

## ANALYSIS

“The Old Order” (1939)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

[“The Old Order,” called the Miranda stories, consisted of six pieces, then a seventh was added. The piece entitled “The Old Order” was retitled “The Journey.” Four of the pieces are sketches, discussed on this document by the critics quoted below: “The Source,” “The Journey,” “The Witness,” and “The Last Leaf.” Three of the pieces are complex short stories and each is analyzed on a separate document: “The Circus,” “The Fig Tree,” and “The Grave.” The account of Miranda’s maturation from childhood to womanhood is continued in the short novels *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.]

“I would like to write about two wonderful old slaves who were my grandmother’s companions, but someone is always giving a low name to good things and I suppose the N.A.A.C.P. would say I was glorifying Uncle Tomism.”

Porter  
quoted in *Time* (28 July 1961)

“The first six [seven] stories in *The Leaning Tower* deal with the childhood of Miranda, its magic atmosphere and the relatives who people it. All this is so skillfully, lovingly, tenderly evoked that one cannot escape wondering how much of it is based on Miss Porter’s own memories of the South at the turn of the century and how much of it is purely imaginative.

These six [seven] stories, although nearly perfect in form, are not completely developed within themselves; each of them, and they vary in length from five pages to twenty-four, is a fragment [Several are complete: “The Circus” and “The Grave” are brilliant short stories.], and it is only by piercing the six together that we get a connected picture of the people and the time. Miss Porter’s method of communicating her material here is sometimes reminiscent of William Faulkner’s in his Yoknapatawpha saga: frequently we are given information in one story that is of value to us only because of something we have learned in another. For instance, we are introduced, in ‘The Witness,’ to Uncle Jimbilly, the manumitted slave, and then, in “The Old Order,” we meet Old Nannie, but not until we get to ‘The Last Leaf’ do we learn that they have been married and are now living apart.

Another reason why these six [seven] pieces are inevitably closer to the sketch than to the formal story is that they seem to aim at indication rather than narration. They present an intricately woven set of impressions, images, and details, out of which emerge the varied attributes of a personality. The emphasis, all through them, is on the character of the individual, and, most particularly, those elements in that character which contribute to its singularity. When events are described, or the past is revealed, it is only as a means of throwing new light on the individual.

Significantly enough, it is not Miranda who dominates the scene in these six stories. In only two of them does she appear as a central character; in one she is present only peripherally, and in the remaining three not at all. The central character is the Grandmother, who is presented to us in the first of the six stories, ‘The Source,’ preparing for her annual journey to her farm where she undertakes the vast business of setting it, and the households of the Negro tenants, in order; after which she returns to her town house, ready again ‘to set to work restoring to order the place which no doubt had gone somewhat astray in her absence.’ That she is the actual source of all stability in the world of her widower son and his three children (Miranda, Maria, and Paul) we have no doubt. The children ‘loved their Grandmother; she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge, since their mother had died so early that only the eldest girl remembered her vaguely: just the same they felt that Grandmother was a tyrant, and they wished to be free of her; so they were always pleased when, on a certain day, as a

sign that her visit was drawing to an end, she would go out to the pasture and call her old saddle-horse, Fiddler.'

Fiddler, we learn in 'The Old Order,' represents the past, for that was the name of a pony the Grandmother had received from her father when she was a child, and 'that name she reserved for a long series of saddle horses. She had named the first in honor of Fiddler Gay, an old Negro who made the music for dances and parties.' And the old Grandmother herself represents the past, which, together with Old Nannie, her lifelong servant and friend, she remembers in the long Southern afternoons. 'They talked about the past, really—always about the past. Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it.' The Grandmother, fully aware of herself as the source of life and order, is given to saying, 'I am the mother of eleven children,' and 'I have planted five orchards in three states, and now I see only one tree in bloom.' She represents the order and stability of the past, qualities that neither her ineffectual son, Harry, nor any of his three children, is equipped to carry forward.

Harry and the children had lived under a 'matriarchal tyranny,' but when it passed there was no system of life to replace it. The Grandmother died suddenly, in the spirit in which she had lived; she 'came into the house quite flushed and exhilarated, saying how well she felt in the bracing mountain air—and dropped dead over the doorsill.' She had been 'the great-granddaughter of Kentucky's most famous pioneer,' and 'the daughter of a notably heroic captain in the War of 1812.' She had kept the splendor of the past before her grandchildren, the same past to which Nannie rendered mute testimony, and, after her death, we learn in the story entitle 'The Grave,' 'It was said the motherless family was running down, with the Grandmother no longer there to hold it together.'

In 'The Old Order,' ['The Journey'] the longest piece of the six [seven], Miss Porter gives us a record of the Grandmother's life, and here we can see how little conventional narrative devices are to her point; the Grandmother's life is recapitulated by details related in a complex method of moving backwards and forwards in time. The piece opens with the Grandmother and Nannie sitting down to one of their reminiscent afternoons, goes back to the Grandmother's childhood and the time of Nannie's coming to the family as the child of two newly-purchased slaves, and continues to come forward and go backward as the points of the Grandmother's characterization dictate, until, at the end, it leaps suddenly ahead to her death. Miss Sophia Jane, we learn, had been 'married off' when she was seventeen 'in a very gay wedding,' in Kentucky.

Then, long after she was married, she saw in her husband 'all the faults she had most abhorred in her elder brother: lack of aim, failure to act at crises, a philosophic detachment from practical affairs, a tendency to set projects on foot and then leave them to perish or to be finished by someone else; and a profound conviction that everyone around him should be happy to wait upon him hand and foot. Meanwhile, 'the Grandmother developed a character truly portentous under the discipline of trying to change the characters of others,' and her husband 'disliked and feared her deadly willfulness, her certainty that her ways were not only right but beyond criticism, that her feelings were important, even in the lightest matter, and must not be tampered with or treated casually.'

But 'not until she was in middle age, her husband dead, her property dispersed, and she found herself with a household of children, making a new life for them in another place, with all the responsibilities of a man but none of the privileges, did she finally emerge into something like an honest life: and yet, she was passionately honest. She had never been anything else.' She had come to despise men, we are told, but she was ruled by them. 'Her husband threw away her dowry and her property in wild investments in strange territories: Louisiana, Texas; and without protest she watched him play her substance like a gambler.' Then he 'had fought stubbornly through the War...had been wounded, had lingered helpless, and had died of his wound long after the great fever and excitement had faded in hopeless defeat, when to be a man ruined and wounded in the War was merely to have proved oneself, perhaps, more heroic than wise.'

So the Grandmother took her family and set out for Louisiana where her husband had purchased a sugar refinery, but she 'had hardly repaired the house she bought and got the orchard planted when she was that, in her hands, the sugar refinery was going to be a failure.' And on she went to an unsettled part of Texas

with her nine children (two had died) and seven Negroes. All the while she mourned her husband 'with dry eyes, angrily.' And finally, twenty years later, she recognized his features in a grandchild, 'and wept.' During the second year in Texas, 'two of her younger sons, Harry and Robert, suddenly ran away.' When they had been returned by a neighbor, their mother found 'that they had wanted to go back to Louisiana to eat sugar cane. They had been thinking about sugar cane all winter...their mother was stunned. She had built a house large enough to shelter them all, of hand-sawed lumber dragged by ox-cart for forty miles, she had got the fields fenced in and the crops planted, she had, she believed, fed and clothed her children; and now she realized they were hungry... Sitting there with her arms around them, she felt her heart break in her breast. She had thought it was a silly phrase. It happened to her.

It was not that she was incapable of feeling afterward, for in a way she was more emotional, more quick, but griefs never again lasted with her so long as they had before. This day was the beginning of her spoiling her children and being afraid of them.' When they began to marry, 'she was able to give them each a good strip of land and a little money...and she saw them all begin well, though not all of them ended so.' Then, when Harry's wife, of whom she never approved, died, the Grandmother took the children and began life again, with almost the same zest, and with more indulgence... She had just got them brought up to the point where she felt she could begin to work the faults out of them—faults inherited, she admitted freely, from both sides of the house—when she died.' She had been visiting a son and daughter-in-law in West Texas, interfering in and ruling over their household even to the extent of 'moving a fifty-foot adobe wall,' when she 'dropped dead over the doorsill.'

