

ANALYSIS

“Holiday” (1960)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“Certainly, the appearance in the *Atlantic Monthly* of ‘Holiday’ (included also in the *O. Henry Memorial Prize Stories of 1962*), has provided ample evidence that her skill in the short narrative is as firm and assured as ever and that the beauty of her prose style is, if anything, superior.... The only thing we are able to do, with the proper discrimination, is to recognize genuine achievement...when we see it.”

Lodwick Hartley

“Dark Voyagers: A Study of Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools*”
University Review (Winter 1963)

“The author has added to this collection of her three books of stories, a magnificent new long story, ‘Holiday,’ three shorter ones and a modest preface.”

Howard Moss

“The Collected Stories: A Poet of the Story”
New York Times Book Review (12 September 1965) 1, 26

“‘Holiday’ represents one of my prolonged struggles, not with questions of form or style, but my own moral and emotional collision with a human situation I was too young to cope with at the time it occurred; yet the story haunted me for years and I made three separate versions, and with a certain spot in all three where the thing went off the track. So I put it away and it disappeared also, and I forgot it. It rose from one of my boxes of papers, after a quarter of a century, and I sat down in great excitement to read all three versions. I saw at once that the first was the right one, and as for the vexing question which had stopped me short long ago, it had in the course of living settled itself so slowly and deeply and secretly I wondered why I had ever been distressed by it. I changed one short paragraph and a line or two at the end and it was done.”

Porter

Collected Stories (1965)

“‘Holiday’ (1960) is told by an unnamed narrator who, long after the events had happened, recalled them. The sensibilities and the background of the narrator are similar to Miranda’s. The thesis is stated in the first paragraph: the narrator was too young for the troubles she was having, and her family background and training had not taught her that it was possible to run away from some things. She had learned later the difference between courage and foolhardiness; but, when the events of the story had taken place, she did not then know ‘that we do not run from the troubles and dangers that are truly ours, and it is better to learn what they are earlier than later. And if we don’t run from the others, we are fools.’

The narrator, wishing to escape her problems, which with the passage of time had diminished and need not be described, had gone, on the recommendation of Louise, a school friend, to the East Texas farm of the Muller’s. Louise had described the family and the farm romantically, but the reality the narrator confronted was quite different. Left on ‘the sodden platform of a country station,’ she was taken in a dilapidated wagon through bleak country to a forbidding farmhouse, set in an infertile spot. The fat puppy of Louise’s story had turned into an enormous, detestable beast.

When she arrived at the front door, the whole family, except the father, came out, and the narrator saw that they all had the same eyes, the same ‘taffy-colored hair,’ even though two were sons-in-law. She found herself in a patriarchal society, in which Papa Muller and the men were treated with deference and respect, the wives standing behind their husbands at meal times to fill their plates.

The story seemingly moves slowly, as the narrator observed the customs of this farming family with deep roots in the soil. Deeply conservative, almost completely isolated from the mainstream of American life--in fact from most community life except for Saturday excursions to the *Turnverein*--the family formed its own little closed society. The narrator found that Papa Muller was a student of Marx, and yet he was the richest member of the community. She observed the disciplined children at play, a wedding, a birth, a funeral--the life cycle of the family.

All of the realistic details (the story is filled with animals and animal imagery) suddenly took on more meaning when the narrator discovered that Otilie, the crippled dumb servant girl, was actually one of the Muller children. She worked constantly, as if she were in perfect health, preparing the vast quantities of food consumed by the Muller family; she worked because the work had to be done, and because she could do it. [One critic] has speculated that in naming Otilie, 'Miss Porter had in mind the Otilie Home for Crippled Children in New York...named after the saint in Alsace, who was born blind but whose sight was restored on baptism.' Otilie showed the narrator a picture of herself as a healthy little girl, tried to speak, but could not. The past in the picture was frozen, but the picture brought the two together. For a moment, the narrator thought, Otilie knew she was Otilie, 'knew she suffered,' staggered away, significantly leaving the picture face downward. Later that day, Otilie regarded her as a stranger, but the narrator could not let Otilie be a stranger.

In immediate juxtaposition is a long account of the family's treatment of animals: the boys trapped wild animals, the girls tended the animals and chickens tenderly; Frau Muller's death resulted from her overexertions in tending to the animals during the storm. The Mullers had put Otilie out of mind, the narrator thinks, though this may not be all the truth in this matter; and, out of self-defense, they forgot her. The compassion for Otilie is shown with great restraint, however, and is contrasted with the emotional scenes of the Mullers after the death of Mrs. Muller. Even Otilie was caught in the emotionalism, for the narrator who had stayed alone in her room the day of the funeral, filled with the 'terror of dying,' heard strange noises, and found Otilie howling in the kitchen. The narrator hitched horse to wagon and started after the funeral procession. But they were too far behind, and there was no hope that Otilie could be made a member of the family for that day, or even that Otilie wanted to join the family circle.

Something, perhaps the sky or the turning wheels--the narrator never knew--suddenly filled Otilie with joy. It was definitely spring, the flood had caused a profusion of vegetation (certainly the Mullers could understand only in a literal sense that April is the cruelest month [Eliot's "The Waste Land"]... She knew they were both fools of life, both fugitives from death, and, as a celebration, they took a holiday. Otilie...had become fidgety during their pause, but they started again, taking, significantly, 'the small road divided from the main traveled one'... The irony...is especially heavy as the narrator thought they would be home in time for Otilie to prepare supper and nobody need know of their holiday. [Humans] can be sustained by love--even love for a twisted, mute, half-beast of a human being like Otilie...

The Mullers had dealt with Otilie realistically: they had given her an importance in the household, a central position; but they had forgotten their blood ties, their spiritual ties. Their position was at the same time cruel and practical. Neither Christianity, nor Marxism had taught the Mullers compassion. One can, then, read 'Holiday' as a political parable, as Miss Porter's probing of the German question: she describes German clannishness, materialism, cruelty, love of animals and mistreatment of fellow human beings, and a willingness to put out of mind the unpleasantness of the past--characteristics she also described in 'The Leaning Tower' and *Ship of Fools*.... The narrator, although she was giving Otilie a holiday, could do little for the girl; for the narrator's own holiday would end soon. She would then leave the Muller farm, leave Otilie and the Mullers to their fate."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 108-11

"Miss Porter [is] a great admirer of James and the most deliberate and severe perfectionist writing American fiction since his death... 'Holiday'...will endure because form and idea are one--technique provides a window to a fable of universal proportions--and because the action in its totality--in its confluence of language, metaphor, theme, movement: in shirt, in its life--carries with it an absolute

inevitability.... It is...a version of pastoral, that subject which finds its archetypal lineage in man's impulse to return to the Garden, to a prelapsarian [before the Fall] world forever green and innocent. 'Holiday' is characteristic of Miss Porter's art in that it is faultlessly written, closely wrought, and economically presented through a sharp, clear perspective and a gradually and firmly evolving focus which narrows to a view that is at once tentative and final, innocent and ironic, luminous and dark. The center of composition is here, but beyond this the mystery of the art remains almost inviolate.

The total configuration of 'Holiday' possesses a self-sufficient order and achieves a symmetrical unity... In many respects this story is a celebration of the soil which is tilled by those who know and understand it deeply and intuitively. Yet at the same time 'Holiday' contains a tragic dimension which moves the reader to awe, regret, and finally acceptance, as the narrator herself is moved in the course of the action. It is a double story of sorts in which the two lines of action meet. On the one hand it is the narrator's story of a chapter in her life, involving a real but unexplained crisis--a psychic turning point; on the other it is almost a typical episode in the Mullers' lives from which they do not attempt to wrest a philosophic and religious meaning: a spring which brings birth, marriage, and death....

