power. Porter portrays the janitress, the guardian of her niece’s sexuality, as a demonic figure. Although she protects her niece through her matronly concerns (stealing the purse so she can marry well), the janitress resembles the devil. The protagonist must descend into the metaphorical hell of the basement to confront the janitress who, with “hot flickering eyes” and a coal-streaked face, stokes the furnace fire (296). In Porter’s depiction, the proponent of a traditional life for a woman represents an evil force. By association, Porter implies that the roles of wife and mother equate to a woman’s symbolic damnation. Motherhood, conspicuous femininity, and other patriarchal functions of a woman’s sexuality, fuel men’s supremacy and woman’s subordination just as the janitress, as the symbol of traditional femininity, feeds the symbolic fires of hell. Even though Porter portrays marriage and maternity as powerful, their source, the symbolized devil, indicates the limitation of this option for women as well.

A thoroughly feminist reading of “Theft” such as this has not appeared in Porter criticism. The renewed interest in “Theft” during the 1950s through the early 1970s did not result in a variety or proliferation of critical responses, a trend more recent scholarship on “Theft” has not corrected. Of this limited material, critics’ nearly universal agreement about the story’s meaning circumscribes its full weight. Nearly all of “Theft”’s critics agree that Porter concerns herself with portraying an individual’s complicity in her own unhappiness when she habitually deludes herself or that the unnamed protagonist in the novel is responsible for her own losses (Mooney 1957; Moss 1965; Nance 1963; Givner, “A Re-Reading” 1969; Liberman 1971; Wiesenfarth, “Structure” 1971; Givner, *Life* 1982; DeMouy,

*Eye* 1983; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Unrue, *Understanding* 1988; Brinkmeyer 1993; Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 2005; Unrue, *Life* 2005).

At a time when women's literature became a more prominent part of the literary canon thanks to feminist espousal of women's works, "Theft" may have been left behind because it did not directly serve feminist needs, as other works, including those of Kate Chopin, did. This lack of feminist support in favor of other women's works seems a likely reason why such a highly praised work as "Theft" has received only sparse critical interest since the early 1970s. As Stacie Hankinson asserts, the relationship between feminist attention to Porter's work and the potential for increased readership cannot be underestimated (260-64). Hankinson argues that situating Porter within a feminist understanding will help her works be read in contemporary feminist studies which will lead to a further understanding of Porter and her works from new interpretations (260). More feminist attention needs to be devoted to Porter (Hankinson 264) in order to open up interpretations of her work (Hankinson 264)

The existing critical responses to "Theft" can partially account for feminists' reluctance to add Porter's works to their list of materials that supported their cause in the 1970s. At a time when feminists attributed women's *de facto* discrimination to systems of oppression, finding fault with a career woman for her own unhappiness may have felt like an antiquated or destructive idea. After all, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, sought to stop the misguided self-blame women placed on themselves, when in actuality the problems were rooted in cultural and institutional discrimination. Second-wave feminists would probably not have found "Theft" to offer support to their cause of finding external reasons for internal problems since a preponderance of its criticism asserts

otherwise. However, one of the goals of feminist critics was to re-evaluate women's writing from a fresh perspective to "re-see" women's texts without interference of bias. Critical understandings of "Theft" could have directed feminist attention to the work because of their uniform blame on the woman, indicating the need for a new critical approach that might expose bias within earlier assessments of the story.

Two other reasons more fully explain feminists' inattention to "Theft." First, Porter's complex style prohibited interpretations that challenged existing critiques. The protagonist seems flawed and responsible for her dismay, but deeper analysis uncovers Porter's illustration of social factors limiting the woman's fulfillment. The overwhelming critical consensus that the story focuses on the woman's culpability seems to overshadow this realization. However, Porter does show that the character internalized patriarchal definitions of herself. The protagonist's struggles illustrate that "inhibiting female patterns may be instilled into young girls through religious or societal dogma, but then become self-perpetuating in adulthood" (Hankinson 230). Although she resisted traditional female roles by independently pursuing a career, cultural patterns of female subordination still lingered subconsciously from her socialization, limiting the extent of her true independence and consequently restricting her ability to demand what her peers owed her. Porter's representation of her protagonist's unorthodox life indicates that a woman must not only combat external forces but also must contend with a difficult psychological battle within the self, a disparity between her intellectual desires and the expectations she internalized from the dominant culture. Porter's complex depiction of this divided identity corresponds to her writing goals. Rather than didactically providing a moral for her readers, Porter sought to explore human behavior, often with great attention to individuals' psychological struggles

(Erdim 58). For a movement requiring digestible material for would-be feminists, “Theft” seems too complex, especially in comparison to Chopin’s works, which many found to be “clear, direct, free from puzzling syntactic convolutions” (Koloski, "Preface" ix).

Second, Porter’s public persona also affected feminist attention to “Theft.” While Porter displayed “a rootedly feminist orientation” earlier in her career, her biographer Joan Givner notes that Porter revised this feminist allegiance in the 1950s and 1960s on the threshold of the second wave’s beginning (*Life* 145, 461). Porter admired Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* for its truthfulness, admonished her brother for his disrespectful treatment of his girlfriends, advocated for women’s suffrage, wrote a defense of Circe in which she moved the blame from the woman to the men for their piggish behavior, read the seminal French feminist book Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, and discussed her displeasure with the Catholic Church’s treatment of women with priests and other Church leaders (Givner *Life* 101, 312, 412, 461). However, at a time when feminist critics sought candidates from women’s writing to “re-see” through new eyes, Porter’s public comments may have dissuaded such adoptions of her works. For example, during a press junket for *Ship of Fools* in the mid-1960s, Porter remarked that,

No, I’ve never felt that the fact of being a woman put me at a disadvantage, or that it’s difficult being a woman in a ‘man’s world.’ The only time men get a little tiresome is in love—oh, they’re OK at first, but they do tend, don’t they, to get a little bossy and theological about the whole business? (qtd. in Givner, *Life* 462).

Similarly, when two interviewers, Josephine Novak and Elise Chisholm, asked if she intended to join the feminist movement, Porter remarked that she was

[c]ertainly not....I don't agree with them. I told them, 'I will not sit down with you and hear you tell me men have abused you.'

Any man who ever did wrong to me got back better than he gave.

And I don't care about any rights. Rights never did me any good. I want my privileges (I haven't always gotten those).

There is something lacking there. I just can't read any more about them. I don't care what they do, just so they don't do it in the streets and scare the horses. (qtd. in Givner *Life* 462)

In the same interview, Porter criticized one of the most respected leaders of the American feminist movement at that time, Betty Friedan. Ironically, Porter's response to Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* echoes Bill's response to the unnamed protagonist of "Theft." When the woman asks for the payment he has promised, Bill instructs her to "[h]ave another drink and forget about it" (295), a reaction echoed in Porter's remarks on Friedan's book: "While I was going through it [*The Feminine Mystique*], I thought, "Oh, Betty, why don't you go and mix a good cocktail for your husband and yourself and forget about this business" (qtd. in Givner, *Life* 462). Joan Givner provides insights into Porter's motivation for changing course on women's political and social emancipation: for example, she suspects that Porter was intimidated by the "well-educated, well-informed, articulate women who were now speaking out....And then, quite simply, there was the fact that she often spoke for effect, and gauged what opinions would go down well with her audience" (Givner, *Life* 461-62).

However, the damage was done. While Kate Chopin also remarked that she did not consider herself a feminist or suffragist ("Kate Chopin"), her reputation did not suffer for this lack of outspoken allegiance to the women's movement. Second-wave feminists looking for a

woman writer to support their cause, or for works in which they could revision patriarchal bias in the works' interpretations would find an author muted by death, such as Kate Chopin, preferable to an unpredictable and contentious living author who publicly expressed her disapproval of their efforts.

However, more recent feminist critics of Porter recognize many compatible qualities in Porter's works, despite the author's rejection of the women's movement. As Hankinson points out in 1997, Porter never wanted to be associated completely with one group (260), as seen with her adoption and subsequent abandonment of so many social organizations and causes (Fascism, Communism, Catholicism, the Mexican Civil War, etc). Porter commented that she had "never belonged to any group or huddle of any kind. You cannot be an artist and work collectively" (Thompson 12), a statement indicative of what Hankinson deems Porter's "pursuit of individualism" (Hankinson 260). As Givner confirms, Porter "said she wanted to write novels, not to have to cut and distort her natural shape to fit some political platform" (*Life* 278). However, Hankinson notes that Porter's desire for autonomy to create her work free of any political binds "explains Porter's desire to dissociate from the feminist movement, and yet, ironically, this very quest to construct an identity independent of extraneous influence represents a prime feminist goal" (Hankinson 260). Porter's actions that reflected her desire to "not follow a pattern" (Thompson 12) support feminist ideals even when her public statements contradict them.

Recent feminist interpretations of "Theft" provide further reason to understand Porter's writing as feminist, and even as a precursor to Friedan's work which Porter disparaged with her flippant rejection of Friedan's complaints. In her seminal book, Friedan roots the problem of women's unhappiness in "the feminine mystique [that] permits, even

encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity,” because a “woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be” but instead a “public image” rooted in mass media and inherited gender expectations from family and society (71-72). The unnamed protagonist in “Theft” exemplifies Friedan’s definition of the feminine mystique in her inattention to her identity until she is confronted with her carelessness by the janitress. As Esim Erdim observes, “Friedan points to the identity crisis as the most powerful factor apparently holding women down, just as they were ready to break new ground for themselves” (52), a point Porter had portrayed over thirty years earlier in “Theft.” Feminist approaches to the story could confirm Hankinson’s assertion that Porter’s work exemplifies feminist goals, and could show that Porter’s works’ might have been a tool for second-wave feminists.

Regardless of Porter’s public statements about feminism, Porter offers a unique perspective that may have offered much to women in the feminist movement in the 1970s. Porter renders a complicated but realistic portrayal of the considerations modern women must face. None of Kate Chopin’s characters advance beyond the moment of confrontation when they realize that they must choose between motherhood and autonomy, but Porter’s protagonist illustrates that life continues for women after they choose an independent, career-focused life. While Kate Chopin’s stories showed the female world’s limitations and unpleasantness, they stopped short of providing an alternative life for Chopin’s unhappy protagonists other than death. However, Porter’s “Theft” elucidates the difficult reality of trying to forge a new, self-determined identity while being bound by another socially determined definition. While Chopin’s stories transmitted feminist consciousness to feminist readers, “Theft” portrays the difficulty of incorporating this feminist consciousness into daily

life when such personal desires conflict with traditional expectations based in powerful social approval. Porter shows that the decision to debunk traditional roles does not lead to an easy life.

Ultimately then, Porter's short story presents an exercise in exploring the decisions a woman must make within a set of limited choices, each restrictive in its inability to express a woman's full self. This leaves the protagonist and the reader questioning the agency this woman had in either her world of artists and images or within the traditional female world of the janitress. In the end, Porter demonstrates that the independent woman has little outlet for her desires within the two possible worlds available to her because neither fully provides her with what she needs to feel complete. In discussing the definition of womanhood in Southern fiction, Mary Michele Bendel-Simso finds that "[o]nce it becomes the socially constructed focal point of female identity, a woman cannot renounce pregnancy and motherhood without simultaneously renouncing herself," a "hegemonic mechanism" (Bendel-Simso 7) portrayed not only in Chopin's works but in Porter's as well.

