

42 CRITICS DISCUSS

*Ship of Fools* (1962)



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“My book is about the constant endless collusion between good and evil; I believe that human beings are capable of total evil, but no one has ever been totally good: and this gives the edge to evil. I don’t offer any solution, I just want to show this principle at work, and why none of us has any real alibi in this world.”

Porter  
Letter to Caroline Gordon (1946)

“The story of the criminal collusion of good people—people who are harmless—with evil. It happens through inertia, lack of seeing what is going on before their eyes. I watched that happen in Germany and in Spain. I saw it with Mussolini. I wanted to write about people in these predicaments.”

Porter  
Interview, *Saturday Review*  
(31 March 1962)

“This novel has been famous for years. It has been awaited through an entire literary generation. Publishers and foundations, like many once hopeful readers, long ago gave it up. Now it is suddenly, superbly, here. It would have been worth waiting for another thirty years... It is our good fortune that it comes at last still in our time. It will endure, one hardly risks anything in saying, far beyond it, for many literary generations.... *Ship of Fools*, universal as its reverberating implications are, is a unique imaginative achievement.... If one is to make useful comparisons of *Ship of Fools* with other work they should be with...the greatest novels of the past hundred years....

There are about fifty important characters, at least half of whom are major.... The Seven Deadly Sins...are all unquestionably if most delicately there...Miss Porter’s two perfunctory priests...modern instances of the corruption of the clergy in the Middle Ages.... All that is conceivably harsh in this novel is its magnificent lack of illusion about human nature and especially the human sexual relationship. Even that

is not really harsh because all the sharp perception and unsparing wit of this total candor is exercised by an imaginative sympathy that is not withheld from even the greatest fool, not even from the Texan oaf, Denny... Her perfectly poised ironical intelligence is constant and in complete authority. If, now and then, her precise prose opens audibly into the overtones of allegory, these cannot be abstracted from the concrete details of the voyage. Yet all the time, as with any great work of art, something larger is in the air...

There is much that is comic, much even that is hilarious, and everything throughout is always flashing into brilliance through the illuminations of this great ironic style. At the same time...what is funny is also sad, moving to the point of pain, nearly of heartbreak.... Catalogues...cannot begin to suggest the brilliance and variety of characterization, nor the thematic unity (the fated and clumsy human quest for love and affection explicitly observed by Mrs. Treadwell) that binds all these together in the work of art even as separation is their condition in life. The Germans are particularly wonderful and horrifying creations, but even the best of the others do not escape the lash of irony."

Mark Schorer  
*New York Times Book Review*  
(1 April 1962)

"The main thing to declare is that in her full maturity, in a country where high-level fiction is scarce and likely to be fragile, Katherine Anne Porter has produced a work of rugged power and myriad insights, a book of the highest relevance to the bitterness and disruption of modern civilization."

*Newsweek*  
(2 April 1962)

"There is not an ounce of weighted sentiment in it. Its intelligence lies not in the profundity of its ideas but in the clarity of its viewpoint; we are impressed not by what Miss Porter says but by what she knows."

Moss Hart  
*New Yorker*  
(28 April 1962)

"Katherine Anne Porter has written a tremendous novel. It took twenty years. One might pause for an instant to imagine this. Twenty years. The courage, the discipline, the fortitude; the cost of every kind, the pressures involved in hearing what must have been at times an almost intolerable burden. And here it is at last, the legend become print: the book has been out (in the United States) for barely half a year and already something of its substance has eaten itself into the marrow of those who read it. The Great American Novel has appeared; ironically, it has turned out to be a great universal novel....

The theme is not (as might be said) an icy condemnation of the human race, but a condemnation of its condition: a clinical exposition, point counterpoint, of the facts of the flesh... In a few opening pages we have what may well endure as one of the indelible set-pieces of black literature: the gruesomeness and beauty of Mexico... We sit in those musty cabins while the men shave and the women let their hair down, we hear them and above all, we see.... On Katherine Anne Porter's ship the people are what they look, and they do as they are. They sleep with each other, or try to (she is a virtuoso of such situations... Every scene, every incident, every interchange, is convincing, alive, is happening, has happened before our eyes.... The intellectuals on board are arid pedants....

Miss Porter's style is elegant and precise; it is straight without being thin, rich without the slightest trace of cloying. It is neither colloquial nor baroque, and she never permits herself a mannerism or an idiosyncrasy. In fact, it is a very fine style, put to use with the greatest skill, but this style and her words have a way of vanishing from consciousness and the page while flesh and blood take over.... The Spanish twins are six years old. They are dead-end characters (a Katherine Anne Porter specialty), born purely malevolent... The young American lovers, conscious creatures of good will, enact throughout one irremediable predicament: they cannot love each other in each other's presence... They cannot let each other go, nor ever be at peace together. Herr Rieber is a bouncing, bumptious, genial little German, full of coyness, sentimentality, and good cheer, who goes off the deep end on the subject of the master race....

The other Germans on board...are heftily united in their feelings about German blood, their nationalism, their laments over the lost war, their contempt for America (polluted by The Negro) and their terror of and disgust with the smell of the poor, the Spanish rabble in the steerage.... *Ship of Fools* will be and has been called anti-German. One might as well say that the book is anti-human. The Spaniards, Americans, Mexicans and Cubans on that ship...do not come out any better. Two out of the limited number—four?—six?—of the ‘decent’ characters are German, Dr. Schumann and Frau Otto Schmitt. Miss Porter took some Germans of the early 1930s as she found them...

There are moments of transport, of otherness. When the boy and the Spanish dancer make love for the first time (the boy about killed his uncle to get some money to pay the girl and her pimp), the key changes and one is utterly carried away, and it is young and sensuous and good. Then there are the Mexican bride and groom, the lovers who do not speak, who float, silent, hand in hand, past the more solid apparitions... Perhaps the high moment of the book comes when the whales are seen, three whales flashing white and silver in the sunlight, spouting tall white fountains, and the Spanish twins wave their arms in pure ecstasy, and ‘not one person could take his eyes from the beautiful spectacle...and their minds were cleansed of death and violence.’ But the whales recede.”

Sybille Bedford

*Spectator*

(16 November 1962) 763-64

“To some of us *Ship of Fools* is a perfect novel, and Miss Porter is the American Flaubert.... Miss Porter has reproduced the very stuff of life in reproducing those twenty-seven days on the *Vera*, and her novel sparkles with vitality and humor.... For all its popular success one heard constantly, during the year in which it topped the best seller lists, that it was too gloomy, too saturnine, that there were no ‘nice’ people in it, and that bad as things were, they were not *that* bad. It was sometimes hard to believe that the people making these remarks had lived through an era of human atrocities unparalleled in the recorded history of mankind.... She was not tracing what had occurred *after* Hitler challenged the world, but what had produced the challenge... She knew that the terrible thing that had happened in the 1930’s had happened in the hearts of men....

In the steerage are 876 Spanish workers, deported from Cuba to Spain because of the failure of the sugar market. Jammed below deck in a fetid atmosphere of sweating flesh where seven babies are born on the voyage, they are presented to the reader as a mass, a device which obviously but very successfully simulates the pyramid of the human condition on earth: a huge, poverty-stricken base with a tiny, self-conscious peak. Steerage is never insisted on in the novel; it never becomes a bore; but the reader, like even the most hard-boiled of the first-class passengers, is always uneasily aware that it is there.

Before the *Vera* sails from Veracruz, we are presented, in front of the hotel, with the spectacle of a beggar crawling on his stumps, a poor creature who has been so intricately maimed in preparation for his calling that he hardly resembles a human being. We are never able quite to forget this beggar. He does not come on board, but a hideously deformed hunchback does, and in these two we have always before us the plight of the man whom fate has blasted from the beginning. Miss Porter wants this always to be kept in mind as we learn of the bickering and meanness of the first-class passengers who are dissatisfied with their cabins, their cabin mates, their tables, and their table companions.... Selfishness and egotism are not pitiable. They are funny, and parts of this book are uproariously funny....

The Huttens and the Baumgartners demonstrate the enormous chasms of misunderstanding which may exist between husband and wife; the Americans David and Jenny show the same between two young people in love. Rieber never succeeds in seducing Lizzi; they hate each other in the end. Mrs. Treadwell fails in her friendships with Freytag and the young officer; Doctor Schumann cannot rise to the demands of his love for the Condesa; the Swiss girl Elsa pines for the Cuban medical student and will not dance with him when he asks her.... To demonstrate that requited and happy love *do* exist, even on the *Vera*...[Porter] introduces the blissful but nameless Mexican honeymooners who never speak or have any contact with the other passengers, but are seen occasionally on deck, hand in hand, with eyes only for each other. Having paid this tribute to Venus, Miss Porter can get on with the real job of the novel, which is to explore the

horror that springs from the desperate efforts of human beings to escape the loneliness in which they feel themselves entrapped....

With the Northern races the fretting complications of self-consciousness appear. The Americans Jenny and David, traveling together but not married, provide a sorry study of the devastation that love can reap in a match of incompatibles. Jenny has a generous, outgoing nature, which has attracted David initially but which now embarrasses him cruelly in public. His own common sense and realism operate to fortify the emotional stinginess of his character, which drives Jenny to despair. However, he observed that David and Jenny, in seeking to lose their loneliness in love, hurt only each other. In their dealings with the other passengers they are the most decent persons on the ship. Jenny may be repulsed and rejected by those whom she seeks to befriend, but at least she is trying to be kind, and that is a rare thing on board the *Vera*...

The *Vera*, of course, is a German ship. The captain and crew represent German authority and the German state.... The three Swiss, the four Americans, the single Swede, do not purport to represent their countries, but the Germans do... The best of the lot is the ship's doctor, but...Dr. Schumann is always at the disposal of the Captain. He does not raise his voice in protest against the anti-Semitism at the Captain's table; his attitude is one of passive contempt for his companions. He is the German intellectual, charming, courteous, disciplined, wise—but not a rebel. The Germans despise each other quite as fiercely as the other passengers do.... The conversation at the Captain's table bristles with the exchange of insults.... However much the Germans may hate each other, they hate non-Germans more.... When the steerage Spaniards are crowded on board in Havana, Herr Rieber has a suggestion for their better disposition which might have been laughed at in 1931 but could not induce a smile today... 'I would put them all in a big oven and turn on the gas'....

The Captain, who regards the antics of the Spanish dancers and the Cuban medical students with abhorrence, is deeply frustrated that he cannot clap their in chains and stick them in the hold. He has fantasies of what he would like to do with a machine gun to the junky piles of humanity that have not been cleansed by German discipline. The terrible thing about Miss Porter's art is that it makes the reader understand and almost sympathize with the heartless Captain. The manners of the Spanish troupe seem at some nightmarish moments offensive enough nearly to justify the worst excesses of dictatorship. But simple irritation cannot provide a sure enough foundation for the Nazi state. For that hatred is needed... There is only one Jew among the German passengers, Lowenthal, a salesman, and he is simply despised and ignored. The real hatred of the Captain's table is reserved for Freytag, a fellow German who is *not* a Jew, but who has married one.... How it draws them together in the charmed circle of national spite!...

Only two things really 'happen' on the *Vera's* trip, in terms of the old-fashioned plot: Freytag is expelled from the Captain's table, and a poor Basque, a wood-carver, is drowned saving the life of an old bulldog that has been cast into the sea by a vicious pair of Spanish children.... [These two events] represent in the large man's capacity for malignance and his capacity for self-sacrifice, his cruelty to his fellowman, and his willingness to die—for a bulldog. The act of the Basque is foolish, even crazy, but it awes the ship's company. However they may reject it, however they may sneer, they are uneasily aware that they may have witnessed something fine. It is the one note of hope in the whole long novel....

Innovation in the modern novel is often mere trickiness: to eliminate plot, to eliminate time, even, as in some recent French fiction, to eliminate characters. Katherine Anne Porter in *Ship of Fools* has used no tricks that were not contained in the workbag of George Eliot. Her innovations, however, are still fundamental. Her book not only contains no hero or heroine; it contains no character who is either the reader or the author, no character with whom the reader can 'identify.' Nor is there anywhere in the book any affirmation of the basic striving upwards or even courage of mankind [the woodcarver?], always considered essential to a 'great' novel.... Yet the experience of reading *Ship of Fools* is still an exhilarating rather than a somber or depressing one... Miss Porter has demonstrated that the seeds of a vast, globe-shaking war can be the material of a great novel."

Louis Auchincloss

*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 145-51

“All the characters are hateful [even the woodcarver?] and it is a pleasure to see each in turn get his lumps. Most of them are piggish Germans.”

John Thompson  
“The Figure in the Rose-Red Gown”  
*Partisan Review* (Fall 1962) 608-12

“Whatever the problems were that kept Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools* from appearing during the past twenty years, it has been leading a charmed life ever since it was published... In virtually a single voice, a little cracked and breathless with excitement, the reviewers announced that Miss Porter’s long-awaited first novel was a ‘triumph,’ a ‘masterpiece,’ a ‘work of genius...a momentous work of fiction,’ ‘a phenomenal, rich, and delectable book,’ a ‘literary event of the highest magnitude.’ Whether it was Mark Schorer in the *New York Times Book Review* delivering a lecture, both learned and lyrical, on the source, sensibility, and stature of the novel (‘Call it...the *Middlemarch* of a later day’), or a daily reviewer for the *San Francisco Call Bulletin* confessing that ‘not once [had he] started a review with so much admiration for its author, with such critical impotence’—in the end it came to the same sense of bedazzlement.

Propelled by this initial acclaim, *Ship of Fools* made its way to the top of the best-seller lists in record time and it is still there.... During these four months it has encountered virtually as little opposition in taking its place among the classics of literature as it did in taking and holding its place on the best-seller lists. A few critics like Robert Drake in the *National Review*, Stanley Kauffmann in the *New Republic*, Granville Hicks in the *Saturday Review*, and Howard Moss in the *New Yorker* decided that *Ship of Fools* fell somewhat short of greatness, but only after taking the book’s claim to greatness with respectful seriousness. A few of the solid citizens among the reviewers, like John K. Hutchens, found the novel to be dull and said so. Here and there, mainly in the hinterlands, a handful of skeptical spirits such as Mary Louise Aswell suspected that the book was a mammoth failure. But otherwise the applause went on and on....

Most of the reviews began in the same way: a distinguished American short-story writer at the age of seventy-one has finally finished her first novel after twenty years of working on it. As this point was developed, it tended to establish the dominant tone of many reviews—that of elated witness to a unique personal triumph. The most sophisticated critics approached the novel mainly in terms of the expectancy that Miss Porter’s previous work had created. In Mark Schorer’s words, *Ship of Fools* had been eagerly awaited by an entire literary generation,’ which may overstate the matter but does point to the fact that over the years Miss Porter has become one of the surviving figures of the golden age of modern American letters—‘the stylist of the 1920’s to the last,’ to quote John Chamberlain’s review.

Her two splendid novellas *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and *Noon Wine*, along with her finely wrought stories such as ‘Flowering Judas’ and ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,’ continue to be anthology pieces, part of everyone’s education in literary craft and taste, as well as emblematic of an era when imaginative freedom and disciplined prose went hand in hand. In some ways Miss Porter has seemed like a very feminine counterpart of the early Hemingway, and her return after two decades of silence provided a rallying ground for old loyalties and affections. In reading the reviews, one had the feeling that almost everyone in the English departments and the New York literary circles was either awed by or pulling for her—particularly those ‘in the know’ who were aware of the troubles that she had had in writing her novel.

If the first paragraph of the reviews was likely to dote in one way or another on Miss Porter, the second was likely to dote upon the universal dimensions of her new book. More often than not, this universality was demonstrated by quoting the Preface: particularly Miss Porter’s statement that at the center of her design is nothing less than the ‘image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity.’ However large the claim might seem, the reviewers accepted it without question and lauded *Ship of Fools* as a novel whose theme ‘is the human race,’ as a ‘parable of a corrupt faithless world,’ as ‘a great moral allegory of man’s fate,’ and so forth.

That the only real sign of allegory in *Ship of Fools* is provided by the Preface (there are a few other details—the German ship’s name is *Vera*, etc.) and that the novel itself is a straightforward and grimly realistic account of a voyage from Veracruz to Bremerhaven in 1931, that the characters are drawn as

*literally* as one could imagine, that the surface of the narrative is completely univalent, that the book is tied together by an attitude rather than by a conceptual scheme—none of this stopped any of the more enthusiastic reviewers from finding themselves in the presence of a great symbolic vision of human life and destiny. As Dayton Kohler, an English professor writing in the Richmond (Va.) *News Leader*, put it... 'Here in microcosm is the world man has made.'

Another feeling repeatedly expressed by the reviews was that the return of Miss Porter had ended a long winter of discontent with recent fiction. Some viewed it as a welcome contrast to the genial popular novel that neatly solves the problems of its characters. But more often *Ship of Fools* was viewed as a kind of antidote to newfangled and noxious fiction by writers like Nabokov and Henry Miller. In their desire to behold again the 'solid' novel that they had been deprived of by the idiosyncrasy and morbidity of contemporary fiction, such reviewers were inclined to see in *Ship of Fools* a somewhat different book from the one Miss Porter had actually written. If *Ship of Fools* does not have a 'flimsy plot' (Winston-Salem *Journal and Sentinel*), this is only because it does not have much plot at all. If it has no 'case histories'...[it] nevertheless includes a dipsomaniac (Herr Baumgartner), a nymphomaniac and drug addict (La Condessa), a religious maniac (Herr Graf), two paranoids (Herr Rieber and Herr Lowenthal), two child psychopaths (Ric and Rae), and—transfixed by their frustrations, compulsions, and illusions—a dozen or more feeble neurotics....

Yet it is not hard to see what these reviewers had in mind. *Ship of Fools* suggests many of the qualities of the traditional 'solid' novel that has virtually dropped out of sight in recent years. Like the nineteenth-century classics, it comes at life in a straightforward and comprehensive way. There are many characters and they all have the uncomplicated distinctiveness, bordering on caricature, that allows the reader to keep them straight and to know where he is with each of them. Miss Porter's steady, clear notation of the strongly marked and banal manners and attitudes of her German Burghers, pedagogues, and naval men, of her American natives and expatriates, of her Hispanic priests and revolutionaries, aristocrats and peasants, thus provides the sort of large-scale social inventory that used to be one of the leading features of the major novel. Though she has dispensed with the old-fashioned elaborate plot, she does contrive an almost continual movement of the narrative among the characters which serves much the same purpose as complicated plotting once did: it brings different classes (in this case, nationalities) and types into relation and into the kind of revealing patterns of connection and conflict that can take on a large public significance. And tied as the novel is to crucial historical events such as the world-wide depression of the 1930's and the coming of fascism, the over-all effect is that of a novelist, as confident in her sense of moral order as Dickens or Balzac, creating the private history of an age.

Seen, then, from a respectful distance, *Ship of Fools* can easily look like the real thing come back again—a spacious, resonant, self-assured novel that the reader can settle down with instead of the highly mannered, oblique, claustrophobic novel of recent years, confined to the academy or the suburb or a vaguely specified limbo, equivocal if not hostile toward the respectable values. At the same time, the unconventional anecdotal structure eliminates the Victorian furniture of an elaborate and artificial 'story' and gives *Ship of Fools* a lean, functional, modern look.... All of which provides a few of the more obvious reasons why Miss Porter was able to win over about eighty percent of the reviewers and presumably the hundreds of thousands of readers whose currents of taste the reviewers both direct and mirror. The other reasons are more subtle.

Virginia Pasley, book editor of *Newsday*, a Long Island daily, remarked that the novel's lack of an immediate story interest and its 'incisive indictment of humanity' would put off many readers. 'It was not written to please. It won't,' she concluded. Yet Miss Pasley was completely wrong—for many of the reviewers chose to recommend *Ship of Fools* precisely for the two reasons that she had dismissed it as a possible best-seller. Indeed, the reception of the novel seemed a good deal less like another gathering of the philistines than a massive act of aspiration—even of conversion. It was seized upon as an opportunity both to move the level of popular literary appreciation up a full notch, and to declare, once and for all, that the human race has come to be as unsatisfactory and immoral as Miss Porter 'objectively' pictures it to be....

There was a good deal of talk about 'the interplay of character' taking precedence over 'the strategy of plotting,' of 'vibrant tension' rather than mere 'suspense,' of the writer's 'vision of chaos' and use of

'thematic structure.' All of which indicated that a half-century after the innovations of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Mann, *et al.*, the idea that the happenings in a novel are far less significant or even moving than the underlying design, usually symbolic, to which they point appears to have filtered down into the popular literary mind." [Solotaroff's negative claims are not dignified by inclusion here.]

Theodore Solotaroff  
"Ship of Fools: Anatomy of a Best-Seller"  
*The Red Hot Vacuum and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties*  
(1962; Atheneum 1970) 103-08

"*Ship of Fools*...is the story of a voyage—a voyage that seems to take place in many dimensions. A novel of character rather than of action, it has as its main purpose a study of the German ethos shortly before Hitler's coming to power in Germany. That political fact hangs as a threat over the entire work, and the novel does not end so much as succumb to a historical truth. But it is more than a political novel. *Ship of Fools* is also a human comedy and a moral allegory....

Miss Porter has written one of those fine but ambiguous books whose values and meanings shift the way light changes as it passes through a turning prism.... Miss Porter is interested in the interplay of character and not in the strategy of plotting. Her method is panoramic—cabin to cabin, deck to writing room, bridge to bar.... She manipulates one microcosm after another of her huge cast in short, swift scenes. Observed from the outside, analyzed from within, her characters are handled episodically. Place is her organizing element, time the propelling agent of her action. The *Vera* is a Hotel Universe always in motion....

