

## ANALYSIS

“The Fig Tree” (1960)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“‘The Fig Tree’ is similar to ‘The Grave’ in its emphasis on Miranda’s initiation into life, but it differs from that sketch in several ways. It is longer and more complex in plot, though even in ‘The Fig Tree’ the narrated action is relatively simple. Miranda and her grandmother and father, with the servants, leave their house for the farm, to spend the remainder of the summer there. Just before their departure Miranda buries a dead chick near a fig tree and then thinks she hears it crying ‘Weep, weep’ from the grave. Forced to leave immediately, she cried during the trip and asks fruitlessly to be taken back.

They reach the farm and an unspecified length of time passes. Just before they return, Aunt Eliza, who has been the main attraction to Miranda, lets her look through her telescope at the moon and tells her that the sky contains ‘a million other worlds.’ The same evening, Miranda hears the cry of ‘Weep, weep’ near another fig tree and is filled with joy when Aunt Eliza tells her the sound is made by tree frogs.... There is considerable power in this symbolism, as also in that which is embodied in Great-Aunt Eliza. This monumental woman is for Miranda a sort of nature- or earth-goddess instructing her in the knowledge, but especially the mystery, of the universe. Miranda first sees her in an elevated position, halfway up a stepladder, giving directions about the telescope with which she would view the heavens. Even in this act Great-Aunt Eliza is violating the strict code of decorum represented by the Grandmother, and she continues to violate it at every turn. Miranda is at first disturbed by this revelation of a new set of values and by her discovery that someone can argue on equal terms and even find fault with the Grandmother, who has always been for her the absolute authority and the fixed center of life. But the knowledge which is at first disturbing proves in the end to be liberating.

In this story Miranda is initiated into the awareness of the immensity of things. She learns not only that the world is large but there are ‘a million other worlds.’ She finds that her grandmother is not the only world of values and the different world of Aunt Eliza can exist separately from it and on equal terms. Eliza is ‘natural’ in her scorn for manners as well as in her scientific investigations. Her universal vision is represented by the telescope, burning glass, and microscope with which she scans all things, from the largest to the smallest. The snuff which seems to permeate her with its color and odor is the symbol of her independence of the Grandmother’s moral universe, and in its earthy color and origin, a reminder of her role as earth-goddess. She looms in Miranda’s sight ‘like a mountain,’ and as she sits poring over some tiny object she looks ‘as if she were saying her prayers’ at the shrine of Nature....

‘The Fig Tree,’ while it begins with the theme of death, reverses the direction of ‘The Grave’ and carries Miranda toward a wider understanding of life. It is her ignorance of Nature that causes the deep and urgent pain which oppresses her throughout most of the story, and it is the instruction of Aunt Eliza that liberates her from this oppression. This liberation is part of the intoxicating flood of knowledge which overwhelms Miranda in the final scene. True, as always, to her name, she has from the first held herself open to this new knowledge. On the first day at the farm she ‘stared fascinated at Great-Aunt Eliza until her eyes watered.’ Throughout the summer she remains faithful to her new teacher. Finally Miranda’s loyalty is richly rewarded. When, just before they are to return to town, Great-Aunt Eliza invites the children to look through her telescope, they are so awed they look at each other like strangers and cannot speak....

Miranda is filled with amazement at the humbling fact that ours is not the only world in the universe; but her sharpest rapture is at learning that there are mysteries which baffle even adults. Until this time she has been completely walled in by the certainties of the Grandmother (who, as we learn in ‘The Old Order,’ believed firmly that her duty was authority and kept her own nagging doubts strictly to herself), but now she receives authoritative confirmation of the suspicion she has already felt—that the world is too big and mysterious to be bounded by the certainties of one person, even if that person is her Grandmother. This is

the thought that makes her break into inner song. It is her song of liberation... Miranda's new knowledge is an early step away from the family and the society which will oppress her increasingly as she nears maturity. At present this separation is merely suggested by the fact that, in her joy, she 'fell back by herself, walking a little distance behind.'