When the Grandmother and Nannie had sat and talked about the past, they had discussed 'religion, and the slack way the world was going nowadays, and...the younger children, whom these topics always brought to mind,' Nannie deplored Maria and Paul and Miranda as 'new-fangled grandchildren,' and both she and the Grandmother had settled ideas about children and their upbringing. 'Childhood was a long state of instruction and probation for adult life, which was in turn a long severe, undeviating devotion to duty, the largest part of which consisted in bringing up children.' A firm and hardy stock was thus preserved from generation to generation, but when the controlling forces, like the Grandmother and Nannie, died or went away, the stock was in danger of thinning out. In these six sketches of the atmosphere of Miranda's childhood, we sense quite plainly that all the family greatness seems to lie in the past, with the Grandmother and her memories.... [See analyses of "The Circus" and "The Grave."]

What [the Grandmother] most represented, of course, was strength and fortitude (very high values in Miss Porter's scales...) but these she passed on to one of her grandchildren. Miranda, too, is a moral aristocrat, and her life, different as it is to be from her Grandmother's, reveals how much of the elder woman's training and personality the small child absorbed."

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

*The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 16-20

"There are four short stories illustrating the same theme, all of them coincidentally dealing with the same characters: 'The Old Order,' 'The Source,' 'The Witness,' 'The Last Leaf.' The two old ladies, one white and one black, in 'The Old Order' ["The Journey"] talk always about the past, making it the very substance of the present and embalming the future with the dead. The Witness exists in the present but his mind dwells on what he believes happened long ago but actually did not. 'The Last Leaf,' through her obdurate behavior in the present, gives the lie to sentimental memories of what the past was. And the Source is a farm which has become symbolic of a past stability and order which never existed except in golden retrospection. These works treat what Miss Porter has recently called 'the country of my heart.' Autobiographical or not, they stand thematically with certain works of Faulkner, Mann, and Proust. Like Faulkner, Miss Porter is fascinated with the tragedy of the Old South and the effect of the legend on those who helped to create it.... To her as to Homer, the generations of men are as leaves which wax green and then fall; and there is always one last leaf to remind the living of the human reality of the past."

James William Johnson

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

“Many of her early tales...are seen from the point of view of a ‘Miranda’ who corresponds closely to the author. It is like Miss Porter to have started with the most basic element in storytelling: the world and the family as they appeared to a child... Clear and unsentimental, they say the essential with a minimum of incident. Nannie, Miranda’s grandmother’s oldest colored servant and former slave, has spent a lifetime serving the family; she has even been married lovelessly to Uncle Jimbilly to suit the convenience of her owners. When she is too old to work any more, she asks for a little cottage of her own on the place which is promptly supplied her. What is her attitude toward these grateful, loving, exploiting people whose care has occupied her entire existence? Indifference. To Uncle Jimbilly...? Simple indifference. She will not let him share the cabin. ‘I’ve served my time,’ she merely mumbles... ‘The Last Leaf’ is an unforgettable picture of inertia, of release, of old age.”

Louis Auchincloss  
*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961)137

“Each of the related stories in *The Leaning Tower* gains something from the others, as this group of stories shapes into a kind of mythical corpus of the family.... At their best, as in ‘The Grave’ and ‘The Old Order,’ they rank among Miss Porter’s most successful works....

‘The Source’...evoke[s] an excellent image of the willful and courageous old lady that we are to meet again in other stories of this group. The story is told from the point of view of the three grandchildren whom she had taken in after the death of their mother (Maria, Paul, and Miranda)... They loved their Grandmother... Their mother had died so early that only the eldest girl remembered her vaguely: just the same they felt that Grandmother was a tyrant, and they wished to be free of her.’... Miranda and her sister and brother come to recognize the difficulty of making a simple judgment, either of persons such as their grandmother or of the things these people do. This recognition is one stage of the complex initiation that Miranda undergoes in all of the stories in which she figures.

The second story, ‘The Witness,’ is...told again from the children’s point of view. It is an account of Uncle Jimbilly, the former slave, who carved miniature tombstones from blocks of wood to be placed over the graves of the children’s pets. Uncle Jimbilly is firm in his simple, almost primitive, morality. From him the children hear exorbitant threats of punishment awaiting them for some accidental misdeed, listen to extravagant accounts of tortures practiced upon heathen unbelievers; but they come to know, by the very exaggeration of his accounts and threats, that Uncle Jimbilly’s aim is not so much to evoke terror in them as it is to gain expression for his own subordinated emotions. Again the reader feels that he is looking in upon another colorful stage of childhood recognition.

‘The Last Leaf’ is the story of Aunt Nannie, wife of Uncle Jimbilly, to whom she had been married ‘with truly royal policy, with an eye to the blood and family stability,’ in the days of slavery. Aunt Nannie had been the personal servant and lifelong companion of the children’s grandmother. Now having survived the grandmother and resigned to her own end, old Nannie had asked for and been granted the use of a small cottage on the family place. The story ends with an incident between Nannie and Uncle Jimbilly, when the old man, from whom she had been separated for many years, attempts to move in with her. ‘I don’ aim to pass my las’ days waitin on no man,’ Nannie tells him...

It is in ‘The Old Order’ [“The Journey”] that we learn about Nannie’s relationship to the grandmother. Here we are given the most complete background of Miranda’s family available in any of the stories. The grandmother was, we are told, the great-granddaughter of ‘Kentucky’s most famous pioneer’ (Daniel Boone). She is the daughter ‘of a notably heroic captain in the War of 1812. Born Sophia Jane Gay in 1827, the grandmother had been given Nannie as a companion when her father bought her and her parents at the slavemarket in New Orleans while the grandmother was still a child. Nannie and Sophia Jane grew up together, and both were married the same year. Each had many children; then, when Nannie fell ill at the time of the fourth, Sophia Jane nursed the Negro baby along with her own.

Grandmother had married a Macdonald, a second cousin, and in him she came later to see ‘all the faults she had most abhorred in her elder brother: lack of aim, failure to act at crises, a philosophic detachment from practical affairs, a tendency to set projects on foot and then leave them to perish or to be finished by

someone else; and a profound conviction that everyone around him should be happy to wait upon him hand and foot.' He died in middle age, leaving her with a family of nine living children that she moved from Kentucky to Louisiana, then to Texas. He left her 'with all the responsibilities of a man but with none of the privileges.'

Sophia Jane had three married sons in Texas at the time of her death, although one of her daughters-in-law had died at the birth of her third child (Miranda), and the grandmother had taken the children in as her own.... The author explores the family background, centering about the lifelong relationship between Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie, the white mistress and the black slave, servant, and companion.... The events in Miranda's (Katherine Anne Porter's) memories take on a mythical character that is part of the emotional education of the surviving grandchildren."

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 24-27

"With a deeply penetrating glance it surveys the lives of the Grandmother and Old Nannie, who together typify their society. The title is taken from a poem no doubt popular in their day, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*: 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new'... Even during her life the Grandmother sees the old order crumbling, though she and Nannie are loath to admit it. She has seen how her children 'went about their own affairs, scattering out and seeming to lose all that sense of family unity' so precious to her. An element of corruption has been passed from generation to generation. No matter how strictly they were raised, the children, especially the sons, usually turned out spoiled...

'The Old Order' ["The Journey"] is composed mostly of generalized narrative describing the long daily conversations between the aged Grandmother and her Negro companion. The style is quietly reminiscent with only touches of irony. The old women have one topic. 'They talked about the past'... Only one scene is dramatized at length: the purchase of Nannie and her parents by the father of the Grandmother when the latter was 'Miss Sophia Jane, a prissy, spoiled five-year-old.' This episode, important as marking the beginning of their relationship and also as a comment on slavery, is first described objectively, then seen from the point of view of Nannie, whose perfect memory for past scenes complements the Grandmother's recollection of dates.

