

SATIRE

“The Martyr” (1923)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

ANALYSIS

“In ‘The Martyr’ she portrays ironically an artist who gives himself to self-pity after his model leaves him for another artist. Ruben, the greatest artist of Mexico, completed for a mural, drawing after drawing of his mistress Isabel, before her other lover sold a painting, which was fortunately the right color for a wall, and took her away. Ruben became a martyr to love—could think of nothing, could talk of nothing except the simple-minded girl whose new love would never make her cook and would buy her a pair of red shoes. To ease his pain, he consumed great quantities of food and drink and grew ludicrously fat. A doctor, sent by friends, prescribes, in a wildly comic scene, diet, long walks, exercise, cold baths, as a cure for the wounded heart; but Ruben could only murmur, romantically, that Isabel was his executioner, that he would soon be in his narrow, dark grave.

Deserted by his friends, Ruben finally died of a seizure at ‘The Little Donkey’ [*sic*] restaurant where he was dining. The friends, who had fled his tiring stories about Isabel, reappeared. The owner of the restaurant confided to the artist Ramon, who would write the biography of Ruben, illustrating it with his own character sketches, that Ruben’s last words had been: ‘Tell them I am a martyr to love. I perish in a cause worthy the sacrifice. I die of a broken heart! Isabelita, my executioner!’ Ramon told the proprietor the last words ‘should be very eloquent,’ for they would ‘add splendor to the biography, nay, to the very history of art itself, if they are eloquent.’ The proprietor, who may or may not have heard the final words he quotes, emphasized that the great artist had been inordinately fond of the tamales served in the restaurant. They were ‘his final indulgence.’ The story ends on the same ironic note: ‘That shall be mentioned in its place, never fear, my good friend,’ cried Ramon, his voice crumbling with generous emotion, ‘with the name of your café, even. It shall be a shrine for artists when this story is known. Trust me faithfully to preserve for the future every smallest detail in the life and character of this great genius. Each episode has its own sacred, its precious and peculiar interest. Yes, truly, I shall mention the tamales’....

[Such] irony...is particularly striking in the broader context of its setting, the Mexican social and economic revolution, and even more so in its more limited artistic frame. It is a mere fragment of Miss Porter’s knowledge of the artistic world of Mexico...during the formative stage of the artistic renaissance.”

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 35-36

“The satiric bent is apparent everywhere, and clearly dominant in several stories. At the two extremes of cruel pathos and cutting farce, ‘Magic’ and ‘The Martyr’ (the latter about a fat Mexican artist who literally eats himself to death when his mistress-model leaves him for a more prosperous rival) are both satiric and allegorical.”

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 112

“It is the story of Mexico’s most celebrated artist, who dies of heartbreak after the beauty he loves deserts him. In this narrative... Porter makes the sublime ridiculous by telling the story from a detached, objective point of view.... The story becomes a comic satire of sentimental excess in one man and finally in his whole society. It is a completely successful *tour de force*. In fact, the comedy inherent in Ruben’s eating

himself to death and calling himself 'a martyr to love' obscures the fact that this is also Isabel's story; she is the victim of his fantasy as much as he is.

The martyr...is in love with a romantic image of woman and projects this image onto his inamorata, Isabel, in total disregard of her real personality, wants, and needs. The objective narrator's view of Isabel is that she is a bad-tempered witch, a stereotypical Mexican spitfire, who exploits Ruben's affection for her by allowing him to support her even though she loves a rival artist. She is not, however, dishonest. Her rude manner with visitors to Ruben's studio is not for them alone; she derisively calls Ruben 'churro,' a Mexican nickname for a pet dog, rips up the flowers he brings her, and shamelessly throws tantrums like a spoiled child, even to the point of physically abusing the master. Yet he insists on interpreting her behavior as loving.

