CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter is one of the greatest writers of fiction that America has ever produced. She belongs to the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert and Henry James, the company of story tellers whose fiction possesses distinct aesthetic quality and whose feelings have attained harmonic expression in their work. She had a particular liking for Henry James. She observed once: "I choose Henry James, holding as I do with the conscious, disciplined artist, the serious expert, against the expansive, indiscriminating, 'cosmic' sort".¹ The emotional effect which she could achieve in her fiction is highly commendable and rightly commended by many critics of great fame. Her fiction reveals to the reader her unbiased understanding of human achievements and failures and hence deserves to be seriously read and even re-read.

Philip Stevick, the editor of The American Short Story 1900-1945, says: "Today only two of the then still emerging generation of short story writers Bates identified are recognised as masters of the form: William Faulkner's reputation

rests on his more than one hundred short stories published between 1930 and 1950, Katherine Anne Porter’s on her twenty six stories".\(^2\) Her pre-eminence as a novelist also has stood the test of time. It remains an unquestionable fact that though her literary output is slim, her reputation is admirably high. "A Writer’s Writer", "The First Lady of American Letters", are samples of the encomiums bestowed on her by critics of eminence.

She was born in 1890 and died in 1980. Her first story ‘Maria Concepcion’ was published in 1922 and her magnum opus *Ship of Fools* in 1962. During these four decades of highly fruitful career she has proved her calibre as a literary genius, revolutionary, literary critic, feminist and enthusiastic traveller, all rolled into one. Though a woman writer from the South, she has cautiously avoided the excesses of "Southern Gothicism". She had definite love for the South yet she was never a regionalist. "I am a Southerner … I do feel an intense sense of location and my tradition and my country exist to me, but I have never stuck to it in my writing because I have lived too nomadic a life",\(^3\) Miss Porter had stated once. H.E. Bates observed in 1945: "A writer of Miss Porter’s diverse sympathies and

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technical flexibility may one day, perhaps, speak for all America and there seems to be no reason why that Writer should not be herself".4

Porter’s work has woven itself into the fabric of American literature by its influence on other writers. Many have expressed their debt to Miss Porter. Among the earliest to do so were Eudora Welty and Kay Boyle. Besides, a host of Texas writers like Trueman Capote at one time idolized her. Tillie Olsen revered her and the reverence is evident in ‘Tell Me a Riddle’. Flannery O’ Connor professed an influence which Porter claimed not to see, but which is apparent when ‘The Displaced Person’ is compared with Noon Wine. Many critics have spoken of her as a pre-eminent stylist, though she did not like this epithet.

According to Edmund Wilson, Miss Porter’s short stories lend themselves to being sorted into three fairly distinct groups. The first section consists of stories which deal with the family life in working class or middle class house holds and generally these stories are bitter and bleak. They seem to be less satisfactory than the best of her other stories and the impression we get from these pieces is that the qualities that are most important in human life are being gradually annihilated in the milieu she is presenting. The second section of her work contains pictures of foreign countries and here Miss Porter is much more successful. Her careful study of Germany between the two wars in these stories is particularly interesting. By

its material and its point of view some of these stories remind the readers of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, but they are more poetic in treatment and more general in implication. "Her remarks about her art, as well as the stories themselves often seem to invite biographical attention. She has repeatedly emphasized her reliance upon memory for story material". 5

But perhaps the most interesting section of Katherine Anne Porter's work is composed of her stories about women, particularly her heroine Miranda. The first six pieces of *The Leaning Tower* deal with Miranda's childhood and the family background of Louisanions living in Southern Texas. This is the setting in which Miss Porter is most at home. One recognizes it in the firm little sketches that show the relations between Miranda's grandmother and her life-long coloured companions, the relation between the members of the family and the relations between the family and the Negro servants in general. There is a conception of a natural human spirit in terms of their bearing on which all the other forces of society are appraised.

Robert Penn Warren looks at Miss Porter from another angle and finds many common traits in the stories of Faulkner and Porter.