### **Chapter III: Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"**

In her notes on a review of Marian Storm's biography, Katherine Anne Porter makes explicit her "belief that a woman is defined by her biological capabilities: her body 'is the repository of life,' and if she denies this she 'destroys herself'" (Titus, *Ambivalent* 7). The protagonist of "Theft" realized her culpability in engendering her own discontent since she ignored her sexuality and denied herself her biological legacy as a woman: "I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing" (297). Through this protagonist, Porter provides an example of a woman who suffers because of her unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of her biological roles.

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" offers another depiction of Porter's attention to sexuality, but in this story the woman benefits from her biology because she has recognized its agency: motherhood assuages Ellen Weatherall's disappointments and limitations. Mary Titus argues that Porter "never relinquished a belief that domesticity, marriage, and childbearing denote female success" (*Ambivalent Art* 6) and affirms Givner's statement that Porter "closely linked her idea of femininity...with fertility" (qtd. in Titus, *Ambivalent* 6). "Jilting" most aptly portrays the positive benefits of such roles for a woman in Porter's works.

However, critics of "Jilting" have mostly declined to read the story in the context of Porter's positive views of female sexuality. The critical response to "Jilting" exemplifies the predominance of attention to style, theme, and biography typical of the readings that have dominated criticism of Porter's fiction. Scholars of the 1960s set precedents for reading "Jilting" from a New Critical perspective, and their attention to the story's stylistic devices resulted in interpretations that did not recognize important power dynamics that a

contextualization of the story could provide. Instead, their textual analysis led to an emphasis on Ellen's jilting which, they found, limited Ellen to a victim's state of dejection, powerlessness, resignation, and hostility toward men, establishing a pattern of stigmatizing the protagonist within "Jilting" criticism. . Emphasis on romantic assumptions of woman's dependency on man led to interpretations of Ellen as a weak, defeated woman. Therefore, interpretations of "Jilting," especially those influenced by New Criticism, have tended to obscure Porter's portrayal of female sexuality as agency, and later receptions and pedagogical strategies have recycled these same foci of analysis, perpetuating similarities in the story's interpretations. However, feminist and queer theories have recently begun to influence readings of "Jilting" by delineating heterosexist assumptions in readings of Porter's works and by acknowledging her views of femininity as empowering. By realizing the strong matriarchy Ellen commanded—which brought her legitimate power and happiness—and by acknowledging her most fulfilling relationships as those with her children, more recent critics have begun to dispel assumptions silently underlying the formalists' analyses: that a woman's most important relationship is with her husband.

Through the scant but compelling argument of these recent interpretations, Porter's alignment with feminist ideas manifests itself, but in a way perhaps too complicated for a feminist movement that was only getting off the ground in the 1970s and that, in this nascent stage, required more transparent literary depictions of women's struggles. However, Porter's Ellen lives beyond the moment of death or submission when Kate Chopin's characters resign themselves to their unhappiness. Ellen chooses to defy her stigma and continue with her life, salvaging happiness and power when her initial desires for a romantic ideal prove unstable in their dependency. Re-examined through a feminist perspective, Porter's "Jilting" provides a

realistic and balanced portrait of the benefits and limitations of motherhood, an example helpful to feminists seeking greater independence and self-determination but still confined by a patriarchal and sexist world. However, Porter's complicated style and embedded message may have been too opaque to garner feminist attention in the 1970s, especially when evaluated against Chopin's fiction, which seems more straightforward and edifying in comparison.

In "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the protagonist, Ellen Weatherall, wavers between conscious thoughts and involuntary memories as she nears death. Porter's stream-of-consciousness mixes past and present, dreams and reality, privileging the reader to travel with eighty-year-old Ellen in her seemingly incoherent remembrances and revelations as she lies on her deathbed. In the course of the story, Ellen's free association reveals that when she was twenty, her fiancée George left her at the altar, a personal and public rejection that "for sixty years she has prayed against remembering" (114). Despite this humiliation, Ellen married John, with whom she had four children. Since John's early death, Ellen has raised the children, managed the farm, and devoted herself to the Church and her community. Now eighty and nearing death, Ellen finds herself in the uncomfortable position of having to relinquish the control she worked so hard to gain and wield for the last sixty years. The priest and doctor come in and out to attend to her, and her children, except for Hapsy who died earlier, gather at her side. At the very end, Ellen awaits a sign from God, which does not come, signifying her second jilting. In the last moment Ellen "stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light" (120) symbolically ending her own life instead of waiting for a God who will not come.

Critics have varied widely in the scope of their remarks on “Jilting” (Laman 279; Estes 437), much more than in the criticism of most other Porter stories. The confusing narrative structure of “Jilting” likely produces the disparity in interpretations. Much analysis attempts to clarify narrative facts or define relationships among characters in an effort to unravel the narrative: Is Hapsy Ellen’s daughter with John (Laman 1990), her illegitimate daughter with George (Barnes and Barnes 1969), or just a friend (Hoefel 1991)?

The difficulty many readers experience in understanding the story’s style and design is itself the subject of some criticism of “Jilting,” including especially pedagogically focused analysis and aids; students’ struggles to tackle unfamiliar techniques in “Jilting” consistently have been a recurrent subject of critical literature for the last forty years. Many reviews discuss students’ difficulty with untangling the stream-of-consciousness and the ambiguity, the two techniques teachers apparently most often address in teaching this short story (Britton 36-37; Becker 1164-65). The prevalence of attention to demystifying Porter’s use of these devices implies a tendency for classroom instruction to focus narrowly on only formal aspects of the story rather than on other factors of analysis.

Even those critics not concerned with pedagogy remark on Porter’s complex but masterful style, including her use of stream-of-consciousness (Schwartz 1960; Nance 1963; Becker 1966; Barnes and Barnes 1969; Britton 1987; Laman 1990); of flashback (Britton 1987); of epiphany (Britton 1987); of ambiguity (Becker 1966; Barnes and Barnes 1969; Britton 1987; Laman 1990); and of metaphor (Schwartz 1960; Estes 1985; Hoefel 1991). Beyond discussing these techniques, critics also remark on the superlative quality of her prose, praising its “poetic texture” (Nance 1963), its psychological complexity and development (Nance 1963; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983), and its stylistic and thematic similarities to

Emily Dickinson's poems (Hardy 1973; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983; Estes 1985) or Henry James's short stories and novels (Johnson 1960; Lopez 1981; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988). Such attention to formal aspects of the story's technique constitutes much of the critical analysis on "Jilting."

As a consequence of this prevalence of formalism in the treatment of "Jilting," close readings rather than contextualization have dominated critical attention to this short story. Especially in the 1960s, scholars discussed the story's participation in Modernist themes, including most prevalently Ellen's attempts to order her chaotic world (Schwartz 1960; Nance 1963; Wiesenfarth, "Opposition" 1969; Cobb 1979; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988). Others have attended to religious themes or allusions (Estes 1985; Britton 1987; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Laman 1990; Unrue, *Life* 2005), representations of death (Mooney 1957; Nance 1963; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988), or themes of rejection (Nance 1963; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983) in order to define a formal unity that all are sure exists but that none can agree on.

The attention to formal literary devices and to the meaning drawn from close readings reflects New Criticism's influence on Porter interpretations. While not all of these readings strictly adhere to New Critical evaluations of Porter's work, all were influenced by this objective perspective. Originally published in 1929 in *transition* (Lopez 126), an "avant-garde magazine of international standing" (Givner, *Life* 198), "Jilting" was subsequently included in a printing of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* in 1930 (Lopez 144) and its inclusion in the widely acclaimed 1965 publication of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, which won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (Givner, *Life* 476), made it a focus of critique at the apogee of New Criticism's influence. Moreover,

Porter's personal and professional associations with some of the originators of this critical approach, especially Robert Penn Warren, Ford Maddox Ford, Allen Tate, and Tate's wife Caroline Gordon, aligned her fiction with New Critical perspectives. The timing of her works' publications and the durability of these connections not only influenced the way her works were read upon publication (and republication), but also may have predisposed readings since, as evidenced in the persistent application of close reading and formal analysis to her short stories, including "Jilting."

In turn, Porter's alignment with New Criticism may have insured that feminists and feminist critics of the 1970s would be unlikely to adopt "Jilting" as a text of interest. Feminist literary critics and feminists of this time were attracted to critical approaches that more fully matched their consciousness-raising goals by examining power relations, gender, and historical contexts, reflecting more subjective concerns of post-New Critical approaches. Standing interpretations of "Jilting" may have deterred feminists from adopting the story as a literary tool for consciousness-raising in the early years of the late-twentieth-century feminist movement. Consciousness-raising literature found root in understanding those realms of life with which women had most experience, including motherhood and marriage (Sarachild 146), but analysts of Porter's "Jilting" largely ignored such aspects of her work and instead limited their assessments to technical qualities, style, and themes not central to a feminist argument. As well, established interpretations of "Jilting," including those that interpret Ellen as a victim and negatively assess her sexuality, might have inhibited feminist readings of "Jilting" and proven the story difficult to defend as a feminist text. Critics seeking literature that provided a compelling reinforcement of feminist arguments would more likely have embraced Kate Chopin, whose works did not have well-established reputations that would

complicate feminists' interpretations. "Jilting," like other Porter texts, came with a history of reception that was not transparently helpful to raising awareness of women's oppression and the need to organize and act.

However, this is not to say that Porter was examined only through the lens of New Criticism. For example, some critics, especially during the 1980s, have examined autobiographical elements of "Jilting" (Schwartz 1960; Nance 1963; Lopez 1981; Givner, *Life* 1982; Britton 1987; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Unrue, *Life* 2005). The history of the analysis of "Jilting" reflects interpretation's dependency on factors other than a work's internal contents as a basis of evaluation, including the influence of prior receptions and trends in literary analysis, which often reflect larger social changes.

Despite these differences in critical orientation, reviewers largely agree that Ellen's inner monologues reveal a person struggling with a gloomy course of life. Some critics, especially those from the 1960s, convey with stark diction the bleakness of what they deem Ellen's absolute dejection: Ellen is "haunted" (Barnes and Barnes, 1969, 165), her faith "despoiled" by a sense of "incompleteness" that cannot be assuaged (DeMouy, *Eye* 1983, 49). Others judge that Porter's portrayal of Ellen demonstrates that "life is senselessly cruel...and it ends in annihilation and the extinction of hope" (Johnson 1960, 94) and that Ellen's jilting left her feeling "despair—loss of hope, belief, and trust in anything or anyone" (Cobb 1979, 99).

These interpretations tend to treat Ellen as a victim: either life—deterministically, tragically—circumvents her fulfillment, or George, by rejecting her, incapacitated her happiness. No matter what success Ellen has as a matriarch, these critics assert that she cannot overcome the pain she suffered at her jilting: "Granny Weatherall has long been the

stabilizing force in a large family, but this position of authority has not dulled the pain of her private tragedy” (Mooney 48 1957). In some of these depictions of her abject misery, analysts even blame Ellen for her own unhappiness, arguing that her sorrow results from her inability to recuperate from the jilting: “Granny’s personal weakness is that when her first lover jilts her she does not give way honestly and naturally to her anger, but suppresses it so that it undermines her whole life” (Givner, *Life* 198 1982). Others assert that her self-delusion (Estes 1985; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988) or sexual sin (Barnes and Barnes 1969) makes her blameworthy.

