

ANALYSIS

“That Tree” (1934)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“‘That Tree’ is an exception in more ways than one to the rest of Miss Porter’s work. Here she is concerned with the pretentious person, a man who in his youth ‘had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry,’ and the failure of whose first marriage had changed him into ‘an important journalist, an authority on Latin-American revolutions and a best seller.’ The central character of ‘That Tree’ is given no name; like the little boy in ‘He,’ he is referred to only by the personal pronouns. But whereas ‘He’ is a small tragedy, ‘That Tree’ is an exercise in ironic comedy which reveals the void in which the commercial artist, or the artist who confuses the highest standards of his art with those of success, must operate; in this particular respect, it reminds us of some of Miss Porter’s more stringent comments in ‘The Days Before.’

The protagonist of ‘That Tree’ is engaged, throughout the story, in a superficial conversation with a friend in a Mexican café, and the conversation reveals the talker. What we really learn is how his first wife, Miriam, who had been unable to accept his Bohemian standards when she came to Mexico to marry him, and who had left him after four years of marriage, has in reality succeeded in subjugating him to her by forcing him to abandon all the aspirations of his youth. Through two more marriages and several more years, her shadow has never deserted him, and now, a success and a hollow man as well, he is preparing to take her back. ‘That Tree’ is Miss Porter’s only real exercise in satire [On the contrary, see ‘The Martyr,’ for example]; it sustains the irony at which much of ‘Hacienda’ hints. But...it provides us with no one with whom we can sympathize.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 51

“‘That Tree’ (1934) is related by a young American living in Mexico. The hero, who has vague ambitions to be a poet, is at first quite happy loafing in the Mexican sunshine and living with an Indian girl who poses for some of his painter-friends. He is, however, more or less engaged to Miriam, a Minneapolis school-teacher, ‘a nicely brought-up Middle-Western girl, who took life ‘seriously’; when she arrives in Mexico City to marry him his whole life is changed. Basically prim and priggish, Miriam is not impressed with his poetic aspirations and informs him flatly that he is an untidy loafer. He smolders under this taunting; they bicker, and finally Miriam goes back to America.

Then comes the point of the story: the hero spends the years that follow doggedly trying to make something of himself to prove to Miriam ‘that he was not just merely a bum, fit for nothing but lying under a tree.’ He swallows his pride, sets aside his poetic ambitions, and becomes a successful journalist, although actually he has no interest in this profession and still (ostensibly) hates and despises everything that Miriam stands for. The fact is that the puritanical Anglo-Saxon element in his own character has given him a bad conscience and left him feeling vaguely that Miriam was right, that at the bottom he is nothing but a loafer.

At the end of the story he invites her to come back, insisting to a friend in a drunken conversation that this time their relations are to be on another basis and that Miriam will ‘walk the chalk line’—a declaration that both he and the reader realize is nothing but a rationalization, since he instinctively feels the need of Miriam’s discipline to counteract the indolent and ambitionless quality of his own character.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 321-22

“‘That Tree’ is an almost uninterrupted monologue in which a successful American journalist in Mexico, agitated by a letter from his estranged first wife asking him to take her back—and by his decision to do so—tells the story of their marriage and divorce to a guest with whom he is drinking in a café. Part of the interest of the story is its description of life in Mexico City, especially among the arty set. The heart of the story, however, is a close examination of the deep conflict between romanticism and realism in life and of some of its implications for psychology and marriage. In one respect this examination takes the form of a study of the American temperament as seen against the background of the Mexican.

The protagonist’s monologue is recorded in a third person form reminiscent of ‘Rope’ in that it permits the ironic narrator to be constantly present, judging the speaker by his own words. One of the strongest signs of his degradation is the very fact that, in his drunken loquacity, he tells this story of the sordidness of his life. It is impossible to distinguish sharply between his own statements and the observations of the ironic narrator (which may be viewed as the stream of his thoughts flowing beneath his speech), but it seems certain that, no matter how deep his shamelessness, he does not actually tell all the humiliating details recorded in the story. On the first page there is this observation: ‘Long after he had become quite an important journalist...he confessed to any friends and acquaintances who would listen to him—he enjoyed this confession, it gave him a chance to talk about the thing he believed he loved best, the idle free romantic life of a poet—that the day Miriam kicked him out was the luckiest day of his life’.... Such condemnatory lines as these add to the atmosphere of maudlin self-revelation....

The marriage described in this story may be classified as a particularly destructive union. One is certain that even its forthcoming renewal will be stable only to the extent that the wife has succeeded in killing the husband’s spirit... The separation has been a sort of escape for both of them, but their reunion after such a long estrangement only emphasizes their enslavement. This particular unhappy marriage has special interest because it is a sort of allegory of the conflict within the protagonist’s own mind. His wife is an embodiment of repressed traits in himself... The would-be poet possesses qualities similar to Miranda’s—intelligence, considerable talent, desire for a free life of dedication to artistic truth. Like her he has escaped to Mexico, and like her he has been disillusioned; but he has been fatally slow in his recognition of the practical, common-sense part of him in the person of his wife. This side of his nature has, however, finally forced his idealistic side into submission. It is here that he parts company with Miranda....

In both, because of their basically artistic natures (though his is less genuine), the desire for escape to truth has taken the form of a flight to an ideal artistic life. Inevitably, the reality proves too human, there is disillusion, and the...protagonist makes a second escape. But here the...protagonist fails to pass the test, and it is his own nature, represented by his wife, that drags him down. His wife’s departure is an incipient escape—a characteristically passive one—for him. After his first shock his thoughts are remarkably close to Miranda’s... As she confirms her first major escape at the end of *Old Mortality*, she feels a sudden liberation at daring to break out of her childhood belief in the sacredness of love... In ‘That Tree’ we read, ‘So she went, and she did him a great favor without knowing it. He had fallen into the cowardly habit of thinking their marriage was permanent, no matter how evil it might be, that they loved each other, and so it did not matter what cruelties they committed against each other.’

