

ANALYSIS

“The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1929)



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

[Nearly all critics misread the ending.]

“Granny Weatherall, lying on her sickbed, passes back and forth from the real world of the living to the phantoms and shadows of death much as did Miranda.... Granny Weatherall’s tragedy lay, like all of her life, in the past. She had once been jilted right at the altar, and this had been the great and unforgettably painful of her whole life.... [She] has long been the stabilizing force in a large family, but this position of authority has not dulled the pain of her private tragedy...when her fiancé failed to appear for her wedding. And now, waiting for death one moment and deluding herself into further of life in the next [?], befuddled by the appearance of her sons and daughters and escaping into her interior visions of death, Granny Weatherall feels not the whole of her life within her, but only its greatest pain. It is her lost lover whom she sees most clearly, and the awful hurt he caused her which she now feels so deeply.... Granny’s death merges with her jilting...[and] reveals the fortitude which has carried her through life, and her absolute refusal to capitulate to a private sorrow which has nonetheless dominated her life.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 49-50

“‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’ shows a dying old woman, stood up by the God she had supposed to exist [misses the ironic point and the humor], just as she had been jilted by an earthly fiancé and forced to live a life of disappointment and compensation.... The most noble of her characters...must submit in the nature of things to sorrows which are not ennobling but destructively abrasive of joy, love, and hope; all of them end with a bleak realization of the Everlasting Nay. They are confronted by the thing ‘most cruel of all,’ which in its enormity transcends all other sorrows—the obliteration of hope. The tiny particle of light must always be snuffed out in the depths of the whirlpool.” [This critic misses all the irony and symbolism and projects his Atheism, misreading Porter overall and in every story.]

James William Johnson

“Another [blind] Look at Katherine Anne Porter”
Virginia Quarterly Review (Autumn 1960)

“In ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’...poetic devices provide the structure for Granny’s stream of consciousness. The unifying image of her final cloudy reveries is of the bride and groom. An elaborate analogy between her fitful memories of an early tragedy, when she had been jilted at the altar, and her final disillusionment, when again there was ‘no bridegroom and the priest in the house,’ provides the framework

for the story. Besides this structural device, the poetic convention of free association is rigidly controlled by an intricate arrangement of word motifs which contain and develop the themes of the story...interfusing the themes of transience and decay, hope and disillusionment, illusion and reality, death and immortality.”

Edward G. Schwartz
“The Fictions of Memory”
Southwest Review (Summer 1960)

“Katherine Anne Porter’s ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’ is a masterful ‘inside’ presentation of the last moments of the heroine. By resisting the temptation to be literal and realistic in the heroine’s language, and by drawing together in the final thoughts all the threads of the ‘jilting’ theme, she achieves a very moving death.”

Wayne C. Booth
The Rhetoric of Fiction
(Chicago 1961) 61-2, n.58

“‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’ tells the story of the death of its aged and crotchety heroine, whose passing is portrayed as a second betrayal at the altar. Granny has been betrayed by one bridegroom early in life, and the betrayal had rankled; now she is betrayed by the holy bridegroom, whose coming she has pathetically awaited on her deathbed.” [Another critic misses the ironic ending.]

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

“There is...a charm about Granny Weatherall...and the principal cause of it seems to be the gentle humor with which she is portrayed. She has the author’s genuine respect and sympathy... Greater and more familiar assets are the vibrant poetic texture and the dream-like interweaving of present and past... A major source of is...the puritanical fear of sex instilled into her by her religious and moral tradition.... This fear was an impediment to satisfying spiritual intimacy with their husbands. This in turn gave the men many of the faults which led the women to scorn them, in an unconscious defense reaction, and to stand alone with hardened hearts. Granny is essentially true to this pattern... Her first apparent love has been simply a romantic dream, never in any danger of becoming real. The jilting provides a perfect ‘escape’ from the marriage and an ideal excuse for hating men—and for refusing to let her eventual marriage affect her intimately.... In spite of the genuine beauty of its portrayal and the very real courage it evokes in her, Granny’s sense of loss is clearly symptomatic of a juvenile fixation on romance which is in turn nourished by that basic characteristic of the alpha heroine—rejection of men [misreading]...”

Artistically speaking, ‘The Jilting’ is beautifully balanced... Even before the perfect immediacy of her final visions pulls the reader into Granny’s mind, he has begun to feel an intellectual sympathy with her. The route to this sympathy is opened by the humor which softens the hard shell of her self-sufficiency, and it is founded primarily on the obvious appeal of some of her judgments... Even in relationships which are obviously intended as loving, irritations and antagonisms are always portrayed much more strongly and convincingly than love. The reader is brought completely into the heroine’s mind by means of powerful, dream-like descriptions of her thoughts and by the author’s brilliant technique of making him share her sensory confusions and progressive clarifications... The story refutes deathbed sentimentality by showing the ironic discrepancy between the thoughts of the dying person and those of the mourners. In this respect ‘The Jilting’ resembles Flannery O’Connor’s story, ‘A Late Encounter with the Enemy’....

The entire story turns upon the fact that, at the moment of her death, the scene which Granny recalls in all its pain and detail is that of her jilting, an event which for sixty years she has ‘prayed against remembering’ because the hatred it arouses is ‘hell.’ It is part of the meaning of the story’s title that these two crucial events become one for her. At the very instant of death her mind is on the day of her first bitter disappointment, for even in her last seconds God refuses to give the sign she has expected, and the emptiness of the last day blends with that of the first... The Divine Bridegroom, like the earthly one, proves to have been a romantic dream, but Granny’s courage will do her no good after this disillusion. Since her first great disappointment she has always hated surprises, but when death finally comes it is ‘by surprise’...

Her last thoughts reflect a life of heroic and compulsive effort to build a rampart of order against the radical disorder of her frustrated heart....

