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## Katherine Anne Porter : a change in her Mexican perspective

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KATHERINE ANNE PORTER: A CHANGE IN HER  
MEXICAN PERSPECTIVE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Graduate Faculty  
of the University of the Pacific

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Mario Paris-Fernandez

October 1975

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter regards Mexico as her "familiar country." Indeed, Mexico in the art of this gifted American writer is more important than generally believed, for, as William Nance says, "Mexico entered into her earliest work as both motivating force and subject matter."<sup>1</sup>

Miss Porter has traveled extensively in Mexico and lived there on several occasions. Her highly developed artistic sensibility has allowed her to gain more than a mere familiarity with the country, its inhabitants, and its history. Naturally, her deep knowledge of the culture is reflected in her artistic production, part of which is devoted exclusively to Mexico.

This thesis presents a brief study of Miss Porter's fiction which deals with that country; it attempts to demonstrate a change in the author's perspective of it, evinced in those stories that have Mexico as a setting; namely, it shows how Miss Porter starts out deeply involved with the culture in the stories "Maria Concepcion," "The Martyr," and "Virgin Violeta," and how, slowly, the theme of alienation

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<sup>1</sup>William Nance, "Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico," South West Review, Vol. LV. No. 2 (Spring, 1970), p. 144.



evolves in the stories "Flowering Judas," "That Tree," and "Hacienda," interpreted as Miss Porter's disillusionment with the failure of the Mexican Revolution.

This study intends to contribute to the field of Inter-American Studies in the sense that it deals directly with inter-cultural relations within the North American continent and with the understanding between cultures, seen through the eyes of a most accomplished writer. If there is a person who could be called truly inter-American, Miss Porter would be the perfect model, because she embodies the ideals of understanding between the different cultures of the North American continent.

The only critic who has dealt thoroughly with the theme of alienation in Katherine Anne Porter is Professor George Hendrick, of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He dedicates a short chapter to this theme in his book entitled Katherine Anne Porter. Other critics, too numerous to name here, have studied Miss Porter's work on Mexico. Their work has been helpful in gaining knowledge of the subject and for the gathering of data. Much of the information has been obtained from periodicals in which Miss Porter's interviews have appeared. Many of her articles, biographical or otherwise, which at one time appeared in periodical publications, have been collected in the Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter, published in 1970. Especially helpful for the elaboration of this work have been the articles of William Nance, "Katherine

Anne Porter and Mexico" (South West Review, Vol. LV, No. 2, Spring, 1970) and Colin Partridge, "My Familiar Country: an Image of Mexico in the Work of Katherine Anne Porter" (Studies in Short Fiction, Newberry College, South Carolina, Vol. VII, No. 4, Fall, 1970). Of special importance is the chapter "'Second Country': Katherine Anne Porter," in Drewey Wayne Gunn's scholarly work American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974). As can be seen from the date of publication of these works, the study of Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico has drawn the attention of the scholars but lately.

The thesis is organized in the following manner: chapter one specifies the problem, its relevance and the source of data. Chapter two provides the historical background for the work. It is imperative that the reader be familiarized with the period of the Mexican Revolution in order to understand the problem better, and to understand the change in Miss Porter's perspective. The chapter begins with a description of the Porfirio Diaz regime and ends roughly in 1920. Miss Porter arrives in Mexico in 1921, to the echoes of the events recounted in the historical overview.

Chapter three, a biographical sketch of Miss Porter, familiarizes the reader with the author's life. In this brief study, essential for the understanding of the work, emphasis falls on two factors: Miss Porter's Mexican experience, and the difficulty of obtaining biographical material

on her, to distinguish fact from fiction.

Chapter four provides a critical analysis of the Mexican stories. The first three stories analyzed in that chapter manifest Miss Porter's versatility in the Mexican milieu, which is seen "from inside;" she walks as easily Maria Concepcion and Juan Villegas' path as she does that of the Mexican artist, or sits at ease in the living room of an aristocratic and enclosed family, like a ghost that has lived there for generations, free to watch Mamacita doze off with Violeta's head on her lap, free to listen to Blanca reading Carlos's poetry.

The chapter shifts then to the stories that deal with the theme of alienation. The abrupt change is intentional, because to establish exactly when the gradual (if indeed it was gradual) change of perspective in Miss Porter's view occurred is impossible. In these stories the number of alienated people becomes gradually larger: in "Flowering Judas," Laura; in "That Tree," Miriam and the journalist; in "Hacienda," a host of characters. It is the number of the disengaged characters in the alienation stories that has suggested that the change of perspective in Miss Porter's real life was gradual, that her discontent with the results of the Revolution grew with the passing of time, until she became completely disillusioned about the movement.

Chapter five briefly analyzes and summarizes the thesis. It reinforces the work by drawing upon the contents of some of the author's non-fiction works on Mexico.

## Chapter 2

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MEXICAN HISTORY, 1910-1920

The Mexican Revolution arose as a countermovement against the regime of Porfirio Diaz, who ruled Mexico from 1876 to 1911 (except for a four-year period from 1880 to 1884). During this long span of time, Diaz made sure that the contending forces that had existed in Mexico since its independence in 1810 would not be able to become too powerful and therefore a threat to his reign. By playing one faction against the other, he shrewdly manipulated them so they could not interfere with his program of government.

His era, known as the years of Diazpotism, was also the time of the great Mexican peace; but the price paid was high, for Diaz's government neglected the masses of Mexico. His philosophy of pan o palo meant that all dissatisfied would be given concessions in land, monopolies, or cash if they cooperated, but if they refused, the palo (club) would be wielded mercilessly. Thus, the commercial representatives of the United States, France, Germany, and Great Britain, along with the Mexican businessmen, landowners, clergy and army, accepted the favors of the dictator.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald Atkin, Revolution: Mexico 1910-20 (New York: The John Day Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 16-18.

Diaz organized a tight system: he controlled Congress; he personally appointed the state governors, who in turn appointed the "Jefes Politicos," the local political chiefs. With the bandits that roamed the Mexican countryside who joined his ranks, he formed the Guardia Rural, the Mexican version of a mounted police. Diaz also controlled the judiciary; the law was lenient to all the favorites of the President, but not to the underprivileged of Mexico, for whom neither justice nor peace prevailed during the Diaz regime. Also, the press was effectively shut up and neutralized as a means of arousing the popular opinion against the government.

In short, Diaz brought every facet of the Mexican social and political structure under his personal control. While he maintained the bureaucratic structure of a democratic government, all the authority was in fact vested in his person. Abolishing a constitutional provision against re-election, he made sure that he would win the elections following the one of 1884.

In the following twenty-seven years of Diaz's reign the railroads expanded, the mining industry flourished, and finally, with the discovery of oil on the east coast, Mexico began its period of industrialization.

Diaz dedicated his energy to develop his country, but nevertheless failed to develop his people. The seeds of discontent took hold because of the very nature of his system, and quickly and irreversibly spread in a soil that

had been rendered fertile by the excesses of the government.

Stanley Ross writes:

Mexico, at the turn of the century, groaned under a political dictatorship which intensified the burden of an institutional heritage dating back to the Spanish Empire and aggravated problems by superimposing an exploitive foreign capitalism. Neglect and suppression of the masses and disdain for the Indian population found its rationale in foreign ideologies, while the regime's policies perpetrated a neo-colonial structure and intensified an extremely dependent economy in a nation which theoretically had achieved independence a century before, when it severed its connections with Spain during the War for Independence.<sup>2</sup>

Since the colonial period, the Indians had obtained their living from small communal farms called "ejidos." In 1856 the "ley Lerdo" divided the "ejidos" into simple holdings that were given to individual Indians. These, unused to private ownership of the land, fell easy prey to unscrupulous hacienda owners or other seekers of cheap land.

During the time of Diaz, because of Mexico's economic development, the value of the land increased enormously, and in the end the Indians were robbed of their land holdings. Many were given very small "ejidos" in unproductive lands, and many others became serfs in the large haciendas. These were a legacy of the Spanish colonial period, owned mostly by families of Spanish descent, who kept them rather for the prestige of owning them than for cultivation. Because of their low yield, these numerous, large estates weighed

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<sup>2</sup>Stanley Ross, ed., "The Peace of Porfirio," Is the Mexican Revolution Dead? (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 42.



down the Mexican economy, yet their owners refused to let others work the vast amounts of idle land.

Francisco I. Madero, son of a rich landowner and businessman of northern Mexico, led the first uprising against Porfirio Diaz. Influenced by the liberal ideas in vogue in Europe at the time, Francisco decided to take a more active part in the political life of his country.

