A Case Study of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" from Formalist, Freudian Psychoanalytic, Post-structuralist, and Feminist Literary Perspectives

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A Case Study of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" from Formalist, Freudian Psychoanalytic, Post-structuralist, and Feminist Literary Perspectives

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Formalist, Freudian psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, and feminist methods of literary criticism all differ fundamentally in their presuppositional concept of literature, their central aims, and their practical application. Contrasting readings of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" using these methods demonstrate the differences and indicate the effectiveness of each while providing a range of perspectives from which to examine the work.

I. Formalist criticism

A first reading of Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" shows it to be a simple and pleasant story about a young girl named Miranda and her afternoon experiences with her brother. Additional study, however, reveals an intricate and carefully crafted literary structure designed to convey the ambiguities and complexities of the maturation process through "unobtrusive" symbolism and manipulation of the narrative (Porter 530). The work is unified through a complex interrelationship of opposing concepts of youth, innocence, and naturalness versus maturity, knowledge and artificiality which revolve around a central paradoxical equation of life and death. This unifying factor not only connects the work aesthetically but contributes thematically
by embodying, in structure, the ambivalence and ambiguity of human maturation. The progression of this system of oppositions is found in four distinct phases of the story: a symbolic and literal triggering of the maturation process in Miranda, a conflict over the process, experiential culmination of the process in an epiphany, and a flashback remembrance of the experiences by the girl.

The story opens with a description of the grandmother's efforts to lay beside her dead husband for "eternity" by repeatedly transporting his body to various places near her when she moves, immediately broadening the scope of the work to the universal while beginning the narrative in a simple and natural way (Porter 530). The cemetery which the grandfather is now buried is described in positive terms as a "pleasant, small neglected garden," contrasting the negative imagery usually associated with death, and the graves are "Lying open and empty," possibly alluding to the Biblical story of Christ, introducing the theme of the ambiguous nature of death (Porter 530). The scene has a "commonplaceneness" and the "grave was just a hole in the ground," indicating an unusual view of death as natural and common rather than something to fear (Porter 531). When Miranda scoops up a handful of earth from the grave it smells "pleasantly sweet, corrupt" reflecting the paradoxical concept of death which is unfolding (Porter 531).

The girl and her brother, Paul, find objects in the
grave which symbolize their roles in the story as well as the underlying theme of life and death. After switching items (an action which establishes the congruency between the individual child and the corresponding symbolic object), Paul has a small, silver, dove-shaped coffin screw which confirms his role as hunter/slayer -- the dove has a "deep, round hollow" in it's breast representing the bullet holes Paul creates when hunting -- and his role as an image of peace for Miranda at the close of the story (Porter 531). The dove-shaped coffin screw symbolically connects death with the concept of peace, further developing the ambiguous portrayal of death.

Miranda claims a gold wedding ring, representing female sexuality and marriage, which corresponds to her role as a maturing girl. The circularity of the ring symbolizes the cyclical and eternal nature of life and death as does the fact that it most probably belonged to her grandfather, indicating the cycle of family generations. After finding their prizes, the children "felt like trespassers" as non-initiates in a realm of maturity connoted by the cemetery (Porter 531).

A description of Miranda's clothing and family situation begins an exposition of the conflict of values and desires of Miranda related to her maturation. Some elderly neighbors, symbolizing social conformity and maturity, scold her for her rugged attire which represents the naturalness in youth. They refer to "the Scriptures," an external code
of behavior which contrasts Miranda's instinctive code; she regarded "shocking people" and "wastefulness" as bad and felt so because it was "simple and natural to her" (Porter 532). The grandmother is associated with these neighbors as a restrictive force of maturity acting against Miranda's freedom as a child, again illustrating this important relationship of opposite concepts.

