

ANALYSIS

Old Mortality (1936)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“There is in all these three novelettes [in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*] an absoluteness of technique and a felicity of language that are seldom encountered even in the best fiction. Both the title story, set in the influenza epidemic of 1918, and *Old Mortality*, the indirectly told tragedy of a Southern belle, are as keen and polished as slim steel.... I found myself reading all three novelettes with admiration...”

Wallace Stegner

“*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*: Three Short Novels”

Virginia Quarterly Review 15 (Summer 1939) 444-45

“What gives distinction to...Porter’s work is the strain of poetry in it.... In...*Old Mortality* two small girls learn the history of Aunt Amy, a Texan beauty of the nineties, who had been much loved, who had been unhappy and died young. The past is delicately conjured in family legend, in the flaunting airs and graces of the South, in dove-coloured velvet and eighteen-inch waists; the present materializes in the fat, shabby and lugubriously sentimental person of Uncle Gabriel, whose bride Amy had been for a few weeks.... Something of enchantment hangs over Amy and her capricious duel with death.”

Anonymous

Times Literary Supplement (London)

(27 May 1939) 311

“The world of Miranda’s childhood is foredoomed by the rapidity of industrial expansion, and we have only to turn to *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*...to learn how painfully Miranda comes to maturity in the knowledge of her family and of war and of disappointed love. Miranda thus moves between the two poles consistently observed in all Miss Porter’s work: the safe world of illusion and youth and innocence and the hard and actual world of maturity and disillusion and a hard-won fortitude.... Miranda, appearing as she does in two of Miss Porter’s three books of fiction and in eight of her twenty-two published stories, marks the closest approach we have to a central character in the work as a whole....

Old Mortality is a miracle of compression; in approximately 20,000 words, Miss Porter tells us all we need to know about Miranda’s childhood, and the legends from the past which shaped it; then she goes on to show us, quite dramatically, how these legends inevitably affect Miranda as she comes to maturity. *Old Mortality* falls into three sections marked out by the author; the first is dated 1885-1902, the second, 1904, and the third, 1912. In the first part of *Old Mortality*, the Grandmother is still alive, and representing, as always, the past. She is the guardian of its history and the keeper of its relics.... The past, splendidly romantic and always redolent of a promise that the present never seems to fulfill, is dramatically projected in the figure of Miranda’s and Maria’s Aunt Amy, who died when she was still very young. Her portrait hangs in the living room and draws the little girls’ eyes again and again. Her beauty is recognized by all her relatives as being superior to that of any other member of the family. The children are forever clamoring to be told this or that fragment of her story, and some relative is always ready to oblige, so that, piece by piece, her sad, romantic history unfolds in their minds.

Amy had been doomed to early death by tuberculosis, but her disease had not kept her from being the belle of every ball she attended, or from tormenting the man she was eventually to marry. “Uncle Gabriel has waited five years to marry Aunt Amy. She had been ill, her chest was weak; she was engaged twice to other young men and broke her engagements for no reason; and she laughed at the advice of older and kinder-hearted persons who thought it very capricious of her not to return the devotion of such a handsome and romantic young man as Gabriel, her second cousin, too; it was not as if she was marrying a stranger.” But Amy persisted in her mistreatment of Gabriel, and then the scandal broke; she flirted at a masked ball

with her former suitor, Raymond, and was even thought to have kissed him; an indiscretion which provoked her brother, Harry, the children's father, into shooting at the man before Gabriel could challenge him to a duel.... The morning after the ball, Harry, accompanied by his brother, Bill, and Gabriel, struck out for Mexico to wait until the scandal would blow over.

Amy woke early, in a fever, and set out after them; she 'rode to the border, kissed her brother Harry good-by, and rode back again with Bill and Gabriel.' Then she sent Gabriel away, and took to her bed; but, later, following a hemorrhage, she asked for him. When he appeared, he had just been disinherited by his grandfather who disapproved of his devotion to horses and racetracks. But, finally, Amy agreed to marry him, saying, 'Gabriel, if we get married now there'll be just time to be in New Orleans for Mardi Gras.' So she was married, and off they went. "She ran into the gray cold and stepped into the carriage and turned and smiled with her face as pale as death,' Miranda and Maria are often told,' and called out, 'Goodbye, good-by,' and refused her cloak, and said, 'Give me a glass of wine.' And none of us ever saw her alive again.' For just six weeks later, Amy was dead in New Orleans.

Now, in the year 1902, the little girls are surrounded by Amy's story, played out seventeen years in the past. There are still some family splendors, like cousin Isabel. 'When Cousin Isabel came out in her tight black riding habit, surrounded by young men, and mounted gracefully....Miranda's heart would close with such a keen dart of admiration, envy, vicarious pride it was almost painful.' On the other hand, there is Cousin Eva, 'shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, (sitting) in corners watching her mother.... She wore her mother's old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches.'

Miranda, naturally enough, identifies herself with the romantic side of the family, and 'persisted through her childhood in believing, in spite of her smallness, thinness, her little snubby nose saddled with freckles, her speckled gray eyes and habitual tantrums, that by some miracle she would grow into a tall, cream-colored brunette, like cousin Isabel; she decided always to wear a trailing white satin gown'.... Miranda wonders about Aunt Amy, looks at her old-fashioned portrait, and listens to the stories of her life. Miranda has never seen her Uncle Gabriel, however, since he has remarried and lives in New Orleans. But she continues to think of his love for Amy as 'such a story as one found in old books: unworldly books, but true, such as the Vita Nuova, the Sonnets of Shakespeare, and the Wedding Song of Spenser; and poems by Edgar Allan Poe'....

The meaning of the second part of *Old Mortality* is quite clear: the cracks are beginning to appear in the legend of the past. The year is 1904, and Maria and Miranda are attending convent school in New Orleans, in which 'they referred to themselves as 'immured.' It gave a romantic glint to what was otherwise a very dull life for them, except for blessed Saturday afternoons during the racing season.' On these Saturdays, their father or another relative usually appeared to take them for an outing, often to the racetracks. Miranda, watching the horses circling the track, longed to be a jockey when she grew up, and determined to practice her riding. On a particular Saturday, however, her father takes her and Maria to a track where one of the horses in the running is owned by their Uncle Gabriel, whom they still know only by the role he had played in Aunt Amy's legend. The horse is a hundred to one shot... But she is distracted from thinking of her bet by her first sight of Uncle Gabriel, who hails the girls and their father from a lower level of the grandstand. 'He was a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes, sad beaten eyes, and a big melancholy laugh, like a groan.' He looks at his two nieces, and says to Harry, 'Pretty as pictures, but rolled into one they don't come up to Amy, do they?'...

They rise in their seats to see Uncle Gabriel's horse streak past the judge's stand. The girls have each won a hundred dollars, but their triumph is hollow in the face of their disillusionment with their uncle, who insists on taking them and their father to visit his second wife.... 'This was the first time they had ever seen a man that they knew to be drunk.... Miranda felt it was an important moment in a great many ways.' The failure of the great legend becomes complete when Harry and his daughters meet Honey, Gabriel's second wife, and Gabriel's demoralization is apparent. The uncle and his wife are living in a dingy, third-rate hotel lost in the back areas of New Orleans, beyond the Negro quarter.... Maria and Miranda 'sat trying not to stare, miserably ill at ease,' until finally their father rises to leave. The girls cannot wait to be gone, and in

the taxi on the way back to school, 'Miranda...spoke out in her thoughtless way: 'I've decided I'm not going to be a jockey after all.'

If in this second part of *Old Mortality*, the legend fails Miranda, in the third and final section she breaks with it, and her voluminous, echoing past, which extends back so far beyond her birth, dramatically but inevitably. And now we see the logical conclusion for which Miss Porter, all the while, has been preparing us. The time is 1912, and Miranda is now eighteen; we find out that she has eloped from school the year before, and married, and, when we meet her, she is on the train, coming home for Uncle Gabriel's funeral. Here she encounters an old lady who has 'two enormous front teeth and a receding chin,' but who does not 'lack character,' and who turns out to be Cousin Eva, the feminist, who had symbolized, in Miranda's childhood, the ugliness of the family. The two women naturally fall to talking of the past and of their relatives, for Eva has been away a long time. Once, Miranda looks at her with a 'painful premonition,' and thinks, 'Oh, must I ever be like that?' Eva has lost her chair at the Seminary and has been to jail three times in her struggle for the Women's Vote.

When the conversation turns to Aunt Amy, Eva airs her opinion. 'Your Aunt Amy was a devil and a mischief-maker, but I loved her dearly.... She went through life like a spoiled darling, doing as she pleased and letting other people suffer for it, and pick up the pieces after her... The way she rose up suddenly from death's door to marry Gabriel Breaux, after refusing him and treating him like a dog for years, looked odd, to say the least.... And there was something very mysterious about her death, only six weeks after marriage... What connection did this man Raymond...have to do with Amy's sudden marriage to Gabriel, and what did Amy do to make away with herself so soon afterward?... Amy did away with herself to escape some disgrace, some exposure that she faced'.... Eva continues, talking of all the girls of Amy's time, their dances and their rivalries, from both of which Eva herself was shut out. Finally, 'It was just sex,' she said in despair; 'their minds dwelt on nothing else. They didn't call it that, it was all smothered under pretty names, but that's all it was, sex.'

When Eva thinks of herself, she becomes all the more bitter towards her family. 'All my life the whole family bedeviled me about my chin. My entire girlhood was spoiled by it. Can you imagine,' she asked, with a ferocity that seemed much too deep for this one cause, 'people who call themselves civilized spoiling life for a young girl because she had one unlucky feature... Ah, the family' she said, releasing her breath and sitting back quietly, 'the whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. It is the root of all human wrongs,' she ended, and relaxed, and her face became calm.' Miranda listens to all of this, and Cousin Eva says finally, 'I wanted you to hear the other side of the story'.... With sure, firm strokes, Miss Porter concludes her story with what I believe is one of the most eloquent, direct and meaningful passages in our contemporary prose. Miranda realizes abruptly how sick she is of these same old narratives, how smothered she has been by her family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, how little she shares their interminable interest in the past. She determines in her mind to leave her old home once and for all, and not to return to marriage. And this magnificent forward-leap of Miranda's mind seems somehow to encompass all her previous history."

