

## ANALYSIS

“Flowering Judas” (1930)



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“In the vision of death at the end of ‘Flowering Judas’ I knew the real ending—that she was not going to be able to face her life, what she’d done. And I knew that the vengeful spirit was going to come in a dream to tow her away into death, but I didn’t know until I’d written it that she was going to wake up saying, ‘No!’ and be afraid to go to sleep again....”

That story had been on my mind for years, growing out of this one little thing that happened in Mexico.... Something I saw as I passed a window one evening. A girl I knew had asked me to come and sit with her, because a man was coming to see her, and she was a little afraid of him. And as I went through the courtyard, past the flowering judas tree, I glanced in the window and there she was sitting with an open book on her lap, and there was this great big fat man sitting beside her. Now Mary and I were friends, both American girls living in this revolutionary situation. She was teaching at an Indian school, and I was teaching dancing at a girls’ technical school in Mexico City. And we were having a very strange time of it. I was more skeptical, and so I had already begun to look with a skeptical eye on a great many of the revolutionary leaders. Oh, the idea was all right, but a lot of men were misapplying it.

And when I looked through that window that evening, I saw something in Mary’s face, something in her pose, something in the whole situation, that set up a commotion in my mind. Because until that moment I hadn’t really understood that she was not able to take care of herself, because she was not able to face her own nature and was afraid of everything.”

Porter

*Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, second series  
(Viking 1963) 152-53

[Many critics of this story make one or both of two errors: (1) They ignore or deny Porter’s religious vision—*despite the title!*--some claiming that Laura has lost her Christian faith; (2) they fail to notice that

Braggioni has the power to release Eugenio and the others from prison and that Laura has the power to negotiate their release with her sexual favors.]

“*Flowering Judas* is not a promising book; it promises nothing. It is a fully matured art. We may only hope to have more of it.... Her style is beyond doubt the most economical and at the same time the richest in American fiction.... While the quality of the style is the same in all of them—there is the same freshness of imagery, the same rich personal idiom—the method is always different. And—this is her great distinction—the method is always completely objective. It would be difficult to ‘place’ an art like this, unless we may timidly call on the word *classical*. For here is a combination of those sensuous qualities usually accredited to a dissociative romanticism, with a clear, objective, full-bodied outside world.”

Allen Tate  
“A New Star”  
*Nation* 131 (1 October 1930) 352-53

“The firm and delicate writing in Miss Porter’s ‘*Flowering Judas*,’ a story startling in its complexity, were it not based on recognizable fact, would be to no purpose. As it is, its excellence rises directly from the fanatical girl and the self-loving man—the ‘good revolutionist,’ who softened to a state beyond principle, is fit only for a career—as it is to find a flaw or lapse in the style that runs clear and subtle, from the story’s casual beginning to the specter of life and death at the end.”

Louise Bogan  
“Nothing Is Fortuitous”  
*New Republic* 64 (22 October 1930) 277-78

“Miss Porter [has] such perfection of style that one is sometimes forced to concentrate more on word patterns than on the substance of a story. It is not absurd to speak of perfection in this context.... A sensitive but inhibited girl is in love with a young Mexican revolutionary and in order to save him is forced to suffer the attentions of Braggioni, a labor organizer whose ‘gluttonous bulk has become a symbol of her many disillusionings.’ Her lover kills himself in prison, she comes home and listens to Braggioni’s singing.... When he leaves her, sleep confuses her feeling with the symbolism of the Judas tree. It is impossible to imagine reverence of emotion conveyed with more precision than in this story... The portrait of Braggioni is a triumph of deflation in few words... The methods of this style—understatement, rigid selection and sympathetic music in words—[create a] subdued and exceptional brilliance.”

Eleanor Clark  
“*Flowering Judas and Other Stories*”  
*New Republic* 85 (25 December 1935) 209

“Take...the description of Braggioni, the half-Italian, half-Indian revolutionist in Mexico.... Indeed the passage is sharp and evocative. Its phrasing embodies a mixture, a fusion, of the shock of surprise and the satisfaction of precision—a resolved tension, which may do much to account for the resonance and vibration of the passage. We have in it the statement, ‘his mouth opens round and yearns sideways’—and we note the two words *yearns* and *sideways*; in this phrase, ‘labor of song’; in, ‘he bulges marvelously’; in, ‘Braggioni swells with ominous ripeness.’ But upon inspection it may be discovered that the effect of these details is not merely a local effect. The subtle local evocations really involve us in the center of the scene; we are taken to the core of the meaning of the scene, and thence to the central impulse of the story; and thence, possibly, to the germinal idea of all this author’s fiction....

What we have here is the revolutionist who loves luxury, who feels that power gives blameless justification to the love of elegant refinements, but whose skin has been punctured in ‘honorable warfare’; who is a competent leader of men, but who is vain and indolent; who is sentimental and self-pitying, but, at the same time, ruthless; who betrays his wife and yet, upon his return home, will weep with his wife as she washes his feet and weeps; who labors for the good of man, but is filled with self-love. We have here a tissue of contradictions, and the very phraseology takes us to these contradictions. For instance, the word *years* involves the sentimental, blurred emotion, but immediately afterward the words *sideways* and *oily* remind us of the grossness, the brutality, the physical appetite. The ammunition belt, we recall, is buckled *cruelly* about his ‘gaping middle.’ The ammunition belt reminds us that this indolent, fat, apparently soft,

vain man is capable of violent action, is a man of violent profession, and sets the stage for the word *cruelly*, which involves the paradox of the man, who loves mankind and is capable of individual cruelties, and which, further, reminds us that he punishes himself out of physical vanity and punishes himself by defining himself in his calling—the only thing that buckles in his sprawling, meaningless animality. He swells with ‘ominous ripeness’—and we sense the violent threat in the man as contrasted with his softness, a kind of great over-ripe plum dangerous as a grenade, a feeling of corruption mixed with sentimental sweetness; and specifically we are reminded of the threat to Laura in the situation.

We come to the phrase ‘wounded by life,’ and we pick up again the motif hinted at in the song and in the lingering rhythms... In nothing is there to be found a balm—not in revolution, in vanity, in love—for the ‘vast cureless wound of his self-esteem.’ Then, after the bit about the wound, we find the sentence: ‘He sighs and his leather belt creaks like a saddle girth.’ The defeated, sentimental sigh, the cureless wound, and the bestial creaking of the leather... The passage itself is a rendering of the problem which the character of Braggioni poses to Laura... What is the moral reality here? That question is, I should say, the theme of the story, which exists in an intricate tissue of paradox, and is only in the dream of Laura at the end, a dream which eludes but does not resolve the question.”

Robert Penn Warren  
“Katherine Anne Porter (Irony with a Center)”  
*Kenyon Review* 4 (Winter 1942) 29-42

“If the Judas tree...is a symbol for the betrayer of Christ (the legend says that its buds are red because it actually became the body of Judas, who is said to have had red hair), then the sacrament in which Laura participated—the eating of the buds of the Flowering Judas—is a sacrament, not of remembrance, but of betrayal.... The second use of the Christ-symbol is present in the character of Eugenio, who is seen first as one of the revolutionary workers languishing in jail, but who figures most prominently as the person in Laura’s dream. His name contains the clue to his symbolic meaning—well-born. As Christ is the Son of God, he is well-born. He is, likewise, a symbol of all mankind—Man. We say he is the ‘Son of Man.’ In this respect, Eugenio is also Christ-like, for he is well-born without the reservations noted in the character of Braggioni—in the highest sense. And as Judas was the direct cause of Christ’s crucifixion, so Laura becomes the murderer of Eugenio (of Man) by carrying narcotics to his prison cell, the narcotics through which he (Christ-like) surrendered himself up to death....

A third type of symbols is composed of love-symbols (erotic, secular, and divine). The story shows Laura unable to participate in love upon any of the levels suggested: (1) as a divine lover in the Christian sense, for it is clear that she is incapable of divine passion when she occasionally sneaks into a small church to pray; (2) as a professional lover in the sense that Braggioni is one, for she cannot participate in the revolutionary fervor of the workers, which might be stated as an activity expressive of secular love for their fellow men; she cannot even feel the proper emotion for the children who scribble on their blackboards, ‘We lov ar ticher’; (3) as an erotic lover, for she responds to none of her three suitors, though she thoughtlessly throws one of them a rose (the symbol of erotic love), an act of profanation, since the boy wears it in his hat until it withers and dies.... Orthodox religion or socialism is a wasteland until transformed by the fructifying power of love...

Laura is not redeemed, even though she desires it, as the eating of the buds of the Judas tree suggests. Her sacrament is a devouring gesture and Eugenio calls her a cannibal, because she is devouring him (Man). She is, like Judas, the betrayer; and her betrayal, like his, consisted in an inability to believe. Without faith she is incapable of passion, thence of love, finally of life itself.... The theme...might be rendered as: Man cannot live divided by materialistic and spiritual values, nor can he live in the modern world by either without faith and love.... Laura’s world, then, is as barren and sterile as the world of Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’: it is a living death.”

Ray B. West, Jr.  
“Katherine Anne Porter: Symbol and Theme in ‘Flowering Judas’”  
*Accent* 7 (Spring 1947) 182-88

“There has been no slackening of published interest in ‘Flowering Judas,’ but the standard reading continues to be the West-Stallman analysis appeared in a college anthology of short fiction in 1949. I know

of no reading that does not take off from it, at least in its basic assumption of the accessibility of theme and meaning through symbolism. The text [in their anthology] is incorrectly titled 'The Flowering Judas.' If one believed that the causes of error are unconscious but real, the accident would be seen as a true mistake. For West and Stallman, *the* flowering Judas is virtually *the* story.... The Judas tree is seen quite simply as 'a symbol for the betrayer of Christ.' Laura's eating of the buds is a 'sacrament...of betrayal'.... [I argue that] the Judas tree does not stand primarily and independently as the figure of pagan treachery, analogous to Laura's treachery. Rather it illuminates, dream image that it is, the natural depths of the bedeviled feelings of a woman who cannot, when awake, come to terms with those feelings.... 'Flowering Judas' owes its greatness not at all to some opportunistic employment of a conventional religious symbol to signify theme but to a brilliant narrative practice throughout... Laura...is *doomed forever* to suffer her own starving soul, a fact confirmed by a negation and fear of life and truth, the note on which the very last image is played out [Italics added: She is only 22 years old. Her guilt dream may change her.]....