The instinct in both is exactly the same but in Miranda’s case it is justified, while in the present case it is only a pseudo-escape from cowardice. Foolishly, this protagonist falls again into his original idealistic error about his arty companions. He will emerge from it this time only into the abject and sodden defeat vividly portrayed at the end of the story. The author scorns this protagonist as a masculine weak sister... His defeat is bitter because he had represented some very real values. In him, however, the escapist aspect dominated over the desire for truth and beauty. This is the weakness which gave Miriam her deathlike grip on him.... There is an element of escape and irresponsibility...which sends Americans to foreign artists’ colonies... Even in her superficial school-teacher romanticism, Miriam is the embodiment of this background, and as such she has real power....

This hero’s idealism has been a perfect echo of Laura’s (political and artistic idealism being here interchangeable) and so is his disillusion. Miriam has seen through it all ‘with half an eye’: ‘The trouble was that Miriam was right, damn her. I am not a poet, my poetry is filthy, and I had notions about artists that I must have got out of books.’ Miriam shares the author’s scornful estimate of him as an overgrown

child, as she reveals to him in the particularly cutting way she says, without any special emphasis, 'Ah your mother.' She herself has from the start been a domineering mother to him, not a wife. Her American middle-class frigidity, which is a root cause of the destructiveness of this marriage on the social plane, is the highly organic symbol of her coldness to all his aspirations. It is an ironic commentary on his blindness to his own desires that subconsciously he too sees Miriam as his mother—the oppressive embodiment of reason, authority, even punishment.

This explains, on one level, his compulsion to take her back. They have really never been apart. During their separation each is preoccupied with the other. She reads all his articles, and his newly-adopted vocation is testimony to her power over him. His two intervening marriages are superficial, and at least one of them is broken up by his resentment of the new wife's criticism of Miriam, his hateful but inescapable other self.... There is necessarily a pretext of love for the marriage in the first place, but the emphasis is overwhelmingly on hatred.... In speaking of his love for Miriam the protagonist is at a loss for words.... But he can go on for hours on her faults, and he admits that, after all, she isn't really beautiful. They achieve no communion through sex. Upon Miriam's first arrival in Mexico there is not the slightest indication of love on her part as she views the nuptial chamber strewn with flowers. She shifts immediately into the role of disapproving mother.

Individually the protagonist of 'That Tree' is an abortive Miranda. In the composite he forms with his wife, who forces him to bitter self-knowledge, he possesses an insight not too inferior to hers. He, too, is disillusioned by the human embodiment of his romantic ideal, but, because of the warring of elements within, he does not have the power to escape from it. Each party sees the values of the other deprecatively, and in their union each betrays, to some extent, his own. The composite individual they form sacrifices the important values to the smaller, safer ones, and is fated to permanent bitterness at the knowledge of what it has done—to an overwhelming sense of lost possibilities.... The tree under which the would-be poet wanted to sit is the symbol of the ambiguous ideal of independence-isolation—in his case muted to irresponsibility-degradation—which he will never reach. This protagonist is unique in Miss Porter's short fiction, representing as he does...a man who quits trying... The single parallel to the composite character he forms with his wife is the Jenny-David polarity in *Ship of Fools*."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 37-42

"'That Tree,' a dramatic monologue, contains two unnamed characters—the journalist telling his story and his companion, perhaps a woman, through whose eyes we see and hear the events of the story. The journalist's monologue is interrupted only once, by a quarrel with a newspaperman. The story is an account of the failure of a man to lead the bohemian life he dreamed of, of the falsity of that dream, of the failure of a marriage, the failure of a prim woman to enjoy life or sex—and, by implication, the failure of the Mexican social revolution. The journalist's own words turn against him, and the listener and the reader see fragmentary but sharply defined images of Mexican bohemianism, the American middle classes, American liberal magazines, American expatriates in Mexico, and the codes of conduct of the journalist, his pseudo-artistic friends, and his Indian mistress.

The narration alternates between heavy irony and biting satire. The unnamed journalist had once had the romantic desire 'to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry,' poetry he knew was worthless, but he insisted, too strongly, that he received great pleasure in composing it. His was the fatuous concept of the poet as a poverty-stricken but unshackled bum; but, after his first wife Miriam left him, he put his dreams aside to become an important journalist for liberal American magazines, an authority on revolutions in Latin America. He confessed to any who would listen that Miriam's leaving him had been his making, that he had become a success just to impress her.... Miss Porter has used the story of the journalist as a way of dissecting several fragments of American and Mexican culture. The hollowness, the trickery, the chicanery—all are expertly, mercilessly exposed....

Miriam, even more than Laura in 'Flowering Judas,' was prim and proper; she took life seriously. She hated Mexicans and their culture; she held her nose when she went to the market; she refused to have an Indian servant. The squalor, the distance between aspiration and reality are all painfully acute to everyone

except the narrator, who could not understand why his wife cried. She hated housework; he had thought it joyful to wash the colorful pottery outside, with the heaven tree in full bloom. In the three years of their engagement, during which she saved for her dowry, she complained...about the dullness of the Middle West; but, once she saw her husband's bohemian friends in Mexico, she became frightened. She knew they were just waiting for their chance and would not believe his mystical explanation that the artist chose poverty. After she left him, he too finally decided his own notions on art and artists were romantic.

He put aside part of his bohemian life to 'walk the chalk line' with Miriam... She had violated his code of conduct when four generals, just after the Obregon Revolution, came to the city for the installation of the new government. 'They infested the steam baths, where they took off their soiled campaign harness and sweated away the fumes of tequila and fornication, and they infested the cafes to get drunk again on champagne, and pick up the French whores who had been imported for the festivities of the presidential inauguration.' When the generals, quarreling among themselves, reached for their pistols, all the Mexican girls on the dance floor swung their escorts, to act as shields (the room was 'frozen,' the music stopped); but Miriam had hidden under a table. She could never understand why he was humiliated by her breaking a Hemingwayish code. He broke his own code of conduct when he argued with the newspaperman, but he was too self-centered to be aware of this.