Madero's opportunity to act came in 1910, when Diaz, who in 1908 had announced that he would retire from government, that the election of that year would be open and free, and that he would not accept reelection, suddenly decided to renege his statement and continue in his position as head of the Mexican government. He had invited open opposition, and Madero seized the opportunity. Madero was chosen as the candidate for the Anti-Reelectionist Party, which he and some friends had formed the year before. The party's slogan, "effective suffrage and no re-election," was a direct affront to Diaz's philosophy and practice of continuous reelection. Two years earlier, when Diaz had made the blunder of going back on his word about stepping down from politics, Madero had written a book called The Presidential Succession of 1910, which criticized Diaz's system mercilessly. To get him out of the way, he was put in jail on a flimsy charge, and held prisoner until the elections were over. Upon his release, Madero fled to San Antonio, Texas, where a few days later he was joined by other supporters who declared him President of a revolutionary

junta. The young man then published his Plan of San Luis Potosi, a political manifesto which declared the recent elections void; Madero was named provisional president, and free elections were promised as soon as the government came into the hands of the Maderistas; an uprising was planned for November 20. The revolution was under way.

While Madero was busy trying to achieve a compromise with Diaz representatives, groups of guerillas relentlessly attacked small towns, railroad junctions, and squads of federal soldiers, gaining to their cause more and more people. There was neither organization, nor generals, nor preconceived plan; their motto was "Viva Madero! Viva la Revolucion!" The size of the revolutionary forces increased to a respectable number. A large group of rebels, led by Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco, attacked and conquered the dissidents' first large objective, Ciudad Juarez, near the American border. At this time, Diaz agreed to leave Mexico, provided that Francisco de la Barra, his ambassador to Washington, headed the provisional government. The provisional cabinet, formed by Maderistas and Diaz men would rule for a year and then call to elections and demobilize the revolutionary army. Madero and the other revolutionaries agreed. After Diaz left for Europe, Madero entered Mexico City triumphantly, and the masses cheered him as the savior of Mexico. Madero thought this the time to have real peace and justice, education for the



people, land for all, controlled foreign investments, and, above all, a true democracy.

There were free elections, as the provisional cabinet had promised, and Madero and Pino Suarez, his running mate, were elected President and Vice-President respectively; the press was permitted an unparalleled freedom. Mexico breathed an air of liberty; but with this freedom there also came to the surface the struggles of groups that sat tensely waiting for their demands to be fulfilled. But Madero refused to believe that he, chosen by a thankful Mexico, need fear any threat. In truth, there were feuds, rebellions, and counter-rebellions. Emiliano Zapata had managed somehow to keep his men armed in the southern part of the country. He waited for his people to get the land they had bought back with their sweat and blood. General Victoriano Huerta, an old, cunning soldier of the Diaz mold, fought Orozco's rebels in the north. His battles succeeded and won him the admiration of the people, who saw in him a strong man, the kind that could set everything straight again. A garrison of the army stationed in Mexico City attacked by surprise. Huerta led the defense, but the battle lasted ten days during which the city shook with the hates and passions of the contenders. Under pressure from the Diplomatic Corps, Madero resigned. He was found dead a few days later.

Huerta established himself in power. France, Germany, and Spain quickly recognized the new government

as legitimate. The United States, however, did not recognize the legitimacy of Huerta's government immediately. When Huerta turned to the United States for financial aid, President Woodrow Wilson's decision fell like a bomb: Huerta must go, or no loan; Mexico would have to hold free elections in which Huerta could not be a candidate. Rebuffed, Huerta arranged for a loan in Europe, and had the members of Congress--the same Congress formed in the Maderista elections--put in jail. At this action, the American Secretary of State sent the following message to his diplomats in that country:

Usurpations like that of Huerta menace the peace and development of America as nothing else could . . . . It is the purpose of the United States therefore to discredit and defeat such usurpations whenever they occur . . . . If General Huerta does not retire by force of circumstances it will become the duty of the United States to use less peaceful means to put him out.<sup>3</sup>

Under this threat from the hated "gringos," the detested Huerta nevertheless gained popularity. The people of Mexico feared an invasion from the north, and their sympathies fell with Huerta, who stood against the common enemy.

Not everybody, however, was ready to back Huerta. Factions of revolutionaries remained from the days of the Madero uprising; Carranza, Villa, Zapata, Obregon were still powerful enough to be independent, and stubborn enough not to join Huerta. The only thing they wanted from the United

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<sup>3</sup>Anita Brenner, "The Wind That Swept Mexico," Harper's Magazine, CLXXXVI, No. 1111 (December, 1942), p. 99.

States was firearms with which to overthrow the General themselves.

Venustiano Carranza, a stubborn old man who called himself "The Supreme Chief," held the state of Coahuila, in the northeastern part of the country, good for smuggling arms from the United States. Carranza had with him Luis Cabrera; both advocated that foreign capital should remit a sizeable percentage to Mexico, that the revolution should do away with monopoly, set the Church aside, destroy feudalism, and give leeway to a strong middle class formed by professionals, businessmen, industrialists, and small farmers.

There was also the famous Pancho Villa, who had defeated the armies of Porfirio Diaz so many times. He held the states of Chihuahua and Durango.

Emiliano Zapata held the southwestern portion of Mexico. He devised the first formal revolutionary program in the history of his country, the "Plan de Ayala," which demanded the complete expropriation of all lands and other productive holdings for the benefit of the poor.

Alvaro Obregon held the state of Sonora, in the northwest. A shrewd, practical politician, Obregon was surrounded by generals and labor organizers.

These four great guerrilla chieftains had no agreement to bind them together, except the hate they shared for Huerta and foreigners. They all wanted Mexico for the Mexicans.

The revolutionary armies, little by little, took

more and more sections of the country. By April of 1914 all that was left of Huerta's dictatorship was a small piece of land which opened on the Gulf of Mexico and included Veracruz, the Mexican oil capital. The revolutionary forces had a clear prospect of taking over the country. In July of the same year, Huerta decided to relinquish his post as head of state, and that same month boarded the ship "Ypiranga," bound for Europe.

Carranza immediately established himself as head of state. He promised that elections would be held soon, and that the country would have peace. But by now the revolutionaries knew their force: they had broken the yoke of Diaz and oppression, and Mexico would be theirs, immediately. So, when Carranza called a convention of generals, neither Zapata nor Villa appeared.

At this impasse, Alvaro Obregon, the general from Sonora, organized the Convention of Aguascalientes with friends from both the Carranza and Villa camps. The convention decided that both Carranza and Villa should retire. However, because neither would step down before the other did, in the end nothing was accomplished. Obregon decided to take Carranza's side against Villa, and there ensued five years of the most tragic and bloody fighting in Mexican history.

The decisive military duel developed between Villa and Obregon, who slowly but surely pushed Villa northward; by mid-1915, Villa was in, and limited to, the northern

deserts.

It was almost predictable that Obregon would defeat Villa, for he gave the civil war political direction by issuing a series of decrees which gave backbone to the movement. Some of the most important stated that all lands seized illegally by haciendas would be returned to the people; that the municipalities would have self-government; that the government would support wage-and-hour laws for the workers, and that they had the right to organize.

With the consequent defeat of Villa, Carranza came to power. In 1917, he tried to devise a legal framework for the Revolution. He called together a congress, which met at the city of Queretaro, to amend the Juarez constitution of 1859. The assembly was converted into a constitutional congress which produced, in the end, the first revolutionary constitution of modern times in Mexico. Anita Brenner has summarized its theory precisely:

All land and other productive resources belong to the commonwealth, but may be held as private property except when public interest requires otherwise. The sub-soil belongs to the nation and may not be owned, but only leased by private parties. The Church may not own property, and foreigners may engage in business only as a Mexican enterprise under the law. Labor is guaranteed the right to organize, the eight-hour day, equal pay for equal work 'regardless of sex or nationality,' and a detailed list of other advantages and safeguards. "Ejido" and idle lands are to be turned back to the peasants. Any landless farmer may petition for a grant if he has been expropriated or simply on the basis of need. Education is lay and public and the classic four freedoms of liberal democracy [i.e.] . . . are provided.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

The character of this constitution makes it of special significance. It blends socialist and capitalistic tendencies, which future administrations could apply in the measure they required. The Constitution of 1917 expresses the desires of those who wrote it, and perhaps also their doubts and tribulations. But at last Mexico had seen (even if at times it was only on paper) a document that accurately reflected "the Mexican Revolution."

However, by the end of the Carranza term, in 1919, the precepts of the Constitution were still rhetoric. Carranza had become a hoodlum hated by his people, and during the later years of his administration there were still guerrillas in various parts of the country; for Carranza all was lost: while trying to escape from Mexico, he died in the hands of an assassin.