Throughout the story her mind follows the law of association, as when her pain recalls childbirth, and the presence of a priest again recalls the jilting. Light-dark symbolism is employed several times, most effectively at her death, which is strikingly similar to Miranda's death vision in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, a scene which constitutes in several respects an ultimate in Miss Porter's fiction [Miranda visits Heaven, an obvious contradiction of this critic's Atheist interpretation here.] Granny scorns Cornelia's frilly blue lamps, but the light from one of them becomes, in a masterful blend of realism and symbol, the image of her dwindling life.... Her thoughts return to the jilting, and she retires from life as she retired to bed after that bitter day.... The final revelation of her hidden emptiness only emphasizes her achievement, and she keeps her hard-earned domination to the end, when she blows out her own light."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 42-46

"Old Granny Weatherall fights to the last drop of consciousness on her death-bed because her pride will not really accept, even now, that she was once jilted as a girl. And that is not funny, it is terrifying."

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

"Granny Weatherall, up to the last—when God gives her no sign acceptable to her and jilts her Himself... [Even Welty misses the irony.] If outrage is the emotion she has most strongly expressed, she is using outrage as her cool instrument. She uses it with precision to show what monstrosities of feeling come about not from the lack of the existence of love but from love's repudiation, betrayal. From which there is no safety anywhere. Granny Weatherall, eighty, wise, affectionate and good, and now after a full life dying in her bed with the priest beside her, 'knew hell when she saw it.' The anger that speaks everywhere in the stories would trouble the heart for their author whom we love except that her anger is pure, the reason for it evident and clear, and the effect exhilarating. She has made it the tool of her work; what we do is rejoice in it. We are aware of the compassion that guides it, as well."

Eudora Welty
"The Eye of the Story"
The Yale Review (December 1965)

"[The critic] John Hagopian has found the moral 'to be that the universe has no order, the proper bridegroom never comes—to expect him will inevitably lead to cruel disillusionment' [Atheist misreading] ... The story is presented by an omniscient observer who reports the stream of consciousness of the dying Ellen Weatherall...[who] had been a strong-willed active woman who had buried a young husband and reared a large family. Mrs. Weatherall had for sixth years, however, been trying to forget that on the day of her proposed marriage, her first fiancé, George, had jilted her. She had married John later, borne his children, and named the first one George; but the last child, the one she wanted to have by George, she called Hapsy—quite obviously a diminutive of Happiness.

The morning of her last day of life, she could still play her role as a cantankerous old woman... Back and forth in time she went, thinking of her orderly house, the clock with the lion on it which gathered dust (a reference to James's 'The Beast in the Jungle')—that is, the disorder in which she...constantly had to fight.... Her thoughts extend her loss to the same loss explored in James's short story, and even her name is similar to Weatherend, the name of the house where the James story begins. Some of the descriptions are similar...

Granny tried to delude herself into believing that there was nothing wrong with her, just as she had deluded herself about being able to forget her jilting.... She was unaware of the meaning of Father Connally's actions as he administered the last rites of the Church... Only when she dropped the rosary and took instead the thumb of her son Jimmy did she realize her living children had come for her death. In a

panic, she began to think of all the unfinished things she wanted done, and then Hapsy came home again. She asked God for a sign, but again there was none. Again there was a priest in the house but no bridegroom—that is, in this second jilting, the absent bridegroom was the Jesus of *Matthew 25: 1-13*. She could not forgive being jilted again. Willful to the last, she would not be jilted again; she herself blew out the light.... As in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the grays of death and the green of life are constantly juxtaposed, just as the images of light, the lamp, candles, matches, flame, are contrasted with those of dark, of fear, and betrayal and death [But in *Pale Horse* Miranda visits Heaven].... Granny Weatherall's mind drifted with [many contrasting images] just as Molly Bloom's did in the last section of *Ulysses*; but Molly's answer was 'Yes.' Granny's affirmation was her own will to die.

As usual with Miss Porter, the truth is bitter and pessimistic. [This is still another Atheist reading of a Christian story.] Her ending, an echo of James again, is fully as horrible as that of John Marcher [She had a successful marriage, five children, and Christian faith up until the last ironic moment, whereas Marcher remained a childless bachelor without religion who wasted his life.].... Miss Porter has learned her lessons from James perfectly. Her story has all the finesse, skill, and symbolism of the master himself; but, although she echoes James, the story is uniquely her own."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 90-93

"As a story...in which surface order keeps from awareness the demands of a more radical personal need—'The Source' suggests the patterns of its more brilliant counterpart, 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.' On her deathbed Granny Weatherall's emotional and spiritual well-being is threatened by the revival of her memory of the fiancé who jilted her. George left her at the altar when she was twenty years old, and in her eightieth year Granny is threatened by his appearance....The smoky cloud from hell, the thought of George, threatens to obscure 'the bright field where everything was planted so orderly in rows.' This image is a miniature of the conflict in 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.' Which will prevail, the cloud or the orderly bright field—the memory of George or the order that has made life's day bright enough to render one cloud unimportant? Granny gave order to her life after her jilting....

Ellen Weatherall is convinced...even though the 'whole bottom dropped out of the world' when she was jilted, that she has 'found another [life] a whole world better'.... If Ellen Weatherall lost a husband in George, she gained one in John. If she had no children by one, she had Jimmy, Lydia, Hapsy, and Cornelia by the other. If she did not make a home for George and the children she could have had by him, she did make one for John and his children. The orderly life Granny remembers having had continuously calls to mind the life of love she might have had save for the jilting. This process of association threatens to bring the memory of George, which for Granny Weatherall is hell....