At times, as the drink pushed aside his defenses, the journalist saw some of the truth about himself, saw that his concept of the artist was romantic; but he could draw no conclusions except those of Miriam and the middle classes: success had to be tangible, momentarily rewarding, and socially elevating. Miriam had won. Two wives later, he was taking her back as mistress, he claimed; but his companion knew better. He thought Miriam would now walk a chalk line—he drew a symbolic line on the tablecloth, then crosshatched it—but it was he, his companion knows, who would follow the line. The listener wanted to say, 'Don't forget to invite me to your wedding,' but did not. More deluded than Miranda at the end of *Old Mortality*, the journalist said to 'the shadow opposite'—an image which continues the wasteland theme of earlier Mexican stories—as they sat in the café now almost emptied, the orchestra leaving: 'I suppose you think I don't know--'; then he paused for effect, 'I don't know what's happening, this time,' he said, 'don't deceive yourself. This time I know.' He admonished himself, as before a mirror. As in 'My Last Duchess,' we have seen clearly the character of a self-deluded, success-failure of a man."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 48-51

"Katherine Anne Porter's childless couples are, if anything, even more miserable than the mothers and fathers in her fiction.... Typically, one or the other is frigid, or impotent, or otherwise sexually deficient; sometimes, it is both. It is clear that some of these spouses sought in marriage a refuge from their families and only find themselves harnessed into a still more oppressive bondage to each other. One such couple is the poet-journalist and his first wife in 'That Tree,' who act out in Mexico a fantasy of escape from the effects of their puritan upbringing."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 46

"'That Tree' is Porter's first attempt to tell a story from a male point of view.... This man thinks just like Porter women. [What an insult!].... [He wants to be] free to worship at the shrine of sacred Art. He is, however, treated with much greater irony: he wishes to project a bohemian image and indulges the worst excesses of a romantic nature... Underneath, however, lie the more practical impulses of his blood—the necessity for name, money, possessions, solid work. He spends three years suppressing these impulses before unwittingly acknowledging their power over him by marrying a wife who he knows will be the incarnation of respectable middle-class values in the romantic land of his heart's desire. After four years of marriage, he is haggard from fighting this alter ego of his, now personified in his wife Miriam.... Duality surfaces again in the same forms Porter repeatedly uses; the masculine free spirit is hedonistic, artistic, and sexually uninhibited, while the feminine personality which opposes it is rigid, domestic, and shamelessly puritanical.

The story the protagonist narrates [No, the guest narrates] to an unidentified companion is a monologue which reviews this conflict and the collapse of his dream.... Dramatic monologue is a vehicle for ironic truth, and in the conclusion the narrator...reveals things about himself that he himself does not recognize. The broad setting of the story is Mexico, land of enchantment and romantic possibility where 'a cheerful bum' can lie down under a tree to write poetry. It is also, paradoxically, a place of revolution, possessed of a precarious peace always on the brink of upheaval. This setting is an appropriate reflection of the narrator's psyche, although he cannot admit this to himself. As in other Porter stories, the protagonist's thinly disguised psychological conflict is personified by two women.

Before his marriage, the narrator [No, the protagonist] takes his new environment to his bosom in the person of an Indian girl who lives with him in sublime simplicity. Her accepting nature requires very little of him... When his marriage is imminent, the Indian girl claims the household furniture and moves cheerfully on to another man with her baby in tow. In starkest contrast, Miriam, who reflects the seeds of the narrator's own culture, is 'a properly brought up...Midwestern girl, who took life seriously.' Whereas Mexican girls instinctively support the male ego because they enjoy sexual attention and male protection, Miriam doesn't want to be protected and is diffident toward sex.... What she does want is to be supported in a middle-class manner.... Miriam views marriage not as a love match, but as an economic agreement. Unlike the Indian girl, who almost as an afterthought claims a dowry of the man who has kept her, Miriam spends three years saving money and accumulating household linen before she will enter into marriage. She cries constantly after her arrival because she will get the worst of a bad bargain. She has traded her maidenhead for an empty house full of wilting flowers where she must cook over a charcoal brazier and wash clothes in a stone tub with cold water.

What was so recently a picnic for the narrator becomes a catastrophe: 'Everything that had seemed so jolly and natural and inexpensive with the Indian girl was too damnifying and costly for words with Miriam.' Yet again there is the dichotomy between the soft, acquiescent girl and the determined inflexible woman... It is significant that the narrator thinks Miriam has learned her discipline as a schoolteacher, supervising children, for her relationship to her husband is that of a mother to a son. Instead of taking up her husband's way of life after marriage, she brings her way of life (which he is ostensibly trying to eschew) to him and tries to impose it on his newly adopted culture. Far from being a 'sweet bird' who wishes to be liberated from her cage, Miriam wishes to make a domestic nest out of her husband's garden of earthly delights. For his part, the tree he wants to lie down under represents a kind of womblike haven where all his needs are nourished at little expense to him. Miriam is the sheltering tree during the years of their marriage in that she supports them with her savings, but aside from physical sustenance, she is hardly a benevolent mother.

She fusses about cleanliness, wholesome food, and table manners. She preaches the work ethic. She is a nagging, complaining, punitive woman who wants her husband to 'walk the chalk line' for her and when he does not, she packs up her 'nest' and goes home. Unlike her husband's natural mother, who managed several children and hard work 'with a quiet certainty, a happy absorbed look on her face,' Miriam does not define her self through nurturing. Indeed, she succeeds in 'reforming' her wayward child-husband only by leaving him, or, as he insists on thinking of it, by kicking him out. It is significant that once 'kicked out' of the nest, he 'suddenly resolves' to make a career for himself in journalism.... From one point of view, this marital struggle might easily be seen as a conflict between id (the poet) and superego (Miriam); because of this struggle, the poet is reformed: he becomes a 'journalist.'

Obviously, in his poet-hedonist role he never feels complete; he fails to find his ideal tree. But perhaps he fails to find it because Miriam, with her 'severe' moral standards and her judgmental comments on his lifestyle, challenges his belief that his romanticism is ultimate existence.... She functions as his conscience or voice of reason, pointing out that his artistic friends are opportunists and that he is a bad poet. In a sense she confirms his worst fears about himself. He admits that 'except for Miriam, he would have been a lousy failure... Instead, he is a 'recognized authority on revolutions in twenty-odd Latin-American countries' with 'a prose style of his own.' He is a concrete success, but he is nevertheless bitter because he has 'spent a good deal of time and energy doing all sorts of things he didn't care for in the least to prove to his first wife...that he was not just merely a bum'... [She is] his 'better half,' a double or alter ego struggling for

supremacy of his personality.... They are opposites, but nevertheless two parts of one whole, for all their disparateness....