Finally, the West-Stallman reading has it that: 'Laura is not redeemed, even though she desires it, as the eating of the buds of the Judas tree suggests. Her sacrament is a devouring gesture and Eugenio calls her a cannibal, because she is devouring him (Man). She is, like Judas, the betrayer—the destroyer; and her betrayal, like his, consisted in an inability to believe. Without faith she is incapable of passion, thence of love, finally of life itself. This is the 'moral' of the story, translated as it is into the language of Christian theology: 'Man cannot live by bread alone.' Distilled even beyond that, into the language of statement, we might say that the theme is this: 'Man cannot live if he accepts only materialistic values' [as does Communism]; or, to put it into a positive statement: 'Only in faith and love can man live.' This does not, however, represent the 'meaning,' for the meaning is...the total embodiment—the form. The statement is only an inadequate attempt on the part of the reader to seek out the author's intention. The question the student should ask next is, 'How much does it leave unsaid?'"

Ray B. West, Jr. and R. W. Stallman (1949)  
quoted by M. M. Liberman  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*  
(Wayne State 1971)

"'Flowering Judas' is Miss Porter's best-known story, and in the opinion of some who have studied her work closely, her most successful piece of fiction.... Ray B. West, Jr., has pointed out the relation of the story to the following lines in T. S. Eliot's 'Gerontion': 'In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas / To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk / Among whispers.' 'If the judas tree,' West observes, 'is a symbol for the betrayer of Christ, then the sacrament in which Laura participated—the eating of the buds of the Flowering Judas—is a sacrament, not of remembrance, but of betrayal.... She is, like Judas, the betrayer; and her betrayal, like his, consisted in an inability to believe.'

Laura's tragedy grows out of her failure to achieve an adequate emotional response: either to the Catholic religion of her girlhood (it is 'no good' when she secretly enters 'some crumbling little church' and tries to pray); or to the revolution, which she professes to serve; or to the young man who serenades her, singing in her patio. Nobody, and no thing, quite touches her. The retributive frustration of such apartness, such indecision, is symbolically depicted at the end in her dream of Eugenio.

The story can doubtless be read as a parable of the plight of many vague young liberals of the 1920's and 1930's who, having severed themselves from their traditional ways of life were yet unable to embrace the revolution, and still less, the revolutionaries. But the meaning should not be restricted to, or impoverished by, the merely topical. 'Flowering Judas,' in a broad sense, is a beautiful illustration of what Robert Penn Warren calls the 'delicate balancing of rival considerations.' The total effect of the work is greatly aided by the richness, precision, and subtlety of Miss Porter's modulated prose."

Walter Blair  
*The Literature of the United States 2*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1195

"'Flowering Judas' is certainly one of Miss Porter's most beautifully written stories.... Braggioni is as concrete...a symbol of...corruption as is Mr. Hatch in *Noon Wine*. What 'Flowering Judas' suggests so powerfully is the treacherous capacity of the individual to do wrong even when armed with the firmest

intentions of doing right... So many noble concepts have led to so much horror and oppression.... Miss Porter's political sense is strong precisely because she sees the important connection between the hope of the individual and the course of the mass.... If Laura is finally forced to brand herself a traitor, it is not through a series of steps or events which she can comprehend, but only because of the blind upheaval of the social order in which she is inextricably involved; and, just as Laura finds herself so abruptly in the wrong, so do revolutions."

Harry John Mooney, Jr.  
*The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 47-48

"'Flowering Judas' is often considered Miss Porter's most important work, a haunting and symbolically intricate narrative which superbly conveys the characters of its two principles. Laura, the heroine, is an American girl who teaches school in Xochimilco, near Mexico City. Because of her left-wing humanitarian principles she has become involved with Braggioni, 'a leader of men, a skilled revolutionist' who is evidently the head of a large and complicated revolutionary organization. Braggioni is in love with her and makes clumsy overtures; but Laura, who has come to Mexico out of a romantic emotional attachment to the country, is nevertheless deeply Anglo-Saxon: cool, reserved, always withholding a part of herself in her emotional relations with others. At the same time there is a latent attraction underlying her loathing for Braggioni, and this fills her with a vague consciousness of guilt.

This guilt complex is increased by her political involvement: she has come to realize that Braggioni is basically cynical in spite of his outward sentimentality, that he constantly betrays comrades who are no longer useful to the movement, in fact that he is actually one of the fat and well-fed 'bosses' against whom the pale and starving workers ought to be revolting. At the climax of the story she helps Eugenio, a young revolutionist who is in prison and despondent because Braggioni will not help him, to kill himself by smuggling drugs in to him. Later she has a disturbing allegorical dream in which the dead Eugenio appears to her and offers her the flowers of the Judas tree, saying, 'This is my body and my blood.' Laura's Catholic conscience has rebelled against the life of cynical compromise she is living, and all her suppressed guilt has risen in a dream to confront her.

It should be kept in mind that Braggioni is by no means the villain of this story [!]. He is a 'leader of men,' a practical revolutionist who knows that life is basically disappointment and that all ideas are finally betrayed, and permits himself certain indulgences in the knowledge that his ends (his revolutionary ideals) justify his cynical means. He is partly correct in his assertion that he and Laura are basically alike except that he has more experience of life. 'Some day,' he says, 'you will remember what I have told you, you will know that Braggioni was your friend.'" But Laura, cold, intellectual, and deeply religious, cannot compromise; for her the gulf between her ideals and her actual life is insupportable."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 320-21

"Laura of 'Flowering Judas' finds herself guilty of a cold idealism which has cut her off from human beings and has blighted the growth of compassion in her heart.... Laura is efficient but frigid.... 'Flowering Judas' and 'The Leaning Tower' are thematically akin. Braggioni is the prototype of the Nazi pigs of the novella."

James William Johnson  
"Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter"  
*Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1960)

"'Flowering Judas' is a study of the utter irrelevance, even malevolence, of the northern reformer in their midst [Mexicans, Cubans, Spaniards]: of the terrible dry Laura, the implacable Yankee virgin who works for communism because she wants to destroy the world. Miss Porter was from the beginning so totally an artist that she escaped the social fetishes of the 1930's. None of her stories of that period seem in the least dated today."

Louis Auchincloss  
*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*

“In this work, modern experience is presented, not so much as a fragmentation of manners and belief but rather as an ironic tension between two powerful competing forces: Christian faith and revolutionary hope. Caught between these two is the heroine, Laura, an American girl of southern Catholic background, who lends her support to the Mexican Marxist forces of revolution.... Laura’s predicament is that she cannot free herself from her early religious training and beliefs, so cannot give herself wholly to the revolutionary cause. This condition places her in a kind of limbo, like the old man in T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion” (from which poem Miss Porter found her title, perhaps even her theme), who complains that he has lost his ‘sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch.’ Likewise, Laura loses the use of her senses. Although a beautiful woman, she clothes herself like a nun and can respond to none of the would-be lovers who woo her. She rejects Braggioni, the revolutionary general; she outwits the young army captain who takes her riding; she unknowingly teases a young man from the Typographers Union by throwing him a rose (the symbol of love) when she can feel nothing for him. She even fails to react to the children whom she teaches when they bring her flowers and scribble on the blackboard ‘We lov ar ticher.’ Her principal contribution to the cause is to carry narcotics to the prisoners in jail, so that they may sleep away their imprisonment.

The story is one of Laura’s inability to love. She cannot love erotically as a woman, humanely as a dedicated revolutionary, or divinely as a communicant in the church. Without love, the story says, the world is a wasteland; but Miss Porter goes on to examine and develop the consequences of this condition. Her central imagery is taken from the concept of Christian atonement, derived certainly from Eliot’s poem that contains the title of the story.... ‘Christ the tiger’ refers to the pagan ritual in which the blood of a slain tiger is drunk in order to engender in the participants the courage of the tiger heart. The Christian ritual is symbolic rather than direct: the symbolic blood of Christ is drunk in remembrance of atonement; that is, to recall the agony and symbolically to engender the virtues of Christ in the participants. In the Christian sacrament, faith in, and love of, Christ alters the substance of bread and wine into the spiritual flesh and blood of Christ. Without faith-love the act becomes cannibalistic, for there is no such alteration... By a subtle alteration...of Eliot’s line, Miss Porter has Laura eat, not the blood of Christ the tiger, but the blossoms of the flowering Judas, the symbol of Christ’s betrayer; so that Laura’s betrayal of Christ, of Braggioni, and of Eugenio (the prisoner who dies of an overdose of her drugs) becomes a betrayal of man, a cannibalistic, not a saving, gesture, as Eugenio reminds her when he appears to her in her guilty dream that ends the story....

What is significant in a story such as ‘Flowering Judas’ is not that Laura fails to escape the conflict between a conservative upbringing and the desire to assist in liberal political causes, but that such a conflict is at the bottom of the whole idea of man’s Christian redemption; that there is something Christlike about such a dilemma.... Porter...demonstrated the necessity for the application of...faith and love...in any human existence, whether of the old order or the new.”

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 9-11

“Like the young Miranda of the last part of *Old Mortality* she is still naïve in her idealism and sees into herself only imperfectly; her fullest revelation comes under the symbolism of a dream.... In the beautiful impressionistic dream...she sees Eugenio, who calls her...to elope with him to ‘a new country’.... She has seen Eugenio as the savior who can lead her out of futility and isolation into the new country of their shared revolutionary dream, but finds that because her ambiguous gift of sleep has killed him, he can lead her only to death... By ‘confusing love with revolution’ she has betrayed not only Eugenio but also the cause which both he and she have served.... The dream...has shown her that her romantic and too timid love has killed her lover and left her doubly alone.... The crucial fact about Laura’s love for Eugenio is that no matter how convincing it at first seems, and even if it is really intended to be taken as genuine (on *some* of the internal evidence), it is not given fictional reality as anything more than a romantic dream.”

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 22, 28-29

“Her singularity is truthfulness: it comes out in the portrait of Laura, the virginal but reckless American school-teacher in ‘Flowering Judas’ who has ventured her political and personal chastity among the vanities and squalors of the Mexican revolution, perhaps as a religious exercise. She is a good old Calvinist-Catholic.... Laura wishes to live near enough to violent passion to be singed by it and is willing to pay for the experience in terrifying dreams. The Mexicans appeal to her because of their boundless vanity, their violence, their ability to forget and their indifference: Miss Porter austere tests her characters against things that are elemental or ineluctable—a classical writer.... Braggioni, the Stalin-like Mexican revolutionary leader...is identified in a frightening, yet slightly fatuous and amicable way with the shady needs of revolution.”