When looking at her new ring Miranda's feelings are "turned against her overalls and sockless feet" and she begins to question her identity as an innocent youth (Porter 533). She feels the stirrings of maturation manifested in a desire to go home, take a bath, put on her best dress, and "sit in a wicker chair under the trees," fulfilling the role that she imagines is that of a mature, Southern, young lady (Porter 533). She continues to imagine a future life of civilized luxury, much different from the one of natural simplicity in which she presently lives, and this internal conflict becomes so great that she considers abandoning her childhood activities with her brother and going home. At this point Miranda desires a movement toward maturity and adulthood, but her persistent innocence and connection with nature remain, allowing her to deeply understand the coming epiphany as well as its significance to her.

In the third "scene" of the story Paul shoots and skins a pregnant rabbit and he and Miranda kneel "facing each other over the dead animal" assuming a symbolically ritualistic posture for the forthcoming rite of passage
(Porter 533). Up to this point they have both been ignorant of the nature of life and death. Miranda made fur coats for her dolls out of pelts from the rabbits that her brother killed, oblivious to their deaths, and Paul shows ignorant fascination with death when holding his silver dove and exclaiming, "This is the screw head for a coffin!" (Porter 531, 533). When initially approaching the graveyard the pair realize that there must be some deep significance to the graves and try to understand it, but they feel "nothing except an agreeable thrill of wonder" (Porter 531).

Upon examining the dead rabbit and its babies Miranda begins to understand the secrets of life and death. The dead baby rabbits are described in contradictory terms, indicating the paradox around which the story revolves; each is "wrapped in a thin scarlet veil" which is both their life sustaining placenta as well as their shroud in death, and although dead, they are described as looking "like a baby's head just washed" (Porter 533). This realization includes an understanding of mortality as well as the paradox that not only is death a natural part of life, they are the same; the very act of living is the process of dying. Through this knowledge she is also able to understand herself and the "secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body" involved in her maturation (Porter 534).

When this epiphany occurs she begins to tremble and feels that she has known these things "all along"; these truths have always been in her as latent instinctive
knowledge because she is a living creature and a part of nature (Porter 533). This process of the emergence of latent understanding is equated with the emergence of her latent maturity physically and mentally. Miranda realizes that nature is not merely "disorderly and...rude" but has unity and meaning and she reacts with "pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight" contrasting her earlier reactions of indifference toward death, indicating that she has been changed by the experience (Porter 533,534). She refuses to take the fur pelt realizing that it cost the rabbit its life. Similar to the Biblical story of the fall of man, Miranda's acquisition of this key knowledge is connected with death and mortality and, as seen at the close of the story, an eventual ejection from her childhood "Eden."

At the close of the story there is a break in the narrative and the story shifts to almost twenty years in Miranda's future in which she is in a "strange city of a strange country" walking through "the puddles and crushed refuse of a market street" (Porter 534). This bleak imagery associated with her future contrasts her desire as a child for "luxury and a grand way of living...founded on family legend of past wealth and desire" (Porter 534). The scene seems to convey a sense of worldliness -- perhaps world-weariness -- and a complete absence of the innocence and naturalness that she once possessed. Even the dyed sugar candies are poor artificial replications of the wild animals that she encountered in her days as a free and vibrant
youth. These candies have a smell of "sweetness and corruption," the same as the handful of earth from the grave she explored as a child, and it triggers a vivid remembrance of that experience (Porter 534). When this vision occurs she is "horrified" not because the vision is frightening or terrible, but because she realizes that she has lost the naturalness and innocence that she once possessed (Porter 534). This remembrance then fades and is replaced by one of her brother as a child holding the silver dove and brings a sense of peace (which is congruent with the dove's symbolism). Through this vision Miranda is reconnected to her "forgotten" childhood and possibly to the virtues that she once possessed (Porter 534). This final vision looks back, contrasting her initial experiences looking forward, thus ending the story with a sense of narrative and structural closure.

Katherine Anne Porter weaves these complex themes throughout a seemingly simple story of a little girl's experience with death and the stirrings of maturation within her. These concepts add considerable depth to the rite of passage story as well as unifying the work as a whole.

