

## ANALYSIS

“The Circus” (1935)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“The frequency with which violence lies at the heart of her discoveries helps to explain a main source of strength in her delicate prose. ‘The Circus,’ the best short story here, conveys the naked agony with which Miranda, too young to grasp the conventions, reacts to the dangers and brutalities of the show. What the others can take in the comic spirit presses upon her as a first initiation into the pity and terror of life. Violence in modern fiction has been so often a substitute for understanding that Miss Porter’s ability to use it to reveal ethical values is another of her particular distinctions, as she showed especially in *Noon Wine*.”

F. O. Matthiessen  
“‘That True and Human World’”  
*Accent* 5 (Winter 1945) 121-23

“Brief as it is, ‘The Circus’ raises problems that are basic to Miss Porter’s art. The story must be seen through the eyes of an innocent child, yet what the child sees must have a symbolic value beyond her understanding. Miss Porter’s solution is to allow the child no opinions: Miranda knows nothing about the ugliness or meanness of what she sees; she isn’t permitted to rationalize about it. Her lack of preconceptions causes her to see the circus as dreadful and isolates her from family and society. Not understanding the conventions, she catches her first glimpse of the possible terrors and frustrations of human living. Though not come by intellectually, that glimpse is the real thing. The reader, recapturing the purity of childhood vision and seeing the truth that lurks beneath convention, discovers the meaning of Miranda’s experience.”

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

“‘The Circus’ shows life as a noisy, three-ring spectacle under a flimsy Big Top...and that the delightful spectacle of life masks fear, hatred, and bitterness.”

James William Johnson  
“Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter”  
*Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1960)

“These events take place during a time of family reunion, when Miranda, still very young, is allowed to accompany the family to a circus. Her grandmother, father, brother and sister, cousins and aunts are all present when Miranda becomes frightened at the sight of a clown performing on a high-wire and has to be taken home by a Negro servant. Meanwhile, she has felt intimations of evil in the eyes of the roughly dressed little boys peering up from the dust beneath the women’s skirts; she has measured appearance and reality in the close-up glimpse she got of a dwarf-clown, whom she had not thought could be human, let alone adult; she experiences remorse and compassion in the realization that she has spoiled the day for Dicey, the Negro servant. She tries banishing the terror by transforming it in her mind into childhood visions of romance; but when sleep comes, the terror, the terribly ‘real’ image, returns, and she must turn again to the sympathetic and resigned patience of Dicey” [who embodies Christianity].

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 27-28

“‘The Circus’ is the first sketch in which Miranda plays a major part.... It records a stage in the process of her disillusionment or initiation into life.... In her fright at the clown’s danger she derives no comfort from the fact that her family surrounds her. When the day’s horrors return to her in a dream and she is

'completely subjugated by her fears,' in her blind need for companionship she turns to the person nearest, Dicey, who is least bound to her by ties of blood and who stays with her more out of duty than affection.... Even while she is in the midst of her large and closely-knit family, Miranda is beginning, at this early age, and more instinctively than deliberately, to go her solitary way and endure her sufferings alone. This trend will never be reversed.

The author's careful adherence to the child's point of view is especially important in this story because its whole significance lies in the way things appear to Miranda.... She doesn't know the name 'clown'; if she did she would not be so distressed at the antics of one.... From the first he suggests death to her... A dwarf...chills Miranda with 'a new kind of fear' and a lesson in human deformity.... The explicit theme of 'The Circus' is Miranda's initiation into a new dimension of experience and her failure to cope with it satisfactorily because of her inability to distinguish illusion from reality.... Loyal to her name, she 'could not look hard enough at everything.' Even at the boys beneath the bleachers she 'gazed and gazed, trying to understand it'.... Miranda's circus experience leaves her more aware of self and ready to supply her own needs, and also quicker to detect illusion....

This is the Grandmother's first circus too, and her attitude toward it reveals a wisdom and moral certitude lacking in the younger generation. She is the only one who at first opposes Miranda's going, and the outcome seems to prove her right. 'Her son Harry,' Miranda's father, continues to appear in an unfavorable light. Almost like another child, he teases Miranda and makes her cry. When he counters the Grandmother's criticism of the effect of circuses on the young by saying superficially, 'This basket of young doesn't seem to be much damaged,' she replies in words which demand respect: 'The truths of their present are in a future so far off, neither of us may live to know whether harm has been done or not'.... A lack of sympathy between Miranda and the other children is once more suggested by the way they tease her 'with malicious eyes' and smile at her with pity, telling her all she has missed."