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There is a peculiar similarity among all the dissimilarities, between Faulkner and Porter. They both turned to the past for a significant part of their material, but turned to and informed and moralized, not romanticized past; and both in the end tell a story of the passing of the Old Order and the birth of the New Order. Both regarded the present as a product of the past, to be understood in that perspective, and both though repudiating the romance of the past saw in it certain human values now in jeopardy, most of all in jeopardy the sense of the responsible individual and at the same time man's loss of his sense of community and sense of basic relation to nature.\(^6\)

The most powerful tension in her work is between emotional involvement and detachment. What we find in the fiction is a hatred of all things that would price any thing above the awareness of human virtue. Miss Porter firmly believes that great human virtues are a must for harmony and peace in society.

In the opinion of Edmund Wilson Miss Porter does not belong to any group or movement nor can we say that she is under the direct influence of any particular writer. But her eminence in the realm of American fiction is really a weighty one. Eudora Welty comments: "Most good stories are about the interior of our lives, but Katherine Anne Porter's stories take place there; they show surface only at her choosing. This artist, writing her stories with a power that stamps them to their

last detail on the memory does so to an extra-ordinary degree without sensory imagery".7

Her Short stories, short novels and the great novel Ship of Fools are all monumental productions. She never liked the words "Novellas" and "Novelettes". In a conversation with Roy Newquist, Miss Porter bluntly said: "Every time I see the word "Novella" my hair stands on end. I have tried so hard to keep that pretentious, slack, boneless word out of the language. I say we have four classifications, and they are good enough—short story, long story, short novel and long novel".8 Katherine Anne Porter once remarked that Katherine Mansfield's work is the important fact about her life. Without the slightest exaggeration we can make the same remark about Miss Porter also.

Like all other forms of creative writing, fiction also grows out of life. By and large all creative writing is fed by life and it rests upon life. It can be considered a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it and what they felt and thought about these aspects of life which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. If its inspiration is


8 Roy Newquist, "An Interview with Katherine Anne Porter", Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations, p.114.
derived from a sense of social architectonics and if it possesses a sense of creative value in relation to social fabric, it deserves to be treated as a work of great significance. A comprehensive study of Miss Porter’s fiction will lead us to the conclusion that she is one of those eminent fiction writers who believe that the artist cannot claim to keep his art divorced from reality and society. She maintains that art is for society and its value, for society.

Each generation has its own peculiar problems of life which result in changes of external environment. The moral failure of modern civilisation and the decadence of twentieth century are dealt with not only by poets like T.S. Eliot but also by novelists like James Joyce. Man is a social animal. Individuals form the family, the nation, the race and the international community. The pivotal role of the individual in shaping a society can never be underestimated. In her fiction Miss Porter exhibits a clear foresight and an analytical outlook when she picturises the importance of the individual in relation to all these different strata. H.Richard Niebuhr in his Foreword to Self, Society, Existence by Paul E. Pfuetze states: "That no self exists or knows itself save in the presence of another self is a thought that has doubtless occurred to men at many times in the past".9 We are able to see Miss Porter’s admirable social consciousness in her short stories, short novels and the fully blossomed novel. Despite the occasional regional touches,

there is an element of universality in all her writing as she does not see an individual just as an island by himself. The aim of this dissertation is to make an indepth study of the fiction of Miss Porter and arrive at conclusions regarding her approach to self, society and existence in the 20th Century context. To be more precise, it is an attempt to delineate how the fiction of Miss Porter demonstrates the individual's experience and perception of self, society and existence with specific reference to Love, Family, Nation and Race which act as influencing and determining factors.

According to sociologists the health of the society depends upon the harmonious co-existence of the individuals. In a century where the distant parts of the world have become close neighbours as a result of rapid progress of science, any change in any part of the world will have its impact on other parts as well. Miss Porter's fiction dwells largely on the adaptability or otherwise of the individual in relation to the society around him. The ship which she has created in *Ship of Fools* is a microcosm of international community. In her short novels there is the mingling of individuals belonging to different nations and creeds. In her short stories, there are conflicts between individuals and the society around them. In some cases the clash is between the children and parental generation.

