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Theme of Life and Death in Katherine Anne Porter's "Holiday"

Abstract

This paper tries to expose a unity of both meaning and technique as reflected in Katherine Anne Porter's most famous and characteristic short-story - "Holiday." "Holiday" portrays rival considerations and conclusions about the beauty of life as opposed to death, an interest which seems sporadically in majority of Porter's writings. An examination of short-story reveals that the gist of Porter's fiction is an elegant balancing of rival considerations particularly and intentionally designed to disclose to the reader the ambiguity and complexity of any situation or human relationship. The ambiguity within her short-stories is therefore intentional.

Keywords: Life, Death, Human Relationship, Human Experiences

Katherine Anne Porter contributed memorable stories to American literature for over half a century. A Southerner and a contemporary of Fitzgerald and Hemingway the amount of her published writings are very small though her reputation is considerable. *The Saturday Review* has positioned her in the legacy of Hawthorne, Flaubert, and James as an artist and story-teller. Her fiction has been marked for its elegance, beauty, brilliance and accuracy. Most of the critics acknowledge about the supremacy of Porter's literary style. They adore the effectiveness of her sarcasm, the precision of her language, and the economy of her structure.

"Holiday," is one of the most skilful short-stories of Porter. It represents his effort to perceive the place of the defective child in his world - both the world of his own family and that of the larger community. It portrays rival considerations and rival conclusions about the beauty of death above life. A consideration with death and its evident capability to eliminate suffering seems sporadically throughout Porter's writings, and is an elemental part of her dialectic portrayal. According to Robert Penn Warren, in his article "Uncorrupted Consciousness," the drama of short-story "develops from the tension between love and compassion, on the one hand, and the gross force of need and the life-will on the other" (285). The central contention in "Holiday" might be termed individual responsibility versus common accountability. This story reflects Porter's characteristic consideration with life's indecipherable paradoxes and contradictions.

Porter states that she has four types of stories: short-stories, long-stories, short-novels, and novels. Her finest work has been done in the short-novel. But of her long-stories, "Holiday" adequately equals "The Cracked Looking-Glass" in the perfection of its well-proportioned structure. Both content and form are that of the quintessential human experience. The events are repetitive, and the narrator vicariously encounters birth, marriage, and death. "Holiday" is the dramatization of life, both in its individual and communal forms.

In essence, it presents man struggling to dictate his order upon the natural chaos of the world, and it explores his effort to differentiate reality from appearance.

The story is a version of the pastoral, but one which does not escape from life's grim realities. The story functions on two levels. On one it is the story of the Mullers, the portrayal of the complications of their lives. On another and more significant level, it is the unidentified narrator's tale. Porter decides the meaning of the events and reports them to the reader. As she vies the German immigrant family collectively contend with life on their farm, her own consciousness and understanding of life's contradictions prospers and grows.

The whole Muller family, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren, survive under the same roof. There are three sisters -- Hatsy, the maiden of the family, Gretchen, anticipating another child, and Annetje, who, when the narrator arrives, is carrying her newborn child. There is also a handicapped, disfigured servant-maid girl named Otilie. These people strive and laugh and cry together. Each has his own duty to do for the welfare of the family. They are right away a community unto themselves, and a house of perennial exile, not intently attached to the outside community. During the progress of the narrative, life's rituals are acted out, Hatsy is married. A storm ransacks the countryside and devastates the farm, kills animals and ruins crops. Mother Muller dies at her works during the storm. Gretchen's baby was born in the calm before the storm. And Mother Muller's funeral is held. Order and disorder continually grapple with one another.