Granny's poignant sensuous recollections are symbolic and distract her attention from the present to remind her of her husband, her children, and her religion, points of order in her past; they also remind her of George, the source of disorder in her life.... The pressure beneath Granny's breast from shortness of breath becomes for her the pangs of childbirth.... But this pain does not only remind Granny of the birth of her children, who were her consolation, but it also recalls the abortive wedding day... Besides this, Granny had her religion: 'She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her.' It was only fitting that Father Connolly should come to her deathbed to minister to her: 'the table by the bed had a linen cover and a candle and a crucifix.' This reminds Granny of an altar and of the day that she was left at it by George....

Altogether she asks for Hapsy on five occasions. But Hapsy never comes. As Granny is dying, presumably in pain, watching the light within her, aware of the priest nearby, Hapsy does not come, just as George did not come under similar circumstances sixty years ago. Disorder breaks through the order of Granny's life; no sign comes to give meaning to the delay of the heavenly bridegroom, who merges with Hapsy (who does not come) and with George (who did not come), and Granny is overwhelmed... Granny's fear of George's return to memory materializes. With the memory of him comes a darkness that prevents her from seeing the order of her life just as previously in her memory the 'whirl of dark smoke' covered 'the bright field where everything was planted so carefully in orderly rows.' Granny, who had so carefully

controlled life, cannot control death.... Death will not wait for Granny to put the last shreds of her life in order. She is once again left to face the priest alone. Granny is forced to a final decision: she blows out the light of her life....

One must avoid being simplistically moral and declaring that Granny tried to love God without forgiving the man who jilted her, that she did not heed the command to leave her gift at the altar and make peace with her fellow man before trying to offer it, and that therefore Granny came to the end of her days like one of the foolish virgins without sufficient oil in her lamp to attend the bridegroom's coming.... The most telling sentence in 'Granny Weatherall' is 'Beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive.' As Granny dies she drops her rosary and grasps the hand of her son. The central fact of Granny's life has been her jilting at age twenty; the remaining sixty years of her life constituted her attempt to reorder her life through marriage, rearing a family, and devotion to her religion. But each of these implies for Granny something other than 'alive.' Like the beads she drops, they constitute a conventional order; but they are really meaningless since they are without a vitalizing human principle.

Thus, as her life ends, the fact of her jilting shows itself as her life-source [?] and challenges the conventional order of her existence. Granny finds that all the order she has put into her life has not enabled her to cope with the tragedy of her jilting sixty years before. Here, at the moment of death, she learns that neither marriage, nor children, nor religion suffices to bring her a peace of soul and human wholeness that can reconcile her to the once unfaithful George....

'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,' then, is not a moral tale about forgiveness, a gospel parable in modern dress. We are not asked in this story to face with a shudder the damnation of an octogenarian. The next world enters the story to give meaning to this world."

Joseph Wiesenfarth
"Internal Opposition in Porter's 'Granny Weatherall'"
Critique 11.2 (1969) 47-55

"The Southern family of this story is very much like Miranda's family—which is to say, like the Porter family....The old woman is dying, in the house of one of her daughters. The actual events of the day—the morning visit of a doctor, who carries on a whispered conversation with the daughter, the daughter's comings and goings during the following hours, the gathering of the doctor and all Mrs. Weatherall's living children at her bedside in the evening, with the priest who comes to administer last rites—are confused in her failing consciousness with episodes of her past life....

She confuses the living daughter with one presumably long since dead. The sound of the whispered conversation between the daughter and the doctor becomes in her mind the rustling of leaves, then of newspapers. The lamp beside her bed becomes the light of her own consciousness, her life; at the end of the story she watches the lamp diminish and fade. She loses her sense of the progression of time on this day, as well as in her recollection of all the past days and years—when the doctor returns in the evening, she thinks it has been only a few minutes since he left in the morning. Her sense of place too is confused. The room in which she lies becomes the room in which she awaited her bridegroom, that in which she bore her last child. Searching for that daughter, she rises in her mind to move through many rooms. The fields and the roads invade the house, and she is riding in the rough cart that is the voice of her attendant daughter.

From the stream-of-consciousness account, given in the third person by the omniscient author, it is not difficult to reconstruct the principal events of Ellen Weatherall's life. Her first fiancé, George, never arrived for the wedding, and, it would seem, was never heard from again. Later, she married another man, John, with whom she had a brief but happy life, bearing him five children.... Her widowed life, with the children to raise and the farm to look after, was hard. An energetic and competent woman, she survived illness and all other adversities to see her children grow up into responsible and relatively prosperous adults.

At the age of sixty, she had a premonition of death which she prepared for by making a series of visits to her children, which she thought would be the last. She recovered from the severe fever that followed, to live another twenty years. But the experience left her with a serene assurance that she would never again

fear death. On her last day, she refuses until just before the end to admit that she is gravely ill, but she acts in this way more from impatience at the fussy attentions of the daughter and doctor and priest than from fear. Still the same strong-willed, toughly humorous matriarch she has always been, she looks back on her life with great self-satisfaction.

Yet her end is not entirely untroubled. When she begins to face the fact that she is dying, she is distressed by the thought of all the undone things—household tasks planned but not completed, details of her will not clearly stated.... More deeply, she is disturbed by the absence of her youngest child, a daughter called Hapsy, who, it is implied, died as a young woman shortly after giving birth to a child. The facts are obscure. Perhaps Hapsy never had the baby. But the dying woman repeatedly calls for Hapsy, and at times imagines that she is there in the room, holding the baby in her arms—or standing beside the bed in a nurse's uniform. Finally, the old woman is tormented by the realization that she has not conquered her bitterness against George, the man who jilted her. After sixty years of unrelenting effort to convince herself that she has overcome her anger and resentment, an effort made out of the conviction that not to overcome her feelings was to condemn herself to hell, her mind in the last moment of life is filled with the grief of that betrayal. Watching the seemingly flickering and dwindling light of the blue-shaded lamp on the bedside table, she cries out in her soul asking God to 'give a sign.' But—'For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house'....