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 86-88

"The characterization of the black girl, Dicey, who is little Miranda's reluctantly devoted nurse in 'The Circus, [is] memorable both for [her] individuality and for...insight into the typical psychology of the Negro servant. Implicit...is a trenchant criticism of Southern white paternalism, the conventional, hypocritical pretense of the masters that they regard the blacks as 'real members of the family.' The 'hideous institution,' even in comparatively enlightened households like that of Miranda's family, functions at its subtle worst in assigning the blacks to roles that deny them full human dignity. But, possibly just because she, like Miranda, was raised in a way that prevented her from knowing any Negroes during her formative years except on terms dictated by the system of social caste, Miss Porter never attempted a full-scale characterization of a black who is interesting primarily in his or her own right.... Dicey, when she has to leave the show to take care of the squawling Miranda, who has been frightened by a clown and a dwarf, demands a certain sympathy as the innocent, incidental victim of the white child's hypersensitivity, but it is not enough to distract the reader's primary attention from Miranda's experience."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 40-41

"At the end of 'The Circus,' the grandmother's remark that 'the fruits of their present are in a future so far off, neither of us may live to know whether harm has been done or not' expresses a thematic preoccupation present throughout Hawthorne and described in similar words at the beginning of *The House of Seven Gables*: '...the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit in a far-distant time; that together with the seed of the merely temporary crop, which mortals term expediency, they inevitably sow the acorns of a more enduring growth, which may darkly overshadow their posterity'."

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*  
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 196

“The circus is a metaphor for the outside world.... It is important to remember that an adult Miranda is the observer and narrator who selects the components of the story and emphasizes some of them.... Porter skillfully uses a child’s viewpoint and psychology to dramatize a situation which the older Miranda will follow like a paradigm: terror in the face of sex/death, escape, and survival as an alien.... She has discovered in this brief venture into the outside world that it is filled with experiences and creatures which are much more powerful than herself and which she cannot hope to control. Moreover, she finds that strangers are not disposed to care for her, an even more painful knowledge when her own family sends her away.... Finally her experience is put in its proper context. [Like all the other critics, this one fails to notice the “proper context” given in the last paragraph—Christianity.] The circus with its new knowledge had been a waking nightmare for Miranda wherein she has been forced to confront the grotesque faces of human beings whose presence in the outside world suggests alienation and destruction.”

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 130-33

“‘The Circus,’ the first story in the series specifically about Miranda, focuses on the first stage of Miranda’s initiation. It begins with a description of many members of the Gay family, some visiting from Kentucky, sitting on planks at the circus. The viewpoint, although omniscient, is restricted to Miranda, and the story unfolds from the little girl’s perspective. It tells of the frightening experience of her first circus. The explosion of sound, color, and smell is overwhelming to Miranda, who is confronted with sordid facts of a world she is not ready to understand—the salacious looks of little boys, the crowd’s bloodlust, their roaring with savage delight at the dangers endured by the tightrope walker, the cruel mouth and bone-white skull of the clown, and the dwarf’s terrible grimace. She knows only that she is terribly afraid without knowing what she has seen: the human capacity for cruelty, lust without love, and death itself....

[This is] one of the epiphanies in Miranda’s growth to maturity, an epiphany that is a paradoxical vision of evil revealed at the heart of gaiety. Animals and animal imagery serve to make the ironic point that is the core of the story’s meaning. At the circus the audience is crowded together ‘lak fleas on a dog’s ear’; Cousin Miranda Gay has wild gray eyes ‘like a colt’s’; the little boys under the stands are ‘monkeys’; when the clown performs, his leg waves ‘like a feeler above his head,’ which he turns ‘like a seal from side to side’; and the dwarf at the entrance has eyes ‘like a near-sighted dog.’ Miranda feels removed from all these ‘creatures’ until the dwarf looks at her with ‘remote displeasure,’ which she identifies as a human look. It is a bridge to an important truth, and Miranda crosses it only subconsciously.