In her fiction, involvement of the author in the action is not very conspicuous. This does not mean that the omniscient author does not appear anywhere in the books at all. Any royal aloofness on the part of the author in
works of serious nature is likely to add confusion to the thinking process of the reader. The particular individual who is member of a family, a nation or a race can be compared to the cell of a human body, which by its proper arrangement gives form and shape to the body.

In this context clear amplification of self, society and existence become inevitable. According to Paul E. Pfuetze, "Self arises where the individual form has the ability to take the attitude of the group to which he belongs, then to come back upon himself, stimulate himself as he stimulates others, talk to himself in terms of his community and lay upon himself the responsibilities that go with the community". 10

Society is conceived as an organization of all the individuals in it. Individuals thus are given exclusive identity as well as continuity, both of which are essential to individuality. The individual is there only through co-operative interaction with others in the community. "Under normal conditions the way in which an individual acts will be determined by his taking the attitudes of the others in the group". 11 In short no individual can have aloofness as he is definitely the part of a whole.

10 Self, Society, Existence, p.78.

11 Ibid., p.97.
Existence is mainly concerned about life on this earth. In this thesis it does not have the theological or metaphysical interpretations. In simple terms, the word is almost synonymous with the years an individual spends in this world till he breathes his last. The span of time from birth to death which an individual spends in the society is denoted by the word existence.

Philosophers like George Herbert Mead believe that there are certain goods which are obviously not shareable in the sense that they cannot be enjoyed by two individuals at the same time. But wherever sharing is possible, whether they are concrete things or abstracts like love, sharing should be done. Common good, goodwill etc., are characteristics of culture and civilisation. Such coherence in a Community can assist in carrying through any good activity. From the philosophical angle universalism holds that it is the moral duty of the individual to seek the good of a community as a whole. "The individual is there only through co-operative interaction with others in the community. His own particular perspective arises in the community".\textsuperscript{12}

From the egoistic point of view it may be doubted whether the attainment of maximum good for one’s community is always or normally accompanied by the attainment of the maximum good for one’s own self. In this context, it may be observed that society has allowed some of its most selfless servants to undergo

\textsuperscript{12} Self, Society, Existence, p.57.
agonies even without providing them very common necessities of life. But these pioneers with courage and strong conviction are rare exceptions to general rules.

"If the modern state links citizens together without establishing a "being together" then let the state be replaced by love which will arise when men, out of the free abundant feeling approach one another".\textsuperscript{13} Spencer and other moralists have held that there must be compromise between the ideals and egoism. Bradley maintains that it is impossible to reconcile the claims of self-realisation and those of self-sacrifice. Miss Porter has her own approach to society in these matters.

Through her fiction she tries to establish that rights are natural only when they lead the society to happiness. The general enjoyment of these rights should be subject to limitations and interruptions. Even in time of peace the right to freedom is limited by what will lead to the common good. Every individual, according to her, should have virtue that is also a habit of action corresponding to the quality of character or disposition. Though Miss Porter was not a philosopher by any standard, a careful reader can successfully use some philosophical concepts in assessing her fiction.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Self, Society, Existence}, p.153.
For Mead, the Philosopher, the form as well as the content of the consciousness itself is of social origin. Inner consciousness is socially organised by the importation of the social organisation of the outer world. In Freudian terms the "Me" is the sensor or the super ego which modifies the instinctive psychic energy of the "id". "All thought is a way of behaving; specifically it is a mode of responding and adjusting". Under normal conditions the way in which an individual acts will be determined by his observation of the attitudes of others in the group. The individual is taught his rights and his duties. Thus it is the social control, as operating in terms of self-criticism, which exerts itself so intimately and so extensively over individual behaviour or conduct.