Isabel is his Beatrice, his Laura, his inspiration; she is a goddess before whose shrine he worships. He continually describes her as an angel and her features and behavior as 'angelic.' He says more than once, and more truly than he knows, 'There is no other woman like that woman.' And of course he is right, for no woman, certainly not Isabel, is like the woman his imagination has created for him: an angel of goodness, kindness, and unsurpassed beauty, a muse who inspires the artistry of his work. It is easy enough to recognize this woman, an ethereal creature of light and air, placed high on her pedestal where she is unsullied by individual personality traits or mundane human necessities: she and Ruben often forget even to eat during the long days given to sketching her perfection.

Isabel, as Ruben creates here, is an other-worldly creature, and he recognizes his courtly role toward her: he is 'deeply in love' with her, to the point that 'everyone declared Ruben would kill on sight the man who even attempted to rob him of Isabel.' He continually pays homage to her beauty by creating sketch after sketch of her, and when she finally leaves him for the artist she really loves, he requites himself well by announcing that she has taken his life with her. Then he begins, literally, to eat himself to death. The false nature of his affection and the ludicrousness of his pose as a soon-to-be martyred lover are caught beautifully in the farcical image of Ruben that the narrator supplies us after the painter has read Isabel's farewell note....

With characteristic hyperbole and blindness to the paradox in his statement, Ruben declares, 'I tell you, my poor little angel Isabel is a murderess, for she has broken my heart.' The two extremes that Ruben chooses to describe his floundering idol are precisely the either/or terms which men of his kind like to apply to all women. His friend Ramon consoles him with the fact that he knows 'how women can spoil a man's work for him'; the woman who left him was a 'shameless cheat-by-night' who almost ruined him. Women are either angels or murderesses, good mothers or terrible mothers, virgins or harlots, and the devil takes all the shades of character in between. In actuality, Isabel is neither angel nor murderess, but a human being who, frustrated with the trap in which she is enclosed, vents her anger by abusing her jailer.

Aside from her shocking behavior toward the talented and adoring Ruben, we know little of Isabel. Most readers would describe her as a flat, one-dimensional character who is nothing more than a catalyst in the author's caricature of the artist. Yet, what we do know of her suggests more of the human being than Ruben's characterization does. There are reasons for Isabel's behavior, and they in turn heighten the irony that Porter creates in characterizing the men of Mexican society. Isabel is...bored, but has no place to go because she depends on men for her subsistence. Thus she must stay with the man she hates until the man she loves has enough money to rescue her from her cage. There is no question of autonomy or self-sufficiency in her; she is the *real* martyr to love, idealized and typed before her individuality has asserted itself.

In fact, she undoubtedly recognizes that her beauty is her fortune.... Through her beauty she attracts men who will support her, and it is because of her beauty that she can bite the hand that feeds her and get away with it. When she rails at Ruben, scattering the petals of his flowers and flicking the tip of his nose with paint, she is demonstrating her worth to those who witness his tolerance, as well as punishing him for refusing to treat her like a person. She is also asserting herself in the same way that a child does: her incredible behavior makes people pay attention to her, relieving her of her statue-like stance and its

attendant anonymity. Like Miranda's Aunt Amy in *Old Mortality*, Isabel creates a legendary image of herself to suppress the one that society and Ruben have created for her.

She scorns his love rightly, as she scorns the bloodless image he has of her. Her own image of happiness is pathetically vague; her farewell message to Ruben indicates that she will now live with a man who thinks her truly precious: he will never allow her to cook for him, and he will paint fifty figures of her. In addition, she says, 'I am also to have red slippers, and a gay life to my heart's content.' The red slippers suggest vivacity and luxury; they are all that Isabel can imagine of the 'gay life' she wishes for, but they remind us of other Porter heroines who fantasize about dancing their lives gaily away with bright flowers in their hair. Isabel's yearnings are the same. She may even find them satisfied by her new lover, if he values her for herself, but most likely she has escaped from one cage only to find another.

