

Treatment of Love and Despair in Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas"

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Abstract

The present paper is dealt with the destructive power of love in the human encounter in Katherine Anne Porter's short-story, "Flowering Judas." In this study the interpretation has a broader meaning as operational on mental, physical, and psychological levels of human experience. It is perceived as a clash between the past and the present. Furthermore, it is experienced when man explores for love or harmony in human relationships, and when he struggles to retain his identity in the fact of hostile forces. The human encounter is multifocal, since several facets of human experience and attitude are considered with it. As destructive forces are repeatedly perceived in the entire corpus of Anne Porter's writings, the theme of destruction takes up a central position in our discussion and experiences her psyche is able to absorb. Her consideration thus focuses on human experience, and she blames herself with the exploration of human consciousness in connection to its experience with hostile forces. Anne Porter much shows an intense concern for the natural human spirit in terms of their bearing on which all other forces of society are assessed. Anne Porter portrays a bleak, hostile world in which human's struggle in vain to accomplish their dreams. As her tragic vision sweeps across life, she finds it chaotic and sorrowful. The perception of man's consistent encounter with hardships and disappointments forces her to pursue him into the bleak, shady areas of nihilism, disharmony, and despair.

Keywords: Love, Struggle, Disharmony, Despair, Power, Dreams

Katherine Anne Porter deemed to be one of the mid-twentieth century America's most influential writers of short fiction. She is an earnest and ingenuous artist but her perspectives on the idea of art and craft of writing are scattered. She has never analysed the nature and character of the genre of short-story. However, certain of her artistic ideology can be drawn from her perspectives exposed on various occasions. Yet, it may be observed that she never takes any special care to manifest the theory of art as in her critical works. Her visits to Mexico and Europe, her Roman Catholic conversion and her concern towards liberal social causes, comprise the basics of her art.

Anne Porter predominantly writes about domestic situations within the context of familial relations. Majority of her characters have been outlined after her friends and relatives. Majority of her short-stories reveal the strong impressions of the old order, the

southern legacy on her psyche and thinking. She is genuinely in pursuit of truth. Due to her revolutionary notions her own married life is unstable and unhappy.

To Anne Porter love seems as a destructive phenomenon. Her exploration of different kinds of love leads inevitably to the conclusion that man's pursuit for harmony in human relationships is unproductive. She finds that human love consists of strong indications of violence and hatred, as such it adds to the chaos and seclusion of life. Marriage is defined by Anne Porter as love, while loving means giving of the self to another. His emphasis on the damage done to human personality in the man-woman love relationships explains the true nature of this encounter, while portraying a young wife's disturbing discovery of the love-hate relationship in marriage Anne Porter touches upon the ambivalence of the married state caused by contrasting emotions.

Anne Porter's personal experience with love led to physical, mental, and emotional heartbreak. All her life she suffered from despair and isolation as she could not find the ideal love she desired for. This separated her not only from the men with whom she set up romantic relationships but from most people. All her marriages ended in bitter disappointment and failure. Her first marriage to John Koontz took place when she is very young and after a few years she started to regard it as a personal disaster. A point of interest here is that Anne Porter failed to find happiness in any of her marriages. For her, both fictional and personal love led to frustration and despair.

"Flowering Judas" has a considerable autobiographical source. The backdrop of the narrative is inspired by the revolutionary situation in Mexico in 1920, which is perceived by Anne Porter with acute interest. The leading characters Laura and Braggioni are modelled on Anne Porter's friend Mary Doherty and a Mexican acquaintance of hers. According to Ray West, "Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas,'" the title of the story has been taken from Eliot's "Gerontion." From the beginning of the story, atmosphere and characterization are used to project catastrophe, death and personal deterioration, Laura's involvement with revolutionary activities in Mexico proposes a disappointment with her own nation, where in all contingency she encountered the bleak, negative facets of life. She comes to Mexico with her passion for living already exhausted. Thus, she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed by the absurdity of life.