Granny Weatherall's name is probably the most obvious example of characterization by word-play in Miss Porter's fiction. The old lady has weathered all in her time—except, of course, the grief of the jilting. And the broad humor of the name's appropriateness is carried out in the whole technique of the story. The wry comedy that dominates the beginning reappears frequently and unpredictably thereafter, almost if not quite to the end. It starts off with Granny's crotchety observations on the pretentious bedside manner of 'young' (actually middle-aged) Doctor Harry.... When the priest is administering the last rites, her mind wanders, and for an instant she responds mentally to his touch with absurd, arch prudery.... But the comedy here is very near to hysteria. And we see that the intent of it, all along, is to prepare for the unsentimental, high pathos of the ending.... Mrs. Weatherall's story is finally a very grim one; we are only the more impressed with the terror of a grief that could defeat so comic a spirit....

Hapsy—whom I take to be the last of her children, who 'should have been born first, for it was the one she had truly wanted,' and for whom she is still searching as the others gather about her deathbed ('It was Hapsy she really wanted')—is named as an embodiment of the happiness that has eluded her all her life. In her good husband and children, her dutiful and useful life, she has rational cause for contentment. But the pleasure of her recollections during this last day of her life, at first marred only by fretfulness over trifling tasks left undone, is gradually undercut by a recurrent, terrifying sense of something lost, or missed, something that she can never quite define, something so important that the lack of it makes all that she had as nothing.

In one of her hallucinations, Hapsy appears to her in something of archetypal guise, the image of the Great Mother—probably, in Mrs. Weatherall's Catholic-trained imagination, a figure having associations with that of the Blessed Mother, or of Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary. Hapsy is holding a baby in her arms. And Granny 'seemed to herself to be Hapsy also, and the baby on Hapsy's arm was Hapsy and himself and herself, all at once, and there was no surprise in the meeting.' Hapsy recognizes and greets her, and tells her that she 'hasn't changed a bit.' Clearly, the meeting is a vision of her anticipated reunion with Hapsy in heaven. But just as they are about to kiss, the voice of the living Cordelia penetrates her consciousness to ask 'Is there anything I can do for you?' and the apparition of Hapsy is gone. In her mind, Mrs. Weatherall answers Cordelia to say that 'Yes...she would like to see George. I want you to find George. Find him and be sure to tell him I forgot him.'

The irony of her 'forgetting' is obvious. And rather obviously, the vision of bliss in the meeting with Hapsy—embodying as it does Mrs. Weatherall's egotistic and all but exclusively maternal idea of happiness—falls considerably short of heavenly perfection. In the vision, the only male figure, even momentarily recognizably as such, is the baby, in whom the images of Hapsy's baby and of the infant Jesus are merged. And the old woman identifies herself not only with the mother but also with the child. [The critic] Nance has rightly defined the essential frigidity of Ellen Weatherall [She had 5 children!]... John, it

is clear, was accepted not as a lover but only as a necessary biological instrument of her maternal instinct... She is proud that her son George (named, oddly enough, for the truant bridegroom) still runs to her, his eighty-year-old mother, for financial advice....

But the sexual syndrome begins to take on metaphysical, and theological, implications when we realize that she wants the whole world, all the things of time and space and beyond, to yield to her mother-housekeeper's need for tidiness and predictability. (The missing Hapsy is troublesome to her also as 'hap,' circumstance, the fortuitous event, all the things that merely happened, which were not laid out in her plan.) With the clean linen of her rage for order, she will make up the rumpled bed of the universe before she dies... Although the priest is there, and this time duly performs the sacred ritual, the second bridegroom, the Christ of *Matthew* 25:1-13, does not come. In a sense he denies her his presence for the same reason that George did—which is that He knows she does not really want Him. She wants no one, and nothing, that she cannot completely control. It is too much for her to accept that the Blessed Mother should have to yield to the Son of Man. She blows out the light of life herself, rather than let Him do it.

And yet, for all that, she does want a bridegroom—and has him, perhaps, at last. Earlier, she had regarded Cornelia's blue silk-shaded lamp contemptuously as 'no sort of light at all, just frippery'.... But Cornelia's lamp—either an oil lamp or a lamp with the bulb shaded to dim and soften it—is not designed for reading or sewing or any of the tasks for which 'honest electricity' is better. It is a light for the marriage bed. And in the end Ellen accepts that same light as the light of life itself. That common thing, the sexual satisfaction that her daughter presumably has had in this bedroom, is after all the dying woman's deepest desire. And I suggest that when she stretches herself to blow it out, the act is one not of final defiance but of final surrender—to welcome to her bed the *third* bridegroom."

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 89-96

[This Atheist mistakenly interprets the story as Atheist.] "If the full implications of Pascal's argument are extrapolated, he who wagers 'God is' has nothing to lose in this life even if the coin falls 'tails,' while he who wagers 'God is not' has nothing to gain in this life no matter which way the coin falls.... [Yet this critic nevertheless calls religious faith a "romantic illusion."] Granny...emerges as a salty-tongued, independent old woman, who refuses until the very end to give up her right to self-determination. While Granny's caustic comments betray an unsentimental view of her children (and physicians and priests) and perhaps an excess of that well-known parental syndrome, 'Mother knows best,' the very real love that flows both ways between mother and children is evident. Granny has 'weathered' a long hard life and is justifiably proud of her accomplishments, but her passionate and successful determination to produce order out of chaos, 'to spread out the plant of life and tuck in the edges orderly,' has not eradicated that moment sixty years before when she stood on the edge of the abyss....