The narrator's self-hatred justifies a certain amount of masochism in his choice of a life's companion, but even that does not fully account for the intimate bond between them even after they are divorced. So strong is this union that the narrator might easily say...'Who says a word against her says it against me.'... From the beginning of their marriage, Miriam refuses to compromise, signaling a fight to the death.... [She] becomes 'an avenging fury,' and by the time she leaves, he feels she has done him serious damage; she herself is 'shabby and thin and wild-looking' from the struggle. Miriam, personifying her husband's early training and the betrayal of his own blood, defeats the poet in him and departs, but once gone, she is hardly forgotten... Instead of being free of her, he has internalized her, with all her precepts and prohibitions. He goes about creating a career 'in the hugest sort of way'....

He has finally succeeded in proving to Miriam that he is 'not merely just a bum' because his new identity as 'journalist' lures her back to the union she has never really left. That the journalist has effectively subsumed her shows up in the fact that despite his promise to reassert the old circumstances of the poet he was—a Mexican house with no conveniences and no marriage license—the punitive tone he assumes is completely different from his previous easygoing manner. He has become someone else, even to the point of insisting that he will now be the one to draw chalk lines, and Miriam the one to walk them. Despite the fact that he says he will not remarry Miriam, his shadowy guest recognizes that, far from disunion, this couple are indeed two in one flesh, and that a new marriage ceremony is in order. He has to restrain himself from saying, 'Don't forget to invite me to your wedding.'

The final sentences of the story illustrate the significance of the monologue, which has amounted to a psychological retrospective of the transformation of poet to journalist. They also reinforce in one final image the irony the reader has observed in the love/hate the narrator feels for his 'better self,' Miriam. To emphasize the speaker's true position, Porter ends one paragraph with the first half of a broken-up statement by the narrator: 'I suppose you think I don't know--' In a new paragraph he haltingly repeats the last three words 'I don't know,' which accurately describe his ignorance and his malady....

It would be too farfetched to suggest that the whole monologue has been a waking dream, the journalist's Prufrock-like explanation of his actions to his poetic psyche—an excessive defense of his decision to live Miriam's way of life, even to the point of remarrying her. However, the fact that the reader knows the journalist to be a divided man emphasizes his ironic insistence on his self-knowledge. The image of him 'admonishing himself before a mirror' infallibly calls up the doubleness of the man and his reflection, the ghost of the poet and the tenuous reality of the journalist, and finally suggests the image of Dorian Gray before his portrait, which decays before his eyes."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 73-78

"'That Tree'... was inspired by the drama of the personal lives of Carlton Beals, an American journalist, and his wife Lillian, whom Porter knew in the early 1920s in Mexico. While there are references in the story to the revolution—it is in the far background—the story is essentially about the Anglo-American expatriate community in Mexico. 'That Tree' still lies within the frame of Porter's design. It is about appearance and reality and self-deception as people avoid available truth and seek idealistic lives that are forever out of reach. On a more immediate level Porter examines reasons people in the expatriate community were attracted to Mexico.

The unnamed journalist 'had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry.' Before Miriam became his wife she wrote him about 'how she longed to live in a beautiful dangerous place among interesting people who painted and wrote poetry,' and how his letters came into her stuffy little world like a breath of free mountain air. The journalist remembers 'a gang of Americans like himself who were living a free life and studying the native customs.' Porter remarked in an essay that she had written on D. H. Lawrence that 'he had come to Mexico hoping to find in primitive people a center and a meaning to life.' The journalist and his wife seem to have less noble motives. It turns out, however, that

the ideal of carefree living, symbolized by the tree, associated universally with knowledge, is irreconcilable with the indigenous American Puritan ethic. [The Bible is “irreconcilable” with Puritanism?]

Miriam’s Biblical name, her preference for Milton’s poetry over her husband’s, her school teaching, her primness, and her sexual repression represent her provinciality and her inability to accept the dark truths about human nature. [The Bible, Milton, and school teaching represent “provinciality”? The Bible and Milton represent an “inability to accept the dark truths about human nature”? This critic’s Atheism generates some very stupid generalizations.] But it is her judgment of the journalist that causes him to abandon his carefree life and work to become a successful journalist. And it is his success that brings Miriam back to Mexico. Thus, the illusion for both of them begins anew, and the conflict remains unsettled. It is the conflict within the American consciousness itself, between escape and responsibility, or perhaps between the frontier and civilization.

‘That Tree’ offers an especially interesting study of Porter’s style. She revised the story before it appeared in the 1935 edition of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, and the change in point of view is noteworthy. In the first version, the story is told by a narrator who is present at the journalist’s monologue and participates in the rendition by translating that monologue into an indirect description of his words, using direct quotations only when the journalist quotes someone else or when a conversation between the journalist and nearby patrons of the bar interrupts the flow of the journalist’s musings. The narrator confirms her presence when she says, ‘He wondered if any of us had ever thought how impossible it is to explain or make other people see the special qualities in the person you love’ and again when she says, ‘Both of us jumped nervously at an explosion in the street, the backfire of an automobile.’