Porter continues to blur the boundaries between humans and animals as she shows the other returning children as having seen the animals at the circus in human terms. There were ‘darling little monkeys’ in human dress who rode the ponies; trained goats that danced; and ‘a baby elephant that crossed his front feet and leaned against his cage and opened his mouth to be fed, *such* a baby!’ This latter, pleasant, view of the relationship between animals and humans is a fantasy created by humans, Porter implies, because it gives way to Miranda’s real, horrifying, view of the truth revealed in a dream state.... If the realist is ‘defined as one who resists self-deception, the realist in Miranda has been born as a result of this experience.’ [The Christian in Miranda might be born of this experience as well, embodied in Dicey.]

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 55-56

“Almost Miranda’s whole life (even though she’s only nine) has been a sort of Modernist quest balancing her desire to escape the tyranny of inherited patterns—represented by her family, especially her grandmother—and her fear of death unmediated by those patterns. She’s haunted particularly by the death of her mother. Increasingly, however, the inherited patterns fail to assure her. As an incident in ‘The Circus’ illustrates, they fail to contain or even to lessen Miranda’s inescapably real horror of death: ‘A creature in a blousy white overall...’ So frightened she has to be taken home immediately, Miranda later that night tries to imagine the beautiful circus acts she missed by leaving early. But her imaginings cannot dispel her terrifying memories of the death’s-head clown.”

George Cheatham  
"Death and Repetition in Porter's Miranda Stories"  
*American Literature* 61.4 (December 1989) 610-24

"The Circus' is a fictionalized treatment of childhood fear of death. Miranda is introduced to death in an unexpected way and is unprepared to deal with the subject. Death, like sex (represented by the nasty boys, under the circus bleachers, trying to look up the women's skirts), is as yet unfathomable to Miranda. The Calvinistic Grandmother, who thoroughly disapproves of circuses, nevertheless permits the child Miranda to go to the circus only because of the family reunion. A surfeit of sensations passes over Miranda, who is unprepared for such excitement.

'An enormous brass band seemed to explode right at Miranda's ear. She jumped, quivered, thrilled blindly and almost forgot to breathe as sound and color and smell rushed together and poured through her skin and hair and beat in her head and hands and feet and pit of her stomach. Then the image of Death: 'A creature in a blousy white overall with ruffles at the neck and ankles, with bone-white skull and chalk-white face...' Miranda becomes hysterical, comprehending the threat of death but unable to articulate the genuine horror she feels. She covers her eyes and screams, and her father orders Dicey, the black hired girl, to take Miranda home—in considerable disgrace, it turns out, for she has missed a great deal of fun. Later that night, amid visions of the malignant dwarf who had taunted her at the circus, Miranda cries out in her dreams and has to be comforted by Dicey.

Miranda learns that she has a great need of companionship. Significantly, she fears the darkness, 'if only Dicey might not turn out the lights and leave her to the fathomless terrors of the darkness where sleep could overtake her once more.' Darkness and sleep have become for her at this point death and dissolution. The threatened fall of a circus clown, accompanied by a 'fall' into knowledge of the real world, makes this in one sense a story of 'the fortunate fall.' The Freudian doctrine that dreams of falling indicate fear of death is at work in this story. The Texas Grandmother's fundamentalist, essentially Calvinistic notions of fallen human nature and conduct make such an interpretation of this story tenable." [It is more than "tenable," it is "Christian" as implicitly advocated by Porter in the last paragraph.]

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

"Porter underscores Miranda's need for a narrative structure to describe the multiplicity of her experiences in 'The Circus.' Here the young Miranda...does not understand the conventions that underlie the activities at the circus.... Miranda on this first trip to the circus suffers frightening torment in not having a mediating structure to help her understand what she sees. Initially the surroundings fascinate Miranda—the narrator comments that 'she could not look hard enough at everything'—but her fascination quickly turns to bewilderment and then even to panic.

Lacking the guiding hand of her grandmother and the consistent routine of life at home, Miranda understands little of what is going on around her, since the circus operates by conventions that turn her everyday world topsy-turvy. Nobody offers her any meaningful or sympathetic help. Typical is Dicey's response to Miranda's asking why a pack of boys squat underneath the bleachers leering upward: 'You jus mind yo' own business and stop throwin' yo' legs around that way. Don't you pay any mind. Plenty o' monkeys right here in the show widout you studyin dat kind.'