Sixty years later, when she remembers that day, 'a whirl of dark smoke rose and covered it, crept up and over into the bright field where everything was planted in orderly rows. That was hell, she knew hell when she saw it. For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell.' This 'hell' that she knows intimately seems necessarily to be the classic one of despair—loss of hope, belief, and trust in anything or anyone. Even now, sixty years later, the 'sharp voice in the top of her mind' recalls the determination which helped her through that agony: 'Don't let your wounded vanity get the upper hand of you. Plenty of girls get jilted. You were jilted, weren't you? Then stand up to it.' The act of will which reduced hate and despair to 'wounded vanity' signifies both courage and determination.

Ellen did 'stand up to it' through marriage on the rebound to John, the husband she eventually came to love, through the single-handed rearing of the children after John's death at an early age, and through hard work and service to others.... Ellen has waged war against loss, against chaos. In her passion for order, she has planned everything... She decided to forget about dying. And she cannot take Father Connolly seriously because 'she felt easy about her soul'.... Ellen's spiritual serenity derives from the decision made sixty years before: 'She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her'.... On that day when she renounced despair, Ellen wagered her life on the existence of a more dependable bridegroom, and as she states at the diminishing point of light that is herself

being swallowed by the darkness, she awaits His coming: “‘God give a sign!’ ... For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house.... She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light’....

Ellen’s suicidal gesture has been interpreted as a refusal to surrender herself to the Infinite, but surely the contextual assertion should read ‘God is not’.... She has not lost the Infinite, since in the context of the story there is none to lose.... Some critics insist that Ellen Weatherall is a failure because she is sexually frigid, she rejects men, or that ‘she was “unsuccessful” because she never again dared seek a love as vital as the one she was once cruelly denied. Rather she settled for the safer and seemingly less dangerous way of order.’ This reading of her character leads to the suspect conclusion that the second bridegroom, Christ, ‘denies her his presence for the same reason that George did—which is that He knows she does not really want Him.’ The loss that haunts Granny throughout her adult life then becomes a result of her own inadequacy or a ‘juvenile fixation on romance.’ The obvious reply to these interpretations is that Ellen’s ‘fixation’ is less romantic than that recurring theory that a woman will achieve success and happiness only through total submission to a man....

It is evident that Ellen learned to love John, the man who cursed like a sailor’s parrot and caught her as she fainted after the first jilting. Her reference to the last child (Hapsy?) as the one ‘she had truly wanted.... Everything came in good time’ surely reveals an acceptable depth of love. If she speaks of John as a child (another alleged symptom of her rejection of men), it is only because relative to her eighty years John was a boy when he died and she wonders how he will recognize her in the next life. She would like to believe that her life has been fulfilled, but she cannot. So she clings to the romantic illusion that George might have supplied that missing dimension.... If the assumption that George could have supplied the lack, already disproved by her life with John, is a ‘juvenile fixation,’ it should be remembered that in this story the hope that Christ will fulfill that need is equally a romantic illusion [Atheist misreading].... If, as Katherine Anne Porter suggests, this life is all there is [Porter died of influenza in 1918 and visited Heaven, as rendered in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*], then its value derives from how it is lived and what remains after... By staking her life and the way she lived it on the hope of a better life hereafter, Granny Weatherall lost nothing.” [This critic appears never to have read Porter’s interviews or other fiction.]

Joann P. Cobb
“Pascal’s Wager and Two Modern Losers”
Philosophy and Literature 2.3 (Fall 1979)

“The psychological complexity of the story need not obscure thematic unity, but a frame of reference is helpful: Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘My life closed twice before its close’ serves as a perfect gloss for Porter’s story, just as the story is a fictional emblem for the poem. Both stress two traumatic losses equivalent to death before the final separation from life.... Ellen dreams of living happily ever after; but the dream is based completely on her desirability for one man.... It doesn’t occur to her that she may have some autonomous power to create her own happiness. Investing everything in romantic love, she loses painfully when it fails.... But wounded vanity is the smallest part of her misery. She has been dealt a psychic death blow from which something can be salvaged but nothing saved [overstatement]....

This nagging sense of something lost, incomplete, and undone is only partially answered by the fact of the jilting itself. We must not overlook the fact that Mrs. Weatherall represses her feelings about this unhappy episode; she pushes it out of her mind before she can resolve it, making it unfinished business. She keeps secrets from her children in order to protect the image of strength she projects—the sequence opens with her desire to get rid of her old love letters from George and John, so that her children will not find out ‘how silly’ she was once.... Thoughts of [George] are not only abhorrent, they are unthinkable, and we might readily wonder why. Even a completely devastated pride ought to have renewed itself to some extent over sixty years....

If her memory of George carries with it a sexual connotation, it is simple enough to understand why she has repressed it. To remember it is to think of herself as a ‘bad’ woman, so ‘for sixty years she has prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell, and now the two things were mingled in one.... She associates memories of George with death and the devil.... The ‘something not given back’ is not only the identity and the sexual initiation—which, after all, she achieves, although in a

different context, with John. The something not given back is her elemental faith that 'God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world.' She has believed completely, and her faith has been despoiled. Never again can she put faith in any order that she has not created herself.... [debatable]

The death of Ellen's total personality on her spoiled wedding day is averted by the man who will eventually marry her and transform her identity by giving her children. Catching her as she swoons, he breaks her fall and saves her for the next and most significant phase of her life. But her painful loss of personal identity is not to be assuaged.... George's parting has been all Ellen needs of hell, for he takes with him her youthful sense of self-worth and her pride in her beauty and fragility—so deftly suggested by her Spanish comb and painted fan, and so easily destroyed in one stroke....

The absence of any real love in her life [Feminist projection by the critic], the dead part of her, is subsumed in the experiences of childbearing, just as a withered arm becomes less significant as the other arm strengthens and compensates for the inactivity of the dead limb.... She sublimates her sexual energy by rearing children. After she has been jilted and has accepted the alternative role that marriage to John offers, she thinks how the absence of emotional love leaves her free to focus on her children... Her husband appears to be a tool for her use [reductive Feminism].... Mrs. Weatherall must withstand a second death: the loss of her importance and power as her children themselves grow independent.... Just as she represses the memory of her psychic death as a young woman, she also represses the thought of actual death.... Having been arrested psychically at her first jilting, Ellen Weatherall has been locked into one perception for sixty years; it is her mentality that assumes that the paradigm repeats itself...