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 20-25

"*Old Mortality* is relatively short...but it gives the impression of the mass of a novel. One factor contributing to this effect is the length of the time span; the novelette falls into three sections, dated 1885-1902, 1904, and 1912. Another factor is the considerable number of characters, who, despite the brevity of the story, are sketched in with great precision; we know little about them, but that little means much. Another, and not quite so obvious but perhaps more important, factor is the rich circumstantiality and easy discursiveness, especially in Part I, which sets the tone of the piece...

Part I, 1885-1902, introduces us to two little girls, Maria and Miranda, aged twelve and eight, through whose eyes we see the family.... In this section, the little girls attempt to make the people they know and the stories they have heard fit together, make sense; and always at the center is the story of Amy. Part II, in contrast with Part I with its discursiveness, its blurring of time, its anecdotal richness, gives a single fully developed scene, dated 1904. The father takes the little girls, on holiday from their convent school, to the

... Part III, 1912, shows us Miranda on a train going to the funeral of Uncle Gabriel... Cousin Eva begins to reinterpret the past, all the romantic past, the legend of Amy, who, according to Cousin Eva, was not beautiful, just good-looking, whose illness hadn't been romantic, and who had, she says, committed suicide.... So Cousin Eva, who has given her life to learning and a progressive cause, defines all the legend in terms of economics and biology. 'They simply festered inside,' she says of all the Amys...

But Miranda, catching a Baudelairean vision of 'corruption under lace and flowers,' thinks quite coldly: 'Of course, it was not like that. This is no more true than what I was told before. It's every bit as romantic.' And in revulsion from Cousin Eva, she wants to get home, though she is grown and married now, and see her father and sister, who are solid and alive, are not merely 'definitions.' But when she arrives her father cannot take her in, in the old way. He turns to Cousin Eva. And the two old people, who represent competing views of the past—love and poetry opposed to biology and economics—sit down together in a world, their world of the past, which excludes Miranda....

Details, in Part I, develop the first criticism of the legend, the criticism by innocent common sense. In Part II, the contrast between Gabriel as legend and Gabriel as real extends the same type of criticism, but more dramatically; but here another, moral criticism, enters in, for we have the effect of Amy on other people's lives, on Gabriel and Miss Honey.... Part III at first gives us, in Cousin Eva's words, the modern critical method applied to the legend—as if invoking Marx and Freud.... Miranda discovers that she is cut off from her father, who turns to Cousin Eva... Miranda...determines to leave them to their own sterile pursuit of trying to understand the past. She will understand herself, the truth of what happens to her.... But...Miranda makes her promise to herself in 'her hopefulness, her ignorance.' And those two words, *hopefulness*, *ignorance*, suddenly echo throughout the story....

Miranda will find a truth, as it were, but it, too, will be a myth... She must learn to live by her own myth. But she must earn her myth in the process of living.... We must remember that the heroine's name is Miranda, and we may remember Miranda of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, who exclaims, 'O brave new world, that has such people in it!'... Miranda of *Old Mortality* has passed a step beyond that moment of that exclamation, but she, too, has seen the pageant raised by Prospero's wand—the pageant evoked by her father, the pleasant everyday sort of father, who, however, is a Prospero, though lacking the other Prospero's irony. For *Old Mortality*, like *The Tempest*, is about illusion and reality."

Robert Penn Warren
"Irony with a Center: Katherine Anne Porter"
Selected Essays (Random House 1958)

"*Old Mortality* is about Miranda's struggle to be free in the present by going in search of the determining past. Unwilling to accept her family's legend of the past for a true account of it, to be permanently charmed by honored ways and family ties and the self-deceiving, sentimental romance of the South, Miranda resolves to 'know the truth about what happens to me'.... But rebellion against the old order deprives her of the illusions that give value to life... After the ancestral idols are broken, what remains? As she flees to marriage, the avenging furies of memory pursue her.... Her clear vision of the past deepens her sense of isolation and moral chaos.... By the end of *Old Mortality*, Miranda has outgrown the brave platitudes of Longfellow's 'Psalm of Life.' She has repudiated the family's romantic interpretation of the Amy legend.... Limited by her mortality, she may yet have the fortitude to search the meaning of her life, unhampered by the conventional clichés, for some truth."

Edward G. Schwartz
"The Fictions of Memory"
Southwest Review (Summer 1960)

"The early part of *Old Mortality* beautifully establishes the legend of the romantic South. The young Miranda is enchanted by her family's tradition of Aunt Amy's beauty and charm. Aunt Amy's story, indeed, might have been written by Margaret Mitchell [*Gone with the Wind*]; it is all dancing and passion and duels and early death. Yet Miranda has no personal memory of Aunt Amy. She remembers once meeting Uncle Gabriel, a drunk and a gambler, who has married a shrewish second wife. Yet even this picture has the romance of collapse. What has no romance at all is the light (if it *is* light) shed on the past by her sour old-maid Cousin Eva, whom Miranda, now grown up, encounters on the train coming home to

Uncle Gabriel's funeral. In Cousin Eva's version of the legend, Aunt Amy was a giddy and selfish flirt who died of a tuberculosis brought on by 'drinking lemon and salt to stop her periods when she wanted to go to dances.' Miranda is not convinced that this is a truthful version of what happened, but it goes far to rub out the glamour of the past, and when she sees her father and Cousin Eva, who have nothing in common *but* the past, united in their need to talk about it to the exclusion of Miranda, she understands that she must make her own present, perhaps so that she too may have a past, even ultimately a legend."

Louis Auchincloss

Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Writers
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 140-41

"The dead past, continuing to live in present memory, changes its character, becomes in effect a lie, and yet many members of the family are content to live in the lie, to define their present selves in terms of that altered past. One character, Miranda, is not, and the story is the account of her long effort to detach her self from the beguilements of the legend, to define her destiny as a separate thing from her heritage, to move out of the past into a clear present....

How pathetic, how trivial even, are all those mementos of the dead Amy's life, over which Miranda's grandmother pores with nearly ritualistic fidelity, when one puts them beside her glowing memories! Above all, how dead!... These were not malicious lies within which Miranda was growing up, only romantic ones, and all with their own charm and lyric melancholy and powerful invitation. But Miranda's life, unlike her elders', is not to be immured in them. In the second part of the story she is two years older, ten. Now she is 'immured' in a convent school with her sister, but the girls use the word, which they had found in romantic fiction, satirically. 'It was no good at all trying to fit the stories to life, and they did not even try'.... Now, when their father takes them to the races in New Orleans, they meet the real Uncle Gabriel...a drunkard living in squalor with a hopeless, embittered wife. 'Oh, what did grown-up people mean when they talked, anyway?' Any remaining illusions of romance are blown away, and Miranda, who, having decided that, because she would never be a great 'beauty,' would be a jockey instead, now decides that she will not be a jockey after all....

In the eight-year interval between the second and the third part of the story, she had declared her independence emphatically by eloping with a man of whom her family could not approve. At eighteen, she is returning home for the funeral of Uncle Gabriel, and on the train she meets the embittered old maid, Cousin Eva... She listens to Cousin Eva's malicious account of Aunt Amy and of other 'beauties' in that dead life.... Cousin Eva is even more hopelessly trapped in the past than the others, obsessively trapped.... [Miranda] will devote herself to knowing 'the truth about what happens to me.' But this promise she makes 'in her hopefulness, her ignorance.' She has moved into freedom through a degree of self-awareness, but the awareness is by no means complete."

Mark Schorer

Afterword

Pale Horse, Pale Rider by Katherine Anne Porter
(New American Library/Signet 1962) 170-72

"Miss Porter's subject matter is southern attitudes as expressed through family history, and...the theme is concerned with the nature of reality—particularly with self-definition. The story is told from the point of view of Miranda between the ages of eight and eighteen, and its details agree with all the other Miranda stories insofar as they relate events in a family that had moved from Kentucky to Louisiana and from there to Texas. At the center of the story are the memories of a girl, Amy, about whose long courtship and brief marriage to 'Uncle Gabriel' the aura of romance has accumulated.... The family legend represents her as a vivacious, daring and extremely beautiful girl, against whom the beauty and grace of later members of the family are forever to be judged. It tells of her using her cruel beauty to tantalize Uncle Gabriel until he despaired of ever winning her, of her precipitating events at a ball that caused a family scandal and disgrace. It tells of her sad suffering from an incurable illness, of her sudden and romantic marriage to Gabriel, and of her early death.

But the legend, which is more than just a romantic memory of Aunt Amy, is also a reflection of the family's attitude toward all events of the past—memories which Miranda can't share and an attitude that she cannot adopt because of discrepancies that she senses between such stories as related by the family and the actual facts that she perceives in the people and events that surround her in the everyday life of the present. In the photograph of Amy, for instance, 'The clothes were not even romantic looking, but merely most terribly out of fashion'; in the talk about the slimness of the women in the family, Miranda is reminded of Great-Aunt Keziah, in Kentucky, whose husband, Great-Uncle John-Jacob, 'had refused to allow her to ride his good horses after she had achieved two hundred and twenty pounds'; in watching her grandmother crying over her accumulation of ornaments of the past, Miranda sees only 'dowdy little wreaths and necklaces, some of them made of pearly shells; such moth-eaten bunches of pink ostrich feathers for the hair; such clumsy big breast pins and bracelets of gold and colored enamel; such silly-looking combs standing up on tall teeth capped with seed pearls and French paste.' Yet despite these disappointing incongruities, the child Miranda struggled to believe there was 'a life beyond a life in this world, as well as the next'; such episodes as members of the family remembered confirmed 'the nobility of human feeling, the divinity of man's vision of the unseen, the importance of life and death, the depths of the human heart, the romantic value of tragedy.'