Still at the back of Miranda's consciousness, even in this joyful moment, is her concern for the buried chick, now become only a vague uneasiness tinged with guilt... Near the end of the story she again thinks she hears weeping... The motif appears frequently in 'The Fig Tree.' Miranda reveals her special dislike for encumbrances of any kind by her approval of the kittens' reactions to clothes... As always, Miranda is on the side of spiritual self-assertion. Her sense of crisis when the family's departure forces her to abandon the buried chick is an early instance of family necessities calling her away from the demands of her spirit... The fig tree which Miranda touches 'for luck' binds the closing scene to the one in which she buried the dead chick under another fig tree. Both trees contain tree frogs, but only under the tutelage of Great-Aunt Eliza does Miranda recognize them for what they are: symbols of life and of the truths of Nature...

It is interesting to see that the role of naturalist, which would seem so much more fitting in a man, is given by Miss Porter to a woman. Great-Aunt Eliza is now a version of the strong, self-sufficient woman, refreshingly different from the Grandmother but sharing to some extent, in spite of her habit of dipping snuff, in the awe which surrounds her generation in Miranda's eyes. By becoming her votary for a while, Miranda absorbs some of her love for Nature and sense of mystery—qualities which will complement the less artistic ones she inherits from her Grandmother... Great-Aunt Eliza...is...a source of freedom and expansiveness. Miranda's grip [on her] signifies not so much love as liberation. Elsewhere in 'The Fig Tree' the pattern of lovelessness continues to prevail. She is growing even more critical of her father... The emphasis of the sketches has completed its shift from the Grandmother to Miranda...

There is a parallel between "The Fig Tree" and "The Grave" in the fact that in each story Miranda emerges from a grave into a new phase of her development. Her concrete emergence from the grave of her grandfather in the first symbolizes her advance from childhood toward maturity, with its bitter knowledge of death, the final oppressor. In the second, her spirit is released from the grave of ignorance and narrow limitations, just as it is released from the little grave under the fig tree where it has been imaginatively confined." [This critic misses the faith in the Holy Spirit she attains in "The Grave" as symbolized by the dove screw head.]

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 107-14

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man (John 1: 47-51).

Miranda...begins her journey where Shakespeare's heroine ends hers. Shakespeare's Miranda...was too sheltered to know that her belief in beauty and nobility was largely deceptive, and she had too little experience to understand Prospero's answer, "'Tis new to thee.' Shakespeare used the name Miranda in the Latin sense of strange and wonderful, but Miss Porter has added to this the Spanish meaning—'the seeing one'; for Miranda in the later stories has the ability to see through the shams of her society and her training. In "the Fig Tree" she sees her grandmother and Aunt Eliza clearly, realizing...many of the absurdities of the adult world. Miranda as 'seeing one' is particularly evident because it is Miranda, disguised in third person, telling the story of the Grandmother, telling all the Miranda stories....

'The Fig Tree' has as its literary background Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Miss Porter goes far beyond the chimney-sweep poems with their dramatic use of 'weep! weep!', key words in 'The Fig Tree,' but she appears to be deeply indebted to Blake's imaginary world. It is characteristic of

Miss Porter, however, that the borrowings are completely integrated into her own special fictional world and are not extraneous quotations nor paradigms of erudite knowledge.... From the beginning of Miss Porter's story, Miranda is shown between the state of innocence and experience.... Grandmother, Harry, and Nannie, all restricted Miranda's innocent joys, by their very acts pushing her toward knowledge but at the same time attempting to keep her pure—keep her skin from being blemished. The restrictions of the elders were essentially the same as those of the parents in the 'Chimney Sweeper' poems in *Songs of Experience*....

The fig has several connotations in the story in addition to Jesus' statement to Nathanael. After Adam and Eve fell from their state of innocence, they covered themselves with aprons of fig leaves; the fig grove was a dark and shady place, and in many mythologies groves or dark forests are often connected with evil; and the fig is also sometimes called a fertility symbol.... In her state of innocence she had made no distinction in animal and human life, and she had afforded the chicken a child-like version of a Southern, Christian burial.... The adults were, as usual, uncomprehending (Grandmother Rhea could not even tell the difference between town and Halifax figs), and the father thought Miranda was having a tantrum because she had left a doll behind.... It was the promise of forty kittens at Cedar Grove...that finally calmed Miranda; as in 'Maria Concepcion,' life was triumphant over death....