Braggioni is the most-evil character in the narrative. Laura is snubbed by him because she is aware of the fact that he symbolises the destructive power of male sexuality. The impression that Braggioni is dangerous is magnified by Anne Porter's employment of animal imagery. He has the eyes of a cat and a body which is animal-like because of its gross obesity. He mutters tunes like an ill-tempered animal and Laura perceives the cruelty of his eyes, for when "he stretches his eyelids at Laura she notes again that his eyes are the true tawny yellow cat's eyes" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 93). The threat he poses to Laura is in the first instance a sexual threat. He is confident of his power over women.

Laura's strong intention of preserving her virginity clashes with the threat which comes from Braggioni. She covertly wants to express her feelings in violence: Laura, burning, imagines herself leaning forward abruptly and with a sound back-handed slap

wiping the suety smile from his face. Intensely conscious of Braggioni's capability for cruelty and destruction, Laura cannot express her animosity for him. Braggioni is brutal to everyone, with a type of specialized boldness, but he is so futile of his talents and so sensitive to slights, - it would need a cruelty and vanity greater than his own to lay a finger on the vast incurable damage of his self-esteem. It would need courage, too, for it is dangerous to offend him, and nobody has this courage.

Another threat of which Laura is conscious is the danger to her life. This takes the form of a premonition of disaster and it is aggravated by the evil, brutal personality of Braggioni: Laura feels a slow chill, a purely physical sense of danger, a warning in her blood that violence, mutilation, a shocking death, wait for her with lessening patience. Due to Braggioni's lust for bloodshed he becomes a reminder of death for Laura. His dreams of a new Mexico emphasize destruction more than creation. He tells Laura: "Someday this world, now seemingly so composed and eternal, to the edges of every sea will be merely a tangle of gaping trenches, of crashing walls and broken bodies. Everything must be torn from its accustomed place where it has rotted for centuries, hurled skyward and distributed, cast down again clean as rain, without separate identity" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 100). Laura sees through his revolutionary enthusiasm and recognizes his personal and compulsive need to destroy life. Giving him his pistol belt, she suggests softly, "Put that on, and go kill somebody in Morelia, and you will be happier" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 100).

Laura's dislike for Braggioni also arises from her belief that he symbolizes the loss of all her illusions by failing to fit her dream of a noble-minded, inspired revolutionary leader; The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusionments, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues. Instead, Braggioni has the malice, the cleverness, the wickedness, the sharpness of wit, the hardness of heart, stipulated for loving the world profitably.

Laura's disillusionment leads her into a state of complete alienation. She avoids establishing human relations, withdraws to the desolate inner world of despair, and becomes a death-in-life figure: She is not at home in the world. Every day she teaches children who remain strangers to her, though she loves their tender round hands and their charming opportunist savagery. She knocks at unfamiliar doors not knowing whether a friend or a stranger shall answer, and even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger. No matter what this stranger says to her, nor what her message to him, the very cells of her flesh reject knowledge and kinship in one monotonous word. "No, No, No" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 97).

Laura's alienation is caused by her disappointment with human beings in general. Laura is incapable of divine love, erotic love, or revolutionary zeal. Laura's coldness of heart but does not blame her for it. In "Laura and the Unlit Lamp," Sister Bride also emphasizes Laura's inertia; however, she goes further than West and condemns Laura for withdrawing from life. She elaborates upon Laura's tendency for negation and believes that Laura illustrates the type of paralysis of the will, induced, through a refusal on the part of the individual to make a reasonable choice between good and evil. There can be no doubt of Laura's negation, however. Sister Bride ignores the fact that Laura has no choice between

good and evil, for she cannot find goodness anywhere, since all she confronts is evil or a meaningless void. A point of interest here is that too much attention has been paid by critics to the personal trait of Laura's alienation. Thus, she is condemned for her incompetence to relate herself to the world, while in reality the world and not Laura deserves condemnation because it is fake, infertile, and basically evil.

Laura's intense disappointment with life is caused by the fact that her psyche is too acute and perceptive. This gives her the true vision which turns life inside out and reveals the destructive aspects which lie hidden beneath the surface. Laura's truthfulness prevents her from following the crowd blindly. Hoping to find comfort Laura slips guiltily into a church to pray and finds herself encountering absurdity and falsehood. Thus, religion fails to comfort Laura. The political sphere is still more dangerous. Evil, immoral men like Braggioni direct political affairs on the pretext of putting the world in order, but Laura sees them in their true form and retreats from the evil and disorder created by them. Romantic love is equally disappointing, as Laura recognizes the fact that infidelity lies at the heart of sentimental fervour. Consequently, Laura's observation of life leads her to the conclusion that it is not worthy of acceptance by her. In a desperate attempt to retain the individuality she possesses Laura withdraws into the cold regions of isolation and despair. Thus, on close examination, Laura's alienation is not a fault but a virtue.