Miss Porter believes that we should have an order of society and we cannot afford to let that order decay. At the same time we must not forget the other capacity of taking back to the community and at times insisting upon changing significant symbols and behaviour patterns of the community. She painfully noticed the society around her crumbling due to misunderstanding of the individuals. "The more we steadily inspect the work of Katherine Anne Porter… it becomes clearer and clearer what she meant when she said that she had been working on one

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14 *Self, Society, Existence*, p.47.
central plan to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western World".\textsuperscript{15}

Real release from isolation can be found only in personal communion with other persons. This conviction of Miss Porter is abundantly clear to the readers of her fiction. Individualism sees man only in relation to himself, collectivism does not see man at all, it sees only society. The inevitable meeting of man with himself can take place only as a meeting of man with his fellowmen. He will be released from his isolation and insecurity when he knows the ‘Other’ in all his ‘Otherness’. He will then realise what it means to be a human being bound up in relation to the neighbour, suffering his destiny along with the neighbours, willing and ready to suffer it.

Sociologists have confusion as to whether self is born prior or society. Some even conclude that they are twin born. The crucial question here is whether the individual becomes a self in and through relation or is he already a self, who then enters into relation with other selves. Man may and do accept some objectives and more universal standards of value without identifying them. The true community does not arise through people having feeling for one another but through first taking their standard in living natural relations with a living centre and second, their being in living in mutual relation with one another.

Through her fiction Miss Porter argues that society gets ahead not by fancying its vision upon some distant goal but by bringing about immediate adjustment of itself by its surrounding. Our values lie in the present as past and future give us only the schedule and plans for a campaign for their realising.

The knowledge of oneself is pre-eminently knowledge of oneself in relation to others. This human inter-dependence gives a rational and psychological basis to the living community both secular and religious. Man’s search for spontaneity and creative freedom only serves to remind him once again his enslavement to the existing social system.

During a panel discussion Miss Porter told Louis D. Rubin: "This whole effort for the past one hundred years has been to remove the moral responsibility from the individual and make him blame his own human wickedness on his own society, but he makes his society and he will not take his responsibility for his part in it".  

In short, to be anything real is to enter relations and purely isolated individual self is nothing at all. "Since the moral and religious interest of the man demands integrity and responsibility in the individual self, we should remember that individuality contributes a serious problem for the absolute idealists since it

16 "Conversation with Louis D. Rubin", Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations. p. 48
is almost impossible on their account to assign ultimate significance to the individual".  

The self is a phase in the development of social form. The individual experiences himself directly and indirectly from the reflected standpoint from the other members of the social group. A social act in its simplest form is an act of one individual qualified or modified in its course by the acts of another individual.

As a rule, we conform to the general will of the community. We assume that the organised institutions represent the considered morality of the community. The things one can and one cannot do are those which everybody else would approve or condemn. The individual has not only the right but also the duty of talking to the community of which he is a part. Katherine Anne Porter firmly believed in this aspect of citizenship. "Later as in Ship of Fools, Miss Porter took a bleak view of the chances for improvement, but in 19Q2 she believed, with Emerson and Thoreau, that individuals could make a difference".  

George Hendrick in his book Katherine Anne Porter has emphasised that the title is particularly useful in understanding the story. James William Johnson has noted that her titles almost universally summarise symbolically the state of affairs

17 Self, Society, Existence, p.335.

she deals within her story. Let us have a cursory glance at some of her important stories. Detailed analysis from the researcher's angle can be found in the ensuing chapters. Only those stories, short novels and the novel which are frequently referred to are mentioned here.

In 'Virgin Violeta' Violeta is a 15 year old Mexican girl who is taught by the Mexican convent sisters that modesty, chastity, silence and obedience are more important than knowledge of music, French and arithmetic. She has been taught that sensual desires are shameful and virginity is the highest virtue. According to George Hendrick violet is a colour emblematic of gravity and chastity. Carlos, a young man comes to Violeta's house during one of her vacations and she develops an interest in reading his poems. One day when they are alone he places his hand on her and his lips on hers. Violeta feels that her virginity has been violated by means of the kiss, without ever having sinned sexually. She feels she is guilty and the story carefully exposes the seed of repression and guilt that are Violeta's response to the standard of modesty and chastity. She returns to School reluctantly because Carlos' kiss has taught her much more than what she learnt at school. Great Psycho-analytical ability is seen in the handling of the theme. Violeta and Laura of 'Flowering Judas' have much in common. They outwardly spurn amorous overtures but inwardly regret their doing so. Though both of them need love and are capable of giving it too there are psychological impediments.
‘The Martyr’ is about a fat Mexican Artist who literally eats himself to death, when his mistress leaves him for a more prosperous rival. In this story the triangle however ceases to be effective with the elopement of Isabel the model with a rival painter. The artist feels that he has been left in the lurch and he cannot fend for himself. He becomes a victim of gluttony. Frustration in sex results in over indulgence. A life dedicated to eating comes to an end as a fitting finale. Miss Porter deals with an unconventional theme in an unconventional way. According to Darlene Unrue, "on the surface, the story is an expansion of the theme of deifying human beings and the tragedies that result".19