The obvious theme of individual responsibility versus common obligation is soon joined to the governing theme--the fools of life motif which appears in St. Paul. So this *apparently* artless tale begins--as a simple story, not a polished literary artifice, told much in the manner of the lyric or ballad; and the tone of some naivete and undeniable humility is in perfect accord.... The reader is all the more impressed with the narrator's sympathetic portrayal of the Muller family. The stranger's narrative voice contributes in no small part to the unfolding design... The unnamed persona certainly reminds us of Miranda, a Miranda living sometime between the period of *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; but there is no reason to suppose once and for all that she is, for unlike Miranda...and many stories in *The Old Order*, she is on the periphery of the action, and she interprets as well as reports the events...

The larger frame of the story, the enveloping action, deals with the family as a whole and the archetypal experiences that affect all families... All the Mullers work unceasingly to increase the already-abundant store of the Muller dynasty. They are German peasants who toil with great reward in East Texas.... The narrator gradually realizes that the servant, Otilie, is an older sister of Hatsy, Gretchen, and a third sister, Annetje. Otilie has been terribly and hopelessly transfigured by a nameless childhood accident, and what remains is a grotesque distortion of humanity. She is pictured as a frenzied automaton, 'a mere machine of torture,' working in 'aimless, driven haste,' preparing and serving 'that endless food that represented all her life's labors.' Yet paradoxically Otilie is the most human and sympathetic character in the story... She ironically achieves humanity in inhumanity, whereas the remainder of her family do not. The mystery of this paradox is at the heart of the story, and here Miss Porter's irony finds its true center in 'Holiday'....

Despite the success of the Mullers there are deficiencies which the narrator does not articulate so much as sense, and we, through her deepening consciousness, perceive the terrible shortcomings of the Mullers--and of humanity. We see the typical contradiction of the German character: Father Muller reads *Das Kapital* religiously every evening and knows whole passages by heart.... But sensing that Marx's abstractions have nothing whatever to do with his essential life, he therefore ignores them..... These same respectable Mullers have forgotten that Otilie is a member of their family.... The narrator sympathizes in large part with the Mullers.... In this patriarchal world Otilie has lost her original place as child, wife, and mother--functions which are fulfilled by all her sisters, but she is assigned another place, and in and through it she works out her own salvation...

Mother Muller dies as the result of her struggles in a storm which ravages the countryside and blights the land. The order of nature is thrown into discord, and so is the order of the family when Mother Muller is stricken.... The death is the turning point of 'Holiday' and the author deftly works out the complications... There is finally no one right attitude, any more than there is a clearly wrong one. The resolution comes in the bringing of the conflicting attitudes and tensions to a sharp and dramatic but deliberately ambiguous focus. Only moments before Hatsy, accompanied by her shy new husband, has shouted at Otilie who is apparently afraid and frightened by the storm 'in a high, penetrating voice as if to a deaf person or one at a great distance, 'Otilie! Suppertime. We are hungry!' Hatsy and her husband then go on to care for a sick lamb. Otilie, the human lamb, is sacrificed to the needs of the family. This implicit comparison of animal

life to human life is one of the most striking aspects of the story.... The narrator observes that 'Annetje was full of silent, tender solitudes... Still, she seemed to have forgotten that Otilie was her sister. So had all the others... For the family Otilie is a ghost from the past, preserved only in the photograph she keeps. Theirs is a cruel, practical, and necessary accommodation.... Otilie, like Benjy Compson [*The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner], bellows against disorder in her world. She howls 'with a great wrench of her body, an upward reach of the neck, without tears'....

Spring, which had just begun when the narrator arrived at the farm, is coming into full bloom against the 'peacock green of the heavens'... Time and life go on in the same ways despite death. Suddenly Otilie laughs, 'a kind of yelp, but unmistakable laughter.' The speaker then sees her 'ironical mistake': 'There was nothing I could do for Otilie, selfishly as I wish to ease my heart of her; she was beyond my reach as well as any other human reach...' We do not know why Otilie laughs. It may be a triumphant laugh since she is still among the living. She is perhaps once again trying to affirm her humanity as she has done so poignantly earlier when she has shown to the speaker her picture as a normal, healthy child. Here is one of the most compassionate and compelling scenes in all literature: its tenderness and pathos are unforgettable. Otilie's entire predicament is brilliantly rendered and starkly portrayed in this vignette. Her joy seems blasphemous on the funeral day the family hold day with which the holiday is ended. Yet is not the family's treatment of her equally blasphemous...

Why is the afternoon 'festive'? Otilie's laughter is best regarded as an affirmation amidst almost unbearable suffering and sorrow; and Otilie celebrates the triumphant return of spring and the continuance of life amidst grief and death, even as the other Mullers turn their thoughts toward the future while they are fashioning the coffin for Mother Muller and preparing her body for burial. 'For a while they would visit the grave and remember, and the life would arrange itself in another order, yet it would be the same. So Otilie assumes life in our minds which the other Mullers do not assume in their 'mystical inertia' of mind and 'muscular life.' Otilie, the caricature who is once described as unreal, is more human and real than the remainder of the family. As Father Muller has realized for them, they are the fools of life. Otilie, physically and mentally and psychically wrenched by fate, is still less a fool and more a person, and she celebrates her 'good luck,' her 'stolen holiday,' even while returning to the kitchen to continue her suffering. It is a final irony that Otilie is able to steal a holiday only when her mother has died.

There are the old themes revolving around the life-cycle and its fundamental rhythms... The fools of life theme is both Christian and existential, and Miss Porter uses it in a darker sense in *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider* and *Ship of Fools*.... Throughout her fiction Miss Porter shows us the truth of St. Paul's statement: Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise.' Miranda, the narrator of 'Holiday,' and Otilie achieve wisdom thus, although they come to it in radically different ways, and Otilie's perception, like her howl and her laugh, is of a very special and finally unknowable order....

The Mullers are typical plain (if wealthy) folk of an agrarian world and characteristic Germans; they are of the land and yet are alienated from its principle inhabitants. Here is revealed another deep irony in the story, and through touches such as these (which are deliberate and which count significantly in the ultimate meaning of the fable) the author is able to suggest a spreading field of meaning and value. Miss Porter triumphantly explores what [the critic] Empson calls one assumption of pastoral: 'You can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people.' To put it another way, simple people fully considered are no longer simple. So it is with the Mullers whose lives are something more than tranquil, orderly, and perfectly consistent.

The apparent simplicity and neatness of the Mullers' lives leads the narrator to flee there and make a haven of their home, but she soon finds out life in both its manifest forms and unpredictable nature continues any and everywhere, despite man's best efforts to avoid it. The mystery of the human experience remains, whether he be in tenement or field, townhouse or cottage. One thinks at the outset that the life of the Mullers inheres in the good since it is straightforward, free of duplicity and cunning, and since it is, for all intents and purposes, wholly successful. But it turns out that not a little of the old German atavism is present: we catch hints of dynastic rule and heavy-handed politics. If Mr. Muller is not Marx's Kapital (as

he says), he still smacks of the German tribal chieftain and rules his house and lands with the close grip of the beneficent dictator.

Because Miss Porter quite characteristically qualifies her sympathy, the Mullers are believable and interesting: they have human failings as well as human virtues. That is one reason why the reader assents to the donnees of the story and is caught up in its actions. There is primitivism in 'Holiday,' but not of the romantic sort: the view of man in the natural world is hard--not soft--and is tough-minded and realistic. As J. F. Powers has said, 'Nobody else could have written the story 'Holiday,' a story which is an example of what he calls 'the nearest thing yet to reality in American fiction.' The reality emerges because Katherine Anne Porter 'has approached life reverently in her stories, and it lives on in them.' And, in the words of Robert Penn Warren, the story is 'paradoxically, both a question asked of life and a celebration of life; and the author of it knows in her bones that the more corrosive the question asked, the more powerful may be the celebration.'