At Cedar Grove, they joined Great-Aunt Eliza, amateur scientist, who with Henry as assistant put up her telescope on the hen house. Eliza...wielding both telescope and microscope, quarreling with Sophia Jane—is a remarkably complex and comic figure. She was perhaps named for Eliza in Joyce's 'Two Sisters' though the snuff-taking is transferred from Father Flynn.... Miranda accepted her as a part of the Halifax world, but she rejected the snuff-flavored gumdrop by washing it and the smell away (a parallel to the boy's refusal of biscuit in 'The Sisters')... Miss Porter's character watched and listened carefully 'for everything in the world was strange to her and something she had to know about'.... Sophia Jane spoke of snuff-dipping as a low-class habit but ignored her own sister's addiction to snuff.... Eliza's approach to science was religious: she sat over her experiments 'as if she were saying her prayers'....

The night Eliza allowed the children to gaze at the stars, she had to admit that science did not have all the answers.... Miranda sang 'nobody knows' in her head, dazzled with joy, still in a state of innocence, still accepting the mysteries.... Eliza explained in uncomplicated scientific terms that the sound came from the tree frogs... She is thus offering a substitute mystery... But, one can properly ask, will the scientific answer be enough for Miranda? It has allayed one fear, but it has not explained the mysteries of life and death. She has accepted an explanation which was, in fact, based on a single vision of life. Even the narrator distrusts the implicit trust of Miranda, for Miranda is described as in a fog of bliss. The mist perhaps hides other questions, other answers. Miranda in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, like Nathanael, is to see 'heaven open'."

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Twayne 1965) 61-66

"The story opens with an account of the family's preparations for one of their annual summer visits to the country. As usual, old Nannie and the Grandmother are figures of oppressive maternalism, curbing Miranda's eager high spirits. Nannie, brushing the little girl's hair and fastening a bonnet to her topknot with a safety pin, holds her firmly between her knees. 'When Miranda wriggled, Aunt Nannie squeezed still harder, and Miranda wriggled more, but never enough to get away.' As always, neither of the women will directly answer the child when she asks where they are going. She must figure it out from remarks exchanged among the adults.

She and her father have a standing joke about the name of the farm, which he is reluctant to visit at this time of year because it is so hot. 'The name of Grandmother's farm...was Cedar Grove, but Father always called it Halifax.... Halifax, of course, is a euphemism for Hell. Obviously, no one has explained this to Miranda. But her Grandmother disapproves of her using the phrase. And when Miranda asks her whether they are going to Halifax, the old lady is typically prim and impatient, admonishing her to 'call things by their right names,' while at the same time refusing to simply say they are going to Cedar Grove....

Just before their departure, Miranda finds a dead baby chick in the yard and feels obliged to bury it with proper ceremony.... Continuing to hear in her mind the tiny cry, she is in a frenzy of fear that she might have buried the chick alive. They are joined at the farm by Sophia Jane's sister, Eliza. Great-Aunt Eliza is so unlike Grandmother that it is hard for the children to understand how they can be sisters. Grandmother is slight, fine-featured, and, despite her energy and will, feminine and proper in every way. Eliza is big and homely, she dresses in rough tweeds, climbs ladders like a man, talks in a countrified, most unladylike way, and dips snuff. She cultivates amateur scientific interests—puttering around everywhere about the house with a microscope, setting up a telescope on the roof of the henhouse to look at the stars—which are most unusual for a woman of her generation, and especially for one of her provincial upbringing.

Sophia Jane tries to suppress her hostility to her sister, but it breaks briefly into the open now and again. She suggests to Eliza, who is climbing a ladder onto the henhouse to set up her telescope, that she should be more careful at her age. Eliza responds tartly: 'So long as you can go bouncing off on that horse of yours, Sophia Jane, I s'pose I can climb ladders. I'm three years younger than you, and at *your time of life* that makes all the difference. Miranda is obscurely disturbed by the spectacle of the two old women quarreling like spiteful children; the solid and dependable front of adult authority is being broken. But, though she knows that her Grandmother disapproves of her sister, she is irresistibly fascinated by the gruff-voiced, kindly old mountain of a woman who is Great-Aunt Eliza, with her earthy smell of snuff and her coarse snuff-colored clothes. Miranda is far too young to understand her own feelings, but Eliza is a spirit of liberation for her, opening an unforeseen way of escape from the narrow, oppressive moral and intellectual authority of the Grandmother.