V. S. Pritchett  
“The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter”  
*New Statesman* (10 January 1964) 41-43

“‘Flowering Judas’...can profitably be read in the light of ‘Where Presidents Have No Friends,’ Miss Porter’s brilliant analysis of the Obregon revolution.... According to legend, Judas hanged himself from a redbud tree, and the title occurs in Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’.... As [Ray] West points out, the Judas tree is a symbol of betrayal, and Laura’s eating of the buds is a sacrament of betrayal. Braggioni...is ironically presented as a ‘world-savior,’ Eugenio (literally the ‘wellborn’) is somewhat Christ-like; and, like Judas, Laura is directly responsible for the death of Eugenio since she brings the narcotics he uses in his suicide.... [West] sees Laura incapable of participating ‘(1) as a divine lover in the Christian sense...(2) as a professional lover in the sense that Braggioni is one, for she cannot participate in the revolutionary fervor of the workers, which might be stated as an activity expressive of ‘love’ for their fellow men; she cannot even feel the proper emotion for the children who scribble on their blackboards, ‘we lov ar titcher’; (3) as an erotic lover, for she responds to none of her three suitors, though she thoughtlessly throws one of them a rose (the symbol of erotic love)....’

Without courage to disentangle herself, she drifts along in the movement, is filled with despair, feeds on the lives of others, and realizes the full extent of her betrayal only in her symbolic dream. The dream, utilizing common Christian symbols as it does, indicates the strength of the religious and ethical system she had partially put aside while she worked in the revolutionary movement.... Laura was, by the very nature of her early social training, a false revolutionist too: she could not, for example, put aside her aristocratic preference for hand-made lace.... Laura, although she had once obviously been touched with the idealism of the movement, was not paralyzed, unable to love—even betrayed love by throwing the flower to the suitor who stood by the Judas tree.... Laura sees, in the dream, the implications of her act played out in traditional Christian terms... She realized for the first time the extent of her betrayal of herself and of her religious, ethical, and humanitarian principles. Some of her Christian precepts were as obviously flawed—her romantic concept of self as Virgin, the hiding of her body, her fear of close human contact, her aristocratic pretenses—but she was unaware of these faults.

Like a Hemingway hero, she was afraid to sleep after this dream of self-realization. Will she, frightened by her betrayal, return to her religion, a religion which in practice helped enslave the Mexicans? Will she merge Christian idealism with revolutionary idealism and find or found a more worthwhile movement? Will she continue her self-isolated, wasteland existence?... The theme of the story may be stated: ‘Only in faith and love can man live’.”

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Twayne 1965) 39-43

[This critic provides some valid analysis but he is a Politically Correct liberal with an atheist agenda that turns his thesis into a lie. His article was published in *PMLA*, a bible of Political Correctness: “[Porter’s] portrayal of hell (not only in ‘Flowering Judas’) is without reference to any corresponding ‘heaven’ or system of ultimate values other than those of Catholicism and Marxism, both discredited. In this respect she is a typical modern secular writer.” In *Pale Horse, Paler Rider* Miranda dies and visits Heaven. This critic either has not read most of Porter’s major fiction or he is simply lying. Furthermore, Catholicism is not “discredited” in the story. That Laura loses faith in the Catholic Church of Mexico does not mean she loses her belief in Christ. In fact, her final dream reveals that she is terrified of going to Hell because she has

betrayed Christ like Judas. This atheist argues that Porter is no different from an atheist, that her “religio-political metaphors” are not religious and are used merely to “reveal the danger latent in them.” To an atheist, Christ is a “danger.” He declares that “Flowering Judas” dramatizes “the failure of two of the great faiths of our epoch”—Christianity and Communism. He lies in claiming that Porter means to say that Christianity is a “faith in unrealities” that is “no longer viable.”]

“In most of her other works there is comparatively little explicit use of the religious and eschatological diction and imagery so prevalent in ‘Flowering Judas’.... Words like ‘faith,’ ‘charity,’ ‘love,’ ‘patience,’ and ‘forgive’ are liberally distributed through the text.... The landscape of the heroine’s dream at the end of the story, in which the infernal communion takes place, is reminiscent of both ‘The Waste Land’ and ‘The Hollow Men’.... Her stoicism is a parody of the spiritual discipline of the saint or mystic, for her unworldliness is utterly dissociated from joy. Totally negative, it does not stem from feelings of kinship with anything beyond herself...

In Laura’s dream at the end of the story...while the image of bleeding and talking plants is familiar to readers of Virgil and Dante, the association with suicide is Dante’s alone (*Inferno*, xiii).... Porter blended the image from Dante with an image of infernal communion from Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’: ‘In depraved May...’ thus achieving a richly symbolic unifying statement that connects all the negations of life and love in Laura’s story with the ultimate negation of life itself by self-destruction.... Most striking is the pit that Laura fears to visit in her dream when Eugenio, calling her ‘Murderer,’ commands her to ‘follow me.’ ‘I will show you a new country,’ he says, with an invitation similar to that of Charon addressing the souls of the damned. The landscape through which Eugenio takes her to successive downward steps is reminiscent of the steps of hell [in Dante’s *Inferno*]... Rejecting with a cry of ‘No!’ the recognition of evil that Eugenio attempts to force upon her...

Braggioni sees himself as ‘wounded by life’... In spite of his unrestrained self-indulgence, nothing satisfies him. “‘I am disappointed in everything as it comes. Everything,’ he sighs.” At this point he affirms his kinship with Laura: ‘You, poor thing, you will be disappointed too’.... Braggioni, the wrathful, with his infinite love and charity for himself, is a worker of death, but Laura oils and loads his pistols. She lacks love even for herself. She is allied to death through her passiveness and through the self-delusion in which she monstrously confuses ‘love with revolution’... She may abstractly love the ‘tender round hands’ of the pupils in the school where she teaches, but they ‘remain strangers to her.’ Braggioni is guilty of every sin, but Laura is virtuous only by negation, not by attachment to any good: ‘Denying everything, she may walk anywhere in safety, she looks at everything without amazement.’ Her ‘bold talismanic word’ *No* serves her in place of the Lord’s prayer, for it ‘does not suffer her to be led into evil.’ Her deficiency of love renders her the victim of that spiritual sloth of *acedia* that [Saint] Thomas Aquinas calls sorrow in the face of spiritual good’.... St. Thomas calls *acedia* a vice directly opposed to the theological virtue of charity.

She has devoted herself to a cause which promised men that they might have life more abundantly only to find herself an agent of the forces of death, a cause that seemed to offer an earthly fulfillment of charity only to discover that it is riddled with intrigue, jealousy, and selfishness.... Incapable of loving either man or God, she has no positive good to which she can turn and so remains motionless, the unwilling but unrejecting agent of death. Charity is travestied in her routine, abstract attachment to the class of children she teaches and in her distribution of narcotics to the prisoners... If Laura’s activities are a travesty of charity, so too are Braggioni’s.... By her passiveness and self-delusion, Laura is a passive accomplice in his crimes.... Perhaps all the major spiritual differences between them can be traced to one cause—that Laura, the idealist, feels deep attachment only to abstract principles, but none to any living thing, whereas Braggioni has no principles save that of expediency, but is possessed of a deep and passionate love.... He is in fact a vessel of all the deadly sins.... In addition to wrath, Braggioni is guilty of pride and envy, the three sins in Dante’s scheme of the *Purgatory* that are caused by love of the wrong objects. Of these, pride or excessive love of self, the sin of Lucifer, is primary.... His likeness to Lucifer the arch-rebel is further borne out not only by the repeated references to his being a revolutionist, but also by inversion through the many parodic details showing him as a secular Christ....

Equally Satanic is the motivation of envy... Although a revolutionist dedicated to that abolition of class distinctions, he boasts of his Jockey Club perfume ‘imported from New York’ and he is proud of his



'expensive garments' tricked out with diamonds and silver ornaments. These, like his conquests of women, and like the very fat that encases him, are the satisfactions of an envy traceable to his impoverished youth... He at least enjoys the pleasures of his vices... For Laura, on the other hand, there is no consolation. She is un-evil, but also un-good. Her children love her, but she cannot love them back. She is loved and desired by men, but can feel nothing for them [not even Eugenio?]. Her specific failures as a woman pre-figure her general failure as a human being.... She continues to work for a revolutionary cause in which she no longer believes because she lacks the energy of spirit to break away... The fetid atmosphere of despair, of waiting without hope, permeates the whole story of 'Flowering Judas'.... To the extent that the outcasts have any hope or faith, it is in Braggioni...but this false savior cynically submits them to at least purgatorial punishment. 'Let them sweat a little,' he says.... Laura herself both dreams and lives out a nightmare of paralysis....

Even the colors of the story...seem to form theological patterns.... No one who has ever seen the judas tree (redbud) in bloom can forget the peculiar intensity of its scarlet-to-purple flowers from which, by association with the red hair of the arch-betrayer, the tree takes its name. There is such a tree in Laura's garden... Purple, the imperial color, is the prevailing color associated with Braggioni and his 'lavender collar, 'purple necktie,' and 'mauve silk hose.' Thus, his link to the judas tree as the betrayer of his followers and of Laura's illusions is reinforced by the color conversion of scarlet, the theological color of charity or love, to purple, the color of empire.... Braggioni's own 'tawny yellow cat's eyes,' 'glossy yellow shoes,' and 'kinky yellow hair' suggest the leopard in Dante's *Inferno*, variously interpreted as representing lust, all the sins of incontinence, or fraud... The normally predominant color of a garden, green, the color of hope and also of life and carnality, is obscured by the darkness and shadows into cobalt blue, in keeping with the general absence of hope in the story....

In a widely read interpretation, Ray B. West sees [Eugenio] as another Christ symbol, but he accepts Eugenio at face value, basing his argument upon the meaning of the name 'Eugenio'—well born—and upon his allegedly Christ-like behavior in surrendering himself up to death by means of the narcotics brought by Laura, the Judas. This, however, is an unlikely interpretation. There is nothing further in the story to indicate how Eugenio might in any way be a means of salvation, whether secular or theological.... Eugenio's death was not a martyrdom for a cause, but a suicide brought on by boredom and despair. In Laura's dream he offers himself as the way to death, not to life... Instead of the Light shining in the darkness, Laura perceives that 'his eye sockets were without light'.... Eugenio's metamorphosis into the tree, an image of damnation taken from Dante's forest of the suicides (*Inferno* xiii), suggests that he is to be taken parodically as much as Braggioni himself. His betrayal of life through suicide is but a more violent version of Laura's negation of life through spiritual sloth.... Although he uses the language of Jesus, his point is to confirm her a member of the damned. Eugenio cannot be taken seriously as a Christ figure, other than parodically, since he is primarily associated with despair, death, damnation, and not at all (except through reversal) with salvation."