Another view is suggested in the second section of the story, when Miranda and her sister have become schoolgirls in a New Orleans convent. During vacation on their grandmother's farm, they had read books detailing accounts of how 'beautiful' but unlucky maidens, who for mysterious reasons had been trapped by nuns and priests in dire collusion... 'immured' in convents, where they were forced to take the veil—an appalling rite during which the victims shrieked dreadfully—and condemned forever after to most uncomfortable and disorderly existences. They seemed to divide their time between lying chained in dark cells and assisting other nuns to bury throttled infants under stones in moldering rat-infested dungeons.' In Miranda's actual experience at the convent, no one even hinted that she should become a nun. 'On the contrary Miranda felt that the discouraging attitude of Sister Claude and Sister Austin and Sister Ursula towards her expressed ambition to be a nun barely veiled a deeply critical knowledge of her spiritual deficiencies.'

The most disheartening disillusion during this period came, however, when Miranda actually met the legendary Uncle Gabriel for the first time. His race horse was running in New Orleans and her father had taken her to bet a dollar on it, despite the fact that odds against the horse were a hundred to one. 'Can that be our Uncle Gabriel?' Miranda asked herself. 'Is that Aunt Amy's handsome romantic beau? Is that the man who wrote the poem about our Aunt Amy?' Uncle Gabriel, as she met him, 'was a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes, sad beaten eyes, and a big melancholy laugh, like a groan.' His language was coarse, and he was a drunkard. Even though his horse won the race and brought Miranda a hundred unexpected dollars—an event that had the making of a legend in itself—Miranda saw that victory had been purchased, not as a result of beauty, but at the price of agony; for the mare when seen close up 'was bleeding at the nose,' and 'Her eyes were wild and her knees were trembling.'

In legend, the past was beautiful or tragic. In art, it might be horrible and dangerous. In the present of Miranda's experience, it was ugly or merely commonplace. In the first section of *Old Mortality*, we get the view of the past as seen through the eyes of the elders with their memories, not as it actually was, but as they wanted it to be. In section two, we get the view of it through the eyes of Miranda herself, who judges it merely as it is reflected in her present. By section three, Miranda is eighteen. She has eloped and married, but she is still struggling to understand her own relationship to the past. To her, her elopement seemed in the romantic tradition of Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel, although we soon learn that the marriage is, in fact, a failure. We meet her on the train coming home for the funeral of Uncle Gabriel. His body has been returned to lie beside Amy's, as though in a final attempt to justify the legend, even though he has married again, and (it is hinted) there are better and more real reasons for him to be buried beside his second wife, who had shared the greater part of his wandering, homeless, and meaningless existence.

On the train, Miranda runs into Cousin Eva, also returning for the funeral, whose own life had been burdened by a constant comparison with the legend of Amy. While Amy was beautiful, thoughtless, impulsive, and daring, Cousin Eva has been homely, studious, and dedicated to high purposes. Amy had died and been preserved in the romantic legend; Eva had lived to develop a character and a reputation as a

fighter for women's rights. In a sense, Cousin Eva's good works, too, were part of her own legend of homeliness and dedication. At bottom, Miranda finds her a bitter, prematurely aged woman; but it is Cousin Eva who provides her with a third view of the legend of Aunt Amy. She hints that it was nothing but sublimated sex that caused the young girls of Amy's day to behave as they did. "Those parties and dances were their market, a girl couldn't afford to miss out, there were always rivals waiting to cut the ground from under her.... It was just sex," she said in despair.'

The older generation, then, had two ways of looking at the past: the romantic way of Miranda's father and of other members of the family, and the 'enlightened' way of Cousin Eva. Each way was different, and each was wrong. But the old did have something in common; they had their memories. Thus, when the train arrived at the station, it was Cousin Eva and Miranda's father who sat together in the back seat of the automobile and talked about old times; it was Miranda who was excluded from these memories, and who sat beside the driver in the front. Yet Miranda feels that she has a memory now and the beginning of her own legend—the legend of her elopement. Strangely enough, neither Cousin Eva nor her father will accept it. When reminded by Miranda of it, Cousin Eva says: 'Shameful, shameful.... If you had been my child I should have brought you home and spanked you.' Her father resented it. When he met her at the train, he showed it in his coldness.

'He had not forgiven her, she knew that. When would he? She could not guess, but she felt it would come of itself, without words and without acknowledgment on either side, for by the time it arrived neither of them would need to remember what had caused their division, nor why it had seemed so important. Surely old people cannot hold their grudges forever because the young want to live, too, she thought, in her arrogance, her pride. I will make my own mistakes, not yours; I cannot depend upon you beyond a certain point, why depend at all? There was something more beyond, but this was a first step to take, and she took it, walking in silence beside her elders who were no longer Cousin Eva and Father, since they had forgotten her presence, but had become Eva and Harry, who knew each other well, who were comfortable with each other, being contemporaries on equal terms, who occupied by right their place in this world, at the time of life to which they had arrived by paths familiar to them both. They need not play their roles of daughter, of son, to aged persons who did not understand them; nor of father and elderly female cousin to young persons whom they did not understand. They were precisely themselves; their eyes cleared, their voices relaxed into perfect naturalness, they need not weigh their words or calculate the effect of their manner. 'It is I who have no place,' thought Miranda. 'Where are my people and my own time?'

Miranda is not merely a southern child, in southern history, reflected through the sensibility of a southern author, even though she is, partly at least, all these things. She is any child, anywhere, seeking definition of herself through her past and present. Katherine Anne Porter's southern history, whether legendary or actual, provides the concrete experience through which 'historic memory' may function. Thus when she wrote the concluding sentence of *Old Mortality*, she was expressing, not the dilemma of Miranda alone, but the dilemma of all who seek understanding. 'At least I can know the truth about what happens to me,' Miranda thinks, 'making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance'."

Ray B. West, Jr.

Katherine Anne Porter
(U Minnesota 1963) 15-20

"*Old Mortality*, the story of Miranda's flight from her family, is divided into three approximately equal sections which could be entitled 'Amy' (1885-1902), 'Gabriel' (1904), and 'Eva' (1912). In the three sections Miranda, whose life links them all, is eight, ten, and eighteen years of age.... *Old Mortality* is a continuation of Miranda's education for life... In idealizing Amy as the embodiment of the myth, the family is unwittingly praising one whose very life condemns it and who resorted to death to escape from it. The contrasting life and escape of Eva is a reminder that the family is destructive in its cruelty as well as in its kindness. All this is grasped only remotely by the eighteen-year-old Miranda of the first section. At this stage her skepticism and that of her sister is limited to their awareness of the contrast between the romanticized picture of the family and its past given them by their elders, and the concrete evidence of fat female relatives, faded pictures, and moth-eaten finery....

The second section contends with the first and negates it. The meeting with Gabriel brings home to the girls with shocking cogency the falsity of the family myth and its moral destructiveness. In this section Miranda, now ten years old, is already partially separated from the family...in the New Orleans convent school from whose dullness she will eventually escape into marriage. Section three, in which Miranda is eighteen and has completed her escape, brings her into contact with Cousin Eva, who furthers her disillusionment with Aunt Amy and completes her education in the destructiveness of the family. Miranda sees that Cousin Eva's avenue of escape is one she cannot follow, and the contrast between her father's cold reception of her and his warmth toward Eva reminds her that her rejection of the family has left her isolated. She reaffirms the rejection...

His poem...reveals Gabriel's blind acceptance of his society's sentimentalism. The whole point of the story is the mortality which he and most others fail to see—the real meaning of the death of Amy, and the corruption and destructiveness of her society which it reveals.... The whole oppressive world was personified for her in Gabriel...whose suit seemed to be backed by the whole moral pressure of the family will. She made it no secret that she found him dull and considered his world too narrow for her.... Amy's wedding dress...typifies her character by its unconventionality, for 'she would not wear white, nor a veil.' It also identifies Amy with the favorite romantic symbol of freedom....

The mystery about Amy's death is willingly preserved by the romantic connivance of the family; but whether or not she committed suicide, as Eva flatly states, she gave every indication of willing and planning her death, for it was to be her means of escape.... Amy would not obey her father or Gabriel even in small matters, so complete was her desire to be free of the code which they represented. She cut off her long beautiful hair because Gabriel complimented it, and she disobeyed with a vengeance her father's commands about modest dress. She delighted in keeping alive and mysterious the question of what occurred between Raymond and herself at the dance to cause the 'very grave scandal' which so upset Gabriel and the family and sent brother Harry to his pleasant exile in Mexico.... When Harry and his brothers left for the Mexican border she escaped and accompanied them, causing an even greater scandal and aggravating her fever.... She continued her life of gaiety and dancing, and her illness became more serious. When certain that she was seriously ill, and perhaps out of sympathy for the long-suffering and recently disinherited Gabriel, she finally consented to marry him... She deliberately hastened [her death] by taking an overdose of medicine....

Cousin Eva is another version of the strong, self-sufficient woman.... The early treatment she receives mars Eva for life and leads to Miranda's musing question, 'Why was a strong character so deforming?' Miranda, who 'wanted to be strong,' cannot admire her fully or emulate her.... Eva has directed her general resentment of oppression against one particular aspect of it, the limitation of women's rights. Miranda has little interest in this work but tells Eva sincerely, 'I think it was brave of you, and I'm glad you did it, too. I loved your courage.' Although Eva possesses courage and some of its related virtues, she is deeply embittered by the cruelty of her mother and the family, filled with hatred and evil suspicions, and preoccupied with sex, though still quite naïve about it. She concentrates all this in her memory of Amy, who was cruel to her and who embodied all the graces she herself lacked. Her long devotion of hatred and her modern education enable Eva to see rather deeply into Amy and her romantic world, but her exaggeration of the evil in them forces Miranda to reject her view as equally romantic and to attempt to form her own from a balanced rejection of the two....