The multiplicity of functions of the scene mentioned above is a good illustration of one of the finest qualities of this story and many of Miss Porter's other works: the economy with which they pack a richness of content into their limited space. It is difficult to believe that so much depth and detail could be included in slightly over twenty pages. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that each character and episode is typical. The ease with which the narrative maneuvers in time, furthermore, compresses history and gives an effect of fullness and complexity. A symbolic quality inheres not only in characters and events but also in certain objects. There is a natural symbolism in the old ladies' occupation of making patchwork out of old family finery. This work is a perfect objective equivalent of their conversation, which takes scattered events from memory, arranges them together in a 'carefully disordered patchwork,' and lays them away again, since they are of no use or interest to the younger generation. Patchwork covers are made to enshrine family relics, the most important of which—the holy of holies—is a rolling pin carved for his wife by their most illustrious ancestor. 'This rolling pin was the Grandmother's irreplaceable treasure'....

Since the Grandmother personifies the old order, the author analyzes the entire culture by analyzing her.... At seventeen she had been married to a second cousin, and she bore eleven children of whom nine survived. Her husband fought in the Civil War and died some years later of his wound.... When her son Harry's wife died at the birth of her third child, Miranda, the Grandmother raised the children. Before Miranda was nine years old the Grandmother died while on a visit to her third son and his family in far western Texas.... It was according to [the old order] that the Grandmother herself had been raised, and she endeavored to impose it on the next generation, never doubting seriously that it was correct and indeed absolute. She could not help seeing that there were flaws. The children, for example, seldom seemed to turn out very well. She agreed in essence with Nannie's estimate of the younger generation: 'Wuthless, shiftless lot, jes plain scum, Miss Sophia Jane; I cain't undahstand it aftah all the raisin' dey had.' But about the manner of this 'raisin' they admitted no doubts....

There is an indication of at least one of the flaws in the system in the description of the Grandmother's method of punishing her two sons who ran away during the 'terrible second year in Texas'... She whipped them with her riding whip. Then she made them kneel down with her while she prayed for them, asking God to help them mend their ways and not be undutiful to their mother; her duty performed, she broke down and wept with her arms around them.... They had endured their punishment stoically, because it would have been disgraceful to cry when a woman hit them, and besides, she did not hit very hard; they had knelt with her in shamefaced gloom, because religious feeling was a female mystery which embarrassed them, but when they saw her tears they burst into loud bellows of repentance.' Already their maleness has removed them almost completely from their mother's control.

The crucial question of slavery seems not to have bothered the Grandmother seriously. It was simply part of that eternal system which gave her only an occasional doubt. When Nannie asked, as she often did, why God was so hard on a certain race because of the color of its skin, and whether discrimination would continue in the next life, Miss Sophia Jane 'was always brisk and opinionated about it: 'Nonsense! I tell you, God does not know whether a skin is black or white. He sees only souls. Don't be getting notions, Nannie—of course you're going to Heaven.' Thus does she separate God completely from the social order. Nannie's views on slavery are quite superficial.... Her first free act was to tell her mistress proudly, 'I aim to stay wid you as long as you'll have me.' Nannie has lived with her mistress on 'almost equal terms.' In short, their relationship is typical of the best possible under the old order; yet the author makes clear her condemnation of slavery....

As the woman is the center of the family and the family the basis of Southern society, so the center of the woman herself is her love. It is precisely here that Miss Porter finds the flaw around which everything crystallized: the Grandmother never achieved a real and satisfying union, spiritually or physically, with her husband. This failure and its implications are explored through the author's comment, dramatized, and powerfully symbolized. The Grandmother's attitudes toward marriage and sex are first revealed after the wedding of her youngest son, while she and Nannie are riding home. The sight of her self-possessed new daughter-in-law has led her to some apprehensive thoughts about the 'new' woman who is 'beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living... unsexing themselves'... The author's condemnation of this archaic view is obvious. Her own Miranda will soon be one of these 'new women.' Here, ironic light is directed at the fact that this old woman who is disapproving of others 'unsexing' themselves has herself led an unsexed life and is by no means free from the subconscious effects of it....

When Nannie almost died of puerperal fever, Sophia Jane nursed Nannie's child with her own, in spite of strong protests from husband and mother. 'She had learned now that she was badly cheated in giving her children to another woman to feed; she resolved never again to be cheated in just that way. She sat nursing her child and her foster child, with a sensual warm pleasure she had not dreamed of, translating her natural physical relief into something holy, God-sent, amends from heaven for what she had suffered in childbed. Yes, and for what she missed in the marriage bed, for there also something had failed.' Here, certainly, is the crucial fact in the formation of this typical woman of the old order. The little satisfaction she does receive from the entire process of marriage and motherhood is related not to her husband but to her children. All else is pain and frustration, leading at best to indifference, at worse to a deep and ever-growing resentment against her husband and all men. With this as a foundation she is inclined never to excuse, always to exaggerate their faults. And of faults there are an abundance, since they have been spoiled by mothers who, like this one, let a compensatory sentimental love for their children undermine the strict code by which they attempted to raise them....

The most important fact about [the Grandmother] was that she never really gave herself away in love, with the result that her marriage was not an enrichment but a bitter violation of self, and hence necessarily a failure—one made doubly bitter by its destruction of her early unrealistic dreams. The Grandmother emerged from this failure cold and resentful toward men but with her natural strength and self-sufficiency redoubled, and it was upon this foundation that she built the partially honest life of her mature years. Only then did her inner motives become at least somewhat parallel to her outer, conscious life, which had always been 'passionately honest' with an intense striving for outer truth...

The Grandmother's transition to a more integrated life seems to have been related to the occasion when the two boys tried to run away. When they gave as their motive the desire to go to Louisiana to eat sugar cane, she suddenly realized how hard her children had been working and how hungry they were. With this though 'she felt her heart break in her breast'.... Apparently the increased 'honesty' of her life was not so much a surface change as a hardening of those deep emotions involved in the sexual yearnings which had never been satisfied or even fully admitted. This profound disillusion with life seems to have weakened the emotional link which bound her to her children in a beneficent sternness so that afterwards she was activated by a shallower love, by awe at their separateness from her, and perhaps by a sense of guilt at the hardships she had necessarily inflicted upon them.... She retained a hidden feeling that life had cheated her of something....

'The Old Order' [characterizes] the strong, independent woman and the concomitant motif of scorn for men.... Her husband threw away her dowry and her property in wild investments in strange territories... Her succinct comment on Miranda's grandfather and every other man who was wounded in the [Civil War] is simply that they proved themselves 'more heroic than wise.' When Grandmother's husband eventually died of the wound received in the war 'she was bitterly outraged by his death almost as if he had willfully deserted her'.... The Grandmother's strength of character is emphasized repeatedly.... [She] was altogether just, humane, proud, and simple.... She had many small vanities and weaknesses on the surface: a love of luxury and a tendency to resent criticism. This tendency was based on her feeling of superiority in judgment and sensibility to almost everyone around her'....

'The Last Leaf' is a pleasant, sympathetic portrait of Old Nannie, the last important survivor of the Grandmother's generation. Having by long and intimate association come to share some of the dignity of her mistress, she is here shown emerging into her 'serene idleness'.... Though the children say, 'We love you,' they thoughtlessly continue to increase her burdens, comforting themselves with that sentimentality which in the old order was so frequently made to do for love. But Nannie has finally reached that rare eminence at which she can be indifferent to love. The children, surprised and rather hurt by her sudden assertion of independence, find it 'almost funny and certainly very sweet to see how she tried not to be too happy the day she left,' but feel 'rather put upon, just the same.'

'The Last Leaf' reveals how Nannie long ago made good her escape from another union which was, if not oppressive, at least indifferent to her. The man to whom she had been 'married off' at the age of seventeen was Uncle Jimbilly. They had had thirteen children, nine of whom had died while they were still living in Kentucky, and after this period of reproduction had ended, the two had drifted apart. After Nannie has moved into her own cabin and is sitting on the porch smoking her pipe, Uncle Jimbilly wanders up and shows an inclination to stay. True to the pattern and to the example of her mistress, she turns him away with a rejection which seems to extend to the entire male sex.... 'So Uncle Jimbilly crept back up the hill and into his smoke-house attic, and never went near her again'...