There are three major events. An oilman, Herr Freytag, a stainless Aryan, is refused the captain's table once it is learned that the wife he is going back to fetch from Germany is Jewish. A wood carver in steerage jumps overboard to save a dog thrown into the sea by the twins, and is drowned. And the zarzuela company arranges a costume-party 'gala' whose expressed purpose is to honor the captain but whose real motive is the fleecing of the other passengers. The characters, seeking release or support in one another, merely deepen each other's frustrations....

As character after character gives way to a compulsion he has been unaware of, it becomes evident why Miss Porter's novel is open to many interpretations. Through sheer accuracy of observation rather than the desire to demonstrate abstract ideas, she has hit upon a major theme: order vs. need, a theme observable in the interchange of everyday life and susceptible of any number of readings—political, social, religious, and psychological. Every major character is magnetized in time by the opposing forces of need and order. Mexico is the incarnation of need, Germany the representative of an order based on need.... Need turns people into fools, order into monsters. The *Vera*'s first-class passengers stroll on deck gazing down into the abysmal pit of the steerage—pure need—just as they watch in envy the frozen etiquette of the captain's table and its frieze of simulated order....

Even Frau Schmitt, a timid ex-teacher who cannot bear suffering in others, finally accepts the cruelty of Freytag's dismissal from the captain's table. If she does not belong there herself, she thinks, then where does she belong? A victim, she thus becomes a party to victimization—a situation that is to receive its perfect demonstration in the world of Nazi Germany, which shadows Miss Porter's book like a bird of carrion. Through the need to belong...a governing idea emerges from *Ship of Fools* that is rooted in the Prussian mystique of 'blood and iron.' It is the manipulation of human needs to conform to a version of order....

Even the most despicable characters, such as the Jew-hating Herr Rieber, seem surprisingly innocent. It is the innocence of ignorance, not of moral goodness.... Each person is trapped in that tiny segment of reality he calls his own, which he thinks about, and talks about, and tries to project to a listener equally obsessed. Not knowing who they are, these marathon talkers do not know the world they are capable of generating. Love is the sacrificial lamb of their delusions....

Miss Porter is a moralist, but too good a writer to be one except by implication. Dogma in *Ship of Fools* is attached only to dogmatic characters.... She combines something of the intellectual strategy of Mann's *Magic Mountain* (in which the characters not only are themselves but represent ideas or human qualities)

with the symbolic grandeur of *Moby-Dick* (in which a predestined fate awaits the chief actors)... It lacks two components usually considered essential to masterpieces—a hero and a heroic extravagance. *Ship of Fools* is basically about love.... The love that comes too late for the Condesa and Dr. Schumann is the most touching thing in it. But the Condesa is deranged, ill, and exiled; the dying Doctor is returning to a Germany that has vanished. The one true example of love—a pair of Mexican newlyweds—is never dwelt upon. We are left with this image of two people, hand in hand, who have hardly said a word in all the thousands that make up Miss Porter’s novel.”

Howard Moss

“No Safe Harbor”

*Writing against Time: Critical Essays and Reviews*  
(1962; Morrow 1969)

“When, twenty years ago, as a famed specialist in the short story, she let it be known that she had begun a novel, she meant...a large lifelike portrayal of a numerous and representative society, with contrasts of the classes and the masses and the generations and the ethnic groups, with causes and effects in the private psychology of one and all, and with their influences on one another—every man to some extent a part of every other man’s fate...the whole so much more than the sum of the parts....

As the time passed, there arose in literary circles a murmur of skepticism or pessimism to which (I hope) she herself was deaf.... What in the world made us so negative, Katherine Anne’s friends and enemies, and all the literary gentry? With the long, solid, closely wrought, and polished work in hand, the grumpiness about it for so long seems strange. Occasionally, when publication had to be postponed again, and then again, did I not sometimes hear in certain voices, voices well-meaning enough as a rule, tones of what in psychoanalytical parlance used to be known as Schadenfreude, exhilaration-when-things-go-wrong?...

She has been enviable for years. Her fame has been out of proportion to the amount of her work, however highly one might think of it as to its excellence. At least in theory, a good many of us would willingly have experienced her sadnesses, shouldered her burdens, faced up to her disappointments, in order to have produced just those few volumes of her short fiction (even giving up hope of the legendary novel) and to have felt her satisfaction in consequence. How proudly she spoke of her vocation at times, almost as though she were a ruler or as though she were a saint!... Even when things have been in no wise flourishing for her, she has seemed somehow exultant, heroic, heroine-like. Furthermore, she has a formidable wit, which may have troubled some people.... Of course in a way one is proud to be chastised with intellect and virtuosity like hers; at any rate one prides oneself on taking it stoically; but it may leave sorenesses of scar tissue, reflexes of spite....

*Ship of Fools* is a phenomenal, rich, and delectable book.... [It] began with a sea voyage that she took in 1931, and specifically, she says, with an account of it in a letter to her friend and fellow writer, Caroline Gordon. Ten years later she began putting it in fiction form, and gradually, perhaps unintentionally, it ceased to be a reminiscence and a tale and became a true and full-length novel.... [with] great flashbacks and mirrorings of motive and fate, by means of a prophetic understanding of the patterns of their lives still to be lived; about three dozen of them clearly delineated and memorable, some unforgettable...diversely involved in love and lust and mortal illness and craziness and chauvinism and cruel intolerance and religiosity, actively involved, in brilliant incidents with hallucinating dialogue, all things motivating one another, all things illuminating one another.... Its qualities...far exceed my expectations: the hallucinating specificity; the supreme and constant meaningfulness of everything; the bewitchment of the story as such, or, to be exact, the stories (plural) interwoven; and a continual sense of cause and effect, both in the mind and in external circumstances, amounting to suspense... An analogy in terms of music occurs to me: the themes best suited to large-scale polyphonic compositions do not make the shapeliest sonatas or the most moving songs....

Essentially it is a theme novel, with great themes.... Femaleness, and the basic coercive-submissive (not to say sado-masochistic) relations of males and females; middle age; neuroticism; and several predestining historic matters; the influential mentality of American expatriates, egocentric but sensitive; the pre-Nazi mentality of otherwise quite ordinary middle-class and lower middle-class Germans, with their wild conceit backed up by fanatic hard work and co-operativeness within the group; the cold and sickening ferment of



ideas like anti-Semitism.... All the qualities that I have praised in her previous fiction—that grasp of lamentable evil...the objectivity, the knack of [realistic] portraiture (often like Frans Hals, sometimes like Goya), the natural-seeming style...suspense throughout...all are still praiseworthy in *Ship of Fools*....

The central part of *Ship of Fools* is the story of the amorous entanglement of a willful and clever American girl painter with a young fellow artist, whom she perhaps loves but does not like (and is disliked by).... There is another love relationship, somewhat tenderer than that of the young Americans, between a middle-aged Spanish noblewoman, whose life really has become hopeless in every way and who has taken to drugs, and a saintly German doctor with a hopeless heart condition, who supplies her with drugs and otherwise befriends her and loves her desperately.... There is only one Jew on board the *Vera*... No one actually mistreats him; he seems not sorry for himself personally, only for the collectivity of Jews. He is bigotedly religious, even superstitious, and rabidly anti-Gentile. The victim of the German insolence and silliness is a good Aryan German, an oil-man named Freytag with a beloved Jewish wife (not on board). When his miscegenation gets bruited about he is removed from the captain's table and seated with Lowenthal, who also gives him a hard time, hating to hear of a Jewish girl's having stooped so low as to marry one of the goyim, even a good one....

How rich it is, in human interest, tribulation, and reading pleasure... In reading *Ship of Fools* one is less aware of structure than of movement, as it might be the movement of one's eyes lighting first on one thing, then on another... Structurally, *Ship of Fools* is in three parts: I. Embarcation; II. High Seas; III. The Harbors—subdivided into about a hundred and fifty brief untitled sections.... In the case of some passengers Katherine Anne gives us, in a section each, profoundly though swiftly, the whole being and salient features of the entire life story.... It is a vast portrait gallery.... There is one physical monster, pitiful and harmless, an S-shaped hunchback named Herr Glocken, and a kind of unfunny clown, a fat bellowing red-shirted political agitator. But these grotesque personages are on the very outer edges of the book.... They make a frame around the more important, less anomalous portraits; a baroque or rococo frame.

This also differentiates Katherine Anne's novel from other novels of the grand-hotel type. She is not mainly interested in the patchwork and variegation of human nature. What fires and polarizes her mind are the themes...the universal characteristics: mutual unkindness of lovers, gluttony and alcoholism, snobbery and conformism, and political power...with scarcely ever a word about any of these subjects in the abstract, not a bit of intellectuality per se; only intelligence, constantly arising afresh from observation.... [The novel] rises rather slowly and coldly at first, with an effect of distance... Gradually one is impressed, gradually one is enthralled, then lifted higher and higher, and submerged deeper and deeper, almost drowned. The wave breaks, at the end of Part II, with (let us say) the burial at sea of Echegaray, the heroic and/or suicidal wood carver. But by that time our responsiveness, intentness, and ravishment are like a wide shelving shore, a flat and curving beach. And for almost two hundred pages after the breaking of the wave, up it comes still, in long breakers or combers, some with subsidiary crests of great brilliance.”

Glenway Wescott  
*Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*  
(Hamish Hamilton, London 1963) 47-56

“You will find yourself already aboard her *Ship of Fools*... She has no clearly identifiable protagonist or antagonist. Her subject is too large to be shown through a central character; for as the ship progresses from the ‘true cross’ to the ‘broken haven’ she shows us how each passenger journeys not only to Bremerhaven but through life. In so doing she shows us the common manner in which we make the voyage, and she shows us the necessarily concomitant subject of what she views life to be....

As the title says, the voyagers are all fools.... Miss Porter reduces the foolery to the oldest mark of the fool, the one thing that all fools in all time have had in common: the mask. She shows how intricately contrived are the masks. Each man wears not one but many. He peers at his existence from behind the various masks of nationality, age, sex, creeds, social rank, race, wealth, politics, and all the other existential distinctions made by both the elemental and civilized man.

At times the masks are as pathetically simple as that of Frau Baumgartner, who in the tropic heat is momentarily too angry with her small son to heed his pleas to remove the buckskin suit in which she has wrongly encased him.... 'She...seemed to hate him.' But in the next moment she 'sees him clearly' and is filled with pity and remorse and tenderness.' At other times the intricacy of the masks is nearly as confusing as it is to Denny the Texan whose...consuming passion on the voyage is to buy, at *his* price, the wares of Pastora, a dancer in the zarzuela company.... Sitting in the ship's bar Denny has an atheist on one side speaking like a bolshevik and over here a Jew, criticizing Christians and meaning Catholics... Denny wants the mask simple and set...

Miss Porter shows the results of a mask settling into reality through Mrs. Treadway, an American divorcee, to whom the past is so bad, as compared to a future full of love she had expected as a child, it seems something she has read in the newspapers. Denny in his final determination to conquer Pastora confuses the door and drunkenly mistakes for the face of Pastora the face of 'unsurpassed savagery and sensuality' which Mrs. Treadwell in drunken idleness painted on herself following the failure of the young ship's officer to arouse and feeling in her. She shoves Denny to the deck, and using her metal capped high heel beats in the face of the fallen and stuporous man with 'furious pleasure' and is afterwards delighted at the sight of her 'hideous wicked face' in her mirror....

Usually, though, the masks shift and change like the postures of a dance. Jenny and David, the American painters who have been living together but are now traveling in separate cabins, approach each other with feelings of love only to have their feelings turn suddenly into hatred and the hatred as it shows itself on their faces evokes the love again. They can no more decide their emotional destiny than they can decide their physical destination. One wants to visit Spain; the other, France. In the course of their constant argument they even swap positions but always the change is in reaction to an action or reaction in the other.

And here Miss Porter takes the breath away with her absolute genius. Never, not once in the seemingly unending continuum of emotional and rational action and reaction, whether between total strangers operating behind the complicated masks of their civilized pasts or whether between selves almost submerged in old marriages, never, no matter how abrupt maybe the reversal of a position or of a thought pattern, is there anything but complete belief that, yes, this is the way it would really be.... Perhaps the truth of the characters lies not in revealing the total man facing an action as large as life itself (perhaps no man can) but in the manner or the method with which the characters face life. If in this or that situation they wear this or that ready-made mask and in the next situation wear yet another or the thousand faces molded by the forms of civilization and elemental man, then perhaps we really are caricatures with our true selves forever unrealized.

Certainly the passengers behind their masks hide from each other their love. Mrs. Treadwell says the passengers are all saying to each other '*Love me, love me in spite of all! Whether or not I love you, whether I am fit to love, whether you are able to love, even if there is no such thing as love, love me!*'... The Germanic mask of discipline and family is so stolid on the face of Dr. Schumann, the ship's doctor, that even though he loves the beautiful Cuban Condesa, who has forsaken herself to ether and self-caresses, he degrades her and wants rid of her. In horror of himself he renounces all human kinship... This was probably the last opportunity for love in his life.

The one unmasked act of love aboard the ship, an act nearly performed earlier by Dr. Schumann when he risked overtaxing a weak heart by stepping forward to save a cat, was performed by a man in steerage, a wood carver who cries like a child when his knife is taken from him and who, when the white dog is thrown overboard into the night sea, leaps after the white object without hesitation or knowledge of whether it is a man or a dog and is drowned saving it. In the lean raggedness of this 'worn but perhaps young' wood carver, who cannot but bring to mind another worker in wood, and in his unselfish act, is an opportunity for the passengers to see behind man's façade.

But even the parent-like owners of the dog want only to forget the wood carver's name, and they lose themselves in the carnal interest the act has rediscovered for them. The wood carver's burial ends with the priests turning their backs while their Catholic flock in steerage nearly kills a taunting atheist. The final results of the wood carver's act are that the dog is saved and fun is had by Ric and Rac, the twin children

who threw the dog overboard... Ric and Rac have named themselves for two comic cartoon terriers who 'made life a raging curse for everyone near them, got their own way invariably by a wicked trick, and always escaped without a blow'....

Miss Porter is writing of civilized men. She is writing of the passengers living in the upper decks, and they are terrified of the masses of humans traveling in animal misery in steerage. All weapons are taken from the masses, even the wood carver's knife. The elemental man is also apparent. Jenny is haunted by the memory of two Mexican Indians, a man and woman locked in a swaying embrace, both covered with blood and killing each other with cutting weapons. 'They were silent, and their faces had taken on a saintlike patience in suffering, abstract, purified of rage and hatred in their one holy dedicated purpose to kill each other.' In her dreams she is horrified to see that this is she and David.

And no matter how tightly the passengers may be enclosed in their formalized attitudes the zarzuela company reveals how thinly surfaced they are. By subverting the masks, the whores and pimps make the passengers pay them to usurp the Captain's table, toast confusion, send the pompous Captain fleeing, and in their hatred mock the passengers by parodying them on the dance floor. The dance itself being a formalization, the parody by the whores and pimps becomes not only a parody of the individual passenger but of everything he considers civilized.

And the parody is meaningful because the passengers themselves are parodies, fools. Fools because behind all the masks and the love and the hatred is a selfishness... The novel comes to no conclusions, answers no questions; its ending is the end of the journey. But these masks are our masks; this is the way we cover our naked selves for the swift passage; this life is our lives moving steadily into eternity, the familiar action in which we are all involved. And the novel is a lament for us all, a song artistically resolved, sung by a great artist of the insoluble condition of man."

Smith Kirkpatrick  
"Ship of Fools"  
Sewanee Review (Winter 1963)

"It might be called 'a moral allegory for our time,' or... 'an existentialist fable.' The ship is called *Vera* (truth), and the most general contrast represented in its passengers and crew (who are the characters of the novel) is a familiar one from the author's short fiction: a juxtaposition of passionate, indolent, irresponsible Latins with the cold, calculating, and self-righteous Nordics. These extremes not only represent a majority of the passengers and crew, but also suggest the beginning of the voyage in Mexico and its ending in Germany. Adding the necessary complexity are the characters that fall between these extremes: an Indian nursemaid, four Americans, a family of Swiss, a Mexican political agitator, a Basque, a Swede, and six Cuban medical students on their way to France.

As a voyage, events may be likened to Dante's progress in *The Divine Comedy*.... *Ship of Fools* is a comedy for today in the same high sense that Dante used the term in the fourteenth century.... The word 'fool,' as used by Miss Porter in her title [means] 'God's fool,' suggesting man's foolishness as compared to God's wisdom. Similarly, the foolishness of the acts committed aboard ship resemble the absurdities of human action as portrayed by modern existentialism....

The authorial eye is located mostly away from and above the characters, effaced in the modern manner, but capable upon occasion of moving into their very minds to provide insights into their often warped, sometimes, tender, occasionally right ways of thinking. Necessary to this view is a strong sense of authorial responsibility, and Miss Porter gains this, one feels, by the extreme honesty and objectivity of her vision. She has...not 'loaded the dice' against her characters. 'I would not take sides,' she said...[with] a sense of understanding based on a firm belief in the imperfectability of man, but an understanding held with compassion....

The action of *Ship of Fools* is made up of three sections: Part I, Embarkation; Part II, High Sea; Part III, The Harbors. Each is prefaced with an epigram. The first is a quotation from Baudelaire... 'When do you sail for happiness?'...the second is from a song by Brahms...'No House, No Home...'the third is from Saint Paul: 'For here have we no continuing city'... Man persists in setting sail for happiness, only to find

himself, after all, houseless and homeless, to become aware at last that his city is doomed.... In Part I we become acquainted with the various characters...groups and nationalities; we come to sense their very real and pathetic isolation. In Part II, which has more than half the book's pages, the major events occur; and this might be called The Wasteland Section...containing as it does the torment of the passengers in steerage, the struggle for detachment or for involvement of the passengers and ship's officers above, their regimented hates and their pathetic attempts to love. In Part III, as the ship nears its destination, the effects of the preceding events begin to tell. A bacchanalian fiesta put on by a group of Spanish dancers in honor of the captain brings out all the hidden fears, guilts, and repressions of the participants, followed by the usual remorse and readjustment of relationships....

Among the passengers and crew in the upper class, the Germans appear in greatest number.... The second largest group are the Spaniards and Mexicans.... Other nationals included are four Americans: William Denny, a young Texas engineer; Mary Treadwell, a forty-five-year-old divorcee; and an unmarried couple, David Scott and Jenny Brown, traveling together to Europe.... The occupants of the steerage are almost nine hundred Spanish workmen being deported from Cuba after the failure of the Cuban sugar crop. It is difficult to say who are the principal characters in the events of the novel... Among the ship's personnel, the doctor and the captain appear most prominent. Captain Thiele is the embodiment of Teutonic authority, firm, unyielding, formal, and wrongheaded. Dr. Schumann represents...almost exactly the opposite. He is warm and compassionate, although somewhat impersonal; he is a devout Bavarian Catholic with a heart condition that might cause death at any moment.... The one character among the voyagers who chooses isolation, as protection against personal pain and disgust, is Julius Lowenthal, the Jew....

A Basque, known only as Echegaray...carves wooden figures with a penknife and...is drowned when he jumps overboard to save the Huttens' bulldog, cast into the sea by the Spanish twins.... An unnamed political agitator...makes fun of the religious observances among the steerage passengers and is struck over the head with a wrench by one of them after he had laughed during the services for Echegaray...The significance of these two figures, like the significance of the Mexican honeymooners, lies in the very vagueness with which the author presents them, almost without name, with only the brief and fatal accident to define the one, with only his political position and his wound to define the other. Both are, in a sense, savior figures, reminiscent of...such figures in 'Flowering Judas'...

The Basque, who, if he is a crucified Christ in his plunge into the sea and dies ironically in an attempt to save an aged and repulsive bulldog, is also a 'creator,' whose artistry is presented as more genuine than that of the American couple in the upper class who call themselves artists. The agitator, as modern savior, is allied to La Condesa (the political exile), who, like Eugenio of 'Flowering Judas,' can gain peace only in the...drugs administered by Dr. Schumann. The ship's doctor, like Laura, serves the cause of betrayal, and so is inhibited from meaningful action."

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 32-39

"Her only novel, *Ship of Fools* (1962), is one of the most significant books to appear since World War II: not only because of its intrinsic merits (which are many and become more clear the more one contemplates her work), but also because it is the first full-scale attempt to make literature of the great, abiding demonology of the 1930's. This is bound to make it a controversial novel, and Miss Porter has both received extravagant praise and been exorbitantly abused.... She deserves...the recognition that she is a woman of absolute dedication and integrity and an artist of great and proven skill."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery/Gateway 1951-63) 238

"The novel is given clear-cut unity by the convention of the sea voyage.... The voyage itself is both an escape and a movement toward new disillusion, and the ship says nothing more clearly about the world it symbolizes than that it is oppressive. Its passengers are aboard only by necessity and few are certain of their destination.... Body odors and the various strong perfumes and disinfectants employed by the passengers add to the physical sense of oppression....

After the precise depiction of the seaport and the vivid introduction of most of the characters...the emphasis shifts to the inner natures of individuals and the interactions between them.... What the story contains of plot consists of gradual developments in the relations, mostly casual, between passengers.... Its magnitude lies not in the long, intricate plot of the classic novel but in the fact that it portrays over forty characters, many of them at considerable length, through a loose and leisurely accumulation of data provided by dramatization of their actions, penetration of their thoughts, and commentary on their backgrounds.... Mrs. Treadwell...is the only passenger described almost exclusively in favorable terms.... A fiesta given near the end of the voyage by the zarzuela troupe...provide[s] a climax in the development of the social pattern.... The humor is never pure comedy, always satire....

The critic who attempts to pursue her philosophical or political conclusions is likely to find himself either building on scanty foundations and out into a void, or confusing Miss Porter's fictional world with his own idea of the real world.... She is scrupulously devoted to portraying life as she sees it, concretely.... The efforts she makes to treat each character fairly contribute to the fullness of the various portrayals and hence to the artistic stature of the book as a whole."