The deftness with which Porter encompasses the events of the moment with those of the past, the real and the imagined, for both the living and the dead is beautifully illustrated in a paragraph of psychological penetration which illuminates Hapsy's importance to Mrs. Weatherall.... As an embodiment of motherhood the ghostly Hapsy, 'standing with a baby on her arm,' is the central symbol of Mrs. Weatherall's powerful maternity. The triangle created by Mrs. Weatherall, Hapsy, and the child symbolize the universal cycle of death and its part in the generation of new life in all its doubleness. Representing three generations, taken together they are an avatar of motherhood and life poised always on the brink of death. Mrs. Weatherall takes a giant step toward death when she seeks her dead daughter and, finding her, merges with her...

Granny Weatherall is robbed of her bridegroom a second time [by Whom?], leaving intact the primacy of her matriarchal independence [Feminist goal is matriarchy as opposed to patriarchal Christianity]... She chooses the death that has already chosen her, blowing out the light of her life herself and asserting even in her last moment, a final power [the highest Feminist priority is acquiring power]."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women
(U Texas 1983) 46-54

"The meaning of 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall' is ambiguous. Although Granny's deathbed memories keep dredging up the humiliating and traumatic event, the focal point of the story is not the jilting of Granny in her girlhood by her fiancé George, who failed to show up for the wedding. It is rather the disillusionment with which Granny ends her life. It is the most horrifying of Porter's stories because it calls into question the value of an ordinary religious life. Granny identifies the bridegroom George with the bridegroom Christ of the parable and as she dies declares that the second bridegroom, Christ, has not appeared, that God has not sent the sign she expected, and that this grief wipes all other sorrow away.

This story is skillfully executed in a stream of consciousness mode, with Porter's retaining Granny's viewpoint and realistically depicting the musings of a mind barely connected to its physical moorings. Time is suspended, and the past and the present are blended. Granny's mind functions by free association, making connections between perceived images of the present and memories of the past...

It is not so much that Granny's religion betrayed her, or that specifically God or Christ betrayed her in the way that the faithless George betrayed her long ago, but rather that she betrayed herself by establishing illusions of an ordered life. She imagined that life was a plan, whose edges could be tucked in orderly; she

has followed the rules of the Church (she 'went to Holy Communion last week'), and she has adhered to a series of precepts such as 'you waste life when you waste good food'...

The Biblical allusion to the parable of the virgins and the lighting of the lamps underlies the story (*Matthew 25:1-13*). In Granny's version, she herself has been among the dutiful virgins, but the inconstant George has supplanted Christ and distorts the parable. The jilting of Granny cost her her faith."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 75-78

"'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall' should be read in close connection with *The Old Order* stories, since it is clearly a fictional treatment of the death of the same Grandmother who appears in the earlier stories, despite the difference in names of characters. The strength of her character is made manifest in the contrasting weaknesses of her children. The matriarchy that she represents will begin to pass away with her death.... Because the Grandmother confuses, at the last moment, her lover George and the savior, Jesus Christ, neither of whom show up, it is arguable that she is to be 'jilted' even in her extremity. Needless to say, nobody knows *precisely* what thoughts go through the mind of a dying person [Porter did; she died and went to Heaven and came back to life in 1918, as rendered in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.]....

Daniel and Madeline Barnes argue, in "The Secret Sin of Granny Weatherall" (1969), that Granny Weatherall was pregnant at the time when George jilted her; the evidence cited is the constant reference to 'babies.' They maintain that what 'is not given back' is her virginity, symbolic of her feminine integrity. If this argument is correct, Granny Weatherall is another portrait of the archetypal 'Southern belle'—an incarnation of this mythical creature in a form rather different from Amy in *Old Mortality*....

[However], Granny, after all, does come to love the man who was her second choice; and she is genuinely devoted to her children. Since she cannot have the man she loves, she comes to love the man she has. Despite her preoccupation with one traumatic event in her early life, the day of being jilted at the altar, she has managed, despite all odds, to live a meaningful life. If Granny has suppressed all real hope for human happiness in this world, hoping for a better life in the world to come, then surely she misjudged. The life she *did* live in this world was quite meaningful... Surely, Granny Weatherall loses a great deal through her preoccupation with one dreadful moment of her past; but she gains a great deal...through her ability to do the work that has to be done, whatever her private sufferings. Waste there is, symbolized poignantly by the wedding cake that is thrown out and never eaten, but accomplishment also.

Granny has truly, as her name patently suggests, 'weathered all' in spite of the adverse conditions of her existence. Her spite is, in fact, the source of her spunk. She is an excellent representative of the Texas spirit, Porter's Grandmother (Aunt Cat) in a superb Texas incarnation. Her life has been lived with gusto, as if she went around only once.... Porter, not at all a Naturalist, manages to accomplish both naturalistic truth and 'psychological realism'."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1990) 95-99

"Eudora Welty, perhaps the greatest of the writers whose careers Porter helped to foster, called Porter's style 'distilled.' It is a wonderfully apt term, one that does not deny the elusiveness Heilman discerned but captures a quality of refinement to essence that characterizes Porter's work at its best. Any number of examples of moments in her stories that achieve such a quality of distillation and take us very near the center of her art might be cited. The blowing out of the candle at the end of 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall' melds ideas of life, death, God, and the assertion of identity."