Eva, excited by her own diatribe, goes on to reveal the real root of her bitterness—the family's teasing about her plainness.... 'Ah, the family... The whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. It is the root of all human wrongs'... Miranda is a determined idealist, romantic, imaginative, perceptive, independent, spirited.... The author treats her with gentle irony but with obvious approval. The ironic distance will diminish as Miranda grows older, until only traces of it are in evidence at the end of *Old Mortality*; in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* it will disappear completely. Like her Aunt Amy, Miranda detests dullness, and she seems to find little else at school.... Part III of *Old Mortality* completes Miranda's education in the nature of the family, and in its last pages dramatizes with great fullness her spiritual rejection of it.... Miranda defends Amy against Eva's attacks, partly because she is still young and a bit romantic, but especially because of the kinship she feels with her earlier counterpart.... It now becomes ironically evident that of the two it is Eva who is more enslaved to the code, for all her independent life,

and more naïve about sex. She is genuinely repelled by the news that Miranda has eloped.... By now [Miranda] has made it perfectly clear that her motive in eloping was not the acceptance of love but the rejection of oppression.”

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 115-27

“The title *Old Mortality* is from Sir Walter Scott’s *Old Mortality* (1816), which begins with a description of John Paterson, known as Old Mortality, a religious enthusiast who wandered the Scottish countryside, caring for...graves, cleaned moss from the stones, renewed the inscriptions... [On the contrary, Porter said that she had never read a word of Scott.] Miranda cleansed the past just as Mortality renewed the stones... She could believe that romantically consumptive Amy would toy with Gabriel’s affections, would cause men to fight over her... Young men, some of rather dubious character, flocked about her.... A former suitor named Raymond, dressed as Jean Lafitte [pirate] ...arrived, went onto the gallery with Amy, and according to family legend may have kissed her, thereby causing Harry to defend her honor by shooting Raymond and causing Gabriel to challenge the pirate to a duel. The legend went on and on: Harry’s flight to Mexico...Amy’s death six weeks after the wedding.... The events have the overtones of a Sir Walter Scott-influenced romantic, Southern novel....

Part II, set in 1904 after the death of the grandmother and after the children have been sent to a convent school, begins with a contrast of the anti-Catholic stories about nuns immured in convents and killing their babies, and the sedate, dull convent life the girls lived and saw about them. The girls had to give up trying to fit the violent stories to life.... In Part III Miranda re-evaluates the legend after her confrontation with Cousin Eva, who like Eve, brings knowledge; and Miranda vows not to be bound by the myths of the older generations.... Suffering from her ugliness and from being the daughter of a beautiful woman, Eva had never had a romantic view of Amy... Tuberculosis, she said, was not romantic... The myth of the South, a hint at another reality, self-knowledge, and self-deception are among the most important themes of the story.... The gravestones of the past are cleansed, renewed, and preserved.”

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 72-76

“Miranda, by the end of *Old Mortality* rebelling against the ties of the blood, resenting their very existence, planning to run away now from these and as soon as she can from her own escape into marriage. Miranda saying ‘I hate loving and being loved,’ is hating what destroys loving and what prevents being loved. She is, in her own particular and her own right, fighting back at the cheat she has discovered in all that’s been handed down to her as gospel truth.... She has made a story out of her anger, and if outrage is the emotion she has most strongly expressed, she is using her outrage as her cool instrument.”

Eudora Welty
“The Eye of the Story”
Yale Review 55.2 (Winter 1966) 268-69

“*Old Mortality* is relatively short...but it gives an impression of the mass of a novel. One factor contributing to this effect is the length of the time span...1885-1902, 1904, and 1912. Another factor is the considerable number of the characters, who, despite the brevity of the story, are sketched in with great precision; we know little about them, but that little means much... Gabriel...marries Miss Honey, who can never compete with the legend of the dead Amy.... He takes them to meet Miss Honey, Amy’s successor, in his shabby apartment, and the little girls know that Miss Honey hates them all.... On the train...Cousin Eva begins to reinterpret the past, all the romantic past, the legend of Amy, show, according to Cousin Eva, was not beautiful, just good-looking, whose illness hadn’t been romantic, and who had, she says, committed suicide. Cousin Eva defines the bitter rivalry under the gaiety of the legend, the vicious competition among the belles.... So Cousin Eva, who has given her life to learning and a progressive cause, defines all the legend in terms of economics and biology...the modern critical method applied to the legend—as if invoking Marx and Freud.... ‘They simply festered inside,’ she says of all the Amys... But

Miranda...thinks quite coldly: 'Of course, it was not like that. This is no more true than what I was told before, it's every bit as romantic'....

She must live by her own myth. But she must earn her myth in the process of living. Her myth will be a new myth, different from the mutually competing myths of her father and Cousin Eva... We remember that the heroine's name is Miranda, and we may remember Miranda of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, who exclaims, 'O brave new world, that has such people in it!'... For *Old Mortality*, like *The Tempest*, is about illusion and reality... The skeptical and ironical bias is, I think, important in Miss Porter's work, and it is true that her work wears an air of detachment and contemplation. But, I should say, her irony is an irony with a center, never an irony for irony's sake. It simply implies, I think, a refusal to accept the formula, the ready-made solution, the hand-me-down morality, the word for the spirit. It affirms, rather, the constant need for exercising discrimination, the arduous obligation of the intellect in the face of conflicting dogmas... This basic attitude finds its correlation in her work, in the delicacy of phrase, the close structure, the counterpoint of incident and implication.... It is the intellectual rigor and discrimination that gives Miss Porter's work its classic distinction... The luminosity is from inward."

Robert Penn Warren
"Irony with a Center"

Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium
eds. Lodwick Hartley and George Core
(U Georgia 1969) 61-66

"*Old Mortality* is about Miranda's struggle to be free in the present by going in search of the determining past... After the idols are broken, what remains? As she flees to marriage, the avenging furies of memory pursue her.... Her clear vision of the past deepens her sense of isolation and moral chaos. More bitterly ironic, the freedom she may achieve is itself of limited value.... Such perilous ironies abound in Katherine Anne Porter's fiction... Her style, unmannered as it is, is intensely personal, entirely an intimate thing. Irony, scrupulous objectivity, precision and subtlety of form—by these means, she fashions her mastery over the personal element."

Edward G. Schwartz
"The Fictions of Memory"

Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium (1969) 71-72

"*Old Mortality* is...so sure in its language, so realized in its apparent aims, that one is tempted to be skeptical of its author's claim to have finished it off in a week. An examination of the first draft, however, leads one to take Miss Porter's word for it; so does a comparison of the first draft with the authorized published version... An ironic tension is achieved by the simultaneous blending and playing off against each other of linguistic levels, an effect which separates both Miss Porter and Miranda from their childhood homes.... Revision establishes Miranda's belief that her father acted on his own to save Gabriel from a duel.... When Maria and Miranda meet Uncle Gabriel for the first time...once a dashing, reckless cavalier... The girls are shocked nearly out of their wits at the discrepancy between fact and legend....

The failure of love, that is, the incapacity to imagine fully another's humanity, to act upon such imagination with a degree of generosity, and to abjure that vicious counterfeit of love, sentimentality, is by now so pervasive a theme in modern writing as to be something like a common topic. As treated in *Ship of Fools*...it had its logical antecedent in Miss Porter's earlier work. In *Old Mortality*, a bit less satiric in mode than the longer work, somewhat less allegorical in genre but no less ironic in its own way, Miranda, for the moment at least, rejects love outright. For her it comes to that when, her marriage foundering, she accidentally meets in the same compartment Cousin Eva Parrington going home to Cousin Gabriel's funeral.... Once the modern historical correction of specious Southern romanticism is resisted as no less romantic in its own way in how it substitutes one unacceptable myth for another, the question of Miranda's identity at the end of the novella cannot be answered by simply identifying her as one of the 'new women' who have cast aside a bogus birthright...

That life is 'a substance, a material to be used,' is the formulation of Aquinas making Aristotle acceptable to Christian doctrine.... The young Miranda who in desperation repudiates the whole of her past and everyone in it, who denounces the very emotion which makes affection possible, does so automatically

out of a sense of unbearable frustration at not knowing how to live a Catholic life; above all, she formulates the question for herself in quasi-Thomist terms but without knowing that she is formulating a question at all, since by now it is her second nature. The meaning, then, is this: Miss Porter has undercut Miranda and put her at sufficient distance to enable us to see her truly in a way that she cannot see herself. Her sympathies are with the young woman, yes; the case against Miranda's past has been well made, but there is no case to be made against the necessity of second nature and, moreover, Miss Porter does not want to make a case, since that second nature is hers as well as Miranda's. Miranda must try to make something of herself. A heroine of sorts... Her success will be in the honesty of the effort...and all around her will be 'that majestic failure of man in the western world'.... Nowhere more clearly than in *Old Mortality* can Miss Porter be seen as classical in her formal resolution of the conflict between the subjective person writing and the objective artist."

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 37-39, 47-48, 49-51

"The romanticism of Miranda's elders is typical of the agrarian upper-class, provincial mentality of the south in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Sir Walter Scott's chivalric novels exerted great influence upon the imagination of that society.... Motherless for many years, the little girls have been raised by their father, Harry, and their grandmother—with the assistance of various aunts, uncles, and older cousins. Both the father and the grandmother are dedicated to the preservation of an idealized picture of the family's past.

The central legend is the 'tragic' life of Harry's dead sister, Amy. Universally acknowledged as the greatest *belle* of her time, high-spirited and independent, she was bravely, almost joyfully undismayed by her conviction that she was destined for an early death. She established herself as the romantic heroine of the family when her second cousin, Gabriel, a patient and long-suffering suitor, felt himself obliged to challenge an offensive rival to a duel. To prevent the duel, her brother Harry created a disturbance by taking a pot-shot at the man. He then fled to Mexico to escape prosecution for attempted murder. Some time later, Amy finally accepted Gabriel's often-repeated proposal of marriage. But, faithful to her own prophecies, six weeks after the wedding she died. Miranda's childish imagination is nourished on the endlessly repeated anecdotes of Amy's adventures....