Much of the economical description of the old woman [Nannie] serves the purpose, in addition to describing her, of emphasizing her nobility and independence by alluding to her racial origins. 'She was no more the faithful old servant Nannie, a freed slave: she was an aged Bantu woman of independent means, sitting on the steps, breathing the free air.' 'The Last Leaf' gives a new perspective to the sketches by assuming, in a few short passages, the viewpoint of the children and of Harry, their father. The effect of this is a sense of the passing of time and of intimacy with, and sympathy for, the new generation, in spite of their faults.... They had not learned how to work for themselves, they were all lazy and incapable of sustaining effort or planning. They had not been taught and they had not yet educated themselves'.... The dominance of the Grandmother has ended."

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 88-102

"'The Source' is an introduction to the grandmother and her family and to Southern society...a fascinating but fragmentary account of the world of Sophia Jane Rhea, which was to help mold the character of Miranda... She represented an authority which could not be challenged.... She took with her a large shepherdess hat which had been woven just after the Civil War, a symbol of the past and of what she

would like to have been. But she never wore the hat, never gave way to her romantic dreams. Instead, she put on a stiffly starched bonnet, with starch-stiffened, long strings—a visual symbol of her unbending nature. She had suffered greatly in her times, and the brutal past came flooding in to her every year when the peach tree bloomed outside the town house....

The children had mixed feelings about her; she had been a fixed reality for them since their own mother had died young and she had taken them over, but they also recognized her as a tyrant. No matter how much they loved her, they were pleased when she started making preparations to return to the town house.... She rode Fiddler as a sign of her strength.... Her greatest delight was in imposing what was essentially an unnatural order. The cycle never ended: disorder to be ordered, but disorder not to be conquered, always multiplying. Taken alone, the story is a remarkable portrait of a strong-willed Southern aristocrat. Seen as the introduction to the Miranda stories, it is even more effective, for one sees the source of the grandmother's power and control over family and farm and that the grandmother is herself the source of the strengths and weaknesses of the whole Rhea family.

In 'The Witness' we learn that [Uncle Jimbilly] did odd jobs about the farm, but was no Uncle Remus, although he would, if asked correctly, carve tombstones to be placed on the graves of the dead birds and animals buried by the children.... While Uncle Jimbilly carved the marker, he told long ghost stories which they didn't understand—had he seen the ghost? Was it a ghost or a man?... Generally he talked of the brutalities inflicted upon the Negro in slave times, though he was not tortured because he belonged to Sophia Jane. 'Dey used to take 'em out and tie 'em down and whup 'em,' he would mutter, 'wid gret big leather strops inch thick long as yo' ahm, wid round holes...in 'em so's every time dey hit 'em de hide and de meat done come off dey bones in little round chunks.' Then he would say, they put corn shucks on their backs, set them afire, and then poured vinegar over the stanced wounds. The children—Maria, ten; Paul, eight; and Miranda, six—could not quite believe his accounts of slavery, but the stories made them nervous. They were hearing a mythic, violent presentation of the life of a Southern Negro, were getting a glimpse of slavery both distorted and accurate.

The accounts of slavery which they heard from the elders collided with the stories by Uncle Jimbilly. Which should they accept, which reject? Uncle Jimbilly was cantankerous and religious—no, he would not carve 'Safe in Heaven' as an epitaph for a tame jackrabbit—but he lacked authority, not because he was a Negro, but because he adopted a role which the children could see through. Exasperated with the children, he would threaten to skin them alive, to pull their teeth to make a new set for the tramp, Old Man Ronk; but he never got around to doing any of these things. His threats of violence were obvious, exaggerated, and even the 'most credulous child' was not frightened by them.... The children are learning to evaluate the testimony of a witness to the past, a witness whose testimony runs counter to the Southern and the family myths about that past.

'The Old Order' ["The Journey"] sketches in the whole life span of the grandmother and ends with her death and the impending new order. Moving back and forth in time, the story begins with her last years, when she sat with the ex-slave Nannie, talking endlessly about the past... The past had been bitter for them both; the grandmother had attempted, as an authoritarian figure, to keep her world stable; Nannie had been assigned a place in the world and had always obeyed. Sophia Jane's father had bought Nannie and her parents in 1832 (Mrs. Porter was born in 1827 and would have been five in 1832).... Emancipated, Nannie still measured her worth, at least partially, by the monetary standards of slavery....

[The Grandmother] helped [the children] establish homes, but they fled her domination. She found faults everywhere: Miranda's mother had been too delicate, a failure as a housekeeper, and could not bear children successfully. Just as she was beginning to work on the faults of the orphaned children, she died.... She announced how well she felt, and fell dead. With her death, we learn in other Miranda stories, the family began to come apart even more rapidly, for the grandmother's power in the family was both actual and mythic. The family's strongest connections with the dead weight of the past were severed, and it now had no real directions to follow. The extent of the change is explored briefly but poetically in 'The Last Leaf'....



After Sophia Jane's death, Nannie, old and decrepit herself, surprised the family by moving away from the family house to a small cabin, a cabin which was symbolically across the creek. The children had tried to assure the old woman that they loved her, but she really did not care; her ties were with the past, and she was now ready for her own death.... The family needed Nannie as servant and matriarchal figure. She would return to them briefly, accept their gifts (offered as bribes that she might return permanently); but, with her new independence, she always returned to her own cabin. Uncle Jimbilly, her husband of convenience, tried to return to her; but she would not, she said, spend the rest of her life waiting on him.... In rejecting the present, she returned, not to her past with grandmother Rhea, but to an African tribal past; she is repeatedly described in terms of African nobility....

She managed to control Harry by insisting she had suckled him (in 'The Old Order' we learn that Nanny had been a wet nurse for the elder Rhea children, but not to Harry). While Nannie's facts were not literally true, he always gave in to 'the smothering matriarchal tyranny to which he had been delivered by the death of his father.... The essential weakness of Harry is subtly probed; like his father, Harry allowed women to dominate. Nannie's control, since she was the last leaf, was not to last. She does, however, through Miss Porter's story, take on permanence.'

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Twayne 1965) 54-60

"Throughout the stories of 'The Old Order'—about Katherine Anne Porter's chief fictional counterpart, Miranda, and her family—images of death abound. Both Miranda's grandmother, Sophia Jane, and black Aunt Nannie, Sophia Jane's servant and companion who was once her slave, are all but constantly preoccupied with the dead; the past, the realm of the dead, is more real for them than the present. 'Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it.' Sophia Jane preserves in elaborate trappings the mementos of her forebears. She decorates her great-grandfather's rolling pin... In the ceremonial burials they give to dead animals, with wooden tombstones carved by Uncle Jimbilly, Aunt Nannie's husband, the children imitate their elders' obsession. But the central theme of the final two stories in the series is the triumph of life over death."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 15-16

"Identifying this group of stories as a sequence allows us to see that together they comprise the length of one of her short novels, they move from beginning | 'The Source' | to end | 'The Grave' | and are unified by common characters and a single narrator, Miranda—although she often uses a double point of view: the hindsight of an adult projecting back to the perception of a young child.... In 'The Old Order' and in *Old Mortality*, Porter examines the influences which made Miranda a divided adult. These vignettes tell us that there are two great mysteries for both the child and the adult Miranda: sex and death.... It is the women of her extended family who are Miranda's role models....

In 'The Source' Miranda portrays her Grandmother as a wonder woman, a matriarch with all the strength and prerogatives of an ancient mother goddess. An equal but opposite portrait of the same Grandmother is contained in 'The Journey,' in which the psychology of this compellingly strong woman is made transparent. Here the Grandmother is a frightened, insecure woman who feels inadequate despite her apparent strength, who finds her romantic notions of love and marriage a delusion and her body and sexuality a trap.... The Grandmother does not seem to derive strength from her mothering in 'The Journey'; it might almost be said to be her ruin.