Variation among critics’ readings extends to the story’s conclusion (Estes 437-8; Hoefel 9). Some believe that Ellen triumphs over adversity in a final subversive act, preempting God by choosing death. William Nance finds that “the final revelation...only emphasizes her achievement, and she keeps her hard-earned determination to the end, when she blows out her own light” (45-6 1963). For others, Ellen’s strength either assuages her or overcomes the jilting by George and/or God (Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Skaggs 1985), or; even more affirmatively, that she has “become the defiant matriarch who jilts in return” (Mayer 34 1980). Others, however, observe that, despite her accomplishments as “a successful mother, a compassionate neighbor, and [a parent whose] children remain as a testament to her achievement” (Cobb 102 1979), Ellen in her final act surrenders tragically to the pain that has patterned her life (Barnes and Barnes 165; Laman 280; Mooney 48-49; Wiesenfarth, “Opposition 52). For these critics, most of whom, notably, wrote in the late 1950s and the 1960s, Granny’s blowing out the light is an act “not of final defiance but of final surrender” (Hardy 96). In their estimation, despite Ellen’s best efforts, her life does not improve because “man’s slavery to his own nature and subjugation to a human fate...dooms

him to suffering and disappointment” (Johnson 89). Many critics attribute this damnation to her inability to recover from George’s jilting, which precluded her capacity to love anyone again (Cobb 101).

However, readings that find her life to be overly determined by that early jilting when she was twenty depend largely on restrictive assumptions about a woman’s means of achieving happiness. These critiques attach a woman’s fulfillment to her relationship with a man. While such a relationship is important to Ellen, focusing solely on the effects of George’s rejection ignores other relationships Ellen cultivated and esteemed that were not defined by heterosexual romance, especially those with her children. In fact, Porter’s “Jilting” shows that a woman can overcome society’s expectation that a woman’s fulfillment depends on a man’s love. While Porter sometimes assigns blame to her characters for their problems, as in “Theft,” more recent challenges to prior heterosexist critiques in “Theft” criticism do not indict Ellen as culpable for an unfulfilling life and even celebrate Ellen’s ability to prosper in the face of adversity.

In fact, Ellen’s actions in “Jilting” fulfill Jill McCorkle’s desire for a female character’s refusal to deny herself based on her relationships with men. While Chopin’s character Edna Pontellier wades into the ocean to her death because she cannot find contentment in romantic love with a man (her husband bores her, and her lover has rejected her) in McCorkle’s revised ending to *The Awakening*, McCorkle wishes Edna had realized “she doesn’t want to die over those two” and instead, Edna swims back to shore with a new anticipation of “all the things her new life will bring” and with a realization that she did not need to confine her life to her relationship with men, preferring instead to be a “a pioneer” (McCorkle 52). By McCorkle’s definition, Porter’s Ellen progresses whereas Kate Chopin’s

women did not, providing an example of triumph over patriarchal oppression that forces women's dependence on men.

Ellen determines to swim to shore metaphorically by continuing her life after her jilting and John's death. She finds the resolve to continue through the agency motherhood offers her, capitalizing on a female power from which Chopin's Edna could not gain sustenance. Not only does Ellen overcome social expectations that a woman must depend upon a man to achieve legitimacy, but she also confronts and overcomes her own belief in romantic love. Ellen had once been "a young woman with the peaked Spanish comb in her hair" and a "painted fan" (112), who valued and emphasized her feminine look and her sexual appeal to men (DeMouy, *Eye* 46). She valued this flirtatiousness for the male attention it brought, but this understanding of her sexuality depended upon the males' interest. George's jilting of Ellen abruptly exposed the tenuousness of her romantic understandings of her sexuality. As Jane DeMouy explains in one of the first applications of feminist theory to the story, the pain of George's jilting lingers with her sixty years later because "her desirability" to George constituted her greatest aspiration since she had "invest[ed] everything in romantic love" (46-47) when she "put on the white veil and set out the white cake" (Porter 114) that symbolizes the purity, innocence, and hope with which she anticipated her life with George. Unfortunately, all of these dreams depended on his acceptance of her. Recognizing the affront of her jilting, Ellen realizes that she could overcome the expectation that she depend upon a man for her identity and sense of worth: "Wounded vanity, Ellen, said a sharp voice in the top of her mind. Don't let your wounded vanity get the upper hand of you. Plenty of girls get jilted. You were jilted, weren't you? Then stand up to it" (114). Ellen had waited "to be claimed, and [George] declined to claim

her” (DeMouy, *Eye* 47), but Ellen does “stand up” to this jilting by creating her own definition of femininity based on actions that exemplify strength and that create order.

The work Ellen undertook after her husband died changed her perspective on her gender and her abilities. She operated the farm, raised the children, aided her neighbors, supported the church, and indeed “weathered all” as her name implies. Porter contrasts Ellen’s adult roles with her youthful identity:

She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman. John would be looking for a young woman with the peaked Spanish comb in her hair and the painted fan. Digging post holes changed a woman. Riding country roads in the winter when women had their babies was another thing: sitting up nights with sick horses and sick negroes and sick children and hardly ever losing one. (112-13)

Despite her earlier romantic ideals—“her youthful sense of self-worth and her pride in her beauty and fragility” (DeMouy, *Eye* 50), Ellen perseveres and in doing so breaks from expectations of a dependent femininity to find fulfillment. Roseanne Hoefel, basing her analysis in feminist and queer theory, argues that, “[t]raditional interpretation of the passage accurately claims that Ellen has matured, learned to accept responsibility. But the repetition [of the phrase “Digging post holes changed a woman”] implies a more substantial change. Ellen has assumed a new identity, no longer confined to the conventional sphere delineated for women” (Hoefel 13).

Although Hoefel suggests the passage conveys that Ellen “has not only deviated from the conventional ‘norm’ that views women’s identity as formed and expressed in relation to husband and children, but also that she has changed her opinion about the roles allotted to

women and the expectations of them” (12), Porter is not as radical in her depiction of Ellen as Hoefel suggests. While Ellen does challenge expectations that a woman’s identity depends upon a man’s love, Porter affirms the traditional importance of motherhood in a woman’s life. Porter avers that a woman’s agency centers on her ability to reproduce and to mother, and in doing so, to establish a legacy and order. Porter does so overtly, equating a woman’s individual strength with motherhood in Ellen’s remark that “A woman needed milk in her to have her full health” (117). Porter also exemplifies the power of maternity, less plainly, through symbolism. As she dies, Ellen drops the rosary to take Jimmy’s thumb in her hand because “[b]eads wouldn’t do, it must be something alive” (119). Ellen’s thoughts continually return to her children throughout the story (Barnes and Barnes 163), and these thoughts offer her solace. Her children—not the priest, Church ideology, or God—comfort her, and while this source of power upsets traditional expectations that a woman define herself in relation to a man, her dependence upon her children also supports other conventional understandings of a woman’s legitimate roles, such as motherhood. While Ellen refuses to succumb to the dejection of the unwanted bride, her resurrection does not require a trailblazing rebellion. Instead, Ellen depends upon another socially acceptable route, motherhood, for her social and psychological redemption.

Nevertheless, Ellen’s functional sexuality—her ability to reproduce biologically—proves sustainable whereas her more superficial sexuality—a romantic illusion, as expressed in her youthful preoccupation with vanity—evidenced as too insubstantial and inadequate to protect her. Ellen uses her sexuality to create order in a life that was flooded with chaos when George jilted her and upset her self-perceptions. In her stream-of-consciousness associations, Ellen contrasts the wedding cake that was wasted “for want of using” (113)

with the term “heirs and assigns forever,” the lineage that her matriarchy will produce for her. She controls the chaos of the jilting through the heritage and order she establishes with her children. Porter portrays the legacy of her matriarchy as powerful, even capable of limiting the effects of George’s denial of her value.

Porter’s depiction of Ellen’s motherhood also illustrates that the ability to give life can challenge the all-consuming power to which we all must yield: death. Her children, instilled with her example and guidance, will continue after her passing. This comparison of life’s beginning and its end signifies Porter’s conflation of birth and death. As an eighty-year-old woman on her deathbed, Ellen reverts to the role of the infant, as evidenced in others’ treatment of her as a child and in her infantile behavior when she wraps her fingers around Jimmy’s thumb as a baby would. Similarly, Porter’s ambiguity confuses birth and death, as exemplified by Ellen’s remark that Hapsy’s “time has come,” which could mean her birth, her giving birth, or her death. Porter illustrates that a woman’s role in the continual cycle of life provides a greater, less fragile identity than her unstable dependence upon George’s unreliable favor.

However, Porter acknowledges limits on this maternal power. Ellen’s agency as matriarch cannot dilute the pain she suffers from her jilting. Sixty years afterward Ellen returns to thoughts of the aborted wedding as she surveys the defining moments of her life, and through symbolism and setting, Porter associates thoughts of George and the jilting with hell and darkness. Porter thus dramatizes women’s vulnerability, but she also demonstrates that childbirth can soften the effects of personal sorrow for women. In the last fleeting moments of her life, Ellen searches for her child Hapsy, not for George or for her husband John; she most looks forward to her reunion with her deceased daughter in the afterlife

(Porter 120). As Hoefel remarks, “Ellen is not the desperate, frustrated woman that many readers try to make her out to be....[H]er hope for happiness lies in reunion...with Hapsy” (13). Porter suggests that a function of Ellen’s sexuality, her ability to have children, provides her with salvation from an otherwise chaotic and unfulfilled life. “The real value of motherhood for Mrs. Weatherall...is that through it she learns about power” (DeMouy, *Eye* 51).

However, criticism that attends to Ellen’s sexuality but is not based in feminist theory tends not to share this estimation of her power. In fact, generally, as Hoefel observes, such interpretations “belittl[e] or refus[e] to acknowledge her existence as an individual capable of living, surviving, loving, and dying according to her own desires” (11). The few scholars who attend to Ellen’s gender and sexuality as a key point of interpretation largely can be divided chronologically: those of the 1960s principally discuss Ellen’s womanhood negatively. They describe Ellen as having “a puritanical fear of sex” and “hating men” (Nance 1963, 42-43); or they examine “Granny’s sense of guilt for her premarital transgression” with George; or John’s rescue of Ellen from her “illegitimacy” since she was, according to the critics, pregnant with Hapsy before she married John (Barnes and Barnes 1969, 162, 164). These critics do not scrutinize the men in Ellen’s life and the ways in which they disappoint her, nor do most of them recognize her perseverance. Instead, they stigmatize Ellen, charge her with complicity in her own unhappiness, or depict her as anti-patriarchal. These critics’ emphasis on Granny’s shortcomings rather than on the men’s failures becomes more and more suspect as conventional wisdom evolves towards feminist assumptions in later decades.