In the most obviously symbolic episode, on the evening of their arrival at the farm, Great-Aunt Eliza shows Miranda the moon through the telescope, and speaks to her of the 'millions other worlds' beyond the earth. But her imagination is only rather abstractly excited by this. Miranda has her greatest joy in Great-Aunt Eliza's wisdom when she relieves her anxiety about the baby chick. Walking back to the house in the darkness, through the fig orchard, Miranda is suddenly frightened again by the sound she had almost forgotten during the afternoon. Having touched a branch of one of the trees, she hears all about her a gain, as if it were coming up from the ground, a chorus of the tiny, sad voices, 'weep, weep.' But Great-Aunt Eliza is able and willing to enlighten her. The cry does not come from the ground, she tells Miranda, but from the trees. It is the voice of the tree frogs, foretelling rain....

In the tree frogs' practice of eating their shed skins, there is a symbol of self-transcendence, of the victory of life over its own decay, that Miranda can comprehend no more fully than she could the 'other world' of the moon that she saw through the telescope. But, for the moment, it is enough and more to know that the cry of 'weep, weep' is the voice of the living, not the dead. The chick is dead, the frogs live. All in an instant, by the wonderful old woman's words, her heart is lifted up."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 16-19

"Symbolizing luck and life, the fig tree makes an interesting juxtaposition with the image of the grave which follows it... At the behest of Miranda's father and grandmother, Nannie is quite literally trying to squeeze Miranda into the shape her society thinks acceptable for females... Caught in a smothering environment, Miranda understands the bird is being stifled and projects her own fear of being buried alive onto the chicken... Added to this natural affinity she has for her elder is the fascination Miranda feels in seeing, for the first time, that there is someone who does not agree with Grandmother, who refuses to recognize her authority, and who, furthermore, is capable of making Grandmother quibble like a schoolgirl and even blush. At the end of their squabble Eliza always seems the victor, because having no embarrassment for anything she does, she can remain unruffled by her sister's objections to her behavior....

Most important, Eliza in her intellectual curiosity and unabashed self-confidence momentarily replaces the influence of Miranda's all-important Grandmother. The Grandmother, heavily present in the early scenes of the story recedes, and is totally absent at Miranda's intellectual initiation. It is appropriate that Eliza play Prospero to Miranda's naivete, that she be the one to turn Miranda's eyes outward to the stars....

The tree frogs shedding their skins...is...an image of rebirth, because they are new again as they emerge from the old skin. In this sense death is only a part of a cycle, an ever-changing process of destruction and renewal...and death is not an end but a becoming.

The symbolism of the fig tree supports this idea. It is certainly primal, held by some to be the tree from which Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit [That was an apple tree.] and by others the tree from which they took leaves to clothe themselves after they sinned. In either case it is one part of the story of how human beings first moved from innocence and ignorance to knowledge, as Miranda does in this story. In the pre-Christian world, the fig tree was sacred to Bacchus, god of wine and fertility; thus knowledge and life coexist in its symbolism... The fig grove at home...is 'very dark and shady,' a cavelike place suggesting the subconscious, where Miranda confronts death and guilt and must perform a ritual burial, just as she represses fears and rebellions."

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 136-39

"'The Fig Tree' begins where 'The Circus' ends in Miranda's developing awareness, an early point in the stage between innocence and experience.... The story begins with Aunt Nannie's dressing Miranda and, in the role of protector of the values and styles of her former oppressors, making sure Miranda's face is shaded with a bonnet lest she get freckles. The occasion is a journey, symbolic of life in that Miranda does not know the destination.