If Ruben has created a phantom to love, it is the phantom likewise that kills him. He succumbs, as he has made up his mind to, within a year of Isabel's departure. He dies of a heart attack induced by extreme obesity while, appropriately, dining on tamales and pepper gravy at his favorite café. The bathos of the situation is intensified by his last message to the world: 'Tell them I am a martyr to love. I perish in a cause worthy the sacrifice. I die of a broken heart!... Isabelita, my executioner!' Of course, Isabel has no better fate. Already warped into stereotype, her personhood will suffer slow strangulation, constricted by a society from which she cannot escape."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 27-30

"In 'The Martyr,' her second original story (*Century* 1923), she is illustrating another obstacle to the fulfillment of the revolution's aims. She herself was caught up in the events of the Mexican revolution when she first arrived there in 1920. Her letters to her family and friends reveal an idealistic fervor as she describes carrying secret messages, teaching dancing in one of the socialist schools, and consorting with archeologists, artists, government officials, and bandits.

When Porter was planning 'Maria Concepcion' she wrote in an essay about the Mexican revolution that the revolution had not touched the hearts of the Mexican people, and she lamented that there was not the commitment by writers to the Mexican revolution that there had been to the 1917 Russian revolution. Porter charged that Mexican writers were concerned with nothing more important than 'the pain of unrequited love.' When she returned to Mexico in 1922, she witnessed the triumphant reentry into Mexico of the painter Diego Rivera, who was responsible for providing the revolutionary spark that the writers had failed to offer. For the remainder of 1922 Porter observed the brilliant murals that the revolution produced, usually under the direction or inspiration of Diego, but she became disillusioned with Diego's self-aggrandizement and the adulation paid him by his admirers. 'The Martyr' is about Diego and his first wife, Guadalupe Marin; it is about the charade of unrequited love she saw as pervasive in the paternalistic Mexican society; and it is about the replacement of love with a shallow substitute.

The ironic tone prevails. The narrative voice has become more intensely ironic than it was in 'Maria Concepcion,' and the distance between the ideal and the actual is apparent from the outset. The callous, bored, materialistic Isabel, who calls people by the names of animals (the obese Ruben is 'Churro,' a pet name for small dogs as well as for sweet cakes; the people who come to pay homage to Ruben are called 'sheep'), is far from the Isabel Ruben memorializes as 'angelic' with 'pretty little tricks and ways.' There is bitter irony in the portrayal of the Mexican artists, Ruben's friends, who remember Isabel as the 'lean she-devil' but nevertheless propagate the lie. After Ruben dies, they memorialize him as a 'martyr to love' even though it is abundantly clear that he eats himself to death....

Before Isabel leaves, Ruben is beginning the nineteenth drawing of her, and according to Isabel's farewell note, there were to be twenty. She says that she is going away with 'someone who...will make a mural with fifty figures of me in it, instead of only twenty.... One of Diego's murals, which Porter had seen, had twenty female figures in it. It was entitled 'Creation' and portrayed, in addition to Woman as counterpart to Man, personified ideals: Knowledge, Fable, Erotic Poetry, Tradition, Tragedy, Prudence, Justice, Strength, Contenance, Science, Dance, Music, Song, Comedy, Charity, Hope, Faith, and Wisdom.

The nineteenth female figure, Wisdom, is the most important, according to Diego's notes of explanation for the mural. The twentieth figure is the Tree, symbol of female fertility.

'The Martyr' remains more important as a step in Porter's developing technique and philosophy than it does as a successful story in its own right. Like 'Maria Concepcion' it contains a religious structure (Ruben 'adores' Isabel and dies a martyr, even if to gluttony) that serves as a reminder of the distance of the ideal from the story's events. It is built around an ironic center; and it grew out of Porter's personal experience. The simple language is present, and the preference for periodic sentences with antithesis and balance to underscore the ever-present irony, is more apparent."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 28-31

"Were it not for its Mexican setting and the Spanish surnames, this story could almost have been lifted from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. A comic tale of unrequited love, it nevertheless posits a serious moral: each man martyrs himself for the things he loves—in Ruben's case an idealized woman primarily, tamales and pepper gravy secondarily; in aesthetic terms, sentimentality announces the death of art. The story begins in the style of the conventional tale of the battle of the sexes....