Leon Gottfried

"Death's Other Kingdom: Dantesque and Theological Symbolism in 'Flowering Judas'"

*PMLA* 84 (1969) 112-24

"The author's physical distance from her friend [Doherty] that evening was an analog to the objectivity that was necessary when she transformed the real-life image into the fictive image. And out of this actual image was to grow also the structural, stylistic, and technical conceptions of 'Flowering Judas,' a created, transcendent image with an organic life of its own.... It is a remarkable aesthetic achievement to which we may return again and again, just as we return to Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'; for long after we have absorbed its universal philosophical and psychological truths, 'Flowering Judas' remains a 'thing of beauty,' a 'joy forever,' embodying Keats's declaration that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"....

In some ways 'Flowering Judas' resembles literary form less than it resembles dance, mother of all the arts, especially of poetry and of the most contemporary of the arts—cinema... The dynamic imagery of dance, the compression and the expressive juxtapositions of poetry, and the montage effects of Eisenstein's cinema are transmuted by Miss Porter...into fictive techniques that produce what interests and moves me most in this story—the charged image.... The story exfoliates from a tight intermingling of showing and

telling. And that story, were it not for the author's technique of dramatically juxtaposing tableaux, is so rich and multifaceted as to require the scope of a novel....

With each image that Miss Porter shows us, we feel that Laura is withdrawing more and more deeply into herself, that her will is becoming more and more paralyzed. The controlling image (Laura and Braggioni sitting opposite each other by the table) is a simplified visual and thematic expression of the entire story; this image recurs at strategic points in the pattern, creating that sense of simultaneity that makes a work of art cohere and seem inevitable. Laura's posture varies only slightly; and though Braggioni is singing and playing the guitar, the tableau virtually does not move—it vibrates from within, sending its electric charge in a radial fashion out into the other images connected to it. [This “controlling image” may be compared to Ezra Pound's concept of the “vortex,” exemplified in Eliot's “The Waste Land”].... Miss Porter makes the guitar an analogy to Laura's body....

Miss Porter's technique of creating a dynamic interplay among images that are strategically spaced in an unfolding pattern is appropriate for the rendering of Laura's state of mind—self-delusion producing paralysis of will.... The energy of the story is transmuted in the kinetic juxtaposition of one charged image to another.... The contrast between the static quality of the images and the immediacy of the historical present tense generates a tension that enhances the effect of Miss Porter's basic image technique.... Miss Porter's technique resembles the early montage techniques of the European movies of the late Twenties and anticipates cinematic methods used by Resnais in *Heroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Last Year at Marienbad*. She shows us one scene, stops the camera, goes on to another scene, goes back to an earlier scene, holds, then goes further back to an even earlier scene, then leaps far ahead. But the image technique is also similar to one used long before the birth of the cinema—Spenser's tableau juxtapositions in *The Faerie Queen*....

The result of Miss Porter's charged image technique is that the reader is left with this timeless image of Laura sitting opposite Braggioni at the table, transfixed in fear and accidie [sloth], all the other images clustered around her like spokes in a hub.... Along with her use of present tense, Miss Porter's frequent use of questions—“Where could she go?”—is another technique for enlivening her overt thematicizing and the progression of static images. And the routineness of Laura's life is another element that makes Miss Porter's technique of repeating the same images in a pattern effective....

Loyalty to one group necessitates Laura's betrayal of trust in other groups.... Her virginal uniform of white mocks her sterility.... Laura, by denying sex, love, meaningful purpose, and action, inclines too far toward betrayal, as the climactic nightmare scene stresses.... The midnight bell seems to be a signal she can't understand. Miss Porter handles the intermingling of interior and exterior worlds so adroitly that the dream passage comes with a controlled abruptness, and the change in tone does not jar, but seems inevitable.... Miss Porter has Eugenio speak to Laura... Echoing Christ's command to his followers, he tells Laura to get up and follow him.... Eugenio calls Laura a murderer (she is *his* Judas, but the charge covers all her crimes of the body, the mind, and the spirit, for they affect *other* bodies, minds, and spirits, including his own.).... All this suggests again Eliot's mental-physical Waste Land, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and... “Gerontion,” as well....

The Judas tree gets its name from the belief that from such a tree Judas hanged himself.... Thus, Eugenio, who has qualities of Christ, as one betrayed offers *Judas* flowers to Laura, the betrayer; and thus, in eating the body of Christ cannibalistically she is also eating the body of Judas, for Eugenio, too, is a kind of Judas, betraying Laura. But the “flowering Judas” is Laura.... The No (in contrast to the Yes with which Molly Bloom ends *Ulysses*) is... a strong auditory image... Just as Eugenio's eyes, unlike Christ's, do not bring light, the dream does not result in self-revelation for Laura, and her self-delusion persists at the end, along with the paralysis of her will... Suggestive religious terms and motifs recur throughout the story.... Miss Porter's frequent use of paradox in style and characterization suggests her purpose in employing religious motifs—as analogies to patterns of human behavior and relationships on secular levels [and to affirm Christian values]....

On the same day on which Catholics hold a festival in honor of the Virgin (a parallel to Laura...), the Socialists will celebrate their martyrs, and the two processions, coming from opposite ends of town, will clash. Thus, rather neatly, Miss Porter summarizes in a composite dialogue image the two conflicting

public contexts (religious and political) of Laura's private despair.... Institutionalized religion and political ideals, perverted in revolution, are escapes from ordinary love.... One may look at Laura in light of six forces that, simultaneously dominate her life: (1) Laura's predominant state of mind is denial: No. Her general negativity as she waits in fear is the frame for everything else we discover about her. (2) She rejects sex; she evades love; she substitutes a grim charity; she radiates a deadly innocence. (3) She gives everything (though it is not enough) to revolutionary politics, while refusing social fellowship and religious transcendence. (4) She fails to distinguish between illusion and reality. (5) Denying everything, overwhelmed by a sense of futility, she waits in fear of violent death. (6) These dominant elements in the story suggest a missing element: self-realization. But the reader sees what Laura fails to see."

David Madden

"The Charged Image in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Flowering Judas'"  
*Studies in Short Fiction* 7 (1970) 277-89

"Her symbols operate on the most direct level and, where she intends a multiplicity of meaning, Miss Porter almost always tells the reader so'.... 'Flowering Judas' owes its greatness not at all to some... religious symbol to signify theme but to a brilliant narrative practice throughout... The sense one gets of Laura's emotional stinginess is not so much that, Judas-like, she has betrayed the young man...but that...Laura has betrayed Laura.... Laura...is doomed forever to suffer her own starving soul, a fact confirmed by a negation and fear of life and truth, the note on which the very last image is played out.... 'Flowering Judas' dramatizes nothing so much as the fact that modern man, especially modern political man (Braggioni), lives and thrives, but more like a pig than a human. As for Laura...her spirit has been given over to a crusade founded not on a faith in the soul of man or the love of God but on the mindless force of history." [This critic dislikes the Christian content of the story.]

M. M. Liberman

*Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*  
(Wayne State 1971) 71, 75-76, 78

"'Flowering Judas' is perhaps the best-known of Miss Porter's stories, and a great favorite of symbolist critics. In 1947, Ray West elaborately analyzed the rather elaborately obvious religious symbolism of the story. Many later critics, taking West's study as a point of departure, have emphasized the erotic significance of the symbols. There are, I would agree with practically everybody, two most important things about Laura: she is a Catholic who has lost her faith [if so, why does she keep attending Church?], and she is sexually repressed....

For the romantic piety [Laura] experienced as a Catholic, she has tried to find a new vehicle in the socialist [Communist] revolution.... Braggioni is the embodiment of all the forces of corruption that threaten the revolutionary movement from within. He is a notoriously lustful man, vain, self-indulgent, ruthless, in love with power.... [Laura] repeatedly reminds herself that she can do nothing for the others in her faction without his help.... Laura's outfit...is suggestive of a nun's habit. And she sits with her knees held closely together.... Dirty, sensual Mexico (whether Catholic or socialist) exercises the ultimate charm of attraction-repulsion, offers the ultimate test of puritan idealism. Desperate sometimes because of her inability to sustain the inner conviction of her revolutionary commitment, Laura pays clandestine visits to churches.... The Roman Catholic Church in Mexico depended upon its alliance with the hereditary landowners for its wealth and political power... It was regarded as one of the greatest enemies of the revolutionary movement....

The flaw that effects Laura's alienation from the church is the same flaw that prevents her from being a wholehearted revolutionist.... To the extent that she is even aware of her erotic impulses for what they are, she has been unable to reconcile them to her ideal of community faith, whether religious or sociopolitical... Laura, in truth, is no less the 'professional lover of humanity' than Braggioni, her high-minded frigidity no less inhumane than his cruel sensuality.... His wretched wife's washing his feet, a grotesque parody of Mary's act of obeisance to Jesus (John 12:3), emphasizes with heavy irony Braggioni's falsity both in the role of repentant and forgiving husband and in that of his people's savior [mock-Christ figure]...

The dream she has after Braggioni leaves makes it clear that Eugenio had been trying to seduce her. She had evidently felt strongly attracted to him. But to help him to sleep she had given him narcotics, not herself; and she obviously suspects that he took the overdoses because he had lost hope of winning her love, not because of despair at his continuing imprisonment.... The important thing...is that she has betrayed herself, her own humanity, in her refusal to love....

From Braggioni's point of view, Eugenio's suicide is a betrayal, although not a very important one, of the revolutionary cause. Laura subconsciously attempts to convince herself of this view in her dream-identification of Eugenio with the Judas tree; his flesh and blood are the blossoms of the tree, its twigs the fingerbones of his skeletal hands. (In legend, it was from the redbud, or Judas tree, that Christ's betrayer hanged himself.) But in eating the flowers, she acknowledges herself as the traitor, and Eugenio after all as the Son of Man.... The cry of 'No!' with which she awakens herself would deny her self-conviction of inhumanity...the cry with which...she has met all demands for human involvement. She is still bound to the lifelong habit of denial, or rejection, that has led her to the monstrous confrontation in the dream.... The point is that there is no true religion, and no true revolution, without love."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 68-76

"Porter named the revolutionary 'Braggioni'... He embodies each of the seven deadly sins... Once, he was a young idealist in both politics and love. It is Laura and those like her who have caused him to change from idealist to opportunist... She neither loves nor opposes Braggioni because she is basically indifferent to him as she is to most people. Her indifference and alienation are caused by her loss of the Catholic faith of her childhood and her inability to replace it with the worship of social progress and machines... As the story was nearing completion a pattern of symbolism appeared to her, not imposed upon the story but implicit in it, an extended use of the symbolic naturalism she had used in 'Theft'... It had been just over a year since she read and discussed *The Education of Henry Adams*...and she remembered now the chapter, 'The Dynamo and the Virgin'... The chapter suddenly seemed highly relevant to Laura's sense of being stranded between the lost religion of her childhood and her inadequate faith in the machine."