The story is a careful examination of all the avenues open to a woman in the Grandmother's culture: she is portrayed as the spoiled and petted daughter of a wealthy planter; as a gay, pretty belle who teases a suitor into marriage; as a fruitful mother. Then she is a widow, the solitary head of her still-dependent family, and, finally, a matriarch. Miranda sees that her Grandmother has had 'all the responsibilities of a man but...none of the privileges'; none of her roles has made her happy, despite her show of strength. Miranda has clearly perceived ambivalence in the woman who has raised her, and in these two seminal

stories Porter recreates the ambivalence which spells conflict for Miranda. Miranda's understanding of womanhood, at the base of the Miranda cycle, as well as stories like 'Theft,' 'Flowering Judas,' and 'The Cracked Looking-Glass,' is that control is paramount. If a woman cannot control of her body, she cannot control her life. Thus her sexuality is a threat to her.... Sexual experience has enough intensity and power to make her relinquish control of herself... On the other hand, sexual experience can be transforming; through it a woman becomes a mother.... 'The Last Leaf' and 'The Fig Tree' illustrate the positive models from whom she learned the value of feminine independence....

There is a dual point of view in each episode which unifies the whole and culminates in 'The Grave.' This double-layered perception is the key to the point of these brief incidents. There is, first of all, the point of view of the childish Miranda, who characterizes the adults of her early experience as giants who left indelible marks on her psyche... The adult Miranda who remembers is the second, selectively artistic point of view. This is the consciousness which provides ironic tone in 'The Source' and 'The Witness' and objective omniscience in 'The Journey' and 'The Last Leaf'.... When Miranda recalls specific events of her childhood and overlooks others, this adult voice attests to their psychological significance for the grown woman she has become....By the time we reach 'The Grave,' we have accumulated a full catalogue of the influences that prepared Miranda for her insights into the cycle of life and death in 'The Grave.' As we read on, in *Old Mortality* Miranda's psychological history from 'The Old Order'...has the effect of plumbing the depths of her subconscious. It is her *Remembrance of Things Past* [Proust]....

'The Old Order,' then, provides special insights into what shaped the adult Miranda, a spirited yet sensitive woman of sharp perception, uncompromising, if contradictory, in her insistence on both individuality and dependence on the sustenance of love.... The significance of Miranda's character to Porter's work can hardly be overstated. She is the identified center of consciousness in fully half of Porter's short stories and the implicit narrator in *Ship of Fools* and at least six other stories, including the most psychologically complex ones. To understand this personality is to understand the viewpoint of much of Porter's work; its autobiographical overtones only make it more interesting... By the time she reaches adulthood, Miranda recognizes that the structure of the Old Order is rotting from within its sentimental core while at the same time it must bow to 'grotesque dislocations' in its society because the outside world is 'heaving in the sickness of a millennial change'....

'The Source'...is a simple account of the Grandmother's annual two-week visit to the family farm. As Miranda perceives it, it becomes a ritual visitation by an all-powerful Earth Mother, without whose good will the place and its people would perish... For Miranda, this Grandmother is not only a person but a symbol of her world.... She is a benevolent, if distant, divinity whose nature is fulfilled by taking care of others.... The use of the impersonal article and the capital G not only suggests that this grandmother is a special creature apart from merely mortal members of her family, but also indicates that the narrator snaps to attention at the thought of her.... One can see why she provokes awe. She is an amazon of the hearth... Her ability to bring order out of chaos...thereby nurturing her dependents, is her primary virtue and can be counted on like the rising sun.... In short, she is like an ancient goddess who descends to earth cyclically and with her restoring touch breathes new life into a dormant world. It is clear that she embodies every attribute of the Earth Mother—even to androgyny.... In Miranda's memory the Grandmother is Janus-faced. She is a woman who likes feminine finery and who understands and adheres to the dress and gestures of a Southern lady. However, she is a women who wants to control rather than acquiesce....

'The Journey' may be viewed as a journey from cradle to grave, which begins with the ancestors of whom the Grandmother is proud and ends with her dropping dead on the doorstep of her son's home. Or it may be equivalent to the flashbacks Miranda is capable of, a journey backward in time for the Grandmother and Nannie, two ancient women who conspire together to recreate their mutual past by reciting it to each other while they busy their hands making memory quilts.... This is, of course, what they are doing verbally and what Miranda does mentally, fitting together the pieces of the family quilt is an apt metaphor and moves in two generational directions.... The two women seem to represent two halves of one universal female experience, the one black and indentured, the other white and free.... They certainly are sisters under the skin... They marry within a few days of each other, and bear and nurse their children together. Their similarities and cohesiveness are emphasized almost to the exclusion of their racial differences, suggesting that theirs is the experience of womankind, not that of a race or class.... Sophia is subject to

'burdensome rule' because she is female. Both will eventually experience a quasi-emancipation: Nannie by presidential proclamation and Sophia by the death of her husband....

Misled by her father, she will be sorely disappointed in her husband and sons, none of whom have one-tenth of her responsibility or power, but on whom she still depends for a worthy opinion of herself. She is first disappointed by the reality of sex and begins to experience its liability: 'a grim and terrible race of procreation,' wherein she is even denied the pleasure of nursing her babies. Her first step toward self-determination comes in claiming her right to nurture; her reward is the sensual pleasure she has wished for and bonds with her children.... Marriage offers her the knowledge that 'she despised men...and was ruled by them.' As she feels her own power taking shape, she chafes under the rule of her husband, whose sexuality she now sees as aggressive, selfish, and exploitive... She is angry with him for 'deserting' her when he eventually dies of a wound sustained in a war he pursued through idealism and stubbornness....

It is only in his death that she fully realizes her own potential... Forced from the home she has always known into the Texas wilderness, she breaks from the confinement of paternalism, literally building a new place with her own hands against enormous odds.... But if she has been frustrated by father and husband, it is her sons who will break her heart, running away from the home she has made in a childish effort to return to the sugarcane fields of Louisiana.... She has sublimated her sexual energy into nurturing, and thus she sees in her sons' leave-taking an indictment of her motherhood. She has been driving them like men when she should have been feeding them like children.... She is too quick to assume she has failed in what she now regards as her most important role: nourishing.

The experience reinforces her sense of inadequacy as a person, and it is more terrible because, for the first time, she feels inadequate as a mother, a devastation more complete than being rejected as a person. Of course, the poor truth of the matter is that she can never be sufficient to them, and this knowledge makes 'her heart break in her breast.' From that day forward she spoils her children, especially her boys, refusing to demand anything of them, and giving them up to young women she disapproves of, 'new' women who want to vote and who don't mind leaving home to earn a living.... While she is appalled, her sons have their way, even when it ruins her resources. Finally, they use her up. It is fitting that she dies in the home of a son who humors her wishes while she avoids commanding him in anything....

[In 'The Witness']in contrast to the Grandmother and her strong benevolence, this old black man is slow, irascible, and grudging, a complainer rather than a doer, who buys himself an audience for his gloomy ghost and slave stories by whittling tombstones for the dead animals the children find around the farm. Although he is Nannie's husband and therefore a contemporary of the Grandmother, as well as a colorful eccentric... Uncle Jimbilly provides a definite link between the stories which precede him and those which follow because of his morbid preoccupation with death.

In 'The Journey'...in the very last words of the story, where the information is most stunning, we are told that the Grandmother 'dropped dead over the doorsill.' Furthermore, the paragraph which conveys this news stresses the zest, the power, and the vitality of the woman, who moves a fifty-foot adobe wall the day of her death, so that the fact of her mortality seems all the more sudden and shocking, as it must have been for the young Miranda. Even the alliterated *d*'s of the phrase have this impact.... What the reader is left with at the end of the second story, then, is the curious juxtaposition of life and death... This is neatly transmitted to 'The Witness' in the person of Uncle Jimbilly, who symbolizes death in life just as the Grandmother has signified life over death. The Grandmother's death and Uncle Jimbilly's daily life were the earliest and most intense manifestations of mortality for Miranda....