“Jilting” scholarship since the late 1970s has largely cautioned against blaming Ellen for having failed to fulfill romantic standards of compulsory heterosexuality which uphold that “a woman will achieve success and happiness only through total submission to a man” (Cobb 1979, 101). Roseanne Hoefel epitomizes contemporary critics who counter such criticisms of the 1960s:

Joseph Wiesenfarth contends that Ellen never dared to love again after the jilting, since her heart never healed (47-55). Such a claim...seems based upon a heterosexist view which, as the privileged one, can often marginalize equally—if not more—plausible interpretations. Clearly, Ellen did love again...in loving her children” (12). Such new perspectives on “Jilting” reveal the assumptions of previous criticism, including the obsolete notion that a woman’s relationship to a man constitutes the most defining characteristic in her identity formation.

Comparisons of older and newer criticisms convey the importance of critical variety in a text’s reputation and subsequent reception. For example, critics differ in their interpretations of Ellen’s feelings about her now deceased husband, particularly in the following passage: “She used to think of him as a man, but now all the children were older than their father, and he would be a child beside her if she saw him now” (Porter 112). Some critics—again, mostly those of the 1960s—have read this passage as an indication of Ellen’s lack of esteem in men, which they then use to cast her as a woman hardened by her past experiences to dislike or disrespect men. In 1964, William Nance uses this passage to epitomize what he calls “the motifs of scorn for men” in “Jilting” (46 1963). Nance says this passage indicates that “the image [Ellen] keeps of her husband is that of a boy,” and this

emasculatation conveys Ellen's disregard for men (46), and insinuates an anti-patriarchal hostility in Ellen.

But this passage could also be interpreted another way, as a feminist disposition suggest. Instead of casting Ellen as a man-hater, more recent critics have seen her as a woman who has progressed, believing the passage illustrates that Ellen recognizes her development: "in her matured state, she has grown beyond him in more than only the sense of aging" (12). Depending on the readings of this passage, Ellen is either a bitter woman who never loved her husband or someone who has risen to a challenge and evolved over time. The difference between the two interpretations is significant and demonstrates the centrality of criticism in the history of a story's meaning. Only since the 1980s and 1990s have analysts begun to offer interpretations that break from traditional depictions that either victimize or demonize Ellen. The differences among the criticisms substantially alter readings of "Jilting":

A feminist perspective on Porter's story thus challenges previous readings and by necessity resists criticism that perpetuates the mythology of heterosexual romantic love, an enterprise that maintains male power by attributing the desires and happiness of the female characters' ... lives to their relationship with men. (Hoefel 18).

With the recent influence of feminist and queer theory, "Jilting" has come to provide a powerful feminist message in its criticism of patriarchal supremacy: men and even God may fail women and even harm them in their dependency, but motherhood affords women fulfillment and power, resulting in a position that resists compromise. Unfortunately, prior readings of "Jilting" and the story's complicated narrative technique have deflected such readings in the past, which may account for feminists' omission of the text in their selection

and celebration of consciousness-raising literature. With the exception of Hoefel's work, no criticism has attended to the bias inherent in "Jilting" interpretations; more analysis by feminist critics could counter the misleading scholarship to date on Porter.

#### Chapter IV: Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave"

The female protagonists of "Theft" and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" typify the two identities available to women in Porter's fiction and exemplify the positive and negative repercussions of these roles. As Wiesenfarth asserts, "...no single role satisfies the need of the whole woman in [Porter's] stories. This truth is dramatized powerfully in 'Jilting' where motherhood and matriarchy fail; in 'Theft' where artistic independence fails" ("Porter" 364). In "Theft," the woman achieves some degree of autonomy in that she pursues her passion for her art, but she lives as an outsider to her community and cannot escape from the shadow of the maternity she avoided. Ellen Weatherall, in comparison, chose to suppress the pain of her jilting and her own complicity in the discontinuation of her early engagement through the power and respect she commanded as matriarch, a role that proved capable of countering her vulnerability but not of remedying fully her dependency. The "Theft" protagonist and Ellen Weatherall epitomize the struggle for identity of Porter's fictional women as DeMouy describes it: "Virtually every one of [Porter's] stories illustrates a basic psychological conflict in the protagonist: a desire, on the one hand, for the independence and freedom to pursue art or principle of social convention, and, on the other, a desire for the love and security inherent in the traditional roles of wife and mother" (*Eye* 5-6). Because of the incompatibility of their desires, each to some degree obviates the benefit available through the identity the woman does not adopt. None of Porter's women can integrate their aspirations to be both independent and socially respected, and without this union of their desires, none of her women finds fulfillment.

But how does a woman choose which opportunity to relinquish? What informs her decision to align with the socially powerful but limited role of mother rather than the

stimulating but socially excluded life of independence, or vice versa? “The Grave” illuminates that decision-making process by revealing the factors that influence a woman’s decision to align herself with either role. Porter situates the protagonist Miranda at a crucial moment in her identity formation: at the cusp of childhood and adulthood, when innocence fades in the wake of increased knowledge, Miranda must confront her options and choose a path. Her maturation from innocence to experience comes through learning the realities of her own sexuality. While typical coming-of-age protagonists often develop by persevering through a trying experience that requires maturity or by rising to some expectation of responsibility, Miranda metamorphoses through her awareness of her gender and sex. Porter’s version of a feminized bildungsroman centers on Miranda’s response to her femaleness, not on her heroic action or benevolent character.

Porter’s definition of female maturity emphasizes the importance of sexuality—both culturally and biologically defined—in a woman’s life within Porter’s fiction. As the catalyst for change and growth in Miranda’s life, sexuality proves integral to her identity. “The Grave”’s depiction of female maturation signifies Porter’s prioritization of sexuality as the paramount factor determining a woman’s identity, as Miranda’s sense of self hinges on her understanding of her sexuality. Porter renders her most complex portrayal of female sexuality in depicting Miranda’s coming of age, exploring the limits and powers of personal, social, and biological definitions of womanhood. Appropriately, “The Grave” has generated the most fully evolved criticism among the three stories, drawing a focused attention to female sexuality not present in the reception of other works, although this attention did not manifest itself until the 1980s. More recent criticism also addresses critical approaches to Porter’s works, including “The Grave,” metacritically addressing the strengths and

limitations of the story's typical analysis, underscoring some of the major inhibitions to feminist adoption of Porter in the early second wave of the feminist movement.

In "The Grave," an older Miranda, twenty years removed from the incidents she recounts, recalls an adventure she experienced when she was nine. With her twelve-year-old brother Paul, she had set out on a hunting expedition but became sidetracked when they stumbled upon empty family graves. Their grandmother had directed that their grandfather be reburied in the public cemetery since their family farm that contained the graves had been sold due to financial difficulties. The children leapt into the graves and uncovered artifacts in the dirt: Miranda found what she identified as a "silver dove," which Paul later recognizes as "a screw head for a coffin" (363). Paul discovered a wedding band. "Miranda was smitten at the sight of the ring" and Paul "seemed more impressed by the dove," so the two traded (363). The siblings continued on their hunt, but Miranda lost interest, instead becoming enthralled with the ring and turning her attention away from the adventure as she contemplated her appearance. Miranda found her boyish clothes rough, and suddenly yearned for more feminine dress and the pampering of a nice bath and a dusting of powder.

The sight of a rabbit interrupted her thoughts, and instead of shooting it herself, Miranda let Paul kill the animal. Upon skinning its corpse, Paul and Miranda discovered its pregnancy. The rabbit fetuses intrigued and amazed Miranda at first, but as she touched the blood that ran over the fetuses, she "began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this" (366). Paul felt he had exposed Miranda to the realities of life prematurely, and swore her to secrecy for

fear that their father would be angry with him for introducing Miranda to the revelations she has discovered through the dead fetuses and the mother rabbit.

Twenty years later, as Miranda “was picking her path among the puddles and crushed refuse of market street in a strange city of a strange country,” a tray of candies in the shape of baby animals and the mingled smells of sugar and decay trigger the memory of that day that she had repressed for twenty years (367). The story ends with Miranda replacing that vision which “horrified” her with the sight of her smiling brother turning the dove over and over in his hand (367).

Criticism of “The Grave,” especially early analysis of the story, conceals the applicability of Porter’s exploration to feminism through its adherence to New Critical principles. Despite the transparent relevance of sexuality in the story, most critics have spent little time considering the confluence of personal, social, and biological constructions of Miranda’s development that affect her choices. Instead, they have focused on style and symbolism, and have largely failed to consider in a substantial way the function of female sexuality in Miranda’s identity formation. Although nearly uniform in acknowledging the awareness of reproduction Miranda gains through the rabbit, scholars have been largely remiss in discussing the implications of Miranda’s sexual knowledge apart from the symbolism. The New Critical focus of most readings of “The Grave” discouraged an acceptance of the work by women involved in an academic and a more general, popular-culture feminist movement in the 1970s.

Biographical attention to Porter in the 1980s likely opened the door to feminist interpretations of the text by highlighting Porter’s own complicated relationship with marriage, men, sexuality, and independence. As well, some feminists began to reconsider

feminist literary theory in the early 1980s, and this self-evaluation resulted in a more inclusive study of literature from a feminist orientation. As Linda Wagner-Martin argues, “1981 was a beginning of formal assessment of feminist critical theory: key works saw publication then—special feminist issues of both *Critical Inquiry* and *Yale French Studies*—and in the resulting discussion it became clear” that feminist theory had changed its focus in the 1980s (629). Critics of the 1980s produced many interpretations of “The Grave” from feminist perspectives; however, the increase in attention to the factors affecting female development in “The Grave” only recently began to progress beyond the nascent stage first begun in the 1980s. Continued feminist attention to “The Grave” has provided many new evaluations, and has indicated areas for further exploration of Porter’s fiction.

As Stacie Hankinson observes in her 1997 dissertation, attention to Porter’s style conceals her message:

[D]ominating the Porter critical scene are various New Critical and Formalistic approaches, not only in the prior generation (i.e. Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks) but also more recently (i.e. Jane Krause DeMouy, George Cheatham).

Traditionally Porter has been appreciated as a “stylist,” which she resented because, for her, “the important thing was not the style but what she had to say” (*A Life* 137).

(14-15)

This trend holds true for “The Grave” particularly. Many scholars, especially those of the 1960s, comment on Porter’s analogies, descriptive detail, prose style, point of view, or imagery in identifying important qualities of the story (Schwartz 1960; Johnson 1960; Nance 1963; Joselyn 1964; Curley 1964; Prater 1969; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988).

In fact, one aspect of Porter's style dominates the criticism of "The Grave": her use of symbolism. While the story warrants attention to symbolism since it relies heavily on metaphorical representations (such as the ring, dove, garden, gun, grave, and rabbit), too much of the literature, especially the early criticism, attends to symbolism at the expense of ignoring other important aspects of the story, including Porter's complex psychological portrayal of female sexuality. As Constance Rooke and Bruce Wallis observe in 1978, "an intense preoccupation with the predominating symbols of the short story had entailed a concomitant limiting of critical focus" (269) in the earlier reviews of "The Grave." But, ironically, even Rooke and Wallis are susceptible to their own criticism, as they rely heavily on symbolism in their analysis. Their contradiction exposes the difficulty of breaking from the New Critical theoretical perspective that dominated Porter studies for decades.