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*  
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 217-19

"Her most obvious restraint is sexual, but she is more than a constricted virgin; she restrains herself emotionally as well as physically, and she does both to prevent the violation of soul as well as body.... Laura is both attracted to and frightened by sex... Since [Braggioni] embodies at once the revolution as a holy war and a vehicle for personal power and private gain, he is a perfect antagonist to Laura's impractical idealism and need to believe.... Laura is like a tightrope walker whose inability to go either forward or backward necessitates a fall. In the meantime, she maintains a precarious balance, poised above a psychological abyss. [That this abyss is Hell does not occur to this atheist critic. Nor does it when she goes on to say that Laura fears sexual intercourse as a "leap of faith" into what "may turn out to be a bottomless pit."]."

By leaving her home she has eluded the necessity for marrying, bearing children, 'settling down.' Thus she has become something of a lay nun, a professional virgin. She can only respond with deviousness to the Mexican men who pursue her, and for the children she teaches she feels no affection, because men and children who offer her love require an emotional commitment and represent too closely the way of life she has rejected.... Her participation in the revolution, but on the fringes of it, is a symbolic dabbling in sexual experience and a remote indulgence of emotional idealism...

Braggioni...is repulsive, fairly oozing the putrefaction of rotten fruit and jaded decadence. For Laura he symbolizes all the 'reality' with which she has had to temper her idealism.... Certainly she prostitutes herself by running his errands, for she is in tacit collusion with him.... Braggioni emphasizes the dichotomy in Laura that is the center of the story when he tells her of the impending conflict between the Catholics and the Socialists in Morelia.... Braggioni recounts the apocalyptic climax to the revolution, symbolically calling up the chaos and death of individuality Laura fears from intercourse.... Where [he]

will commit murder, Laura sins by omission [by not helping Eugenio? No.]... Laura thinks that she must run; a third time she denies her instinct and does not go, betraying herself....

Eugenio, the dead rebel, embodies her lost hope, her failed nerve, and her stifled sexuality. He beckons her as a demon lover to accompany him to death... In an inverted paradigm of the Last Supper, Eugenio offers flowers of betrayal from the Judas tree, recalling the crucifixion and his death at the hands of a betrayer. He offers up his body and blood as a rebel willing to die for his cause...and as a priest offering sacrifice... She is not deluded by him... Since she is not taken in, when she accepts, she is not innocent but culpable. Eating greedily, she signifies her collusion with guilt and allows Eugenio to call her a murderer... The sin of omission she has committed [is] failing to prevent his self-destruction.... Laura is her own worst enemy, a woman who, in an effort to protect her integrity, has controlled her emotions to the point of being unable to act according to her own values. In her nightmare, she confronts reality. By refusing to prevent Eugenio's suicide, she has murdered her own principles. In effect, she has become a suicide, too.... It is too late. In both body and blood, she has already raped herself."

Jane Krause DeMouy  
"“Flowering Judas’: Psyche, Symbol, and Self-Betrayal”  
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983)

“Flowering Judas’ has almost always been interpreted as a story about revolution and betrayal, and any critical confusion has centered on the extent to which Laura is in fact the betrayer, the ‘Judas.’ Ray West’s early analysis of Laura as betrayer because she brings no love to the revolution has been the most widely accepted interpretation for many years....

[Laura] has glimpsed the reality and the dangers and has avoided both by withdrawing to a state of deadened feeling while simply carrying out the ritual of the revolution. ‘Like a good child’... Laura represents the alien who came to Mexico ‘uninvited’ to participate in the revolution. In so doing she ostensibly had to abandon her own Catholicism and take on the ‘religion’ of revolution because the Church was an enemy of the revolution in Mexico. One supposes that Laura has joined the revolution with the kind of fervor that shows in Porter’s own early remarks about it. But now Laura has become disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the movement, even with her own participation.... Laura feels betrayed. Her idealistic view of the revolution has not been confirmed.... She has protected herself against the reality of the revolution by protecting herself against feeling.... Porter...does not intend to portray a frigid or even sexually repressed Laura. She shows a Laura who has simply withheld love... The complete withholding of love has been Laura’s protection against brutal violence from revolutionaries like Braggioni....

Braggioni is the symbol of Laura’s disillusion, for she had thought of a revolutionist as...essentially a Christ figure.... The reference to the upper room is an allusion to the place of the Last Supper, and the maid’s warning, ‘He waits,’ is an allusion to Christ. The story thus is framed by symbolic, if ironic, allusions to the sacred supper at which Christ and his disciples celebrate the Passover, significantly a celebration of one people’s escape from bondage. It is at the Last Supper that Jesus instructs his disciples in the meaning of feet washing, that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is observed, and that Jesus predicts Judas’s betrayal.... Braggioni, the shock-haired youth, Eugenio, Laura, and the Zapatista captain have all betrayed the revolution. They simply go through the motions of being revolutionaries but without the idealistic commitment....

A more careful look at Mrs. Braggioni and at the feet-washing scene reveals that both she and her husband have misplaced values. Feminism was an important part of the revolution, and Mrs. Braggioni is active in the feminist movement. She ‘organizes unions among the girls in the cigarette factories, and walks in picket lines, and even speaks at meetings in the evening.’ The narrative voice adds, ‘But she cannot be brought to acknowledge the benefits of true liberty.’ The irony lies in the two meanings of ‘liberty,’ neither of which she accepts. She does not free herself from male domination and yet will not concede to Braggioni’s freedom from fidelity...‘I tell her I must have my freedom... She does not understand my point of view,’ Braggioni says. Mrs. Braggioni may be a feminist leader, but she is not a true feminist. It is significant that we never know her given name; she is known only as an extension, or a possession, of her husband. She is not dedicated to an ideal but to a man.... Mrs. Braggioni, cast in the image of Mary

Magdalen, has placed a poor substitute in a god's role.... As tempting as it is to see Braggioni's tears as a sign of his redemption, the tears are tears of only self-love and self-pity."

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
"Revolution and the Female Principle in 'Flowering Judas'"  
*Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*  
(U Georgia 1985)

"[Porter] participated in Obregon's inaugural celebration...drinking tea and champagne with him in his official residence in Chapultepec Castle, and also attended the lottery ticket sellers' ball in company with 'the greatest labor leader in Mexico,' Luis N. Morones.... Porter went to union meetings to hear the spell-binding Morones speak.... Porter claimed she was like the girl [Laura] in the story, taking 'messages to people living in dark alleys.' A few years later she added that she visited political prisoners in their cells, two of whom she named.... 'A clash between Catholics and Socialists on May 12 [1921] resulted in the death of [a government official], which Porter lamented in her journal... In 1922 she had written in her journal, 'if Morones is the next president, salvation of Mexico is assured.' In 'Flowering Judas' [1930] words like 'salvation' became bitterly ironic.... In 1943 Porter wrote to Mary Doherty...'I remember well that my childhood faith in the Revolution was well over in about six months' .... Mexico as potential paradise was and could be nothing but a dream....

Mary Doherty...became Porter's confidante and, in a correspondence that spanned fifty years, a continual source of information about Mexico.... Like Laura, Doherty taught Indian children in Xochimilco, but never tried to organize women into labor unions.... Doherty...was a 'virtuous, intact, straitlaced Irish Catholic...born with the fear of sex.... Samuel O. Yudico came to entertain her with his guitar.... His father, like Braggioni's, was Italian.... Yudico and Morones became Braggioni.... [Porter] detested what she interpreted as Yudico's advances on the Virgin Mary Doherty, in whom she saw herself and fictionalized her detestation in 'Flowering Judas'....

Braggioni revenges himself on a thousand women for the humiliation one woman caused him in his youth, just as he would brutally revenge himself against his political enemies if the need arose. His behavior is pointedly typical of the revolutionary who violates at every step the principles he pretends to uphold.... Porter, who attended a feminist meeting with Thorberg Halberman where she became the '79<sup>th</sup> member of the woman's party in Mexico,' certainly viewed the attitudes of Yudico/Braggioni toward women as a betrayal of the Revolution and a personal affront to herself and Laura.

In 1928 Porter shifted her attention from Yudico, who died that year, to Luis Morones, explicitly identifying him with Braggioni in her notes.... Porter's own hope vanished, and so Braggioni emerged as a perverse savior who, like Morones, only talks of 'sacrificing himself for the worker'.... [and is] perfectly typical of the revolutionary personality she came to despise.... He would be more dangerous if he really believed his apocalyptic rhetoric which reveals his arrogance and hypocrisy since he enjoys the luxuries of the rich whom he would exterminate. To Porter he is the typical revolutionary.... The revolutionaries she knew contributed to what was...a portrait of *the* revolutionary....

Laura...does not, understandably, love Braggioni, but she does not love anybody. Thus she is a traitor to the Revolution and to her own religious principles.... Porter, in tears, told me [Thomas F. Walsh] that she herself had given sleeping pills to a prisoner who saved them until he had enough with which to kill himself, adding that only the death of the man who caught influenza from her had affected her as much [See *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*].... Porter [also wrote] of carrying messages that would result in the death of five men against whom she holds no grudge.... If it is a true account of Porter's activities, then it explains the guilt she assigns to Laura, who also engaged in deadly intrigue she is not committed to.

Whatever the facts behind Laura's relation to Eugenio, her inability to love, deeply rooted in Porter's own personality, is directly linked to her fear of death... Laura's protective withdrawal into self only results in a death-like stasis of noncommitment... Throughout the story her 'No' is a rejection of life, but her 'No' to Eugenio's invitation expresses her rejection of suicide. She at least reaffirms her will to live despite her continuing state of irresolution."

Thomas F. Walsh

“The Making of ‘Flowering Judas’”  
*Journal of Modern Literature* 12.1 (1985)

“I confess to loving ‘Flowering Judas’ most among her works, though I recognize that the aesthetic achievement of *Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine* and the stories grouped as ‘The Old Order,’ is a larger one. Still, ‘Flowering Judas’ established Porter and rhetorically set a standard even she never surpassed.... Porter’s story, intensely erotic, is neither a ‘Waste Land’ allegory, nor a study of Christian nostalgia. Its beautiful, sleep-walking Laura is neither a betrayer nor a failed believer, but an aesthete, a storyteller poised upon the threshold of crossing over into her own art... Laura’s curious coolness, which charms us into a sense of her inaccessibility, is the product not of her disillusion with either the Revolution or the Church, but of her childlike narcissism. Much of the lyrical strength of ‘Flowering Judas’ comes from its superb contrast between...Laura...and...the professional revolutionist Braggioni... Narcissist and self-loving leader of men share in a pragmatic cruelty, and in a vanity that negates the reality of all others.”