Born in slavery, [Uncle Jimbilly] is fixated on that heritage in the same way that Miranda will become fixated on hers...Unlike Uncle Remus, of whom he is a caricature, Uncle Jimbilly does not cloak the point of his slave stories in metaphor... The detached tone of the narrator, Miranda, suggests that the children hardly think that Uncle Jimbilly will carry out his threats... As children, they are not much threatened by death.... Although Uncle Jimbilly is obviously protesting his social status, his enslavement—for which he blames the white family which employs him—can best be read as metaphor. In the first place, Uncle Jimbilly is not a slave and has not been for most of his adult life. Second, he has not been abused either as slave or servant through a long life with this family. Third, even the children recognize that he never has

‘done as single thing that anyone told him to do. He did his work just as he please and when he pleased.’ And he repeats stories he has heard as he please, giving an ironic twist to the title of his vignette. What he actually bears witness to, by his own person, is not physical abuse of slaves by their owners but the physical deterioration and certain death to which all humans are slaves. One may go grumbling, like Uncle Jimbilly; one may suffer terribly or gradually rot away under the stupor of drugs like Old Man Ronk, but as surely as he lives, someday each person is ‘going to get a mighty big surprise,’ just as the Grandmother did and her survivors will....

Although Aunt Nannie, the family’s faithful black mammy, is not someone Miranda might be expected to emulate, she is nevertheless a startling and forceful example of the fact that a woman—even in her last years—can refuse to be defined by her culture and allow her real self to emerge.... If Uncle Jimbilly’s portrait is a sober reminder of doom, the presentation of Aunt Nannie is a hymn to survival.... Although she anticipates dying, particularly after parting from the Grandmother and promising to meet her in heaven, no physical death will overtake her for years. However, her old identity dies, or is perhaps subsumed in the new vital individuality she assumes. She has been, all her life, dutiful, self-sacrificing, and maternal, using herself up in nurturing the younger generation. In that, she has been a duplicate of Sophia Jane and other women of her generation and culture.... The symbiotic relationship between the Grandmother and Nannie has already been established in ‘The Journey’; physically and psychically Nannie is the image and likeness of Sophia: ‘...she was thin and tall also, with a nobly modeled Negro face...’

While the Grandmother is alive, Nannie is her second-in-command, her right hand, an extension of her discipline, her principles, her self. The children of the family address them both equally as ‘Mammy’ and recognize little difference (except those incumbent on caste) between the women who have both nurtured and reared them.... Like the Grandmother, Nannie is Mother, albeit a black one...and must have kept Miranda mindful of both the slavery and tyranny of motherhood even after the Grandmother’s death. Her capacity for work and self-sacrifice is her great strength, and her motherhood is the weapon with which she extracts agreement or respect. For her part, she is taken for granted by the children she serves, and she knows that their love for her is fickle, sentimental, and largely based on their dependency. When the Grandmother’s death frees her individuality, she turns her back on the Old Order, breaking ties with children, husband, and her previous identity....demonstrating the falsity of their sentimental assumption that she is ‘a real member of the family, perfectly happy with them’...

She trades black dresses and ruffled mobcaps for a blue bandanna head wrap and a cornucob pipe. Instead of the housework she has always done, she braids and sells woolen rugs in her retirement. No longer content to wait on others, she is now the one who receives visits and gifts from both strangers and family. She becomes...independent, but her strength in her newly revealed self is demonstrated most sharply in her rejection of Uncle Jimbilly, the husband who has fathered her numerous children. The mate decreed for her by her owners, he is first of all a remnant of her actual slavery and a reminder of the burdens of motherhood he has given her. Second, she sees him as a man, servant or not, whose sex entitled him to her service, and thus she refuses his presence in her house.... Nannie’s real identity...is essentially singular.... She belongs, finally, to no one but herself. A last leaf, anticipating the breeze to which she will succumb, Nannie nevertheless remains in Miranda’s memory a survivor....

Nannie would be particularly important to Miranda because she survives the changing social order at the onset of the twentieth century.... Where her grandmother remains firmly entrenched in the old world, Nannie straddles the two, having been both a traditional woman and an independent one. It is appropriate that she serves as the transition figure while Miranda’s consciousness is becoming more aware of independent women... [At the same time] Miranda remembers...that ‘in the old days’ Nannie often got her way with Harry, Miranda’s father, by reminding him that she had nursed him at her breast. He always gave in to ‘the smothering matriarchal tyranny’... It is, after all, not only women who can be oppressed by familial relationships. This realization marks a shift in Miranda’s perspective.”

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 115-29, 133-36

“Her mother died when Katherine Anne was two years old, and her rearing was shared by her father and her paternal grandmother, Catherine Anne Skaggs Porter, who provided the model for the grandmothers in ‘The Old Order,’ ‘The Downward Path to Wisdom,’ and ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’.... Porter’s stories set in the South concern the Old Order and the New. The Old Order was a structured antebellum society that cherished aesthetic ideals at the same time it nurtured inequities indigenous to feudalism. In their feudal structure the Old Order aristocrats enjoyed privilege and comfort by encasing themselves in a detachment that ignored the bond of humanity and the cost in suffering that luxury exacted. Old Order descendants preserve the past by legend and fragile truths, to which reason and science are anathema. They are often in conflict with the New Order, made up of persons who consciously reject the romantic values and traditions of the past and of poor whites struggling to enter middle-class respectability....

The stories ostensibly are set in the Southwest after the family moved from Kentucky to eastern Texas near the Arkansas border, a region settled by slave owners from both the upper and lower South and suffused with feudal customs and values that are distinct from the freewheeling traditions of the Old West. In their retrospective segments, the stories depict the changing of orders and the post-bellum Southern economy that precipitated the family’s move from the upper South to Texas. The first two stories of ‘The Old Order’—‘The Source’ and ‘The Journey’—are told primarily in retrospect.... ‘The Source’ is the grandmother’s story. Her past is summarized in references to the Civil War, to her widowhood, to her having planted orchards in three states, and to Aunt Nannie and the other Negroes on the farm who had been slaves. But it is also the beginning of Miranda’s story. The grandmother’s dignity and formidable efficiency are described as parts of her overall orderliness and her fondness for ritual. She is both the source of the family and the source of many of Miranda’s views and strengths.

‘The Journey’ expands on the grandmother’s past briefly outlined in ‘The Source.’ This second story begins in the later years of Grandmother and Aunt Nannie but shifts into retrospection to provide an account of their Kentucky past.... They recreate their histories by selective recall and artistic shaping. Memory is the means by which they create order in the universe. They convince themselves that changes are aberrations and that ‘a series of changes might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known’.... Sophia Jane, the grandmother, chose the child Nannie, whom she called a ‘monkey,’ for her playmate the same day she received the pony ‘Fiddler.’ She did not know which she loved more. Her identifying the Negro child Nannie with animals is precisely that society has done in the buying and selling of slaves. Even when Nannie went to the big house to live with Sophia Jane, the kindness shown her was ‘not so indulgent, maybe, as that given to the puppies’....

[The Grandmother] disapproves of the modern ways of her youngest son’s wife, who represents the ‘new’ woman, ‘who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living’; but when Sophia Jane had been a young mother she had flouted tradition by taking the ill Nannie’s child to nurse, horrifying both her husband and mother. And even though she had had traditional aristocratic ideas about a woman’s place and responsibilities, when she was widowed, she learned to do men’s work and conduct men’s business, accumulating enough wealth to give each of her children land and money as wedding gifts.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 51-54

“All these works take place in the Grandmother’s household or surrounding farm, and all have to do with the ‘Southern’ past, the myth that must somehow be dealt with by Miranda... The Grandmother...is a fictional caricature of Porter’s Grandmother Porter (Aunt Cat) who managed to weather all difficulties in spite of the incompetent and passive males surrounding her.... The Southern myth: women got a raw deal. Texas, somebody once said, was hell on women and horses....