She does not begin to appreciate the truly morbid character of her elders' preoccupation with the past—especially of their apotheosis of the dead Amy—until the episode that is the climax of Part II, dated 1904... Uncle Gabriel is an aging drunkard, bleary-eyed, shambling, coarse-talking.... The sisters are taken to Gabriel's shabby apartment on Elysian Fields [where] the real human cruelty of the Amy myth is revealed. Gabriel has repeatedly assured their father that his present wife, Miss Honey, will be delighted to receive them. But, as it turns out, Miss Honey has not the slightest interest in them... The sisters go back to the convent feeling rebuffed, and somehow cheated of their rightful pleasure in the holiday....

In the final part, dated 1912, Miranda is on her way to attend the funeral of Gabriel—who, of course, is to be buried at his request beside Amy. We learn that Miranda has run away from school, almost a year before, and married. On the train, she meets Cousin Eva, the ugly duckling of her father's generation.... Many of the things [Eva] says, in her open condemnation of the family's traditional romanticism, seem to lend support to Miranda's own efforts to define realistic values for herself. But, in the end, when they reach their destination and are met by Miranda's father, Miranda feels once more cut off from all her elders. It is clear that her father has not fully forgiven her for her elopement.... Seeing the essential warmth and affection with which her father and Eva greet each other, subtly excluding her from the circle of their understanding, Miranda resigns forever, as futile and pointless, the effort to comprehend the past....

The title of the story...ultimately derives from that of a novel by Sir Walter Scott. Its internal source is the verse Gabriel wrote for Amy's gravestone.... The little poem quite accurately defines the family's basic attitudes toward life and death.... The state of 'mortality' was one that offered only grief, one to be escaped as quickly as possible. The desire for escape is the basic motivation of the family's preoccupation with the past and with the dead, a body of experience that is safely beyond the threats of time, and that can be manipulated at will, in imaginative remembrance, to make it conform to the romantic ideal.... It is...in [the] internal struggle, the conflict of impulses within Miranda's own soul, that the central dramatic tension

of the story is generated.... Within her own soul runs a strong strain of the family romanticism, the fatal capacity and need to fictionalize experience....

Old Mortality is not a blatantly feminist work. Cousin Eva, the chinless suffragette, is finally a comic character, more pathetic than admirable. But it is important that the protagonist of the story is female. Her search for identity and for freedom, is to a great extent identifiable with the struggle of modern southern women to escape from the role to which the chivalric tradition of the nineteenth century had assigned her—a role that Miss Porter clearly sees as one of subjection. However subtly the men might have disguised it as apotheosis of woman, and however willingly the women themselves might have acquiesced in the deception, the status of the female under the chivalric code was slightly lower than the fully human rather than higher. Miranda, in the innocence of her childhood, dreams of becoming a jockey—in short, of becoming a man....

Gabriel's devotion to horses, and to the elusive dream of permanently installing himself and Miss Honey in the splendor of a suite at the St. Charles Hotel on the proceeds of his gambling, is of a piece with his alcoholism as evidence of his moral irresponsibility and his refusal to see his second wife's bitter suffering. The horse he enters in this particular race is, moreover, a mare. And she shares with her owner's wife the euphemistic indignity of the appellation 'Miss.' The first time through the story, a reader may find it difficult to follow which, Miss Lucy or Miss Honey, is the horse and which is the wife. The confusion is undoubtedly deliberate on Miss Porter's part. That old-fashioned Southern habit of calling a married woman Miss, as if she were eternally virgin, is an offshoot of the chivalric myth. The dubious nature of the compliment, which really amounts to denying the recipient her rights and dignity as a mature woman, to denying the virtue of sexual fulfillment is underscored in this case by the association of horse and woman. Woman in a society whose values are so ordered, Katherine Anne Porter suggests, is not only not the rider but the ridden. Whether her name be Honey or Lucy, the exhausted and bleeding mount that bears drunken Gabriel as he plunges on in the mists of his absurd dream is emphatically feminine....

Miranda is shrewd in seeing that Cousin Eva's analysis of the spiritual malady of her generation, her picture of Amy and the others as morbidly 'sex-ridden,' is 'every bit as romantic' as all the rest she had been told about her elders. But if the vote for women and the 'realism' of the new psychology of sex cannot provide the basis for new social institutions to accommodate the vital human impulses that the old forms threaten to stifle, then what can? It is for this way to truth that Miranda is desperately searching at the end of the story.... It is clear...that the author's attitude at the end is not identical with that of her protagonist. During the ride home from the station, Miranda 'hoped no one had taken her old room, she would like to sleep there once more, she would say good-bye there where she had loved sleeping once, sleeping and waking and waiting to be grown, to begin to live.' We see here the pathetic falsity of all Miranda's brave 'resolutions' to reject the myths of her family and seek the truth of her own existence without illusion. Like her thoughts about her marriage...her purpose to 'know the truth about what happens to [her]' actually represents a reversion to childhood. It is a purpose undertaken under the greatest of all human illusions, that of the wish for a renewal of innocence....

Miss Porter plainly rejects Miranda's dream of innocence, of starting over. The last word of the story is of crucial significance. It is only in her 'ignorance'—which is a kind of *deliberate* ignorance, by no means synonymous with innocence—that Miranda can assure herself she 'doesn't care' about her family and their myths, can hope to find some 'truth about what happens to [her],' independently of any interest in the truth about others."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Frederick Ungar 1973) 25-33

"Besides feeding, clothing, and instilling moral and religious principles in her granddaughter, Aunt Cat provided one additional and unlikely function—she laid the foundation for Porter's literary gifts. These talents Porter sometimes explained by saying that she came from a long line of storytellers and had listened all her life to articulate people... Mortified as she was by her reduced circumstances and by the pity of her neighbors and sisters, [Aunt Cat] harked back constantly to the better times she had known, recalling her own childhood and youth and the early lives of her daughters. Her favorite subject was her youngest and

best-loved daughter, Annie, who had made a good marriage to a dashing young man from West Texas who owned a string of racehorses.... Abruptly tragedy struck, for she survived only four months after her marriage and died away from home of a mysteriously ill-defined illness. Porter said that when she was growing up the memory of this aunt, Aunt Gay, was kept as vivid in the house as if she had never left it. Later she used the story, in *Old Mortality*, basing Aunt Amy on Annie Gay and Gabriel on her uncle, Thomas Gay....”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 55

“The tale depends primarily on what she will do with the legend of Amy and the bitter reality of Cousin Eva.... To be independent, a bluestocking and a suffragist like Eva is to become ossified in bitterness.... Uncle Bill [says] ‘When women haven’t anything else, they’ll take a vote for consolation. A pretty thin bed-fellow’.... In Part I of the story, Miranda is portrayed as easily seduced by romantic illusion. It is her practical-minded sister, Maria, who disabuses her of her notions.... When, for instance, Miranda’s father announces that ‘There were never any fat women in the family, thank God,’ Miranda thinks immediately of Great-Aunt Eliza’s huge frame and Great-Aunt Keziah, who weighs 220 pounds.... *Old Mortality* is the story of Miranda’s confrontation with the most formidable archetype her society can offer: the Southern belle, a nineteenth-century American manifestation of the virgin love goddess....

Amy was...‘beautiful, much loved, unhappy, and she...died young.’ The mystery in her behavior encourages others to speculate aloud about her and the meaning of her actions. Enigmatic, devilish, magnetic to men, she has also been capricious, toying with Gabriel’s affection, agreeing to marry two other men, and then subsequently breaking those engagements without reason. She has been the cause of a near duel and her brother Harry’s flight to Mexico, and yet she never offers an explanation of the affair. Finally, after dismissing Gabriel summarily, she whimsically agrees to marry him when he is disinherited. Her family says good-bye to her after her wedding, and six weeks later she is dead, perhaps by suicide. A more romantic and tragic combination of circumstances is not to be imaged, conjuring as they do the likes of Juliet, Madame Bovary, and Anna Karenina. Then too, Amy is a dark lady—not only Shakespeare’s, but Hawthorne’s, and certainly Poe’s—with more sensuousness and dangerous allure than virginity would ordinarily allow. Amy’s physical beauty supposedly corresponds in every detail to her family’s standard of female perfection....

Amy was in reality a young woman whose graces and physical charms have been exaggerated by the family, who take more pleasure in the reflected glory they receive from their relationship to this angelic mystery than they do in the accuracy of their descriptions.... It is not quite the simple matter Cousin Eva makes it...when she describes Victorian mating rituals as ‘just sex.’ Amy’s allure is rather a complex combination of sublimated sexual energy, real allure, and personal restraint.... She is, like Laura [“Flowering Judas”], a very ambivalent personality confronted by a now familiar dichotomy: the choice between being a sexual coquette or marrying to become a mother. The lessons of her society for young unmarried females are contained not only in their code of female beauty, but in the more concrete example of the behavior of Miranda’s father toward his daughters.... Amy has...raised coquetry to a high art, learning not only to display her beauty, but to flaunt her sexuality while forbidding intimacy.... Holding the prize in abeyance as long as possible allows Amy a fleeting personal autonomy she doesn’t want to relinquish.... Having been a belle herself, Amy’s mother recognizes that her daughter’s sex appeal is one of the few cards she has to play in the courtship game....

Mardi Gras sets the tone for Amy’s brush with sexual and social disaster.... Gabriel, attired to please Amy, looks like the sentimental fop he is in a blue satin shepherd’s costume and curled beribboned wig.... In stark contrast to Gabriel, Raymond, a former fiancé of Amy’s, arrives late and alone, with all the air of a nocturnal lover come in over his lady’s balcony. He appears as the daring pirate Jean Lafitte and boldly takes Amy’s attention from the others. After a sojourn with Raymond on the gallery, she waltzes by ‘with a young man in a Devil costume, including ill-fitting scarlet cloven hoofs,’ a costume which stresses Amy’s attraction to sin, passion, and a satyr-inspired sex, and the ultimate irony of her own arcadian attire.... It is Mariana who should be wearing the simple shepherdess costume and Amy who should portray the sultry

Mexican. However, part of Amy's appeal lies in the fact that although she aggressively displays her sexuality, she puts a demure mask over it....