While some of these symbolism-dominated readings have attempted to construct meaning through interpretations of representations, some merely draw attention to Porter's use of symbols as a formal device. Still others, especially early reviews of "The Grave," set out to determine fixed definitions for these symbols to provide a precise close reading of Porter's meaning. Rooke and Wallis's interpretation exemplifies this tendency to encapsulate meaning precisely in symbols. They determine that Miranda and Paul embody Eve and Adam in the garden of Eden; the dove represents the Holy Spirit, connoting the possibility of redemption; the ring symbolizes "marriage and sex;" the rabbit signifies sin and death (270); and the marketplace represents Miranda's exile into a hell because of her sinful knowledge (275). This constricted interpretation, which relies on New Critical assumptions, narrowly sublimates Porter's complex story into a rather formulaic distillation, ignoring the complications of paradoxes and multiple meanings in the symbolism, and reducing Porter's

art to a translation of a Biblical myth rather than an incisive depiction of female development. While Porter's story does allude to the Biblical account of the Fall, Rooke and Wallis oversimplify the story in order to offer a cohesive and consistent interpretation.

Some more recent critics also assert simplistic correlations for the symbols in attempts to find a narrative unity. For example, in a 1989 article, George Cheatham insists that the dove "unquestionably symbolizes the resurrection of man's immortal soul through the power of the Holy Spirit" (112). But the very variety of symbolic readings, which proffer multiple meanings of the symbols, implies the need for more diverse interpretations that account for numerous possibilities. For example, according to critics the ring symbolizes social custom (Schwartz 1960; Unrue, *Truth* 1985; Bendel-Simso 1992); marriage (Joselyn 1964; Rooke and Wallis 1978; Birky 2002); sex (Rooke and Wallis 1978; Birky 2002); love (Joselyn 1964; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983); Miranda's virginity (Joselyn 1964; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983); "beauty, the cycle of existence...permanency" (Joselyn 1964); Miranda's security and honor (DeMouy, *Eye* 1983); aristocratic wealth (Unrue, *Truth* 1985); "traditional womanhood" (Erdim 1990); the anatomical os cervix (Erdim 1990); "the self-destructive potential of a stifled femininity" (Erdim 1990); and, as Mary Titus explains, "all the complex interweavings of sexuality, marriages, and death" (*Understanding* 120 1988). While any reviewer need not acknowledge all possible meanings of the ring, recognizing Porter's ambiguity and the potential for multiple meanings more accurately characterizes the fullness of Porter's skill and of the story's complexity. New Critic Cleanth Brooks himself identified this tendency to limit interpretations as the "Heresy of Paraphrase" in his 1947 book, *The Well Wrought Urn*, through which he warns scholars to avoid the inclination to oversimplify texts in order to find a reductive narrative.

But even early analysts who resist one-dimensional definitions of symbols in favor of determining that the story allows multiple meanings ignore the significance of female sexuality. Instead, these readers articulate Porter's portrayal of a generic maturation. For example, in his 1965 analysis of the story, Bell acknowledges that he cannot define the meaning of the grave or the dove, but that such specificity proves unimportant since "The Grave" "is a story about emotions and intuitions that are vague and formless to begin with" (44).

Attention to multifarious portrayals of Porter's symbols developed only recently. In 2001, Mark Busby, in an analysis starkly different from those of Formalist critics, observes that "The Grave" "turns on the dualities of youth and age, birth and death, innocence and experience, past and present, fertility and infertility, male and female, guilt and innocence, all intertwined through the power of memory" (143). Likewise, in a 2002 article, Beth Birky identifies connections between seeming dichotomies in Porter's work: "Body and mind, action and reflection, practice and theory are not dialectically opposed but intimately connected, thought infusing experience in unexpected and inspired ways" (63). She insists that "Porter is not offering us a specific truth, except that we each contain 'secret, formless intuitions in [our] mind[s] and bod[ies]'"(63).

Also, critics in the 1960s and 1970s failed to turn feminist attention to "The Grave" because of their focus on religious allusions that implied a moral judgment of Miranda (Joselyn 1964; Curley 1964; Rooke and Wallis 1978). While later critics, including some feminists, also analyzed Porter's reference to the Fall, their attention to the social pressures affecting Miranda's decisions about her sexuality minimizes Miranda's culpability (DeMouy, *Eye* 1983; Unrue, *Truth* 1985; Bendel-Simso 1992). Aligning Miranda with Eve, especially

in reductive readings that often appear moralistic, results in interpretations that tend to blame Miranda for her horror and unhappiness. Feminists searching for illustrations of women's oppression and for models of empowering women to change their lives would likely not find a work by a female author with a reputation for finding women culpable for their subjugation compatible with their goals.

Attention to Porter's life in the 1980s probably marshaled the interpretations of "The Grave" that unlocked the story for feminists. Ironically, one of New Criticism's founders may have generated the increased interest in the relationship between Porter's life and textual readings in the 1980s. In his 1979 introduction to Porter's critical essays, Robert Penn Warren noted that "Katherine Anne Porter's fiction remains, perhaps, the best source of biography in the deeper sense" (2). The publication of two biographies of Porter in the 1980s followed Warren's implication. These books—Joan Givner's *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* in 1982 and Darlene Harbour Unrue's *Understanding Katherine Anne Porter* in 1988—exposed Porter's struggles with her own identity and sexuality. Analysts of Porter's life have not ignored the political, discussing her allegiance to various specific causes as well as the larger, contextual social forces that affected her choices. As shifts from New Critical theory intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, critics turned their attention to biography and the political undercurrents affecting literary production and some of Porter's work attracted interest.

"The Grave," regarded by many as her most directly autobiographical work, garnered a renewed interest at this time after suffering inattention in the 1970s. Many more recent critics have noted similarities between Miranda and Porter, with varying degrees of comparison of the author to her protagonist (Curley 1964; Lopez 1981; Givner, *Life* 1982; Pannill 1984; Titus, "Mingled" 1988; Cheatham 1989; Erdim 1990; Graham 2001; Unrue,

*Life* 2005; Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 2005). Scholars assert that Miranda's fear of maternity reflects Porter's experience with her mother's death in childbirth, an event that Mary Titus argues haunted Porter because her father compounded the children's loss by blaming them for his wife's death ("Mingled" 112). Other authors attribute Porter's depiction of Miranda's horror at the sight of the aborted baby rabbits to Porter's abortion in Mexico (Graham 2001; Titus, *Ambivalent Art* 2005) or Miranda's isolation to Porter's inability to return home (Stout, "Writing Home" 2001). Attention to trauma and the capacity of reproductivity to yield both death as well as birth increased with the recognition that these aspects of the story reflected Porter's life.

Meanwhile, feminist self-assessments of feminist criticism produced greater inclusiveness in the range of works considered by feminist scholars and in the theoretical approaches they adopted in their criticism. As Jane Gallop argues in *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*, feminist theorists' desires to be accepted within academia had resulted in exclusivity within their critical appreciation of texts. As Linda Garber summarized in 2001, "Gallop argues that feminist criticism ignored dissident, non-, or 'anti-theoretical' voices in order to go mainstream" (180) and other critics, such as Elaine Showalter, explored the difference between feminist criticism manifesting in the 1980s and earlier theory rooted in the women's movement (181). The self-reflection of feminist literary theorists in the 1980s resulted in an evolution of feminist theory, allowing a recognition that more diverse understandings and applications of feminism theory should be undertaken.

Following the increased attention to autobiographical elements of "The Grave" and changes in feminist scholarship itself, criticism of the story has evolved, emerging as the strongest scholarship to date on Porter's work, including meta-conversations that identify

strict adherence to particular theoretical trends as a problem within analyses of “The Grave.” These evaluations of literary politics’ effects on interpretations of the story may illuminate the distractions that have discouraged feminist attention to Porter and her works until recently. While Bell began the metacritical attention to “The Grave” in 1965 when he warned scholars against committing a “Procrustean Fallacy” (44) by over-relying on the definition of symbols and emphasizing form to the detriment of elucidation, critique of literary approaches to “The Grave” suspended until 1989, when Cheatham argued against an anti-Formalist backslide. While conceding that “[t]he work disappears...if we move too far into the text” (112), Cheatham confronts what he identifies as theory’s voguishness. His rebuttal illuminates the tendency of theoretical fashions to shape understandings of “The Grave,” the latest of which Cheatham sees as focusing on the author’s consciousness or overall “cogito” to the loss of the story’s “textuality” (111-12).

Birky’s 2002 analysis of “The Grave” criticism explores undercurrents in the story’s scholarship that suggest Porter’s reliance on an essentialist definition of women. Birky acknowledges that Porter emphasizes the “concrete physical embodiments of female sexuality and internal discoveries” (55) in shaping a woman’s future. For example, while Miranda initially wants “to see” the fetuses, to gain intellectually from this experience, Porter equates Miranda’s realization with a physical knowledge, a “trembl[ing]” initiated by her contact with the blood that confirms “the formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form” (367). Birky finds that “Miranda’s trembling suggests that the body knows even before the mind comprehends” (60). Attention to Porter’s emphasis on the corporeal, echoed in the dominance of early literature that emphasized physical representation in its attention to symbolism, suggests that biology defines a

woman's destiny. The implications of this early criticism were likely compounded by biographical readings that noted that Porter's emphasis on the body indicated not only her personal experiences (her severe illnesses, including a possible abortion that led to infertility, her desire to be sexually appealing, her own mother's death in childbirth) but also rising attention to physiology in the 1920s and 1930s. Analysis that perpetuated the understanding that Porter viewed maternity as a natural imperative may have discouraged second-wave feminists from adopting the text. Definitions of woman that rely on biological arguments have for a long time been associated with oppression, since biological determinism has been used to justify women's exclusion from various roles. Recent feminist criticism, such as Birky's, has remedied such false perceptions of Porter's portrayal of women, but at a time when feminists needed easily accessible literature that uncontroversially supported their goals, "The Grave" would have proven too complicated and perhaps controversial for their purposes.

Birky partially redeems Porter's reputation with a revisioning of the essentialist/constructivist dichotomy. Rather than seeing "The Grave" as echoing Freud's declaration that "Anatomy is everything," Birky reasons that Porter portrays Miranda's development with a constructivist understanding as well, one that eludes Porter's other critics because of their polarized perceptions of essentialism and constructivism. Birky finds that Porter "shows how feminine consciousness surfaces in a space where the physical and intellectual experience of a female converge" (55). For Porter, Miranda, like her other women, is both mind and body, and this duality creates the essence of the identity struggles Porter's women face:

The relationship of the female body to creation and the fragile balance between life and death is an emotional and physical truth...[A] female does not consciously move from body to mind or mind to body; the two form a wisdom buried deep within the layers of her body and spirit. (Birky 60)

Birky's correction of a prior misconception illustrates the need for reflection on Porter's fiction and its criticism in order to determine more accurate and evolved understandings of Porter's work than those that have been offered to date. Additional feminist perspectives, in particular, could further elucidate "The Grave" as Birky's reading illuminates the crux of Porter's identity formation. In light of Birky's recent estimation of Porter's women, Jane DeMouy's questions about how a woman chooses her identity seem even more difficult for Porter's women to answer than when DeMouy posed them in 1983:

...[O]n the archetypal level, femininity is primarily associated with both maternity and sexuality, and with both birth and death. On the psychological level, she understands that contemporary woman needs independence as much as she needs love: she needs an androgyny that society will deny her. Porter sees that, on the physical/emotional level, woman's sexuality thus becomes an area of conflict: What does she do with her sexual nature if she chooses not to marry and mother? If she chooses to deny her sexuality, what happens to her capacity to love? (*Eye* 8)

In "The Grave," Porter explores these questions to understand the power and the limitations of a woman's sexuality, and the role of social and biological understandings of reproduction in a woman's identity formation. Rather than provide an instructing vision of womanhood, or a didactic moral for "The Grave," Porter searches for an understanding of the complex systems of influences through which a girl learns what it means to be a woman. As

Unrue explains, this investigation into the psychological, social, and biological influences on a woman's identity affirms Porter's interest in discovering realities about our culture:

"Porter regarded the search for identity as the search for truth, because to know oneself was to know humanity; to know less was to exist on only a physical level..." (*Truth* 170).