Miranda will come to demand a *new* order, one that does not require her enslavement to the *old* order, that is the Southern myth... Porter viciously caricatures Southern manners, Southern character, Southern narratives, the whole Southern mystique with a view to its ultimate rejection.... Above all else, the reader must be careful not to miss the subtle humor in the narrative voice of these pieces... On the positive side, Porter, like Faulkner, celebrates the Southern tradition...that valued courage, honor, hope, pride,

compassion, pity, and sacrifice. But on the 'pejorative' side...Porter questions the dominance of the white knights and the virginity of their women; and she suggests that slavery had a darker side than the color of a man's skin....

'The Source' describes the fountainhead of Miranda's strength, the 'source' of her strength and endurance. That source is the Grandmother...a metaphor for the Southern myth, a myth that is highly attractive and even to some extent valuable, but a myth that...will ultimately be rejected by Miranda at the conclusion of *Old Mortality*... She represents both what is admirable and what is repugnant in the Texas and Southern experience... The Grandmother's admirable qualities are clearly her independent spirit, self-reliance, get-up-and-go, sheer energy, indomitable will, unshakable faith in her own efforts—all qualities associated with pioneer Texas values. On the other hand, the Grandmother possesses certain qualities that are threatening to those around her—a domineering personality, intolerance for those who dare to disagree with her, a tendency to run roughshod over the timid and passive, a lack of concern for the projects of others, and a cruel impatience with the slow and sluggish... The Grandmother imposes order, sanitation, and sense on what otherwise would be chaos, filth, and foolishness. Tyrannical and feared though she is, she nevertheless is beloved...

'The Journey'...deals with the relationship between the Grandmother and an ex-slave, Old Nannie, that relationship symbolizing Southern manners in 'the old order'.... Together they quilt a pattern of the past.... The reader is not quite sure whether old Nannie is an extension of the Grandmother or whether the Grandmother is an extension of old Nannie... Black and white have lived together so long that the untying of the knot is no longer possible.... Old Nannie is comically triumphant over males, both white and black; a distinctively feminist ideology lurks just beneath the surface of the ironic narrative. Indeed, 'the old order' as Porter imaginatively depicts it was...a benevolent matriarchy, contrasting with the *actual* old order that was hell on women and horses....

'The Witness' is a character sketch of Uncle Jimbilly, handyman and former slave, an individual not allowed to live his life truly, but only as a 'witness' to the greatest of American moral blights, Negro slavery.... Uncle Jimbilly is an ostensible 'Uncle Tom' figure who masks his suffering in a ritualized shuffle of conversation with the three young children for whom he whittles tombstones to be used for various dead animals.... He is an artist-figure preoccupied with death, essentially the death of the spirit, the legacy of slavery.... Uncle Jimbilly is an educator in the Uncle Remus tradition, but his mournful tone when speaking of the old days under slavery makes him something more than this [for] his private rejection of Southern platitudes."

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1991) 65-75, 77-79

"Like Porter's grandmother in 'Portrait: Old South,' Sophia Jane possesses strength and fortitude, driven by a consuming rage for order. In 'The Source,' for instance, as soon as she arrives for a visit at her country house, she immediately begins overseeing the complete overhaul of the grounds, outbuildings, and main house.... After her stay, with order restored, she returns home where 'at once she set to work restoring to order the place which no doubt had gone somewhat astray in her absence.' Her demands for order, based on unchanging tradition, are strict and inclusive....

But Sophia Jane's life is out of balance, primarily because memories utterly dominate her perspective, overruling all other concerns and values.... With Aunt Nannie, her black maid and companion, Sophia Jane spends much of her time talking about the past, extolling bygone days and devaluing all else.... They are very much aware that the pressures of time and modernity are transforming the South—Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie steadfastly refuse to confront these changes and to adopt a realistic view of the times.... [They] live by duty rather than inquiry....

Her willfulness on the one hand gives her great strength and power, as we can see in her heroic efforts to raise her grandchildren and her successes at running a farm amid personal and economic adversity.... On the other hand, her power borders on tyranny. In the iron grip of memory, she strives to impose her will upon others just as her inner self imposes itself upon her.... She rejects any divergent opinion... For Porter

such single-mindedness invited destruction for both the individual and the artist.... Nannie and Sophia Jane delight in sewing patchworks from cut ‘scraps of the family finery, hoarded for fifty years.’ This is a fitting metaphor for the artist’s delving into memory to reinvent and reshape a larger pattern of meaning. But whereas Porter saw the artist’s efforts as a process of challenge and interplay that ultimately enlarged consciousness, for Nannie and Sophia Jane their sewing is merely a means to apotheosize the past, [serving] no function in the household....

I believe Porter came to see her grandmother as the embodiment of the predominant voice of her own hidden self of memory.... Porter believed she had to incorporate her grandmother and her grandmother’s ways into her own life—to maintain an ongoing and open-ended dialogue with her—without becoming entirely like her and thereby closing herself off from the other voices of the world and of her past.... In ‘The Witness’... Uncle Jimbilly, a former slave, tells stories describing the horrors of slavery that cut against the family” tales glorifying plantation life on which Miranda and her siblings had been brought up.... Uncle Jimbilly stands as a disturbing witness whose testimony refutes much of the grandmother’s rosier recollections of the past.... For all his crazy rantings and empty threats, Uncle Jimbilly nonetheless delivers a telling rebuke to the family’s glorified past, nudging the children out of their innocence...into embarrassment and guilt...

Aunt Nannie in ‘The Last Leaf’ undermines their present-day security in the benevolence of black-white relations and indeed of the stability of familial bonds. Aunt Nannie may be...the final leaf of her generation to fall, but she also may be...the concluding page of the grandmother’s narrative.... Her moving out of the family house into a house of her own refutes the stereotypical role she, along with other blacks, was forced to play in the grandmother’s (and the South’s) narrative, thereby subverting its portrayal of family order and interracial harmony. In her new home Aunt Nannie sheds the persona of trustworthy servant for that of a strong and independent African.... Once the wearer of a mask of servility, Nannie now embraces her lost heritage... Nannie’s metamorphosis only hastens the dissolution of the family order that she and the grandmother had once held together so well.”

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistic Development*  
(Louisiana State 1993) 152-57, 160-62

“Katherine Anne Porter’s collection ‘The Old Order’ tells of transition, a rite of passage from an old world to a new. Using life and death imagery, the stories in ‘The Old Order’ detail the changes from slavery to freedom, aristocracy to bourgeoisie, birth to death. The multigenerational narrative elevates the story into mythic time of recollective past, present, and projective future.... Future generations of Porter’s characters, descendants of Sophia Jane and Nannie will not be obliterated, but, like Miranda, forever transformed.... Miranda does not lose her life but bears a historical psychological burden of her family and the South. She tries to shed this guilt through symbolic burials of small creatures. Nannie’s changing place in the family indicates the problems of reconciling an unjust past.... ‘The Old Order’ is cathartic in eliciting compassion and hope by harmonizing the violent past to the eternal present through Miranda’s mature vision.”

P. Jane Hafen  
“Katherine Anne Porter’s ‘The Old Order’ and *Agamemnon*”  
*Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (1994) 491-93

“Nannie, an important character in the ‘Old Order’ stories...is presented with great dignity despite the indignity of having once been called ‘crowbait’ and a ‘little monkey’ and sold for twenty dollars. Indeed, it is Nannie’s ‘journey’ as well as Sophia Jane’s that is recounted in ‘The Journey,’ where she achieves the independence and personal authority to criticize the white judge who had once sold her, after he has unapologetically related the insult to others.... As for Sophia Jane, she journeys from an unquestioning acceptance of slavery and of her right to call the black child a ‘little monkey’ and value her equally with her horse to a level of moral discernment that allows her to defy the strictures of society, voiced by her mother and her husband, and nurse Nannie’s baby when Nannie ‘almost died’... The two characters journey through life to the point that each regards the other as her best friend.