Harold Bloom, ed.  
Introduction  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1986) 1-3

“‘Flowering Judas,’ considered by many critics one of the greatest of American short stories, and by most Porter critics as her finest production in that genre, appears in all major American short story collections.... That Laura may eventually be required to surrender even her sexual integrity to Braggioni is strongly suggested in Porter’s masterful use of the pistol (a transparent phallic symbol), which Laura is required to clean and polish, and which Braggioni strokes, ever so gently, while it lies in her lap.... Laura’s essential treason is that she is being *used* for the purpose of others; she is not actively or passionately *engaged* in the revolutionary enterprise. Like the original Judas, she has sold out...”

She is not *really* aristocratic, but a desire for lace that is not machine-made suggests that she aims at standards for herself that she would not struggle to achieve for others; here she resembles the erotic Braggioni who loves his yellow silk handkerchiefs, ‘Jockey Vlub, imported from New York.’ Her Marxism, like that of Braggioni, is purely for show; it is a way to walk within the corridors of power. She, like Braggioni, proves quite capable of administering the death penalty... The problem is how to remain true to oneself and at the same time achieve status in the world; to keep the faith and yet survive to go on working for a cause... The story of Laura (the quest for the laurel) involves a conflation of Judas tree and laurel tree; it is a story of treason to the world for the purpose of loyalty to the integrated self....

Critics have pointed out, in numerous studies, the many levels of Christian imagery present in the text. Supplication (the washing of feet), the offering of food (communion), the asking for forgiveness (supplication)...the return of Eugenio, after death, to Laura in her dreams (resurrection), Eugenio (etymologically ‘well born’) as savior (or false savior), and Laura’s understanding that she cannot equate love and revolution (repentance).”

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1990) 140-46

“Yvor Winters thought ‘Flowering Judas’ superior to the writings of all other living Americans with one exception: an unnamed short story by William Carlos Williams.... In 1935, upon publication of a new edition of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*...in the *New York Herald Tribune* [Porter] was described as ‘probably the finest short story writer in America,’ while a reviewer for the *New York Times* declared her ‘indubitably among the most brilliant of our writers of short stories.’ A review in *Forum and Century* called Porter’s style ‘as subtle and lovely as Kay Boyle’s’ and found it superior to Boyle’s in its ‘greater vitality and less rarefied mannerisms.’ Almost all of the reviewers found ‘Flowering Judas’ a perfect, or near perfect, story, regardless of the standard by which it was judged....

Laura...travels to Mexico at the age of twenty-two much as Porter herself did at thirty-one, to ‘attend and assist’ the Obregon Revolution.... Porter...described her intimates in Mexico as ‘almost pure revolutionaries’ who fed her dissenting nature.... By employing the present tense and establishing a unity

of time and place—a single evening in Laura’s apartment—Porter creates at once a sense of immediacy.... Porter’s use of the passive voice through her omniscient narrator is crucial to the characterization and events of the tale. It also enables Porter to maintain her own aesthetic distance from Laura... ‘Flowering Judas’ is an early and significant testament to Porter’s own rejection of passivity and of her commitment to responsible action....

A Roman Catholic since birth, Laura has ‘encased herself in a set of principles derived from her early training,’ and she considers not wearing machine-made lace one such principle.... Porter juxtaposes the idea of salvation through revolution against salvation through the church... Both have gone astray through treachery, dishonesty, and misplaced values.... One complicating factor is that Porter has made Braggioni so repulsive that readers are tempted to view Laura more sympathetically than she may deserve.... She ‘owes her comfortable existence and her salary to him’.... Unwilling to accept responsibility for her actions, unwilling to look upon her fellow man and to speak, like Eugenio, ‘in a voice of pity,’ Laura is damned to a state of suspension between illusion and reality. Having ‘encased herself in a set of principles derived from her early training,’ having been the instrument of Eugenio’s death, and having eaten, ultimately, of the Judas tree, Laura is both the betrayed and the betrayer.”

Virginia Spencer Carr, ed.  
Introduction  
“*Flowering Judas*” casebook  
(Rutgers 1993) 11-12, 14-19

“Porter by 1926 still looked to Mexican folk culture as expression of life’s depths and mysteries, as a counterforce to the abstractions and mystifications of modernity.... The thrust of Porter’s analysis is on the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of people of modern society ever experiencing fully the primitivist earth... Particularly after her return visit in 1930, her writings on Mexico—letters, reviews, and fiction—reveal her progressive disenchantment with the country and more generally with primitivism... In all likelihood, [Laura] was drawn to Mexico by preconceived notions of the romance and mystery of the country and its revolution. Laura’s present unhappiness derives in part from the shattering of her romantic illusions. Symbolizing her general disillusionment is the revolutionary leader Braggioni....

That Laura repeatedly sneaks into Catholic churches underscores both her desire for faith...and her resistance to abandoning her previous beliefs.... Even though she actively interacts with other people as a teacher and a revolutionary collaborator, she always maintains her discipline and reserve, resisting any deep commitment to another person... Laura’s rejection of others is matched by her rejection of her body... In their manipulation of others and their commitment to noncommitment, Braggioni and Laura share a great deal, despite the fact that opposing drives propel their lives—self-denial for Laura and self-indulgence for Braggioni. Ultimately, both Laura’s and Braggioni’s actions embody a renunciation of human community... ‘It may be true I am as corrupt, in another way, as Braggioni,’ she thinks, ‘as callous, as incomplete’....

Feelings of responsibility and guilt over Eugenio’s death haunt Laura’s consciousness (she carried Eugenio the drugs with which he killed himself and she did not call the prison doctor to save him), thoroughly disrupting her attempt to characterize all the people she knows as strangers, no matter how well she is acquainted with them.... Laura is torn by conflicting feelings of guilt and denial. Despite her words to Braggioni suggesting their complicity in the suicide, Laura does her best, after Braggioni leaves and she rests alone, to repress all thoughts of her guilt... The dream that follows works out her worse suspicions... In an echo of the Last Supper quite different from that in the reconciliation of Braggioni and his wife (when she washes his feet), Eugenio offers Laura flowers from a Judas tree to eat and then himself becomes the very tree from which the flowers are stripped....

In her drastic turn inward that devalues the external world and her relationship with other people, Laura thus becomes precisely what Eugenio accuses her of being—a murderer and a cannibal, a person who sees other people merely as objects (thus ‘murdering’ their selves, their humanity) to be manipulated in whatever way that will nourish her own desires (she thus ‘cannibalizes’ them).... Laura is not unlike John Marcher in Henry James’s ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ (Porter held a deep admiration for James), a man who



commits his life to waiting for the disaster he foresees...with Marcher destructively isolating himself from deep commitments with other people.

Laura's asceticism...in large part derives from her inability to resolve the searching tension between her Catholic upbringing and her revolutionary present. Rather than bringing these two powerful forces into a constructive dialogue...whereby the two ideologies challenge and provoke each other and so become deepened and enriched [Catholicism and Communism are inherently contradictory, as evident in the reality of Mexican politics.]... The tension lacerates rather than nourishes, driving Laura into inaction as she fluctuates between the two ideologies. She remains a traitor to both causes, the trace of one forever present in the other, so preventing her from giving full commitment to either. In the end she falls victim to her own inaction and denial, becoming as corrupt as the country in which she lives....

On May Day the Catholics and Socialist hold competing festivals.... Such violence arising from ideological conflict also rages within Laura; and so, too, does the violence at Morelia signify the disruptions that rage throughout all of Mexico, at least the Mexico of Porter's fiction of the late 1920s and early 1930s—a land torn to pieces by an internal war of competing ideologies, a land once of hope but now of destruction, a land run by people, revolutionaries or not, whose only conviction is to themselves and their individual welfare. Laura's confusion, despair, and suffering are Mexico's; the Edenic paradise of 'Children of Xochitl' and 'Maria Concepcion' has become the wasteland, a land that has betrayed itself, a land of the Flowering Judas."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.

"Mexico, Memory, and Betrayal: Katherine Anne Porter's 'Flowering Judas'"  
*'Flowering Judas'* casebook (1993) 196-99, 201-09

"[This story] has often been praised as one of the great treasures of the Modernist aesthetic... Despite its ambiguity (a rich and provocative ambiguity, as the great volume of interpretive criticism attests), 'Flowering Judas' shows no trace of the uncertainty of purpose that has sometimes been seen in 'Maria Concepcion.' The intrinsic uncertainty of the situation, the mingling of idealistic hope with cynical disillusion that characterized the political scene in Mexico, which Porter knew so well, is realized in a way that seems at once detached, because of its clearly visualized details, and intensely personal, because of the sense of dread and guilt that permeates the narrative tone.... Scene, incident, tone, and style come together as they do in few other stories, constituting a work that has persistently engaged critics.... Readings of the story find in it a depth of elusiveness combined with a perfection of surface which together mark it as a rare achievement....

Laura...was identified by Porter as a representation of Mary Doherty, who, she said, had endured such a serenade. At the same time, Laura is Porter herself, lonely, disappointed, guilt-ridden. Braggioni is a composite of Luis Morones and Samuel Yudico, the man who in fact serenaded Doherty and whose wife cried and washed his feet (according to notes Porter jotted in 1921) when he went home after philandering. Both were active in Mexican labor politics, both were very close to President Obregon and involved in the atmosphere of plotting and menace that surrounded him, and both were notably corpulent... [Morones] has been regarded at least by one historian as 'the most powerful man in Mexico' in 1924.... Though not identified with the Communist Party of Mexico per se, Morones was considered both by the U.S. government and by Porter to be a Bolshevik... He was one of the main leaders of the labor movement... The quality of sexual corruption that pervades the characterization of Braggioni reflects, as well, the odor of decadence that had attached to Morones by the mid-twenties.... In May 1921 [Porter] was warned that her name was on a list for arrest and deportation... She encountered in Mexico an objectified version of the disillusion, fear, and preoccupation with death that had haunted her at least since her own near-death from the flu in 1918 and implicitly ever since her mother's death in 1892."

Janis P. Stout

*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 48, 79-81

"'Flowering Judas,' the earliest of her successes, is the story of a young woman, Laura, of Catholic background and training, who, having come to Mexico City as a teacher, finds herself actively involved in the revolutionary cause. Inhibitions produced by Laura's background and training, however, keep her from

giving herself freely either to the revolutionaries she presumes to serve or to the young men who try to woo her, or even to the Indian children whom she teaches for a part of each day. Without the capacity to love she languishes unaware of her spiritual poverty until through negligence she fails to prevent the death of an important revolutionary and suddenly is terrified at the recognition of her isolation and emptiness.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 71

“[This is the only critic who thinks Laura is *attracted* to Braggioni, a Feminist apparently projecting her own love of power, however corrupt.] His physical appearance suggests the combination of sensuality and violence that secretly attracts her.... Her immobility is a tense resistance against her own desire to yield to Braggioni’s oily allure.... Laura’s pleasure in her own objectification is combined with an ‘insatiable thirst’ for ‘excitement’... It is troubling to see Porter representing women who work to counter their objectification by choosing, essentially, to turn themselves into objects, freezing into silence and immobility, denying human connection.”