In the revised version, the first-person viewpoint is abandoned, but Porter implies the presence of a companion in the statement ‘They both jumped nervously at an explosion in the street, the backfire of an automobile.’ Such a companion seems to be confirmed when the journalist says ‘to his guest,’ ‘For God’s sake...let’s have another drink’ and later when he observes, ‘Our glasses are empty again.’ The guest/companion/auditor is mentioned explicitly near the end of the story: ‘His guest wished to say, ‘Don’t forget to invite me to your wedding,’ but thought better of it.’ With the changes in the revision Porter refines the story in several important ways. She moved the emphasis upon the ironic turn of events to an emphasis upon the psychological state of the journalist, who seems to be addressing himself rather than another person. Porter calls the nebulous companion only ‘the guest,’ but the journalist thinks of the companion as ‘the shadow opposite’ and finally as a ‘mirror.’ The final version is both more complex and more realistic. Except for faint allusions in *Old Mortality* and ‘The Leaning Tower’ Porter left Mexico behind in ‘That Tree,’ using it again only as the opening scene of *Ship of Fools*, the place of embarkation for the *Vera*, just as it was the place of embarkation for her serious writing.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 42-45

“‘That Tree’ describes American journalists living temporarily in Mexico. The journalists are a kind of plague to the Mexican natives—a swarm of parasites who consume their resources, and look down their noses at their ‘primitive’ culture. Porfirio Diaz is reputed to have said, ‘Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States.’ The closeness of Mexico to the United States has, in fact, been one of its major problems. The American curse that materialized in the form of parasitic journalists who swarmed over the nation during the Obregon Revolution to ‘interpret’ Mexican culture for their readers is the context of this story. Porter herself was, of course, one of the breed. As a presumed authority on things Mexican, she was offered numerous journalistic assignments that required her presence in Mexico.

The journalist, a male chauvinist pig if ever there was one, and almost totally without redeeming social value, had come to Mexico without a truly noble cause in view. ‘He had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry’.... But he has difficulty in finding that ideal tree, under which he can write poetry and do little else except imbibe the local alcoholic beverages. It is his wife, Miriam (named, no doubt, for the sister of Moses the lawgiver), who casts a pall over all this useless activity. She is a Midwestern schoolteacher, a virgin with no interest in sexual experimentation, and a genuine desire to get ahead in the world.

The anti-hero of the tale loses his job, becomes a parasite upon his wife, and suffers the indignity of a divorce. But her leaving at last instills in him a will to succeed in journalism, which he does. Renouncing art (no great sacrifice, since his talent was non-existent), he rises in the world. When, five years later, his former wife asks to come back, he is willing to take her on his own terms, or so he drunkenly tells himself. An ineffectual, alcoholic, passive male in confrontation with a dominant female who goads him into action (suggestive, as usual, of Porter's Texas father and her Texas paternal grandmother) form the core of the tale. The male, who drifts from one relationship to another (he has an affair with an Indian woman while corresponding with his wife), and cannot manage even the simplest of household chores, is given sufficient scope in this tale to reveal himself as a cad, a bum, and a shiftless, sorry good-for-nothing, when all is said and done. The reader is exasperated with his passivity, as no doubt Katherine Anne Porter was exasperated with all such masculine types.

The style of the story is Hemingway-burlesque. Everything takes place within a bar, and not exactly 'a clean, well-lighted' bar. All is reminiscence narrated by a third-person ironic observer. The "tough-guy" speeches spoken by barroom brawlers evoke the worst aspects of the wasted life of expatriates. On a personal basis, Katherine Anne Porter seems in this story to be working out the proper self-attitude towards her career in Mexican journalism. The self-criticism is pitiless; called into question is the whole notion of whether she can be an artist or whether she must remain a bum journalist, a parasite in a foreign country. The moralistic side of Porter's thought (represented by the shrewish Miriam in the narrative) is dominant here. Here Porter renounces caricatured notions of art-for-art's-sake and the spiritual notion of the artist. It has become clear in her that all human beings, artists included, are looking out for the main chance. [The most obvious refutations of this argument are Adam in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and Dr. Schumann, the woodcarver, and the dying old faith healer in *Ship of Fools*.]

Journalism is rejected; genuine artistic creativity (which involves hard work, responsibility, dedication, sobriety, commitment, and all the other elements of the Mosaic code) are now embraced."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 150-53

"The lure of Mexico, particularly in its legend as a land of primitive naturalness and unrestraint standing opposed to puritanical Western culture, is central to another of Porter's Mexican stories, 'That Tree' (1934). Here two American expatriates, a journalist and his wife, Miriam, look to Mexico for succor and fulfillment. They hope that, immersed in what they see as Mexico's freedom, they will find liberation from their repressed and stunted bourgeois lives. Rather than emerging unencumbered and whole, however, both merely succumb to the romance of their naïve desires. While they come to see the falsity of their dreams, they nonetheless continue to strive after them.

For the journalist, Mexico is the appropriate place for fulfilling his dream of becoming a poet, or at least of living the life of a poet. Mexico represents for him an escape from the dreariness of modernity, particularly the middle-class life of getting and spending to which he feels he would be shackled were it not for his artistic dreams. Naïve and romantic, he envisions poetic endeavor merely as the abandoning of everyday responsibilities to give free reign to emotions. There is no real work involved: poetry for the journalist comes freely and easily. 'He had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree, in a good climate, writing poetry,' the narrator reports of the journalist's efforts at poetry.

'He wrote bushel basketsful of poetry and it was all no good and he knew it, even while he was writing it. Knowing his poetry was no good did not take away much from his pleasure in it. He would have enjoyed just that kind of life: no respectability, no responsibility, no money to speak of, wearing worn-out sandals and a becoming, if probably ragged, blue shirt, lying under a tree writing poetry. That is what he had come to Mexico in the first place.' Here is another manifestation of an artist of the lost generation wallowing in unanchored emotion. As the narrator makes clear, the journalist's aspirations have as much to do with life-style as with poetry. His artistic failure is anything but surprising.

The romance of Mexico also entices Miriam. Like the journalist, she envisions Mexico as a haven from the puritanical constraints of modern American society. During the three years before she went to Mexico, she wrote the journalist about 'how dull and dreadful and commonplace her life was, how sick and tired she was of petty little conversations and amusements, how narrow-minded everybody around her was, how she longed to live in a beautiful dangerous place among interesting people who painted and wrote poetry, and how his letters came into her stuffy little world like a breath of free mountain air, and all that.' But as quickly becomes evident upon her arrival in Mexico, Miriam has no intention to live out her desires for romance and intrigue. She instead embraces middle-class stability and security, precisely the values from which she professes to be fleeing. The life-style she wants to maintain is embodied in the huge trunk with which she arrives, packed full of linen and silk underwear. It also lies behind the terrified look she gives upon seeing the journalist's home, empty of the stylish furniture and conveniences she had expected. By her middle-class vision, Miriam sees in Mexico's primitive conditions not romance but waste and poverty and, even worse, savagery.