II. Freudian psychoanalytic criticism

At surface level, Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" seems to be a simple story about the natural maturation process of a young girl and her experiences related to it. Freudian analysis, however, uncovers numerous symbolic and
literal indications that the psychosexual development of Miranda is, in fact, abnormal due to the absence of her mother during early childhood. Because of this lack of a maternal figure, Miranda shows an ambiguous sexual identity and an unusual relationship with her brother manifested in an incestuous encounter. In spite of her difficulty with the maturation process she successfully enters the final stage of psychosexual development and resolves, to some extent, her earlier problems with personal identity and sexuality.

In the third stage of Freudian psychosexual development, the phallic stage, Miranda, like all young girls, began to associate sensual pleasure and sexual identity with genital stimulation and soon realized that she lacked the external sexual organs that her father possessed. This realization attacked her sense of self-worth and caused her to experience penis envy, desiring a male reproductive organ of her own. Because she was raised in a "motherless family" she could not utilize ordinary methods of adjustment to deal with her sexual conflicts and fixation occurred at the phallic stage—prohibiting a resolution of the penis envy until physiological changes occur, awakening her sexual instincts (Porter 532).

One method of dealing with penis envy is through an association with the father in hopes of "sharing" his penis. Miranda transfer this relationship to her brother, who is connected throughout the story with hunting and the phallic symbol of the gun. He serves as a surrogate father figure to
her, and she assumes a subordinate role. On their outings together "Miranda always followed at Paul's heels along the path, obeying instructions about handling her gun...learning how to stand it up properly" (Porter 531). By spending most of her time with her brother she partially satisfies her desire to have a penis and develop sexually.

Eventually young girls resolve their sexual confusion and penis envy by identifying with their mother as a vicarious connection to the father's penis and a model of the same sex. Without a sufficient maternal presence (the grandmother is characterized as oppressive and somewhat masculine and is not a suitable substitute) Miranda cannot formulate a sexual identity and shows sexual ambiguity as a tomboy, wearing overalls instead of a dress, which is forbidden by "the law of female decorum" in her community (Porter 532). Her hunting expeditions with Paul and her association with the male phallic rifle in the story also indicate her unclear sexual identity.

Paul fulfills his role as a male surrogate sexual figure in an incestuous sexual experience with Miranda at the graveyard which is not directly mentioned in the text but is strongly indicated by the subtext. The setting of the event is described with several sexual symbols: open graves and grave "stones rising out of uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass," and the pair symbolically descend into the grave (Porter 530). They feel "an agreeable thrill of wonder" and did "something they had not done before" (Porter
Miranda gains a gold wedding ring representing her newly acquired female sexuality and as soon as the experience is over they feel guilty because they know that they have violated a social taboo. Miranda tells Paul, "maybe one of the niggers'll see us and tell somebody" and later Paul vehemently tells her not to "tell a living soul" (Porter 534). This warning is expressed much too strongly to refer only to the killing of the rabbit, an activity which they had done many times before and brought the pelts to Uncle Jimbilly to prepare.

Miranda thinks about "the whole worrisome affair with confused unhappiness for a few days" and then represses it "quietly into her mind" (Porter 534). Almost twenty years later an odor triggers the resurfacing of the memory as a "dreadful vision" and she is "reasonably horrified" with a sense of guilt (Porter 534).

Through this sexual experience Miranda's penis envy is relieved and she progresses to the final genital-oriented stage of sexual development. The ring, as a symbol of her sexuality, causes her to be dissatisfied with her immature sexual identity and to long for things that she associates with being a young lady. She begins to understand "the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form" and starts to form a feminine identity by desiring to wear dresses and powder and be physically attractive (Porter 534). This maturity, as manifested in her realization of sexuality when viewing the
dead, pregnant rabbit, has been latent in her unconscious prior to its emergence; she felt that she had "known all along" (Porter 533).

Miranda's unusual connection to her brother allows her to surpass her difficult psychosexual development and reach maturation. The repression and reemergence of the memory of this experience indicates, however, that her sexual identity and psychosexual function may be incomplete or impaired in some sense due to her upbringing.