William L. Nance

*Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 160-61, 162, 165, 168-70, 174-75, 177

"Miss Porter has a fine power of nervous observation. Her picture of Berlin in the Isherwood period is eerie and searching. She sees everything that disturbs. She notices peculiar local things that one realizes afterwards are true: how often, for example, the Berliners' eyes filled with tears when they were suddenly faced with small dilemmas. Hysteria is near to the surface. Yet the tears were a kind of mannerism. Her power to make a landscape, a room, a group of people, thinkingly alive is not the vague, brutal talent of the post-Hemingway reporter but belongs to the explicit Jamesian period and suggests the whole rather than the surface of a life."

V. S. Pritchett

*The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*  
*New Statesman* (10 January 1964) 41-43

"The Book-of-the-Month Club...chose *Ship of Fools* as its April selection, and in its brochure sent to members published...an ecstatic review by Clifton Fadiman.... Mark Schorer in the lead article in the *New York Times Book Review*...concluded that *Ship of Fools* could be compared 'with the greatest novels of the past hundred years. Call it, for convenience, the "Middlemarch" of a later day'....

With [her] voyage to Europe still clearly in mind, Miss Porter read in 1932, Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (1494). When she began planning the novel, she took, as she says, 'this simple almost universal image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity.' Brant's influence on the novel is much more pronounced than most critics, Mark Schorer excepted, have seen.... Miss Porter has retained much of the moral earnestness and the satiric thrusts of Brant, and she has also made special use not only of his ship image but also of the deadly sins. The sins against society including injustice, dishonesty, and uncharitableness; the sins of the church and the clergy, ill-advised prayers, irreverence in church, clerical excesses; the sins of lawyers, doctors, patients, bad women, beggars; the sins at the carnival, to name only some of the categories, are also abundant on Miss Porter's ship. Unlike Brant, Miss Porter presents developed characters instead of abstractions.

The allegory of good and evil is implicit in Miss Porter's version, but she has made the meaning more clear by using as a focal point the rise of the fascists in the 1930's, and the world-wide calamity which resulted from the mass movements led by Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. She catalogued in detail the inertia and political naivete among most of the Americans and Europeans on the *Vera*: the anti-Negro, anti-Mexican sentiments of the Texan Denny, attitudes still prevalent long after Nazism and fascism were officially dispelled in Germany and Italy; the Spanish dancers, prostitutes, pimps, criminals, managing to terrify the whole ship and to survive and even thrive; the Fatherland consciousness, the pig-headedness, the anti-Semitism, the self-pity, the cruelty of the Germans, based on Miss Porter's personal observations, both on the ship bound for Europe in 1931 and in Germany itself. Miss Porter incorporates virtually all of Brant's fools into her own political parable and sober warning.

One of the most brilliant qualities of the novel is the deft handling of point of view, which constantly shifts from character to character. As a result of the shifts, the reader sees characters and events from multiple angles of vision; and he begins to understand the complexity of the characters and the events. No one observer has the 'truth'; no one observer is Miss Porter's spokesman. Mrs. Treadwell's bruised arm, for example, resulted from a beggar's pinch; but, when Dr. Schumann saw it, he thought it was from an amorous pinch. Time and time again, interpretations which seemed logical to those making the judgments are proved wrong.

The opening section, the first part of the Embarkation section with the rubric from Baudelaire... 'When shall we set out toward happiness'... which is used ironically—is a sustained mood piece, a near-perfect introduction to the action and events which are to follow. Veracruz is described with overwhelmingly realistic details, and by implication Miss Porter extends her Veracruz to include all commercial cities and her passengers to include all the people of the world. Veracruz was a 'little purgatory between land and sea,' and the reader soon learns that the embarking passengers were to leave one purgatory for another on ship, for another at their port of destination.

At first, the sights and sounds, the local color, are stronger than the passengers themselves. The capitalistic-proletariat *leitmotif* which runs through the novel is introduced early: the Mexican capitalists were bloodthirsty, unfeeling, confident they would last a while longer. The proletariat were sometimes innocent victims (as was the boy killed in the bungled bombing), exploited, mistreated, treated no better than cattle, as were the hundreds of Spaniards put in steerage. Class and social differences are evident throughout the novel, not only in first class itself, with its own bitter divisions, but between first class and steerage.... The fat Mexican in the cherry-colored shirt, a figure remarkably similar to Braggioni in 'Flowering Judas'...[is] a mock revolutionary.... At the funeral service, he often belched loudly and 'made the sign of the Cross with his thumb on the end of his nose.' The devout in steerage, angered, fell upon him' and the fat revolutionary was struck a strong blow on the head. The reactions to the attack are brilliantly analyzed... The account as parable is of the weakening of the revolutionary movement....

Miss Porter at first gives surface impressions of the Germans, Americans, the Swede, the three Swiss, and the Spanish dancers and their two children. Some of the members begin to appear in focus: the Huttens, parents of Bebe; Mrs. Treadwell, who has a large bruise on her arm because she had refused alms to a beggar. Miss Porter emphasizes not only the beastliness of the beggar woman but also the aloofness and alienation of the woman who refused to give money to her. In groups, couples, and one by one, Miss Porter introduces her cast of characters, then we see many of them again through the eyes of the ship's doctor, Dr. Schumann, who, from his first description, seems suspect, because of two dueling scars on his face. The standard reaction of slight repulsion is proved wrong, however, for Dr. Schumann is not a bigoted fraternity man, but a professional man of talent, a professional observer with a clinical eye but with human compassion, a representative of what was good in a Germany of the past; but he is dying of a heart disease, just as the 'good' Germany was dying....

One of the most horror-provoking bits of local color, the maimed beggar, is found in Brant [1494].... In Miss Porter's version, the beggar, who had been deformed by a master, appeared on the terrace in Veracruz every morning (just as the clowns and dwarfs in 'The Circus' appeared in the circus tent every day). Partially blind, and dumb, he crawled along the sidewalk like a dog, 'wagging his hideous shock head from side to side slowly in unbearable suffering. The men at the table glanced at him as if he were a dog too repulsive even to kick...' Miss Porter used, as she often does, animal imagery to describe man; but, in this instance, we see an example of her concreteness as opposed to Brant's abstraction, and her version of the perfidy of beggars surpasses Brant in horror, setting, and tone....

The travelers straggled into the plaza and the restaurant slowly, and the reader sees them as the travelers themselves would view a group awaiting passage, or as the Mexican waiters see them. The insolent waiters stared at the motley assortment of travelers, at the fat couple with the fat bulldog Bebe. The night before, the clerk had told the woman, 'No, Senora, even if this is only Mexico still we do not allow dogs in our rooms.' The humor and gentle irony of this passage is followed by a comic, mock-heroic description: 'The ridiculous woman had kissed the beast on his wet nose before turning him over to the boy who tied him up in the kitchen patio for the night. Bebe the bulldog had borne his ordeal with the mournful silence of his

heroic breed, and held no grudges against anybody.' Miss Porter's complete control of language, which perhaps derives partially from Sterne, is beautifully demonstrated here.

The horror of the death of the young Indian boy, killed by mistake in the bombing of the Swedish Embassy, made almost no impression on the travelers; and they were equally unconcerned about the Indian arrested by the police. Herr Rieber predicted the man would be shot, but his pre-Nazi mentality is not to be trusted—he wanted inferior races shot, or put into gas ovens. The bored reactions of the Mexicans discussing the bombing become a parable for man's reactions to violence and symbolic of the madness which the world was headed for in less than ten years.

Love, sex, and jealousy are introduced in the first pairings on the *Vera*: the pre-Nazi, pig-like Rieber, and his Lizzi, and Arne Hansen, a sex-ridden Swede. The feud of the two men over Lizzi lasted the entire trip, coming to a climax the night of the captain's ball. The Spanish dancers, without their pimps, were ogled by Denny, the sex-crazed perennially unsuccessful Texan. He shared a cabin with Herr Glocken...and David Scott, lover of the American girl Jenny Brown, who had caused such a scandal in Veracruz by appearing in slacks. David and Jenny were constantly at each other, consuming each other in their love-hate relationship.... Miss Porter did not set out—in the characters of Ric and Rac or in some of the pre-Franco Spaniards or pre-Nazi Germans, or in the pre-Little Rock Southerners—to define the exact nature of good and evil. Nor does she see the possibility of the redemption of man. Echegaray, the Jesus-like character, sacrificed himself to rescue Bebe—a parody of Jesus dying for mankind—but nobody understood, nobody cared, least of all the priests....

Three women are of special interest; all three are, in one way or another, spokesmen for Miss Porter. [1] Jenny, the young artist, seems partially autobiographic: she was from the South, from a large family which had disapproved of her wanting to be an artist; she had been much interested in liberal causes and believed in direct participation in political protest. Unfortunately, Jenny had allowed David to influence her work, and she no longer used the bright colors in her paintings that she had once employed. She is only slightly disillusioned; she is another Miranda still capable of seeing the world (if not always her lover) with perception. The love-hate relationship of Jenny and David is one of the major themes of the novel. [2] Mrs. Treadwell, the 45-46-year-old divorcee, wanted to withdraw from all contact but was inevitably drawn into the life of Freytag, the handsome businessman who both loved and hated his Jewish wife. Mrs. Treadwell, a secret alcoholic, unwittingly revealed that Freytag's wife was Jewish...and brought about his downfall among the Germans at the captain's table. In her alienation, Mrs. Treadwell is much like the unnamed narrator in 'Hacienda.' Her assault upon Denny comes at the end of the captain's dinner and is her vengeance taken upon the errant male.... [3] La Condesa is also a spokesman for Miss Porter; a slightly grotesque, once-beautiful woman constantly in need of sex, she...was capable of love; and the love affair with the doctor, though doomed, is one of the most admirable (which is to say, less animalistic) examples of love in the novel....

The willingness to send Freytag away from the captain's table because of his Jewish wife is a brilliant parable of the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism. The pride in race, the self-satisfaction of the remaining Germans, the failure of the intellectual Dr. Schumann to defend Freytag—all are realistic and at the same time symbolic. Miss Porter has extended her allegory to the universal human condition; she shows the racism of Denny and of Lowenthal. When the members of the Zarzuela company stole the prizes for the Captain's Gala, virtually everyone in first class saw what they were going; but nobody did anything about it. Lowenthal has many of the despicable traits of the Germans, for Miss Porter has not presented a romantically conceived stage Jew. He is self-satisfied, a shrewd businessman selling religious goods and bragging of his work...

The third section begins with a quotation from St. Paul: 'For here have we not continuing city...' The central scene is the Captain's Gala. The parallel to Brant is explicit: In the section on Carnival Fools, he wrote that revelers often pretended to mask their identity in order to commit immoral acts. At Miss Porter's carnival-like dinner, all semblance of morality was swept away.... The thieving, amoral Spanish dancers proposed, symbolically, a pact with Germany; Herr Baumgartner goose-stepped and was followed by goose-stepping children—a modern Pied Pipe leading the children to destruction...Hansen's attack on Herr Rieber; the ribald Cucarache song; the drunkenness of David, Denny, Baumgartner, Jenny; the dishonest

drawing for prizes were only a few of the actions of the fools, actions which stripped from them the last vestiges of civilization.... The horrible events of the night meant nothing to the passengers....

Miss Porter has, by the end of the novel, explored attitudes toward life and death, love and sex, religion and religiosity, love and hate, racism and politics; she has presented the deadly sins in old forms and in new guises.... Had Miss Porter emphasized 'human nobility' or even the possibility of human nobility, she would not have given a true picture of the 1930's or of much of man's experience in the twentieth century. Miss Porter sees the possibility offered by the wood carver; but, because of the *human condition*, his act does not bring salvation, is not even a worthy example. Miss Porter had written in *Ship of Fools* a gigantic novel, subtle and forceful, naturalistic and symbolic, allegorical and political."

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Twayne 1965) 131-40

"Katherine Anne Porter is sometimes thought of as a stylist.... There is nothing of arresting façade in her style, nothing of showmanship.... Though it looks easy rather than hard, it has a certain elusiveness that makes it not quite easy to account for. It would be difficult to imitate or parody... Miss Porter has a very wide vocabulary, but no pet vocabulary; she has considerable skill in compositional patterns... She is exact and explicit; she eschews mystery in the medium without losing the mystery in the matter.... Her variety appears in an obviously wide spectrum of tones and attitudes...modulating easily among the contemptible, the laughable, the pitiable, the evasive laudable, and, most of all, the ever-present contradictory....

In *Ship of Fools* the style is a window of things and people... It seems compelled by the objects in the fiction; it is their visible surface, the necessary verbal form that makes their identity perceptible. It seems never the construction of an artist imposing...but rather an emanation of the materials themselves... Miss Porter is ruling all, of course, but she seems not to be ruling at all: hence of her style we use such terms as 'distance,' 'elegance,' and of course the very word for what she seems to have ceded, 'control.' She is an absentee presence: in one sense her style is no-style. No-style is what it will seem if style means some notable habit of rhythm or vocabulary, some interchangeable...advice that firmly announces 'Faulkner' or 'Hemingway.' Miss Porter has no 'signal' or call letters that identify a single station or wave length. She does not introduce herself or present herself. Much less does she gesticulate....

No-style means a general style...a fusion of proven styles.... Jenny's sense of rigidity and immaturity in her lover is really an echo of her creator's sense of many of her human subjects: she sees them with easy clarity and goes right to the point. Her images for them come solidly out of life; they are not stylistic gestures... The difficulty of describing a style without mannerisms, crotchets, or even characteristic brilliances or unique excellences leads one constantly to use such terms as *plain, direct, ordinary, unpretentious, lucid, candid*... The qualities that they name are not inimical to the subtle or the profound, to the penetrating glance or the inclusive sweep. Miss Porter is much closer to Bronte than to Austen in her description of Dr. Schumann when he catches the evil Spanish twins in another destructive practical joke: he 'examined the depths of their eyes for a moment with dismay at their blind, unwinking malignance, their cold slyness—not beasts, though, but human souls'....

Here, as elsewhere, Miss Porter's manner is reminiscent of George Eliot's—of a carefully, accurately analytical style that is the agent of a mature psychic and moral understanding.... There is an Eliot-like perceptiveness in Freytag's discovery 'about most persons—that their abstractions and generalizations, their Rage of Justice or Hatred of Tyranny or whatever, too often disguised a bitter personal grudge of some sort far removed from the topic apparently under discussion' and in the matter-of-fact postscript that Freytag applied this only to others, never to himself....

For a final note on Miss Porter's great range, we can contrast this hilarious Smollettian jest with two quite dissimilar passages. One is the vivid imaging, in her visible gestures, of the inner unwellness of a Spanish countess: 'Thumbs turned in lightly to the palm, the hands moved aimlessly from the edge of the table to her lap, they clasped and unclasped themselves, spread themselves flat in the air, closed, shook slightly, went to her hair, to the bosom of her gown, as if by a life of their own separate from the will of the woman herself, who sat quite still otherwise, features a little rigid, bending over to read the dinner card



beside her plate.' Though here there is a more detailed visualization of the symbolized object, the feeling for the troubled personality is like Charlotte Bronte's. To this Countess, Dr. Schumann feels attracted, guiltily. After seeing her, 'He lay down with his rosary in his fingers'... In the meditative element, in the imaging of a remembered frenzy, and most of all in the particular moral sense that leads to the words 'soul estranged from its kind,' the account is reminiscent of Conrad....

My principal points, nevertheless, have been that Miss Porter's style has strong affiliations with the Austen and Eliot styles, that its main lines are traditional rather than innovating, and that it is markedly devoid of namable singularities, mannerisms, private idioms, self-indulgent or striven-for-unique-nesses that give a special coloration.... To claim for a writer affinities with Austen and Eliot (and to note, as evidence of her variety, occasional reminiscences of other writers) may seem faint praise... To note a resemblance in styles is not to make premature judgments of over-all merit... It is not to suggest influences, imitation, idle repetition, failure of originality, or limitedness.

On the contrary, it is a way of suggesting superiority in the individual achievement: here is a writer working independently, composing out of her own genius, and yet in her use of the language exhibiting admirable qualities that seem akin to those of distinguished predecessors. It is a way of proposing, perhaps, that she has got hold of some central virtues of the language, virtues whether of strength or grace, that tend to recur and that, whatever the modification of them from writer to writer, may in essence be inseparable from good writing. To say this is to imply a traditional style, or core of elements of style.... a group of long-enduring ways of using the language, apparent norms of utility, representative workings-out of possibility.... To call a writer a traditionalist in style would involve the old paradox of unique personality seizing on the universal thing or mode."

Robert B. Heilman  
"Ship of Fools: Notes on Style"  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*  
George Core and Lodwick Hartley, eds.  
(U Georgia 1969)

"*Ship of Fools* has very likely been the longest and most eagerly awaited fictional work of the century. For over two decades it has been subsidized by foundations and by publishers... The writing itself has in the main the beauty and efficiency that one has always found in Miss Porter.... The characters emerge rather than develop, and their movements in and out are rather like details in a flat design than like instrumentalities of cause and effect in a logical progression of action.

In this respect they resemble allegorical figures.... The 'allegory' of Miss Porter stands somewhere between the fifteenth-century allegory of Brant and that of the twentieth-century Kafka. In most respects, Miss Porter is as unlike the latter as she is unlike the former. Her characters are more than Kafkaesque wraiths. She rarely sails quite so much windward of fantasy as Kafka. Her symbols are not so elusive, intangible, or equivocal. Her reliance is on her own powers of exact observation rather than on intuition. But she is assuredly successful like Kafka in convincing her readers that nightmares are reality—at the same time that she shows reality to be a nightmare....

No one is forced to take *Ship of Fools* to be an allegory in the basic meaning of a prolonged metaphor with dual meanings carefully worked out through personifications of abstract qualities and of universal implications—as in *The Faerie Queene*, or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, or even *Gulliver's Travels*.... Though nobody has yet tried to force the novel into the mould of the medieval allegory through the application of something like the stock device of the Seven Deadly Sins, a general claim has already been staked for the Freudians: namely, the Captain represents the Super-Ego; the cabin passengers stand for the Ego; and the steerage, the Id.... [Freud was reductively hierarchical, like the Germans.]...

The thesis of the novel, Miss Porter has been quoted as saying, is 'the responsibility people must share for.' And she continues, 'I do not want to be uncharitable, but the good and virtuous people of the world are often in collusion with evil'.... Both in 'The Leaning Tower' and *Ship of Fools* Miss Porter indicates that she at an early stage unerringly sensed in the German character the destructive elements that would produce the holocaust of World War II."

Lodwick Hartley  
"Dark Voyagers"  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*  
Hartley and George Core, eds.  
(U Georgia 1969) 211-13, 215, 217, 221-22, 224-25

"I would...describe [*Ship of Fools*] as a tragic satire, basically allegorical in structure, in which many different stories of realistic romance are deliberately aborted, in keeping with the satiric purpose... The satiric bent is apparent everywhere...The book's central design is thematic rather than narrative. All the stories...are woven into, and become simply parts of, the total pattern of thematic statement.... One can expect few people reading *Ship of Fools* for the first time to have the same vested interests that the book seemed to threaten a decade ago....

The huge cast is managed with incomparable skill and economy. Only a handful of the 'eight hundred and seventy-six souls' in steerage are ever distinguishable as individuals. But almost every one of the fifty-odd inhabitants of the upper decks, including ship's officers as well as passengers, is clearly portrayed—at least in indelible caricature, if not, as with an astonishing number of them, in deeper shadings of thought and feeling.... The book is a vast complex of many little stories.... In just under five hundred pages, Miss Porter enters the most private consciousness of more than twenty people—of both sexes, of several different ages and ethnic groups, of widely varying personality types—with totally convincing mastery of attitude and sensibility, of mental idiom, in every case....

The book is nearly divided into three parts... But the arrangement is a deliberate mockery of the conventional plot structure, with beginning, middle, and end. As the epigraphs ironically suggest, there is no definite beginning, no dependable ending, either in time or place.... [It is] a voyage that is eternal.... At one level, *Ship of Fools* can be interpreted as a kind of prophesy in retrospect of the triumph of fascism in Europe.... Only two years later [1933], in the real world, Hitler was to become Chancellor of Germany. And there can be no doubt that if Katherine Anne Porter despised fascists in general, she saw the Nazis as the worst of the lot.... Miss Porter shows her keen insight into the kind of unholy collusion of good and evil...that permitted Hitler to firm his alliances with other fascist states for attempted world conquest and genocide, while in...every country of the world, believers in the equality and freedom of man uncomfortably compromised their consciences...

In the despicable racist Captain Thiele, commander of the *Vera*, Miss Porter clearly intended her readers to recognize the kind of German, in a position of authority, on whom Hitler was principally to depend for his political success. And almost all the Germans on the ship share Captain Thiele's attitudes.... At the ball...the [Spanish] dancers mock him with malicious toasts to the success and glory of the Spanish-German fascist alliance.... Miss Porter saw that the historical source of fascism is in degenerative processes affecting the whole of modern civilization.... The fascist mentality is fundamentally the same wherever one encounters it. The same basic social and psychological maladies that give rise to fascist political movements afflict the people of all faiths and nations.... There are no wholly admirable characters in the book. They are all fools.... The Americans are a deplorable lot....

There is one Jew aboard.... In view of the book's obvious intention to hold the Nazi mentality up to scorn, Miss Porter might reasonably have been expected to make the solitary Jew her most sympathetic character.... But Herr Lowenthal is...wallowing in self-pity and retributive contempt for Germans and all other *goyim*, blasphemously cynical about his exploitation of Christianity in his trade in religious goods... Lowenthal is, in fact, one of the least attractive people on the ship.... In some respects, Lowenthal is the 'stage Jew' of literary convention. But in others he is a consummate caricature of all that is worst in the *German* national character as Miss Porter represents it, piecemeal, in the other Germans aboard the *Vera*. In her characterization of Herr Lowenthal, Miss Porter interprets the German persecution of the Jews—rightly, I think—as, to a great extent, an exercise in projected self-hatred....