Porter explores identity by providing a complex illumination of the difficulties a woman faces in a society that defines her socially acceptable roles in relation to a sexuality that can prove to be a threat, both physically and ideologically. Two narrative events inform Miranda's view of her sexuality and the limitations of her identity as a woman. First, her acquisition of the ring causes a notable change in her demeanor because it crystallizes knowledge of the social expectations of a woman and a compulsion to abide by gendered codes of conduct. As Miranda examines the ring, she "turned her feelings against her overalls and sockless feet, toes sticking through the thick brown leather straps" wishing she could instead "take a good cold bath, dust herself with plenty of Maria's violet talcum powder..., put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees" (365). As Don Graham remarks, this change in Miranda signals a transformation in her aspirations and her personality (13). No longer concerned with their hunt, Miranda instead contemplates her appearance and wishes for all the trappings of a Southern belle, relinquishing her adventurousness in order to be "passive, pretty, no longer a tomboy in a man's sphere of action and movement, but a young begowned woman sitting there and waiting—for what?—for a young suitor, of course, for a husband, for marriage" (Graham 13). Miranda welcomes her conspicuous sexuality that transforms her into an object of male desire.

Remarkably, this stark alteration does not upset Miranda, who makes the transition with ease. Porter indicates that Miranda was already familiar with this aspect of womanhood. Although Miranda did not heed common wisdom about appropriate dress for a girl, she did not object to such rules altogether. While she found her overalls and sandals much more logical—“quite simple and natural” (365)—she knew the expectations of appropriate dress for a female. Miranda, narrating, observes that “[t]he back country law of female decorum had teeth in it” (364). She did not object to these expectations even when she was a girl, and, in fact, “with her powerful social sense, which was like a fine set of antennae radiating from every pore of her skin” she recognized she was getting too old to dress and act like a boy (365). In contrasting herself to her “[b]ig sister Maria, the really independent and fearless one” who disregards decorum by racing bareback on her horse, Porter indicates Miranda’s awareness of gender expectations and her recognition that she, unlike her sister, will likely acquiesce to these cultural norms.

While Porter portrays this change in Miranda as a superficial maturation in that it primarily affects Miranda’s dress and replacement of adventurousness with desires for physical adornment and luxury, Porter also illuminates the serious, negative associations of this transformation by linking female maturation with death and shame. Paul discovers the wedding band in the grave, a rather ominous setting that forebodes an undesirable outcome for Miranda’s interest in femininity, allure, and, by association, marriage. As an abundance of critics attest (Joselyn 1964; Curley 1964; Rooke and Wallis 1978; DeMouy, *Eye* 1983; Unrue, *Truth* 1985; Hendrick and Hendrick 1988; Erdim 1990; Bendel-Simso 1992), Paul and Miranda’s exploits in the garden-like setting surrounding the graves reenact the Biblical Fall of humanity. While Adam and Eve take fruit from the tree of knowledge which grants

them a sinful realization of their humanity, a grave provides the trinkets Miranda and Paul exchange that will bring Miranda a disturbing knowledge of her biology. Porter inverts the image of a tree, a live growing thing, with a grave, thereby associating Miranda's initiation into knowledge of gender roles with death. Like their archetypal models, Paul and Miranda feel shamed after they exchange the dove and the ring, fleeing the grave area because they felt "like trespassers" (363). Miranda, in particular, feels disgraced because her boyish attire violates decorum. In Porter's revision of the Fall, noncompliance with social expectations brings a woman added shame. This allegorical reading of "The Grave" also augurs an unfavorable outcome for Miranda. Porter's alignment of Miranda with the sinful Eve equates Miranda's development into womanhood with a fall, a dislocation into a less desirable state.

Further coloring Miranda's feminization as a negative change, Porter replaces Miranda's adventurousness and natural audacity with inertness and superficiality, a symbolic death of her earlier personality. The girl who leapt into her grandfather's grave, who "[s]cratch[ed] around aimlessly and pleasurably as any young animal" (363), succumbs to the spell-like change evoked by the ring, drawn by its "myth of southern womanhood... a romantic myth of cleanliness, passivity, and the inactivity of gentility" (Bendel-Simso 115-16). The implications of the ring—sexual appeal, marriage, and motherhood—and the modification it brings in both dress and attitude threaten Miranda's established sense of self. In her transition to womanhood, Miranda trades her freedom and identity as an independent spirit—as symbolized by the dove—for the trappings (literal and figurative) of a Southern belle.

While Miranda adopts the external vision of femininity with ease, her second epiphany—her realization of her sexuality's functions—traumatizes her, so much that she

represses the memory of this awareness for twenty years. Porter defines this reproductive threat as both physically and ideologically antithetical to Miranda's desires. This recognition moves Miranda beyond her budding sexuality's emphasis on appearance into the new world of expected female biological roles—particularly motherhood—that this maturation brings.

Miranda realizes her own susceptibility to this reproductive jeopardy through her identification with the rabbit. Paul dissects the rabbit to expose the fetuses, which Miranda humanizes by calling them “babies” (367). The full power of Miranda's association with the rabbit does not manifest itself until she touches the rabbit's blood, a foreshadowing of her menstruation, which will ordain her physical exigency and initiate her into biological womanhood. Upon seeing the eviscerated rabbit, Miranda at first reacts with the adventurous spirit with which she leapt into the grave, but her natural curiosity quickly turns to fear:

Miranda said, “Oh, I want to *see*,” under her breath. She looked and looked—excited but not frightened, for she was accustomed to the sight of animals killed in hunting—filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty. She touched one of them ever so carefully, “Ah, there's blood running over them,” she said and began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this....She understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and so steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she had to know. (366-67)

With the image of the lacerated rabbit and her nearly full-term fetuses, Porter conflates

female reproduction and vulnerability, life and death, as Miranda “first discovers the meaning of mortality, and in doing so, paradoxically discovers her femaleness and her soul” (Unrue, *Truth* 50). Miranda’s physical connection with the animal educes her psychological identification with the rabbit, which awakens her to her reproductive legacy in the context of death. As DeMouy asserts, “Miranda is not traumatized until her quick mind sees the link between her femaleness and the precarious, bloody ritual of birth. Giving life means risking death. This is her true legacy from her grandmother and her society” (*Eye* 140). The rabbit’s own nature endangered her, for she may have evaded Paul’s hunt if the excess weight of her pregnancy had not slowed her. Through the rabbit’s death, Porter shows that “fertility yields to death rather than fulfillment” (Titus, “Mingled” 120). Miranda gains knowledge of her fertility, but, in comparison with the transformation wrought by her discovery of the ring, the change resulting from this incident proves “much more unsettling because it focuses her attention not to the external trappings of being a woman, but on the physical implications” (Givner, *Life* 70), which could include death.

Porter portrays Miranda’s sexuality as not only threatening to Miranda’s life, but also menacing to her will. Like the inactivity and allure the ring triggers, which threaten Miranda’s adventurous spirit, her biology, especially its capacity and perhaps compulsion to reproduce, threatens to betray her nascent individualism. While pregnancy and childbirth now carry an ominous association in Miranda’s mind after her experience with the rabbit, Porter indicates that Miranda may feel a disinclination to mother that runs contrary to her body’s preparedness to reproduce. Miranda liked to outfit her dolls in luxurious clothes, including rabbit pelts, but otherwise she “never cared much for her dolls” (365), the toys and the childhood play that mimics a mother’s care for her children.

Furthermore, Porter indicates that Miranda may have assumed a predisposition against the physicality of sexual intercourse. While Porter's narration is too ambiguous to allow a precise definition of Miranda's attitude toward sex, a Freudian interpretation of Miranda's disposition toward hunting illustrates her naïveté and potential uninterest in sex. Hunting, the employment of the phallic gun (DeMouy, *Eye* 142) in an aggressive and masculinized act, destroys a creature of nature, which Porter associates with femininity and fertility through Miranda's relationship with the pregnant rabbit and the engravings of leaves on the wedding band Miranda wears. Miranda "had no proper sense of hunting at all," unlike Paul, who knows about human sexuality and often derides her for "spoiling [his] shots" (364). In fact, Miranda prefers to shoot for the gratification of hearing the noise rather than to kill (364). Miranda's purposeful botched execution of the hunt indicates her possible lack of interest in sex or an apathy or aversion to the outcomes of sex, such as pregnancy and motherhood. Miranda pursues her own interests with the gun, mocking its intended use by firing without attempting to kill, possibly foreshadowing Miranda's later interest in sex as sexual gratification only, without interest in its reproductive function of regeneration. But, again, Porter's ambiguous symbols intimate Miranda's discomfort with sexual activity or her potential repulsion to sex, but inconclusively. However, the symbolism suggests that Miranda's newly discovered biological functioning could bring about a change in this attitude or could in fact enact a role Miranda previously has rejected: motherhood. Miranda appreciates her individuality, her ability to separate from Paul and pursue her own interests, but her sexual functioning could threaten her conscious desires and disturb her willful adventurousness.

After dwelling on “the whole worrisome affair with confused unhappiness for a few days” (367), Miranda buries the full weight of her realizations in the grave of her mind until sights and smells of the foreign market unexpectedly resurrect the experience twenty years later, but this time with a feeling of terror:

[W]ithout warning, plain and clear in its true colors as if she looked through a frame upon a scene that had not stirred nor changed since the moment it happened, the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind’s eye. She was so reasonlessly horrified she halted suddenly staring, the scene before her eyes dimmed by the vision back of them. (367)

As Miranda stares at the inanimate candy rabbits, the smell of the market mingles with these visual images, reminding her of the discoveries she made that day twenty years before, but with a gravity only a more experienced and socially knowledgeable adult Miranda could be aware of. The “smell in the market, with its piles of raw flesh and wilting flowers, was like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day in the empty cemetery at home” (367) which foreshadowed her realization of the paradoxical ability of her fertility to give life and take it away, both metaphorically and literally.

Porter reinforces Miranda’s realization that her sexuality is antithetical to her desires through the disjunction between appearance and reality in the market. While Miranda accepted the importance of appearance, which her sexuality ushered in (as signified by her desire for the ring and the luxuries of the southern belle) the dangerous reality of her reproductivity (symbolized in the rabbit’s pregnancy and death) upsets her superficial understanding of her femininity, forcing her to confront the full embodiment of her sexuality. The “sweetness” of the grave and the sugar-coated, dyed candies appeal to Miranda’s desire

for the cosmetic, like the clothing and pampering she yearns for after acquiring the ring. However, these appealing but deceptive imitations of nature give way to the “corruption” of the grave, the threat of her own reproduction. Miranda, in her youth, envisioned a silver dove when she actually held a coffin screw, but her romanticism and fanciful imagination cannot counter the gravity of her biological role. Miranda realizes that her maturation into womanhood means not only a desire for physical attractiveness that will appeal to others, but also an expectation to reproduce and mother that opposes her will. In that horrifying moment in the market, Miranda recognizes the social and biological imperatives of her sexuality that will shape her future.