The version of pastoral in 'Holiday' is neither propaganda nor idyll: it is realistic in its description of a world which is both elemental and communal, and the sharpness of detail and accuracy of picture contribute in no small way to our understanding of this microcosm of the human community.... The action of 'Holiday' embodies a full and convincing world, invested with all the appurtenances of life and charged with visceral (and cerebral) forces: indeed the still center of the story involves the senses and emotions in an almost painfully real and palpable way: it is the intense yet sure feeling one encounters often in the best Russian fiction--in *A Sportsman's Sketches* and in parts of *Anna Karenina*. All in all 'Holiday' is an utterly believable confluence of elements which are caught and held--radiantly--in the living tapestry of the art--a pastoral in which form, the shape of the art, and substance, the fable within the art, are one: the form of the wrought thing is the thing itself--and the configuration of the whole is both beautiful and blest."

George Core
"‘Holiday’: A Version of Pastoral”
Georgia Review (Fall 1966)

"In its own way 'Holiday' is quite as successful as the shorter 'He,' and the novella, *Noon Wine*, both of which it resembles in some important ways, especially, in its devastating effect on the reader's sense of that lonely, vain, and painful labor which is life itself, but also in the brilliant and poignant depiction of characters who are more or less dumb and who, precisely because of their inarticulateness, are made to serve the author's purpose of inducing a more articulate character, with whom the reader can identify, to experience a revision of life.

'Holiday' is *about* the Mullers, German farmers residing in East Texas, but it is *within* and treats *of* the mind of a young nameless woman-narrator who, in her concerns and the feelings with which she voices them, bears a strong resemblance to the Miranda of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* as well as the Miranda of *Old Mortality*. The Mullers, as surely and colorfully drawn as Flaubert's peasants in early scenes of *Madame Bovary*, are, nevertheless, practically faceless, since by their physically healthy animal mindlessness they are virtually indistinguishable from each other and so remain at a distance from the reader, thus permitting them to stand perfectly for that mass of undifferentiated humanity of which we are all a part and from which we are, paradoxically, distinct....

Ottile, the forgotten sister consigned to the family role of kitchen servant, being incapable of speech, can only try to indicate to the narrator, in agonizing little scenes, the turbulence in her heart. There are thus two dramas being enacted at once: the play of life-and-death in the family story and the education of the narrator as she perceives Ottile's astonishing role in that story. It is the narrator's career which is central, and the difficulty for the reader is that he is enjoined, as in a Henry James fiction, to stay with the author's subtle intelligence as it backs and fills, progressively correcting faulty impressions, ultimately drawing truthful conclusions about the unalterable laws of human existence from a welter of tangled appearances. Miss Porter keeps nothing from the reader but she stops just the crucial millimeter short of doing the reader's decisive work....

Unlike that kind of contemporary writer who claims narrative effacement as an exclusive virtue and is in fact, on suspects, too timid to state his work's meaning lest the work fail to live up to the auctorial promise, Miss Porter states that meaning in 'Holiday' in a secondary but explicit way as 'this great truth,' and in an equally explicit but primary way, since it has now been dramatized, at the conclusion" "Well, we were both equally the fools of life, equally fellow fugitives from death. We could celebrate our good luck, we would have a little stolen holiday....'

The delight in the work is to experience the less explicit, often exquisitely subtle, always ironical, movement of concrete iteration to reiteration, until the terms 'fools of life' and 'fellow fugitives from death' are known for what they can mean beyond abstraction, through the narrator's experience of the wordless girl. This narrator, 'too young' to put her 'troubles' in philosophical perspective, enjoys a series of illuminations in moments of fictional time which will ripen from meaning to significance in the story's encompassing action, the years one can assume to have followed the end of the action proper. From the position of maturity, the narrator can *tell* 'this story' in a locus of wisdom, but in so doing she will let it unfold couching it in images of nature, at a Jamesian, that is, at a speed consistent with experience itself, so that for the reader it will be psychologically dramatic.

A friend and dormer schoolmate, knowing as little as we do of the young woman's 'troubles'--only that she wants a holiday by herself--urges her to lodge with the Mullers.... There is a touch of resentment against Louise, reminiscent of Miranda's against her family in *Old Mortality*, people who do you wrong by making you the victim of their own romanticism, a fundamentally untruthful view of life founded on an inability to separate appearance from reality. Describing the Mullers' menage in paradisiac terms, Louise concludes, 'I was there in the summer when the peaches and watermelons were in.' But she is cut short with 'This is the end of March,' thus drawing the line between a springtime revision of the past and a view of the same objective situation as a wintry present reality.

Louise had spoken of 'endless daughters and sons and sons-in-law and fat babies falling about the place; and fat puppies....' There were 'cows, calves, and sheep and lambs and goats and turkeys and guineas roaming up and down the shallow green hills, ducks and geese on the ponds.' The cataloguing of animal nature, so vital, and for Louise so arcadian, is for the narrator a presentiment of its opposite. Louise had said that her 'favorite' was 'a darling little black thing named Kuno...' who materializes in fact as 'an enormous black dog of the detestable German shepherd 'breed' and who menaces the narrator the moment she reaches the farm, confirming her conviction that 'in daily life...there are also such useful things as plain facts that should be stuck to through thick and thin.' But more importantly there is notice in this seemingly slight incident, and in its gross animal image, of the cruel fact of passage in all created life and, for one who senses it, the fear of inevitable death.

Later for the narrator there is a satisfaction as well in coming to terms with death and the fear of it. It is crucial to the story in the way that it justifies the young woman's presence thematically and does so, in part, through the dog, Kuno, as he is reintroduced, now in connection with Otilie, to invoke the theme of nature, dumb but strenuous and striving. The occasion is the death of Mother Muller, the story's turning point.... Her own terror having receded with the departure of the funeral party, the young woman, supposing that Otilie is wretched at having once again been left behind, bundles her into a battered wagon and tries to overtake the train.... The configuration is thus rounded out: nature, human and general, is denied a romantic possibility as in the perpetual passing hour of death; men howl in concert, but each for his own life. This paradox, bodied forth here in the narrator's experience of Otilie's very flesh, is earlier merely stated: 'I could do nothing but promise myself that I would forget her, too; and to remember her the rest of my life.'

When she arrives at the farm, burdened with her own sorrow, the young woman sees only 'scanty leafless woods,' and, as if speaking more of her own life as she had found it, reflects that 'there was nothing beautiful in these woods now except the promise of spring, for I detested bleakness, but it gave me pleasure to think that beyond this there might be something beautiful in its own being, a river shaped and contained by its banks, or a field stripped down to its true meaning, ploughed and ready for the seed.' A child will be born to one of Otilie's sisters, as easily as a foal is dropped, but the narrator is 'passionately occupied with looking for signs of spring.'

Amid the search for a comfortable sign of life, one which will bear on the narrator's personal distress, Otilie makes known to the young woman her true identity. She is more than an idiotic kitchen slave; she is a member of the family, everyone's flesh and blood. She is Otilie and she knows it, and she would have another know it. She shows the narrator a childhood photograph of herself, once a lovely child, a duplicate in appearance of her sisters and brothers.... If it is the image of the puppy Kuno become a howling dog that, for the narrator, connects Otilie with herself, time, and nature, it is the filament which is the image of nature connecting everything with everything. In selecting for her figure from nature that slenderest of threads which supports the pollen-bearing organ of the flower, Miss Porter made at once the most apt and ironical choice.