"Holiday" is one of two of Porter's short-stories narrated in the first-person. It is provoking to guess that the narrator is Miranda. Her solitary, sensitive, and probing spirit reminds one of Miranda. But there is no other reason to guess that she is Miranda, and she remains anonymous. Her mental state is significant to the development of both story and theme, and Porter never hesitates to tell the reader so. The narrator is an anxious young lady when she comes to the Mullers in the Texas farm terrain. She discloses the reader that at the

time of this experience she is too young for some of the troubles she is facing, and her only way of handling them is to escape:

But this story I am about to tell you happened before this great truth impressed itself upon me -- that we do not run from the troubles and dangers that are truly ours, and it is better to learn what they are earlier than later, and if we don't run from the others, we are fools. (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 407)

She has come to the farm anticipating it to look and feel as her friend has recounted it. But the friend is there in mid-summer, and the narrator comes in late March. Her instant disillusionment with the place accentuates the appearance-versus-reality themes, "Everything was just as Louise had said, if you like, and everything was, at the same time, quite different" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 408). This remark is the first unequivocal reference to life's mysteries. It reveals both the visible factual reality, and the narrator's projection of her own feelings upon the outer world. In this latter activity, she does in fact remind one of the Miranda of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The language sets the tone of isolation and depression. The narrator discovers herself "tossed off like an express package from a dirty crawling train onto a sodden platform." She challenges a "bitter wind" and a "desolate mud-coloured shapeless scene" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 408-09).

The forest is leafless and skimpy and the narrator determines that there is nothing beautiful in this forest now except the hope of spring. Even the mischievous puppy her friend has told has grown into a huge black dog of the abominable German-Shepherd lineage. At the outset, the narrator looks for reclusiveness and has particularly urged for a secluded room. She is comfortable to stay in her room, except for food, and to see the family from a distance as they go about their works. She herself believes divided into several fragments and she

views the family in the same manner -- as one human being divided into many separate appearances. As she sees, she makes presumption about the Mullers, presumptions which she will have to reconsider later as appearance becomes reality. She sarcastically determines that Otilie, the servant, is the only complete person in the house, but that she belongs nowhere. The exquisite and gradual approach of spring resembles the narrator's own reluctantly enlivening senses and the gradual change in her attitudes. She starts to lose herself and cast off her troubles as she slides easily into the marginal life of the household and even helps with minimum tasks. As the days moves forward, so does her significance in the family, specifically in Otilie. Otilie has hovered about the dinner-table on the night of her arrival; then her first impression of the servant girl has been isolated, almost clinical.

No further referral is made of the girl until the narrator comes in late one evening from a long, rambling walk in the forest. Here Porter employs her customary technique of conflicting opposites. The narrator's walk has revitalised her spirits. The signs of spring have invigorated her hope. But when she enters the house, the family has already eaten, and Otilie is informally dispatched to host the guest, Hasy plainly introduces hers "that is Otilie. She is not sick now. She is only like that since she was a baby. But she can work as well as I can. She cooks, but she cannot talk so you can understand." For the first time, the narrator looks intently at the girl and views "in that mutilated face" eyes that are "strained with the anxiety of one peering into a darkness full of danger" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 420). The girl goes about her work with "aimless, driven haste" (420). Thus, both Hasy's remark and the narrator's impression are contradictory assessments of Otilie's humanity. They both hint that the girl is a living being capable of emotion and work, and that she is an aimless, inhuman automaton. The reader abruptly realizes that the focal point of the story has narrowed gradually. Otilie has grasped the insight of both narrator and reader. The narrator is interested with both the degree of Otilie's humaneness and the extent of her

isolation amidst community. On Sundays, when the whole family goes to the community beer garden, the “Turnverein” to dance and visit with the neighbours, the narrator witnesses Otilie.