In ‘Theft’ though the theft of a purse is the ostensible theme of the story, this theft is not so important because the purse is restored to the owner. It is the thief who is important. There are three thieves—Bill who steals 50 dollars which he once promised to give as the heroine’s due; the Janitress who steals the purse but returns it after the heroine has permitted her to keep it; the heroine who looks upon herself as a thief and determines to deprive herself of every single possession. Both the theme and the treatment are unique and reveal Miss Porter’s genius. … "The story has a distinctly autobiographical ring, and is probably based

on some episode of Miss Porter's experience in New York city during the 1920s".  

In 'Flowering Judas' the centre of interest is Laura an American expatriate living in Mexico. She works as a Teacher and is involved in the activities of the revolutionaries. She teaches English to the Indian Children but the work of a Teacher is only a smoke screen for her serious involvement in the revolution. A young man of nineteen tries to court her by singing her serenades. It is as though Porter wants to say that women in general and young women in particular are insecure if they are deeply involved in such public affairs and Movements. They are exposed to the dangers of exploitation of all sorts by the powers that be. The problem of modern waste land is the pathetic inability of man to live according to his dreams. "Laura is a wasteland figure, outside religion revolution and love". According to George Hendrick, there is really profitable use of symbolism in 'Flowering Judas' and this makes the story very effective. According to Miss Porter, "symbolism happens on its own self and it comes out of something so deep in your own consciousness and your own experience".

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20 John Edward Hardy, Katherine Anne Porter, p.63.

21 Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter, p.118.

'Maria ḡoneksiçon', 'Magic', 'Rope', 'He', The 'Jilting of Granny Weatherall', 'The Cracked Looking - Glass', 'The Journey', 'The Last Leaf', 'The Fig Tree', 'The Grave', 'A Day's Work', 'Holiday', 'The Downward Path to Wisdom', and 'The Leaning Tower' are the other short stories discussed in this thesis. These stories do exhibit Miss Porter's enviable knowledge of the working of the human mind in given situations.

*Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* have to be considered in a more detailed manner. "If Miss Porter had written nothing but these three narratives, she would be among the most distinguished masters of the craft in this country", observes William Try in *New York Times*.

**Old Mortality**

This is one of Miss Porter's short novels and divided into three parts. Miranda the young child looks at the picture of her dead aunt Amy. Miranda is eight and Maria her elder sister twelve. A healthy young cousin Gabriel really loved Amy though she did not show much reciprocation. One day another young man made advances to Amy and an infuriated Harry (Miranda's father) shot him and to avoid arrest he went to Mexico. After this event she agrees to marry Gabriel but unfortunately the marriage was a very short lived one. From New Orleans Amy's body was brought to her native place for burial. On her tombstone Gabriel had engraved: "she lives again who suffered life/ Then suffered death,
and now set free/ A singing angel, she forgets/ The griefs of old mortality". Even after marrying another lady he continued to cherish the memory of Amy. When Miranda and Maria were students at the convent of Child Jesus they were once taken to the house of Gabriel by their father. But they had felt uneasy and returned quickly to the school.