By depicting the adult Miranda as “horrified” by the revelation brought by the rabbit’s death twenty years earlier, Porter portrays this lesson’s continual power to affect Miranda. Miranda will never be so carefree again as she was that day at the graves. Mary Titus comments on the import of the lesson Miranda receives from the rabbit, noting that “as the horror of the adult Miranda in the hot, foreign marketplace indicates, this is not a simple lesson in the facts of human sexuality; it is a symbolic realization of her bondage to child-bearing and death. Split open, the body of the rabbit corresponds to Miranda’s own new split” (“Mingled” 121). This bifurcation not only tears “her from her former childhood innocence” (“Mingled” 121) but also causes an acute rift in her identity that cannot be reconciled: a divide between what Miranda desires and what she will be expected to do because of her body’s reproductive capabilities. Like the protagonist in “Theft” who feels stunned by the realization of her sexuality and her error in ignoring it, Miranda realizes in the market that she cannot completely repress her sexuality, because of its biological and social roots. She attempts to bury her knowledge again by replacing the unpleasant realization with

the image of her brother, but the memory's power to traumatize her is undeniable. Thus, rather than weighing the benefits and limitations of each identity (independent but socially outcast individual, or esteemed but dependent mother) in respect to its compatibility with her sense of self, the adult Miranda chooses the path of the independent woman over the roles of wife, mother, and matriarch out of fear. Through "The Grave" Porter shows that a woman decides her identity out of terror rather than mediated personal preference. Miranda's sexuality dominates her identity formation.

So what happens to a woman who understands the social pressures to marry and mother but finds these expectations antithetical to her desires? Porter answers this question with her depiction of Miranda in the market. When we rejoin Miranda twenty years later, she has restored many of her youthful qualities; she is single, independent, and adventurous. But at the same time, Miranda is exiled, far from her homeland and family, alone and haunted by memories. Her interest in the superficial continues, as she is daintily "picking" her way through the streets while she keenly registers observations of the marketplace's look and smell (367). Through her description of the setting from Miranda's point of view, Porter characterizes these superficial interests as somewhat deceptive; Porter also indicates Miranda's capacity to recognize and understand more than surface level appearances, including the unpleasant parts of life she would rather ignore. Porter's vision of Miranda's life proves difficult to define conclusively because of the story's ambiguity (especially in the final scene), but her portrayal of Miranda's decision to retain some of her identity while acquiescing in the role of the physically appealing woman results in a rather bleak depiction of suppression, isolation, alienation, exile, and more trauma, albeit with the benefits of exploration, autonomy, and thrill.

By beginning the story of a girl's maturation into womanhood with displays of matriarchal power, Porter shows the path Miranda could have taken, the one that she has not chosen by the end of the story. Porter frames Miranda's maturation into womanhood with a powerful matriarchal figure, her grandmother, who, at the beginning of the story, directs the world around her even from her grave. In her "constancy and possessiveness" (362), qualities Porter later associates with males in Paul's coveting and prideful ownership of the dove, the grandmother orders the world around her, dictating that her husband's body be moved for the second time as she willed: "At last her husband was to lie beside her for eternity, as she had planned" (362). Porter characterizes her grandmother's matriarchal power as a recognized and legitimate agency, one that rivals patriarchal authority.

Porter also depicts matriarchal agency to moderate social norms, thereby providing a cohesive unification of family and community. Miranda's grandmother held the family together and made them socially acceptable in the absence of their mother, garnering "the most sincere respect" from the women of the community (365). In their Southern world, "in the back country [where] the law of female decorum had teeth in it" (364) the community's women regulate adherence to customs, as when they chastise Miranda and challenge her father's authority for his decisions they deem inappropriate. The women's regulation of the community's conduct exemplifies the near parity of motherhood and matriarchy with patriarchal authority. But this female power cannot challenge the codes of oppression, and without the ability to redefine women's roles, matriarchs affirm the social norms that bias men, thereby reproducing the patriarchal culture.

Motherhood, while risky because of the possibility of death implied by the rabbit, could also result in the greatest sense of security and power for Miranda. While the

alternative, the lonely life of an ostracized but independent woman, brings an isolation that segregates Miranda from her earlier identity by physically displacing her from her family and homeland, thereby making her more vulnerable in her singularity, motherhood engenders a connection and legacy that paradoxically frees a woman to enjoy her context because of the great social idealization of motherhood in Southern culture. By contrasting the two—Miranda’s powerful grandmother at the beginning of the story and a disturbed Miranda who is alone and frightened at the end—Porter seems to show that matriarchy, while a limited agency, is Miranda’s legacy and the preferable path if one wants power, acceptance, and security. Despite Miranda’s desire for social approval, as evidenced in her “powerful social sense” (365) and in the fact that she does not think of herself as “the really independent and fearless one,” Miranda bravely chooses the less established route by pursuing her own interests and living independently, as Porter’s depiction of the single Miranda exploring the foreign market connotes.

However, Porter complicates Miranda’s choice, tempering her depiction of Miranda’s courage with the stigma of dependence and upheaval. Miranda’s chosen route largely depends on her objectification—her sexual or social appeal, the degree to which, on a superficial level, she attracts the interest of suitors and friends to replace the support she lost from her family, a process which at times may limit her. Miranda also disrupts the cycle of life represented in Porter’s symbolism through the ring’s unbroken circle and connection with marriage, the maturing girl’s presence in her dead grandfather’s grave, and the rabbit’s dual service as a womb and a tomb. Porter depicts Miranda’s roguish refusal to accept her legacy as unnatural because it threatens life’s circularity. By not participating in the natural

order of reproduction, Miranda represents a chaotic force that brands her a social and biological aberration.

In the end, “The Grave” elucidates the options available a woman and complicates each choice with unique benefits and limitations. In doing so, Porter depicts the difficulty of determining an identity and the sacrifices these exclusive options force a woman to make, leading readers to question a woman’s means of gaining acceptance and power, love and authority. The exploration of these questions fulfills the consciousness-raising goals of the second wave. Had second-wave feminists adopted Porter as an important woman writer worthy of re-visioning, they and future feminists who have struggled to incorporate their feminist ideals into their daily lives could have understood that their feminist understandings would often come into conflict with larger systems of oppression, even decades after the recognition of social inequality for women. While Kate Chopin’s works provided examples of women’s dependency and fragile sense of security due to social expectations, which inspired many women to join the women’s movement, Katherine Anne Porter’s works could have provided a recognition of the difficulty they would face in applying these newly acquired ideals in their daily lives, including the potentially crippling intense psychological difficulties of possessing intellectual desires that contradicted social expectations. While not didactic, Porter’s writing still provided a complex portrayal of independent-minded women’s struggles, which could have provided concrete examples of the complications the enactment of their raised consciousnesses would bring to their lives.

## Conclusion

In a 1972 essay, Adrienne Rich urged that we revisit our conceptions of women's literature, a process she called "re-visioning:" "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival" (18). Second-wave feminists accepted this charge, significantly altering the literary canon by compelling the inclusion of women's works and by offering new interpretations of texts from feminist orientations. Kate Chopin's rebirth epitomizes the success of the second wave's literary efforts; from near oblivion, feminists resurrected Chopin's fiction and energetically revised interpretations of her works, and in the process, anointed her as an emblem of the women's movement in the 1970s. However, second wave's means of achieving literary equality inadvertently limited recognitions of other authors because the movement's goals restricted some critics' participation and authors' inclusion in feminists' delineated plans for women's rightful acknowledgment.

Not until attention to biographical representation in Porter's works increased and feminist literary critics began to evaluate their field in the early 1980s did Katherine Anne Porter scholarship begin to benefit from feminist consideration. However, this feminist attention to Porter's fiction still has not produced the quality of scholarship that more thorough and concentrated investigations of other authors, such as Kate Chopin, have generated. Porter's complex style, public persona, and relationship with New Criticism overshadowed her depiction of female sexuality for feminist scholars. Recent metacriticism of Porter analysis indicates that literary studies of Porter's work are evolving to address this gap, but over thirty years since Chopin's rediscovery and the inception of feminists' "re-visioning," a significant volume of diverse scholarship on Porter remains curiously absent,

especially scholarship that addresses her female protagonists' sexuality, the scarcity of which increases in her less anthologized works.

However, as Rich's call for "re-visioning" literature asserts, ending the power of oppressive authority in women's lives requires analysis of the written representations of sexuality in our culture. Rich explicitly links an investigation into prior understandings of literature to sexual identity:

A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us. (18-19)

Porter's works deserve a re-visioning to illuminate their merit to women and society, thereby allowing a fulfillment of John Stuart Mill's call to advance our culture by listening to women's experiences, which should include their understanding of female sexuality and the ways in which it has shaped their experiences.

Not only do women's voices need to be heard, but they also should be recognized for both their many dimensions and their individual distinctiveness. Women present a multitude of voices that communicate diverse, and sometimes contradictory, thoughts and experiences. Katherine Anne Porter provides complicated and, at times paradoxical and even un-feminist, views of women's desires. However, these depictions, while deviating from second-wave dogma, still communicate a female perspective worthy of acknowledgment and study. A

need to move beyond the second wave's much criticized exclusion of certain women or women's voices, which third-wave feminists have begun to remedy through the inclusion of women of color, and through alternate understandings of the male/female binary and compulsory heterosexuality, still exists in literary scholarship and the accepted literary canon.

These more diverse analytical perspectives might not only help us hear the unheard voices mainstream second-wave feminism silenced, but also allow scholars and readers to "see...afresh" works analyzed by the second-wave feminist scholars. For example, a comparison of Kate Chopin to Katherine Anne Porter elucidates the narrowness of prior Kate Chopin analysis. While many of Kate Chopin's critics assert that her writing avoids transferring didactic morals (Koloski, *Study* xiii; Espey 246; Spangler 251), when compared with Katherine Anne Porter's more exploratory endeavors to understand the interplay between women's individual desires, their sexuality, and social expectations of their gender, Kate Chopin's fiction seems more conclusively argumentative through her depictions of undesirable lives for women. In expressing this comparatively polemical stance, Kate Chopin seems to show female readers what *not* to do: Depending upon a man, sublimating all personal desire to him, and yielding all powers, including sexual agency to his control, bind Désirée and Athénaïse to a disastrous fate. In many ways, Kate Chopin's stories served as a didactic threat to women of the second wave: remain silent and you too could face devastation. While Katherine Anne Porter's women live bleak or limited realities (the "Theft" protagonist is alone, guilty, and oblivious; Ellen is jilted one last time; Miranda is exiled and alone), they, unlike Désirée, do live and, unlike Athénaïse, Porter's women do experience part of their desires (the "Theft" woman practices her art; Ellen finds love and

family; Miranda retains her adventurousness). While Kate Chopin portrays freedom as elusive, if not unobtainable, for women, her depictions inspire desires for autonomy in her readers. By contrast, Katherine Anne Porter allows that women can achieve independence, but that women will always make sacrifices because all freedoms require a concession for anyone. All of the women in these discussed stories must forfeit a valuable part of their identities for the fulfillment they enjoy. While Chopin's women submit to death or men, Porter's women struggle, but they do bravely strive to find contentment. The varying degrees to which they succeed and their difficulties along the way represent Porter's investigation of female characters trying to incorporate dreams anathema to the social expectations of women. In second-wave feminists' judgment, Porter's portrayal may not have served their needs, but full recognition to her depiction of women encourages a more comprehensive understanding of those authors and works 1970s feminists did adopt. Porter's depiction may not have attracted women wanting to believe they could radically change American culture or needing a motivating exemplum of the ills befalling women if they did not try to live their dreams, but feminists' inclusion of other women writers' depictions, such as Porter's, would have allowed a fuller recognition of the distinctiveness of each author and text they did adopt.