Ruben is a painter like Rubens, a self-indulgent voluptuary, enraptured by the beauty of Isabel, who resembles Jezebel (Ruben's friends refer to her as a 'lean she-devil'; and she may owe something to Isabel in Melville's *Pierre* (1852)). It is clear from the outset that Ruben/Rubens will lose in a contest with Isabel/Jezebel. Isabel's pet name for Ruben, 'Churro,' is... 'a sort of sweet cake, and is, besides, a popular pet name among the Mexicans for small dogs.' Indeed, Ruben is treated like a dog. And the more he is humiliated by Isabel, the more he adores her. The gargantuan self-pity exhibited by Ruben when he loses his beloved Isabel to the rival artist is comical...

Martyrdom is presented as a colossal expenditure of psychic energy, leaving nothing left over for aesthetic production. When Isabel leaves him, the pitiful Ruben is without his inspiration and cannot continue to paint. The self-indulgent character of martyrdom is symbolized by the ever-increasing bulk of Ruben. His self-perpetuating disease must be fueled by more and more sweet wine, cheese, and tamales. It is fitting that Ramon, his ardent admirer and prospective biographer, is a caricaturist, for Ruben is pure stereotype, unadulterated romantic fool who simply must die of nothing less than a broken heart, though in a café, and only after a massive serving of tamales and pepper gravy, 'his final indulgence'....

Food, as a substitute for sex, is patently served up throughout the story. Ramon, the caricaturist, remarks that when his beloved Trinidad ('that shameless cheat-by-night') deserted him 'nothing tasted properly.' In addition, he tells Ruben, he was struck tone-deaf and color-blind. For Ramon, of course, such a bland existence is only a temporary discomfort. Ruben, on the other hand, cannot recover his interest in life. Sex has to be replaced by sugary red wines and a spicy diet of tamales and pepper gravy. But such a negative glorification of sex as the wellspring of human life leads to death of the spirit and a continually expanding physical bulk. His physician, a cynical realist in matters of this sort, recommends 'a diet, fresh air, long walks, frequent violent exercise, preferably on the cross-bar, ice showers, almost no wine'—a litany unheard and unheeded by Ruben.

Ruben is, of course, an ineffectual, passive male weeping over a lost female (as Harrison Boone Porter wept for a lifetime over his dead wife). His inability or unwillingness to help himself or in any way to shake off his lethargy is simply contemptible. He fattens himself on a diet of sentimental claptrap, and his friends collaborate, because of their 'delicacy,' in the consequent and literal breaking of his heart.... 'Martyr' has as its context the real-life relationship between Diego Rivera and his first wife, Guadalupe Marin... Porter's detachment concerning Rivera's revolutionary murals accounts for the ironic tone of this story."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 136-39

“Ruben is almost certainly based on Diego Rivera, a fact that by itself speaks significantly of the implied primitivism of the story. The most prominent Mexican muralist of his time, Rivera drew upon the power of Mexican folk culture in his attempt to portray Mexico and its revolutionary spirit. But in Porter’s story, Ruben is entirely out of touch with his country’s folk traditions. His imagination instead wallows in dreams of romantic love.... Ruben resembles the Indians who travel to the shrine at Guadalupe looking for succor in the image of Mary... He too looks blindly to an idealized image of a woman, Isabel, his ‘angelic’ being. [This Atheist critic thinks all religious people look “blindly” while demonstrating his own blindness to the actual implications of the text. He argues with persistent disregard of contrary evidence that Porter is a “primitivist” rather than a Christian, even though she visited Heaven in 1918 as she reported in several interviews and as she rendered in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 53

“During this second stay in Mexico, in 1922, Porter became well acquainted with Diego Rivera... Rivera and his views on socially responsible art were influential in her experience and thought for several years.... She would speak of him for a time, before turning against him, as the greatest artist of his age. It would not be long, however, before caricatures of Rivera appeared in her fiction emphasizing his obesity, his lugubrious self-importance, and his tumultuous relationship with Guadalupe Marin, who served as a model for him and became his wife. Porter had observed the two in action. They provided her with the originals for Ruben and Isabel in her story ‘The Martyr’ (published in 1923).... The muralists combined portraiture with genre scenes in a way that Porter herself would sometimes adopt.... Her familiarity with caricature as practiced by her acquaintances in Mexico... was an element in the fullness of her techniques of characterization.”