The Americans Jenny Brown and Mary Treadwell are rather obvious self-caricatures of Katherine Anne Porter, at different ages. But it is an important part of the design that she also invested herself in one of the least appealing of the Germans on the *Vera*.... The absurdly pretentious diary that Frau Rittersdorf keeps

on the voyage—with its self-conscious stylizing and ignorant pedantry, its aloof pseudo-sophistication and anxious assertions of objectivity—is undoubtedly a parody of the journal that Miss Porter kept during her own first trip to Europe, and that she used as the basis for the fiction of *Ship of Fools*....

Caricature is Miss Porter's dominant method in the book. She has developed to near perfection the caricaturist's essential vision of the beast in man.... All the characters...are fitted at one time or another with animal masks of varying subtlety. But the caricature of *Ship of Fools* is caricature raised finally to the level of tragic myth and mystery.... The fear the first-class passengers suffer is that they really are, as human beings, in no way essentially different from the wretched herd in steerage... The death of Echegaray is the crucial episode in the development of the book's central theme, and is elaborately and carefully anticipated in earlier action....

In the superb description of the beggar, and of the 'placid citizens' as they observe him, a passage of consummate, cold artistry that is yet resonant with unmistakable compassion, Miss Porter all but casually indicates the basic theme of her book, and reveals the essentially tragic attitude that she is to maintain with incomparable consistency through all the...satiric comedy that the tales of her sundry fools evoke. The beggar...is progressively degraded... *Ship of Fools* suggests...that the only true moral imperative for man, whereby he can maintain any true faith in the holiness of his humanity, is that he keep *asking* the unanswerable questions about his creaturely status."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 110-12, 116, 119-26, 134-36, 138-39

"In the traditional satirical manner Katherine Anne Porter isolates her characters' most repugnant traits by identifying those traits with animals. She reflects through her use of animal imagery her almost medieval hierarchical view of world order, in which man's fall from grace manifests itself in his exhibiting qualities of lower forms of life.... The Huttens elevate their dog to human status, providing a comic inversion of Miss Porter's use of animal imagery....

Miss Porter provides the perfect image of man's dehumanization in the description of the beggar... She examines men whose souls have been as maimed as the beggar's body. The zarzuela company are described as beautiful and brightly plumed birds, but their actions reveal them to be a 'thieving flock of crows'; the cold and ridiculous Huttens look like two frogs in their lovemaking; and David Scott looks like a 'willful cold-blooded horse.' Many such descriptions provide not only a key to the personalities and human failures of the characters, but also a perfect comic barb, as when Rieber, who has been lusting after Lizzi, gets into a fight with Hansen: 'He bleated like a goat'... The animal imagery thus reflects the perversions of human nature which lower men to the level of animals....

She observes her characters from an ironic point of view and emphasizes through comedy and irony the grotesque and absurd aspects of their actions.... The Spanish dancers are a banal but menacing force of evil, and their perversity is unrelieved by comedy.... Their laughter is filled with malice and cold ridicule. But Miss Porter's satire does not end with deflation of character or with sheer amusement. She seeks to evoke the laughter of recognition, laughter of compassionate understanding of the absurdities that man himself creates. In contrast the satiric comedy employed in the treatment of the condesa and the doctor is gentle, the elements of the absurd and the grotesque being subdued. Katherine Anne Porter attributes to these two characters qualities which she believes are necessary if man is to make a stand against evil and rise from the animalistic level to his true place as a human being.... Because the condesa is a lost soul by her own choice, she cannot stand as the moral norm of the satire. But from her unflinching refusal to have delusions about herself and other men, the doctor learns to acknowledge the evil in himself, emerging as a man with understanding of human failures and human suffering....

The doctor has appointed himself to a position of moral perfection from which he views the condesa—and practically everyone else aboard ship—'with a good deal of moral disapproval.' While the other characters lose their humanity by acting like animals, the doctor loses his by performing like a machine.... The condesa says of the doctor's cold morality: 'Oh, my friend, have you gone mad with your virtue and piety, have you lost your human feelings, how can you have forgotten what suffering is?' The doctor's

terrible failure is implicit in his physical defect: he has a serious heart ailment. His concern for his own moral superiority has left him without any capacity for human love.

Dr. Schumann's religious beliefs have so undermined his human feelings that he can only conceive of his love for the condesa as springing from lust. The doctor recoils from the two aspects of the condesa's decadence: her sexual perversity and her drug addiction. He dissociates himself personally from her by ministering to her needs as a physician instead of a lover. For the human love he could have given her, he substitutes the narcotic-filled hypodermic.... He fulfills her unnatural need for drugs, rather than her natural need for love, marking his complicity in her decadence... Miss Porter is as critical of the doctor's selfish and egotistical piety as she is of the condesa's physical depravity... But Dr. Schumann eventually recognizes the evil in himself and learns the value of human love.... Dr. Schumann does not turn his back [on the dancers robbing shops]: he recognizes evil, he suffers, and he regains his humanity. His triumph lies in the struggle itself...

With the exception of Dr. Schumann and the condesa, the passengers on the ship simply move from one illusion to another, from the failed hopes of Mexico to the new illusions of their various harbors. Their fruitless searches are pointed out in Miss Porter's working title for the novel: *No Safe Harbor*. Only the doctor moves from foggy self-delusion to an acceptance of truth.... The reactions of the other characters to their own plights and those of the people about them compose small plot movements, which themselves comprise larger movements. Each smaller episode shows the gathering forces of evil which build up to the three main sequences: the Freytag episode, the Bebe episode, and the climactic fiesta episode, which involves virtually every character except the doctor and the condesa. These three episodes move from the most impersonal evil and hatred to the most personal, and all arise from the chaotic feelings and attitudes of the passengers on the *Vera*.

From the beginning of the novel Miss Porter sets the various nationalities one against the other in encounters which are thinly veiled expressions of hatred. Within the groups of each nationality there is conflict between people of different social and economic strata, different regions, different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The chaotic world in which they live exists because of their insistence on stressing differences in themselves and other people and in making those differences the basis for hatred. The smug superiority of the Germans emerges as the dominant influence and sets the tone for the Freytag episode. Character after character reveals his prejudices, his personal little snobberies, and the tension arising from these feelings is first released in the Germans demand that Freytag be removed from the captain's table.

Nearly all Freytag's thoughts center around his feelings of guilt for having married a Jewess. Even though he loves his wife and has seen the insults she has had to endure, he is infected by strong feelings of German nationalism.... He tacitly goes along with the anti-Jewish jokes they make about his not eating pork, because he is too weak to denounce their prejudice until they have discovered the truth and have made it impossible for him to show any real moral strength. Freytag's concern is for himself, not for his wife.... Freytag moves to Lowenthal's table and discovers that the Jew hates him as much as the others do. Miss Porter satirizes all prejudice, all hatred, all bigotry by showing that Lowenthal and Rieber are essentially the same. They both hate Freytag, but each for a reason dictated by his own perverted view of the world. Had Lowenthal lived in a country where gentiles were persecuted, he would have been like Rieber, grinning with glee at the thought of genocide. Miss Porter's satire, by showing prejudice from two opposite angles, transcends the topical, shopworn outrage against anti-Semitism and becomes an attack on human beings who forget the humanity of their fellow men....

The irony of the episode lies not only in the similarities of Rieber and Lowenthal... The historical irony is emphasized by Professor Hutten's praise of the captain's removal of Freytag from their table... Its importance lies in its indicating a cancerous hatred in the human heart, not a strength of character and a righteousness in which the Germans can take pride.... His speech thus prepares for Miss Porter's satiric attack on him in the Bebe episode.... Miss Porter[']s constant concern is that the reader understand the importance of individual responsibility for the great evils of the world... By putting the Spanish children in the position of persecutors, Miss Porter shows the prejudice of the Germans and the Jew to be as infantile and as irrational as the mischief of the twins. This parallelism is reinforced by Ric and Rac's incestuous relationship—their imitation of the adult world. The use of parallel episodes stresses not only the absurdity

of mindless hatred, but also the serious consequences—namely death—that can result... The death of the woodcarver in his attempt to save Bebe provides the tragic element for the episode and for the entire novel. The satiric power of the Bebe episode lies primarily in the irony, which Miss Porter achieves by blending comic, absurd, and tragic elements into one satiric sequence....

Continuing the use of analogy and inversion, Miss Porter associates the twins who throw Bebe overboard with animals.... In this world of fools, humans name a dog 'Baby,' and treat the animal as if he were their son; and children who are treated like dogs name themselves after dogs in the own private jest against their collective enemy—the adult world.... The Huttens show more humanity toward their dog than they do toward other human beings, and the dog is made human while the humans are made animals.... The professor's inability to conceive that the woodcarver died in an unselfish attempt to save Bebe shows his philosophical belief to be no more than empty rhetoric.... Miss Porter criticizes the Huttens, not only because of their stupid prejudices but also because evil *is* 'our affair.' The Huttens ignore the evil they see around them, and they cannot recognize good, as in their attempt to turn the good and selfless act of the woodcarver into a selfish, egotistical act arising from ignoble motives....

The woodcarver, lover of animals, acts to preserve their beauty by preserving life, just as he has tried to capture something of their beauty in his carvings. Miss Porter implies here parallels between the physical beauty of animals and the spiritual beauty of man, between the artist as carver of animals and the artist as satirist. The woodcarver's purpose is to save the dog, poor specimen of animal beauty though Bebe is, from physical death; the satirist's purpose is to save man, in spite of his spiritual defects, from spiritual death. The characters in *Ship of Fools* are threatened with spiritual death not only from their inability to love on an impersonal level, but also from their human failure in personal relationships....

At the fiesta the powers of chaos rule, and the passengers respond automatically to the amoral and permissive atmosphere, revealing themselves to be unequivocal fools. The objects of the satire are those passengers who are perverted in various ways from their understanding of love, of which sex is a real and important part.... The selfish ends the characters all seek either are denied to them or are in turn perverted by the selfishness of others into grotesque parodies of their original foolish desires.... Rieber fails in his long-planned seduction of Lizzi because of his hatred for Hansen; Jenny is saved from adultery with Freytag only because she passes out as they begin to make love; the Baumgartners use sex as a brief respite from their hellish marriage; Elsa has her chance to dance with the Cuban student to whom she is attracted but rejects him for fear of his discovering her ineptness in even the most casual and innocent romantic relationship; Herr Graf at last gives money to Johann, who sleeps with Concha and experiences some of the tenderness of which he has been robbed by his uncle's cold and harsh religiosity; Mrs. Treadwell and Denny encounter each other in a grotesque and absurd situation in which Denny suffers his own animalistic sexuality in the violence of Mrs. Treadwell's suppressed eroticism....

Of these relationships none provides a better example of Miss Porter's satirical skill than that of Mary Treadwell and William Denny. The very presence of Denny the gross lustful boor and Mrs. Treadwell the frigid, sexually frustrated lady in the lawless world of *Ship of Fools* generates those qualities which mark the work as satire.... The most outrageous sense of chance, which functions so effectively in satire, is combined with a terrible and just inevitability to bring about the encounter. Denny's human failure arises from stupidity, not evil. Amoral as an animal, he harms no one except himself. His prejudices, the closes he comes to evil, are so diffuse that their potential evil is lost.... Everything about Denny is a joke, and the satire, tempered with low comedy, shows the inane folly of his daily existence. Denny is the comic sex maniac at the beginning of the novel, and nothing new appears in his personality.... Denny's sexual appetite, devoid of the human elements of love and tenderness, is the object of Miss Porter's satire. In his encounter with Mrs. Treadwell, the harm Denny has done himself is reflected in the physical injury Mrs. Treadwell inflicts on him....

Mrs. Treadwell...refuses to acknowledge the reality of the unpleasant. In the same way she creates two faces for herself: the sophisticated, slightly cynical woman of experience and the naïve girl who still wears her hair brushed 'back...in the Alice and Wonderland style she had worn in bed since she was four or five.' Mrs. Treadwell does not realize that perhaps, as her bedtime hair style indicates, she has never grown up.... She has not become mature because she has refused to admit the reality of either the unpleasant events in

her life or her being in any way responsible for their occurrence: 'This is just an accident'... She was married to a man who beat her until she 'bled at the nose,' an experience which led her to associate sex with brutality and to reject not only the unpleasant experience itself but sex as well. In her romantic scheme sex exists only in a Platonic context....

On the night of the fiesta when the young German officer tries to kiss her, she is passive, frigid. Miss Porter satirizes Mrs. Treadwell because of her refusal to admit her own needs, which she suppresses by cultivating her romantic vision of what life *should* be.... Mrs. Treadwell's sexual frigidity, like the doctor's weak heart, is a physical manifestation of a spiritual failure, her inability to be warm, tender, loving. On the evening of the fiesta her artificial life—the precariously poised duality of her worldly charm and her ingenuous romanticism—is momentarily shattered by her encounter with William Denny.... Rather than washing off her age, she ironically paints on the whorish youth of the dancers.... The mask represents a very real aspect of her personality, an aspect she has repressed.... In this guise she takes on all the aggressive viciousness of one of the Spanish prostitutes and yet retains the ingenuousness of her Alice-in-Wonderland self.... The roles of Denny and Mrs. Treadwell, whose actions begin to suit her face, are reversed, with great effect in creating the irony as well as in heightening the grotesque aspects of the situation. Denny, the constant pursuer, becomes the pursued, and Mrs. Treadwell, heretofore the image of passive frigidity, becomes the savage aggressor.... The phallic high-heel of her golden evening sandal... is her weapon, and she uses it with all the animalistic cruelty that she identifies with masculine lust.... Both Denny and Mrs. Treadwell ignore the truths about themselves inherent in their encounter, marking themselves as stupid and self-deluding, those qualities which characterize them as fools....

The failure of love, the only refuge in a world gone mad with hatred, Miss Porter shows, arises from a deadly selfishness which allows men to seek only the fulfillment of their own egotistical desires... The result is a spiritual suicide of which the characters themselves are never quite aware. Miss Porter satirizes the follies of man... She holds up to the reader an image of the fool reflected in her mirror of satire. But Katherine Anne Porter's ultimate hope is that he will recognize his own face as well as those of other men and will strive to correct those failures which deprive him of his own humanity."

Jon Spence

"Looking-Glass Reflections: Satirical Elements in *Ship of Fools*"

*Sewanee Review* 82.2 (Spring 1974) 316-30

"Her particular area of expertise was in the short story. She was perceptive and insightful in depicting characters but she was not able to show them growing, changing, or maturing. Similarly, she could portray incidents that were dramatic and arresting but she was not able to imagine them as causing significant changes in the lives of her characters. Her art was quintessentially that of a short-story writer and within the confinement of that form worked brilliantly. When, however, she tried to work on a huge panoramic canvas and solve the riddle of what had gone wrong with the whole Western world in the twentieth century, she had to weld together all the small incidents and essentially minor characters in such a way that the cumulative effect would achieve significance. It was a daunting technical problem that might well have overwhelmed anyone....

Publication was timed, 'like Melville's *The Confidence Man*,' with its 'flock of fools on this ship of fools with its captain of fools,' for All Fools' Day. On Sunday April 1, 1962, Katherine Anne Porter was the heroine of the hour. Both the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Herald Tribune* book section carried on their front pages immensely favorable reviews.... The 'dear beautiful Kennedys' were in the White House, and when Ernest Hemingway's widow, Mary Hemingway, sat beside the President at dinner and tried to talk about Cuba, his response was to ask if she had read *Ship of Fools*....

She had explained why she would never get any more awards or prizes in the United States: too many people who had resented her for years were getting into the act; she had had her share of love and praise and fine criticism and had to expect a reaction, especially when she hit a million-dollar jackpot as she had; there were people who hated her writing and her reputation, and when they were joined by the people who hated her having that money it made quite a mob."

Joan Givner

*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*

“In *Ship of Fools* (written 1941-61, published 1962), Katherine Anne Porter reproduced a form of combat on board a ship out of Vera Cruz heading for Bremerhaven. Based loosely on Sebastian Brant’s late-medieval *Das Narrenschiff* [1494], which headed for a ‘fool’s paradise,’ Porter’s ship makes for Germany in 1931. Her scheme, like that of the war novelist, is an anatomy of the culture, a mirroring in a given cast of characters (voyagers, like a squad or platoon) of the workings of a society. Porter reflects prewar society as rent by irreparable conflicts: Jew/Gentile, male/female, generational, social/political, matters of class and caste. Her ship is the typical cross section, here a ‘ship of fools,’ in the army or war novel an arena of imposters.”

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-80: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 119n.

“In *Ship of Fools* Porter uses the desert wastes of Vera Cruz, its town walls pocked with bullet holes, to establish the backdrop of the barren microcosm which the passengers will not escape, but will carry with them onto the *Vera*. Like the setting of a medieval morality play, Vera Cruz is purgatory, and it is populated by characters representing whole classes of people and human experience. The emaciated Indian, who stands for the ubiquitous starving and revolutionary masses, is opposed to the upper-class property owners and power brokers. They are joined by the grotesque, horribly maimed beggar, who seems more animal than human; and the bitter brawling of the animals of Vera Cruz, carping at each other in disparate languages, surrounds the men in the square.

Amid this setting, two other crucial elements are introduced: sex and violence/death. The two essential activities of the men drinking in the square are eyeing the young women on their way to work and to church, and discussing the most recent aimless bombing by the revolutionaries, which has killed an innocent young Indian boy, cannon fodder in the grisly Mexican struggle for power.

Enter Everyman—the passengers—to suffer the aridity both of the land and the human beings in it; to be accosted, cheated, reviled, and scorned to the limits of their endurance, until ‘their humanity [is] nearly exhausted.’... There are hurricanes along the coast, revolutions and general strikes and a smallpox epidemic in the coastal towns. They travel ‘at their own risk’...significantly refusing to make comrades of each other. Furthermore, they lack something Miranda has had: a willingness to commit themselves to another. It is this disunity and their separateness that is the very thrust of the tale. Coming from different cultures, holding different values, and speaking different tongues, they seem to lack the most rudimentary fellow feeling. Each person functions as an island entire to himself....

Like the initial setting in Vera Cruz, the *Vera*—the real setting of the book—is allegorical, as are the disparate pilgrims bound to it. The ship may be, as the author’s note tells us, heading toward eternity, but the passengers on it are condemned to go round and round in circles. They cannot escape what they have left, and they cannot arrive at anything truly different. In this context, it is wise to remember that an earlier title of *Ship of Fools* was *No Safe Harbor*. Although this is a voyage to specific ports, there is really no place to go. Most of the passengers, like the sugar workers, are going from misery to misery. The *Vera*’s primary destination, Bremerhaven, is not really home to anyone. The German families returning there have been in Mexico so long that they will find themselves expatriates in their own country; others, like Freytag, intend to displace themselves altogether from Germany, and the businessmen and women are transients whose primary ties to their country are monetary.

Jenny Brown and David Scott, who make their home wherever they find it, do not want to go to Bremerhaven at all, but they lack the proper visas to go elsewhere. The *Vera* and its people are headed inexorably toward Germany, the leaning tower of the world’s trouble in that time, which threatens to bury others in its collapse. The reader, for instance, has ironic knowledge that though Mrs. Treadwell will avoid Germany by disembarking at Boulogne, her destination, Paris, will not be safe. Even there the shock waves of destruction will be felt, and her Utopia will wind up overrun, occupied, and corrupted at its core before the destruction of world war is complete.

Among their number, the passengers count their share of misfits and outcasts, like the town of Vera Cruz: Herr Glocken, the pathetic hunchback; Herr Graf, the dying religious fanatic; Elsa Lutz, lard-like, but full of never-to-be-satisfied romantic longing; and Herr Lowenthal, the eternal scapegoat, the Jew. They adequately represent the whole of the first-class passengers, among whom the manhood is mostly hunched and dying, the womanhood stultified and unsatisfied, and where each person regards the other as a pariah. The one element that might alleviate this condition, love, struggles to survive in an environment that supports only lust: it is no mistake that the only passengers aboard when the ship docks in Vera Cruz are two Cuban 'ladies of trade.' But the situation is not entirely without hope.

The last people on board are a Mexican bride and groom—young, beautiful, newly joined, like Adam and Eve, a potentially perfect couple. With this pair always on the fringes of things, Porter will focus in the body of the book, on the couplings and uncouplings necessitated on a floating wasteland where passengers must surely fear death by water [allusion to Eliot's 'The Waste Land']. Most significantly, although she ceases to depict women with divided psyches (all the women in *Ship of Fools* have accepted their metier, for good or ill), she essentially uses her innate understanding of that conflict, projecting it into global proportions.

First of all, the passengers on the *Vera*, like her conflicted protagonists, are trapped. Physically, they are all bound to the island of the ship. Mrs. Treadwell finds the ship 'like a prison, almost,' and of course it truly functions that way for La Condesa and the deportees in steerage. Their presence beneath the grating, along with the crowded cabins and the smallness of the ship, adds to the sense of constriction all the passengers feel. Psychically, they are hemmed in by self-satisfaction, smugness, and prejudice, whether Christian or Jew.

Second, like Porter's earlier heroines, none of the characters, with the possible exception of the bride and groom, is able to use his or her sexuality to any good end. Although some reach out for unity, for one reason or the other, they all discover in the end what Mrs. Treadwell has known all along: to love, one must go naked, love is dangerous, and the best protection is an aloofness that prevents the other from coming too close.... The corollary that Mrs. Treadwell is perhaps too insulated to see is that such aloofness fosters an indifference which ultimately allows evil to run rampant. Unchecked by love, evil rules the world.