Porter writes that Miranda 'could never find out about anything until the last minute' and that she 'was always being surprised.' The family in fact is going to Cedar Grove, which Miranda's father, Harry, calls Halifax, his word for Hell. The individual responses to Cedar Grove define the relativity of truth. Harry thinks of it as Hell because it is unpleasantly hot. Grandmother loves it because she has been going there for fifty summers, her feeling an indication of her affinity to both the past and tradition. Miranda thinks of it as idyllic, filled with images of watermelon, grasshoppers, Chinaberry trees, and sleeping hounds. The disparity between appearance and reality is implied in these contrasting views and establishes Porter's theme. The family is to meet Great-Aunt Eliza, who represents scientific truth, and both she and science are feared somewhat by Grandmother, who hopes 'nothing will happen' when Eliza sets up her telescope.

Before the family sets out, Miranda skips away to her favorite grove of fig trees. She finds a dead baby chicken, and according to the customs of the region, buries it in a tiny grave. Before she leaves, however, she hears a tiny sad voice saying, 'Weep, weep.'" When she is taken away on the journey, she is miserable, thinking she has buried a chicken alive. She associates figs with her misery and rejects those that Aunt Nannie offers her, but she suppresses the misery before they reach Cedar Grove. Miranda's distress surfaces violently when she hears again the 'Weep, weep' coming from the ground. In spite of grandmother's fears, it is science that provides balm for Miranda's misery, as Eliza explains the sound as the song of the tree frogs' announcing rain—not at all the sad song of a buried-alive animal.

'The Fig Tree' is a complex story that does not concern Miranda's confrontation with death but rather concerns her awakening to her natural role in life. Miranda's maternal instinct has been apparent in her past visits to the farm. She was fascinated with any little animal as long as 'it was a baby and would let her pet and feed it.' A part of her self-awareness has been that of the female as the nurturer or life-giver, an awareness that is focused in the fig, a symbol for womb. When Miranda believes she has violated this essential role, she rejects the figs offered as treats, and she 'almost forgets' the baby animals at the farm. When Great-Aunt Eliza offers the truth, Miranda is in a fog of bliss. The sound that announces rain is symbolically the sound of life rather than the sound of death."

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 56-58

"'The Fig Tree' was actually completed in Bermuda in 1929, but the story was not published until June of 1960... Porter referred to it as 'the last of the Miranda stories.' The story's title suggests an affinity for St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and the story does deal with a guilty conscience, or at least a consciousness of

guilt. Miranda buries a dead chicken under a fig tree, only to fancy that she hears it uttering the faint syllables 'Weep, Weep.' Later, on a visit with the family to great Aunt Eliza's farm, she is told that a similar 'Weep, Weep' sound comes from the tree-frogs. Miranda is thus consoled, for perhaps she did not, after all, bury a live chick underneath the fig tree in town.

But the real subject of 'The Fig Tree' is suffocation, symbolized by the 'Weep, Weep' sound of the supposedly suffocating chick buried beneath the fig tree. Suffocation is brought about by the culture of the old order, the treatment of children, the keeping of knowledge from the young (just as their skin must be protected from freckles by exposure to the sun). Children are therefore the helpless victims of the old order, unable to breathe freely in any sense. The relationship of this story to Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' has often been pointed out...

Miranda learns that her Grandmother and her Great Aunt Eliza bicker like the sisters they are, that they are not in agreement on very many topics (Eliza's dipping snuff, for example), and that nothing is very certain. Great Aunt Eliza's scientific interests make for an objective backdrop for this story. Nobody knows for sure about the wonders seen in her telescope; and nobody knows for sure about the received truths of the old order. For Miranda, certainty now comes into question. Katherine Anne Porter, certainly is questioning received truths that she herself had learned from the old order."

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1991) 79-80

"The limits of the grandmother's vision and the pressures exerted upon it by 'modern' thinking—such as that of scientific investigation—are central in 'The Fig Tree.' In this story Miranda stands between her grandmother's obsession for establishing coherent community, characterized by her command always to act under her orders...and her great-aunt Eliza's obvious disinterest in standards of social behavior and her compulsion instead for structuring life according to scientific observation. If Sophia Jane always focuses her attention of the family and its codes, making sure as best she can that everyone acts by what she sees as the appropriate standards, Eliza always has her eyes at either the microscope or the telescope, seeking to discover how things are put together and work. Miranda, not surprisingly, stands transfixed by Eliza, for she has never seen anyone so openly disregard the family's codes of conduct.