In the 1920's, President Obregon created a renewed air of tranquility and prosperity in Mexico. In the field of education, for example, his minister Jose Vasconcelos made great advances. He opened many new schools and set in motion new, effective programs. In the field of economics, Obregon created the National Bank of Mexico, which later became a tough competitor in business with foreign interests and brought startling economic changes to the country.

By 1924, Mexico had become a very different place from what it had been fourteen years earlier. Many of the provisions of the Constitution of 1917 had become engraved in the Mexican way of life. But because of the elasticity



of that same charter, some administrations have applied its revolutionary concepts in a less stringent manner.

In 1923, reflecting on the events that had taken place during the preceding decade in Mexico, Katherine Anne Porter recalls a conversation she once had with an Indian woman there. They had both been watching a skirmish between federalist and revolutionary troops. The Indian woman remarks that the trouble is all for the sake of happiness to come: happiness on earth, for men, and not for angels. Miss Porter comments:

She seemed to me then to have caught the whole meaning of revolution, and to have said it in a phrase. From that day I watched Mexico, and all the apparently unrelated events that grew out of the first struggle never seemed false or alien or aimless to me. A straight, undeviating purpose guided the working of the plan. And it permitted many fine things to grow out of the national soil, only faintly surmised during the last two or three centuries even by the Mexicans themselves. It was as if an old field had been watered, and all the long-buried seeds flourished.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, Miss Porter here is optimistic about the outcome of the Revolution. She saw, in 1920, the renaissance of Mexican art, and the new spirit that the Obregon administration inspired even at such an early moment of its existence. But the cyclic shift of emphasis between the liberal (revolutionary) and the conservative philosophy of later administrations would cause a change in Katherine Anne Porter's perspective of Mexico. But that is best appreciated in her fiction.

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<sup>5</sup>Katherine A. Porter, "Why I Write About Mexico," The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 355.

### Chapter 3

#### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Katherine Anne Porter was born at Indian Creek, Texas, on May 15, 1890. Her family was of the old Southern tradition, and Miss Porter was brought up according to the social and moral codes inherent in the familial legacy. A descendant of Jonathan Boone, Daniel's brother, Miss Porter was born to Harrison and Mary Alice (Jones) Porter. Two years after Katherine Anne's birth, Mary Alice Porter died. Harrison then moved the family (there were five children in all) to Kyle, also in the state of Texas, so the children could be reared by their grandmother, Catherine Anne. The figure of the grandmother looms large in the life of Miss Porter: an authoritarian, hard-working widow, she brought the children up strictly, but lovingly. Mrs. Porter must have had an enormous store of patience, since her granddaughter (who was very much like the older woman), was ". . . precocious, nervous, rebellious, unteachable, and I made life very uncomfortable for myself and I suppose for those around me."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., Twentieth Century Authors (New York: The W. H. Wilson Company, 1942), p. 1118.



Her younger years were spent in private southern schools, one of which was probably in New Orleans, according to Glenway Wescott, a biographer and friend of Miss Porter's.<sup>2</sup> After the death of the grandmother in 1901, the family moved to San Antonio, Texas, where it is supposed that Katherine Anne studied drama.

Ever after the first move to San Antonio, Miss Porter led, with her family, "a gypsy life, moving about from place to place without a home."<sup>3</sup> At age sixteen she escaped and got married to a yet unknown man; three years later she was divorced. The next year, in 1909, she left Texas, because "the society was confining," and she wanted to write. She then went to Chicago, where she found a job on a newspaper, from which she was fired after a week "of non-work," as she put it, and returned home, where "she sang old Scottish ballads in costume . . . all around Texas and Louisiana."<sup>4</sup> Apparently she then went to Denver, Colorado, where she spent some time at a sanitarium because she had tuberculosis. She also worked for a newspaper there, "The Rocky Mountain News," as a reporter. This was in the year of 1918,

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<sup>2</sup>Glenway Wescot, "Katherine Anne Porter Personally," Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium, ed. Lodwick Hartley and George Core (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Thompson, "An Interview," Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium, ed. Lodwick Hartley and George Core (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 9.

when she nearly died of an attack of influenza.

This year was crucial in Miss Porter's literary career. She was very badly ill, near death, but she pulled out of it and recovered. She relates the experience of facing death in her interview with Barbara Thompson:

[The experience] just simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, ready. It took me a long time to go out and live in the world again. I was really "alienated," in the pure sense. It was, I think, the fact that I really had participated in death, that I knew what death was, and had almost experienced it. I had what the Christians call "the beatific vision," and the Greeks called "the happy day," the happy vision just before death. Now if you have had that, and survived it, come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there's no use deceiving yourself that you are. It took me a long time to realize that that simply wasn't true, that I had my own needs and that I had to live like me.<sup>5</sup>

After this experience, Miss Porter went to New York, where she supported herself by doing ghost writing, something that she once remarked scared her. Not too long after, in 1921, she went to Mexico where "I attended, you might say, and assisted at, in my own modest way, a revolution."<sup>6</sup> She was referring to the Obregon revolution that had in reality only been part of the great revolutionary movement that had started with Madero in 1910. Just how she "assisted at" the changes that the Obregon government brought about in Mexico is not known. Perhaps, since her fiction is so closely related to her life, she could have done what Laura in "Flowering Judas" did (which was of little consequence to the revo-

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 10.    <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

lution), but nothing is certain. Miss Porter has never specified exactly what she did, but she has revealed that she went to Mexico because "exciting things were happening there," and because she was interested in Aztec and Mayan art. This, the first Mexican experience of her mature years, quite obviously left a deep impression on her. As soon as she returned to Fort Worth, Texas, she wrote her first story derived from that experience. "Maria Concepcion" was published in 1923, after being rewritten fifteen or sixteen times. In Fort Worth Miss Porter supported herself by writing for a trade paper; she also sold some reports on her Mexican experience to Century Magazine. She acted with local drama groups for some time, but decided to return once more to Mexico, again interested in that country's art. She made arrangements for an American exhibit of Mexican art and wrote an article entitled "Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts."<sup>7</sup>

During the decade of 1920 Katherine Anne Porter reviewed books for the New York Herald Tribune, The New Republic, and The Nation. She also traveled widely during this period of her life, but it is practically impossible to know exactly when and where she went, as there is no official record of this period released by Miss Porter. The decade was a prolific one: she had been writing short stories all this time, but they appeared infrequently. In 1930 a

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<sup>7</sup>Hendrick, p. 24.

collection of short stories appeared under the title Flowering Judas, a success from the point of view of the critics. The next year she again went to Mexico on a Guggenheim scholarship. There, an incident with Hart Crane occurred. Crane had also been awarded a Guggenheim scholarship that year and was invited to stay with Miss Porter at her house in Mexico. She apparently later regretted the invitation because of the excesses of her fellow writer, and Crane had to move out. He rented the house next door. Crane was irked because Miss Porter did not accept an invitation to dinner at his house and, drunk, that night cursed her in his customary bad language and worse taste when in that condition. The importance of this incident is that it helps understand in part the character of Miss Porter. Crane later wrote about it. After offering his feelings on the matter, he added, "I'm also tired of a certain rather southern type of female vanity."<sup>8</sup> This statement, according to George Hendrick, ". . . strips away some of the secrecy around Miss Porter's life and reveals her as her grandmother's child, with a fixed moral code and with definite ideas on right and wrong sexual and moral behavior."<sup>9</sup>

That same year, Miss Porter embarked on a ship bound for Europe from the port of Veracruz. The voyage later

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<sup>8</sup>Brom Weber, ed., The Letters of Hart Crane (New York, 1952), cited in George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Hendrick, p. 24.

served as the background for the novel Ship of Fools, published in 1962, which established firmly her success as a writer and gave her popularity.

After 1931 Miss Porter lived in Paris for several years. She married Eugene Pressly, of the American Foreign Service. In 1937 she divorced him and returned to the United States where, remarried to Albert Erskine, Jr., she settled down for several years in Baton Rouge. She divorced Erskine in 1942, the year The Itching Parrot, her translation of the famous Mexican picaresque novel, El Periquillo Sarniento, was published.

In 1949 she accepted a position as writer in residence at Stanford University. In later years she held similar positions at many other colleges and universities, including the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the University of Liege, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington and Lee.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from occasional visits to universities to deliver lectures, to dictate courses, etc., Miss Porter has lived, in recent years, a quiet and sedentary life in College Park, Maryland.

Katherine Anne Porter has traditionally been reticent to reveal facts about her personal life. Most of the biographical material on her has come from her own

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<sup>10</sup>John E. Hardy, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), p. xi.

biographical sketches and interviews. The difficulty lies in the fact that her own statements sometimes conflict, and though she has been rather open to interviews in which she is always agreeable and talkative, the information gathered in bits and pieces has had to be put together, leaving great lapses of time empty and with conflicting information as well.