And finally, of course, there is the familiar threat of death, which surfaces in a variety of forms wherever sex is indulged, but most notably in the threat posed by the incorrigible Spanish twins, Ric and Rac, self-styled demons whose symbolic relationship opposes them to the Mexican bride and groom. Interestingly, neither pair is really characterized; their flatness suggests that they function as polar possibilities in the potential use of human sexuality. Whereas the Mexican couple are discreet and modest in their affection for each other, softly fatigued but fulfilled by their discovery of their capacity to complete each other, the twins represent sex turned in upon itself: incestuous, uncontrollable, unblinking, shameless.

Dr. Schumann calls the twins 'devil-possessed'; in fact, the demonic nature of Ric and Rac seems to be the one idea in which the passengers on board the *Vera* are united. What is more significant, however, is the fact that, unlikely as it seems in the case of six-year-olds, they are creatures with sexual knowledge, and they are constantly attempting or threatening to kill by throwing things into the ocean. Their activities affect virtually every would-be couple on the ship with the exception of their own people, the Spanish dancing troupe, and the two independent and essentially asexual American women, Mrs. Treadwell and Jenny Brown, and the men associated with them. In essence, their evil, sexual presence in several instances provides a counterpoint to the developing relationships among the various men and women on the ship. Their continuous attempts to kill establish an ominous tone which culminates in the death of the innocent Etchegaray, the wood-carver, who creates the likenesses of animals while the children attempt to drown living ones. Thereafter, their elders will wreak their own havoc through their devilish fiesta, bringing to complete chaos and perdition any possible coupling on the ship....

Although set in opposition to each other, Porter's female types in *Ship of Fools* are static, not developing. These women have already decided how to love and how to use their sexuality, and their characterization says more about the author's view of their choices than about them. There are, first of all, the Venus figures, the temptresses. The women of the Spanish zarzuela company—Amparo, Lola, Pastora,



and Concha—are a far cry from the somewhat innocent, passionate Maria Rosa in ‘Maria Concepcion’ or even the admirably independent Ninette in ‘Magic.’ Described as pretty slatterns, they are not unappealing, but their innate corruption shows in the tawdriness of their appearance, in their cheap dresses and their badly run-down shoes. In them, something beautiful has become corrupt. The sleekness of their hair, their graceful limbs, and their glittering teeth and eyes remind the reader of nothing so much as a predatory animal. They are more than once described as having serpent’s eyes, and, truly, sex on their terms has become an evil thing.... Dancing in Porter’s literature is a metaphor for sexual activity, usually in a very restrained form. But these Spanish whores make their living by dancing, using it to entice the men around them. Their dancing and their ‘love’ is something to be traded for money, and it can be fraught with violence.... Amparo shudders with masochistic pleasure when Pepe slaps her as a prelude to making love to her. Most frightening of all, however, in Porter’s terms, is that these women have so completely *become* sex that every other part of them is dead....

The second Venus figure, La Condesa, is far more complex. As an outcast who is being deported from her native Cuba for alleged involvement in revolutionary activities, she represents what a woman who steps outside traditional female roles can expect. As an exile, an incendiary, a prisoner, and a woman who relies on drugs which leave her in a trancelike state, she reflects not only her feelings about her own womanhood, but the psychic states of many of the women on the ship. One can believe that she ‘loathes’ women and hates being one.... She is burdened by her motherhood... She apparently attempts to entice young sailors when she first boards.... She is clearly a seducer...a concrete threat to [Dr. Schumann’s] weak heart....

Since Frau Hutten has so completely taken the traditional role to herself that her acquaintances call her ‘the ideal German wife,’ she may stand as a representative of the others....Frau Baumgartner, Frau Schmitt, Frau Lutz, or Senora Ortega.... Her whole person is wrapped up in service and support of her husband and his ego.... She remembers bitter pills of submission she had to swallow for the health of her marriage.... Seeing her resentment as baseness, she represses it in favor of her husband’s patriarchal superiority, acquiescing in the delusion that she depends on him for everything....Too often, however...she must support him while appearing to need his assistance.... Porter women are not supposed to fall into that trap. If they have any sensibility at all, their psychic identity is at least as important to them as their sexual identity.... The women of the wasteland are noticeably infertile.... Public mothering must be directed to Bebe, the bulldog, an abortion of the kind of matriarchy practices by Granny Weatherall and Miranda’s grandmother.... Frau Schmitt, with no children of her own, has also allowed her whole personality to be subsumed by her husband’s...

The androgynous women on the *Vera* don’t confront this problem of utilizing maternal or even sexual energy. They are for the most part self-contained, sexually inactive, and dependent on no man. Frau Rittersdorf is the most obviously single of these women, returning unengaged from a trip to Mexico she felt sure would secure a wealthy Mexican husband for her mature years....sending flowers to herself on board the *Vera*. By paying court to herself, Frau Rittersdorf does away with the necessity for confronting and coping with sexual feelings... She is finally contented with the memory of her husband’s head cradled in her arms, she singing to him and rocking him to sleep ‘as if he were her little child’.... Lizzi Spockenkieker...flirts and teases like a silly young girl...and seems deliberately masculinized... Lizzi is above all a businesswoman with a career; she is used to taking care of herself first, without the assistance of a man who might in the long run prove to be a bad investment. Her refusal to participate in sex is hardly from maidenly inhibition but rather because the right contract has not been struck. Again, she is not unlike Amparo, for to Lizzi, sex is money, and she seems to lack any passion of her own....

Androgynous but far more complex are the two most completely characterized women in the book: Jenny Brown and Mary Treadwell...alike...in their essential decision to be independent of any man for the sake of personal psychic survival. Interestingly, the man who becomes the scapegoat and therefore the outcast of the ship’s ‘society,’ Wilhelm Freytag, is associated with them and with no other women on the voyage, suggesting that these two, more than any other women on the ship, are pariahs also.... Jenny Brown, the independent young American woman traveling with a man not her husband, is immediately defined as a dual creature.... She makes her first appearance among the other passengers in Vera Cruz wearing the shirt and trousers of a Mexican working man. The other passengers note her appearance with disdain, and the Mexican waiters in the piazza call her a mule.

More significant...is her opposition to David Scott, her lover. In the broadest terms of the novel, they represent yet another possible Adam and Eve, a couple who want to achieve a perfect, happy love—that is, unity and integration. Yet they are frustratingly separate. Although traveling ‘together,’ they cannot even agree on a common destination. Their physical separation and incessant quarreling on the ship suggests, on the simplest level, that their relationship is more grounded in sexual attraction than in a lasting love and...that their division arises from the inherent opposition of warring personalities. Porter readers have encountered this couple in ‘That Tree’: the free artistic personality paired with the rigid, puritanical seeker of pristine, classical perfection....

Although Jenny has been influenced by David’s taste and preference, even to the point of adopting his artistic technique and purity of color in dress, she recognizes her error and determines to reassert her own style. When a gypsy says a man is in her future, Jenny declares she doesn’t need a man to survive. She is clearly a separate personality, sometimes irritatingly so, from David’s point of view.... Jenny, with her easy gaiety, her light-heartedness, and her emotional readiness that allows her to picket for any political cause ‘for a lark,’ is promiscuously available as David sees it... In spite of her idealism, Jenny dares not allow herself to believe in love as she would like to do. When Freytag waxes poetic about the nature and possibility of love, Jenny listens hopefully... But she ends by asserting her ‘bitter mind’ over her feelings and declaring these attitudes ‘sick, sentimental and false... I think it is a booby trap... But I keep falling into it just the same’.... Likewise, Jenny abhors the maternal feelings which well up in her easily, but they are what soften her to David time after time on the voyage....

Wilhelm Freytag, one of the more sensitively characterized men on board the *Vera*, functions as a perfect foil to both David and Jenny while simultaneously creating a romantic triangle with them. An emotional opposite to David, who, like Jenny, desires a good and true love, Freytag’s presence makes it clear that Jenny has not chosen David idly. Ultimately, she prefers David, who ‘hates love worse’ than she does. She supposedly resents this in him, but paradoxically it allows her to trust him. It is yet another convoluted statement of Jenny’s rejection of her emotional nature and inner self, certainly a defense Porter women learn in order to protect themselves.

Jenny creates yet another triangle with Wilhelm Freytag and the wife whom he idealizes, Mary Champagne. Like Jenny he has reached out for what seems pristine and perfect to him in a partner, and Mary Champagne’s name indicates all that she is to him: virginal, pure, blond, beautiful, rich. Freytag constantly compares Jenny’s ideas, attitudes, and behavior to Mary’s perfection... Yet Jenny, as an unmarried woman traveling with her lover, certainly represents sex, and Freytag’s attraction to her, always clearly defined as a sexual one, is yet another reminder that perfect and pristine love does not exist—because we are sexual creatures.... His private reverie proves that, like the traditional male, he distinguishes sexual women from the ones worth marrying....

Mary Treadwell is an androgynous woman so confirmed in her choice of independent singleness that it is horrifying even to David Scott, who is obviously nearly as bent on protecting himself emotionally as Mrs. Treadwell. From the beginning, Mary Treadwell is defined as retentive... She has refused a beggarwoman alms and has been rewarded with a brutal punch that has left her with a bad bruise on her arm.... We watch Mrs. Treadwell make her ‘escapes’ from emotional entanglement, first with Frau Schmitt and then with Herr Freytag.... She is not so uninterested in men that she has not noticed that Freytag is the only attractive man on the ship.... Her mild attraction to this good-looking man brings about the kind of trouble she has learned to expect from contact with the opposite sex.... She has lived in an emotional cocoon ‘that lay on the other side of that first love which had cut her life in two’.... She has tried hard to be ‘a slut’ for her husband and has suffered his abuse. Mrs. Treadwell’s experience proves the validity of the fear—shared by other Porter women—that sexual experience will change irrevocably the controlled maidenly life they know.... At night Mary Treadwell reverts completely to her maidenhood.... Significantly, she always loses at solitaire, but the game, along with the wine she drinks each night, is her distraction from remembering her painful disappointment in love....

The men of the *Vera*...are individuated, but bound together by their clear disdain for women, which reflects the complete breakdown of rapport between the sexes.... There is hardly a man on board who regards a woman as a person, much less an equal... Arne Hansen, Johann, and Herr Rieber all regard

woman as sex objects; William Denny is the worst of all.... The ship's captain feels that women must be kept in their place, and even so minor a character as the purser has an 'utter contempt for the female sex'.... The rising action, the events of the first half of the trip, are moved forward by the frenetic behavior of Ric and Rac, while the bride and groom stroll always on the periphery of the ship's activity. It is no mistake that the murderous twins, so sexual in nature, are linked to the sexual temptress La Condesa. From the beginning of the voyage all three are a threat to the doctor's weak heart. As a couple, he and La Condesa are the focus of the first half of the work and act as a paradigm for the other couplings taking place on board.... He behaves like a jealous lover...then feels the need to confess and ask absolution... He correctly recognizes her as a demon lover who would drown him in the depths of the passion of which he fears himself capable...

As the work moves toward the major events of the voyage...good men do nothing. In four separate instances evil triumphs, aided and abetted by the passivity of those who witness it. In the first such instance, the social exclusion of the man wedded to a Jewish wife, Willhelm Freytag, comes about because of the indifference of Mrs. Treadwell to her companion's secret, which in turn allows her to repeat it thoughtlessly to the prejudiced Lizzi.... Significantly, the petty evil present on the ship assumes a more sinister air directly following this exclusion.... Ric and Rac's evil becomes more overt. They threaten not only to throw Bebe...overboard, but Hans Baumgartner, too. Concha, meanwhile, is suggesting to Johann that he smother his uncle so that he will have money to spend on sex with her.... Of course, it is not the death of the dog that results, but that of the innocent and helpless (weaponless) Etchegaray, who has acted to save life with a thoughtlessness equal to that of the evil children... His lowly status at once recalls the senseless murder of the poor Indian boy in Vera Cruz and foreshadows the slaughter of the Jews....

Like the surrogate child that he is, Bebe represents the security of the Huttens' life together and the familiar solidity of their marriage, for which Frau Hutten has sacrificed everything. Bent over the half-drowned dog, she is reduced to weeping over their lost Eden in Mexico, their happiness in their youth. Feeling completely bereft, she throws herself on her husband's mercy, which triggers in him a sense of rightful power and therefore forgiveness and passion for his wife. Emotionally restored to their familiar roles—she the child and he the almighty father...they make love passionately, in what is probably the most awkward sexual encounter in literature.... Frau Hutten has rediscovered power over her husband by learning again to be a sexual child....

After Etchegaray's death, each person has a chance to demonstrate a capacity for commitment, that is, love; instead, each will demonstrate a capacity to do nothing. First, practically nobody understands what Etchegaray has done; practically nobody cares that he has done it, or that he has departed this life. Everyone's fear of death is highly personalized. Second, there is no one to speak against Ric and Rac for Etchegaray, and even the Huttens, most wounded by the twins after the poor wood carver, decline to accuse them. There is no law against drowning a dog, they say; they have no idea what the twins might have been thinking. Like the young woman in 'Theft,' they rationalize themselves out of the trouble of standing up and speaking out against a justifiable and obvious injustice done to their property and to the life of another human being.

The funeral the next morning is a mockery of the communal rite of passage it should be, with the first-class passengers acting like observers of a spectacle rather than participants and with violence breaking out among the fellows of the dead man. The portent of the failure of anyone to mourn properly the destruction in the wake of such evil is obvious. Ric and Rac ride high, enjoying themselves.... That this malignity might be corralled is demonstrated by the final incident involving the malicious twins. Having stolen la Condesa's pearls, they race along the deck and nearly collide with the Lutzes, who are walking there. Frau Lutz instinctively grabs Ric and administers a maternal slap, causing him to drop the necklace, which Rac then throws into the sea. After arguing with his wife over the discretion and propriety of reporting what they have observed, Herr Lutz speaks to Dr. Schumann, the whole company is taken to task, and the children are punished and subdued (albeit for the wrong reasons). But, most important, the passengers are spared the children's mischief for the remainder of their stay on board.

Unfortunately, the passengers don't perceive that they have the power to oppose the encroaching malice of the dancing company. This is aptly demonstrated in what happens when they go ashore on Tenerife. A

place of rough but incredibly lush beauty, it is the home of 'beautiful and chaste' young girls who are water carriers. They are the very antithesis of the women of the wasteland, who not only can provide no water—that is, life—but who, if they are beautiful, are hardly chaste, and, if chaste, like Elsa Lutz, hardly beautiful. Unlike the young girls 'employed in making an honorable living,' the Spanish company descends like a flock of crows on the island shops, shouting, insulting, thieving, stealing, scattering, creating chaos and fury wherever they turn, and leaving mayhem in their wake.

Frau Rittersdorf records the details in her diary.... Of course, she feels no responsibility to do anything about this, and each of the others reacts in kind. The Americans gather with Freytag and follow the Spaniards about to see the show. The Huttens characteristically decide it is not their affair. Herr Glocken, probably the most timid member of the ship's company, is ironically the only one asked for assistance by a shopkeeper; he is completely muted by the Spaniards and must be assisted himself by Frau Lutz, who again steps in to discipline Ric and Rac as they chase Herr Glocken down the street. But neither do the Lutzses or the Baumgartners speak out against the thieves.... Everyone goes on 'gossiping all around the subject and never once admitting guilt or complicity...'

The dancers announce their fiesta for that evening, and it becomes plain that the capitulation of the 'worthy' members of this ship's society is complete. They gather out of curiosity to gawk at the stolen items displayed for raffle and wind up buying chances on the prizes. If indifference has been their sin to this point, the passengers now rationalize a direct participation in the devil's dance to come. One by one they separate to rest, to shave, to make a costume, to prepare for the party. The men think in terms of seduction, whoring, and rape.... The two major themes of the work are brought together in a nightmarish circle in which they chase each other's tails. The ship's society is brought to complete chaos through its tacit acceptance and connivance with evil. This destruction is spelled out in sexual terms, and the myth of the perfect couple is all but destroyed as one union after the other is frustrated or aborted.

By design of the dancing troupe, the whole evening becomes an exercise in inversion. [Postmodernism] Ordinary place settings are disturbed, so that there is confusion and commotion as people try to seat themselves for dinner; and the stage is set for at least one violent argument, between Arne Hansen and Herr Rieber. Only the bridal couple conduct themselves with a dignity that sets them apart from the rest. The Spaniards, having established themselves at the head table, are purposely late, upsetting the captain and leading to his perfectly murderous reverie in which he fancies himself mowing down a riotous mob with an 'elegant portable machine gun.' By the time the Spaniards take possession of his table and run through a series of inverted toasts, the captain is not sure whether he has been honored or cursed. He flees the madhouse shouts of 'To eternal confusion! To dishonor! To shame!'—abandoning his ground to the invaders who have turned his 'correct' society into a hellish mockery.

Already the passengers have begun to quarrel and to drink too much. When the Spaniards begin the dancing by mimicking the dancing styles of the other passengers, they bring to a fine point the insults they have heaped upon the others in the previous several days. Herr Glocken, who wears a ridiculous tie inscribed 'Girls, Follow Me,' establishes the fact that sex is the business of the evening. And of course all this devilry should end in an orgy, but in the inverted terms of the evening, even orgy will be thwarted. The image which ties together the chaotic violence inherent in the evening and the theme of aborted love is the raffle display of feminine finery, presided over by the Spanish women, who are available, like the frilly lace, for a price. The only real sexual union of the evening occurs when Johann finally succeeds in buying Concha. For everyone else, there is frustration, violence, and despair.

Elsa Lutz, finally confronted by the Cuban student whom she yearns for, cannot dance, and so loses the chance to fulfill her fantasy. Jenny and David quarrel and separate, and even Arne Hansen is forced to sit moodily nursing a beer because Amparo refuses to have anything to do with him. William Denny winds up literally chasing Pastora around the ship in an effort to get her into bed.... Jenny takes up with Freytag, who has designs on her, but she passes out before he can make love to her. Mrs. Treadwell gets drunk and allows her young officer to kiss her, but rejects him easily, out of habit, without a second thought. When Arne Hansen, drunk and already irritated by Herr Rieber, cracks a beer bottle over the bald man's skull, he recalls the similar incident in the steerage the day of Etchegaray's funeral. Hansen's act effectively ends not only Rieber's satyric reverie but also his prospects for seducing Lizzi...

It is, however, the violent and unlikely encounter between Mrs. Treadwell and William Denny that most effectively typifies and climaxes a whole voyage of misbegotten unions. We have already seen that Mrs. Treadwell is trying to gracefully negotiate a tightrope stretched between the fairy tale world of her youth—in which she was a princess—and the lonely mature years that stretch before her. What she ignores and cannot consciously deal with is the sexual period of her life, spent with her husband. Although she easily rejects the young officer's advances, he does stir in her a desire to try on that role again. In a parody of Cinderella, who lost her slipper at the ball running from the prince, Mrs. Treadwell returns to her cabin half barefoot, having given a broken sandal to the steward for repair. There she sits down 'to amuse herself' by painting on her own face a mask of 'unsurpassed savagery and sensuality,' not unlike Amparo's. She recognizes in it 'a revelation of something sinister in her character,' her sexuality and its attendant uncontrollable emotion, both of which she has so successfully repressed.

If Mrs. Treadwell is the princess who has once more successfully evaded marriage to the prince, William Denny in a grotesque caricature of the prince come to claim his bride, forces her to confront reality. Seeing the mask of her repressed sexuality, he mistakes her for Pastora. In this he recognizes her as a sexual woman—in his parlance, then, a whore. He assaults her and she resists. Finding that he is too drunk to right himself when she pushes him to the floor, she does to him what Lacey Mahaffey does to her drunken husband in 'A Day's Work.' In what might be described as an inverted rape, *she* assaults *him*, punching him in the face and finally removing her remaining slipper to viciously pummel his head with its metal-capped heel, leaving her mark with every blow. Her anger with the man who has initiated her into the sexual world is thus spent by this passionate attack on another man who embodies carnality; after this she can wash her face of the terrible mask, restoring herself to princess-like maidenhood in a white satin bedgown, hair tied back like Alice in Wonderland. Restored to the equilibrium she understands, she sniffs the fresh sea air and remembers how, in the Maytime of her life, she saw stars coming out one by one in the Paris sky.... [Frau Baumgartner] thinks to herself what the inhabitants of the wasteland really want from each other was only, *Love me, love me in spite of all!*...

Like cockroaches, the dancers have survived the holocaust and seem none the worse for wear. The bride and groom leave without saying good-bye to anyone, and this is just, since they have never truly been part of this company.... As in Vera Cruz, the portents are bad. In every harbor, there are strikes, and cargo cannot be unloaded. The small boats that come out to meet the ship add confusion rather than gaiety, and there is no certainty that the captain will stop in any port but Bremerhaven.... Finally, in Bremerhaven, a temporary commitment is made. Jenny asks, without rancor, why they are continuing when they are not going to spend their lives together. David replies that 'maybe' they will never leave each other. The best thing they can think of is that they will sleep in the same bed that night. If unity can't be counted on, there is at least animal warmth for a time."

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 179-202

"Porter's only novel, *Ship of Fools*, which she wrote laboriously over a thirty-year period, appeared in 1962 and attracted considerable attention, in part because it had been so long awaited. The novel, an account of a voyage from Veracruz, Mexico, to Bremerhaven, Germany, in 1931, during the Nazi regime, explores the wreckage of modern civilization by focusing on the often vicious private histories and behavior of the ship's passengers. The vision of the book is a bleak one and apparently derives from Porter's longstanding belief that art offered the only hope, however small and fragile, in a darkening world."

