CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION
A close survey of the themes and technique of Katherine Anne Porter reveals her as an artist of stature and relevance. As she has made clear in *The Day Before*, it is the psychology of human behaviour which interests her most, and each of her stories is an attempt to elucidate some particular problem or mystery in man's behaviour. And like a true artist she succeeds because she frequently illuminates the human situation in a way that seems wholly original and appealing to us. She shows human relations in constantly shifting phases in the moments of which they are made.

Katherine Anne Porter's writing is organically related to the subject matter, and the subject matter is closely connected with the author. In fact when we know the account of her life, the subjective orientation of Miss Porter's work (Miranda Stories)
becomes evident. She has made little effort to conceal the almost autobiographical nature of her principal heroine Miranda and several other characters. In fact it seems her subject matter in totality is the extension of her own life.

Her fiction successfully depicts her vision of life which shows her to be a true representative of our age. True to the saying of Flaubert that 'novels are the mirrors of their age', Miss Porter, like her contemporaries, has felt the emptiness of modern liberalism, humanitarianism and secularism and brought out the inadequacies of human behaviour and the pathological conditions which bring about attitudes of alienation. The sense of alienation is the dominant motif which gives a unity to Miss Porter's fiction. Her works collectively reveal that she has penetrated deeply into the ramifications of the human condition. To a great extent, her writings share with the writings of that period the most important response to the War — the ironic skepticism and negative vision of life. The conditions created by war were also responsible for the disorientation, dislocation and dichotomy in man,
numbing the conscience of man and inducing cynicism and a sense of alienation. As her fiction reveals, these attitudes have dried up all the inner resources of man.

All her works—her stories and a novel together—reveal Miss Porter's predilection for certain themes which depict individuals as isolated and estranged because of the conditions of oppression created, either by the circumstances of their life, society or by the inadequacies of their own nature. Leslie Fiedler regards her a 'female Faulknerian' because, like Faulkner, she evokes the syndromes of disease, death, defeat, loss, frustration, idiocy and lust.

The characters in her fiction experience a sense of isolation in terms of their own selves, the family and the society. She has successfully illustrated the dull melancholy and the oppressiveness of the family life which lead to the alienation of the character. The family situations which occupy most of her major stories reveal that the mere struggle to

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have anything of one's own, to be oneself at all, creates an element of strain which keeps everybody at breaking point. In The Day Before she observes:

"Even in harmonious families there is this double life . . . the one we can observe in our neighbor's household, and, underneath, another — secret and passionate and intense — which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends. Always in his mind each member is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have woven about him. One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them". 1

The characters in The Cracked Looking Glass, Rope, A Day's Work, That Tree, Old Mortality, The Downward Path to Wisdom and several characters in Ship of Fools are depicted as oppressed by certain situations originated by the family life. These characters also reveal an intense urge to escape from the life of unrelieved tension, lovelessness, sexual-frustration and despair.

1 Katherine Anne Porter, The Day Before, p. 64
In almost all her works, Miss Porter has explored the moral, ethical and spiritual problems of the modern man which lead to the sense of alienation. This theme finds its final expression in her novel *Ship of Fools*. This novel is an ironical and satiric portrayal of the disruption of order and the erosion of moral values, resulting in chaos and despair not only in the personal life of the individuals but also in the social and political life of that period. This novel reveals Miss Porter's apprehension of disaster. Alfred Kazin appropriately describes her as "Cassandra"; the prophet of doom. *Ship of Fools* portrays Miss Porter's vision of the total failure of man and poses the question of man's identity. The question of individual identity is meaningful only in the context of certain assumptions about the nature of humanity as a whole. The question about the validity of those contextual assumptions arises because human beings as we see them in *Ship of Fools* are subhuman and not very different from animals.