At the family farm Miranda abandons her customary interests in barnyard animals because she finds Eliza so captivating. The narrator comments that 'Great-Aunt Eliza's ways and habits kept Miranda following her about, gazing, or sitting across the dining-table, gazing... Sophia Jane has her religion of tradition and community; Eliza has hers of science and intellectual inquiry. Significantly, Eliza's system, rather than Sophia Jane's, solves Miranda's crisis, her fear that she has mistakenly buried a chick alive.... Eliza's revelation sends Miranda into a 'fog of bliss,' and she takes hold of her great-aunt's hand, an action signifying her allegiance to this strong-minded woman whose knowledge helps her to understand the world as she never had before. Her hand-in-hand embrace suggests her freeing, at least for the moment, from her grandmother's grip.

Miranda's apparent newfound freedom, however, may in fact be merely continued servility, with only the tyrants changing. Sophia Jane and Eliza, indeed, share some striking and disturbing similarities, as Miranda notices during one of their frequent arguments. Miranda intently watches the foes at battle, intrigued less by Sophia Jane's and Eliza's words than by their manner, at once authoritarian and childish. She sees [them] bickering like two little girls at school, or even the way Miranda and her sister Maria bickered and nagged and picked on each other and said things on purpose to hurt each other's feelings.' She backs away, feeling 'sad and strange and a little frightened.' Eliza's obsession with science, mirroring that of the grandmother's with tradition...is in some ways as rigid and distorting in its single-mindedness.... For her the world is more an equation to be solved than an environment to be lived in. The dining room table, for instance, becomes a laboratory instead of a place for repast and conversation. She gets her greatest joy not from eating but from picking her food apart to determine its structural characteristics.... In her obsessive quest for facts, Eliza remains almost entirely oblivious to the feelings and concerns of others, living in a world essentially unto herself.

Amid Miranda's overwhelming joy at the story's end, when she revels in her awareness that she has not buried the chick alive and grasps her great-aunt's hand, Eliza maintains her cool scientific detachment, acting more like an academic lecturer than a close family relation.... Sophia Jane and Eliza represent opposing approaches to organizing one's life, depicting the tension between traditionalism and modernism with which Miranda must come to terms as she grows up. At the end of "The Fig Tree," Eliza has shown Miranda an entirely new way of understanding things: Miranda sees that despite her grandmother's admonitions, there is a way other than her grandmother's 'this way.' She stands awed by her awareness that reality can be structured, and narrated, in ways she has never seen before, and a new world of possibility looms before her, a realization about the here and now not unlike what she discovered about the heavens when she looked for the first time at the moon through Eliza's telescope: 'Oh, it's like another world.' Eliza's modernism is indeed for Miranda 'like another world'...

At the story's conclusion Miranda appears anxious to explore this new world as fully as possible with Eliza as her guide. Miranda's fulfillment, however, lies not in simple discipleship with Eliza, for...Eliza has limitations every bit as problematic as Sophia Jane's. Although Miranda's allegiance to Eliza no doubt will introduce more freedom into her life, such freedom, as seen in Eliza, creates new problems and struggles.... Miranda must learn to draw from the opposing ways of her grandmother and her great-aunt, rejecting neither but embracing both, integrating into her growing consciousness a dialogue between them that pressures and illuminates both figures and their outlooks."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development*  
(Louisiana State 1993) 162-65

"Through her rule-bound burial rites, Miranda repeats her mother's burial, and as the story progresses we see that the correct performance of the rites has become her way of coping with the terror and loss connected with her mother's death. Because she is thinking about death and burial, Miranda's steps lead naturally to the fig grove of the town house, a symbolic landscape in the story, representing the nurturing mother's body. It is dark and comforting in the grove, and Miranda's favorite tree reaches down to her height, feeding her without effort on her part... A later description of the fig grove at the farm makes the connection even clearer; the trees, with their soft round fruit, smell milky, like a mother's breast.... Implicit in Miranda's distress for the chick is the fear that the nourishing world of the grove is also the grave; the lost maternal care for which the fig trees provide a milky substitute is also incurably the world of death. If Miranda cannot perform her burial ritual adequately, she cannot comfort and silence the voice calling from the grave.... [This critic fails to see the important contrast between the two fig groves.]