Miss Porter has declared that the technique she used for writing is memory. Everything she writes, she says, is based on "actual human experience," in something she has seen or heard, a small detail that she happened to notice at some point in her life, about herself or somebody else. In truth, then, her literary production in fiction is pervaded with the sense of autobiography, concentrated--perhaps more than in any other character--in Miranda, in whose stories is found much of Miss Porter's family background, as well as events that occurred in the author's actual life.

Miss Porter's career as a writer started at the early age of three. From early childhood she manifested an interest in letters and drama. To establish exactly when she began to write seriously is actually impossible, but it is safe to assume that her first stories were written during her late teens. She kept her manuscripts and notes for stories in trunks, and it is only a small part of her actual work that has seen the light of day. This is due to the fact that she is a highly polished writer, and although she writes most of her shorter fiction usually at one sitting,



what she has deemed publishable is uncontestable evidence of the superior style at her command. The ease and grace of her language, direct, concise and simple, conveys the most profound thought and perception. Her talent has won her many honors, among which are the gold medal for literature from the Society of Libraries of New York University (1940); the O. Henry Memorial Award (Sidney Porter was a collateral relative of Miss Porter's) and the Emerson-Thoreau Bronze Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1962); the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (1966).

Miss Porter undoubtedly has tried, and managed, to control her public image. Her biographical accounts have the flavor of her fiction, and however biographical her fiction is, one can never ascertain that a given passage in it parallels an event in her life. Thus, her life is surrounded by a kind of subliminal mystery which she has imparted to it by leading a very private life.

Miss Porter's fiction deals specifically with three geographical areas. One is the Kentucky-Texas area that is the "native land of my heart." Some of the stories that cover this particular area are "the Old Order," "The Source," "The Witness," "The Last Leaf," "The Fig Tree," and "The Circus." These provide an insight into Miss Porter's family background and themes such as the life of European immigrants in the region, their customs, beliefs, and tribulations. A second area is Europe, especially France

and Germany. Among the stories that deal with this area are "The Leaning Tower" and "The Cracked Looking Glass." And thirdly, there is Mexico, the land she called "my familiar country," of which indeed she is still fond, although certain events there caused her to become disillusioned about the promise of the Mexican Revolution. Miss Porter first became interested in Mexico because of stories about that country that her father used to tell her. Her first visit there was, as far as can be established, in 1910, when she witnessed, from the window of a church, a street battle between forces of the Federalist government and Maderistas.<sup>11</sup> She would return several times to Mexico, but to establish precisely when, as has been said, is nearly impossible. Mexico played an important part in Miss Porter's life as an author. It was there that she went not long after her bout with influenza in 1918; her first published story deals with Mexico, and she was deeply interested in the national life of that country, studied its art and customs, and lived there for a considerable period of time.

Her non-fiction writings on Mexico are the following: "Why I Write About Mexico" (1923), "Notes on the Life and Death of a Hero"--preface to her translation of El Periquillo Sarniento (The Itching Parrot), by Jose Joaquin Fernandez de

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<sup>11</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, "Why I Write About Mexico," The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 356.



Lizardi, 1941), "Miss Porter Adds a Comment," a letter to the editor of The Nation (1943), "Leaving the Petate" (1931), "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" (1923), "The Mexican Trinity," a report from Mexico City (1921), "Where Presidents Have No Friends" (1922), "La Conquistadora" (1926), "Quetzalcoatl" (1926), and "The Charmed Life" (1942). These writings deal with deeply autochthonous things; they reveal how deeply Miss Porter understood all the aspects of Mexican national life: its inhabitants of different social and economic backgrounds, the political situation, the national artistic movement, and, in general, the Mexican character, philosophy, and history.

The fiction on Mexico is composed of six stories: "Maria Concepcion," "Virgin Violeta," "The Martyr," "Flowering Judas," "That Tree," and "Hacienda." These stories, apart from being illustrative of the Mexican landscape and customs, reveal a progression in the art of Katherine Anne Porter and the change in her perspective of Mexico, her disillusionment with the state of things there, perhaps as part of that cosmic disillusionment that is evident at the end of Ship of Fools. There is a shift in perception, as Professor Hendrick has noted, from inside the Mexican culture to the stories where the element of alienation is discussed, which represent her detached view of that country.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Hendrick, p. 51.

## Chapter 4

### FROM "NATIVE" TO ALIEN

"Maria Concepcion," the first story Miss Porter published, takes place entirely within the Mexican culture. Miss Porter's familiarity with the Mexican culture is outstanding, and her profound understanding of it is evident in this remarkable tale. The characters are the inhabitants of a small Indian community near the site of a buried Indian city, where most of the Indians work.

Maria Concepcion is married to Juan Villegas, who works for Givens, the only foreigner to appear in the story and the person in charge of the excavations. In the opening scene we see Maria Concepcion walking down a dusty road toward the ruins, where she is taking some living fowls to be a part of her husband's and Givens's lunch. Maria is entirely contented: she and Juan, married in the Church, are going to have their first child, and her body is "not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman."<sup>1</sup> Suddenly by the roadside Maria hears the laughter of a young couple playing in a field. She catches a glimpse

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<sup>1</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 3.

of a young Indian girl, Maria Rosa, only fifteen years old, being pursued by a virile young man. Maria Concepcion notices that the man is no other than her husband, Juan, who proceeds to seduce the young Indian girl, Maria Rosa. Maria Concepcion goes on her way, hatred for the couple burning in her heart.

Juan and Maria Rosa decide to go away to the war and stay away for nearly a year. Juan deserts from the army and decides to come back to his native village. He is imprisoned as a deserter, but his American boss, Givens, manages to get him out of jail. Juan returns to his hut to find that Maria Concepcion has lost her child, but she accepts him back. Her hatred for Maria Rosa, though, is undying, and she decides to kill her. After the deed is done, she returns to her hut, and Juan finds out what has happened. He decides to help her, because he knows that the police will immediately suspect his wife. When they come to look for her and take her away, other men and women come to her aid, and she is freed. Maria Concepcion takes Maria Rosa's baby as her own.

Miss Porter's success in "Maria Concepcion" is that she manages to immerse herself totally within the life of the small community. She does not, as narrator or omniscient author, take sides. She does not make any kind of comment either on the customs of her characters or their morality. The Indian is seen in his simple, daily life; he cannot understand, for instance, the American's interest in the

old bits and pieces of pottery. Maria Concepcion cannot understand why Givens does not have a woman, and looks upon him condescendingly, with the sort of natural amusement of the simple soul. On the other hand, Givens finds interest only in the past of these people that work for him, but cannot understand their present position, their problems, or their way of life. He, too, is amused by the simplicity that the Indians display, but not in a sarcastic or malicious way. He makes a poor representative of the hated American during the Mexican Revolution; he is not the prototype of the American businessman so hated by the revolutionaries.

In "Maria Concepcion" the Revolution forms only part of the background; Juan Villegas and Maria Rosa flee to join the nearest army, but they are not concerned at all with the ideals of the war. They see it as a place to go, as something to do, but only because they are escaping from their plight. This is especially significant because it shows the lack of involvement of the Indian masses in the life of Mexico as a country. The Revolution is something far away that they do not understand or care about, as shown by the fact that Juan deserts to return to his village and his people.

Religion appears also as something superficial for the Indian. Maria Concepcion is very proud of her marriage in the Church, but in the end she takes the law into her hands because outside laws are worthless. "Outside laws"

refers not only to the precepts of the Church, which Maria Concepcion violates by killing Maria Rosa, but also the law of the land, embodied in the policemen that hold a hearing for the young woman. The community can be seen too as a homogeneous group with the same values that Maria Concepcion holds, because they back her up against the authority of the white man. During the hearing, the people speak up on Maria Concepcion's behalf; the wall of protection they draw around her cannot be penetrated by the representatives of a law foreign to the Indian community:

Maria Concepcion suddenly felt herself guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were around her, speaking for her, defending her, the forces of life were ranged invincibly with her against the beaten dead. Maria Rosa had thrown away her share of strength in them, she lay forfeited among them. Maria Concepcion looked from one to the other of the encircling, intent faces. Their eyes gave back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy.