Mary Titus  
*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 54, 56

“Flowering Judas” is a religious and political allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne, a masterpiece primarily in the tradition of psychological Realism, using techniques of poetic Impressionism throughout, Expressionism in the nightmare, and Modernist manipulation of non-linear time. Once he is established, Braggioni seems always present, like all big government. The flashbacks and expository passages seem to occur in the mind of Laura while she resists Braggioni the seducer. This technique intensifies suspense—will she give in or won’t she?-- and the feeling of Laura’s emotional paralysis.

Laura has just come from a visit to the prison and “she is waiting for tomorrow with a bitter anxiety as if tomorrow may not come, but time may be caught immovably in this hour, with herself transfixed, Braggioni singing on forever, and Eugenio’s body not yet discovered by the guard.” This revelation that Eugenio is dead but not yet discovered focuses the plot. Thematically, his undiscovered death represents the death of Laura’s faith in the revolution, which has not yet been discovered by Braggioni. The name Judas equates to betrayal and in the course of the story it applies to Braggioni, to Laura, to Eugenio, and to the Communist revolution worldwide. Laura has betrayed Jesus already by joining a political movement that is trying to destroy belief in Him.

Since the story is set in Mexico, the Italian name Braggioni seems out of place. However, as early as the 1920s and throughout the 1930s the International Communist Party headquartered in Moscow was sending revolutionaries from all over the world to infiltrate and overturn governments in Mexico, the United States and elsewhere. The Italian name calls attention to the international scope of the politics dramatized in the story, to the fact that Communist revolutionaries were invading other countries. Laura “borrows money from the Rumanian agitator to give to his bitter enemy the Polish agitator.” Braggioni personifies the invading Communist movement and Laura represents all its liberal dupes. He is trying to seduce her, acting like a romantic hero, thumbing a guitar and “snarling” a tune, but like the Communists overall he is inflated (fat) and boastful (*Brag-gioni*). More than that, he represents all the activists and “world saviors” with a vested interest in perpetuating wrongs and exploiting people in order to maintain their power, all those who believe their ends justify their means—all the fascists who pretend to be liberals.

Laura is “in bed” with the Communists but is too revolted by the corrupt revolutionary leader to be seduced literally. Emotionally she is like many liberals who supported the Communists from a distance. Unlike them she is directly involved. She must humor Braggioni “with pitiless courtesy, because she dares not smile at his miserable performance. Nobody dares to smile at him. Braggioni is cruel to everyone... It is dangerous to offend him, and nobody has this courage.” His singing is a metaphor of his “miserable performance” as a political leader, for his excess of “self-love” has made him a tyrant corrupted by power. For others he cares nothing, for himself he feels “tenderness and amplitude and eternal charity.” Laura “owes her comfortable situation and her salary to him,” but she feels like slapping his face. Her evasion of

reality was characteristic of liberals who enabled Communists in the 1930s to infiltrate the U.S. government and Hollywood, where Porter worked briefly. Liberals were “useful idiots” who thought the Communists just intended to help the poor, not murder millions of people and work to overthrow our Democracy. Liberals like Laura hired hundreds of Communist spies for government jobs who stole our atomic bomb secrets and gave them to the Soviet Union, enabling our enemy to develop a nuclear arsenal that threatened Americans with annihilation for the 40 years of the Cold War.

“The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusion, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues.” Her Communist “comrades” are cynics who call her integrity “romantic error” and their own inhumanity “a developed sense of reality.” Laura is “determined not to surrender her will.” But she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be.” She is a recurrent type in Realist fiction, the romantic idealist who refuses to accept reality. She is “like a good child” and “her round white collar is not purposely nun-like. She wears the uniform of an idea, and has renounced vanities.” Oh my. She is a Catholic as well as a virtual Communist, which is a contradiction common in Mexico and Italy and elsewhere. “She has encased herself in a set of principles derived from her early training [Catholicism]...and for this reason she will not wear lace made on machines. This is her private heresy, for in her special group the machine is sacred, and will be the salvation of the workers.” Communists replace God with machinery. Porter applies religious terms to the revolutionaries in order to show that they have made politics their religion.

Braggioni “sings with tremendous emphasis... He has, the song relates, no father and no mother” (he is a bastard and a son of a bitch). This paragraph continues in the most poetic Impressionist style since Jay Gatsby piled up his monogrammed silk shirts to impress Daisy, full of alliteration and assonance, mainly repetitions of the vowel *o*, evoking Braggioni’s body shape and open mouth: “His mouth opens round and yearns sideways, his balloon cheeks grow oily with the labor of song. He bulges marvelously in his expensive garments. Over his lavender collar, crushed upon a purple necktie, held by a diamond hoop: over his ammunition belt of tooled leather worked in silver, buckled cruelly around his gasping middle: over the tops of his glossy yellow shoes Braggioni swells with ominous ripeness, his mauve silk hose stretched taught, his ankles bound with the stout leather thongs of his shoes.” Here Porter’s opulent prose “bulges marvelously,” evoking the luxurious lifestyle of this champion of the poor. The hypocritical Communist leader is just as acquisitive as any capitalist: “He is rich, not in money, he tells her, but in power, and this power brings with it the blameless ownership of things, and the right to indulge his love of small luxuries.” He imports Jockey Club silk handkerchiefs from New York. Since a girl he loved laughed at him, he has exploited women all his life: “One woman is really as good as another for me, in the dark. I prefer them all.” This is how Braggioni believes in equality.

Laura serves the revolution by taking food, cigarettes, narcotics, and messages to Communists in prison, and by smuggling letters to others hiding from firing squads. The “infernal hole” of the prison is a hell from which Laura has the power to save them by striking a bargain with Braggioni, though she represses this fact: “If she could avoid it she would not admit even to herself the slow drift of his intention.” The despairing prisoners ask her why Braggioni does not get them out, knowing that Laura could get them released if she would give Braggioni sexual release. Braggioni tells her, “Let them sweat a little.” Porter here is the first major American writer to indict Communists for using the inhumane strategy of prolonging human suffering for greater political gain and to maintain their own power in perpetuity. Communists sometimes have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. This theme introduced by Porter in 1930 was continued by Steinbeck in *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and by Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952).

“Denying everything, she may walk anywhere in safety.” Her illusion is solipsistic—truly a “romantic error.” For her denial of Braggioni is also a denial of Eugenio, making her responsible for his suicide and sending them both to Hell, which is “that disaster she fears.” Her conflict between causes is defined by a dramatic image when Braggioni “begins telling her about the May-day disturbances coming on in Morelia, for the Catholics hold a festival in honor of the blessed Virgin, and the Socialists celebrate their martyrs on that day. “There will be two independent processions, starting from either end of town, and they will march until they meet, and the rest depends...” He asks her to oil and load his pistols.”

Essentially, it is the irresolvable conflict between Christianity and Communism that has paralyzed Laura. Eugenio has waited for her to persuade Braggioni for so long that in despair he has killed himself. Laura confesses this to Braggioni: “‘He had taken all the tablets I brought him yesterday... I told him if he had waited only a little while longer, you would have got him free,’ says Laura.” Not really. The individual is dispensable to a Communist. In fact, Braggioni is glad to be rid of Eugenio. Perhaps he sees Eugenio as a possible rival. Suspending his seduction of Laura, Braggioni goes home to his wife, who washes his feet in the sacrificial role of Christ, the fraudulent role that he plays in public as a “world savior.” The reader’s feeling of outrageous injustice and absurdity intensifies the irony when, in response to his tearful little apology to his wife—while she kneels before him like Mary Magdalen washing his feet—she begs *his* forgiveness. There’s equality for you. Though he says he is “sorry for everything,” he does not ask for *her* forgiveness. Part of Laura’s disillusionment is discovering that whereas the revolution promised rights for women, the movement in truth is at least as patriarchal as the capitalist order.

Laura wears a white nightgown to bed that extends the motif of purity introduced by her “round white collar...not purposely nun-like.” She tries to purify her mind—to “not remember anything.” The parallel of herself to the jailer and her school children to “poor prisoners” like Eugenio expresses her feeling that, in her detachment, the children she teaches are “dead to her,” that she is betraying them just as she betrayed Eugenio, that she is not morally pure at all. The nature of her relationship to Eugenio is deliberately vague, suggesting various possibilities: (1) Eugenio may simply be one of the rebel prisoners, of no special interest to Laura as compared to others. However, that his name means “well-born” may imply that he is from the upper-class and gave up status and wealth to join the revolution, making him a contrast to Braggioni, who rose from poverty to power and corruption. This would mean that Eugenio was once an idealist more like Laura than Braggioni was. (2) Eugenio might have been in love with Laura, though that seems unlikely, since the revolutionaries are described as cynical. If Eugenio were in love, he would have something to live for. He is a prisoner in despair. He is not in love, he is “bored.” (3) Hence the ambiguous line “it is monstrous to confuse love with revolution, night with day, life with death—ah, Eugenio!” must apply to Laura. She is the one who is “full of romantic error.” This possibility is suggested by Braggioni when he says he does not know why Laura joined the revolution unless she is in love with a man in the movement. Her emotional paralysis in repression suggests that she can only love Eugenio in the abstract, as a disillusioned idealist like herself. Loving him is then a form of self-pity.

(4) However Laura may feel about Eugenio, she allows him to die from an overdose of the drugs she gave him by not calling the prison doctor. Her failure to call upon the doctor is analogous to her failure to call upon Jesus, the Physician of the soul. Eugenio overdosed on a narcotic just as he did on Communism. Like him, Laura feels betrayed by the revolution. He is an allegorical reflection of her own despair, his suicide an expression of her own desire to run away. It is clear in her nightmare that she identified with Eugenio enough to give him the means to kill himself and then allowed him to escape his misery—out of compassion, or “love.” In contrast to her various rejected suitors, Eugenio is imprisoned and hence no threat to her virginity. She compensates for not giving Braggioni what he wants by giving Eugenio what he wants, telling herself that she is serving the revolution. Not calling the doctor was a “romantic error.” By letting Eugenio die she betrayed both her faiths. In Catholicism, suicides go to Hell.