Katherine Anne Porter's works may not have inspired personal or social change, but her stories could have provided a psychological benefit to 1970s feminists by acknowledging the difficulty of living one's desires while embedded in a culture that prevents or otherwise hinders their fulfillment. By representing the divisions within her protagonists' identities, Porter acknowledges the difficulty of reconciling within one's own psyche intellectual desires, biological compulsions, and the internalized demands of patriarchal culture. Porter

could have exemplified this internal division for feminists applying their revolutionary ideals to real life but, muted by inattention, Porter's potentially helpful portrayals of incompatibility between individuals and their culture remained unknown or unacknowledged by feminists. In effect, Porter's fiction provides the literary recognition of a problem with no name that is akin to the psychological benefits Friedan provided by identifying an unaddressed and unacknowledged problem for women in *The Feminine Mystique*. Porter, like Friedan, addressed the confusion women feel when their lives do not reflect their dreams. The need for such a recognition for feminists should not be underestimated; this cognizance of the difficulty of incorporating feminist goals into one's life remains a topical issue more than three decades after the beginning of the second-wave movement, as exemplified by the publication of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's 1996 book, *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life*, which examines the ways second-wave feminism has over-intellectualized and over-venerated feminism so much that feminism loses its relevance because everyday women cannot live up to unrealistic feminist ideals.

As well, attention to Porter's fiction could have contributed a perspective largely absent from Southern literature. As Mary Michele Bendel-Simso asserts in 1992, the representations of women within Southern fiction are rather homogenous: often, women are either mothers or virgins. In searching for women who defy these roles, Bendel-Simso asks, "What happens to grown women in southern fiction? What story begins after the traditional ending of death or marriage?" (102). Kate Chopin does not offer an answer: *Désirée* and *Edna* are dead, and *Athénaïse's* adventure ends with her return to marriage. But Katherine Anne Porter diverges from these depictions to illustrate the life of the independent or free-thinking woman. Yet Porter does not create a rose-tinted model life for these women. As

Bendel-Simso observes,

In southern fiction, women who choose a scholarly and independent lifestyle forfeit respect for their pursuits, since their motivation is regarded less as a free choice than as a perversion or as a consolation for their inability to catch a man...Consequently, these women are not only exiled within their communities, but they are also deprived of the companionship and financial security that accompanies marriage and religious orders. (103)

Porter's women confirm this evaluation of the rare aberrant women in Southern literature. Most of Porter's women in the South are young like Miranda or post-menopausal like Ellen (Bendel-Simso 113-14). And of Porter's rebellious women who do choose the independent life, none lives in the South in Porter's fiction (Bendel-Simso 113-14). Bendel-Simso's recognition of Porter's women and their fringe status "re-vision" depictions within Southern literature, redefining Southern literature by more thoroughly acknowledging women's paths that have previously escaped critical notice. Miranda and Ellen, or even women beyond the South like the unnamed protagonist of "Theft," struggle. However, Porter's women represent a truth, one feminists could have heard and benefited from.

Studies situating Porter within Southern literature, beyond representations of women in this genre, have been insufficient. Beyond Bendel-Simso's conclusions, how does Porter's writing compare to other Southern writers? Specifically, Porter's repeated rendering of family legacy that she depicts as a female inheritance, could appropriately contrast other Southern writers' consideration of heritage in their fiction. Much like William Faulkner's Ike McCaslin in *Go Down Moses*, Porter's women struggle to understand their relationship to their legacy. Like Faulkner, Porter blurs the line between physiological, cultural, and

psychological inheritance. Investigating how Porter's idea of matriarchy and motherhood compare to other Southern authors' depictions of social order and legacy could complicate understandings of Southern women's limitations and powers. What does Porter's vision of the South for women indicate about Southern culture?

Additionally, scholarship considering a larger body of Porter's depictions of women's sexuality would allow a more informed discussion of Porter's representations of mothering. While I have asserted that Porter indicates that both motherhood and the decision to remain childfree carry unique mixes of benefits and limitations for the protagonists in these three works, a comprehensive analysis of Porter's representations of women's sexuality is needed. DeMouy provided something like this in 1983, but the benefits of other theoretical perspectives and newer readings of Porter necessitate another undertaking of the subject. Birky's attention to constructivist and essentialist portrayals of women's sexuality could enhance Porter studies beyond the dichotomous definitions that currently dominate critical discussions. As Birky reasons,

It would be too simplistic to suggest that feminist critics, theorists, and writers have only two alternatives for exploring the connection between female body, experience, knowing, and writing: essentialist and constructivist. Feminist writers and readers have ventured into the vast and shifting realm between the social construction and bodily experience of their lives as women, between the distancing offered through language and the immediacy of physical space. (53)

Porter seems to explore this very dichotomy of constructivism and essentialism in her fiction. Porter's women must decide the basis and means to create their identities and must discover, often unwillingly, the strengths and limitations of their positions within the spectrum of the

essentialism/constructivism debate. Biographers note that Porter understood reproduction as a feminine ideal, but does she represent that belief in her fiction? In what ways? Is her fiction as autobiographical as many assert?

Moreover, further evaluation of the lack of women's sexual desire in Porter's depictions seems necessary. Porter's definition of female sexuality largely excludes female desire. Of the three short stories discussed, only one woman has experienced a yearning for men sexually, and for that woman, Ellen Weatherall, her sexual longing represents a foolish vulnerability that results in a jilting, and the memory of that trauma stays with her the rest of her life. As DeMouy summarizes, Porter portrays "loveless sex and human isolation" (DeMouy, "Porter"). More concentrated analysis of women's sexual impulses in Porter's fiction could challenge existing understandings of her fiction.

A more thorough understanding of Porter's women requires an in-depth analysis of Porter's men and male sexuality, as well. Scholars have largely neglected to evaluate Porter's male characters and the role of male sexuality in her fiction. Hankinson acknowledged in 1997 the dearth of attention to Porter's men, and specifically the lack of scholarship on their relation to Porter's women, but ten years after her observation, no one has offered a substantial review of Porter's male characters, despite suggestions that such investigations could clarify studies of Porter's women:

While critics have noted that few of Porter's female characters could be described as fulfilled or content due to the limitations of their environment, I believe that a trend in her work reveals certain women to be capable of emotional survival despite the failure of men who—through any combination of infidelity, incompetence, absence, rejection, or death—leave their women deserted. (Hankinson 10)

As Hankinson's generalizations convey, Porter's fiction needs such evaluation of male characters. For example, in "Jilting," the three most important male figures in Ellen's life disappoint her: George, John, and God all behave unreliably, each abandoning her at a moment of need, and each desertion affects her life profoundly. Not only is more information about Porter's men necessary to understand her female characters, but also to analyze the men in their own worthwhile study. For example, why does Porter associate men with death in "The Grave"? Paul kills the rabbit, and metaphorically the other men cause destruction that severs: Miranda's grandfather must be exhumed to rejoin his wife and restore family cohesiveness his absence upsets; her father disrupts the family's existence in the community by lowering their social respect, ending their favorable public reputation; and her brother brings about the end of Miranda's innocence, imagination, and playfulness with the knowledge he shares with her. Conversely, how does Porter depict male legacy? Why does it often disrupt order, especially that which the women construct? Does Porter portray men with as much psychological precision as she portrays her women? Do her men face limitations like the female characters, and, if so, how do these restrictions affect them? What are the roots of these confines? Does Porter portray their sexuality as anathema to their intellectual desires? Exploration of Porter's men would provide a wealth of possibilities for future study given its scarcity in her criticism to date.

The final area requiring "re-visioning" is feminist dependence on Porter's life history in analyzing her works. An over-reliance on personal biography in feminist criticism may be tainting Porter analysis rather than enhancing it. Biography is important, but it unfortunately dominates a large amount of the feminist criticism on Porter. For example, as Hoefel reasons regarding "Jilting," heterosexist interpretation based on Porter's life "perpetuates the

mythology of heterosexual romantic love, an enterprise that maintains male power by attributing the desires and happiness of the female...to their relationship with men” (18). With Porter’s numerous marriages and romantic entanglements crowding her biographies, such information may influence literary criticism to the point of misrepresentation. Also, criticism grounded too heavily in Porter’s life events may perpetuate false assumptions about her intent. Often readers make assumptions about women writers’ subjects and meanings because of their gender, often treating their works like veiled biography rather than as a product of a skilled author’s imaginative process. Biographical readings risk suggesting that Porter merely mined her life for her stories and presented them artfully. Withdrawing from biographically informed interpretations of Porter’s works would allow other theoretical orientations to evolve. Feminist readings further steeped in feminist theory and/or queer theory (like Hoefel’s), in the intimate personal experience of reader response (like Birky’s), or in metacritical evaluations (like Hankinson’s) could enhance Porter studies profoundly.

In advancing feminist consideration of Porter’s texts, prior feminist criticism can serve a cautionary role through those interpretations that have gone astray. The appropriate manner in which to analyze Porter’s complex style has plagued feminist critics: while it is too general to say that Porter remains ambiguous in her views of women, it is also too finite to classify her women in discrete categories. DeMouy, in her groundbreaking and now 25-year-old book, typologized Porter’s women, but this distillation seems too overt, as if DeMouy wanted to confine Porter’s women rather than see them in all their contradictions and multiplicitous manifestations. Moreover, DeMouy’s analysis remained beholden to New Criticism through her close readings and attention to symbolism. Her women, like Porter herself, are hard to define, but the exploration and analysis of their represented lives is

worthwhile and realistic; women are many things, often things that often contradict, and always are unique. As Porter explained,

My whole attempt has been to discover and understand human motives, human feelings, to make a distillation of what human relations and experiences my mind has been able to absorb. I have never known an uninteresting human being, and I have never known two alike; there are broad classifications and deep similarities, but I am interested in the thumbprint. (“Statements” 455)

More than three quarters of a century after Porter’s first publication, her fiction requires a “re-visioning” to orient criticism to her complicated representations of female sexuality. While Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was speaking about Kate Chopin when she said the following, perhaps our “fresh eyes” will allow us to see that Porter also succeeded in “...making a very firm point that the freedom which serious writers are concerned is the freedom of the imagination, the freedom of the soul, of the spirit, the internal freedom. It is not in rearranging society closer to the heart's desires. It's an understanding of the heart's desire in all its permutations” (“Kate Chopin”), even those manifestations a feminist movement in the 1970s was not ready to hear.

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