'Holiday' ends with the astonishing sight of Otilie, moments before so wretched, now 'happy and gay,' on the way to her mother's funeral. For her it is a rare day off; she is alive in the moment, with 'the hot sun on her back,' and the narrator ponders her own 'ironical mistake,' which is not merely that of failing initially to understand that Otilie was at once close to her and beyond reach as fellow 'fool' and 'fellow fugitive from death, but it is also the mistake we can see working back through the story to the beginning, where the narrator supposes that she could 'send [Louise] word now and then if anything interesting was happening.' The narrator form of 'Holiday' argues for specific varieties of communicable understanding, from which Louise is excluded because she is confirmed in her own view of reality for which the Muller farm stands, and because she exists in time simultaneously with the narrator as the 'too young' fictional character, not with the narrator as storyteller old enough to have reflected on the truth of the fiction. As a fictional character Louise cannot see what is 'interesting' in the young woman's experience as interests is made of abstracting the true from the 'real.' Finally, given her own way with words, Louise's articulateness stands between her and the narrator. Otilie's muteness, however, allows for communion."

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 80-87

"'Holiday' is the work of a very great artist in fiction."

Arthur Voss
The American Short Story (1974) 301

"In 'Holiday'...Katherine Anne Porter treated in a complex comic mode the themes of bestiality and human recognition which are central to the satiric tragedy of *Ship of Fools*. The long story is told, it would seem many years after it happened, by an unnamed woman whom it is probably most convenient to identify with Miss Porter herself. Seeking escape from certain unspecified troubles, the narrator asks the advice of a friend in choosing a place for an isolated and inexpensive spring holiday. The friend makes arrangements for her to go to the Texas farm home of an immigrant German family, 'not far from the Louisiana line,' where she herself has spent a summer vacation. In her description, it is all very charming....

When the narrator arrives, 'tossed off like an express package from a dirty little crawling train onto the sodden platform of a country station,' she is considerably disheartened. The March landscape of desolate, muddy fields, swept over by a bitter wind, gives little promise of the summer opulence her friend pictured. The family are the simple, healthy, hardworking people she has been promised. They are not inhospitable. But eternally busy, and clannish, speaking German among themselves, they leave her alone most of the time. And she is actually grateful for this, since it leaves her free to think through her own problems--during long hours in her attic room, and, as spring approaches, on solitary walks through the orchard and along a path beside the river. She feels comfortingly surrounded, but not confined, by the life of the family.

But there is more than a touch of the merely brutish in the Mullers' rude earthiness. The patriarchal rule of the old man over the three generations of his family who inhabit the farm is revealed more and more clearly as a ruthless tyranny. The women, who wait on the men hand and foot, are permitted to keep up only a tenuous attachment to their hereditary Lutheran faith, for the basic ritual purposes of weddings, christenings, and funerals. The patriarch himself, ironically the richest landowner in the county, is an inveterate student of Karl Marx, but in no way morally enlightened by his studies.

The weekly dances are the *Turnverin*, in a building located on land owned by old Muller himself, provide the family almost their only opportunity for social contact with the neighbors. They speak a low German dialect as corrupted by three generations of its isolated use in America that it would be unintelligible anywhere else in the world. With their intellects trained by the broken lights of a neglected religion and the old man's eccentric reading of Marx, the Mullers pursue an existence that only the most determined sentimentalist could see as anything but sadly benighted and brutalizing. The capacity for human cruelty that underlies their animal good spirits is most obviously revealed in their treatment of the dumb and deformed, crippled serving-girl, Otilie.

That the poor creature is required to work very hard, preparing and serving the family's huge meals, is not in itself necessarily inhumane. For she seems, despite her afflictions, 'tough and wiry.' Perhaps, it is suggested, an enforced idleness, depriving her of the opportunity to contribute anything to the family's welfare, would be psychologically more damaging than the exhausting physical labor. But no one speaks to her, or otherwise recognizes her existence, except to give her orders. She lives in a small, dingy ill-furnished room behind the kitchen. And the narrator has been at the farm some weeks before she discovers, to her peculiar horror, that the wretched Otilie is not, as she had naturally supposed, a hired servant, but a member of the family.

Apparently recognizing a sympathetic spirit in the visitor, Otilie shows her an old photograph of a healthy little girl about five years old, who by sign language, touching the picture and then her own face, she identifies as herself. The child in the picture, the narrator sees, is unmistakably a Muller, with the same heavy blonde hair and round face, the same pale, slightly slanted eyes that characterize all the present generations of youngsters in the family. And at second glance she can dimly but surely make out the broken image of that face in the adult Otilie's twisted features.

What occurs in the episode of the photograph--something on the order of a classic 'recognition scene,' with modern improvements--is symbolic of a deeper, mutual human recognition between the narrator and Otilie. The long, slowly developing story reaches its climax with the account of a great storm that inundates and wrecks the farm. The crops are ruined. Many of the farm animals are lost. The family exhaust themselves trying to save what they can, wading out at the height of the storm to get some of the animals under shelter in the barn, and brining a drowning lamb into the house to revive it.

The next day, with the rain diminishing, they have begun to take stock and rather calmly to prepare for the work of cleaning up and restoring that faces them. But old Mother Muller has at last overextended herself, and almost before the bewildered family can grasp what is happening, she contracts pneumonia and dies. On the afternoon of the second day thereafter, as soon as the subsiding flood makes the roads accessible, they bury her. And the departure of the family for the funeral provides occasion for the narrator's last encounter with Otilie.

Awakened from a bad dream by what she first thinks is the howling of a dog, she goes downstairs to find Otilie sitting alone in the kitchen in a frenzy of inarticulate grief. Clearly, she had wanted to be taken along to their mother's funeral, but the others, as usual, have forgotten her. With the thought of catching up to the procession before it reaches the cemetery, the narrator hitches up a pony to the wobbly, ramshackle spring wagon that is the only vehicle left, and pulls and hauls the helpless Otilie out of the house and up into the absurd equipage.

It is the same pony and wagon with which one of the younger boys had met the narrator at the railroad station upon her arrival a month before. The harness is a mysteriously makeshift of broken scraps and bits of rope and twine and twisted wire; the bouncing, lurching wagon threatens to fall apart at any moment, its loose wheels 'spinning elliptically in a truly broad comic swagger' as they move out into the rutted road. Glancing apprehensively now and again at the 'jovial antics' of the wheels, and holding on to her howling charge to keep her from falling off the seat, the narrator is trying to calculate her chances of overtaking the funeral procession, when suddenly she realizes that the bestial sounds of sorrow that Otilie was making have changed to something that is 'unmistakably laughter.' It is a beautiful, bright day, the land coming brilliantly alive after the flood has passed, and a strange joy has touched Otilie's tortured consciousness.

The narrator decides that she will not, after all, try to catch the funeral procession, but makes the most of Otilie's rare happiness and takes her for a ride down the lane by the orchard to the river. 'There would be time...to get back to the house before the mourners returned. There would be plenty of time for Otilie to have a fine supper ready for them. They need not even know she had been gone.' Thus the story ends, with the two strange friends joining in a kind of celebration of the rites of spring--turning their backs on the funeral, the celebration of death, and facing instead toward life.

A major achievement of the story is its sensitive and brilliant treatment of the natural setting, the narrator's record of her responses to the phenomena of seasonal change. But the landscape painting is more than background, of course. It is coincident with the narrator's whole purpose in the vacation she spends with the Mullers. The reader is not explicitly told when she plans to leave the farm, but it is clearly to be assumed that her long holiday is ending with this day on which she decides to take 'the little stolen holiday' with Otilie. In her surrender to the ecstasy of the first day of full spring, after the storm, she has found what she came for in the first place. But it seems that it is only with and through Otilie that the experience is possible. The human sharing is essential. But what justification is there for the narrator's feeling that she is sharing something?...