Little wonder that the journalist comes to hate Miriam. Her vision of things undermines the world he has constructed around his romantic visions of Mexico and poetic endeavor, forcing him to question his artistic ideals and to confront that part of him that he has attempted to repress. To Miriam there is nothing romantic about artists who wear dirty clothes and have no money. 'Why didn't they go to work and make a living?' the journalist characterizes her argument, adding that 'it was no good trying to explain to her his Franciscan notions of holy Poverty as being the natural companion for the artist.' Miriam argues, over the journalist's objections, that his artist friends have not deliberately chosen poverty ('Nobody but you would be such a fool,' she tells him) but are merely biding their time for something better. To the journalist's dismay, he eventually sees that she is right. The journalist admits to his guest that he 'lived to see Jaime take up with a rich old woman, and Ricardo decide to turn film actor, and Carlos sitting easy with a government job, painting revolutionary frescoes to order, and I asked myself, Why shouldn't a man survive in any way he can?' The journalist's question here, an attempt to excuse his friends' actions, indicates both the severity of Miriam's challenge and his resistance to it.

Undermining the journalist's resistance to Miriam is the disturbing emergence of his own middle-class voice that sympathizes with her, the voice he had sought to silence by coming to Mexico. 'His old-fashioned respectable middle-class hard-working American ancestry and training rose up in him and fought on Miriam's side,' the narrator reports. 'He felt he had broken about every bone in him to get away from them and live them down, and here he had been overtaken at last and beaten into resignation that had nothing to do with his mind or heart. It was as if his blood stream had betrayed him.' Eventually the journalist gives in to Miriam's, and now his own, challenge: 'When it came to a showdown, he hadn't a single argument in favor of his way of life that would hold water. He had been trying to live and think in a way that he hoped would end by making a poet of him, but it hadn't worked.' Despite his anger at Miriam for forcing him to see the truth about himself, he grudgingly admits that her criticism of him, culminating when she walks out on him to return to the United States, saved him from wallowing in his dreams and jarred him into seeking, and achieving, a respectable career as a journalist. His success with journalism is of quite a different order than his earlier attempts with verse: 'He had made the kind of success you can clip out of newspapers and paste in a book, and you can count it and put it in the bank, you can eat and drink and wear it, you can see it in other people's eyes at tea and dinner parties.'

As the journalist recounts his life story to an unnamed guest at a café, he at first glance appears to be a fitting representative of Porter's vision of the artist as seeker of truth through the exploration of memory. Porter by the thirties saw artistic creation as first and foremost an activity exploring the depths of memory, an activity that she once characterized as 'endless remembering.' Despite the fact that the journalist creates his narrative from his memories, he is anything but a mature artist. Rather than actively searching out his memory, bringing the voices of the past into interplay with those of the present so that the perspectives of each shed light on the other and thereby create fuller perspectives for both, the journalist calls forth his memories merely to insert them into a preconceived narrative frame. Nowhere in his story to the guest does the journalist deeply explore his past. Instead he merely constructs what he hopes will be an entertaining story—one with a surprise ending—that will at the same time justify him.

Near the end of the story, the journalist prepares to spring the two big surprises: Miriam's letter asking him to let her return and their impending reunification. 'He smoothed out the letter he had been turning in his hands and stroked it as if it were a cat,' the narrator writes. 'He said, "I've been working up to the climax all this time. You know, good old surprise, technique. Now then, get ready."' Here and in the rest of his story, the journalist manipulates his past for narrative suspense, pigeonholing rather than opening himself up to the insights and challenges of memory. Entertainment for his guest, his story is also flattering self-appraisal, an attempt to structure his life into a pattern of progressive enlightenment and growth that ends with his and Miriam's new life together.

The journalist's efforts to convince himself of his impending fulfilled life, however, in the end, collapse. The silence of his guest, now described as the journalist's 'shadow opposite,' accuses the journalist of what he knew all along but has done his best to deny; that his impending life with Miriam will be as disappointing as it was before, another cycle of hope ending in despair. He says to his guest that he imagines that she thinks he does not know what he is doing this time but adds, 'Don't deceive yourself. This time, I know.' But of course it is the journalist who deceives himself, as the narrator's comment after his words underscores: 'He seemed to be admonishing himself before a mirror.' The journalist has sought to plot his life by a narrative model celebrating growth and fulfillment when actually it is better represented by a cyclic repetition of hopeful dreams and painful frustrations.

As the story ends, it is clear that despite the silent rebuke of the guest—embodying the journalist's own deep-seated criticism of the story he tells—the journalist still strives to deny everything that calls into question the fictional shape he has given his life. He thus remains a romantic dreamer, spinning out narratives every bit as false as his earlier verse."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 69-73

"Carlton Beals (1894-1979) was an American journalist and teacher who spent considerable time in Mexico. A friend of KAP's, he went with Porter to see Diego Rivera's frescoes at the Preparatory School. He was the model for the poet/journalist in 'That Tree' and contributed to the character of Carlos in 'Virgin Violeta'."

Darlene Harbour Unrue, ed.
Katherine Anne Porter Remembered
(U Alabama 2010) 274 n45

The journalist is *not* the narrator of 'That Tree,' contrary to some critics. Three quarters of the way through the story, "'For God's sake,' he said to his guest." Later, "'Sacred Art,' he said..." And again, "He said, 'I've been working up to the climax all this time'." The third person point of view makes the reader aware that somebody else is rendering the monologue. In fact, the whole monologue is in the third person. The subject of sentences is "he" not "I." Porter often renders monologues and stream of consciousness passages in this unconventional way, a technique that allows her to establish the illusion of objective Realism—as if the journalist were being tape-recorded talking about himself in the third person--while being a Modernist at the same time, turning the monologue into a psychological allegory. At the end of the story, "The journalist...swung his half-focused eyes... The journalist paused..." "The journalist swallowed the last of his drink... His guest wished to say..." The journalist cannot know what the guest wishes to say, only the guest can know that.