Porter creates a new kind of woman in her story, intellectual, modern in her interests, fulfilled without childbirth. Great-Aunt Eliza, unmarried, and somewhat masculinized...with a large frame...and a 'growly voice,' is the Grandmother's sister, and her clear counterpart.... Great-Aunt Eliza fascinates Miranda and provides her with a model for an other way of being a woman besides motherhood... But for a modern woman, the alternative Aunt Eliza represents fails to resolve essential conflicts. Eliza is clearly masculinized, and she is associated with the traditionally masculine world of scientific rationality, dissection, and observation. Although she is free of the twinned ties of childbirth and death [No human is free of death.] she is also unsexed, grizzled, 'growly,' and odd. Aunt Eliza releases the child from her maternal legacy of death [?], but she also breaks her away from the legacy of nurturing." [This critic fails to notice that Eliza is a proud grandmother.]

Mary Titus  
*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 88-90

"At the beginning of 'The Fig Tree,' Miranda reveals how much Sophia Jane has actually become her own model for a southern woman's ways of knowing.... However...she also keeps noticing what disturbs this attractive orderliness—the evasive language of adults, the confusion that her father causes by calling Sophia Jane 'Mama' and 'Mammy,' even the failure to make a distinction on the part of...Sophia Jane herself. Miranda finds it strange that Grandmother did not seem to notice the difference' between the greenish white figs at Cedar Grove and the sweet black ones at home.... Death offers Miranda a consoling certainty.... Although Miranda imitates Sophia Jane in her obsession with preserving difference, she also

chafes under the gendered differences that the old order seek to impose upon her.... The rebellious child dresses her kittens in the outfits and wigs of her dolls, as if to play out how she will definitely not grow up to be a lovely plaything. Hence, when Miranda arrives at Cedar Grove...she turns away from the models for womanhood in the old order and finds an exemplar of how to live in the new world of science.

Just as Nathanael became an apostle after a clairvoyant Jesus told of how he had seen his follower sitting under a fig tree (John 1:43-51), Miranda becomes the disciple of Great-Aunt Eliza, a scientific visionary who helps the girl to understand the fruit of the title. [This critic elsewhere reveals his Atheism, which may have influenced him to ignore the evocation of Jesus by a Christian writer.] Although Eliza is herself a mother, Miranda loses under her tutelage the nascent maternal instinct that once made a little girl love to feed and pet baby animals on the farm. The woman-to-be sense other possibilities than the maternity that she had been bred to desire.... Eliza...models a new way of looking that does not give a fig for the conventional concerns about female appearance.... Eliza lives not to be looked at but to look at the world through her microscope and telescope....Unlike the old order that thrives on idealized certainties, Eliza testifies to the scientific agnosticism of the modern age....

Although the contrast between the conservative Sophia Jane and the modern Eliza at first frames 'The Fig Tree' as a tale about opposing models, Porter understands the parallel desires behind such apparent dissimilarities. Eliza is actually the very double of Sophia Jane in her differences. Both of these elders reduce modeling to the arrogance and authoritarianism that make them so much alike.... Because Sophia Jane and Eliza understand imitation as obedience to their orders, the pair are as similar as the two apparently distinctive fig trees in the story. The black sweet figs of the tree in town seem different from the greenish white ones at Cedar Grove, but the country orchard is, in fact, 'much like the one in town.' Just as each grove echoes with the cry of the grave, each sister models radically incomplete ways of responding to mortality.... Grandmother's old order idealizes and sentimentalizes death.... Eliza's clinical realism demystifies mortality. In 'her most scientific voice,' the great-aunt explains away the injunction to weep as a misinterpretation of the natural world....

Since Eliza and Sophia Jane assert equally masterful claims to their competing orders, they become sovereign rivals. The measure of their similarity is that both clash over the pettiest opportunities to affirm their primacy and superiority.... Both flaunt their differences, but Miranda recognizes how these old ladies 'were bickering like two little girls at school' or were like her and her sister in the way they provoked each other with small squabbles and ongoing harassments. Leaving behind the sibling rivalry of old age to walk by herself, young Miranda wants to be the one who is truly different from these childish adults."

