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CONFRONTING THE CONVENTION: AN EXPLORATION OF REDEFINING THE SELF IN THE
SELECT SHORT STORIES OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Anne Porter's legacy in American literature vindicates distinctiveness through her most famous collection of short stories. As a writer, Porter was interested in the psychological aspects of human nature, the hidden and unconscious motives that guide human behaviour. Essentially, her works extol to plumb into the depths of the human mind and examine the paradoxical nature, the weaknesses and follies that make them so quintessentially human and interesting. The series of seven sketches entitled *The Old Order* concentrates on Miranda stories, which explores the existence of a tension because of the coercion to adhere to the old order. The present paper deals with the Miranda stories namely *The Source*, *The Witness*, *The Circus*, *The Fig Tree*, *The Grave*, *Old Mortality*, and *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*. Miranda, the protagonist ventures through childhood acquaintances and its repercussions becomes explicit in youth and adulthood. The protagonist seems to grow and change under the readers' eyes and exhibit her self – determination in the choices she make or alternately accept her situation with greater resolution.

Keywords: bildungsroman, selfhood, human complexities, inner consciousness, novella, old order, repression

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Katherine Anne Porter is a renowned literary figure of her time known for her distinctive stories that encapsulates to integrate the factual crusade of human nature through self-revelation. It is significant to note that her fictional art deals with penetrating vision of human life and its complexities. A profound study of her short stories and novellas gives a pragmatic expression on subjective consciousness, which means, her works apprehends to the perceptual experiences, that is, from her memories of the past and from the real stories. Edward Schwartz mentions "Miss Porter's "truth" is the truth of feelings and behavior rather than that of ideas" (qtd in CLC,311). Ultimately, her writing presents a unique perspective, which relatively focuses on the character's psyche.

The sense of continuity in expressing the past is because of Porter's own psychic injury, which has profoundly affected her character and disposition; repression of her social ideology, the pain of economic

conditions made her to reject orthodox beliefs and dogmas. She revolts against the confines of the old order and strengthens her personality in search for truth. Porter, reestablishes her concept of beliefs and traditions and moves with Thomas Hardy's notion "into another tradition of equal antiquity, equal importance, equal seriousness, a body of opinion running parallel throughout history to the body of law in church and state: the tradition of dissect"(qtd in Edward Schwartz, 82). Porter creates in her stories, characters that are determined to create their own traditional values and their struggle to come out of the old order in order to establish their identity and to postulate their self – definition.

The Miranda stories of Katherine Anne Porter published in *The Leaning Tower* (1944) highlight the Miranda stories, especially the series of seven sketches entitled *The Old Order*. Porter portrays the southern way of life focusing on familial bonding and linked to the confusion and inconsistency in the adult-child world. Miranda's life journey reflects her own experience in a female –dominated world. *The Source* provides a very accurate portrayal of the grandmother who becomes the architect of Miranda's character as a modern woman. Sophia unfolds and sustains the dignity and etiquette of the Old South with all its richness and correctness. She is an embodiment of discipline, matriarchal domination, and postulates command in thought and action. This stable figure of authority is a source of sustenance for Miranda and for the other grandchildren. Sophia Jane Rhea, Miranda's grandmother plays a vital role in the development of her initiation. However, Sophia represents the Southern belle; she rejects the old order and social values to re establish consciously the Southern matriarchal society. Therefore, Miranda is exposed to the traditional communal, family milieu with close interpersonal relationships with the members of the extended family.

The Witness portrays Miranda's exposure to the Southern past through Uncle Jimbilly, nanny and grandmother. The harsh realities of slavery seen through Uncle Jimbilly's stories are a revelation that causes considerable disturbance and horror in Miranda's mind. She understands and learns the sufferings of the Negroes through his incredible stories of the slaves. Miranda pays great attention to the stories told by Nannie and Uncle Jimbilly and learns the things of the past through these characters. Through the short story *The Source* and *The Witness*, Porters reveals Miranda's childhood, the influence and effect of the past in her life. The later stories exemplify the transformation that is reflected in Miranda and how she learns to question and reject the irrelevance of the old order.

The short stories *The Circus*, *The Fig Tree* and *The Grave* portray Miranda's childhood experience, her inability to accept the realities of life and her subsequent disenchantment with the adult world in the process of initiation when she is thrown into the realm of experiences. Miranda's consciousness is imprinted with traumatic experiences by her encounter with death and gender issues. *The Circus* describes Miranda's confrontation with social realities - that there is a great deal of difference between appearance and reality. More than a vision of hideous evil, it has to view as Miranda's encounter with the adult world and get an insight of the contradictions within it. *The Circus* revolves around an incident in Miranda's day that brings her awareness to gendered identity. The young Miranda along with her family members visits a huge circus. It is her first visit to a circus and she observes different people, their behaviour, their savage revelry and the noisy and colourful extravagance of the circus. . Levy says "Miranda sees her world more clearly, its shams and casual cruelties than the scoffing members of the family around her" (155).The peeping boys below her and the clowns and circus players with their dangerous stunts leave her traumatized. This is her initiation to womanhood through different experiences