Miranda is travelling by train after separation from her husband and a fussy old woman encounters her. During the conversation it is found that the elderly lady is Eva Parrington who is a cousin of Amy. Eva makes satiric remarks about the dead Amy very frequently. She speaks ill of Amy’s morality and casts suspicion even about her death. She is going to participate in the cremation of Gabriel which is to take place near Amy’s grave. In fact the purpose of Miranda’s visit is also the same. Miranda’s father receives both of them at the station. Miranda develops a type of hatred to the elders and their ways. She comes to the conclusion "I don’t want any promises, I won’t have false hopes, I won’t be romantic about myself. I can’t live in their world any longer... atleast I can know the truth about what happens to me".23 She assured herself silently making a promise to herself in her hopefulness, in her ignorance. In her stories the family is always supported in the evil work by other institutions—Social, Political and Religious. And in her treatment of evil in the family, just as in her treatment of

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corruption in politics and religion, she always holds an implicit vision of an ideal that has been vitiated, betrayed or perverted.

_Noon Wine_ is the story of some good souls who had to undergo untold miseries for no fault of theirs. Mister Helton, a lover of harmonicas gets employment in the farm of Mister Thompson. He usually sings a song which has reference to "Noon Wine". One day when the children of Thompson meddle with the harmonica Helton shakes them with the ferocity of a "mad man". Time rolls on and the children grow healthy and hefty.

One day a stranger comes to the farm and makes enquiries about Mr. Helton. The stranger introduces himself as Mr. Homer T. Hatch. He says that Mr. Helton is a lunatic who escaped from Dakota years back and he has now come to take him back. Mr. Thompson replies that ever since Helton came to his farm he has been behaving like a normal man and he would not like to send back Mr. Helton to the lunatic asylum. But Mr. Hatch tries to overpower Mr. Helton and this makes Thompson furious. In the melee Thomson’s axe accidentally falls on Hatch killing him. Law takes its course. Helton is taken back to Dakota and Thompson is charged with murder. But after the trial Mr. Thompson is acquitted by the Court. Yet no one is ready to believe that Mr. Thompson is innocent. He finds it difficult to have a peaceful life anymore and takes a terrible decision. He writes "Before Almighty God, the great Judge of all, before whom I am about to appear, I do hereby solemnly swear that I did not take the life of Mr. Hatch on
purpose. It was done in defence of Mr. Helton, I did not aim to hit him with the axe but only to keep him off Mr. Helton. He aimed a blow at Mr. Helton who was not looking for it. It was my belief at that time that Mr. Hatch would have Mr. Helton if I did not interfere."  

Then he shoots himself dead. Speaking about *Noon Wine* Miss Porter has stated that the story is fiction and it is made up of thousands of things that did happen to living human beings in a certain part of the country at a certain time of my life. She is convinced that this story is "true" in the way that a work of fiction should be true, created out of all the scattered particles of life she was able to absorb and combine and shape into new being. [Mr. Thompson’s] "fatal pride, the hope of restoring his good name, is active almost to the end".  

*Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is a tragic love story with strange and unexpected turns. Miranda who is working with a news magazine, though poorly paid, is interested in serving the soldiers who are always in readiness to sacrifice their lives for the country. There was a young soldier officer by name Adam with whom she fell in love. He used to boast that he had never known any pain in his


life. On the other hand Miranda had experienced pain on many occasions in her life.

One day she fell seriously ill. Because of the war crisis even an ambulance was not available and with a lot of difficulty, at last she was admitted to a hospital by Adam. The doctor and the nurse took personal interest in her case and she became normal. But Adam was not permitted to visit her in the hospital. It was a relief to all the people when it was broadcast that the War had come to an end. It was now time for Miranda to get discharged from St. Luke’s Hospital. Her grief was that her beloved Adam had not yet visited her. In fact the colleagues in the press had come with a taxi car to take her back. At the instance of Miranda, the nurse read out a letter addressed to her. The letter was from a stranger, a friend of Adam to the effect that Adam had died of influenza at the Camp Hospital. The one who never knew pain is now no more and the one who suffered too much of pain is alive. She herself cannot walk without a stick. When she really wants Adam to be with her as her prop he has left her alone. She imagined that "Adam was beside, invisible but urgently present, a ghost more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart".26 She said "I Love you" and stood up trembling. Miss Tanner the Nurse said "Your taxi cab is waiting my dear" and there was Mary ready to go. "The excesses of Porter criticism have been often

26 Katherine Anne Porter, ‘Pale Horse, Pale Rider’ in The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter, p.317.
noted. Her critics often jumped to her side like knights errant vying for their lady's favour. When 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider' was published she was compared with Dante, Milton and Henry James; remarks Joan Givner in her introduction to Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations which she has edited.

