

GRANNY WEATHERALL'S DYING MOMENT: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S ALLUSIONS TO EMILY DICKINSON

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The final sentence of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" presents the story's central critical dilemma. No longer lost in the world of her memories and fully aware that she is about to die, the old woman "stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light."¹ In the preceding paragraph the narrator notes that this "point of light" coming from the bedside lamp "was herself." Readers are thus directed to conclude that Granny wills her own death. But why and in what spirit does she come to desire an end to her life?

In the absence of comments by the narrator which interpret Granny's last act, reactions from critics have varied widely. Yet most are based on the allusion in the conclusion to the New Testament parable of the wise and foolish virgins who wait through the night for Christ the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13).² Like Granny's fiance George, who unexpectedly did not appear at the marriage ceremony, Christ himself jilts the expectant old woman at her death — when, ironically, a priest is once again in the house — by not manifesting himself to bring her into heaven as her unquestioning faith taught. Despite her "emptiness," William L. Nance argues, Granny "keeps her hard-earned domination to the end, when she blows out her own light."³ David R. Mayer goes further to suggest that the frustration of her "empty waiting" causes her to reject both "her life and God himself" and to "become the defiant matriarch who jilts in return."⁴ While acknowledging Granny's rejection of Christ, John Edward Hardy contradicts such interpretations as these. He contends that her blowing out the light is an act "not of final defiance but of final surrender"⁵ which welcomes the third

1. *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), p. 89. Following quotations from this story are noted parenthetically in the text.

2. Charles A. Allen first noted the importance of this allusion in "Katherine Anne Porter: Psychology as Art," *Southwest Review*, 41 (1956), 227.

3. *Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), pp. 44-46.

4. "Porter's 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,'" *Explicator*, 38 (Summer 1980), 34.

5. *Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Ungar, 1973), p. 96. Besides Mayer, one other critic notes comparisons between this short story and poems by Emily Dickinson. Jane Krause DeMouy uses "My life closed twice before its close —" and "I know that He exists," as "frames of reference" and "glosses" for interpreting the story. She does not suggest that Porter alludes to them. Unlike other critics, DeMouy believes that contradictory readings of Granny's final act are possible: it may be either her assertion of power or her response to a "perception of nothingness." See *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), pp. 45-54.

bridegroom Death, who will fulfill the desire for sexual satisfaction that life has denied her. Hardy deduces Granny's serene confidence at this moment from an earlier allusion to Emily Dickinson's tranquil poem "Because I could not stop for Death —." Although the poem and Porter's short story are analogous in tracing a woman's reactions to death's arrival, the two ladies' emotions need not necessarily be similar. While the echoes of Dickinson are significant in understanding why Granny at last wishes to die, they are more numerous and more complex than Hardy recognizes. Porter subtly alludes also to two poems which question the conventional Christian notion that Christ's appearance at the moment of peaceful death will confirm the believer's life to have been purposeful. These contrasting allusions parallel the alternation in Granny's emotions when she finally understands her hopeless situation, thereby underscoring the complete disillusionment and boundless grief which motivate her final despairing act.

Despite similarities between "Because I could not stop for Death —" and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the differences are crucial. In the poem the female narrator uses the extended metaphor of a carriage ride to speak about her own death.

Because I could not stop for Death —
 He kindly stopped for me —
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves —
 And Immortality.
 We slowly drove — He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For His Civility —
 We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess — in the Ring —
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain —
 We passed the Setting Sun —
 Or rather — He passed Us —
 The Dews drew quivering and chill —
 For only Gossamer, my Gown —
 My Tippet — only Tulle —
 We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground —
 The Roof was scarcely visible —
 The Cornice — in the Ground —
 Since then — 'tis Centuries — and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses Heads
 Were toward Eternity —⁶

6. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), II, 546. Poem number 712.

Shortly before Granny fully realizes that she is dying, Porter alludes to this poem by having the narrator compare the sound of her daughter's voice to the rough motion of a cart into which the old woman imagines climbing. At the same moment Father Connolly is at the bedside administering the church's last rites.