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 251-52

This story is traditional Realism in being anti-Romantic, the opposite of a love story, ironic in being about love nonetheless. Porter is ironic in tone from the beginning to the end of the story. The ending is especially ironic and has been misread by nearly all critics, especially by Atheists eager to claim support for their own faith. The ironies make the story comic, not pessimistic.

For example, there is almost no information about the villain George, generating speculation about his reasons for abandoning Ellen at the altar. One possible reason is evident immediately: (1) Granny is such a domineering personality, and so much inclined to criticize and belittle others, she may have scared George away. That she is now dying makes it comical that she still believes that “There’s nothing wrong with me,” as if still denying that there was any reason for George to jilt her. (2) Another possibility is that George felt that he could not live up to Ellen’s high expectations and demands. (3) Still another is her Victorianism. (4) Finally, her pride. Ellen describes her first reaction to being jilted as “wounded vanity,” acknowledging to herself that she is vain. However George may have seen her when she was a girl only twenty years old, we should appreciate Granny for her personality, for her defiantly independent spirit even as she is dying, endearingly comical for her prudery, and admirable for her endurance, moral strength, and service to her family and community. Granny Weatherall has weathered all the many storms in her life and is rewarded with a good husband, the love of her children, the fulfillments of domestic life, the gratification of service to others, and faith in her salvation.

The United States was over 90% rural in 1800 and over 50% urban by 1919. Though this story is full of authentic rural detail it does not make the locale or time specific, in order to make Granny representative of farm women in America transitioning into the urban world of the 20th century. The larger vision and greater universality elevate this story above the best of local color stories about farm women in the 19th century, “The Revolt of Mother” by Mary Wilkins Freeman and “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” by Hamlin Garland. The most extensive and profound treatments of farm women are by Willa Cather in her great prairie novels. In being religious and otherwise, Granny Weatherall (1929) contrasts with the elemental Addie Bundren, the central figure in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) by Faulkner. Granny is more like Faulkner’s indomitable old lady Granny Millard in “Raid,” *The Unvanquished* (1938). After her husband John dies, this Granny likewise does both women’s and men’s work, a jilted Victorian who becomes a “feminist” exemplar: “Don’t tell me what I’m going to be,” she says to the world.

Granny is characterized in her first act, an assertion of her virtue that is amusing in its prudery because she is being examined by her doctor: “The brat ought to be in knee breeches.” Doctors used to deliver babies to prudish women blindly, feeling their way under a protective sheet covering the female body. One critic argues that George abandoned Ellen because he got her pregnant, but that seems unlikely in view of her prudery. Granny has always been an old-fashioned lady, a Victorian female in her superiority to Harry the male, even though he is a doctor. “Get along now, take your schoolbooks and go. There’s nothing wrong with me.” The gong of irony resounds, as it is already comically obvious that Granny has lost her reason. Harry (hairy) “spread a warm paw like a cushion on her forehead.” She experiences his touch with a Victorian sensibility that defines a male as an animal—a beastly one—and a Gentleman as like a doctor in his proper relationship to a Lady: attentive, warm, and curing all ills without giving offense. Granny rebukes Doctor Harry for calling her a “good girl” and demands respect. Ironically, of course, she is in fact becoming childish, as very elderly people often are. As a woman, Granny draws her strength from her Victorianism: “I’m on my feet now, morally speaking.” Her Christian faith and Victorian morality have given her self-respect, stability, strength and confidence that enable her to “weather all.”

The matriarchal strength of Granny contradicts the allegation of later Feminists that American women in the 19th century were oppressed by “the Patriarchy.” John—“a good husband that I loved”—has been dead for many years: “he would be a child beside her if she saw him now.” She has run the farm herself and maintained it with the help of her children—Cornelia, Lydia, Jimmy, Hapsy—“There they were, made out of her.” “Leave a well woman alone,” she tells the male. “I’ll call for you when I want you.” Her attitude here is much like that of Addie Bundren. In Granny’s case, the death of her husband forced her to develop her masculine side—“rolling up her sleeves”—transcending the Victorian paradigm of gender roles as farm wives often had to do, especially widows. “She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman.”

Granny combines the attributes of a Victorian lady with those of a strong pioneer woman, having also served as a midwife, doctor and vet: "Riding the country roads in the winter when women had their babies was another thing: sitting up nights with sick horses and sick negroes and sick children and hardly ever losing one." It turns out, ironically, that she has had medical experience to support her attitude toward Doctor Harry. The style becomes Expressionistic as Granny shouts with her own authority "because Doctor Harry appeared to float up to the ceiling and out." This approximates how many people who have died and then come back to life have reported their own experience of death. It is actually Granny who will soon be floating up and out. "She meant to wave good-by, but it was too much trouble. Her eyes closed of themselves, it was like a dark curtain drawn around the bed."

Cornelia is the evidence that Granny has been a good mother in disciplining her daughter: "She was always being tactful and kind. So good and dutiful," said Granny, "that I'd like to spank her!" She saw herself spanking Cornelia and making a fine job of it." After the death of Granny and her Victorian values, Postmodern parents stopped spanking and raised undisciplined children, making a poor job of it. Granny's agrarian domestic life was spiritually fulfilling: "thank God there was always a little margin left over for peace: then a person could spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly. It was good to have everything clean and folded away." Katherine Anne Porter was one of the least domestic and most urbane and liberated women in American literary history, living in various countries, having several marriages, divorces and many affairs. She transcends herself in her portrayal of Granny. She is able to appreciate the quiet domestic life and traditional values she rejected for herself. Her transcendence of gender—like that of Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor—is another of the qualities that set her art far above the self-centered writing of Feminists.