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 54, 75, 86

“Porter draws Ruben with the exaggerated strokes of a cartoon. The ‘martyr’ of the story, he can only speak of his passionate adoration of Isabel. When she leaves him for another artist, he essentially gorges himself to death, between bites mourning the moments when ‘she used to kick my chins black and blue’.... Porter repeatedly links his eating to his loss: while he laments Isabel’s absence he fills himself with substitutes... Ruben longs again to devour his model with his eyes but must now satisfy his hunger for her in other ways. In his obsession with her as his model, Ruben’s ‘consuming’ desire for Isabel was apparent before she ran away....

Ironic and exaggerated, ‘The Martyr’ parodies the male artist’s obsession with the meaning of woman. Yet even as parody, it suggests through Ruben’s gluttony the artist’s desire to control and consume his model through language and image. (At the same time the story alludes to Rivera’s own voracious appetite for both food and sex. His frequent relations with his models—perhaps including Porter—are public knowledge.).... Describing Isabel’s new relationship, Porter reveals that this woman is as addicted to her objectification as is Laura in ‘Flowering Judas’: Isabel has left Ruben for a man who will create a ‘mural with fifty figures’ of her ‘instead of only twenty’.”

Mary Titus
The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 63

There is so much to see in Porter’s fiction that critics tend to miss a lot of the humor. “The Martyr” is pure satire and very funny. Porter the Realist is ridiculing sentimental Romantic art, artists, and any society that feeds on sentimental Romanticism, as exemplified by Mexico since the 1920s and epitomized by the famous mural painter Diego Rivera. At first Porter admired Rivera enough to try to sell some of his work to dealers in New York, but she soon grew disillusioned with him.

Ruben is a caricature of Rivera, who was no Rubens, yet nevertheless had a comparable stature and success, reflecting the vulgarity of public taste. Much of the humor in the story is generated by irony. In the first sentence, for example, Ruben is said to be “deeply in love with his model Isabel, who was in turn

romantically attached to a rival artist.” The story reveals that Ruben is deeply in love with himself. It is also ironic that Isabel rejects “the most illustrious painter in Mexico” in favor of a painter “whose name is of no importance.” She has no respect for Ruben. Her pet name “Churro” equates him with a small dog, yet he is proud of this. He “thought it a very delightful name,” since the word also means “sweet cake.” He is being a sentimental Romantic in ignoring the double meaning and responding only to what is complimentary. Like political liberals, he denies the reality of anything negative about himself. He shakes when he laughs because he is getting fat, connoting self-indulgence and corruption, as with the fat revolutionary leader Braggioni in “Flowering Judas.” Among his deadly sins are Pride, Sloth, and Gluttony. He and Isabel eat at a café called The Little Monkeys, implying that they resemble monkeys.

It is ironic that Ruben’s “model” is Isabel, for he is her opposite. She is thin, he is fat. The models of Rubens by modern standards look overweight, another detail contrasting the two artists. Further, Isabel is a cynic, Ruben a Romantic. She tears apart the bouquets of flowers he gives her. Her name Is-a-bel suggests that she is a Mexican equivalent of the American Southern belle in being an attractive teaser, user and abuser of men, like Amy in *Old Mortality*, except that Amy is a cool tease whereas Isabel, in the slang of the day, is a “hot tamale.” Like Gabriel in the later story, Ruben is a Romantic fool to fall in love with such a woman, for he too is destroyed when he loses her. Gabriel becomes a drunk and Ruben a glutton. Isabel is certainly no model of conduct either as she abuses and mocks her benefactor, in contrast to the people who come on pilgrimages to admire the acclaimed artist. Yet Ruben tells the physician that Isabel “was an angel for kindness.” She does resemble Ruben in being vain and self-absorbed, “for sometimes she would stand all day long, braiding and unbraiding her hair.” She is just as shallow as she is bored. Ruben adores this vacuous, lazy, nasty abuser for her physical beauty alone—for her appearance, which is the opposite of her true nature. He thinks the “she-devil” is “angelic.”