David Minter  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1248

"[Themes:] The illusions which people create and live by are explored in particular ways, but the grand illusion that guides the ship is that they are all going forward to something better. The reality is that they are going forward to something worse than their wildest imaginings. In this pell-mell race to the future, the voyagers are isolated from one another in, for the most part, loveless existences. They mistake or substitute

lust, orderliness, or zeal for love, which Porter shows to be the mystery of life capable of uniting all people. She also takes up the question of evil, its sources and its nourishment in contemporary society.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988)

“*Ship of Fools* must be judged for what it is—a realistic novel in the tradition of the comedy of manners.... [This reductive demand blinds the critic to everything else the novel has been shown to be by numerous other critics.] The total number of characters that Porter individualizes with names and particular histories is forty-one.... In episodes portraying personal unkindness, cruelty, stubborn prejudice, hatred, and bigotry. Porter shows that all the characters are devoid of genuine love, lacking substantial hope for the future, and even incapable of meaningful action [overlooks self-sacrifice of the woodcarver].... They are all ‘fools’ because they are blind to the disaster that awaits them (the rise of Hitler, World War II, and the holocaust.... *Ship of Fools* contains some mighty and memorable passages, but.... The stereotypical Texan must be beaten out of Porter’s system [and this obviously angers this Texan critic].... Just as the Grandmother in Porter’s early Texas fiction is a metaphor for Texas...so William Denny is clearly the metaphor for Texas in *Ship of Fools*....

Katherine Anne Porter seems to have split herself into two parts in *Ship of Fools*. Jenny Brown, the aspiring painter, who is living and traveling with David Scott...represents the side of Porter that one may call the Miranda/Laura portrait.... The other side of Katherine Anne Porter, Mrs. Treadwell, ‘a woman of forty-five, divorced, returning to Paris,’ is the character closest to [her] at the time of publication of *Ship of Fools*.... But Mrs. Treadwell is really a caricature of the ‘genteel’ lady, afraid of life, of risk, of any commitment whatever.... Fittingly, it is the ‘genteel’ Mrs. Treadwell who will avenge herself upon the coarse Texan....

Just as Melville’s *Pierre* offers clues to the proper understanding of *Moby-Dick*, so *Ship of Fools* provides an index to clearer understanding of Katherine Anne Porter’s short stories. And the novel does contain some passages of magnificent writing.... Neither did it do any harm to her reputation as the greatest of the short story writers of her generation.”

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1991) 175-77, 179, 185-86, 189-90

“*Ship of Fools* [is] a work whose allegorical and historical dimensions enlarge the meaning of each character’s actions.... Again and again, she argued that ‘a man may choose between the good and the evil in his own soul’.... Porter shows how apathy, ignorance and misdirected or mawkish liberalism allow the state’s authority to go unchecked and consequently to grow even stronger.... In her portrayal of many of the German passengers who submit wholly, as does Frau Schmitt, to the Captain’s authority, Porter, too, suggests that learning to obey the state leads to mass inertia and limits the ability of a person to determine when and what to resist.... The passengers condemn the Captain’s policies among themselves but never confront him with their views. Equally serious is the widespread refusal of the passengers to oppose the behavior of Ric and Rac, the Cuban students and the zarzuela dancers, even though the behavior of all these groups includes slander, intimidation and theft....

The only passenger to resist these three groups with any kind of force is Dr. Schumann. He saves the ship’s cat from the clutches of Ric and Rac; he admonishes the Cuban students for their lack of consideration for La Condesa, insisting that they stop visiting her in the evening; and he advises the Spanish dancers to change their methods and their manners, at least for the rest of the voyage. None of his criticisms has much effect, probably because these groups have developed their pernicious behavior unchecked by anyone, including official authorities.... Dr. Schumann reveals himself to be one of Porter’s most admirable characters... Moreover, Porter implies that the refusal of the other passengers to act likewise is a major cause of the spread of evil throughout all levels of society. In fact, Dr. Schumann’s behavior closely approximates that of Porter herself who stressed again and again in her personal life that we should not allow others to commit immoral acts with impunity....

Frau Hutten's moment as the voice of Katherine Anne Porter is short-lived, for almost immediately she regrets her betrayal of her husband and denies her position. Her retraction, however, cannot stop these words from reverberating as one of the major themes of Porter's novel and also of Porter's life.... 'I do know well there are many evil people in this world, many more evil than good ones... We encourage these monsters by being charitable to them, by making excuses for them, or just by being slack'..."

Debra A. Moddelmog  
"Concepts of Justice in the Work of Katherine Anne Porter"  
*Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 26.4  
(Fall 1993) 37-52

"A book of conspicuous weightiness, reflecting ponderous political and moral ambitions, it explores at considerable length the atmosphere of arrogance, suspicion, and fear that pervaded the Western world on the eve of World War II.... It could not possibly have the impact in 1962 that it would have had in the late 1930s, when the tensions between Germany and the rest of the world that appear in the novel were actually building, or in the 1940s, when the events leading up to the war were still relatively fresh in the minds of the public. If she had been able to follow up *then* her 1931 journal letter to Caroline Gordon recounting shipboard observations that ultimately went into the novel, she might, with virtually the same book, have had something that would have swept reviewers off their feet and remained highly esteemed by subsequent critics. By 1962, however, those events and that atmosphere had already been examined and reexamined in countless books, articles, and films." [So the "faults in the novel" alleged by this critic are merely due to the timing of its publication and are not actually faults in the novel.]

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 196, 212

"*Ship of Fools* came out at last in 1962, sold well immediately, and soon was made into an equally successful motion picture. The ship in the novel is a German vessel, the Vera, which sails from Veracruz, Mexico, to Bremerhaven in 1931 with a complement of passengers and crew that includes Germans, Mexicans, Americans, Spanish workmen, a group of Spanish dancers, Cuban medical students, a family of Swiss, a Swede, and a Jew. Porter devotes the first part of her novel to an introduction of these characters and their interrelationships. In the second part she sets them all on their separate actions, which come to a conclusion in part 3 after the captain's gala, a fiesta that the Spanish dancers turn into a wild orgy.... Reviewers were of several minds about [this] long-anticipated work, some praising it inordinately..."

The novel has no plot in the usual sense. The network of episodes presents characters who do not develop but reveal themselves in their exchanges to be a speculum of humanity, good, evil and indifferent; and the movement of the whole is little more than the mechanical progress of the voyage itself. Porter has been quoted to the effect that the thesis of the novel is 'the responsibility people must share for evil'.... What is clear is the jewel-like precision with which Porter here, as in her previous work, presents the motley assemblage of people on the voyage. For most of her readers, of which she now has many, and a fair number of critics, that much was enough."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 72-73

"*Ship of Fools* is an immense achievement, often brilliant, yet unremitting in its bitter view of human folly.... Like 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider,' *Ship of Fools* employs illness as metaphor for all manner of wrongs. When the ship first reaches 'High Sea' at the start of part 2, the novel's center, it is literally awash in vomit: 'Hundreds of people, men and women... wallowing on the floor, being sick.' Like 'The Princess,' as well, *Ship of Fools* portrays a young woman artist, less alienated perhaps than Porter's early heroine, but no less unhappy, still struggling against a hostile, predatory world that refuses to recognize the union of two roles: woman and artist. Many readers view Jenny Brown of *Ship of Fools* as an autobiographical character, based on Porter at the age of forty-one, when she traveled to Europe by ship from Mexico in the company of Eugene Pressly. As a self-portrait, Jenny is troubling, for to this young woman Porter gave all the inner afflictions and outer adversities that had impeded her own long career."

Perhaps because the novel offers so little good cheer, most scholars have focused their attention on its lengthy, sporadic composition or debated its overall quality rather than paying close attention to individual characters or scenes.... The novel's formal qualities have challenged readers, for it works in short vignettes, shuffling through a thick deck of characters, depicting their interactions in brief, acute, and often distasteful scenes... The novel's iterations are intended to reinforce its central theme... 'the constant endless collusion between good and evil'... 'Endless collusion' finds formal expression in repetition; like riders seated on a Ferris wheel, the characters of *Ship of Fools* rotate before our eyes, moving in and out of the harsh light of Porter's vision.... Readers have consistently acknowledged the epigrammatic brilliance of its scenes....

Both [critics] Spence and Unrue see the novel as a multistranded analysis of the kinds of human self-absorption and illusion that lead to the failure of community and love.... In *Ship of Fools* [Porter] seems particularly interested in the expression of sexual desire and—again and again—the seemingly uncontrollable choice of a debased, unworthy object for that desire. The novel contains some of her most brilliant depictions of gender identity and sexual relations, but it works primarily through repetition and accumulation... Three pairs of women and men merit examination for both the imaging and patterning of their relations in the novel. The three women—Jenny Brown, Mrs. Treadwell, and La Condesa—have strong autobiographical roots; the shape of their lives and their current appearance or desires often evoke Porter's own story. The three men—David Scott, William Denny, and Dr. Schumann—are linked as well, most notably through their contempt for women.... For all three men—in fact for every character in this *Ship of Fools*—shame and self-loss accompany enacted desire; rigidity shatters, fluidity breaks through. This imagery appears in innumerable forms...

Mrs. Treadwell's disappointment in love recalls that of other heroines in Porter's fiction, from Miranda, who thinks of marriage as 'an illness she might one day hope to recover from,' to Rosaleen, to Granny Weatherall, to the grandmother of *The Old Order*, who ended life with a 'deeply ground contempt for men'.... Mrs. Treadwell will consciously transform herself from a beribboned Alice in Wonderland innocent to a painted whore, manipulating gender codes for her own means. But despite her mastery of her culture's gender codes, she remains, emotionally, in their grip.... She can perform the whore and the virgin with equal ability.... She is caught in the grip of her culture's monsters, full of the hatred, fear, and nausea that accompany performing her proscribed gender identity.... In beating Denny she has beaten out of her own self all that he represents, the ugly prejudice, the messiness, and the lust....

Love is a battle in *Ship of Fools*—Porter portrays use and abuse, predation, violence, hatred expressed and hidden.... Love in the novel appears as a kind of hunger that cannot be controlled... Jenny Brown, for example, repeatedly feels 'gaunt and empty and famished,' 'starved and frozen out' by David Scott's self-absorption, a solitary 'starved animal...feeding on the wind of a daydream'.... The ideal of Romantic Love, being impossible, misleads, misrepresents, betrays, and finally, inevitably brings about its cruel counterpart, hate.... David creates and re-creates a mercurial Jenny according to his own notions and desires.... Rather than a full rejection of that 'charming' fiction, love, Porter rather half-heartedly concludes that somewhere between the extremes of romantic idealism and 'total depravity' lies human nature; this, acknowledged, allows us to achieve some imperfect 'fragments of happiness'."

Mary Titus

*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 198-213

"*Ship of Fools*, the novel over which she labored for more than two decades and finally published in 1962 to great, and justified, acclaim."

Eric Ormsby

"View from a Falling House"

*The New Criterion* 27.10

(June 2009) 71

"Rarely had a novel by a living writer been announced and anticipated more feverishly.... *Ship of Fools* was probably never intended as a novel of incident. It is a novel of ideas we can investigate.... In 2009 Lisa Roney...examine[d] parallels between life in a sanatorium and aboard a ship and shows how Porter sets up



dualisms and parallels that largely reflect racial, economic, and sanitary prejudices of the time.... Where Erasmus seeks to teach and to mend character by gentle satire, Porter caricatures her fools and ridicules her specific characters instead of just their faults.... Porter knew and understood Erasmus well, but...her modernist mind was finally unable to share his humanist world view.... Porter's characters, by contrast, subject to identical sins, have no such hope. Their hopelessness makes their illusions all the more affecting, and their fear of death is correspondingly stronger in the absence of any assurance about an afterlife....

The unvarnished portrayal of sex, greed, prejudice, the mistreatment of Jews and the handicapped, in short, the inhuman behavior of the sorry lot of human beings on the upper deck of the *Vera*—excepting only a few decent passengers—nauseated not only Porter's readers but led to a crisis inside the publishing house of Little, Brown as well.... Porter is careful to show that the same passengers who inspire revulsion in the reader often reveal traumatic experiences in their own past, either in interior monologue or in unguarded admissions to fellow passengers. Cruelty, in *Ship of Fools*, is not graced with beauty but is shown in all its unvarnished reality. Porter's willingness to face humanity's shortcomings directly...reveals her devil-may-care honesty.... And Porter did not exclude herself from scorn, as the partial portrayals of herself in Jenny, Frau Rittersdorf, and La Condesa make clear."

Thomas Austenfeld, ed.  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Ship of Fools:  
New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts*  
(U North Texas 2015) 2-3, 5, 7-8, 10-12

"Many of Porter's revisions to *Ship of Fools* emphasize a negative, pessimistic, and cynical view of mankind. Although the 1943 synopsis outlines such a view, the published novel is darker. Over the course of her twenty-year 'voyage' to complete the novel, Porter suffered painful personal experiences and witnessed national and world events that inform the novel. The...untimely deaths of family members and friends, unhappy love affairs, repeated episodes of ill health, and financial troubles. Historical events also contributed to Porter's darkening views: wars, the development and employment of nuclear weapons, the Cold War, the civil rights struggle, and the Second Red Scare. These private and public occurrences allowed Porter ample opportunity to observe the human failings that are central to *Ship of Fools*."

Beth Alvarez  
"Before the Voyage Ended":  
An Examination of the Serial Publication of *Ship of Fools*, 1944-1959"  
*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 102-03

"She cried inconsolably and often during her time in Berlin [1931]. It was this lonely, desperate, and anxious time in the author's life—combined with her devastation years later after the fall of Paris—that set the tone for *Ship of Fools*.... Germany was edging toward something horrific and deeply frightening.... "Something terrible is going on here" [she wrote in a letter]....

Porter chronicles brilliantly the interiority of her characters. Many readers and critics, however, have rejected the novel in part because entering into the uncensored, disturbing mental worlds of the men and women aboard the *Vera* can be unpleasant as well as uncomfortable. Her depiction of relentlessly vicious individuals, however, easily blinds one to Porter's repeated attempts to account for their insensitivity and brutality. Porter frequently affords glimpses into the histories of her characters, shedding light upon the darkness of their inner lives and putting their dysfunctional behavior into context.... Like Sebastian Brant, Porter holds a mirror up to each one of her readers, whether or not we wish to gaze into it, with the hope that we might see that every moment is a struggle to 'try to be a little less evil than we want to be'.... *Ship of Fools* enables and invites us to stop and to look unflinchingly into the mirror of our foolishness and capacity for cruelty, to see ourselves as deeply flawed....

Men aboard the *Vera* want their women hot, dirty, and often bought, and look upon them more as 'live meat' than romantic partners.... Herr Rieber publishes articles about 'the extermination of the unfit,' while Mrs. Treadwell tires of 'moral bookkeeping.' Circe-like Porter has merely to let us into the minds of her characters for a few seconds before she turns them into swine.... Her passengers frequently inspire disgust and revulsion, yet a closer look reveals that many of them have been traumatized in some way, not unlike

the Germans themselves in the aftermath of World War I. We are predisposed to dislike and condemn them, perhaps, as it is easy to do with Porter herself, but not without acknowledging their humanity and the degree to which they are damaged and have been shaped and molded by painful experiences, often from childhood. On the surface, the passengers are able-bodied and perhaps good-looking and well-dressed, but internally they are maimed and broken, vulnerable, and all too often willing to turn against others, especially during difficult times....

The hearts of the passengers are blighted by a cold, judgmental reserve embodied in the person of Mrs. Treadwell, whose heart contracts forever once she marries a man who betrays her trust with violence and cheating....How many spirits had been broken, violently, to preserve the sanctity of Herr Professor Hutten's superiority? His wife and countless students had been terrorized and finally subdued, all so that Herr Professor Hutten might maintain his naïve, unblemished view of mankind's unshakable goodness.... Hans is humiliated and smothered by parents imprisoned within a stifling code of patriarchy that keeps women subservient and bitter and the men feeling inadequate and shamed. Frau Baumgartner has no power, so she unloads her frustrations on those closest to her. She specializes in the humiliation and emasculation of her men; it is the only pleasure and relief she knows....

The children mirror the behavior of their elders, mimicking gleefully their base sexuality and criminality and thumbing their noses at all respectable types who dare to foil their rampages. They are never supervised and amuse themselves with throwing an animal overboard and harassing adults at every turn. Passengers hope for their demise and consider them inherently evil and beyond redemption. As readers, it is easy to collude with the passengers aboard the *Vera*, to refuse them compassion or allowance for their tender age or the viciousness of their guardians.... Porter vividly shows the human tendency to don masks and block out or reject what is too painful to contemplate, just as the passengers in the steerage ignore the woodcarver, Etchsgaray, who grieves when his knife is confiscated."

Alexandra Subramanian

"*Ship of Fools: A Severe Blow to Faith*"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 170-71, 174-79, 183

"The larger ground plan of *Ship of Fools* positions the characters between the earthly city and the continuing city of Saint Augustine.... The 'Fatherland' has become the *volkisch* equivalent of the heavenly Jerusalem, a profane counterpart of the Augustinian notion of pilgrimage. It is this Germany that appears in the ecstatically naïve form to the boy trumpeter in the last scene of the novel as he stares at the town with 'blinded eyes.' Such a vision is an offspring of the political idea of the Reich, which originated in Weimar conservatism but which Hitler was able to make electoral use of in the early 1930s... What Porter pinpoints in these passengers are the emotional correlations to this idea of the Reich, especially the lazy, diffuse sensuousness of the 'belonging' sentiment. Frau Schmitt, for example...

Porter knew exactly what she was doing in making the ancient figure of the ship of state, which goes back to Plato's *Republic* (Book VII), specific to the late summer of 1931. The vertical structure of the *Vera* from Captain Thiele on the bridge down to the unemployed workers in the steerage reproduces the quasi-monarchical hierarchy of the Weimar republic.... If the *Vera* is the Weimar ship of state, then the unemployed Spanish sugar workers in the hold are a reminder of this state's shaky foundations in the international economic market, especially that following the October 1929 crash.... The only difference between...Weimar proposals and those of the Nazi state was that the latter had the determination to carry such deadly thoughts into action.... [Porter] understood the threat of National Socialism to the republic and tried to tell major American journals about it: 'I stood there and I knew—I went through five revolutions in Mexico—what was happening'....

The novel depicts the approach of the Third Reich... This approach had to be made through the political system of the Weimar republic and...Porter's 'parable' is set during this stage of transition.... It is notable that the word Nazi is never used in the novel.... Porter intended that the German passengers on the *Vera* be seen as citizens of the Weimar state and, since she gives the voyage of the ship the time frame of August to September 1931, this makes them citizens during the unstable government of Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. Some interpreters treat the German passengers as though they are virtually National Socialists already, but the Captain, the ship's doctor and middle-class passengers such as the Huttens have the monarchist

allegiances appropriate to supporters of the traditionalist right (which was in power in Brüning's government and that of his successor...) What Porter presents in parable-like form in *Ship of Fools* are the 'political action[s]' whereby this nationalist right was outflanked by the radical right....

When Frau Rittersdorf, after seeing Herr Glocken the hunchback, writes a query in her notebook about the advisability of euthanasia for 'all defective children' she is, of course, predicting the T-4 program of 1939-41 in which the mentally and physically handicapped in Germany were killed.... Her point in the 'Freitag crisis' is that this very clownishness in the persons of Herr Rieber and Lizzi could become a mask behind which an unconscious tendency to evil in the more upright characters could hide itself. This is Porter's sharpest contemporary use of Brant's motif of the fool.... The zarzuela company...cap their subversion of nostalgic sentiment toward the Germanic past—this time for the Second Reich—by dancing an 'insulting parody' of the German waltz. But another dance has come to the fore at the Spaniards' party. It is that of paper-hatted Herr Baumgartner, a lawyer making a mockery of the law, who plays pied piper to the future children of the Nazi state as they goose-step after him in 'shrieking disorder'....

Porter's technique of picking out ideational and metaphorical prefigurations of the Third Reich in the Weimar moment of 1931 means that her novel is not primarily focused on the psychological or plot-like development of character (a frequent complaint of critics). *Ship of Fools* can be seen as belonging to a Modernist prose genre that Robert Penn Warren called the 'philosophical' novel, the novel that dramatizes the political and the theological idea."

Joseph Kuhn

"The Weimar Moment in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 187-90, 195, 198-99, 202

"M. M. Liberman argued that instead of 'novel' *Ship of Fools* should be called an 'apologue,' an allegorical tale in which the moral is more important than narrative minutiae. Others wanted to call it an epic, a comedy, a moral allegory, a parody, a parable, or a satire.... Early critics who proposed such a range of classifications for *Ship of Fools* were illuminating Porter's choices for fulfilling the [Modernist] aesthetic.... Had Porter completed it in the early 1930s, when it was first evolving from its embryonic stage as the third part of a novel she had conceived in the late 1920s, it would have found a more welcoming reception by reviewers and critics who embraced such [Modernist] novels as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*—re-writings, as it were, of classic works and bold illustrations of Ezra Pound's injunction to 'Make it New!' and of Eliot's point in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' that the past and the present collaborate in the mind of the artist....

She attributed her inspiration to Sebastian Brant's fifteenth-century *Das Narrenschiff* [1494], which she called a 'moral allegory' that fit her 'purpose exactly'... A case can also be made for Porter's reliance on other moral allegories, such as Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*, Prudentius's *Psychomachiae*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Johnson's *Rasselas*.... Porter's satire is Juvenalian, only invective, closer to the imagination and style of Jonathan Swift, whom Porter venerated.... Porter's satire is classic, and part of it is indeed Juvenalian, aimed at herself as well as at persons on whom she wants to exact revenge.... Porter's shifting and circling focus, moving from one fool to another, requires the characters to be largely caricatures, drawn with the broad incisive strokes of caricaturists such as Albrecht Durer, whom Porter discovered in her youth, and Jose Clemente Orozco and Miguel Covarrubias, both of whom she discovered in Mexico in the early 1920s."