III. Post-structuralist criticism

Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" explores a theme of immaturity versus maturity through the story of a young girl beginning to feel the stirrings of womanhood. Typically, the term maturity is privileged as a superior state in the oppositional arrangement of the two thematic elements, endowed with this status by adult dominated Western culture. Philosophically, there is no basis for the authority of a society to make this determination and it is ultimately an invalid center of judgment.

On the surface "The Grave" seems to be a simple anecdote, but actually contains a wealth of meaning due to naturally integrated symbolism and unobtrusive but ambiguous narrative elements. These underlying components make the text "writerly," to borrow Roland Barthes' term, encouraging the reader to produce meaning and give the work a plurality of interpretation. The treatment of the oppositional themes
in the text causes it to be "self-deconstructing," revealing the invalidity of a hierarchical arrangement and a definitive evaluation of the central concepts.

The text does not allow the concepts of maturity and immaturity to stand alone but associates them with other abstractions creating a complex network of thematic interconnections preventing simplistic resolution of meaning according to the conventionally presupposed organizational hierarchy. Immaturity, as the lower term in the oppositional system, is connected with naturalness and freedom, positive ideas, elevating its conceptual status. This correlation is made through Miranda's unconstraint and independence and her role as a little girl before she encounters the revelatory experience which facilitates and symbolizes her maturation in the story. She is described as preferring "her overalls to any other dress" and "careening around astride bareback horses" (Porter 532). She often joined her brother wandering around the countryside unsupervised on "expeditions" naively participating in the activities of hunting and exploration (Porter 532). Miranda's behavior is governed by a code of values that seem "simple and natural to her" contrasting the repressive and artificial "law of female decorum" and "Scriptures" which the adults (represented by the old women she encounters) follow and enforce on their children (Porter 532).

Maturity is related in the text to both death and artificiality, lowering it in the hierarchical structure.
through the same code of ideological evaluation that usually privileges it as the higher term (death is subordinated to life and artificiality to naturalness). Miranda's acquisition of maturity is associated with her explorations in a graveyard, recovering the wedding ring from one of her dead relatives, and the killing and examination of a pregnant rabbit, experiences from which she gains key knowledge into the nature of life and death. Her maturation is also described in terms of syntheticism and affectation. When she first begins to desire the things associated with growing up she imagines dressing up in "the most becoming dress she owned" and sitting "in a wicker chair under the trees," reflecting her conception of a proper Southern belle (Porter 533). She also desires "luxury and a grand way of living," contrasting her natural simplicity (Porter 533).

Although the conceptual connections of maturity with death and artificiality and immaturity with naturalness and freedom disallows the conventional privileging of maturity, the text takes the decentering process one step further, attributing an ambiguous multiplicity of significance to each of the secondary terms with which the two central ones are associated. This expansion of internal meaning not only refuses the standard, but voids the stratified organizational pattern altogether. Death is denied the usual straightforward portrayal as ultimately negative; instead it is portrayed as commonplace and natural. It is described as a "long repose" rather than an end (Porter 530).
Paul finds a coffin screw head that is in the shape of a dove, connecting death with concepts of peace and transcendence. The graveyard is not portrayed as dismal or frightening, but as a small "garden" with "uncropped sweet-smelling grass" (Porter 530). The death of the pregnant rabbit causes Miranda to react with "pity" as well as "shocked delight" and the dead rabbits are described as looking "like a baby's head just washed": images contrasting those usually associated with the Western idea of death (Porter 533).

Elements of the narrative also contradict the idea of naturalness as wholly positive. Miranda's naturalness is presented as a barrier to her development, holding her back to childish and improper pursuits. When she looks at the ring she has found and begins to think about her own internal desires her feelings turn "against her overalls and sockless feet"(Porter 532,533). With a new understanding she rejects her naive and immature activities, refusing to take the pelt of the rabbit that Paul has killed, like she has so many times before.