Hatsy’s marriage is another of life’s formal rites. And again, the narrator is on the verge of the action, narrating it to the reader and attempting to fit it into the evolving order of life. As the day’s tasks over, her attention moves to Otilie, waiting, as usual, on everyone else. The servant-maid is cleaning the litters from the room. To the narrator, “nothing could make her seem real, or in any way connected with the life around her.” Yet when she sets her pitcher on the stove to be filled, Otilie lifts the heavy kettle and pours “the scalding water into it without spilling a drop” (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 425). The narrator can come to no conclusions about the degree or quality of Otilie’s humanness. In the first of the two previous passages, she has implied that the girl’s silence alienates her totally. Now Otilie appears unreal. Both assessments signify that the girl is an impaired human being. Yet, the narrator perceives that Otilie, in her own way, is both productive and competent. But Porter proceeds to balance the rival considerations; she intentionally juxtaposes differences.

Instantaneously after determining that Otilie is unreal, the narrator is repelled with the girl’s elemental humanity. It is the next morning, and the narrator passes Otilie on the steps. The girl moves toward the narrator and tries to speak but cannot make the sounds. The earnestness of Otilie’s attempts speaks for her; and the narrator goes to her grimy, windowless den which opens off the kitchen. There Otilie shows her a moth-eaten photograph of a female baby about five-years old. The narrator recognizes the unique Muller features in the child’s face, and knows without a doubt that the baby in the portrait is Otilie, the elder sister of the other girls.

The storm is the climactical incident in the narrative. It rattles the self-imposed line of the Mullers' survival by quickening Mother Muller's demise; and it is the incident which accelerates the penultimate moment of experience for the author. Mother Muller falls down from her exertions during the storm. Even though she manages to save most of the animals, she sacrifices her life. The family assemblage before her funeral reminds an old-fashioned wake and admits the narrator to see the healing quality of misery. But death brings turmoil to Otilie's life, too. The narrator, who realises for the first time not death, but the panic of dying, cannot bring herself to attend the funeral; rather she falls asleep on her bed alone in her cabin. The stress here is upon her solitude. She wakes up from a dream that Kuno, the pet-dog is caught in a trap. She finds that the howls in her dream are real and come from inside the house. It is Otilie, seating in her chair, howling, "with a great wrench of her body, an upward reach of the neck, without tears" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 433).

Contemplating that Otilie's agony is an expression of despair and a wish to attend the funeral, the narrator bundles her up and sets out in a horse-drawn wagon to catch up with the others. The narrator's own sense of Otilie's credibility and humaneness is suddenly so shocking that a "howl as doglike and despairing" as Otilie's rises up in her own throat and dies unspoken. Then suddenly, Otilie laughs out loud and claps her hands in happiness. Neither the narrator nor the reader wholly understands the source of Otilie's abrupt transition; but the narrator imagines it to be an expression of happiness at the charm of the spring day. The abnormality of Otilie's behaviour is not comprehensible logically, only emotionally. The narrator feels pleasant with her "ironical mistake" and determines that their outing will be a holiday, a temporary downtime from the toil of day-to-day life, rather than a funeral.

With the closure of “Holiday,” Porter has made full circle. Now she restates through the narrator the theme which is presented so pointedly at the beginning of the story. The narrator calls her mistake ironical because she ultimately determines that there is really nothing she can do for Otilie. She states herself that Otilie is beyond her reach as well as any other human reach. But again Porter qualifies the assumption. The narrator cannot accept totally that Otilie’s flaws alienate her completely. Therefore, she adds another qualification: “and yet, had I not come nearer to her than I had to anyone else in my attempt to deny and bridge the distance between us, or rather, her distance from me? Well, we were both equally the fools of life, equally fellow fugitives from death” (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* 434-35). The narrator is life’s fool because she has rejected her own advice. She has not run from those dilemmas not her own, but rather has extended her hand in an attempt to communicate, to bridge the gap between individual alienation and that living centre that holds us all restricted to our inescapable common source.

More than any of the other short-stories of Porter, “Holiday,” may more thoroughly express her own personal resolution for successfully challenging the life’s cruelties. The story signifies that the Mullers’ capability to make the most of what life brings without complaining. The Mullers never run away from their problems, but they stand firm. The narrator of “Holiday” goes a critical step beyond the Mullers.

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