Gary M. Ciuba

*Desire, Violence & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*  
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"The Fig Tree" is an allegory of Miranda's psychological development, structured according to the familiar Hegelian formula of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The two sisters, her grandmother and her great-aunt, personify the thesis and the antithesis, respectively. They represent conflicting opposites including old order/new order; traditional/modern; religion/science; conformity/liberation and so on. Both are extremes deficient in qualities of their opposites. They bicker and quarrel "like two little girls at school," indicating to Miranda that both adults are too limited, too immature ironically, to be a perfect model. "She began edging away" from both of them, toward her own synthesis.

The Hegelian pattern reflects the Neoclassicism of Porter and is recurrent in her fiction, most pertinently in *Old Mortality*, where an older Miranda rejects both the thesis of the southern belle represented by Aunt Amy and the antithesis of radical feminism represented by Cousin Eva. In "The Fig Tree" Miranda is much too young as yet to attain a synthesis, just as in "The Grave," though she is older in that story, she still cannot understand the meaning of the dove screw head—the Holy Spirit—until has grown up: "She had not realized that she was learning what she had to know."

The synthesis Miranda is developing toward unconsciously is symbolized in the title of the story. As noticed but not pursued by two critics quoted above, the fig tree alludes to the one in the Bible where



Nathanael was recognized as a believer by Jesus (John 1: 47-51). That tree is singular, whereas there are *two* fig groves in Porter's story. The title implies that Miranda is comparable to Nathanael. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* she compares herself to the biblical character Lazarus. Here she is not recognized as a believer by Jesus literally, as Nathanael was, but she already has been recognized by Jesus when baptized as a Christian. Her baptism endowed her with the Holy Ghost, the spirit of Truth. In this story, her feeling that "everything in the world was strange to her and something she had to know about" is evidence that she is pursuing the Truth impelled by the Holy Ghost. She does not become aware of this until she has grown up enough to understand the meaning of the dove screw head in "The Grave."

In "The Fig Tree" the fig grove in town is "dark and shady," a place Miranda associates with death after she buries the dead chick there. "She covered it up with a nice mound, just like people's." The "weep, weep" she hears is a sound like mourning. When she hears the weeping in the second fig grove on the farm she continues to assume it is "a little crying voice from the smothering earth, the grave." Her great-aunt informs her "in her most scientific voice" that the sound is not coming from the ground but from above—from tree frogs announcing that it is going to rain.

The farm is as "hot as Halifax," evoking "The Waste Land" of T. S. Eliot, in which rain will bring new life. Rebirth is also symbolized by the tree frogs who shed their skins. Miranda did not bury the chick alive after all. The weeping is not an expression of sorrow, it foretells rain and regeneration. Ironically, the medium of this revelation is the great-aunt who looks through her microscope "as if she were saying her prayers," having replaced religion with science. She expresses no awe when looking through her telescope, whereas Miranda "called out in pure rapture, 'Oh, it's like another world!'"

The other world that the adult Miranda sees in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* after she dies of influenza is no less than Heaven—far beyond the limitations of science. Spiritual progress is evident in little Miranda's recognition of both differences and similarities embodied in her grandmother and her great-aunt, in seeing beyond them, and in reconciling opposites. There are black figs and white figs, for example. "It was strange that Grandmother did not seem to notice the difference. The air was sweet among the fig trees." For all her faults, this southern grandmother has transcended racial prejudice and taught Miranda to do the same. At the end Miranda decides that the grove of white figs is "much like the one in town." It is ironic that a black woman is charged with preventing a little white girl from having her face darkened by freckles, but the story makes Old Nannie seem a member of the family.

By paralleling the biblical Nathanael to little Miranda, the story's title implies that Jesus recognizes her as well. He nurtures the soul of His child invisibly, through her experiences. With perfect timing He raises her gaze upward to the heavens, reveals wonders of divine Creation to her through the telescope, inspires a sense of infinity, shows her that she has no reason to weep at death, absolves her of the guilt she feels and gives her peace. At the end she is in a "fog of bliss" prefiguring Paradise.

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