The conclusion of the story completes the maturation pattern, presenting Miranda at the stage of adulthood and refusing to resolve the thematic conflict. By offering no express evaluation of the central opposing concepts, the narrative closes, eliminating any possibility of establishing a new hierarchy to replace the one that is dissolved in the text. No indication is given of her
condition as an adult and the closing scene focuses on her flashback to her childhood experience, which is triggered through the ambiguous image of "sweet, corrupt smelling candy" (Porter 534). She is "horrified" by this remembrance, either because she regrets the loss of her childhood or because she looks back on it as fearful and unhappy. The vision fades and she sees "clearly her brother...standing again in the blazing sunshine," ending the story with a statement which refutes, through its neutrality, any hierarchical arrangement of terms (Porter 532).

Of course, in calling attention to the self-deconstructing pattern of this story, I have violated the very tenets of post-structuralist literary theory (Murfin 223). I have shown how the text renders its own presupposed thematic hierarchical pattern invalid by describing the concepts and their associated significances in terms of positive and negative, according to the same system of thought which governs the aforementioned pattern. Although they have no ultimate realistic basis, these centers of thought must be used as a frame of reference to make sense of the external world and to communicate.

IV. Feminist criticism

Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave" integrates both the mimetic and didactic functions of art through the roles of women in the work. The story defies the conventional,
pervasive social structure of male dominance, presenting a patriarchal pattern as both a viable possibility as well as partial reality. It shows the uniqueness of female experience and perception by contrasting Miranda's actions and attitudes from those of the representative figure, Paul. Miranda's maturation is described on two levels: the natural physical and emotional maturation of a young girl and an underlying self-realization and emergence into autonomy as a woman in the previously established pattern of female independence and strength.

"The Grave" contains an underlying structure of social arrangement in which women are the dominant figures, controlling their own lives and, in varying capacities, exerting control in their relationships with others. The grandmother stands at the top of the hierarchy as head of the family and the most preponderate figure in the narrative. She determines her own course of action "set[ting] out to find her own burial place" and owning her own farm (Porter 530). Her "constancy and possessiveness" cause her to transport her husband's interred body from place to place as she moves so that they could lie side by side "for eternity, as she had planned," indicating her dominance in the familial system (Porter 530). She exerts this power by discriminating "against her son Harry in her will" (Porter 532).

The old women that Miranda meets on the road also show a certain position of authority in the society. They are
bearers of cultural values, the enforcers of "the law of female decorum" which "had teeth in it," chastising Miranda for dressing like a boy (Porter 532). Miranda shows some aspects of unconventional autonomy as well, roaming around the countryside unsupervised, violating social rules in her dress and behavior.

There are considerable cognitive differences between Miranda and Paul, demonstrating those that exist between the sexes. The significance of this factor lies not in the particular differences themselves, but in the fact that they do differ. Any attempt to identify and ascribe cognitive traits to the sexes on the basis of this literary work would be augmenting or perpetuating stereotypes. On their hunting trip Paul proves himself to be goal-oriented; when making a kill he "wanted to be certain that he had made it" and would sometimes "smash his hat and yell with fury" when he misses (Porter 531,532). Miranda, however, participates in the activity for its own sake, enjoying "pulling the trigger and hearing the noise" (Porter 532). When Paul becomes frustrated with the hunt "Miranda could not understand his indignation" (Porter 531).

Miranda is raised in a "motherless family," lacking the most influential cultural model while growing up (Porter 534). Because gender roles are culturally learned rather than biological based, Miranda shows a sense of sexual ambiguity due to the absence of a maternal figure. Miranda is a tomboy, dressing in masculine styles and
participating in traditionally male activities. Eventually she is exposed to a sufficient level of inculturalization (by the old women, for example) to realize the discrepancy between her behavior and that of other young women.