The gendarmes were at a loss. They, too, felt that sheltering wall cast impenetrably around her. They were certain she had done it, yet they could not accuse her.<sup>2</sup>

The description of the landscape proves Miss Porter's familiarity with the Mexican countryside. In fact, the description at the beginning of "Maria Concepcion" bears witness to more than mere familiarity. The reader can almost sense, walking down Maria Concepcion's road, the odor of the honey and the buzzing of the bees; the care that must be taken to

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<sup>2</sup>K. A. Porter, "Maria Concepcion," Flowering Judas and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 3.

avoid the maguey thorns from biting into the bare flesh of the feet, the weight of the food basket, the chickens dangling from the blue-cotton-rebozo-covered shoulder, the heat and the loneliness, the sparse shade cast by the cacti standing by the side of the road. The road in the story here becomes a symbol for the road of life, and the characters and the events in "Maria Concepcion" become, in George Hendricks's words, Miss Porter's introduction to "the ironic distance between things as they are and as they should be, between truth and fiction, between expectation and fulfillment, between art and life."<sup>3</sup>

The name Maria Concepcion is especially significant in the story because it sets up most of these polarities, mainly those of life and death and the imposing of a foreign religion on the Indian culture. "Maria" is the name of the Virgin Mary, thus symbolizing the religious theme; "concepcion" means "conception"; but Maria, the Indian, renounces the Catholic religion that has been imposed on her, and, to make the irony more poignant, the child Maria Concepcion gives birth to dies, while Maria Rosa's, conceived in "sin," lives. This treatment emphasizes the isolation of the Indian culture in Mexico, a fact subtly presented in Miss Porter's first published story.

Miss Porter's second story, not published with her

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<sup>3</sup>George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 30.



collected stories in 1930, was "The Martyr." It appeared in The Century Magazine in July of 1923 and deals also with life in Mexico. The setting, in contrast to "Maria Concepcion," is in the city, and the characters, in contrast to the Indians, are artists of the new movement in Mexico, presumably those who took part in the Mexican renaissance of the '20's.

The central character in this story is Ruben, the "most illustrious painter in Mexico." He is deeply in love with Isabel, his model, who calls him "Churro" (a sort of sweet cake made of dough and covered with honey and sugar) and fondly pulls his hair and dabbles his nose with paint. Her lover is Ruben's rival, but she cannot leave with him until he sells one of his paintings, ". . . for everyone declared Ruben would kill on sight the man who even attempted to rob him of Isabel. So Isabel stayed, and Ruben made eighteen different drawings of her for his mural, and she cooked for him occasionally, quarreled with him, and put out her long, red tongue at visitors she did not like. Ruben adored her."<sup>4</sup> One day, though, Ruben's rival manages to sell a painting to a rich man, not because his art is good, but because its colors are precisely what the man needs for a wall in his new house. Isabel leaves a ludicrous message explaining that she has left for Costa Rica with her lover because he will not make her cook for him and will buy her

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<sup>4</sup>K. A. Porter, Collected Stories . . . , pp. 33, 34.

red slippers.

Ruben can do nothing but talk about his lost Isabel and gorge himself with all sorts of food, until the folds of his flesh show like the dough with which the "churros" are made. His friends desert him, because they get bored of the same old story; Ruben will not listen to their entreaties for him to continue his art, "for his country and for the world." Finally, one day, Ruben dies of a heart attack while eating at a restaurant called "The Little Monkeys," where he and Isabel used to go for late meals. Ruben's friends go to the restaurant to get an account of the event from the owner.

"But what did he say to you," insisted Ramon, "at the final stupendous moment? It is most important. The last words of a great artist. They should be very eloquent. Repeat them precisely, my dear fellow! It will add splendor to the biography, nay, to the very history of art itself, if they are eloquent."

The proprietor nodded his head with the air of a man that understands everything.

"I know, I know. Well, maybe you will not believe me when I tell you that his very last words were a truly sublime message to you, his good and faithful friends, and to the world. He said, gentlemen: 'Tell them I am a martyr to love. I perish in a cause worthy the sacrifice. I die of a broken heart!' and then he said, 'Isabelita, my executioner!'"<sup>5</sup>

The irony in the story is perhaps a little too evident to have a powerful effect. The purpose of Miss Porter's approach, however, is not all lost: she ridicules a movement which perhaps had been the object of too much propaganda. She also seems to be ridiculing Diego Rivera, one of Mexico's

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<sup>5</sup>Porter, *Ibid.*, p. 31.



greatest artists, with whom Miss Porter had had a disagreement, and had called him, in her "Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts," "treacherous and dishonest."<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the reason for the story, it does evince once more Miss Porter's versatility in the Mexican environment. Again, as in "Maria Concepcion," she has a complete grasp of the scenery, and her characters are strictly Mexican. Ruben is one of those lost Romantics, not uncommon in Mexico, and who are somehow part of the Latin temperament.

"Virgin Violeta" is Miss Porter's third deeply Mexican story. It concerns the fifteen-year-old daughter of a Mexican aristocrat, Violeta, enclosed in her house as much as she is enclosed at the convent where she goes to school.

The action in "Virgin Violeta" occurs entirely within the house: Violeta is listening to her sister Blanca and their cousin Carlos read his poetry. Violeta is intensely jealous of her older and prettier sister, because she (Violeta) is in love with Carlos. "And Carlos. Carlos! He would understand at last that she had read and loved his poems always."<sup>7</sup> Violeta wishes she could keep Carlos's poems because they express exactly what she feels. Violeta has to stare at a picture of the Virgin and St. Ignatius

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<sup>6</sup>Drewey Wayne Gunn, American and British Writers in Mexico, 1556-1973 (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1974), p. 111.

<sup>7</sup>Porter, Flowering Judas and Other Stories, p. 25.

Loyola which is above Carlos's head and to hide her face in Mamacita's lap when she blushes at her own thoughts of love for Carlos. Presently Carlos asks for his old book of poems, but Blanca does not know where it is. Violeta says she has it and goes to her room to get it. Carlos follows her and in the darkness of her room kisses her. Violeta tries to cry out, but Carlos puts his hand over her mouth to prevent her from doing so, and explains the kiss away as a matter of a cousin's familiarity.

When they go back to the living room, Violeta is still more distressed to find that her sister has found the book on the shelf where it belongs. Carlos, who had planned a trip to Paris, decides to leave (Mamacita had asked him to leave at a decent hour). He kisses Blanca good-bye and turns to kiss Violeta, who can only see his "macaw eyes coming closer and closer, the tight, smiling mouth ready to swoop,"<sup>8</sup> and, falling backwards, screams uncontrollably. When she comes to, she is in bed, Mamacita caressing her brow and telling her everything is fine. But Violeta cannot understand what happened.

During that summer she cannot bring herself to read Carlos's poetry, and even makes caricatures of him. She has not been able to solve the problem in her mind, and when the new school term begins, she does not want to go to the convent, where she says there is nothing to learn.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

In this story Miss Porter's versatility is manifest. The action occurs within the walls of the house; Violeta feels that something in her feels as if "in a cage;" the church where she goes is "a bigger cage." The continuous reference to enclosed places symbolizes the social class of Violeta's family, that portion of the Mexican society so closed and so conservative in its traditions. The children are educated in convents, they are very closely guarded by their mothers (especially the young girls), in contrast to the Indians in "Maria Concepcion," who are young people of eighteen already hard at work earning their daily bread.

The symbolic title is also very adequate: violet is the traditional color for chastity and purity; the name of the young girl serves to set off, ironically, her desire for love. When her cousin has kissed her, she feels that she has been impure, and the feeling with which she is left is utter confusion, because she cannot distinguish between the pure, "virginal" love of Virgin Mary, and the carnal love, or desire, of which she becomes aware through her cousin.

To Miss Porter's credit in this story is again her clear presentation of one more aspect of Mexican life. As in the previous stories, she does not make any comment on the characters or their situation; but she does not need to, since her presentation is from the inside. It is as if she were sitting at ease, invisible, in the living room with Mamacita and Violeta, and can see Carlos and Blanca and hear their murmured verses, and feel the enclosedness of the family.

In "Maria Concepcion," "The Martyr," and "Virgin Violeta," Miss Porter has provided a widely ranging view of Mexican life such as could have been told by a native. Never, in any of the stories, is the reader aware, or could be, that the writer comes from a different country and culture. In all three Miss Porter refrains from any kind of comment that would give her away, that would make the reader aware of her origin or nationality. Her characters are deeply Mexican, as well as her settings, which allow the reader to see three facets of Mexican life, and the three clearly distinguishable social classes that exist in Mexico: the Indian, the artist, who generally belongs to the middle class, and the aristocracy.

From the "inside" stories, which I have termed "native," Miss Porter moves on to a set of three in which she introduces the theme of alienation, in which her change of perspective emerges.