Darlene Harbour Unrue

"Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*: Failed Novel, Classic Satire, or Private Joke?"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 214-216, 227

"The noble, but finally misguided, idealism of Ike McCaslin [in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*] sheds light on Dr. Schumann's similarly admirable but ultimately flawed commitment to a principled life. Typically understood as the moral center of *Ship of Fools*, Dr. Schumann emerges in this reading as more complicated and less trustworthy, not the moral compass of the novel but finally another of its foolish denizens.... The woman's [Roth's mistress in "Delta Autumn"] stinging admonishment of Ike bears a striking resemblance to the sharp reproach that La Condesa delivers late in *Ship of Fools* to Dr. Schumann, another well-intentioned but misguided idealist....

In their rejoinders, both Roth's mistress and La Condesa zero in on the crucial failing shared by Ike and Dr. Schumann: whatever their good intentions, the two men have so detached themselves from their inner feelings and emotions that they cannot empathize adequately with the sufferings of others, particularly of those who revel in rather than restrain their passions. Ike's and Dr. Schumann's failures of deep empathy stem from their ascetic withdrawals from the dizzying complexity of passionate human relationships.... Dr. Schumann also lives by a tightly configured asceticism, grounded in religious belief and rigid self-control that in many ways mirrors Ike's. Dr. Schumann's desert—his sanctuary to which he can retreat for spiritual succor and security—is the sea on which he spends most of his life.... By working as a ship's doctor, rather than as a doctor in Germany, Dr. Schumann signally cuts himself off from his family, thereby largely freeing himself from the demands and responsibilities that come with being a husband and a citizen....

This is Porter at her best, using a few spare words to describe Dr. Schumann's controlled, polite, and forceful rejection of his tablemates' anti-Semitism. A small but telling detail—Dr. Schumann's crossing his tableware into an *x*—signals not only his rejection of his tablemates' anti-Semitism but also the dangerous ends to which their prejudice leads. As suggested in Dr. Schumann's motion, the anti-Semitism of the Germans transforms the Christian cross into an *x*, a letter often suggestive of endings and of death...and with only one more small adjustment, as is easily imagined, the *x* becomes a Swastika. But for all of Dr. Schumann's magnificent, exacting formality in refuting his tablemates' anti-Semitism, one is also struck by how quickly he retreats from the table... Dr. Schumann's dramatic departure from the table proves anything but an effective challenge to the anti-Semitism of his tablemates.... They ponder whether Dr. Schumann, given his thinking and his name, might actually be a Jew himself....

Dr. Schumann's dignified attempt but utter failure in meaningfully affecting his tablemates' anti-Semitism parallels in some crucial ways Ike McCaslin's failure in influencing the values of people within his family and community.... Dr. Schumann's lunge to save a cat from being tossed overboard by Ric and Rac reveals the ongoing struggle between emotion and reason that shapes his life. In saving the cat, Dr. Schumann acts instinctively, unthinkingly putting his own life in jeopardy because of his fragile heart condition.... As his thoughts reveal, Dr. Schumann suffers from a version of the myopic focus on self and self-interest that besets all the passengers on the ship.... If Dr. Schumann's professionalism and her sexism cannot check his desire for La Condesa, neither can religious faith. Central to Dr. Schumann's efforts at ascetic withdrawal is his unbending Catholic faith, which provides him with a means to understand—and to resist—his transgressive desires....

As does Ike, Dr. Schumann thus in the end fails to save—or even influence—the world in which he lives from the powerful forces of history. Ike's and Dr. Schumann's ascetic strategies for coping are of course in some ways commendable, above all in their devotion to their craft—the good hunter, the good doctor—and particularly when seen against the worlds in which the two men live, worlds in which most people overlook the moral and ethical in their pursuit of money and power. And yet those ascetic strategies, which pull them away from active involvement with their families and communities, ultimately fail because they lead Ike and Dr. Schumann to sequester themselves in the cold and distant world of the individual consciousness.”

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.

“Faulkner's Ike McCaslin and Porter's Dr. Schumann”

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 114-17, 119-20, 122, 124-25

“In her personal canon, she made room at the top for *The Praise of Folly*. She told her nephew that she had been formed by Erasmus ‘from her tenth year.’ In 1932, she was reading him in Basel, and on June 19, 1941, she signed a contract with Doubleday to write his biography. After the publication of *Ship of Fools*, she reiterated her admiration, hinting that her representation of folly was inspired by his.... For Erasmus, folly is foolishness, and although it is the butt of his satire, he generally finds it amusing. For Porter, on the other hand, folly is innate wickedness. When writing of ordinary human life in *The Praise of Folly*, he is tolerant and urbane; in contrast, in *Ship of Fools*, she is harsh and scornful. Unlike Porter, Erasmus actually likes his fools, and far more than she, he identifies with them in their folly....

Although Porter was drawn to Erasmus because of his moral seriousness, she was unable to share his conclusions because she held an opposite view of human nature.... One explanation for her darker view is

that she was a witness to history in a century that was rife with corruption and violence.... She reminds us that not only children and lovers, but nations were entangled in hatred and reciprocal murder.... [The] tug between humanism and modernism, between idealism and realism, results in a tension that is one of the strengths of such gems of fiction as 'Flowering Judas,' 'Old Mortality,' and 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider'....

In 'Marriage Is Belonging' (1951), Porter claims, as Augustine does, that...children 'human nature in essence, without conscience, without pity, without love, without a trace of consideration for others, just one seething cauldron of primitive appetites.' This view of children can be seen in two of the most striking characters in *Ship of Fools*, the six-year-old twins, Ric and Rac. These little ones do not reflect an Erasmian concept... [They] are portrayed as incarnations of evil.... Porter portrays these masochistic children as miniature adults. They ape the adults around them... From one point of view, Porter's characterization of the evil twins is an extreme reflection of Augustine's theory of original sin; from another, it is like a composite snapshot of the dark views of childhood in the new social sciences."

Jewel Spears Brooker

"Fools and Folly in Erasmus and Porter"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 17, 21-24, 28

"Jenny and David[s]...tense relationship recalls the couple in Hieronymus Bosch's sinister painting *The Allegory of Intemperance*.... It is generally assumed that it must have been completed some time between 1495 and 1500 as part of a triptych illustrating the Seven Deadly Sins. The famous companion panel, the *Ship of Fools*, is now in the Louvre in Paris. Given the immediate European popularity of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff*, published in 1494, Bosch is likely to have designed his triptych as a visual interpretation of Brant's poem.... Herein lies a significant difference between Brant's late medieval poem and Katherine Anne Porter's twentieth-century novel *Ship of Fools*: Porter's ship reaches her destination, Bremerhaven, though whether this is a blessing is a moot point. United despite their class divisions in their patriotism and anti-Semitism, the Germans on board the *Vera* yearn for a 'Fatherland' which would soon prove worse than Sebastian Brant's Narragon."

Dimitar Daphinoff

"'After All, What Is This Life Itself?':

Humanist Contexts of Death and Immortality in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 31, 35, 40

"[Sebastian Brant's] *Ship of Fools*, a didactic instruction in verse, is...based on a completely different aesthetic foundation...from Katherine Anne Porter's novel of the same name.... The original edition of Brant's *Ship of Fools* [was] printed in Basel in 1494, in German.... Porter connected Brant's series of fools with the experiences she had had with Europeans.... By explicitly referencing Brant's work, and by borrowing his title, Porter sought to create a clear intertextual relationship between her work and Brant's *Narrenschiff*...the first large work of modern German literature and at the same time, the most important poetic German contribution to European moralism in the Renaissance....

Brant's most important source of inspiration, namely Horace...wrote [an] ode to the 'Ship of State'.... Even Horace's ship allegory contains the melancholic and critical, not necessarily pessimistic but certainly not cheerful fundamental tone that we later see in both Brant's and Porter's works. This is just how ships of fools work; they are not places of happiness, but rather places of squalidness and mental weakness.... It [is] a modern novel, one that has clear structural differences from the...individual types of foolishness found in Brant's image of a ship full of fools. This is a significant difference, and it speaks to the aesthetic core of the difference between the new and old ship of fools....

Brant dealt with the 109 different types of fools in individual chapters, each with (1) a motto, (2) an image, and (3) a didactic poem. The poems dealing with each of the negative behavioral deviations are argumentative in nature. The panopticon of foolishness...is a mirror, ultimately one that reflects vice, deficiency, weakness, stupidity, and sin... Porter's work also deals with these same themes, but her version handles them differently.... Porter's fictional virtual world is built through narrative, and only occasionally does she integrate argumentative and descriptive elements. In short, Brant's priority is arguing, while Porter's is telling....

Porter tells the story of at least thirty people or groups of people.... We encounter some of these people as real characters, as opposed to the woodcut-like sketches, the more abstract types of sinners found in Brant. Still, Porter's series of figures, which are all presented as equals in the work, demonstrate clear structural similarities with Brant's 109 fools. But while every one of Brant's figures gets its profile exclusively from an abstract discussion of negative morality, Porter's figures get their profiles primarily psychologically through their actions and through the mental processes that the author gives us a glimpse of. Components of an ethical discourse occur only secondarily (for instance, when protagonists reflect on the morality or amorality of the small children Ric and Rac).... Porter presents us with a psychologically interpreted moral universe.

Porter tells the common story of a common voyage of figures across the Atlantic.... Her narrative utilizes a principle of film montage known as shot and cut, with alternating sequential syntagma; she thus incorporates a non-linear narrative flow [Modernism]. All of these partial episodes are presented...on equal footing. This fragmentation of character portraits throughout the work forces the readers to use their imagination to construct a holistic synthesis of each character [as in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*].... In addition to profiling her individual characters, Porter modeled a social and socioethical context of interaction through her depiction of the overall ship. This is missing from Brant's work. Porter's readers can imagine a two-tier *Vera* world, in which the exploited and non-privileged are penned up 'in steerage' in the third class ('the oppressed and intimidated'), where revolutionary potential rears its head. Above deck, in the first and second classes that we get a glimpse of, we see a world of delusion, of ideology, and vapidly romanticized belief....

It is significant that the 'bride and groom' on board (who represent the existence of human happiness in the world) play no role in the narrative; their existence is only briefly mentioned.... Not even the two American artists are able to free their minds. It is a world in which moral considerations, dominant in Brant's work, are psychologized as nothing more than subjective prejudices or learned group egos. It is a world of mutual racism, social discrimination, of boundaries and structural violence.... This entire upper class is largely and only provisionally held together through their mutual class-disdain of those in steerage.... Thus, in Porter's work we experience a world of ancient European thought that cannot rid itself of authoritarian structures.... The captain of the ship...represents an authoritarian-fascist social model and a substitute for the lost monarchy.... The Spanish students and the shady dancers of the Spanish Zarzuela troupe break into this model of social order as antagonists. Someone has paid for their passage on the upper deck. In contrast to the Germans and Swiss, they represent the opposing model of deviation and chaos....

In an allegory, the aesthetic-poetic and rhetorical-real world levels of communication work together. The allegory invites us to interpret a second statement from that which is first said in the text, to see a second something behind the concrete fiction, and, if we choose, to transfer this something into the facticity of the [real world].... The ship represents the world, as Porter says in her paratext, a world that is on its course to eternity.... We can understand this process of understanding as a progression from the concrete to the abstract.... In contrast to Brant, Porter does not give us any explicit directive.... This type of author often understands himself or herself as nothing more than an analyst, a seismograph and recorder of the course of the world."

Joachim Knappe

"Paratexts and the Rhetorical Factor in Literature:  
Sebastian Brant and Katherine Anne Porter"

*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 53, 56-57, 59, 62, 64-66

"Some critics and reviewers have insisted that readers who saw only horror, disillusionment, cruelty, misery, and misanthropy in this novel overlooked or ignored the dominant theme of love woven throughout the narrative and consequently misread the whole work.... It can be argued convincingly that reviewers such as Granville Hicks who did not see what Ray B. West called the 'sense of human possibility' in *Ship of Fools* did not read the *satire* accurately....

The *Vera's* Captain Thiele, who exemplifies the foundations of Nazism, believes he belongs 'to a larger plan...' He often revels 'secretly in the notion of lawless murderous fury breaking out again and again...' General Fritz Thiele, in marked contrast to the ship's captain, served in the German Army in both World

War I and World War II before becoming part of the German resistance and participating in the assassination attempt against Adolph Hitler on July 20, 1944. After the attempt failed, he was arrested ...and hanged... General Thiele, the anti-Nazi martyr, illustrates the human possibility that the de facto Nazi Captain Thiele cannot imagine...

Herr Professor Hutten is the literary namesake of Ulrich von Hutten, a Renaissance German satirist and humanist poet Porter greatly admired... Porter's Herr Professor Hutten, holding forth in lengthy, blathering discourse at every opportunity, represents the arrogance and dryness of the worst academics, whom Porter had grown to dislike during her stints as writer-in-residence on college campuses in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, the professor's condescending treatment of his wife, Frau Professor Hutten represents the attitude Porter perceived in her temporary colleagues at Stanford and the University of Michigan who thought her inferior because she had no academic degrees. To make sure the personal satire would not be missed, Porter gave Frau Professor Hutten the name 'Kathe.'

Herr Siegfried Rieber's given name provides a clue to a noble standard he fails to meet. Porter probably had in mind both the character Siegfried in Richard Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which she saw several times, and also Wagner's source for the hero in his opera, the valiant dragon-slayer Siegfried of the German medieval poem *Das Nibelungenlied*. Porter loathed Wagner, whom she described as 'a loud and noisy charlatan, a shell-game man, a rotter.' She said he became for her, 'with Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, a part of Hitler's Germany.' That description applies equally to Porter's portrayal of Siegfried Rieber, no less offensive for his antic buffoonery, but she also provides a glimpse into the degree of Rieber's failure by simultaneously reminding the reader of the brave, martyred slayer of dragons in an heroic age.

Dr. Schumann's name, which Porter changed from 'Sacher'...is a reference to the German composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856). In some ways the doctor's alignment with the Romantic German composer is perfectly logical, for he is part of that Romanticized past, his dueling scar a symbol of what Porter quoted a young poet in Germany describing to her as the 'old soft-headed Germany.' Porter obviously preferred the past poets to the 'new race of poets, tough and quick, like...prize fighters'... Dr. Schumann is the most moral character in Porter's novel, despite his failings, because he has more insight into the human condition than the others and because, as he develops increasing self-awareness, he learns the meaning of love, the sources of evil, and the limits of a Romantic view of life.

Herr Wilibald Graf, the frail dying man who is a sexually repressed sadist [misreading] and a religious fanatic convinced he has the power of healing, finally abandons his prayer to be enfolded in the arms of God and replaces it with a prayer for oblivion. His name is an allusion to one of Porter's favorite artists, the Swiss Renaissance painter and printmaker Urs Graf, whose works she also studied in Basel in 1932. Graf's sincere religious beliefs and humility in the face of his human failings made him a natural choice for representing a moral ideal juxtaposed to the perverted piety of the messianic Wilibald Graf.... [This is a perverted interpretation: Wilibald Graf is actually *like* Urs Graf.]

The name of Wilhelm Freytag, one of the most complex characters in the novel, is very likely an allusion to the German novelist and playwright Gustav Freytag (1816-1895), said to be repelled by both the democratic radicalism of the [young Germans] and the escapism of the Romantics.... He achieved international renown with his widely translated 1855 novel *Soll und Haben* and with *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863), a critical textbook in which he explained a system for dramatic structure later named 'Freytag's Pyramid.' *Soll und Haben*, however, also anticipated the Nazi state of the next century by depicting Poles and Jews as inferior 'colonists' whose land should be seized and whose language and culture should be eradicated by the German master race.

Gustav Freytag's literary representative, Wilhelm Freytag in *Ship of Fools*, is devoted to a paternalistic social hierarchy.... His chauvinism goes beyond gender to nation. 'He knew he was altogether German, a legitimate son of that powerful German strain able to destroy all foreign blood in its own veins and make all pure and German once more...' Among many others on board the *Vera*, he is anti-Semitic, despite the fact that he himself is the object of anti-Semitic hatred and cruelty when his wife's Jewishness is revealed.

Below the love he professes for his wife lies a racial hatred comparable to that revealed in Gustav Freytag's *Soll und Haben*.

Etchegaray, the Basque woodcarver who loses his life saving the bulldog Bebe, is the namesake of Jose Etchegaray, one of the leading Spanish dramatists of the last part of the nineteenth century. Although [his] early work was heavily Romantic, under the influence of Henrik Ibsen he turned to social realism and problem plays. With the Provençal poet Frederic Mistral, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1904. Porter's Etchegaray is a true artist, frustrated and depressed beyond imagination when his carving knife is confiscated and he no longer can fulfill his artistic impulse. His jumping overboard to save the drowning dog costs him his life, which has become meaningless to him as a stifled artist. [misreading] In this instance, Porter is drawing a parallel between two artist equal in their adherence to the artistic spirit, one of a simple primitive woodcarver unrecognized by the world and the other a playwright celebrated by the world.... [The woodcarver is a Christ-evoking figure.]

The name of Herr Julius Lowenthal clearly suggests Walter Lowenfels, an expatriate poet, playwright, and editor of the *Communist Daily Worker*, whom Porter ridiculed by associating him with her persecuted Jew who cynically sells Christian artifacts to the Christians.... Walter Lowenfels was in the news in 1932 while Porter was in Basel and Paris.... Porter met Lowenfels in Paris early in 1933. She didn't like him or his poetry, which was heavily political. After Henry Miller presented a thinly disguised Lowenfels as the poet Cronstadt in *Tropic of Cancer*, Porter remarked that she would have thought better of Miller if he hadn't mistaken Lowenfels for a poet. She was also angry with Lowenfels for trying to use her name to gain entrée to her friend and patron, the wealthy heiress Barbara Harrison....

Porter always had an adversarial relationship with her younger sister, Mary Alice, named for their dead mother but always called 'Baby,' even as an adult.... Her joke on Baby, who bred Boston bulldogs, was to make the dog in the novel a bulldog and name him 'Baby,' or rather, 'Bebe,' the French form of the name.... Another member of the Zarzuela troupe, Pancho, bears the common nickname for 'Francisco' and points directly to Francisco Aguilera, Porter's 1924 Chilean lover who is generally credited with fathering the child she delivered stillborn... When she ran into him in Washington, D.C. in 1942 she told her friend Marcella Winslow she was 'madly in love with him once and almost murdered him.' The eventual murder was literary, as she made him a very minor character—and a pimp—in *Ship of Fools*.

Of Porter's five known husbands, only her fifth husband, Albert Erskine, escaped her satirist knife. Her fourth husband, Eugene Pressly, although not represented by name, is the model for David Scott, described in images of coldness and death throughout *Ship of Fools*. Reminders of her first three husbands, John Henry Koontz, Otto Taskett, and Carl von Pless, abound in the names Johann, Otto, and Karl, either actually aboard the *Vera* as passengers or as former husbands or lovers recalled or imagined by female passengers. Herr Graf's nephew Johann is a cruel, sex-starved youth who feels mostly contempt for his sickly and parsimonious uncle. Karl Baumgartner is a hopeless drunkard, and Karl Glocken is a hunchback. Both Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Schmitt mourn dead husbands named Otto. Porter's most scathing portrayal, however, is reserved for her first husband, John Henry Koontz, although she does not rely on his name to carry the satire. The character William Denny is J. H. Koontz in very thin disguise.... His routine physical abuse of Porter...resulted in her bloody nose, broken bones, and hospitalizations. Mrs. Treadwell, one of the most autobiographical characters in the novel, muses at one point, 'Was I really ever married to a man so jealous he beat me until I bled at the nose?'

It is easy enough to see that Jenny Brown is very much based on a younger Porter, and Jenny's love affair with David Scott represents the doomed relationship of Porter and Eugene Pressly.... Porter's disclosing the savagery under the surface of Mrs. Treadwell's decorum was a deep probe into the violence within herself... Frau Rittersdorf, however, conveys Porter's harshest self-ridicule.... They share former husbands name Otto, and Frau Rittersdorf sends herself flowers from fictional lovers named Johann and Karl and muses about a Mexican lover not unlike Felipe Carillo. Whether Frau Rittersdorf's meandering thoughts about euthanasia for defective children is Porter's confronting her guilt over a 1921 abortion in Mexico can't be ascertained....



Some critics have argued (myself included) that Mrs. Treadwell, Jenny Brown, and Dr. Schumann are among the passengers who take steps toward self-awareness during the voyage. Mrs. Treadwell discovers the violence within herself, Jenny discovers what love is *not*, and Dr. Schumann discovers the irrationality of love and the apathy that underlies evil. But the illuminations are fleeting and do not lead to significant change. [After they part, Dr. Schumann changes his mind and decides to help La Condesa as much as he can while remaining faithful to his wife.] Most of the passengers, Porter's fools, refuse to take advantage of the opportunities for acquiring knowledge about themselves or the general human condition...

Many reviewers of *Ship of Fools* remarked on the microcosmic quality of Porter's ship and its passengers and its mirror reflection of humanity.... No one recognized the full extent of her Swiftian satire in the characters Porter created as private jokes that also served as revenge on real persons or the fact that Porter was holding herself up to ridicule as well.... 'I am a passenger on that ship,' [she wrote]."

Darlene Harbour Unrue

"Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*: Failed Novel, Classic Satire, or Private Joke?"  
*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 216-227, 229

"*Ship of Fools* the film reminds us of the relevance and timeliness of the story Porter created, a relevance and timeliness that deserve acknowledgment in the continuing debate over the novel's worth.... With a few exceptions, the emphasis on the novel's journey to completion has substituted for discussion of the novel as a literary product published in an historical and cultural context.... It is remarkable that a novel that outsold every other American novel in 1962 (Cowles) is not seen more clearly as a novel of its time.... Many reviews tout its status as a long-awaited work by a highly acclaimed artist, but such statements may not fully explain its extraordinary popularity....