When she examines the pregnant rabbit and the baby rabbits Miranda gains a self-knowledge of her procreative power. This realization is symbolized by the female sexual symbol of the ring that she had claimed earlier in the narrative. When Paul points out that the baby rabbits were about to be born, Miranda indicates her new understanding, responding "like kittens. I know, like babies" (Porter 534).

This newly acquired self-knowledge, coupled with her relative freedom from the patriarchal social structure allows Miranda to emerge into the female role of autonomy as demonstrated by the other women characters in the story. Immediately after undergoing the experience with the rabbit, Paul realizes Miranda's developing independence and individuality, addressing her "with an eager friendliness" and "on equal terms". When the narrative shifts twenty years into Miranda's future, the brief scene of her life gives the impression that she is independent as a mature woman. She is walking through a market street, presumably alone, in a "strange city of a strange country" indirectly indicating a sense of freedom and removal from her past (Porter 534).

In "The Grave" Porter combines insightful observations
of social systems with fictional portrayals of the possibilities existing to transcend them. Miranda's path of maturation reveals some of the complexity and uniqueness of the female experience, offering hope of individuality and independence from patriarchal society.

Formalism considers literary works as self-contained pieces of art, primarily valuable on the aesthetic level. Freudian psychoanalytic critics are much less concerned with aesthetic merit and view literary works as being based on a structural model similar to the one found in the Freudian concept of the unconscious. This model contains a relatively small and unimportant surface level or meaning lying over a much greater, latent one; Freudians consider the true value of the work to be in the hidden area. Post-structuralist critics view literature as drawn from a universal text and the author is given little credit for his work. With the author removed as the assumed provider of meaning, the reader is allowed to become a "producer" of meaning, permitting an infinite plurality of interpretation. According to the feminist school of literary criticism, literature both reveals and perpetuates the oppressive structure of male-dominated society and should be studied with this presupposition.

Formalists' central aim is to evaluate literary works as unified pieces and to determine meanings of the text alone without external sources of information. This goal is
accomplished through close readings of the text, examining each element as it relates to the others in the work. Special attention is paid to form as well as content, and in fact, the two are considered inseparable facets of the same thing. Formalists search for unifying elements, considering unity as of vital importance to aesthetic merit.

Psychoanalytic theory attempts to discover hidden psychological motivations which contribute to an understanding of the characters in the story and their relationship to the meaning of the work. Freudian critics examine the text for indications of these unconscious motivations according to psychoanalytic theories and subject the text to the Freudian pattern of dream analysis, looking for significant symbols. These clues are organized in ways that may be explained by psychoanalytic concepts of the human psyche and are used to inform the reading.

Post-structuralist and feminist critics, however, are often more concerned with their own ideology than they are with the texts that they study. Deconstructionist criticisms generally attempt to achieve the same end: to demonstrate how every literary work proves their philosophical arguments. Feminist criticism is as much political as it is literary and serves two main functions: the condemnation of male literature as sexist and oppressive and the interpretation of women’s literature from a feminist theoretical perspective.

Formalism takes all parts of a literary work into
account, yielding a more comprehensive reading; whereas Freudian literary criticism includes only the parts of the work which are congruent with its theories, seemingly ignoring much of the text and potentially leaving out many points which are important to understanding the piece. Unlike formalism, Freudian criticism often pays little or no attention to form, again limiting the scope of its interpretation. It relies on an external system of literary analysis which has been ultimately arbitrarily determined and is highly debatable, contrasting the closed system of formalist interpretation. The nature of Freudian literary examination, in which the critic searches for extensive psychological meaning based on relatively small and ambiguous indications in the text is conducive to making forced and unlikely interpretations. Freudian criticism is valuable as a different way of viewing a work but is ultimately incomplete because of its inability to take the text into account as a comprehensive whole.

Post-structuralist and feminist criticism are similar to the Freudian perspective in this manner, offering limited literary examination because of their non-literary agendas. The philosophical goals of post-structuralism and the political ones of feminism may also lead to readings which reflect the critics personal convictions rather than that which is in the text, providing a narrow view of the work.
Bibliography