Among her Mexican stories, "Flowering Judas" most emphatically illustrates the theme of alienation or of the expatriate in a foreign land. In this story Laura, an American girl of twenty-two teaching in Mexico at the time of the Obregon revolution, characterizes the theme of alienation. Laura lacks deep, inner identification with the events and the environment in which she lives. She is also profoundly estranged from her surroundings.

Laura, the main character in the story, works for one of the revolutionary leaders, Braggioni, a selfish,

vain, lustful man to whom Laura, like many others, owes her position. In her case, she works as an English teacher among children.

At the opening of the story we find Braggioni waiting at Laura's home for her return. For the past month he has devoted his attention to her. Braggioni wonders at Laura's "notorious virginity" and at her reasons for taking part in the revolution. Is she in love with someone in it? No, she isn't. Is someone in love with her? No, Laura does not think so.

As the evening goes on, we find that Laura had visited the jail that morning, and found that Eugenio, to whom she had taken sleeping pills, had committed suicide. Braggioni thinks Eugenio is a fool and continues to sing to Laura in a voice she despises. But Laura dares not tell him anything.

Presently Braggioni leaves. Laura goes to sleep and has a dream. In the dream, Eugenio leads her to a desolated spot and calls her murderer. Laura tries to take his hand, but he will not let her. He then tells her he is taking her to death, but she refuses to go unless he takes her hand. Instead, Eugenio takes "the warm bleeding flowers" from the Judas tree (which has transported her to the spot) and Laura eats them. Again Eugenio calls her murderer and "cannibal, this is my body and my blood."<sup>9</sup> Laura cries, "no!" and at

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<sup>9</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, Flowering Judas and Other Stories, p. 160. Hereafter the page numbers will appear in the text, for the next three stories.

the sound of her voice she awakes in terror, and cannot sleep again. Thus the story ends.

The symbolic inferences of Laura's dream are many. Although "Flowering Judas" has been a favorite among reviewers for its symbolic content, the symbolism in the story will only be referred to here in its relation to the theme of alienation.

Laura's behavior in the story indicates that she is alienated in three different senses: 1) geographically, 2) psychologically, and 3) philosophically (religiously).

Laura's geographical alienation is the most obvious: she is the disillusioned expatriate in a foreign land. Laura has left the United States for unstated reasons. We know only that "uninvited she has promised herself to this place; she can no longer imagine herself as living in another country, and there is no pleasure in remembering her life before she came here" (p. 145). She, by her own volition, became an exile. She alienated herself from the land that saw her grow and gave her the principles that would determine her fate, a fate which, once in Mexico, became "nothing, except as a testimony of a mental attitude" (p. 149).

The "psychological" and "philosophical" spheres of Laura's alienation are hard to separate. They are intertwined and interwoven in an almost inseparable form, since Laura's behavior is somewhat determined by her philosophy--or lack of it--and the nature of her religious beliefs, just



as her inner turmoil has to do with her confused view of life.

Laura's part in the revolution is superficial: she runs errands, warns the enemies of the current regime of any danger, gives them money provided by their leader, and visits her co-revolutionaries in jail, carrying fresh gossip and news. Her participation too is exterior, i.e., physical, and not born of a conviction of the wrongs of the prevailing system, born not of a philosophical conviction of the rights of the workers, the division of the land, etc. "I suppose I don't really understand the principles," she says. "But she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feelings of what life should be" (pp. 141-2).

In other words, Laura's estrangement or alienation stems from a psychological problem--of a religious nature. Even though Laura participates, superficially, in the Mexican revolutionary movement of the time, this action is more a symptom of her inner turmoil and a consequence of it rather than a self-fulfilling commitment to the revolutionary cause. Laura's problem is that she cannot feel, she cannot believe in anything. She is barren of feeling about virtually everything.

Born a Roman Catholic, Laura appears as an active member of one of the revolutionary factions, but yet "in spite of her fear of being seen by someone that would make a scandal of it, she slips now and again into some crumbling



little church," an action which is "her own little heresy" (p. 142). Her dress is nun-like, a fact that betrays her religious fixation. Moreover, Laura will not wear lace made on machines, while it is on the machine that the salvation of the worker rests. This fact reveals her aristocratic preference for hand-made clothing.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Laura lacks true ties with the revolutionary movement, because actually she does not believe in the true precepts of the revolution. And in what does Laura believe? "Precisely which is the true nature of her devotion, its true motives, and what are its obligations? Laura cannot say" (p. 145). As a matter of fact, Laura believes in nothing. She is incapable of returning the love of her students, who write "we lov ar ticher" on the classroom board; she is incapable of returning the love of her suitors, restraining herself sexually. Moreover, Laura has a passion for denial. Her ultimate refuge is the sempiternal NO with which she faces everything that threatens to involve her. She refuses to know those whom she helps, and "the very cells of her flesh reject knowledge and kinship in one monotonous word. No. No. No. She draws her strength from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil. Denying everything, she may walk everywhere in safety, she looks at everything without amazement" (p. 141).

Out of the dialectic position of her Christianity

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<sup>10</sup>Hendrick, p. 39.

and the revolution within Laura there is no possibility of a synthesis, which would be an accommodation of her Christian principles to the philosophy of the revolution and thus a conscious and active participation in the movement. Instead, she retreats into her attitude of denial, consequently separating herself from any kind of commitment.

Perhaps one reason for her present emptiness is that she has become too intellectualized and cannot come to terms with the reality that surrounds her. Laura is incapable of love, feeling, passion, true sympathy and understanding; she is vapid, fearful and indecisive. Why does Laura so repeatedly say NO? It is hard to say. Her background perhaps has much to do with her present situation, but apart from the religious concern which pervades her whole person and influences to a high degree her way of being, nothing is known about her past; she is loath to think about her origin, and all the reader knows is that she has been trained in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Laura's dream offers the ultimate proof of her religious fixation. When she dreams, she can do it only in terms of what her subconscious mind is fixed upon: religion; and it is the religious symbolism in the dream that gives us the ultimate clue to Laura's alienation: she clearly shows that she wants to take Eugenio's hand. Since Eugenio personifies death, it is clear that that is what she wants, to die. Laura wants to hold hands with death because there is no longer any place for her on earth, "she is not at home in

the world" (p. 151). She insists so much on holding the hand of death (the plea for Eugenio to take her hand occurs three times in the dream) that she betrays her desire to die, to sever the ties with a world with which she cannot establish a rapport. There can be no redemption for Laura, because she is incapable of love. She has--like Judas--betrayed herself as a human being. Estranged even from herself, Laura's ultimate desire is not only to alienate herself from the Mexican Revolution, but from life itself.

The theme of alienation is also central in the story, "That Tree." In it we see again, as in "Flowering Judas," the American expatriate in Mexico, the romantic dreamer who has quit his native land to fulfill his utmost desire: to sit under a tree, free from the preoccupations and responsibilities of the world.

The story, a dramatic monologue, contains two main characters, an American journalist and his guest--presumably a woman--through whose eyes we see the events of the story. The story recounts the failure of a man to lead the bohemian life he had dreamt of, the falsity of that dream, the failure of a marriage, the failure of a prim woman to enjoy life or sex . . . ,<sup>11</sup> and all caused by their alienation.

The journalist--he does not have a name in the story--had come to Mexico to fulfill his dream "because he felt it in his bones that it was the country for him" (p. 96). For

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

three years, surrounded by his friends--some Mexican artists, and his lover, a young Mexican Indian woman--he tries to accommodate to a simple, idle, romantic life writing poetry. He writes "basketsfull" (which he knows is no good), until his marriage to Miriam, "a nicely brought up Middle Western girl" (p. 97), a school teacher he has been engaged to for the past three years. After four years of marriage, Miriam, unable to put up with her husband's way of life, unable to understand the Mexican milieu, returns to her father and her native town in the United States. The shock of Miriam's departure brings the protagonist to a new resolution. "He had started out, you might say that very day, to make a career for himself in journalism" (p. 96), a goal he achieves with astonishing ease. In time he becomes an expert in Latin American revolutions and works for several American liberal magazines. Five years and two wives later, at the time when the journalist and his guest are having drinks at the Mexico city cafe, the journalist has decided to accept Miriam back, despite the previous "hatred" he felt towards her because she could not see life as he did. Miriam's father has died, she is terribly lonely, and has realized that everything was her fault. Although the journalist has decided to accept her back, he will not marry her again.

The underlying theme in "That Tree" is alienation. The failure of the journalist to fulfill his dream, the falsity of that dream, the failure of the journalist and Miriam's marriage, and Miriam's failure to enjoy life or

sex are due to the estrangement suffered, unconsciously, by both of them.