The success of *Exodus* as a novel (1958) and film (1960) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a book in English (1952), play (1956), and film (1959) may have suggested an American audience's developing interest in the subject matter of *Ship of Fools*. Particularly of note here, Mann's *Judgment at Nuremberg* teleplay (1959) and Kramer's movie version of it (1961) also paved the way for the success of Porter's *Ship of Fools*... One might argue, in fact, that the novel benefited from its long-delayed publication.... In addition, the capture and trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1960-61... The Eichmann trial ended on August 14, 1961, the same month and year in which Porter completed her novel.... *The Pawnbroker* [1965]...*The Sound of Music* [1965]...*Ship of Fools* [1965]...

[Filmmaker Stanley] Kramer asserts that Porter's *Ship of Fools* is not so much a satire as 'a saddening observation of humankind's sorry condition and pending tragedy in 1933, when Adolph Hitler was coming into power without much resistance'.... Both Porter and Kramer recognized that...lies and obfuscation on the parts of both individuals and governments obscured the path to truth...and were wary of party lines and group think.... It is through failed romantic relationships that Porter and Kramer best communicate in their novel and film the many ways, large and small, that humans fail each other and compromise themselves.... [Porter] was displeased with some of the changes [in the film] and she thought 'the film bore the marks of Hollywood sentimentality'."

Christine Hait

"*Ship of Fools* the Film in Context"  
*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 128-31, 134, 136, 140-41

Michael Hollister (2017)

## REBUTTALS TO CRITICISMS

"It will be a reader myopic to the point of blindness who does not find his name on her passenger list."

Mark Schorer

"We're All on the Passenger List"

*New York Times* (1 April 1962)

“A little sense on Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools!*... Its virtues, to me at least, are obvious: it is one of the very few American novels (almost unique in this lately) that deserves to be long; the writing is always alert, modest, and honest. As for its gloom and grayness, I find them in their way glorious. For what it is worth, *Ship of Fools* is in the American Liberal Tradition, a tradition that most of us follow in our non-fiction, but one that is hardly attempted any more in imaginative work.... I can’t see that the fact that *Ship of Fools* doesn’t include such opposite Germans as Einstein, Hitler, and Thomas Mann is an indictment. It would be easy to picture an idealistic prosecuting attorney, such as Mr. Solotaroff, reading *Macbeth* (I am making no comparison), and saying its perverse darkness has no room for Erasmus, Spinoza, and Sir Francis Bacon.”

Robert Lowell  
Letter to the Editor of *Commentary* (1962)

“I can think of only one possible reason for anyone’s not liking this book: just at the start the characters are almost too strong; one shrinks from them a little. No, you may say, I do not wish to spend another page with this smug glutton, or this hypochondriacal drunkard... But presently, having read a certain number of pages, you feel a grudging sympathy with one and all, or a rueful empathy, or at least solidarity, as a fellow human being.... Anyway, who am I to lecture this woman of genius about her techniques...?”

Glenway Wescott  
*Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*  
(Hamish Hamilton, London 1963) 53

“The critical reception of *Ship of Fools* when it first appeared was almost unanimously enthusiastic. What dissent occurred concerned itself with three features of the novel: the rendering of the characters, the pessimism of the theme, and what some critics considered an absence of suspense.... Theodore Solotaroff, writing in *Commentary*...in a curiously vituperative article...characterizes *Ship of Fools* as ‘massive, unexciting, and saturnine.’ Such charges are reminiscent of the response made to another American work a century earlier, when one critic called *Moby-Dick* ‘...trash, belonging to the worst school of Bedlam literature.’ Many considered Melville’s novel dull, its action clogged by extraneous matter....

A key to Miss Porter’s method...is pointed out most clearly by Eric Auerbach in...*Mimesis*. [He] discusses a puzzling quality of epic narrative, what he calls the *retarding principle* and what Goethe characterized as ‘the *retarding element* appropriate to Homeric epic.’ Such retardation consisted in the breaking off of a dramatic incident in order to shift and explore the background...of the event. It was, Auerbach maintains, ‘In dire opposition to the element of suspense.’ Miss Porter utilizes this *retarding principle* in the construction of her comic-epic, much as it was used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, for the purposes of deepening and enriching her narrative; and those are the qualities that impressed most critics of the novel. [italics added]

The charge that *Ship of Fools* shows little ‘sense of human possibility’ reminds us of early charges made against another significant American work, ‘The Waste Land’ of T. S. Eliot. As does Eliot in his poem, Miss Porter portrays much of modern life as sterile and impotent, but she also suggests, as does Eliot, the fructifying possibilities of love. She is less extreme than Jean-Paul Sartre in her rendering of what is disgusting and absurd in human life, nearer to Albert Camus in her attitude of detached observation; superior, perhaps to either in the over-all sense of compassion that finally pervades her work.”

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 41-43

“We are being arbitrary if we demand, to begin with, more of a novel than that it be interesting [Henry James]. I am moved to invoke certain commonplaces [such as this] of a sort I had supposed to be news only to sophomore undergraduates....

The first brief waves of reviews were almost unanimous in their praise of *Ship of Fools* and then very shortly the many dissenting opinions began to appear... That Miss Porter's book should have been originally well-received so rankled *Commentary's* staff that a lengthy rebuttal was composed... The article progresses to a frothing vehemence... The *Commentary* critic goes on to charge Miss Porter with having written a novel contemptible in two decisive ways: (1) badly executed in every conceivable technical sense, particularly characterization and (2) unacceptable on moral grounds, being pessimistic and misanthropic.... Why Dostoevsky, for example, is permitted to be both massive and saturnine and Miss Porter is not is a question spoken to later only by implication. The critic's charge that her writing is 'unexciting' is curious considering his own high emotional state in responding to the work....

The proper critic asks: How can we tell what a work means, let alone whether it's good or bad, if we don't know what it is to begin with?... Mr. [Wayne] Booth [makes] explicit his bias for finely-constructed, concentrated plots. To entertain a preference for *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Great Gatsby* over, say, *Moby-Dick* or *Finnegan's Wake* is one thing and legitimate enough in its way. To insist, however, that the latter two works are inferior because their integrity does not depend on traditional plot structure would be to risk downgrading two admittedly monumental works in a very arbitrary and dubious way. Finally, to insist that every long work of prose fiction should be as much like *Pride and Prejudice* as possible is to insist that every such work be not only a novel, but a nineteenth-century one at that....

Miss Porter's book appears to take a dim view of the behavior of the race... The aggrieved critic cannot come down from high dudgeon long enough to see that a view of literature as merely an ideological weapon is in the first place a strangely puritanical one and wildly out of place... Most works of fiction, *as everyone should know*, are not written to accomplish anything but themselves, but some works of fiction are written to demonstrate to the innocent that there is much evil in the world. And others are written to demonstrate to the initiated, but phlegmatic, that there is more evil than even they had supposed and that, moreover, this evil is closer to home than they can comfortably imagine.... It is nowhere everlastingly written that literature must have a sanguine, optimistic, and uplifting effect. Is there not something salutary in a work which has the effect of inducing disgust and functioning therefore as a kind of emetic. Had the critic given Miss Porter her due as an artist he might have seen that *Ship of Fools* condemns human folly, but it never once confuses good and evil.... [unlike Postmodernist fiction]

Far from taking delight in exposing human foibles, in 'getting' her characters' 'number,' Miss Porter's narrative voice has the quality of personal suffering even as it gives testimony. It seems to say: 'This is the way with the human soul, as I knew it, at its worst, in the years just prior to the Second World War. And alas for all of us that it should have been so.'... The resolution of the manifold conflicts in the work is part of the encompassing action of the work, that which the reader can logically suppose will happen after the story closes. The Germans will march against Poland and turn Europe into a concentration camp. The others will, until it is too late, look the other way. This is a fact of history which overrides in importance the fact that no one on the ship can possibly come to good....

As an apologue [to Brant's *The Ship of Fools*, 1494] Miss Porter's work...not only has the right, it has the function by its nature to 'caricature' its actors, to be 'saturnine,' to have a large cast, to be 'fragmented' in its narration and above all, to quote Mr. Booth again, to achieve 'unity based on theme and idea rather than coherence of action...[to have] no steady center of interest except the progressively more intense exemplification of its central truth.... *Ship of Fools* argues that romantic literary conventions do not work in the modern world.... In her 1940 introduction to *Flowering Judas*, Miss Porter says that she spent most of her 'energies' and 'spirit' in an effort to understand 'the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of man in the Western world.' This is the dominant theme of *Ship of Fools* as it is of all her writing."

M. M. Liberman  
"The Responsibility of the Novelist"  
*Criticism* 8.4 (1966) 377-88

"It was a bad time for the appearance of *Ship of Fools*, with its rather old-fashioned, tough-minded pessimism that was bound to, and did, give offense to gnostics of all persuasions and temperaments—from the outraged Theodore Solotaroff, spokesman for what M. M. Liberman calls the 'post-Freudian, post-

Marxist, humanitarian social consciousness' of *Commentary*, at one extreme, to the gentle Catholic liberal, William Nance, at the other.... As Liberman suggests, Miss Porter might have saved everyone a great deal of trouble if she had not called the book a novel in the first place....

The demand that all works of fiction have 'finely-constructed, concentrated plots,' as Liberman points out, is...a bias. On the basis of that requirement, a good many books that have been called novels, not to speak of countless works of great beauty and wisdom in other genres would be disqualified for admiration.... It is a commonplace but deplorable habit of critics to deny their favorite writers the right to change. *Ship of Fools* simply is not, obviously was not intended to be, and is in no way obliged to be anything answerable to [any critic's] definition of a novel."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 110-12

"*Ship of Fools* has been the subject of an adverse body of criticism which finds the author's philosophic view of man pessimistic and misanthropic. By reading the novel as a satire, however, one perceives that Miss Porter's philosophic and artistic purpose is neither misanthropic nor pessimistic. *Ship of Fools* is a criticism of mankind by a woman who cares deeply about humanity. She derides human folly that arises from man's delusions about the evil within himself and from his failure to love. She aims to induce man to admit his own failings and then to strive to overcome them. But Swift...points out one of the principal problems of such satire: 'Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover everybody's Face except their Own.' The adverse critics of *Ship of Fools* affirm the continued validity of Swift's perception of the nature of satire and its audience."

Jon Spence  
"Looking-Glass Reflections: Satirical Elements in *Ship of Fools*"  
*Sewanee Review* 82.2 (Spring 1974) 316-30

"The first time I picked up a copy of *Ship of Fools*...I did not lay the book aside until after midnight, and not once did I worry about method, point of view, thematic concerns, or the relations of this or that episode to the entire work. I was simply caught in its toils. And so with my last reading. Of how many books since World War II can one say that?..."

More than one critic has complained that there are not enough nonfools on the Ship, not realizing that Brant (like Katherine Anne Porter) denies true wisdom to men, and in a sense, saw all men struggling in their foolishness.... There are not enough 'good' people on the Ship to give a true picture to the modern optimistic and progressive [liberal] mind—which is like attacking Thoreau for saying that most men live lives of quiet desperation, ignoring divorce statistics, dodging war news in the papers... There are indeed, good people and good deeds on the *Vera*, but they are admittedly few—the ship's doctor is a good man and the death of the poor artist-peasant Echegaray in trying to save the bulldog from drowning is a good deed. But many a masterpiece has survived 'saturnine' doctrine....

Love does, indeed, come in for a shabby deal...but it is not denied.... There is another example of love that seems 'true,' that of Herr Freytag [for his]...Jewish wife... The question is not one of attractiveness at all—but, of justice or humanity—a factor which Herr Lowenthal's characteristics, as he moves toward his fate, may be taken to underscore.... The Germans were not the only people willing to give a downward push to the Western world—even some Americans who pass for liberals, equating liberalism with lack of standards and lack of individuality."

Robert Penn Warren, ed.  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*  
(Prentice-Hall, Twentieth Century Views 1979) 16-19

"[This] collection demonstrates that *Ship of Fools* is an underrated novel: it challenges us... The novel partakes of so many historical discourses that only a multiplicity of views can come even close to doing justice to its complexity.... A satisfying interpretation of the novel still eludes us, notwithstanding a variety of enlightening approaches.... In our day...popular culture has...caught up with the significant legacy of Porter's novel. Isn't it time for scholarship to follow suit?"

Thomas Austenfeld, ed.  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Ship of Fools:  
New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts*  
(U North Texas 2015) 3, 7, 13

"Porter understood well that when she chose to reveal human nature unvarnished, as she had observed it in life, she would encounter hostility and resistance."

Alexandra Subramanian  
"Ship of Fools: A Severe Blow to Faith"  
*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 171

"Porter's novel...triumphs as a literary document of great intellectual integrity. It suggests that in the wake of two world wars and the collapse of religious hope, constructive satire is no longer the appropriate genre to express one's dismay and desolation at man's meaningless voyage through life."

Dimiter Daphinoff  
"'After All, What Is This Life Itself?':  
Humanist Contexts of Death and Immortality in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*"  
*New Interpretations and Transatlantic Contexts* (2015) 45

The negative critics have been routed. Their ship has sunk. Over the years the accumulating analyses by many discerning critics have demonstrated that *Ship of Fools* is the last great masterpiece of Modernism—a landmark of literary history. One characteristic of a masterpiece is that it gets attacked for being original. Even *Moby-Dick* got mostly bad reviews. Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein hated *Ulysses* (1922), the most influential innovative fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it got censored in the United States until 1933. Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), another masterpiece that got some terrible reviews, are the greatest achievements that mark the beginning of literary Modernism in America. *Ship of Fools* (1962) marks the end of the Modernist movement.

*Ulysses* is famous for its many correspondences between an ancient text and the present. *Ship of Fools* likewise contains many correspondences between an ancient text and the present, while also containing many prefigurations of the Nazi regime—pointing both backward and forward in history. *Ship of Fools* also became a bestseller, popular for colorful descriptions, vivid dramatic scenes, and brilliant characterizations. There are also many similarities between Porter's work and *The Magic Mountain* (1924) by the German Thomas Mann: Both are complex blends of Realism and Modernist symbolism, consistently ironic, with allegorical characters. Both works have been challenging to critics—over many of their heads in the case of Porter. Both use the metaphor of sickness, Mann to analyze the psychological sources of World War I in human nature and Porter to analyze the psychological sources of World War II.

One of only eleven American novels containing multiple coinciding allegories, *Ship of Fools* contains 3 coinciding allegories evoked by the metaphor of the ship: (1) the ship of the world; (2) the ship of state (the ship corresponds to the government of Germany in 1931 that soon got taken over by Captain Hitler); and (3) the ship of the individual soul in quest of salvation. Melville used this ship metaphor repeatedly in his fictions set at sea, but his *The Confidence-Man* (1852), set on a Mississippi River steamboat, is his novel most comparable to *Ship of Fools* in its pessimistic view of human nature—which is essentially the same as the Christian view: Humans are corrupted by selfishness, pride and other faults exposed in both novels. Liberals who do not believe they are ever wrong resent such affronts to their self-esteem.

Porter blends 6 traditional literary modes into an organic whole: (1) Allegory; (2) Realism; (3) Satire; (4) Confession; (5) Historical Novel; (6) Modernism. The most evident mode is Realism in the tradition of Henry James, deep and extensive psychological analysis of character, manners and morals. *Ship of Fools* is a model of Realism in its masterful dialogue, varieties of speech, accurate technical details, objectivity, and vision of life. The ironic tone has a sharp edge of Satire. The book is also a discreet religious Confession in the tradition of St. Augustine, as Porter purges her soul by projecting aspects of herself into at least one character—Mrs. Treadwell--bases other characters on former lovers and husbands, and declared "I am a

passenger on that ship.” In its time, settings, themes, and correspondences between some characters and real people, this is an Historical Novel. *Ship of Fools* is Modernist in its multiple points of view, interior monologues, analogies between the present and the past and future, correspondences to an ancient text, blending of diverse literary modes, cosmic vision, and varying of styles.

Discerning critics of the novel have compared Porter to Juvenal, Horace, Sebastian Brant, Dante, Swift, Sterne, Balzac, Dickens, George Eliot, Melville, Flaubert, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Mann, Kafka, Faulkner, Camus, and to the artists Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Durer, Frans Hals, and Goya. All critics, even her detractors, allow that Porter is one of the greatest short story writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it became a commonplace among her detractors that the quality of her writing declined in her attempt at a long novel. On the contrary, in his analysis of style in *Ship of Fools*, Robert Heilman praises Porter for her “great range” and her “superiority in achievement.” She has an “accurately analytical style that is the agent of a mature psychic and moral understanding.” He praises Porter’s diversity, virtuosity, elegance, clarity, precision, strength, grace, perceptiveness, vividness, detailed visualization, penetration, symbolism, inclusive sweep, and skill in compositional patterns. “Here is a writer...composing out of her own genius, and yet in her use of language exhibiting admirable qualities that seem akin to those of distinguished predecessors” Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Tobias Smollett, and Joseph Conrad. Any reader sensitive to language should be able to enjoy *Ship of Fools* for the quality of the writing alone.

The word *purgatory* in the first sentence of the novel and the epigraph from St. Paul before the last section establish a Christian perspective ignored by Postmodernist critics, whose analyses are atheistic. The conscience is represented best in the novel by Dr. Schumann and Herr Glocken the hunchback. The doctor is a Catholic who calls the evil twins Ric and Rac demons possessed by the Devil—evoking the religious allegory of salvation. At the opposite end of the religious spectrum from the wild Ric and Rac are the two complacent priests who are “much alike” and personify the current ineffectuality of the Church in the world. Nobody can stop Ric and Rac just as nobody can stop Hitler. The priests do not even try. There are 5 major events in the novel: (1) the boarding of the ship by suffering workers; (2) the dismissal of Freytag from the Captain’s table because he has a Jewish wife; (3) the woodcarver’s sacrifice of his life to save a dog, evoking Christ; (4) the looting of shops by the Spanish dancers that is ignored though observed by many; (5) the takeover of the ship by the dancers. These events are moral tests that are all failed by nearly all the characters and by all the negative critics of *Ship of Fools*. Responses to each event express the souls of the responders. The negative critics also miss or grotesquely falsify the significance of the dying old Herr Graf, the most Christlike character, representing true religious faith. The critic Darlene Unrue calls him a “sexually repressed sadist and religious fanatic”! She is more wrong about him than any fool on the ship. The name of God occurs 176 times in the novel, twice in the final sentence. The recurrent expressions “God knows,” “for God’s sake,” and “God help us” are religious motifs throughout. Most of the characters are headed from purgatory to hell on earth and Hell hereafter.

Critics who claimed there is “no plot” in *Ship of Fools* are less perceptive than most passengers on the ship, who at least detect the plot of the Spanish dancers. These critics miss both that plot and one of the most momentous plots in history: The takeover of the German ship by the Spanish dancers is analogous to the impending takeover of Germany by the Nazis, who are plotting to take over the world. A literary plot is a narrative that dramatizes causes and effects. *Ship of Fools* dramatizes the psychological and social causes of World War II and dramatizes the effects through analogy and prefigurations such as when Rieber declares of the poor steerage passengers, “I would put them all in a big oven and turn on the gas.” The Spanish dancers propose a pact between Spain and Germany to the Captain, which evokes the pact between the fascist Franco and Adolph Hitler during the Spanish Civil War that began soon after the action of this novel. To evoke massive historical plots that were soon to overwhelm individual lives, Porter abandons the convention of a single protagonist so as not to exaggerate the importance of any one individual, and she frequently ends scenes with ironic emphasis on the mundane and petty. There are over a dozen individual plots involving diverse relationships and encounters among the passengers that generate suspense, most significantly those of David and Jenny and of Dr. Schumann and La Condesa.

Literary history contributed to making the negative critics of *Ship of Fools* look foolish. They postured as defenders of the highest literary standards, yet they belittled a masterpiece at the very time these standards were collapsing. By 1962 Postmodernism was replacing Modernism, as marked in 1963 by the

publication of *V.*, the first novel of Thomas Pynchon—the most hip, popular, celebrated, elite, awarded and representative Postmodernist fiction writer in America. Porter the Christian got criticized for pessimism about human nature, whereas Pynchon the atheist cynic is pessimistic about everything. Blind critics saw no “soul of humanity” in *Ship of Fools*, whereas Pynchon does not even believe in the soul. Complaints were made about Porter’s characterization—which is brilliant—whereas there is no characterization at all in Pynchon. All his characters are cartoon projections of his ideas. Complaints were made by inattentive critics that there is no dramatic tension in *Ship of Fools*, whereas in Pynchon there can be no dramatic tension because he writes intellectual fantasies without any real people in them. Complaints were made that Porter’s realistic ending lacks force—missing the psychological forces of fascism evoked throughout the book and the implicit presence of no less a force than Adolph Hitler—whereas Pynchon delights in trivial open endings deprived of any force at all by ambiguity.

The dunce cap awarded to the Most Foolish Critic goes to Theodore Solotaroff for attacking *Ship of Fools* as if the author had once humiliated him by rejecting his advances. Such critics are like the most immoral passengers in their (1) prejudice and injustice, as by lumping all the characters together with negative generalizations as the Nazis do to the Jews; (2) dismissing the problems of others as tedious and “dull”; (3) disregarding the significance of the woodcarver—a Christ-evoking figure—and his sacrifice of his life; (4) overlooking the dying old faith healer as the Christlike personification of dying religious faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Secular critics are too prejudiced against religious content to see it.

The most ridiculous allegation by fools was that *Ship of Fools* is too negative and hopeless. These critics had no historical awareness. Everyone else knew that World War II was *very* negative, but that civilization was in fact saved in the end. Porter perfectly evokes the causes of the war and her novel derives great power from history—from the collective knowledge of what happened next in Germany and in Spain. Most of the negative critics are liberals who would prefer hopeful sentimentality to the truth. They would have improved the ending of the film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* by showing happy Nazi children pausing at play, waving goodbye to Anne as she is driven off to a gas chamber.

Michael Hollister (2017)