Porter continues to present Miranda's voice through her struggle for identity. *The Fig Tree* story portrays the growing Miranda; her childhood experiences remain consistently in her thoughts. When Miranda was exposed to physical and psychological trauma, she uses imagination as a mechanism to learn and develop into adulthood. Porter continues to present Miranda's voice through her struggle for identity. *The Fig Tree* story portrays the growing Miranda; her childhood experiences remain consistently in her thoughts. When Miranda was exposed to physical and psychological trauma, she uses imagination as a mechanism to learn and develop into adulthood. The experience of the day further enables her to re-evaluate and reconstruct her

understanding of her social world through her independence from the family and from the ideas and knowledge, which she nurtures in her mature state.

The Grave expresses Miranda's encounter with the mysteries of life and death. Nine-year-old Miranda engages in an expedition, delighted when she and her brother discover buried treasures in an open and empty grave. This shows Miranda's need to discover her selfhood, to express her desires from the world of oppression and denial. Later, Miranda is exposed to the sight of the pregnant rabbit's womb cut open by her brother Paul. Miranda realizes that she has seen something, which she cannot fully understand. She is horrified but equally fascinated too as she becomes aware of herself as a woman endowed with the power to procreate. It is another important milestone in her initiation from girlhood to adolescence. The impressions of that day are momentous enough to be recollected years later in a far off place and she remembers the pregnant rabbit and the babies with the same horror but soon the image of her young brother and their treasure hunt on that day fills her with comfort and cheer. Miranda constructs her identity with an affirmation of freedom, reason and self-consciousness condemning, the despair, denial and oppression.

Old Mortality is a novella, which concentrates on young Miranda who seeks identity to find her true self in order to attain freedom from dominance and depression. The grown-up Miranda begins to look at the family's myth of Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel with mature eyes trying to understand how her family with a penchant for preserving and deifying the old order has gone about creating a romantic aura around the two figures. Miranda is now eighteen-years-old and can now reevaluate the past. The story is presented as a novella and there are three women of three generations- Miranda herself and before her, her aunt Amy and before her Molly. Molly Parrington had wit, boldness, intelligence and the independence to be self-sufficient and this made her a contrast to Aunt Amy. Miranda is influenced by the stories of these women, who defied the old order in their own way. Amy did so, paid with tragic consequences, and gained a mythical status in the family. Miranda's fascination for the old stories turns to revulsion when she understands that there is a world of difference between reality and myth. She has no desire to live up to her father's image of this fascinated Southern belle but to find her own identity.

All the three women escape from the patriarchal restrictions and strive to achieve an identity and selfhood. Miranda's elopement from the orderly life at the convent shows her as a rebellious and defiant young woman who is determined to find her own path and forge her own identity even if it means making mistakes and regretting them as long as she could be free to reject the old and embrace the new order of freedom. However, she little realizes that her choices are bound by the old order, which is an essential part of her. This is evident in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider discusses Porter's life experience. Robert H. Brinkmeyer suggests, "[Porter's] exploration of the world of her upbringing largely derived from her growing interest in the significance of the memory in the creation of self and art" (117). The story reveals the hidden consciousness of Miranda who is portrayed as a young lady of twenty-four physically and spiritually in search of selfhood. Away from her secure home, Miranda tries to make her living in very trying circumstances. The war makes life very hard and demanding even for civilians and Miranda struggles to assert her own self in a hostile world. She meets and falls in love with Adam. Meanwhile, she becomes a victim to the deadly influenza that is slowly killing hundreds in the city. The story is weaved around her delirium and dreams while she fights death, which is a recurrent presence in all her dreams. The final irony is when she recovers but loses Adam to influenza even as the war ends. Her attempts to escape reality through dreams are not because of the consequences of present war, but rather the problems rooted in the memories of childhood. Porter explores Miranda's inner state, her inability to accept the conflicting demands of the society upon her, and the haunting fear of death in the form of the "pale rider" during her illness. She only finds comfort in the company of Adam. It is through him that Porter delineates the significance of social stability and patriotism towards one's country. Miranda refuses to accept this that there is no one in her life again to interrupt her freedom of life. Thus, Miranda is left only with the memories of love and has to find her way alone, but takes a strong decision to move on.

This paper presents the life of Miranda Gay from childhood to adulthood. The Miranda stories show young Miranda's mind is perceived with different incidents and analyses these events in her matured state. Her understanding of the old order makes her to consider it as abstract dependence. Choosing a life partner of her own also dissatisfies her, making her feel isolated. Finally, Miranda continues the journey of self, by redefining her inner consciousness, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Moreover, this enables her to find her selfhood and autonomy amidst all human complexities.

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