The elaborate pattern of animals and their relationships with human beings is of fundamental importance in the development of the moral theme. It is one of the more obvious ironies of the situation that Mother Muller dies as a result of her overexertions in trying to save the animals during the storm, while her daughter Otilie's human feelings are so callously ignored by the family that they do not even think of taking her along to the funeral.

By the time the narrator turns back on the road to the cemetery, choosing to see the day of death as instead a 'lovely, festive afternoon,' she has long since come to terms with the Mullers' attitude toward Otilie, and acquitted them of ultimate culpability in the matter. It is difficult at first for her to understand how even the gentle-hearted Annetje, who 'as full of silent, tender solitudes [for] the kittens, the puppies, the chicks, the lambs and calves...seemed to have forgotten Otilie was her sister.' But she charitably reasons that Annetje as well as the others 'forgot her in pure self-defense,' ignoring both her obvious physical pain and the possibility of her mental suffering while at the same time expecting her to do her share of the household work. 'It was not a society or a class that pampered its invalids and the unfit. So long as one lived, one did one's share... Suffering went with life, suffering and labor.'

But the narrator herself, of course, does not belong to that society and that class. And try as she will to imitate the family, she cannot put Otilie out of mind. She can no more will her out of her consciousness than she can will her out of her life--hoping every day, as she does, that when mealtimes come the twisted body will not stagger through the doorway from the kitchen, that they will find her dead in her room. And, at first glance, her acceptance of Otilie's sudden change of spirits during the wagon ride might seem to go beyond the terms of her acquittal of the Mullers, on the simple human grounds of 'self-defense.'

It might seem that she now feels she had misinterpreted Otilie's sorrowful howlings as an expression of truly human grief, in her mother's death and in being denied the right to attend the funeral. Perhaps we are to see Otilie as having no really human emotions at all, as merely an animal, in short, responding by simplest instinct to the warmth and brightness of the day, whom the narrator sensibly decides she might as well indulge in her mindless merriment while it lasts. But such an interpretation will not, I think, survive a second reading of the passage. The story's ending is not just grotesquely comical. It is comic, and the comedy is high human comedy.

In the first place, Otilie's grief is not necessarily invalidated by the delight that so abruptly succeeds it. Such transitions, especially under great emotional stress, are not at all uncommon in normal human experience. It is only that people who lead normally regulated lives are trained by custom to suppress any emotions that are inappropriate to the social occasion. Otilie, of course, had had no such training in the observance of convention. We may suppose her to be more than a little addled by her long years of exile within the family, and by the evident physical pain that she constantly endures. Perhaps the illness that crippled her and struck her dumb sometime in early childhood also affected her brain. The details of her

medical history are not very clear. But there is no indication anywhere that she is totally or constantly mindless. And the emphasis throughout these closing pages of the story is precisely on her human aspects.

It is, when she takes hold on her to keep her from falling out of the wagon, just the narrator's sense of 'her realness, her humanity, this shattered being that was a woman' which is so shocking that the narrator herself is on the point of emitting a 'doglike howl.' The fact that the narrator does not howl, does not yield to the hysterical impulse of bestiality, is of crucial importance. She summons her will to sustain her conviction that this 'shattered being' is a human being. To be sure, she reflects: 'There was nothing I could do for Otilie, selfishly as I wished to ease my heart of her; she was beyond my reach as well as any other human reach.' But she goes on then to ask herself, 'and yet, had I not come nearer to her than I had to anyone else in my attempt to deny and bridge the distance between us, or rather, her distance from me?'

If Otilie is 'beyond...human reach,' it is essentially in the same way that all human beings are inaccessible to one another. That inaccessibility, indeed, defines the human. It is, paradoxically, the very intensity of her realization that Otilie cannot be reached which brings the narrator 'nearer to her than...to anyone else' in human recognition."

John Edward Hardy
"Katherine Anne Porter's 'Holiday'"
Southern Literary Messenger I (1975) 1-5

"Her family's treatment of Otilie, their use of her life for the family purposes had shocked me deeply, running violently against the grain of my traditions, religious teachings, my own natural feelings--everything. In my society invalids were coddled, kept in bed or wheel chairs, waited on perpetually, and I am afraid, were not allowed to forget for a minute that they were--invalids, that is, useless even though loved."

Porter
Drafts for Introduction, *Collected Stories* (1979)

"Not only did...solitude stimulate her creativity but it allowed her to reassess her marriage [to John Koontz]. Perhaps the best indication of her mood is in the short story 'Holiday,' which is based on a visit she made with her sister at the time to a German farming family. The first paragraph of the story conveys her emotions in the last part of her unsatisfactory marriage: 'At that time I was too young for some of the troubles I was having, and I had not yet learned what to do with them...' Once she faced the fact that her marriage was 'trouble that did not belong to her' she hardened her resolve to run from it 'like a deer'."

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 98

"In 'Holiday,' Porter again builds a symbolically and psychologically complex story on a double point of view. The story moves forward using a triad of themes. The quickening life of the natural world in the rural Texas countryside parallels the cycle of human life in the fecund Muller family. The beauty of the burgeoning spring begins to soothe the ragged nerves of the protagonist, even though she recognizes her separateness from the solidarity and security of the family circle; she learns from the Mullers that nature is Janus-faced and that its dark side is also a part of life.... Comfortable and at home in the bosom of their land, the Mullers appear to live in harmony with it..."

The unity of this story is impressive. 'Holiday' has two narrative threads: Miranda's tale, which accounts for her coming to the country to restore her psychic health, and the story of the Muller family, prosperous German farmers who not only live on, but live for, the land. The two threads are rhythmically interwoven... The Mullers' grotesquely deformed daughter...might be the embodied specter of Miranda's psychological upheaval.... Porter's imagery suggests the warmth and solace of the womb.... [The narrator] expects to be nourished by the natural world here, and she retreats, down a tunnel-like lane through the woods to the womb of a foster family...which will also provide her with incubating space until she is ready for rebirth.... In this burgeoning spring, Hatsy and Gretchen might be performing acts of sympathetic

magic, inducing the fruitfulness of the earth of their own sexuality, and an encouragement of its continuance in the community....

Mother Muller's strong character is singularly important to her family, since she exercises a distinct, equal rule over this brood. She is independent and tough, jealously guarding her female rights in work and in the family circle. Taking care of the milking is the province of the women of the family... Likewise, taking care of their men is the province of these women, and that power is not to be usurped, not even by Father Muller, whose wife has to remind him during the flooding that it is *her* right to tend to him and not the other way around. Directress of her whole household, Mother Muller assumes command at dinner, introducing Miranda to the family despite the patriarchal presence of her husband. On workdays it is she who gives 'orders right and left' to the rest of the family; she even instructs her husband on his errands. In fact, she never defers to him, and at dinnertime when she takes her position behind his chair in order to serve his dinner, she is an overwhelming presence... Her husband, by accepting her service, demonstrates his faith in her ability and his need of her partnership as well as his respect for her role. The women of this family are not trifled with or condescended to; they are honored not only for their intrinsic value, but for their contributions to home and hearth. In effect, when Mother Muller and her daughters serve their husbands dinner, they literally feed their men and symbolically assert their own importance to the well-being of others....