Laura could have saved Eugenio and gotten him released from prison if she had sacrificed her pride in her struggle against Braggioni. Mrs. Braggioni demonstrates that the attitude of her husband can be changed if he is flattered and catered to enough. Preserving her sexual virtue might be an excuse for Laura not to prostitute herself once, but that weighs little compared to a man’s life, as a Catholic priest would probably have advised her. Jesus forgave a prostitute, saying “Go and sin no more.” When Laura goes to church and says a Hail Mary asking the Virgin Mary for help it is “no good” because she is already betraying Jesus and because her self-sacrifice must be to give up her virginity to save the life of Eugenio and possibly the other prisoners. Christians are expected to be self-sacrificial in imitation of Christ. And revolutionaries are expected to give their lives for the cause if necessary. Laura betrays both causes by refusing to save Eugenio out of pride, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. She claimed that she was prepared to suffer martyrdom: “My personal fate is nothing, except as the testimony of a mental attitude.” In the end, however, she puts her personal fate above everything. She simply would not sacrifice her virginity to such a repulsive pig—not even to save a life. She is proud and selfish like Braggioni. “‘It may be true that I am as

corrupt, in another way, as Braggioni,' she thinks in spite of herself, 'as callous, as incomplete'." Braggioni sins actively, Laura passively.

In her nightmare at the end, Eugenio personifies her guilt. The symbolism of the nightmare, like the title of the story, confirms that Christianity prevails over Communism in the soul of Laura. She does not feel guilty for betraying Karl Marx. Laura follows Eugenio out from her house of bondage to Braggioni, but when she reaches up for his hand he eludes her, drifts away and calls her "Murderer." He sets her down from a Judas tree into a desert, a waste land. As he feeds her bleeding Judas flowers and calls her "poor prisoner" he has turned into a skeleton and inverts the meaning of the Christian sacrament: "This is my body and my blood." The inversion implies that Eugenio is leading her toward eternal death. His "eye sockets were without light." Laura has murdered her religious values—sacrificed Christ in a big way rather than sacrifice herself in a small way. However, in the tradition of medieval dream allegory, like the idealistic dreamer in Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railroad" Laura wakes up shocked into recognition of spiritual reality and may now redeem herself. After all, she is only 22 years old. She needs to ask Jesus to forgive her and get the hell out of Mexico.

#### ATHEIST AND FEMINIST CRITICS

You would think that a story with the name Judas in the title would suggest that somebody has betrayed Jesus, but atheist critics avoid and deny this most obvious meaning. They limit Judas to the popular term for *any* betrayer. They avoid the main character in the story and in the universe. The atheist Leon Gottfried even argues that "Flowering Judas" is not religious at all, only political: the title and all the Christian allusions, parallels, themes, and values are merely "religio-political." To a reader familiar with literature in general and with Porter's major writing in particular this is ridiculous. This atheist would reduce Dante's *Inferno* to a story about the politics of Italy.

Likewise, the atheism of Robert Brinkmeyer censors the Christian vision of Porter. In his analysis of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* he rejects Porter's accounts in interviews of her near-death experience visiting Heaven and her rendering of its meaning in her story, claiming that it was merely a memory of "oblivion." He is a Politically Correct liberal so intolerant of a belief different from his own he refuses to report it, like the liberal news media. In his discussion of "Flowering Judas" he acknowledges that Laura's nightmare in the end is "an echo of the Last Supper" and he refers to "a Judas tree" but he ignores the Christian faith implied by these allusions. Consequently, he cannot explain the ending of the story: "It is, finally, unclear precisely what Laura comes to accept about herself." He does not recognize that she feels guilty for having betrayed Jesus and is terrified of going to Hell. As an atheist he cannot conceive of Hell. Instead, he thinks "the disaster she fears" is realizing she has been living a "destructive life of denial." She is only 22 years old. She can change. Such a realization is hardly a disaster. In the end, the atheist Brinkmeyer admits that Laura is experiencing a "tension between her Catholic upbringing and her revolutionary present." He implies that her Catholicism is in the past, yet he admits that it is creating a tension in the present. By relegating her religious faith to her "upbringing" he reduces its significance to psychological conditioning, which amounts to an atheist rejection of the whole story. The story dramatizes Laura's paralysis in being unable to reconcile Catholicism with Communism—nobody could—yet this liberal fool faults her for not "bringing these two powerful forces into a constructive dialogue."

The atheist Jane DeMouy claims that Laura has "chosen the revolution as an ideological framework *in place of* her Catholicism." This ignores the two symbolic May Day processions of Catholics and Socialists that will clash as a metaphor of the conflict in Laura between her two conflicting faiths. DeMouy goes on, "It is also *obvious* that she *substitutes* the revolution and its doctrines for the religious doctrine of her childhood." But then, as if realizing that she must account for the fact that Laura is still going to church, DeMouy concedes that "the stature of her religious faith has *diminished*." Previously in the story she has said that Laura "has not lost the habit of faith despite her *disappointment* with the Catholicism to which she was born." Religious faith is a threat to the self-esteem of atheist liberals and virginity is an affront to their hedonism. Ironically—for a Feminist—DeMouy adopts the view of chastity taken by macho predators in the revolution: "Among the Mexicans, her virtue is 'notorious,' since, for them, virginity is a state of arrested development." But of course, all Mexicans are not pigs. Most of them are Catholics, whose May Day procession is in honor of the blessed Virgin.

To DeMouy “Flowering Judas” has nothing to do with Jesus. It is all about *herself*—as a Woman: Laura is guilty of betraying herself by denying herself “affection, sexuality, and maternity,” resulting in emotional paralysis. DeMouy goes out of her way to avoid using the name of Jesus: “In an inverted paradigm of the Last Supper, Eugenio offers flowers of betrayal from the Judas tree, recalling the crucifixion and his death at the hands of a betrayer.” She does not capitalize His and she elides the reference to “crucifixion” from a merely implied Jesus into Eugenio. She mentions that Eugenio parodies the words of Christ, “Follow me,” but she never acknowledges the significance of Christ at the end of the story, where Eugenio tries to lead her to Hell. DeMouy pushes Jesus out of the way in order to preach Feminism. “By refusing to prevent Eugenio’s suicide, she has murdered her own principles.” According to DeMouy, Laura did not murder Eugenio, for a Feminist is responsible to no one but herself—certainly not to a male God. DeMouy displays the same pride that Laura exhibits in betraying the values of Jesus.

The Feminist critic Darlene Harbour Unrue is likewise a narcissist, declaring that “The title and the dominant symbols in the story support the theory that Laura is betrayer of the female principle more than she is of anything else, and it is the recognition of this betrayal that terrifies her.” Laura is not terrified of Hell, she is terrified of being Politically Incorrect—violating “the female principle.” For example, “Laura as the carrier of drugs has fulfilled only one role of the Great Mother.” Drugs are good according to “the female principle,” whereas according to Jesus drugs are often evil and suicide is worse. Unrue devalues Laura’s dream as evidence of her belief in Jesus and fear of going to Hell because she betrayed Him: “It is important to remember...that the dream is created in Laura’s subconscious with the symbols of her childhood religion and that it externalizes Laura’s own fears rather than offering objective proof of Laura’s responsibility for Eugenio’s death.” Her nightmare is evidence of her guilty conscience but not of guilt? No other critic goes so far astray as to deny that Laura has any responsibility for Eugenio’s death. Unrue is a typical Feminist in shifting blame: “The label that associates Laura with Judas Iscariot seems too strong.” Not to Laura herself. That is why she has the nightmare indicting herself as a Judas. Unrue dismisses the religious implications in the story by saying they express “Laura’s discarded Christianity.” In her analysis of *Ship of Fools* Unrue the atheist calls the most religious Christ-evoking character in the novel, the dying faith healer, a fanatic and a sexual predator.

Unrue complains that “Mrs. Braggioni may be a feminist leader, but she is not a true feminist.... She does not free herself from male domination.” Neither did Hillary Clinton, who also stayed married to a philandering husband. Always hypocrites, Feminists did not complain about that because Bill Clinton was the leader of their party. In reality, Feminists have consistently shown that they do not really care about corruption, having run Hillary for President of the United States, although she has been proven to be one of the most corrupt national politicians in American history. Says Unrue, “Mrs. Braggioni, cast in the image of Mary Magdalen, has placed a poor substitute in a god’s role.” This atheist critic will not bring herself to say Christ’s role, she does not respect the pattern of obvious Christian allusions in the story, she lumps Jesus together with all the pagan gods. Laura does not believe in a pagan god, she believes in Jesus. Mrs. Braggioni has been able to accomplish a lot for women by playing Mary Magdalen, by surrendering her *pride*—unlike Laura and Feminists such as Unrue. Unlike self-righteous “true Feminists,” according to the text Mrs. Braggioni’s “sense of reality is beyond criticism.”

The Feminist critic Mary Titus is interested in “power relations” between men and women, not in the meanings of the story. She is a political activist with the mentality of a biased sociologist or anthropologist, like most “literary” critics since the 1960s. To accommodate the huge influx of Feminists who were neither interested in nor equipped to analyze texts objectively, English departments nationwide accepted political advocacy and established politically correct Marxist “cultural studies” and “contextualism” as alternatives to teaching literature. Most Feminists deny that objectivity is even possible. Titus is a typical Feminist “contextualist.” She is not interested in the text, the story for itself, she is interested in “gestures that constitute gender performance” and “men’s desire to dominate women.” She considers Laura as a “female subject” with a “simultaneous attraction to and fear of objectification.” Ignoring the story as a whole, she talks around the text and reaches into it like a shopper choosing ingredients for a salad. All over the country Feminist “contextualists” make salads according to strict politically correct rules and serve them at conferences. All their salads contain mostly the same ingredients and taste much the same, all sour and bitter. Titus entitled her book *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*, but she does not analyze the

art of Porter at all, she feeds us her own recipe. She should have entitled her book *My Ambivalence about Katherine Anne Porter*.”

Atheism and Feminism are two of the primary forces driving Political Correctness since the 1970s. As illustrated above, ideologues overlay their own beliefs on a text, covering up the beliefs of the author. The agenda of Atheists is to purge religious faith from the culture and the agenda of Feminists (most Feminists are also Atheists) is to purge the cultural influence of males and non-Feminists. Without the Christian vision of Porter, the story is trivialized. It is no longer about the possibility of going to Hell for all eternity, it is about Laura’s “disastrous” betrayal of “the female principle” because at age 22 she is still a virgin, and so on. Ideological critics have been satirized frequently in American literature, including Irving’s Ichabod Crane in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1819), Hawthorne’s Parson Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836), Melville’s expedient Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre* (1852), O’Connor’s atheist liberal Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and Porter’s pompous Professor Hutten in *Ship of Fools* (1962). Rayber wears ideological eyeglasses and a hearing aid he turns off whenever he does not want to hear something. Today academics in the liberal arts must conform to all the ideological dictates of Political Correctness in order to be hired, published, or tolerated.

Michael Hollister (2017)