The public is just as wrong about Ruben as he is about Isabel. It is ironic that “everyone declared Ruben would kill on sight the man who even attempted to rob him of Isabel,” for all he does is eat. This hero-worship is consistent with the public overestimation of him as an artist. “I sit still; I cannot move anymore.” The rich man who buys a painting from Isabel’s lover represents the prevailing attitude of buyers in that he chooses the painting only on the basis of the dominant two colors ordered by his decorator. Ruben in despair is comical rather than pitiful: “He thrashed his arms about a great deal”; “He was weeping, and between sobs he ate spoonfuls of soft Toluca cheese, with spiced mangoes”; he “lay down on the floor with his head in a palette of freshly mixed paint and wept vehemently”; “‘She used to kick my shins black and blue,’ he would say, fondly”; “He hung in all directions over his painting-stool, like a mound of kneaded dough”; “he bulged until he became strange even to himself”; “‘The buttons are bursting from his shirt. It is positively unsafe’”; “His friends agreed it was getting rather stupid.”

Ruben’s friend Ramon is like him in being popular though “not a great artist,” as suggested by the similarity of their names, five letters beginning with R. Both are essentially commercial rather than serious artists. Ramon “did caricatures, and heads of pretty girls for the magazines.” Ruben does the whole figure of Isabel the pretty girl, over and over. Both men have been left by their girlfriends. The comical difference between them is that Ramon is even more shallow than Ruben: “Let me tell you, when Trinidad left me, I was good for nothing for a week.” A whole week. Ramon exploits Ruben too, like Isabel but in praise rather than abuse, exalting Ruben for the biography he intends to write about him, “to be illustrated with large numbers of his own character portraits.” His depiction of Ruben as the “Inspired and Incomparable Genius of Art on the American Continent” will be an absurdly idealized caricature to “add splendor to the biography, nay to the very history of art itself.”

Porter’s tone throughout the story is distanced from Ruben by the formality of her style, as when his friends decide to shift the responsibility for helping the great man to a physician at the university: “In the mind of such a one would be combined a sufficiently refined sentiment with the highest degree of technical knowledge. This was the diplomatic, the discreet, the fastidious thing to do. It was done.” The death of Ruben is an anticlimax rendered in such a laconic style as to deflate his pretensions: “The proprietor ran to him. Ruben said something in a hurried whisper, made rather an impressive gesture over his head with one arm, and, to say it as gently as possible, died.”

The tone of Ruben the Romantic is the opposite of Porter's. He exploits the opportunity to pose as tragic, to make himself a "model"—a hero of Art--by claiming in his last words that he dies as "a martyr to love.... I die of a broken heart!" No, you die of too many hot tamales. The rhythms of sentences mock the pretenses of those who will profit from Ruben's death the more he is idealized. "'That was all, gentlemen,' ended the proprietor, simply and reverently. He bowed his head. They all bowed their heads." They revere a mock martyr rather than the true martyr Jesus who actually did die a martyr to love. The story concludes with comical bathos, mundane exaltation of the flesh rather than the spirit: "'He was also supremely fond of my tamales and pepper gravy,' added the proprietor in a modest tone. 'They were his final indulgence'." Ramon promises the proprietor to commend him in his biography of Ruben, so that the name of his café "shall be a shrine for artists.... Yes, truly, I shall mention the tamales'."

Michael Hollister (2017)