She knows only an intense longing and a nagging anticipation of death which implies both the futility of her desires within her social structure...and the physical destruction she anticipates. A woman born to a society which saw her father as her protector until a husband took over that necessary role, Amy is protected to a degree which destroys her personal privacy, to say nothing of individuality or initiative.... She ignores her father's demands that she wear a more modest costume to the Mardi Gras ball, and when Gabriel praises her long hair, she cuts it short both to assert her independence of his image of her and to divest herself of a demure femininity that seems oppressive to her.... Gabriel, in his doglike devotion, is an encumbrance to Amy—and not only because his courtship represents a serious threat to her virginity. Since she cannot be a belle without the attentions of a swain, however, her victimizer becomes a victim of the sentimental society which glamorizes these roles.... Gabriel plays the Southern knight so well that he continues the role years after Amy's death, composing sentimental poetry to her memory and supervising the carving of her tombstone even after he has taken a new wife....

The wintry gray of her [wedding] costume is unbroken except for a 'dark red breast of feathers' on her gray velvet hat, which suggests the mortal wound which is her illness, and her marriage, and her womanhood—and which she herself seems to intend: 'I shall wear mourning if I like,' she tells her mother, 'it is my funeral, you know'.... Amy's reiterated insistence that Gabriel is 'dull' makes it clear that he is no real threat to her virginity. But a man like Raymond is, not only because he is more aggressive than Gabriel, but because Amy finds him sexually exciting. Fearing the experience of sex itself and the potential rowdiness of her own sexuality, Amy has broken her engagement to Raymond, ultimately choosing a safer Gabriel.... She chooses the only opportunity she has to marry quickly and experience the worldly pleasure of sex symbolized by New Orleans with its races, the parades and balls of Mardi Gras, and the 'dashing' dress she chooses to wear to the Proteus Ball.

It could be also that in marrying Gabriel she does not relinquish her virginity at all, since he will do anything to please her, and this leaves her psychologically free to flirt and act the part of the unmarried belle in her new gown.... Even if she consummates her marriage to Gabriel, her psychic detachment from intercourse allows her to think of herself as inviolate because she has not been excited by it.... Thus her marriage to Gabriel would be a real rejection of sexual participation and experience, and she could continue her pattern of sexual display and restraint. True to her anticipation, six weeks after her wedding—exactly the length of Lent, which, ironically, ends in the celebration of resurrected life—Amy is dead of a combination of consumption and medicinal overdose.... [Her] delicacy is a fear of the sexual reality of marriage... Metaphorically...her consumption, which forces her to go to bed and to expel blood from her body, suggests menstruation.... Tuberculosis was also thought to enhance the beauty of its victim, since under its influence the eyes sparkled with fever and spots of color appeared in the cheeks, just as menstruation is a sign of physical maturity, which makes a female more sexually appealing. Thus, symbolically, Amy's illness must represent her womanhood, a biological and social handicap to a free spirit.... Each of the three attacks she experiences during the last year of her life occurs after some breach of feminine restraint on her part....

It is supremely ironic that the only outspoken 'feminist' in the family, Eva, who crusades for female suffrage, is Amy's harshest critic, with no sympathy for Amy, who is suffocating in her confined role.... She provides a warped kind of balance to the romantic image of Amy... Eva implies that Amy was pregnant by another man when she married Gabriel and that she killed herself 'to escape some disgrace....' In her rage to hang infamy on Amy's memory, Eva ignores the obvious facts that, once Amy had a husband, she could bear a child without 'disgrace' or 'exposure' and that Amy was one who sought the public eye rather than avoided it. Eva is projecting her own feelings, perhaps, but she has no understanding of Amy as a person and reacts only to what Amy represents.... Amy would not commit suicide to avoid scandal; but would she commit suicide to fulfill an image she has of herself?... Unable to choose how she will live, she chooses instead the way she will die. Instead of fading into a ragged oblivion, she dramatically snuffs out her life (whether by accident or design) so that her beauty and mystery are etched in the memory.... It is possible that Amy inadvertently took an overdose of medication, although she doesn't appear to have ever done anything else inadvertently.... It is also possible that she is pregnant by her

husband and that, recognizing that she can no longer retain her independence, she kills herself in a direct refusal to share her life or her identity with a child....

Like Amy [Miranda and Maria] feel 'hedged and confined' by a conventional life in their boarding school. Like her, they suffer a constant surveillance by their chaperones, the nuns, and find their lives incredibly 'dull' except for Saturday afternoon trips to the races, where excitement reigns.... By the age of ten, [Miranda] has decided to become a jockey... She moves from a traditionally feminine idol to a masculine hero and eschews beauty for independence and excitement. The same division is obvious when she rejects Spanish-style riding for the jockey's bounce.... Miranda is once again repelled by the reality of the horse's blood and suffering, and in rejecting that reality, she effectively isolates herself from her uncle, father, and sister. She wants nothing else to do with the painful victory of a horse that has won heroically for a heavy man with sour breath and rumpled clothing.... The whole affair is a descent into Gabriel's particular circle of hell; he lives in a run-down hotel located, ironically, in a section of town called Elysian Fields. It is indeed a land of the dead....

Miranda still has daredevil aspirations, and Eva still bitterly nurses old wounds inflicted by the family in her youth. The ugly relative is clearly meant to balance the beautiful one, and Eva is Amy's contrast in every way.... Her obvious jealousy and her mercenary spirit discredit her.... She would have married for money.... [Miranda] is repelled by Eva's invective.... At this point Miranda clearly sees a dichotomy between beauty and character.... She resolves characteristically that she will stay in no place and with no person that might forbid her making 'her own discoveries.' Ultimately she promises herself that, barring all else, she will know the truth about her own experiences. Unfortunately, the truth she has yet to know will not make her free either."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 145-57

"The Amy legend was based on a Porter family legend [and] probably also incorporated Porter's idealistic view of her own mother, a view created by her father's sentimental and guilt-ridden recollections of his wife'.... The legend does not pretend that Amy herself had romantic notions about love and marriage; it admits indeed to Amy's not having loved Gabriel at all.... Miranda and Maria associate the past with poetry, with art.... By the time part 2 begins and Miranda and Maria are in school in New Orleans, they have refined their distinctions between life and art.... The disillusion occurs when the truths claimed for the idealized past are discovered to be lies. The entire past is held up for examination when Miranda and Maria discover the truth of the Amy-Gabriel legend....

Miranda...had idealized horse racing as a genteel pastime, just as she had idealized Uncle Gabriel. Now she must look at the other side of 'winning,' just as she must look at the real Gabriel. More significantly, she must share in the guilt, for she had wanted to be a jockey.... Her heart 'rejects' the 'victory'.... Miranda's shame is compounded by the fact that she won money on Miss Lucy's victory.... Gabriel is the link to 'old mortality,' a selective burial of the dead.... Miranda is the truth-seeker...and she readily abandons the romantic version of things when she discovers their falsity.... She meets Cousin Eva, who already has renounced everything romantic.... Miranda is not able to reconcile what she sees as two false views of life: the romantic view of her family and the unromantic one of Eva. She rejects them both... Her rejection of Eva and what she represents is symbolized in her refusing to ride in the backseat of the car with her.... Miranda, not able yet to bring the past into the present, puts all her faith in the future."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(U Georgia 1985) 124-30

"Miranda at the end of Part I accepts meaning as something transcendent, as something solidly grounded in a transhuman 'life beyond life'.... Later in Part 2, however, and especially in Part 3, a series of disillusioning experiences centered on Amy and Gabriel alters Miranda's sense of truth.... Aunt Eva continues the disillusionment.... Even before encountering Eva, in fact, Miranda has taken a large step toward rejecting the transcendent answers offered by both family and religion.... In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

as earlier, the initial gaiety of her choice turns, ultimately, to despair [the opposite is true], as the implicit 'ignorance' of that choice becomes manifest." [This critic imposes his Atheism throughout his study of Porter and does not recognize Heaven when Miranda visits there in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.]

George Cheatham
"Death and Repetition in Porter's Miranda Stories"
American Literature 61.4 (December 1989) 610-24

"One would be justified in titling this story: 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman'... Of foremost importance, from Miranda's point of view, will be her own difficulty in measuring up, ever, to the standards of grace and beauty set so long ago by Amy, the beloved. Romance is the real subject, the intoxicating and addictive aura cast by the past upon the present, leading to enervation in the present day.... Gabriel, having drunk himself to death because of his inconsolable grief over his dead wife, has been brought home to be buried next to her. There seems to be no surprise that Uncle Gabriel had no desire to be buried next to his second wife, Miss Honey, who had expired earlier. Gabriel lived only for his lost Amy and for his racing horses....

On the train Miranda meets Cousin Eva Parrington, a magnificent caricature of the feminist agitator. Here we get a completely different picture of Amy and the culture of the old order that she represents. Her aunt Amy was actually a spoiled, selfish, sex-driven female who unthinkingly sacrificed others to her petty whims. Porter here ruthlessly undermines the absurd Southern myth of the virginity of the white female.... Furthermore, we see that a life dedicated to a cause, as Eva Parrington's is, can end in meaninglessness... Porter's message is that we ought not be bound by romantic and illusionary notions of the past, but rather pursue our own journey in our own way.... Far from romanticizing the Old South, this story, through pitiless caricature, rejects the very basis of the Southern myth....

Porter is quite careful to hide her own feelings about Miranda's Aunt Eva, the homely spinster and Latin teacher who was dismissed from her teaching position because of her feminist agitation. But Eva is the new Eve...promising new opportunities for the modern woman of the type that Miranda is in the process of becoming. Aunt Eva's cynicism is not altogether unlike that of her creator; and her utter realism is an antidote to Miranda's romantic tendencies.