Father Muller...uses his land to build community.... Actually, Otilie occupies a very important place in the family, as her likeness to Hestia, the Greek goddess of hearth and home, suggests. She is not only the keeper of the fire but the one whom, by providing food for the family, allows them their moments of community.... Like Otilie, [the narrator] is unable to understand and is therefore mute when the Mullers speak German. Like Otilie, Miranda suffers muteness that is 'nearly absolute' with her own family, being unable to communicate to them her fears or pain. [This critic is identifying the narrator with Miranda in *Old Mortality* despite the author making a point of not naming the narrator.] Otilie manages to communicate only briefly with Miranda one afternoon, illustrating that she, too, recognizes their kinship... For a moment Miranda feels united by that photograph to Otilie, as if their lives 'were kin, even a part of each other,' and in that moment of recognizing the Otilie in herself, Miranda sees 'the painfulness and strangeness of her' vanish'.... Projecting her own sensitivity onto Otilie, Miranda prays for her release through death: '....let us find her there like that with her head fallen forward on her knees. She will rest then'...

Otilie represents the suffering spirit of Miranda more than anything else. It is her own suffering she wishes death to release her from... Whether they acknowledge her presence or not, the Mullers are dependent on Otilie, and they function successfully because she is present among them. On a literal level, she cooks the food that sustains them, metaphorically they are sustained by keeping the wretched pain of her distortion among them. Otilie's presence on the fringes of their every action is not only a sober reminder of their human frailty, but an incorporation of grief and pain into their everyday lives, and Miranda finds 'great virtue and courage in their steadiness and refusal to feel sorry for anybody, least of all for themselves.' Otilie's presence, finally, is a sign that the Mullers can accept what Miranda cannot: the aberration, the blow a Janus-faced nature can and does periodically mete out....

The Mullers will deal with the ravaging of the farm as they would with most adversity: they will redouble their efforts to meet the challenge, to repair, replant, restore.... Otilie sits before the oven in the kitchen howling her grief. It is as if Miranda's retreat to the womb of this place must now be reversed through violent labor. Settling Otilie into the same spring wagon in which she came to the farm, Miranda sets out to join the funeral train in a comic 'lurching progress' through the mud which parallels rebirth."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 166-69, 171, 173-75

"The Mullers, a German family depicted in 'Holiday,' are characteristic of the German immigrants Porter knew in the region around Kyle, Texas.... The first climax of the story occurs when the narrator realizes that the mute and deformed Otilie actually is one of the Muller children.... The narrator...justifies the exclusion by asking 'What else could they have done with Otilie?' She promises herself that she will

forget her, too.... The final climax [is] when Mother Muller dies and the other family members set out for the funeral [and] Otilie begins howling in a frenzy.... The puzzle in this story is not why Otilie laughs with happiness on the way to her mother's funeral but rather what the narrator learns from it all.

The narrator ponders her original mistakes, first to assume that Otilie could be explained in ordinary human terms, and second to assume that there was something she could do for Otilie.... Otilie is not part of a discernible order. She is inexplicable, like life itself. The narrator will not try to put Otilie within the context of a limited perspective but rather will allow her to remain ineffable. Together they will celebrate the heat of the sun...on this most religious of days, a true holy day, that affirms human life and the mystery of it."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 86-88

"'Holiday' is the only story [by Porter] other than 'Hacienda' that is narrated by a first-person observer. The reason is most likely that Porter wished to soften the irony in both these narratives. The usual Porter narrator is highly ironic, 'distanced,' and ambivalent. What the first-person observer accomplishes is the removal of part of the 'distance' between the narrator and the subject matter. In both 'Holiday' and 'Hacienda,' Porter is writing about highly personal experiences....

The title of the story, 'Holiday,' has a double meaning. First, the narrator comes to this East Texas rural community to get away from the stress and strain of her work, to take a 'holiday.' Second, the narrator's attempt to provide Otilie, the mentally retarded daughter of the Mullers, a 'holiday' from the never-ending domestic drudgery provides an additional meaning of 'holiday.' 'Holiday' is thematically close in one sense to 'He.' In Otilie...the reader will recognize a human being similar to 'Him' in the earlier story.... Otilie has been dehumanized and devalued by the family because that is the only way they can justify their continuing support of her on the farm.... The love that family members have for Otilie has to be repressed in order for Otilie to have a chance at any form of survival. Like Mrs. Whipple in 'He,' the family have disguised and repressed their true feelings about Otilie.... In the difficult world of rural Texas, anyone who is capable of work must work; and that work must contribute to the good of the family unit. No sentimental solution is viable....

The patriarchal structure [of the family] goes unquestioned. Yet love does abound, though not often articulated, between husbands and wives. Mr. Muller's weeping upon the death of his wife is shocking to the narrator. And Mr. Muller's Marxism...provides a comic incongruity; he strives to be a master in his household and in his community, and he believes that his 'atheism' stands in the way of his rightful influence in the affairs of his region. In truth, no better example of the dedicated capitalist and communal conformist can readily be found in literature... The stifling of individuality at the expense of communal safety and security is what is seen as most threatening. Otilie, then, can be seen at least in part as the symbol of what can happen to the individual who does not 'fit' into the accepted scheme of things.

Texas readers will especially enjoy the magnificent descriptions of nature embedded in this story.... The landscape reinforces the conflicting emotions battling in the consciousness of the narrator.... 'Holiday' contains Porter's finest descriptions of nature.... It is one of her most personal and intimate stories, dealing as it does with material that she would have preferred to banish from her consciousness. But everything comes together at last to produce a masterpiece of fiction.... Katherine Anne Porter's stories of the south and southwest rank as great literature under any standards, regional or aesthetic."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 124-31

"If somewhat grudgingly, the narrator comes to accept the Muller family's structure and Otilie's place within it. [The critic contradicts himself on this point below.] She finds the family's refusal to pity themselves and their determination to make do come what- ever disaster particularly compelling.... The narrator's admiration of the Mullers in large part derives from her knowing that they possess the fortitude

to confront their problems that she herself sorely lacks, although she does not say so here. As she admitted at the outset of the story, her need to flee her problems precipitated her holiday excursion....

The depth and feeling that she notices in Otilie's eyes suggest to the narrator that the servant girl is not the unfeeling automaton to which the Mullers' system reduces her, but an individual who suffers under subjugation. She suffers alone, unnoticed and uncared for, except for provisions for her basic physical needs. Otilie's anxious eyes mirror the narrator's own unspoken uneasiness with the Mullers.... As she had when Otilie had showed her her photograph, the narrator experiences an overpowering sense of connection with the servant girl, this time so profound that on some deep level she enters Otilie's world, gripped by a compulsion to let out a fierce howl--Otilie's method at communication--to voice her rage at the Mullers' injustice and her and Otilie's isolation." [See rebuttal to this interpretation below under Worst Critics.]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 111-13

"[The critics tend] to condemn the Mullers while focusing on the larger structures of their world.... Yet both internal and external evidence suggests another view, raising the possibility that in the Muller family's 'use' of Otilie, Porter saw healing and even joy, not a failure of love.... Throughout the narrative lies evidence that Porter viewed the Mullers' treatment of Otilie in a positive light, seeing it as a way of providing this different daughter with an important, meaningful place through service to the family. As the narrator tells us, the Mullers show a 'deep right instinct' in 'their acceptance of Otilie.... I found great virtue and courage in their steadiness and refusal to feel sorry for anybody, least of all for themselves'.... She identifies the Mullers 'use' of Otilie as...manifesting a positive human instinct to 'save somehow for the uses of human love and daily living even the most fragmentary of the maimed, the deformed, the Otilies of this world,' to make 'valid' a life her culture invalidated." [This dogmatic Feminist critic reverses her position in the course of her discussion and condemns the family as patriarchal Nazis. See the rebuttal below under Worst Critics.]