Ship of Fools

Sybill Bedford observed in The Spectator of November, 16th, 1962: "The Great American novel has appeared, ironically it has turned out to be a great universal novel". Miss Porter's prophetic vision prompted her to take into the field of her work as many representatives of human species as can be efficiently managed. This large and representative cast itself is sufficient to give a universal appeal to the work.

As has been already pointed out Miss Porter was a conscious literary artist in the tradition of Henry James and James Joyce. Ship of Fools reveals her exploration of the human personality and society itself. "Promised Land" and "No Safe Harbour" which were the working titles of the book were discarded and Ship of Fools was accepted when the book was to be published. For the title she is indebted to Sebastian Brant's "Das Narrenschiff". Miss Porter was deeply impressed by the ship image of Brant and thought it would suit her purpose also.

In her prefatory comment on *Ship of Fools* she speaks of it as the "simple almost universal image to eternity".

The story, the interweaving lives of a large number of passengers Germans, Swiss, Spanish, Cubans, Mexicans, Swedes, Americans and 876 people in the steerage on board the North German *Lloyd S.S. Vera* (Truth) takes place between August 21st and September, 17th in the year 1931. It should be remembered that it was a real voyage she undertook from Mexico to Germany which provided her thought and inspired her to bring out *Ship of Fools*. The book is divided into three parts, each with a title and an appropriate epigraph. Part - I "Embarkation", "Quand partons - nous vers le bonheur?" (Baudelaire); Part - II "High Sea" - "Kein Haus, Keine Heimat" - (Song by Brahms); Part - III "The Harbors" - "For here we have no continuing city" - (Saint Paul). The epigraphs themselves ironically suggest that there is no definite beginning or dependable ending, either in time or in place.

The opening session, the first part of the embarkation section with the Rubric from Baudelaire, meaning, "When shall we set out towards happiness?" is a near perfect introduction to the action and events which are to follow. The port town of Vera Crus is a little purgatory between land and sea for the traveller. The reader soon realises that the embarking passengers are to leave one purgatory for another on the ship, and for another on the port of destination. Class and social differences are evident not only in the first class but also between first class and
steerage. The first section will force the reader to give a negative answer to the epigraph.

It is in Part - II that we see the travellers, alienated without permanent houses or homes, revealing their true colour. "The huge cast of characters introduced in the first section are seen intimately and distantly, wrongly and obliquely in this long second section"\textsuperscript{28}. Three women are of special interest and all of them are in one way or the other spokesmen for Miss. Porter. Jenny the young artist seems to be particularly autobiographic. She hails from the South like Miss Porter and had interest in Mexican revolution as Miss Porter had. Mrs. Treadwell, the forty-six year old divorcee and severe alcoholic, though wanted to withdraw from all contact, was drawn into the life of Freytag, a handsome business man who both loved and hated his Jewish wife. Miss Porter herself was a divorcee. La Condesa also is a spokesman for Miss Porter. With all her large and small human feelings she is much more than the member of a decadent aristocracy.

The third section begins with a quotation from Saint Paul - "For here we have no continuing city". Here the most significant event is the Captain’s Gala. At Miss Porter’s carnival—like dinner, all semblance of morality is swept away. The third section of the novel does not offer any undue optimism about the future of

\textsuperscript{28} Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, \textit{Katherine Anne Porter}, p.118.
humanity. The world is a place of foulness and fools. "Miss Porter has by the end of the novel explored attitudes towards life and death, love and sex, religion and religiosity, love and hate, racism and politics and also presented the deadly sins in old forms and also in new disguises".  