The guest is narrating the monologue, reporting it like an objective journalist, as Porter was in Mexico. Porter went to see Diego Rivera's frescoes with a journalist named Carlton Beals, the model for the journalist in this story. After becoming disillusioned with the famous Rivera, Porter satirized him in "The Martyr." In "That Tree" she satirizes Beals. At the end when the talking journalist "swung his half-focused eyes upon the shadow opposite," the guest is identified with "the shadow," a literary concept deriving from the psychology of Carl Jung but introduced earlier in *Moby-Dick* by Melville and in works by Joseph Conrad. The shadow is an image of negative truth repressed by the conscious mind. The concept of the shadow is reinforced in the last word of the story: "He seemed to be admonishing himself before a mirror." In effect he is talking to himself. The guest is functioning as a mirror of the talking journalist by reflecting

the truth he suppresses: that when he reunites with Miriam he will not be able to reverse their power relations, refuse to marry her and require her to “walk the chalk line.” As his shadow, the guest is his “opposite.” The shadow is objective and knows the journalist better than the journalist knows himself: the journalist is still repressing the truth: “I suppose you think I don’t know--” the truth. That in fact he does *not* know the truth is evident in his concluding self-contradiction: “‘I don’t know what’s happening, this time,’ he said, ‘don’t deceive yourself. This time, I know’.” Ironically, he is the one deceiving himself. His eyes are “half-focused.” His guest “wished to say, ‘Don’t forget to invite me to your wedding,’ but thought better of it.” Because the shadow is repressed, it is merely a temporary “guest,” does not speak, and allows the conscious mind, the host, to go on repressing the truth.

Miriam was a strong woman leader in the Bible—the sister of Moses. The Miriam in this story is both a particularized individual and an allegorical figure alluding to her namesake. She is a prim, “nicely brought-up” schoolteacher from the Midwest, a region associated with the middle, the average. The journalist thinks he is her intellectual superior and belittles her: “You could have put her mind in a peanut shell.” If this were true, her favorite poet would not be Milton, with his cosmic religious vision. As an allegorical figure this Miriam represents on a lesser scale what the biblical Miriam represents—values in the tradition of Mosaic law: God, civilization, respectability, morality, responsibility, hard work. Miriam is the direct opposite of the journalist’s primitive Indian mistress. The Indian girl follows her instincts whereas Miriam believes in overcoming instincts with education and morality. The journalist does not even mention that Miriam is religious because, like the critics, he ignores religion.

Interpretation of a story by Porter is always a challenge because her fiction is so richly complex, subtle, allusive, patterned, symbolic, allegorical, and ironic. This story is especially challenging because it is a monologue and Miriam has no voice except as filtered through the journalist, who is not objective or fair. This makes it important for Porter to establish in the opening sentence that the journalist is unreliable: “He had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry. He wrote bushels basketfuls of poetry and it was all no good.” Poetry expresses the character of the poet and this poet is “no good.” The technique of monologue reveals the truth about him more effectively than a dialogue with Miriam because he confesses things he would never say to her and a monologue also conveys that he is a self-important domineering talker whose conversations with Miriam or anyone else usually become monologues: “He confessed to any friends and acquaintances who would listen to him—he enjoyed this confession, it gave him a chance to talk...”

The journalist is so despicable he is comic—a fool as Miriam calls him—but he turns into a villain the more we sympathize with poor Miriam. Bohemians are notoriously irresponsible in relationships. This one is inclined to laugh at Miriam about her serious issues: “She was never able to see the amusing side of a threatening situation.” He allows her to believe he is a virgin, concealing that he has been living with an Indian girl and probably fathered her child. Worse, during the three years she is up in Minnesota preparing for their wedding, this “reporter” never prepares her for the primitive conditions she will have to accept down in Mexico. When she is shocked, he has no idea why she cries. The bad poet has no understanding or empathy: He is surprised that she expects “to settle down in a modern steam-heated flat” and assumes that she wants to be a filthy bohemian bum like himself: He thought “he was freeing a sweet bird from a cage. Once freed, she would perch gratefully on his hand”—in *his* cage.

When the journalist loses his job, he still expects Miriam to do all the housework. “She showed him her ruined hands” and “despised him for thinking it a picnic” in a garden with a “heaven tree.” They live in squalor on her savings and “her money melted away.” She rightly calls him a loafer, a “Ne’er-do-well” and “Parasite!” but “he had not listened to her.” He is also a hypocrite, complaining that Miriam is not beautiful in the way he prefers—“the kind that knocks your eye out”—though he himself is implicitly unattractive, called a weak little “shrimp” with no chin. His “love” for her is shallow, he sees only the surface of reality and lacks the depth required for self-knowledge. He believes that “no matter how evil” their marriage might be, “they loved each other, and so it did not matter what cruelties they committed against each other, and he had developed a real deafness to her words.” The evil is in him: “How he wished he might have thought of a trick to play on her that would have finished her for life.” He is vindictive and cruel, even plotting against her, whereas Miriam at the end of the story is forgiving.

It becomes increasingly clear that his criticisms of Miriam reflect his own faults: “Her moral standards were severe”; “She would not have an Indian servant”; “She was not interested in his poetry”; “She was not at all teachable and she took no trouble to make herself interesting”; “She had her points, all right, like a good horse, but she had missed being beautiful”; “She could make her personality, which no one need really respect, felt in a bitter, sinister way.” It is comical that the bad poet feels superior to Miriam—“You could have put her mind in a peanut shell”; she was “full of little crazy notions”—because she wins all their arguments: “She upset most of his theories”; “He had a sackful of romantic notions”; “The trouble was that Miriam was right, damn her”; “She was abominably, obscenely right”; “He hadn’t a single argument in favor of his way of life that would hold water.”