Miriam's character brings to mind Laura, of "Flowering Judas." Like Laura, Miriam teaches; she wears clothes into which she practically disappears (Laura wore nun-like clothing). Like Laura, Miriam was disappointed at home: "she longed to live in a beautiful dangerous place among interesting people who painted and wrote poetry," because her life was dull and commonplace where she was.

When she arrives in Mexico, Miriam is disappointed by her surroundings. She cannot conceive of living in an apartment barren of furniture, with only a bed and a stove and paintings by Mexican artists on the walls. She does not approve of her husband's friends and covers her nose when she goes to market. The native smell shocks her foreign senses. Once, at a dance where there was going to be a shooting, instead of using her husband as a shield, as the Mexican women instinctively did, she dives under a table to protect herself. This causes the journalist-to-be great embarrassment.

Miriam's estrangement, unlike Laura's total alienation, is cultural as well as psychological, but she does not suffer from a complete lack of commitment to life. Her alienation is cultural in her inability to adapt to a different way of life, to the local customs, and to the local ways and means without a "modern steam-heated flat and artistic young couples from the American colony" (p. 109).

She cannot "walk the chalk line"---a favorite expression of hers when referring to her marriage--with the Mexicans, and refuses to have an Indian maid. But Miriam's problem is evidently psychological. A bit naively, perhaps, she is unable to adapt to the way of life she precisely came looking for. She cared not a jot, once in Mexico, for her husband's occupation--or lack of it. She calls him "parasite" and "ne'er-do-well," and eventually leaves him. Miriam fails completely to identify herself with her husband's way of life, which is mainly what she is estranged from. If Miriam shows one redeeming quality or purpose which will help her overcome her alienation it is the fact that she does look forward to a social position which she considers more dignified and in which she will function. After all, she is a professional teacher, she is "well brought-up and not a prissy bore" (p. 97). When her husband has become a well-known journalist and a best seller, she will be ready to return to him, ready to forget her sexual dissatisfaction, ready to forget that he lives in Mexico.

The journalist's case, at first glance, seems opposite to Miriam's situation. This is due to the superb way in which Miss Porter handles irony, and how she sets up seemingly dissimilar situations. At times the reader is convinced that the journalist has achieved his goal. He is metaphorically sitting under the heaven tree writing poetry. He lives in close contact with his Mexican artist friends and his Indian lover. Ironically, before Miriam's



arrival, he seems to be happy with his girl, but she eventually leaves him for another man after tricking him out of his furniture.

The journalist's total alienation occurs because he fails to understand his situation; he fails to understand that his dream is utopian and impossible. Even his Mexican friends, who in a certain sense remain faithful to art, do something else to fulfill other, less idealistic, aspects of their lives: he "lived to see Jaime take up with a rich old woman, and Ricardo decide to turn film actor, and Carlos sitting easy with a government job, painting frescoes to order" (p. 112-13).

Miss Porter's cynicism points out even further the journalist's detachment. He excuses himself from pursuing art as a way of life by giving as an example what some of his friends have done, and not by admitting, as he once did, that he is just not good for art. Good artists have been able to make a living from their work without having to "take up with a rich old woman," or by working at regular jobs while practicing their art in their spare time.

But instead of bringing together the ideal and practical aspects of his life when Miriam departs, the journalist gives up completely his way of life, his notions about artists and art itself and becomes a successful journalist, thus estranging himself from his primary goal. "His old-fashioned respectable middle-class hard-working American ancestry rose up in him and fought on Miriam's

side" (p. 113). Like Miriam, he cannot fulfill his dream, not because it is impossible, but because it is strange to him, it is foreign to him, and he cannot adapt to it. The journalist discovers his true self, so to speak, when he realizes that his "sympathies happened to fall in exactly right with the high-priced magazines of a liberal slant which paid him well for telling the world about the oppressed peoples" (p. 116). He had found his ideal tree, he thought, in journalism, doing something diametrically opposed in practice to his original idea of what life for him should be. Even at the time when he is telling the story, which is seen in retrospect, the journalist believes he has achieved his goal. The irony of his alienation, his defeat, is enhanced by the fact that he fails to realize that he has become exactly "like the newspaper bums, the drunken illiterates that seemed to think they were good enough for Mexico and South America" (p. 101). He thinks he has fulfilled his dream, but he has not. He has accepted Miriam back after five years of separation but, he says, will not marry her again. His companion, though, is ready to say, "Don't forget to invite me to your wedding." She is sure that it is he who will walk Miriam's chalk line now, because he is forever estranged from his original dream, forever estranged from the sensibility to art he would never achieve, completely out of touch with the Mexican reality.

"Hacienda" continues the theme of alienation in Miss Porter's Mexican fiction. In this long story all the

characters, except the Indians at the pulque hacienda and possibly the Russian, Andreyev, are estranged from the environment in which they find themselves. They fail to identify themselves with the very same situation they came to capture through their movie cameras. They fail, for example, to recognize the plight of the Indian; they fail to recognize his state of medieval serfdom and the injustice of the social system in which he lives. The "revolution of blessed memory" has had no effect on the lives of these peons, whose way of life has been exactly the same for the past few hundred years.

"Hacienda" is narrated in the first person. The narrating "I" is a woman writer who simply records events, but does not take part in the action. She is "strangely detached from the events," agrees George Hendrick, "and her disengagement is an extension of the disengagement and isolation of Laura in "Flowering Judas."<sup>12</sup> This lack of participation of the narrator has been found by critic Harry Mooney to be a major defect in the story, since the narrator, he comments, "has no integral function," because "she makes no comment on it, and seems to serve mainly as a reporter."<sup>13</sup> But seen in the light of the analysis of the development of the theme of alienation in Miss Porter's

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>13</sup>Harry J. Mooney, Jr., The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter (Pittsburg: The University of Pittsburg Press, 1957), pp. 48-49.

fiction, the way in which this type of narrator functions serves to demonstrate the degree of estrangement which her characters have reached. Moreover, it reflects, in fiction, the disillusionment that Miss Porter felt about the Mexican Revolution in her personal life.

The plot in "Hacienda" is simple: the narrator is invited to watch the filming of a picture about Mexico at the hacienda of Don Genaro and Dona Julia, Mexican aristocrats of Spanish descent. At the beginning of the story, she is met at a train station by Kennerly, the American film manager for the Russian moving-picture company, and Andreyev, a Russian cameraman. With them, she boards the train that will take them to the hacienda. Shortly after arriving at the last stop before their destination, they learn from an Indian youth of a terrible accident that has occurred. One of the actors, Justino, has shot his sister (also an actress in the film) with a gun belonging to the film company: Justino has fled, but has been immediately pursued, captured, and brought back by Vicente, another young actor in the troupe, and shortly thereafter put in jail.

After listening to the account, Kennerly and his companions finally arrive at the hacienda. Gathered there we find a numerous assortment of characters: Uspenski, the communist film director; Don Genaro, the hacienda owner, and his wife, Dona Julia; Lolita, the actress from Mexico City; Betaucourt, the censor representing the Mexican government; Montana, the songwriter, and a few other guests.

They are all discussing the killing of the young actress, which has stopped the production of the film. The next day, the narrator leaves for the city and the story ends.

The narrator is not the only, or the most important, example of alienation in "Hacienda." The people gathered at Don Genaro's farm represent a microcosm of the foreign interests that have always been present in Mexico, favored by the Diaz government and who, together with the Mexican bourgeoisie, have carried on business, Mexican Revolution or not. In "The Mexican Trinity," a report from Mexico City dated July, 1921, Katherine Anne Porter wrote:

Has any other country besides Mexico so many types of enemy within the gates? Here they are both foreign and native, hostile to each other by tradition, but mingling their ambitions in a common cause. The Mexican capitalist joins forces with the American against his revolutionary fellow-countryman. The Catholic Church enlists the help of Protestant strangers in the subjugation of the Indian, clamoring for his land. Reactionary Mexicans work faithfully with reactionary foreigners to achieve their ends by devious means. The Spanish, a scourge of Mexico, have plans of their own and are no better loved than they ever were. The British, Americans and French seek political and financial power, oil, and mines; a splendid horde of invaders, they are distrustful of each other, but unable to disentangle their interests. Then there are the native bourgeoisie, much resembling the bourgeoisie elsewhere, who are opposed to all idea of revolution, . . . and like the politicians they are pathetically unanimous in their belief that big business will save the country.<sup>14</sup>

The characters in "Hacienda" represent the sort of people and interests described in the passage above. Don

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<sup>14</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 400.



Genaro and Dona Julia belong to the aristocracy; they are also Spaniards, "the scourge of Mexico." Their farm has survived revolts, uprisings, and land reform laws and has remained unchanged for generations. Don Genaro and Dona Julia live in their own social sphere, totally detached from the plight of the Indian they exploit; their love for fast cars and airplanes, the people they live with, the condition in life they are used to, could not be more removed from the crudity in which their peons live.