Granny recalls lighting the lamps when her children huddled up to her and relates enlightenment to God. Now near death and feeling guilty for failing to forgive George, she tries to "hide from the light," longing for the peace that death will bring. Then she is roused again by the very pride that sustains her pain. She asks to see George, *sixty* years after he jilted her! Now that is a comically tenacious grudge, though it is quite plausible. Most people would say what George did was unforgivable. It makes you ask yourself, How would I feel? Granny wants the satisfaction of claiming to George that he was not important in her life anyway—a lie and a comical example of Realism: "Find him and be sure to tell him I forgot him." It seems to be a step forward that she is finally ready to face George, but it is clear that she has neither forgotten nor forgiven him and wants to see him for revenge: She wants to tell him that despite him she got a good husband she loved and everything she ever wanted: "Better than I hoped for even. Tell him I was given back everything he took away and more." This is true, but nevertheless, she is still not able to forgive George. Forgiveness is therapeutic as well as redemptive. In Porter as in Hawthorne, the psychology is valid even if the reader does not share the religious belief.

The image of Granny's vindictive anger at George for humiliating, betraying and rejecting her in front of everyone is "a monstrous frightening shape with cutting edges; it bore up into her head, and the agony was unbelievable." When she confronts George in her mind, her inner monster of anger and hatred is like a demon that pulls her toward hell. The agony of George's betrayal elides into the agony of childbirth—an *objective correlative*. Giving birth to an innocent redeems her loss of innocence and gives her a new life as well. The memory of giving life elides into dying and she attains transcendence through identification with others, her children and theirs through the generations: "She seemed to herself to be Hapsy also, and the baby on Hapsy's arm was Hapsy and himself and herself, all at once." This anticipates spiritual union with loved ones in the afterlife. Jesus has given her a sign of her salvation.

At the altar when she got jilted "The whole bottom dropped out of the world...with nothing under her feet." She fainted in a momentary death. Her human savior John "had caught her under the breast, she had not fallen." It is ironic that she wanted George so much, since he proved to be such an unreliable cad, whereas John literally saves her from falling, expresses intense concern for her and proves to be an ideal husband. Above all she is supported by her faith: "Without Thee, God, I could never have done it." But now, on her deathbed, her guilt becomes dread: "There's going to be a storm." She anticipates seeing her deceased daughter Hapsy (Happiness) in the afterlife but her guilt makes her fear that she will not be able to find Hapsy—"there was no bottom to death, she couldn't come to the end of it." She stares "at the point of light that was herself." This inner light contrasts with the outer light of the material world: "The light

was blue from Cornelia's silk lampshade. No sort of light at all, just frippery." When the light of the material world goes out she panics and feels abandoned again: "God, give a sign!"

Granny fears a parallel between getting jilted by George and getting jilted by Jesus. "For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house." In shock, she loses her faith in God: "I'll never forgive it." She replaces God with "it"—the cruel indifferent Nature of the Naturalists. Her refusal to forgive "it" is her meaningless revenge. In blowing out the inner light of herself, illumination by Jesus, she chooses death, becoming Postmodernist. Atheists identify with her delusion. That is all they can see in the story or in life. At the altar when the jilted bride fainted and John caught her in his arms, he cursed George and offered to kill him for Ellen, but her response was "Don't lay a hand on him, for my sake leave something to God." Vengeance is His. Yet she herself could not leave George to God by forgiving him, not even to save her soul. "For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell, and now the two things were mingled in one and the thought of him was a smoky cloud from hell that moved and crept in her head."

Most critics interpret the ending to mean that Porter, a Catholic, lost *her* belief in God and an afterlife despite having died and visited Heaven in 1918. On the contrary, Granny loses her faith because of her own faults: (1) She is too proud to forgive George. Both she and Laura in "Flowering Judas" are governed by pride, repress guilt, and fear going to Hell. (2) Ellen represses her anger and hatred—lack of forgiveness—instead of facing and purging it; (3) she expects God to follow *her* plan for her life instead of His: She tries to "spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly. It was good to have everything clean and folded away." Her obsession with order is a symptom of her repressed moral disorder that she has put out of sight: "It's bitter to lose things. Now, don't let me get to thinking." (4) She believes her salvation is a contract "as surely signed and sealed as the papers for the new Forty Acres. Forever." But she breaks the contract herself before it can be fulfilled. (5) She asks God to give her a sign that she will be rewarded for her faith while she is doubting His existence. (6) It is evidence of pride that she expects Jesus to become visible beside her *before she dies*, rather than wait for her to reach the altar of Heaven. (7) She equates the faithless coward George with Christ--the supreme exemplar of courage and faith.

(1) Granny's paralleling of the two situations implies that, just as her jilting by George preceded her having a better life afterward with John, her death will precede an afterlife with Jesus that will be "a whole world better." (2) This positive interpretation is consistent with Porter's lighthearted deathbed comedy, which is incongruous with a pessimistic interpretation: "Father Connolly murmured Latin in a very solemn voice and tickled her feet. My God, will you stop that nonsense? I'm a married woman." Granny is in no danger of going to Hell because she is delusional, she is not responsible for her misperceptions at the last moment, and God is merciful. (3) The climax of ironies is Granny's panic in the end that she is being jilted by God even though she feels that He must not exist. Her loss of faith at the last moment is a final storm that she will weather, as implied by her name, *Weather-all*. (4) She has developed a close relationship with saints rather than with Jesus. Consequently she does not know Jesus well enough to know that He will never abandon her, just as she did not know George well enough to suspect that he might. (5) She has already been saved from her hell in life by John, the father of her children named after the disciple who wrote the last book of the Bible, who kept her from falling and helped her resurrect herself. (6) She went to Holy Communion "only last week," a sacrament of *union with Jesus*. (7) Granny loses faith at the very moment before her faith will be confirmed. "Everything came in good time." (8) Ironically, she can't forgive Jesus for a moment whereas He will forgive her forever. (9) Most ironic of all, since Jesus is within her—He is the light in her soul--it is Granny who jilts Jesus.

Michael Hollister (2017)