The bad poet and Miriam are versions of the American Adam and Eve, one of the major themes in American literature, initiated by Hawthorne in “The Maypole of Merry Mount” (1832): They are innocents who Fall into knowledge, but in their case, not enough knowledge. In the Hawthorne tale, set in 1628, a young couple are having fun at a hedonistic colony in early Massachusetts, where carefree revelers are drinking and consorting with Indians and behaving like animals. However, as soon as the young couple fall in love, they *care* for each other and turn from Romantics into Realists, facing up to “the sternest cares of life” personified in the Puritans who raid Merry Mount, cut down the maypole and take the couple back to their colony. The phallic maypole is a pagan tree. In “That Tree” Mexico is a version of Merry Mount to the bad poet and even to Miriam until she arrives from Minnesota. The Hawthorne couple are implicitly going to Heaven, whereas the journalist is going to Hell.

Like Porter herself, this Miriam is a “feminist” in that “she had no intention of wasting her life flattering male vanity.” To her credit, unlike the Mexican girls who hide behind their men, Miriam believes in gender equality, qualified by Realism. When threatened by violence in the café, she hides under a table because “it had never occurred to her to save her life at his expense.” The bad poet wants her to act dependent on him like the Mexican girls act, rather than like an independent person. When she does not, he is “humiliated.” The Indian girl took a dowry from the journalist, whereas Miriam brings her own dowry to the marriage, a lot more than he brings. The journalist states that he loves Miriam, but also that he hates her. He marries her, but also divorces her. He escapes to an opposite life of irresponsible freedom in Mexico, but due to his conditioning and psychological needs he cannot escape the influence of Miriam. To “impress” her he became a journalist, a bestselling authority on Latin-American revolutions, which are analogous to his personal revolution against authority in being corrupt and futile.

He is offended and starts a verbal altercation in the café when another journalist seated nearby makes a remark mocking the repeated failure of revolutions. The journalists ridicule each other, yet in character they are alike—dissipated, vulgar, egocentric troublemakers—“newspaper bums.” The journalist has abandoned bohemian bumhood and become a newspaper bum himself, changing from one kind of parasite into another. “They spent their time trying to work up trouble somewhere so they could get a story out of it.” They are like the “*Gotcha!*” journalists of the post-Watergate era today, liberals who are propagandists for their political party, unscrupulous and inflated by power like the fat one who “looked like a parboiled sausage ready to burst from its skin.” They are identified with Marxism in being red—sausage red, “scarlet,” and “darker red.” The four journalists at the nearby table are analogous to the four fat generals of the revolution seen later in the cafe. Each group has a belligerent drunk who starts to get violent and is subdued by the others. The name of one is Joe, suggesting that such men are common and typical of male human nature. He is an ordinary Joe. The fat generals have more power than the news bums to be self-indulgent, reckless and unpredictably dangerous. The “chinless” little protagonist is cowardly in acting tough to a much larger man only because he knows the man will be restrained by those around him, like the liberal journalists today who attack the President.

Only 3 of the 9 critics include the tree in analyzing a story entitled “That Tree.” Nance says the tree is a symbol of “independence-isolation,” DuMouy calls the tree a symbol of Miriam “sheltering” the journalist, and Unrue thinks the tree is a symbol of “carefree living” that is “associated universally with knowledge,” as if carefree living is all knowledge. Unrue is an Atheist with no knowledge of the Bible. In history, the tree is an archetypal symbol with diverse meanings in various mythologies and religions—the Tree of Life, the Tree of the World, and so on. The most famous image of a man under a tree in the history of religion is Buddha sitting under a bodhi tree where he attained Enlightenment. Porter parodies Buddhism by implicitly

comparing it to merely lying under a tree all the time writing bad poetry. This bad poet is so lazy he does not even want to *sit* under a tree, he wants to lie down under it. But he would rather get drunk: “He had spent a good deal of time lying under tables.” A vague form of Buddhism has been popular in the bohemian tradition represented by the bad poet satirized here, as evident in the Beatnik movement of the 1950s—Kerouac and Ginsberg and others—who adopted Buddhist concepts that got reduced to mere sentiments as they trickled on into the counterculture of the 1960s. Porter was too independent and dedicated to respect the expatriate bohemian movements of the 1920s in Mexico or on the Left Bank in Paris—Gertrude Stein and that crowd.

The two most famous symbolic trees in history are (1) the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, containing Satan in the form of a serpent, who tempted Eve; and (2) the Cross of Jesus, traditionally called a tree—the true “heaven tree”—on which He redeemed the sins of the human race and offered Heaven. All 9 critics ignore these and the other implicit allusions to Christianity, in chronological order: (1) Miriam’s “sense of humor never worked for salvation”; (2) “For crisesake, Joe”; (3) “she Preferred Milton”; (4) “For God’s sake”; (5) “Christmas checks from her father”; (6) “the heaven tree in full bloom”; (7) “his Franciscan notions of holy Poverty”; (8) “good God.” Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a classic example of “Sacred Art” in contrast to the “filth” produced by the hedonistic protagonist. Additional evocations of religion, sometimes in ironic contexts, are “devilish,” “mystical faith,” “his faith had renewed itself,” and “I thought art was a religion.” His bad poetry was bad religion. He chose the wrong “heaven tree” to sit under. Then he abandoned all trees and got on “in the world of affairs.”

Ironically, in becoming a success in the world, the journalist has become worse as a man, while Miriam has become more humble and forgiving—more Christian. It is no wonder that two more women have divorced this guy. He is going to take Miriam back into the same primitive lifestyle that made her cry, even though he has published a bestseller and has the money to provide what she would like: “She was going to live again in a Mexican home without any conveniences and she was not going to have a modern flat. She was going to take whatever he chose to hand her, and like it.” He intends to treat Miriam like an Indian mistress, like he is one of the macho aristocrats who provoke revolutions in Mexico. He is still essentially the same “no good” bum, drinking in the same café, but as a bad poet he was passive and did little harm, whereas now, as a journalist he has acquired social power and become more contentious and aggressive. His picking the verbal fight with a rival journalist suggests that he will be more likely now to pick fights with Miriam. Now that he has status and has published a bestseller he will feel even more superior to her. The explosion that interrupts his monologue prefigures what is likely to happen again in their relationship: “Another revolution.”

Michael Hollister (2018)