The world created in Ship of Fools is obviously a self-contained world, based on the writer’s experience of the real world but distanced from it in order to exclude elements which distract attention from the essentials. The intention of the novelist is to portray the inevitable disruption of an order which does not take into account the complexity of life in the present century. Any social system which does not take into account the instinctive drive in the human psyche is bound to fail and result in disharmony. It is this disharmony which led to the Second World War and critics are of the opinion that this novel is about the Second World War in retrospect. At heart of man lies a radical corruption and that is why he is foolishly self-alienated. Interdependence of the entire humanity is an absolute and unavoidable need of the century. In the wake of rapid scientific achievements the concept of interdependence has gained new dimensions. Miss Porter, to her terrible dismay realised that though there was tremendous growth of knowledge there was no proportionate growth of wisdom. Swollen heads and shrunken hearts were leading humanity from one catastrophe to another. Miss Porter, during an actual voyage from Mexico to Germany, came to realize this dreadful reality. It

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29 Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter, p.119.
is worthy to note that she does not exempt herself from the undesirable traits shared by other passengers of the S.S. Vera.

In her 1940 introduction to 'Flowering Judas' Miss Porter says that she spent most of her energies and spirit in an effort to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of man in the Western World. This is the dominant theme of Ship of Fools "Nearly every character in the work is a staggering example of an aspect of this failure". 30

Robert Penn Warren in his Katherine Anne Porter: A collection of Critical Essays, drives home to us certain valid points:

Miss Porter has a will to face and to face in its full context, what Herman Melville called the great "NO" of life. If a deep stoicism is the underlying attitude of this fiction, it is a stoicism without grimness or arrogance, and though shot through with irony and ware of a merciless evil in the world, yet capable of gaiety, tenderness and sympathy. Its ethical centre is found in those characters who, like Granny Weatherall, have the toughness to survive, but who survive by a loving sense of obligation to others. 31

Miss Porter has not in general chosen to cast her stories in scenes. Her sense of human encounter is very profound and always fundamental to her work.


What Miss Porter makes us see are those subjective worlds of hallucination, obsession, fever and guilt. She shows us that we do not have to see a story happen to know what is taking place. In her stories she does not attempt to diminish life but on the otherhand intensifies life. Since her subject is what lies beneath the surface, her way is to penetrate to bring out the essence. To express the emotion of courage she uses outrage as her instrument. She uses it with precision to show with what monstrosity feelings come about from love's repudiation.

In the face of such shape and weight of present misfortune, the voice of the individual artist may seem perhaps of no more consequence than the whirring of a cricket in the grass, but the art lives continuously, and they live literally by faith, their names and their shapes and their uses and their basic meanings survive unchanged in all that matters through times of interruption, diminishment, neglect, they outlive governments and creeds and the societies, even the very civilization that produced them. They cannot be destroyed altogether because they represent the substance of faith and the only reality. They are what we find again when the ruins are cleared away. And even the smallest and most incomplete offering at this time can be a product in defence of that faith.32

It becomes clear to a discerning reader that Miss Porter makes use of her fiction to assess the individual characters in relation to society at its different levels. Her stance is that noble human conduct in "Love" and "Family" is necessary for peace and harmony at higher levels of society. She does not disapprove "Nationalism" with some sense in it. The irrational pride of people

based on an imaginary superiority of their country, she found, was becoming a stumbling block in the path of harmony and global prosperity. She witnessed how "Racialism" was slowly rearing its ugly head promoting only hatred and jealousy among people.

Almost all her fictional characters either fail to understand each other or misunderstand each other. Some of them behave as though they are born enemies and quite often on the verbal level also this repulsive attitude is exhibited. "But in the most civilized houses, the best people in the world do the most horrible things to each other, sometimes not knowing what they're doing and when they find their lives approaching some sort of disaster, they do not know what happened. This is the true human predicament". 33 Miss Porter's fiction is immediately engaging and it also stimulates our moral imagination. It conveys to the reader very effectively that avoidance of collective responsibility will end up in collective disaster.