Mary Titus
The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 101, 103, 105-06, 108-10, 112-13, 116

"Holiday" is structured according to 4 major traditions: (1) Pastoralism, (2) Realism, (3) Humanism, and (4) Christianity. The pastoralism is *complex* rather than *sentimental*, a distinction made by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, taking into account dark realities rather than idealizing Nature. More specifically, the story affirms agrarian, folk, and Christian pastoralisms.

(1) The pastoral retreat is a tradition extending from ancient Greece. To regenerate herself, this woman narrator retreats from her problems into the natural world on a farm--the agrarian "good place," where she revives her spirit by living with a family of "good folk"--essentially peasants, though wealthy--who are good Christians, except for Father Muller. The coming of spring, frequently described, gives pastoral form to a story packed with pastoral images and motifs such as flowers and animals and babies and dancing. The weather gets warmer, interrupted by a storm, and the narrator warms to the family and especially to Otilie. Complex agrarian pastoralism is expressed in the hard work and hardships of life on a farm as well as in the satisfactions of raising crops and animals and children. Folk pastoralism consists of feelings and values that unify the family and the community, such as caring for animals and plants, marriages, births, and rituals of work, dining, play, and religion. The most compelling affirmation of agrarian and folk pastoralism is that everyone in the Muller family is happy, except poor Otilie. The family, especially Otilie, makes the narrator happy enough to celebrate.

(2) Porter is first of all a Realist in the tradition originating in the late 19th century. Traditionally the primary dynamic in Realism is countering Romanticism. "Holiday" is structured in successive invalidations of Romanticism by Realism, illusion by fact and idealism by practicality: Louise expresses a sentimental pastoralism in describing the Muller place, a form of Romanticism invalidated by the experiences of the narrator. Throughout the story the narrator discovers that she herself has been Romantic and then becomes Realistic, as in disapproving of the Mullers treatment of Otilie, then concluding that "they forgot her in

pure self-defense.” “What else could they have done with Otilie?” She feels that she can do something for Otilie, but then realizes her “ironical mistake. There was nothing I could do for Otilie, selfishly as I wished to ease my heart of her.” However, in the last scene she does in fact do something for Otilie by giving her a holiday, on a pastoral impulse transcending Realism. At the same time, the narrator stays in touch with reality and responsibility: “There would be time enough to...get back to the house before the mourners returned. There would be plenty of time for Otilie to have a fine supper ready for them. They need not even know she had been gone.”

(3) Humanism is belief in the dignity of humans, tolerance of human diversity, and respect for humane values, with or without belief in God. All of the major American writers are humanistic in this sense except for the cynical Postmodernists since the 1960s. “Holiday” is humanistic in every way, most importantly in two ways: the narrator’s responses to the humanity of Otilie and the debunking of dogmatic Feminism. Feminism is anti-humanist in its intolerance of males and diversity. The Feminist critic Unrue appears to have recognized Porter’s rebuttal to her politics and backed away from a Feminist interpretation of the story, the Feminist critic DeMouy, to her credit, interprets the story plausibly, while the Feminist critics Givner and Titus embody the dogmas that Porter debunks. Porter knew that dogmatic Feminists would recoil from her portrayal of the young women in the Muller family, especially when the husbands sit down at the table “with their wives standing back of their chairs to serve them.” How disgusting. Nevertheless, all of these young women are eager to get married and have babies. They are all happy in their traditional roles. “Gretchen, expecting another baby, obviously the pet of the family, with the sly smiling manner of a spoiled child...wore the contented air of a lazy, healthy young animal.” Annetje “carried her newly born baby over her shoulder” and smiles back at her husband with “warmth in their eyes, the smile of long and sure friendship.” And Hatsky happily affirms “Jah, jah, I am marrit now soon!”

The other direct assault on Feminist dogma is the portrayal of the patriarch Father Muller. The modern Feminist agenda is focused on abolishing patriarchy and establishing matriarchy, political Romanticism. Mother Muller would not like this at all, because she has so much power as a matriarch already. She governs the house, the children, family rituals, morals and religion. “Mother Muller strode about hugely, giving orders right and left.” Father Muller follows her “directions and instructions...exactly.” She has “the stride of a man” and works outside like a man especially in the storm, a metaphor of the Feminist storm that kills respect for her in American culture and for all women in traditional roles. Porter satirizes the modern Feminist dogma that patriarchy is always oppressive to women and always Evil by showing that Mother Muller is more dominant and more heeded than her husband. She and her family are Christians whereas he declares himself an atheist and a Marxist in principle. Nobody agrees with him on either ideology and he does not pressure any of them to agree with him. Unlike Feminists, he is tolerant of diversity in thought. He complains about paying their Lutheran minister but he does not try to stop anyone from going to church. Porter goes so far in her satire of Feminist dogma as to make the patriarchal Father Muller a comical figure rationalizing his wealth, the “richest man in his community” denying that he is a capitalist and pretending to believe in the “inapplicable precepts” of Marxism.

(4) Christianity elevates the family members above the animals they raise. Mother Muller is teaching her children to worship God, a humble subordination of the self that increases their ability to get along with each other. She sets a self-sacrificial example when she saves her animals from the flood at the cost of her life. The narrator enacts the Christian virtues of empathy and charity in her treatment of Otilie and in her forgiveness of the Mullers. Her spiritual connection with the Mullers is evident in her joining Hatsy to plant seeds in the garden, pulling Annetje’s baby in a wagon, helping the daughters clean up after the flood, and helping Annetje to revive the lamb, a traditional name for Jesus, that almost drowned in the dark flood. Annetje evokes the resurrection by exclaiming “Alive! Alive!” They revive the loving spirit of Jesus. Otilie is like the retarded boy in “He,” a Christ-evoking figure, but the Mullers do not send her away to a state asylum like the Whipples, they give her a vital role in sustaining the family. It is Realism, adaptation to a painful reality, that caused the family to “forget” Otilie, a deficiency of Christian love that the narrator comes to understand was “self-defense.” The plot of “Holiday” affirms Christianity when Mother Muller dies and Father Muller cries out, “Ach, Gott, Gott.” Calling himself an atheist to rationalize his capitalism, in his grief he invokes God after all. He is rich but “what goot does it do?” He realizes that true wealth is not in money but in love, which Christians know is epitomized in Jesus.

WORST CRITICS

George Hendrick declares that “Neither Christianity, nor Marxism had taught the Mullers compassion.” He equates Christianity with Marxism as ineffective, a false equation. He lacks compassion in accusing the Mullers of lacking compassion. It is sentimental presumption to blame the Mullers for their treatment of Otilie, since the narrator was closer to the family than the critic is and she forgives them. Furthermore, it is possible that after her childhood affliction family members tried to express compassion and to interact with Otilie but soon learned that, because she was incapable of responding, such attempts were cruel. They only confused her, upset her, made her howl and hide, and distracted her from the routines that alone gave her any feeling of security. Mother Muller may have given orders to leave Otilie alone. Hendrick loses his credibility altogether with comparisons of “Holiday” to an unrelated poem by Frost.

Robert Brinkmeyer is such an unreliable critic that sometimes his interpretations are the exact opposite of what a story means. For example, in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* Miranda dies, escapes hell, visits heaven, and is brought back to life by Jesus, giving her absolute knowledge of her salvation. Brinkmeyer sees none of this, refuses to see it and interprets the story as pessimistic, projecting his own Atheism onto a Christian story. His interpretation of “Holiday” is just as perverse: He acknowledges that the narrator “comes to accept” Otilie’s place in the family, that she has an “admiration” for the Mullers, that she sees their “rightness in their dealings with Otilie,” but then Brinkmeyer spins around and declares that in the end the narrator feels a compulsion to let out a fierce howl “to voice her rage at the Mullers’ injustice.” The pressure of Political Correctness required Brinkmeyer to reverse his position because otherwise he would be validating a patriarchal family--a thought crime against Feminism. Otilie howls because her mother just died, not because she feels unjustly treated.