Clearly, Miranda and Aunt Eva, not to mention Katherine Anne Porter, are sisters under the skin.... The story has turned—in one of its many facets—into a feminist ideological tract." [This misses the clear rejection of Eva's bitterly reductive viewpoint, which the critic himself has acknowledged ends in "meaninglessness." This critic is a defensive male Texan who mistakenly thinks the egalitarian Porter is anti-male. In *Ship of Fools*, Porter mocks the feminist Lizzi Spockenkieker as a bigoted fool, and the three spiritual heroes in the novel are all male—Dr. Schumann, the woodcarver who sacrifices his life to save a dog, and the dying faith healer—the last two Christ-evoking figures. Furthermore, the Christian vision in *Ship of Fools* affirms faith in a male God and a male Savior.]

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1990) 84-90

"Porter suggests that Amy uses marriage to Gabriel, a man she does not really love, as an escape from her family and a way to New Orleans for Mardi Gras and perhaps a meeting with her old beau Raymond.... Despite Miranda's conscious fantasies and her awareness of contradictions in the Amy stories, Miranda has unconsciously patterned her life after Amy's by eloping from her convent, a fact that Porter surprises her readers with in part 3. The romantic Amy legend and the forbidden reading material about the convent have mingled in Miranda's mind to produce a plot and an ending very close to the fictional ones she has been brought up with: spirited young woman, immured in convent, is rescued by dashing young man. But she has quickly grown dissatisfied with this ending to her own life....

By failing to comprehend the complexity of the reading experience, Miranda undermines her own ability to see how she has unconsciously used the romance narrative to script her elopement and the feminist critique to write the erotic plot out of her life.... The independent Eva, who has reduced love to

hormones and marriage to economics, lives alone, but she is unhappy and bitter, and Miranda seems to be following in her footsteps... The narrator undercuts Miranda's decision to renounce love with the phrase, 'as if this were the answer'... Porter acknowledges in her notes a similarity between Miranda's experiences and her own [but] she emphasizes that *Old Mortality* is 'not an autobiographical story' and that Miranda is 'by no means intended to represent myself'.... Porter has Maria's birth date rather than Miranda's correspond with her own. However, 1912, the date of part 3, was a momentous year for Porter as it was for Miranda—a time when Porter was reassessing her marriage to John Koontz, her first husband.... In 1936 a few days after finishing *Old Mortality*, Porter decided to end her third marriage....

To a March 1970 question asking if she was ready to join the Women's Liberation Movement, Porter replied, 'I will not sit down with you and hear you tell me men have abused you. Any man who ever did wrong to me got back better than he gave.' Porter's dismissal of feminism reveals her fundamental dislike of women's passively occupying stories, not her lack of support for women's rights. In *Old Mortality* the narrator undercuts both Eva's 'woman as victim' stories and the rest of the family's 'woman as Southern belle' stories'.... In the end, Porter herself shies away from the feminist politics of the reading experience, by concluding *Old Mortality* with a typical modernist ambiguous ending that runs counter to the plot's interest in creating feminist readers....

She ends her long story skeptical about achieving the *control* over a text the feminist reader hopes for. [The text is out of *control* because the author does not agree with the Feminist critic.] Porter's skepticism reflects her modernist epistemological doubt and her vexed relation to feminism... Porter's ending undermines the reader's *attempt to control her text*.... She bought into the patriarchal ideology of her day, which depicted feminists as ugly, as alone, and as interested in careers and women's causes only because no men would have them." [This Feminist critic is frustrated that she cannot "*control*" Porter's meanings. Miranda is a "feminist" but not an ideologue who wants to *control* other people. The ugliness of Feminists for which they are responsible is evident in their attitudes. [Italics added.]

Suzanne W. Jones

"Reading the Endings in Katherine Anne Porter's *Old Mortality*"

Southern Quarterly 31.3 (Spring 1993) 29-44

reprinted in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*, ed. Darlene Harbour Unrue
(G. K. Hall 1997) 177-78, 181, 185-88

"Both Miranda and Maria associate the wondrous aura of the family legends with the romance of the theater and literature they so much adore.... So taken is Miranda by Amy's story that she faithfully envisions a life for herself every bit as glamorous as her aunt's.... Miranda's wishes are apparently not unlike those of Amy herself, who strove to shape her life into one of a romantic narrative.... Miranda's and Maria's frustration with resolving the tension between reality and romance mirrors Amy's, for her unhappiness lay in the undermining of her romantic vision by the everyday demands of routine life and by the resistance of her friends and family to measure up to the roles she had created for them in the narrative by which she wanted to live'.... By her elders' standards whatever happens in the present never measures up to what has happened in the past. The present is always a dim shadow of a more glorious past, not a particularly comforting thought for a young girl about to embark on her life.... Typical of her budding resentment toward the past's stranglehold on the present is her response to an old gentleman who downplays a performance of Paderewski in light of his earlier hearings of Rubenstein....

In Part 2, Miranda and Maria... confront even more obviously both the distortions of the family legends and the crushing potential of the past, when worshiped unreservedly, to thwart personal growth by devaluing the present.... The girls are more aware of the distortions and exaggerations, more cognizant of the gulf separating the world of the imaginative narratives from that of everyday life.... During their visit to Uncle Gabriel's home, Miranda and Maria see how the past utterly consumes the present when a person lives entirely by his or her memories.... In Part 3, Miranda, now eighteen [meets Cousin Eva].... A leader in the women's suffrage movement, Eva evaluates life with cold Freudian cynicism, and she targets the family (both her own and families in general) for vicious attack.... Not only every bit as romantic as the family's, Eva's obsession with the past is also every bit as consuming. For all of her efforts to assert her independence and to free herself from the past, Eva is chained to her childhood by her Freudian vision....

Whatever the truth of Eva's characterization of Amy and Amy's friends, her description of them, in an irony she herself does not see, is actually a portrait of herself—a festering, sex-obsessed woman....

Over the roar of the car's engine, Miranda cannot hear the stories Eva and her father tell, but ablaze with her sense of difference, she does not care, for she vows from this day forward to be the author of her own stories.... Miranda vows, 'in her arrogance, her pride' to go her own way, depending upon no one but herself for guidance and support. Her vow gives way to bitter resentment over what she sees as her elders' domination.... Miranda's fierce rage for independence quickly extends itself: she will seek to liberate herself not only from her elders but also from her entire family, even those of her own generation. She will not return to her husband. She wants to be free of all ties to others, ties that she now sees not as enriching but as confining.... Her ignorance lies primarily in her naivete: although she claims that she will not be romantic about herself, that is exactly what she is. She conceives herself as a solitary quester for truth, in effect the romantic artist.... Miranda's angry rebellion against her family may be necessary to loosen its tight control of her thinking, but it is merely an initial step toward a fulfillment that lies far ahead. To reach her goal, Miranda must use and draw from her past, engaging rather than repressing her memories."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 165-74

"*Old Mortality*...has often been considered Porter's finest work. It was recognized by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren with inclusion in their enormously influential 1943 anthology *Understanding Fiction*, a watershed of the New Criticism, and it has been included in numerous anthologies for college students. Warren believed the story had 'few peers in any language'.... Its theme, the struggle toward self-definition, is the central theme of her own life'....

She shows the Grandmother, modeled on her own Grandmother Porter, as a powerful matriarch of independent mind, confident of her authority. (Porter's wish to identify with her powerful grandmother, known as Aunt Cat, is indicated by her referring to herself, in letters to her niece, as Aunt Kat.) Nannie, the 'faithful old servant,' is also apotheosized as a figure of singularity and authority, asserting her right to live as she chooses'.... The racing filly...is seen after the race with blood coursing from her nostrils and stiffening the hairs about her "delicate" mouth—all to fulfill the role set for her by sentimental, feckless men. This has been seen as a representation of the beautiful southern belle who ran in the race for husbands at great cost to herself'... Only the attentive reader sees that [Amy] has enacted a parody of the feminine ideal.... Miranda launches herself into independence by running away from the convent to get married...

[Cousin Eva] has been seen as reflecting Porter's ambivalence toward feminists.... Eva simply replaces the legend of the belle with her own legend, equally overdramatized... Eva urges [Miranda] to 'use your mind a little' and not 'let yourself rust away.' It is a message that, at the end of the story, [Miranda] is attempting to put to use.... The older narrator understands just how limited a young woman's freedom to live her own life and develop her own ideas really is. It is on this note of mingled triumph and poignancy that the story ends.... Porter participated in her generation's reevaluation of women's roles, but for the most part she made her testimony indirectly, through spare symbolism, rather than through the resounding exhortations of some of her contemporaries."

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 170, 191-95, 258

"Porter's responses to idealizations of white southern life are sufficiently ironic and acute that they made her Agrarian friends uncomfortable. Her short novel, *Old Mortality*, seems to have infuriated Allen Tate.... Porter joined with the Agrarians in advocating anti-sentimentalism, although she never went as far as the young Allen Tate... In *Old Mortality* it is thoroughly modern Eva who articulates the Agrarian/Fugitive anti-sentimental style when describing a woman's demise... Not delicacy but abortion, suicide, or disease—any one of these—did away with the Southern Belle.... Amy's 'greensickness,' or chlorosis, and that of her mother before her, may be read as a further expression of her efforts to resist her culturally mandated decline from virginal Belle to sexual womanhood and maternity.... The association of the female

body with death and decomposition that infects Eva's imagination and...gains a momentary hold on Miranda recurs throughout the work of male Agrarian/Fugitive writers....

Beneath the surface of the smiling Belle, [Porter] saw women oppressed and destroyed by an ideology that enforced obedience to men and endorsed repeated childbearing while simultaneously denying women's sexuality. The Miranda stories share a violent imagery of defloration, suggesting Porter's recognition that for the Belle sexual intercourse represents a kind of social death.... Eva's version of Amy's legend represents another 'symbolic truth,' to use Porter's term in her letter to Eudora Welty. It arises from the wedding of legend and memory and confirms Eva's present identity: it is her ordering fiction.... Eva finds pride and identity opposing herself to Amy; in her story she is the strong survivor, and Amy is the guilty victim of the decadent past.... Miranda's family loves romantic stories, and dashing Amy Gay, now long dead, epitomizes their favorite subject matter. Like Edgar Allen Poe, Miranda's parents and grandparents find no subject matter more beautiful than the death of a beautiful woman."