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1. Alfred Kazin, p. 72
2. J.E. Hardy, p. 133
It is obvious that the whole body of her work, including the novel Ship of Fools projects individuals who are anxiety-ridden, isolated and estranged beings and whose psyche is exposed to continuous persecution. However they all implicitly draw our attention to a significant point, as Wiesenfarth observes:

"...to overcome these evils man must see the truth about himself, learn to live and undergo spiritual rebirth. Human order emerges when love is based on the unpleasant truth about human nature. The possibility of order is extended to many when the artist shapes human experiences into fiction. Miss Porter's negative art is therefore a sign of hope: her stories show man what he is so that he can change." 1

Ship of Fools is an obvious criticism of the attitudes of non-involvement, self-inflicted isolation, conceit and mean spiritedness of the characters. Miss Porter has reacted strongly against the spiritual impoverishment and the ethos of the age which is the cause of all kinds of evils and problems in the lives

1 Joseph Wiesenfarth, "Negative of Hope: A Reading of Katherine Anne Porter", Renascence, p. 85
of individuals, and the total insecurity of their position. In this connection John McIntyre has rightly commented:

"Miss Porter's sinister parody of life acquits her from any technical frivolity, and the seriousness with which she impugns man's infidelity is the real evidence of her respect for all God's creatures: Ship of Fools persuades everyone that human living requires decision and involvement; it assures all that personal failure is equally society's loss." 1

In the conventional sense, critics do not regard it a tragedy, but it is a tragedy in the Chekhovian sense — a tragedy of "attrition". Miss Porter has given a realistic account of the sum total of all that life has to offer and she has not tampered with the theme to bring about an artificial ending to show how good overcomes evil.

Miss Porter's technical ability also deserves the praise and recognition it has received from all

schools of modern critics. The most important feature of her achievement is its consistency and uniformity. This quality is rarely found in such degree in writers. Mooney says, "... both lesser and greater writers may be approached through their faults or through their deflections from recognized standards. Miss Porter however is nearly faultless within the limits of her work..."¹ All the aspects of her technique—plot, setting presentation of characters, narrative devices and language reinforce the power of what she has to say. The rich individualizing details of the person, situations and the devising of situations bring out the full character and dimensions of a man's nature. She has also shown her intense awareness of the inner life, motives, complexes and contradictions in the characters. Mr. Thompson in Noon Wine is a superb example of her subtle analysis of the secret thoughts of the character. The 'stream of consciousness' device,
which she employs tactfully and with skill, brings out the innermost thoughts of the characters in *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

Her stories reveal an obvious restraint and balance of language. Hers is a strong, flexible style, and her language is marked by economy, an avoidance of non-essentials, which gives it smoothness, intensity and directness. This is part of the secret of its strength. She does not unnecessarily take recourse to symbolism. In her novel *Ship of Fools* also, she has avoided the trite and stereotyped language, which rescue the book from artificiality. The theme of *The Downward Path to Wisdom* offers the dangerous temptation to indulge in crude sentimentality but the extreme objectivity of her style safeguards it from being melodramatic. Maria Conception and *Flowering Judas* are written with subdued and exceptional brilliance. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and *The Grave*, Miss Porter shares with Hemingway the ability to create by suggestion and she makes us
sense more than she tells. Structurally all her stories are extremely compact. Particularly, as Nance comments, "Noon Wine and Old Mortality are marvels of richness in a small space".  

Finally we have an apt and well-deserved tribute to her skill in technique from a reviewer.  

"Miss Porter's prose has extraordinary purity and concentration, . . . all the dross has been distilled out. What is more important, it never gives the effect of irrelevant or insipid prettiness, never therefore becomes a 'style' because it never once, for its own sake, becomes separated from the story she has to tell".

Her stories draw our attention to the most significant quality of her fiction. They are extremely concrete and are marked by their immediacy and directness. All her works together reveal an objective view of thing, a powerful imagination, acute sense of perception, a preoccupation with the vivid memories of concrete


experiences and a sense of isolation and independence. These qualities lend an intense emotional charge to her works so that each of them becomes an experience to the reader. It is obvious that through her art she has given body to her vision of life.