Brinkmeyer concludes by groveling to the Feminists, claiming that the lives of the patriarchal Muller family are “a dehumanizing existence of assembly-line efficiency, each person confined to his or her place in the rigid order.” False. The order is not “rigid” it is flexible, as the Mullers demonstrate during the storm. Farm families must adapt to changing weather as well as other problems that arise with animals and crops and children and otherwise, as when Mother Muller goes outside and does the work of a man. The cows are grateful for the “assembly-line efficiency” at milking time. Brinkmeyer exposes himself as a liberal by his ignorance and by criticizing efficiency. Presumably he would neglect the animals and crops and children to avoid being dehumanized. The Mullers are more human than Brinkmeyer. They are not dehumanized academics, they are doing what is natural, what humans have been doing since civilization began with agriculture thousands of years ago. As peasant folk toiling on the land they represent the common people worldwide. Porter expresses her humanism and spiritual connection with such people throughout the story and especially in the symbolism of saving the lamb with Annetje.

Later in his book, Brinkmeyer contradicts himself by praising the Mullers for efficiency: “Certainly impressive is the family’s efficiency in running their very successful farm.” He also contradicts his earlier claim that the Mullers are dehumanized: “Likewise impressive is the family’s cohesiveness as manifested in its communal solidarity and identity, even if this bonding means that individual concerns and developments *at times* are sacrificed to the group’s needs. As a tight-knit unit, the family marshals great strength in the face of adversity.” Earlier he implied that each family member was “confined to his or her place in the rigid order” all the time [italics added]. However, this praise follows implicit condemnation of the Mullers as Nazis: “‘Holiday’ can be read as a parable of the totalitarian state, with the Muller family representing the emerging power of Germany under Fascist ideology.” Nonsense. Father Muller and his neighbors have “a shrewd worldly distrust of all officeholders not personally known to them, all political plans except their own immediate ones.” These are peasants, Nazis were of the ruling class--politicians and militarists, urbanites and professors like Brinkmeyer.

Brinkmeyer stoops so low as to associate the Mullers with the mass extermination camps of the Nazis: “Insiders deemed physically or mentally unfit, like Otilie, are also disempowered.” The Mullers did not disempower Otilie, Nature did. And she is not “disempowered,” she performs an essential function as the family cook. The worst lie that Brinkmeyer tells is that Porter herself was “attracted” to the Nazis: “The

narrator's ambivalence toward the Mullers may suggest that in the early thirties Porter herself shared similar feelings." All her life Porter was a fierce enemy of fascism in any form. See especially "The Leaning Tower" and *Ship of Fools*. As a Christian and a lifelong champion of individual liberty Porter is the opposite of a Nazi, whereas Brinkmeyer, as a totalitarian Marxist, Atheist, and lying propagandist for Political Correctness, is very like a Nazi.

The most ironic aspect of Brinkmeyer's propaganda is that his false description of the Muller family as totalitarian applies not to them but to himself. He is part of the academic police state that enforces the rigid order called Political Correctness. Each professor is confined to her or his field yet "There is little room for individual identity within the tight-knit and systematically organized family. All work as one, and the corporate identity supersedes the individual's.... Nor is there much space for private emotions and enthusiasms." Brinkmeyer reveals that he is a totalitarian Marxist as well as a dogmatic Feminist by calling the family "corporate," equating it with evil Capitalism.

In her revised biography of Porter (1991, p. 5) Joan Givner claims that "Holiday" is about "the woman writer in the larger world." On the contrary, the narrator declares that she is escaping from troubles, but "It can no longer matter what kind of troubles they were or what finally became of them." Porter keeps those troubles out of the story because the story is not about them. Givner ignores the narrator's admonition that "the plain facts...should be stuck to." She refers to the dime novels by Victorian women stacked in the attic room as "material that she expects will connect her with a series of foremothers." False. The narrator pays no attention to these works because "her foremothers" were Romantic and she is a Realist.

As a dogmatic Feminist, Givner also attacks the Muller family, claiming that Otilie "has been banished from their presence and their consciousness. There is no room in the patriarchy for a woman who cannot fulfill the roles of wife, mother, and bearer of children." Nonsense. Otilie is the family cook, she feeds them, they see her at every meal, they praise her for working hard. And obviously there is "room in the patriarchy" for millions of childless unmarried women in all kinds of jobs. Givner is a sloppy reader who projects her prejudices and is intolerant of Porter's opinions when they differ from her own. Her biography is a biased product of Political Correctness.

The dogmatic Feminist Mary Titus likewise ignores the author: "That Porter did have troubles...that have bearing on 'Holiday,' is very clear from biographical evidence." Repeating Givner's errors, Titus insists that "Holiday" is "about a woman writer's search for identity within the confines of patriarchal culture." False. The narrator has said that her problems do not matter in this story. As a Feminist enemy of patriarchy, Titus delights in agreeing with Brinkmeyer that the Mullers are Nazis: The patriarch imposes "unified ideological control, enforcing obedience to a single order while denying and even erasing difference." False. It is the matriarch Mother Muller who imposes order and enforces obedience, Father Muller does not impose his atheism, he does not accept his wife's Christianity, and Porter differentiates among the children in detail, characterizing their differences as well as their similarities.

Titus claims that "In her portrayal of Mother Muller, the matriarch, Porter suggests the negative side of traditional womanhood." False. Porter emphasizes the *positive* aspects of traditional gender roles in her Realist debunking of Feminist dogmas. After claiming that Father Muller has all the power, Titus admits that Mother Muller is a "powerful, fearsome woman" with "control and power." Titus tries to associate the narrator with "the silenced woman artist," a Feminist myth--Romantic self-pity: Contradicting herself, she has just referred to books published by "foremothers" of the narrator, proving that women writers have not been "silenced." Women have always had their own periodicals and they have been the great majority of successful novelists because women have always been the great majority--up to 80 percent--of the readers. Titus asserts that "Both Porter's narrator and Otilie are alienated from the patriarchal household" and 'mutilated' by the hard fist of a tight patriarchal order." Nonsense. Patriarchy is not responsible for the accident of Nature that alienated Otilie; and the narrator is not alienated, she is spiritually *connected* to the family as symbolized when she helps Annetje revive the lamb.

Otilie is fortunate to be performing useful work in the security of her family rather than sent to a state institution like the retarded boy in "He." Hatsy gives her the highest praise a Muller is likely to bestow: "She can work so well as I can." Titus consistently reverses the meanings in the story: "In 'Holiday'

darkness swiftly follows light: as spring brings new life to the story's artist-narrator, death comes for the great Mother Muller." False. Titus reverses the order in the narrative: light follows darkness, not the other way around. The story ends in the bright sunlight of spring, a rebirth in Nature and in the narrator transcending death--a metaphor of religious faith in rebirth. Titus's reversal of narrative order exposes her dishonesty and projects the atheism that darkens her Feminist worldview. "It is a holiday from oppressive gender roles," according to Titus. False. Ottilie is oppressed by her disability not by her gender role and the narrator is not oppressed at all. The narrator howls in empathy with Ottilie: "My sense of her realness, her humanity, this shattered being that was a woman." Overcoming their sorrow and transcending death, together they celebrate "our good luck...a breath of spring air and freedom."

Michael Hollister (2018)