Cornelia's voice staggered and bumped like a cart in a bad road. It rounded corners and turned back again and arrived nowhere. Granny stepped up in the cart very lightly and reached for the reins, but a man sat beside her and she knew him by his hands, driving the cart. (pp. 87-88)

What Dickinson calls the carriage driver's "Civility" is echoed by the explanation that along the road Granny journeys "the trees leaned over and bowed to each other." In response to the gentleman's kindly, unhurried demeanor, the speaker in the poem states: "I had put away / My labor and my leisure too." Likewise, on her last morning Granny has put away her troubles and displays in her idle musings a calm readiness for the future: "Things were finished somehow when the time came; thank God there was always a little margin over for peace: then a person could spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly" (p. 81). Yet the words "staggered" and "bumped" in the description of the cart's movements suggest that her ride will not allow such tranquil ease. The peril thus foreshadowed is fulfilled in the comment two paragraphs later that "Cornelia's voice made short turns and tilted over and crashed." Furthermore, the ride in the poem is purposeful — past school, fields, and sun toward "Eternity." Granny's cart travels in circles, arriving nowhere. When she understands her situation, she senses an approaching thunderstorm: "Light flashed on her closed eyelids, and a deep roaring shook her. Cornelia, is that lightning? I hear thunder" (p. 88). Upon fully realizing that she is dying, Granny behaves far differently than Dickinson's narrator. "But I can't, it's not time," she protests, recalling tasks remaining to be completed. Whereas in the morning she decided to let death "take care of itself now" (p. 82), in the evening she feels "taken by surprise" (p. 88). Her distress at this climactic moment reveals the essential irony in Porter's allusion to Dickinson's well-known poem.

The dying woman's escort in "Because I could not stop for Death —" heads the horses toward what might be considered a conventional Christian "Eternity" where the passing centuries feel shorter than a day. Yet he himself is not clothed in religious imagery. The expected escort in the other two poems to which Porter alludes, however, is clearly Christ himself. Ironically, he is the bridegroom who proves unfaithful to his promise. In the following stanzas first published in *Poems* (1896), both the dying narrator and the assembled mourners are awaiting the majestic, ennobling appearance of Christ the King.

I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air —
Between the Heaves of Storm —

The Eyes around — had wrung them dry —
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset — when the King
 Be witnessed — in the Room —
 I willed my Keepsakes — Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable — and then it was
 There interposed a Fly —
 With Blue — uncertain stumbling Buzz —
 Between the light — and me —
 And then the Windows failed — and then
 I could not see to see —⁷

A number of details in this poem appear also in Porter's short story, suggesting her familiarity with it. While thoughts about a will are death-bed conventions, Granny's sense of a thunderstorm, references to the window in Cornelia's bedroom, and particularly the use of the color blue all bring this poem and its ironic theme to mind at the conclusion of the story. In Granny's delirium during the day, she hears leaves rustling outside the window and later becomes aware that the shades are open, letting in "streamers of blue-gray light like tissue paper over her eyes" (p. 84). Just before her death, feeling that a thunderstorm is about to begin, she tries to tell her daughter to close the windows. But more significantly, the color blue is associated with those objects both the dying narrator and Granny see and hear last. The fly with its synesthetic blue buzz and the blue light from Cornelia's lamp with a silk shade are both ironic substitutes for Christ's presence which should have filled the room according to their expectations.

"I've seen a Dying Eye" also raises doubts about the conventional Christian hope of experiencing spiritual fulfillment at death. First published in *Poems* (1890) along with "Because I could not stop for Death —," it differs from the first-person poem quoted above in its use of a narrator who closely observes the one dying, searching for a clue to the meaning of that inevitable event.

I've seen a Dying Eye
 Run round and round a Room —
 In search of Something — as it seemed —
 Then Cloudier become —
 And then — obscure with Fog —
 And then — be soldered down
 Without disclosing what it be
 'Twere blessed to have seen —⁸

The clinical precision of this description suggests a world of harsh reality in which spiritual truths are suspect unless demonstrated conclusively. Here

7. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, I, 358. Poem number 465.

8. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, II, 419. Poem number 547.

no observable physical differences in the dying person testify to a vision of Christ. Therefore, the narrator remains skeptical about the value of such a manifestation and, moreover, about its very occurrence. Besides examining religious beliefs in a similar context, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" has two other echoes of this poem. Whereas the narrator sees "a Dying Eye / Run round and round a Room —," at the very moment Granny realizes she is dying, "she was so amazed her thoughts ran round and round" (p. 88). Furthermore, both works use the image of fog to indicate the chaotic darkness of death. One of Granny's memories is of the evening fog "marching across the creek swallowing the trees and moving up the hill like an army of ghosts" (pp. 83-84). When it would reach the orchard, she would "go in and light the lamps." By blowing out the light at the end of the story, then, she allows the deadly fog to overwhelm her. At the crucial moment her vision is clouded and obscured, just as the person's in "I've seen a Dying Eye."

Porter's repetition of words and images from these poems emphasizes more significant similarities in method and purpose. Both writers attentively record human perceptions at the instant of death, using their findings to invalidate comforting explanations of life's final crisis. The two poems, but especially the shorter one, stress eyes and sight. Likewise, in the second to last paragraph of the story, the one immediately following the allusion to "Because I could not stop for Death —," Porter carefully notes what is seen and also what does not appear. First, remembering her dead daughter, "Granny made a long journey outward, looking for Hapsy" (p. 88). But the narrator does not say that the search is successful. Then the dying woman becomes conscious of the bedside light which "flickered and winked like an eye": "Granny lay curled down within herself, amazed and watchful, staring at the point of light that was herself" (p. 89). The word "watchful" suggests her expectation that several objects will converge within her range of vision: she is observing her own waning life, she is guarding against death which will rob her of life, and simultaneously she is anticipating the arrival of Christ who will bring eternal spiritual satisfaction. The paragraph closes with her internal cry: "God, give a sign!" At this moment of utmost crisis her faith needs to be confirmed if it is not to collapse in the face of death's consuming power. Yet the sign never appears. Granny has only the bedside light to watch in her final moments — a modern electric light and not the lamp of faith which the wise virgins in Christ's parable carry to welcome the heavenly bridegroom late at night. Porter quite clearly follows Dickinson's technique for revealing her character's emotional response to death by contrasting what the person actually sees to what was anticipated. The extreme disparity intensifies Granny's sense of loss and disappointment; the faith by which she withstood the first jilting has proven illusory just at the moment she was hoping for fulfillment of its promises.

The ironic epiphany to which "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" builds is a vision of the inescapable, frightening absoluteness of isolation. Granny can turn nowhere else for comfort after her religious beliefs have

been shattered. The boundlessness of this spiritual and emotional emptiness nullifies the efficacy of every means by which she has sought to escape her painful loneliness in the past — including a pride in her own strength and power to act. Up until the disillusioning moment of death, she remains confident of her ability to do whatever is necessary to weather any crisis. Nevertheless, in the end she must recognize that human endeavor, like all else in which she trusts, is ultimately ineffective. Her final act, then, reveals the ironic futility of all that has kept her so busy. It symbolizes this anguishing knowledge because it is life-denying, unlike the life-enhancing deeds which have characterized her social and familial relationships. Whereas throughout life an illusory self-confidence has motivated Granny, now she acts in weakness.

The sequence of allusions to Dickinson's poems placed at the end of the story helps to make the intensity of Granny's disillusionment believable. The contradictory views of death in the poems mirror her swift alternation between emotional extremes — from calm readiness to shocked disappointment, from confidence to skepticism. Without raising biographical questions concerning Dickinson's final beliefs about death, Porter uses the pessimistic poems to refute almost ruthlessly the reassuring message of "Because I could not stop for Death — ." Forced to renounce hopes of experiencing comfort and companionship in death, Granny feels only the reality of the despair that she has hidden since the day George jilted her. By choosing to die, she reveals an utter hopelessness about the possibility for life after the loss of innocence. For her, the long-delayed fall into knowledge becomes literally the fall into death. Like the person Dickinson's narrator watches in "I've seen a dying Eye," Granny does not disclose to her observers how to live so that they may fit themselves for their own moment of death. In her grief, life has become unimaginable; the ultimate vanity of all hopes and actions, unendurable.