Though Laura rejects all human relationships, she is drawn to a political prisoner, Eugenio, who fits her ideal of a revolutionary leader. Ironically, he dies of an overdose of drugs, brought to him by Laura. The end of the story illustrates Anne Porter's brilliant handling of sensory and subconscious impressions through dreams. The semi-poetic language heightens the pathos of Laura's predicament, while religious symbolism emphasizes it still further.

A meticulous study of the dream reveals that it consists of a series of threats to Laura. She is betrayed by life which takes the structure of love, but which is in reality, death and destruction: "The tolling of the midnight bell is a signal, but what does it mean? ...come out of your sleep, out of your bed, out of this strange house. What are you doing in this house?" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 101-102) It expresses Laura's immediate need to escape from her unhappy life. Laura reaches for Eugenio's hand in her dreams. She can relinquish her coldness of heart in dreams for only then can love take a perfect form. Yet, even here Laura encounters destructive evil, for Eugenio's smile is sharp and sly. He drifts away when she seems to require him most. Laura's reaching for love proves that she is not frigid or inhuman after all. Eugenio's strange behaviour places him in the category of betrayers, and he proves no better than any of the men who admired Laura for ulterior motives.

Laura's anxiety continues in the rest of the dream, and she reaches the very brink of the chasm of disaster. Eugenio neglects her plea and "from the Judas tree he stripped the warm, bleeding flowers, and held them to her lips. She saw that his hand was fleshless, a cluster of small white petrified branches, and his eye sockets were without light, but she ate the flowers greedily for they satisfied both hunger and thirst" (*The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*, 102). At last, Laura recognizes Eugenio as a messenger of death.

In Ray West's definition of the dream he identifies Laura with Judas the betrayer because she is incapable of love:

Laura is not redeemed, even though she desires it, as the eating of the buds of the Judas tree suggests. Her sacrament is a devouring; gesture end Eugenio calls her a cannibal, because she is devouring him (Man). She is, like Judas, the betrayer; and her betrayal, like his, consisted in an inability to believe. ("Symbol and Theme in 'Flowering Judas,'" 127)

Laura's inefficiency to believe has been established, but the reason for her lack of faith is the absurdity, the meaninglessness, of life. She ignores to accept false beliefs and hence prefers to live by her own alienated standards. She is no cannibal; on the contrary she fears destruction and flees from its threat to save herself from psychic and physical annihilation. She is innocent and is incapable of betraying or destroying anyone for she is detached from all human beings. Betrayal and destruction demand emotional commitment and Laura is drained of all emotion. Her share, if any, in Eugenio's death is her passive observation of his folly, and her deep-seated passivity.

In the dream emphasis has been laid on the Eucharistic command of Eugenio and Laura's obedience in eating the Judas blossoms which drip blood is further evidence of the threat of destruction. Laura, recognizing the similarity between love and death, refuses to accompany Eugenio and saves herself in time. Her withdrawal into life is an act which implies the exchange of one wasteland for another. The only redeeming trait of Laura's final adventure is that she is deprived of the last of her illusions and is doomed to live on in isolation and doomed despair.

In this paper various kinds of human love have been found to be primarily destructive. We have noted that romantic love, nurtured on sentimentality, has the power to destroy artistic skills. Male sexuality has been found to be an evil encounter with power to shatter the impulsive happiness of the very young. The destructive potentiality of the marital relationship has been scrutinized under varying circumstances. It has been noticed that escape to unreality cannot help man to sever the distressing bond of love which binds him to the human world. Sexuality, fortified by primitive instincts, has been perceived to be the agent of death. Eventually the absence of love as harmony in various situations in human life has been discovered to be the cause of the withdrawal of the sensitive, perceptive spirit into the desolate deserts of isolation and despair.

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