Mary Titus

The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 189, 191-95

"Her short novel continues exploring the models of southern womanhood that she has examined in 'The Source,' 'The Journey,' 'The Fig Tree,' and 'The Grave,' but it complicates this feminist critique with the recognition (first seen in 'The Circus') that the model-disciple relationship may inherently lead to its own inversions and perversities.... As a little girl, Miranda wants to be a violin-playing tightrope walker. Such a fantastic profession will endow her with the glamour of the big top that her cousins cheerfully report in 'The Circus' and with the glamour of the concert stage that her elders bring home with them after hearing Paderewski. When Miranda becomes a student at the Convent of the Child Jesus in New Orleans...she takes as her model not the dull lives of the sisters who care for her but the lurid depictions of convents that she read the summer before in the novels of anti-Catholic propagandists.... Miranda only desires the frisson of her gothic romances as a delightfully debased preparation for her self-glorification.... The cult of the racetrack promises the glory that the drab nunnery lacks and that the old order confers upon only its most favored members....

Miranda's relatives desire the past that they remember yet remember the past that they desire.... Whereas the sisters consign the past as past to the unattractive realm of old mortality, they are entranced by the immortality of the past as still present, as represented in the beloved remembrances of the elders.... Miranda 'believed for quite a while that she would one day be like Aunt Amy, not as she appeared in the photograph, but as she was remembered by those who had seen her.... The arbiters of gender believe that Amy of yore displayed more skill and grace than any of her modern counterparts. They regard mortality as having elevated Miranda's aunt even further in the empyrean of family lore, for she lives forever in the supernal realm...where she can be imitated but never rivaled... Her sentimentalized demise makes the unequalled Amy into the unchallengeable ideal. In the cult of family life, the dead beauty plays the same role as the lost cause in the southern civil religion—the vanished but hallowed center around which survivors and subsequent generations organize themselves in mythic memory.... Male novelists after the Civil War intensified this ideal by mythologizing the belle as the image of a lost southern Eden....

[Aunt Amy] could become the supreme model for southern women because she was also the supreme disciple of the sexist old order.... Amy was a character in the making who decided that she would at least be her own co-author. And that double consciousness virtually made her claim a place in the tradition of literary belles extending from Bel Tracy in John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832) to Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, the number one bestseller in 1937 when *Old Morality* was published.... What honor was to the public sphere, coquetry was to the romantic... Although the southern lady might be oppressed and repressed by a male culture, she could master men in the realm of romance, compelling the affection that she also seemed to forestall. However, coquetry also limited a woman to conventional roles that gratified male needs.... Since a romantic like Amy judges only the distant, only the difficult and indifferent, as truly desirable, she tired of the faithful Gabriel as if he were too perfect a disciple....

After Amy succumbed to old mortality, her relatives completed the process of modeling her life on literature.... Indeed, most of Amy's family suffered from the 'jejune romanticism of an absurd past' that Twain diagnosed as a symptom of 'the Sir Walter disease'.... Amy died from the romanticism that Twain mocked: the South's desire to emulate Scott's novels through its aristocratic life and overinflated literature.... Amy did not allow herself to be taken to the hospital where she might have received the kind of medical attention that helped Eva when she twice almost died. Rather, wrapped in becoming shawls and surrounded by flowers, Amy entertained crowds of visitors at home, where she was careful always to sit up so that her hair might remain curled. She suffered hemorrhaging and then went out to ride or dance. She coughed up blood... She played the coquette, but she also continually violated the expectations of the old order, as if seeking some less conventional way of being a woman.... Amy questioned the traditional models for southern womanhood most flagrantly in claiming that she would copy the example of the family spinster and be 'a nice old maid'.... She was traditional and subversive...

[Cousin] Eva's critique is motivated by more than obvious envy; it speaks for the way that writers of the Southern Renaissance often indicted the belle for narcissism, masochism, and frustrated eroticism.... Despite her denunciation, Eva is a true daughter of the traditional South. Just as [the traditionalists] idealize beauty, the unlovely Eva absolutizes corruption.... Although Eva demythologizes the model for southern femininity, she has actually internalized her own deformity.... Eva passionately hates what she loves too much. As Amy's...embittered rival, she appropriately shares a similar grievous fate. Although only in her early fifties, Eva 'looked so withered and tired, so famished and sunken in the cheeks, so *old*, somehow' because she has spent her life in rancor and resentment'.... Miranda needs such a model because she has already begun to follow her legendary aunt's perilous example. Just as Amy courted the approval of her brother, Miranda has sought to satisfy her father's demanding standards for personal appearance. And just as the Amy of family myth rather impulsively married the disinherited Gabriel, Miranda has pursued an equally reckless romance. In absconding from her convent school to marry a man of no great financial promise, Miranda seems to have lived up to Eva's verdict on her father's branch of the family as having 'no more practical sense than so many children. Everything for love.' But the eighteen-year-old has already grown disillusioned with such amorous folly. Less than a year after the elopement Miranda finds the marriage 'very unreal' and unconnected with her future....

Eva's diatribe against the old order reinforces Miranda's desire to recover from her romantic malady. She even considers imitating her cousin despite her fear of becoming the very image of her wearied elder: 'Oh, must I ever be like that?'... The disciple is drawn to a feminism so sublime that it requires ennobling sacrifice. Such a crusade promises the glorious tribulation that the young masochist had once sought in her perfervid fictions of convent life. Like Miranda's other ambition of becoming an airplane pilot, a career as a suffragist in 1912 would at once fulfill her increasingly countercultural desires and gratify her appetite for vainglory. The schoolgirlish infatuation wanes, however, when Miranda realizes that her formidable cousin would leave in her wake no opportunity for triumph.... Eva undercuts not only the model of beauty that Miranda might have inherited but also the kind of modern antimodel that the feminist's own life might have provided... Miranda's new-found maturity is always undercut by her continuing naivete....

Much like Eva, Miranda does not realize that she secretly desires to imitate what she seemingly denounces. Although Miranda resolves, 'I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself,' she is supremely romantic in her resolution to embark on a solitary quest for selfhood.... When she forsakes family legend for the private truth of her own experience, she is the child of a romantic tradition that extends at the very least from her South's cherished Poe to her own family. As the narrator explains, Miranda does not know that her very question about what to make of her future results from the fact that 'all her earliest training' had taught her that life was to be crafted and 'directed towards a definite end.' Miranda embraces the teleology of her family so ardently that she makes its emphasis on self-fashioning even more extreme by seizing her life 'in a fury of jealous possessiveness'.... Miranda still finds her models and her rivals in the old order. She ends *Old Mortality* 'in her hopefulness, her ignorance,' because she does not know that her defiant self-assertion is flawed by self-deception."

Gary M. Ciuba

Desire, Violence, & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction:
Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy
(Louisiana State 2007) 81-85, 87-91, 95-99

A comparison of *Old Mortality* by Porter to *Absalom, Absalom!* by Faulkner illustrates the aesthetic diversity among the great Modernists. Both fictions are set in the South and both convey the difficulty of interpreting history. Both dramatize the reasons why the main interpreters—Quentin and Miranda—are ambivalent but to some extent “hate” the South, and why both abandon their families. Both plots center on a mystery in family history that is interpreted variously by different characters and is left ambiguous. In *AA* two young men try to solve the mystery, in *OM* two girls try. In both stories the principal mystery is the motivation of the romantic character who dies, Charles Bon in *AA*, Aunt Amy in *OM*. Bon’s murder was virtually a suicide as well and Amy’s death may have been from a suicidal overdose. Amy has consumption (tuberculosis), a metaphor of her psychological consumption by the southern belle ideal. The problematic historical social issue in *AA* is race, in *OM* it is gender. Both writers reject the myth of the southern belle. And in both novels a victimized unmarried woman—the hysterics Rosa Coldfield and Cousin Eva—is so outraged that her perceptions as a witness falsify reality.

AA was published on 26 October 1936 and *OM* was written between 30 October 1936 and 5 January 1937. (Stout 258) There is no evidence that Porter ever read *AA*. In effect, however, it *seems* as if she set out to improve upon its aesthetics. She renders her complex story in only about 50 pages, Faulkner renders his in over 300. Porter is predominantly Neoclassical in her fundamental aesthetics, valuing economy, clarity, intellect, morality, balance, irony, and wit. Faulkner is predominantly Romantic in his fundamental aesthetics, valuing feelings, sensibility, expressive style, organic form, and divine Nature. Porter the Neoclassical Realist admired Faulkner of course, but she was very critical of what she considered his “moral confusion”: “Brings his characters up to a crisis in their lives where they have to act on a moral issue and they simply do not know what it is and in the end they act out of an inherent convention or in some way crookedly for the reason that *they cannot think*.” (Givner 393) This is certainly true of Bon. The mystery is, What was he thinking? [Italics added]

It is especially true of young Quentin, who “cannot think” because he is overwhelmed by feelings. He is a romantic adolescent in love incestuously with the southern belle myth embodied in his sister Caddy, hence he identifies with Henry Sutpen the murderer of Bon (good?) when Henry felt compelled to defend his sister Judith from marriage to a man who is part black, but Quentin is too weak and cowardly to attack the boyfriend who took Caddy’s virginity and resorts to drowning himself. Faulkner depicts Quentin as childish for killing himself because he feels that his sister dishonored his family. In contrast, Miranda overcomes her conflicted feelings and thinks her way to independence. In the end it does not matter what her Aunt Amy was thinking or whether she deliberately overdosed, since she was dying anyway. What matters is that the myth of the southern belle is dead to Miranda.

Faulkner was slightly like the pathetic Gabriel in *OM*—a heavy drinker and lover of horses who idealizes a woman, though Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* is a rebel rather than a belle. Ironically, Faulkner married a southern belle named Estelle (star). She tried to commit suicide on their honeymoon. As for morality apart from his fiction, Faulkner did not charge his black tenant farmers any rent and risked being murdered for his outspoken advocacy of civil rights.

Michael Hollister (2017)