Kennerly is the representative of the American businessman. He is of the "pullman" class, the kind of man who goes to the extreme of bringing California oranges all the way from the United States and drinking warm beer from a bottle so as not to risk infection from the "filthy paws of the Indians," whose smell, for him, "poured, simply poured like mildewed pea soup" (p. 224). Kennerly is the cool businessman who loses his temper only when the interests of the Hollywood people he represents are in danger. When informed of the death of Justino's sister, his sole concern is for the possible damage suit by the girl's family. He asks in a frenzy if the accident happened on the set; when he finds out it had not, he exclaims, "Oh, I see. Well, let's hear the rest of it. If he wasn't on the set, then it doesn't matter" (p. 246). Kennerly does not care about the human life that has been lost; a thought about the girl does not even cross his mind.

Andreyev, the Russian cameraman, is always thinking



about Russia. Of the whole lot, Andreyev appears less detached than the rest of the company; he, at least, tries to sing in Spanish. But apart from this fact, he is as much a businessman as the rest; he knows that such a thing as a suit against the company because of someone's death is something unheard of in a country like Mexico. When Kennerly mentions such a possibility, Andreyev rebuffs him for almost giving the Mexicans strange notions about such a thing; their ignorance about such matters gives him his peace of mind.

Betancourt, one of the Mexican advisers to Uspenski, is Mexican by birth, French-Spanish by blood, French by education. A representative of the foreign powers symbolically embodied in him, his duty during the filming is "to see that nothing hurtful to the national dignity got in the way of the foreign cameras" (p. 253). The irony is incisive, and serves to set off his detachment from the Indian national dignity and the true situation of his country: "Beggars, the poor, the deformed, trust Betancourt to brush them away" (p. 253). When referring to the accident of the Mexican actress, he says, "I am sorry for everything, but when you consider what her life would have been like in this place, it is much better that she is dead" (p. 253).

Carlos Montana, the Mexican songwriter, whose songs were once so popular as to be the only ones heard in Mexico, has become a failure. This character is perhaps the most revealing of all. The lost popularity of his songs, his

love for Mexican folklore (which symbolizes the popular revolution), all have failed. After all Carlos, the Mexican, the popular hero, has been ensnared by the enemy of Mexico, the businessman. It is Betancourt who has gotten him a job, and it is also Betancourt who calls him a failure. Now Carlos forms part of this group to whose connections in business he owes his survival. He could not have survived by living the ideals of the Mexican people, just as the Mexican Revolution could not have triumphed. He, too, for all his sentimentality, is detached from the reality in which the majority of the Mexican people live. He is now part of the club of international businessmen who really run the country.

The alienation of this group as a whole is what makes "Hacienda" so interesting. The contrast between Don Genaro's house and its guests, and the actual pulque-making hacienda strikes the reader forcibly. The detachment of the group is such that the place itself appears as through a haze. The Indian lives in a world so apart from the world of the Kennerlys, the Betancourts, and the Montanas that the camera captures that world in its full objective reality:

The camera had seen this unchanged world as a landscape with figures, but figures under the doom imposed by the landscape. The closed dark faces were full of instinctive suffering, without individual memory, or only the kind of memory animals may have, who when they feel the whip know they suffer but do not know why and cannot imagine a remedy . . . . Death in these pictures was a procession with lighted candles, love a matter of vague gravity, of clasped hands and two sculptured figures inclining toward each other. Even the figure of the Indian in his loose white clothing,

weathered and molded to his flat-hipped, narrow-waisted body, leaning between the horns of the maguey, his mouth to the gourd, his burro with the casks on either side waiting with hanging head for his load, and this formal traditional tragedy, beautiful and hollow. (p. 236)

The Indian remains as unchanged as his world, and as dead as the pictures that portray him. The doom with which Miss Porter sees the Indian is the doom caused by the alienated, estranged foreigner and Mexican whose interests have detached the latter from the truly autochthonous inhabitant of the country. The immense gap between the world of the Indian and the world of the Mexican ruling class and its foreign partners, Miss Porter seems to say, will never be closed, or even narrowed. At Don Genaro's ranch, an army is present to prevent any change: the ideals of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 will never triumph.

The following chapter presents a conclusion of this argument.

## Chapter 5

### FINAL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

From complete immersion in "Maria Concepcion" Miss Porter moves to the alienated figures in "Hacienda." The pessimistic atmosphere which encloses the farm, the dead figures of the Indians, the statue-like positions in which they are described, parallels Miss Porter's dissatisfaction with the state of things in Mexico when the story was published (1934). It would be naive to assume that Miss Porter could not see the defects of some of the people, especially the politicians in power, during her stay in Mexico. But it is clear that she had great hopes for the Mexican Revolution; in Mexico she had had, in 1921, "the most marvelous, natural, spontaneous experience in my life."<sup>1</sup> She had gone to study Mexican art, and was so impressed by it that together with some Mexican artist friends she organized the first international exposition of autochthonous arts and crafts in 1922, which took place in Los Angeles, California. The rebirth of Mexican art coincides with the birth of her art ("Maria Concepcion" was published in 1921). She recognized Mexican art

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Thompson, "An Interview," Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium, ed. Lodwick Hartley and George Core (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 11.

as "something very natural and acceptable, a feeling for art consanguine with my own, unfolding in a revolution which returned to find its freedoms in profound and honorable sources."<sup>2</sup> Those honorable sources, the Indians and the poor of Mexico, are the principal characters in "Maria Concepcion," living in their own habitat, with their worries and tribulations, but perfectly content with their way of life. By 1931, however, as Miss Porter describes in her essay "Leaving the Petate," the mentality of the Indian and peon is to acquire a brass bed as a status symbol; but even if the situation has changed a bit by then, some of her maid's children "may become mestizo revolutionaires, and keep up the work of saving the Indian."<sup>3</sup> The tone is highly ironic; if the Indian still has to be saved, the Revolution, for Miss Porter, has not accomplished what it set out to do.

By the year 1923, the Catholic Church had regained some of its old prestige and wealth. Miss Porter writes in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," recognizing the negative effect of that institution in the history of the Indian:

It is not Mary Guadalupe nor her son Jesus Christ that touches me. It is my friend Juan Diego I remember, and his people I see, kneeling in scattered ranks on the flagged floor of their church, fixing their eyes on mystic, speechless things. It is their ragged hands I see, and their wounded hearts that I

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<sup>2</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, "Why I Write About Mexico," The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 356.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., "Leaving the Petate," p. 393.

feel beating under their work-stained clothes . . . .<sup>4</sup>

In 1933, ten years later, the Indians were still as poor as they had always been. During the campaign for the elections to be held that year, Lazaro Cardenas, says Anita Brenner, "campaigned as if in war" in the small towns and villages. He sounded like Madero in his speeches, and the peasants, with outstretched hands, called to him "Lazaro . . . father . . . help us!"<sup>5</sup>

This is the situation portrayed by Miss Porter in "Hacienda," a situation completely hopeless for the Indian masses and the proletariat of Mexico, who will live forever "in a deathly dream."

Some critics have found "Hacienda" incomplete, regarding it as mere notes for a novel, inconclusive, or simply an artistic failure. They fail to see it in the light of Miss Porter's other writings about Mexico or in the context of all her Mexican stories. Taken in this sense, "Hacienda" is nothing but the culmination, the inevitable conclusion, of its author's view of her familiar country, a clear statement of her opinion of the situation at the time of the publication of the story. Moreover, the mood in "Hacienda" precludes that of Ship of Fools, Miss Porter's later novel, in which her negative attitude has transcended Mexico (where

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," p. 398.

<sup>5</sup>Anita Brenner, The Wind That Swept Mexico: History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942 (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1943), p. 90.



she had seen "clowns like Hitler") and embraces the entire world. In one of her last interviews, Miss Porter, talking about her disenchantment about the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the events that took place in Europe during Hitler's time, she comments:

Of course, I had seen all that in Mexico. The revolutionaries, good ones and bad ones. Zapata and Villa, they tore Mexico apart. The poor stayed poor. They redistributed the land and it's all back in the hands of the rich landowners.<sup>6</sup>

Miss Porter's work on Mexico is clear testimony of her abilities as a writer. In it she has fused her profound sensibility for the characteristics of a suffering people with the admirable style of a consummate artist, to present a change of perspective in a very personal experience.

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<sup>6</sup>Henry Allen, "You Can't Surprise Me; A Veteran Writer With A Secret in Her Closet," San Francisco Chronicle, November 7, 1974, p. 29.

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