Only after Sophia Jane's death, however, does Nannie reach her fullest level of dignity, because only then can she discard the last vestiges of slavery.... In giving Nannie her proper tribal identity, rather than a racial label blurring that specificity and one that would implicitly assign to her the stigma of inferiority such labels have historically carried, Porter releases her from the social system that would limit her authentic power and dignity, now fully evident as she inhabits her own place with the impunity of independence.... Uncle Jimbilly, as well...is given great power and authority in 'The Witness,' where he is the title character... Jimbilly is presented in somewhat comical caricature, but his witness to the inhumanity of slavery...is not undercut. He is the voice of a cultural memory that whites have found it all too convenient to suppress."

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 134-35

"'The Old Order'...opens with a version of Porter's creative process, the making of a work of art out of fragments of legend and memory. Grandmother and Nannie, both storytellers, spend hours with needles [and] old family finery...sewing family quilts.... In their collaborative work, the two elderly women employ the material of women's lives, recounting marriages, births, and deaths and stitching together fabric worn by the family women at these central events. Their 'clear lemon floss' creates a beautiful and useful [they are not used] object from fragments of the past: the quilt suggests how the past, when reembodyed through art, becomes a comfort to the present, an enclosing warmth, and something to be passed on in a family as a thing of good use....

The world of 'The Old Order' is governed by the grandmother, a Demeter of great mother figure who performs, yearly, a seasonal, cyclic journey of homecoming and renewal... 'The Source' identifies the grandmother as the wellspring of order and love in her extended family.... The grandmother's seasonal journeys evoke the seasonal cycles of Demeter and her daughter, moving between a fertile springtime world and Hades, the world of the dead.... The grandmother's fertility, her cyclical patterns of renewal, make her a symbol of maternal power.... Evidently Porter feared that her family faced complete extinction with her generation and at times saw herself as at least partially responsible."

Mary Titus  
*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 76-77, 86-87

"Sophia Jane is most obviously an avatar... The radical meaning of her first name links her with the female personification of wisdom in *Proverbs* 8, who accompanies God in the work of creation. Religious language hallows the summertime visit of this spirit of re-creation.... Like Wisdom in *Proverbs* 8, she instructs her wayward offspring in the right way to act. Sophia Jane provides the stability and structure lacking in the lives of her motherless and virtually fatherless grandchildren.... Sophia Jane is the source not just of the nameless, faceless grandchildren in 'The Source' but of the entire Old Order.

Although the Grandmother is the grand motherly figure in the life of Miranda and her siblings, she illustrates how the model-disciple relationship can easily degenerate into bondage.... The plantation mistress brings the Old South's hierarchy of power into the emerging New South of Miranda's girlhood, for she behaves like 'a tireless, just and efficient slave driver of every creature on the place'.... She governs...black workers with an old-fashioned noblesse oblige that ameliorates their problems but never eliminates the racial inequality behind their litany of complaints.... [This liberal critic expects this old lady on the verge of death to eliminate racial inequality.]

The Grandmother is actually Miranda's ancestral double in struggling with the models of southern womanhood.... Before her marriage the youthful Sophia had tried to internalize the ideal for a young lady in the South.... Sophia Jane modeled herself so completely after a culture that located female identity in her 'virtue' that she developed a nightmarish obsession with the chastity required of her gender. The young woman repeatedly woke in terror from dreams about losing her virginity because it defined 'her sole claim to regard, consideration, even to existence'.... The southern maiden yearned for what she most feared, the license for carnal desire forbidden her as a belle but readily excused in her dissolute male cousin.... Since she could not imitate the sexual freedom of males, she copied the sentimental propriety of well-behaved



females... Sophia Jane recognized and sometimes challenged the inequities of the Old Order, but she never rebelled against it completely. Instead, she increasingly suppressed her reservations until she finally grew into the grand model of devotion to duty and obeisance to authority. If southernness is a kind of religion...in which 'society is God,' Sophia Jane became the high priestess of its Old Order....

Whereas Porter writes Nannie into a crucial role in the sequence, Miranda writes her off. The little white girl is too much a child of her culture to see how the former slave, servant, and friend of Sophia Jane eventually overcomes the confinement of the Old Order. In 'The Last Leaf' Miranda and her siblings deem Nannie a happy member of the family, for they have been 'brought up in an out-of-date sentimental way of thinking.' Only when Maria is older does Miranda's sister see through the myth of the postbellum South and realize that all of the children have allowed Nannie to work too hard and too much for the family. If the children do not appreciate Nannie's labors, they understand even less about the history that resulted in her domestic servitude. In 'The Witness' the children view slavery as having occurred in a fairy-tale-like 'once upon a time' and as having ended when slaves advanced their lot by becoming servants. They are surprised that the bent and stiff Uncle Jimbilly was born a slave, and they innocently imagine that he has overcome his years of bondage quite well. Although the threesome are growing up near the turn of the century, they seem to know nothing of Jim Crow laws and the kind of lynch mob that Porter imagined in her unpublished 'The Man in the Tree'...

Uncle Jimbilly initiates them into the violence hidden by their sanguine naivete. The youngsters fret over getting a tombstone carved as a witness to the grave of a pet jackrabbit, but when they come to the elderly African American for his handiwork, he testifies to how thousands of slaves were beaten and burned or left to die in the swamps after being tortured. Uncle Jimbilly rightly makes his young audience squirm with guilt, for the possibility of ritual sacrifice darkens the storybook history that Miranda has been used to hearing. He casts this specter over Miranda's future as well. Alluding to some new version of the slave uprising so often feared by whites in the nineteenth century, Uncle Jimbilly intimates that the powerful should be vigilant against some unspecified and unexpected calamity....

'The Witness' brings the voice of the victim into Miranda's childhood. The story thereby becomes Porter's way of witnessing.... Porter knew from the inception of the sequence the real hidden foundation of Sophia Jane's world.... Porter gives [Nannie] such a central role in 'The Old Order' that the African American woman becomes a kind of twin to Sophia Jane.... Nannie grows from being a shadowy double of Sophia Jane to becoming a self-possessed woman who is finally more free than her white mistress.... In 'The Journey' Porter makes Sophia Jane and Nannie so similar that their resemblances might almost seem more important than their differences. Both suffered from the 'burdensome rule' imposed upon women in a culture crafted by men...A master-slave bond grew into a more benevolent model-disciple relationship and finally approached a kind of kinship. Sophia Jane first saw her lifelong companion as a 'little monkey' of a plaything... But five years later the white child indicated how ambiguous her relationship had become with her black counterpart when she made their names—*Jane* and *Nannie* both having roots in the Hebrew word for 'grace'—and approximate ages converge. Sophia Jane Gay inscribed her slave's name as Nannie Gay in the family Bible and gave the little black girl her own year of birth. As the two grew up, they grew even more alike...still more symmetrical.... Nannie nursed Sophia Jane's babies until Sophia Jane, in a reversal of roles, took Nannie for a model and nurtured her own newborn....

Sophia Jane and Nannie spend their old age as virtual soul mates in 'The Journey'...both longing for the past, lamenting the present, and excusing the other's offspring for the very faults they condemn in their own, both piecing together coverlets and patchworking memory to memory... Although the resemblances between Sophia Jane and Nannie create a veteran camaraderie, they also expose the way the Old Order oppresses all women, especially those who are black.... Sophia Jane neglects the way a judge hurts Nannie on earth for the same reason that she imagines herself as Nannie's 'sponsor' before the ultimate judge in heaven. Nannie lacks the inherent worth of a white woman of property....

Nannie achieves a form of liberation in 'The Last Leaf.' Miranda is not even mentioned in this story, for she is just one of the children who provide...an occasionally naïve point of view.... When Nannie moves away from Sophia Jane's family to live across the creek...she moves beyond the whiteness that has kept her from finding her place in the world.... She has grown into the image of her very own origins.... Since

Nannie and Jimbilly no longer regard their children or their memories as shared with each other, to resume the marriage would be to endorse its purely economic origins in slavery. Whereas Uncle Jimbilly is a tired and beaten handyman, Nannie has redefined her socioeconomic identity.... Sophia Jane was never able to voice such powerful self-determination as a challenge to her weak husband and wrong-headed sons.”

Gary M. Ciuba  
*Desire, Violence & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*  
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Michael Hollister (2018)