Even more disturbing are the circus acts, which appear to Miranda as frantic onrushes of sights and sounds. Their audacious flauntings of the norms of everyday activities mock the rigid decorum by which Miranda until now has unquestioningly lived. (Not insignificantly, her grandmother had apparently understood this threat and had resisted Miranda's attending the circus. She finally allowed her to go because the outing was occasioned by a family reunion, an activity embodying the solidarity of the family and Miranda's place within it.) Even the brass band sends Miranda close to hysteria....

When she opens her eyes, she sees a clown on a tightrope tantalizing the crowd. Everyone else knows what to make of his derring-do, and the onlookers roar with delight. Miranda, though, is terrified by the

high-wire act, frightened even by the clown's costume. Having never seen a clown before, she sees not a comic entertainer but 'a creature in a blousy white overall...' When the clown stumbles on the wire, apparently purposefully as part of the act, Miranda shrieks 'with real pain.' After the clown blows kisses as he dangles on the wire held up only by his ankle, Miranda covers her face and shrieks out even harder, 'the tears pouring over her cheeks and chin.'

Adding to her terror is the ugly grimace a dwarf gives her as she and Dacey leave the circus early. Miranda realizes by his look (his grimace mirrors Miranda's distorted face) that the dwarf is not, as she had suspected, a misshapen animal whose ugliness is entirely discrete from her but a human being who suffers as she does. Miranda sees the dwarf as a fitting image of the horror and ugliness that human existence, including her own, can acquire and of the cruelty that can unexpectedly explode from people—all of which until this night was essentially unknown to Miranda, a girl more accustomed to seeing people at their civilized best, behaving by the rules of her grandmother.

At home after the circus Miranda hears the other children speak about the acts she had missed. For them the circus was all delight. Their versions of the death-defying acts glow in a magic aura because, unlike Miranda, they understand the circus as a world governed by its own rules and conventions. What happens at the circus has little to do with their own everyday lives. It is the stuff of dreams, and they describe the acts accordingly.... Upon going to bed, Miranda tries to transform her vision of the circus into that held by the others, but her frightening memories shatter her efforts....

Without being able either to place the circus in the world she has up until now known and constructed or to understand the conventions that undergird it, Miranda sees the circus as embodying forces of misrule and disorder that throw her and her grandmother's orderly life into utter disarray. For Porter, such horrifying disorder underlay all existence and had to be acknowledged, but to confront the chaos without the mediating structures provided by the rituals of family, community, and religion was to risk being overwhelmed by despair and terror.... Miranda sees at the circus that the abyss is never far from consciousness, there to be faced, often unexpectedly, in all its horror.

'The Circus' not only suggests the need for frameworks by which to structure experience but also underscores a damaging flaw in the grandmother's systematic ordering: her vision of self and reality too easily glosses over the terror underlying experience with saccharine nostalgia." [This critic is an Atheist who rejects Christianity, the "framework" implicitly advocated through Dacey in the last paragraph.]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development*  
(Louisiana State 1993) 157-60

"Dacey, of 'The Circus,' is...presented sympathetically, as a person of formulaic and rather comical lamentation who nevertheless, in the last analysis, shows enormous patience and kindness to a child. Given the way in which Dacey's wish to see the circus is ignored and her services simply taken for granted, one might read the last line of the story—'Dacey ain't mad at nobody...nobody in the whole worl'—as irony, indicating either that if Dacey is not mad it is because she isn't thinking very clearly or that she *is* mad at a deep level that will someday come to the surface. And if Porter were a different writer either of those readings would be plausible. But in Porter's hands, this line means *simply* [italics added] that she has forgiven and is prepared to go on giving what is expected, a moral status that may be stereotyping at some level but is also a status of virtue and dignity." [It is also explicitly Christian.]

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 135-36

"Young Miranda takes her first steps into adult experience. Looking under the bleachers, she encounters the gaze of young men who gather there to peer under women's skirts, their 'bold grinning state without any kind of friendliness in it'... The circus clown, blowing 'sneering kisses' from its 'long scarlet mouth,' sends Miranda into a frenzy of terror; it is her first glimpse from innocence into experience, a world where

laughter expresses 'savage delight' at another's endangerment, smiles mask suffering, and kisses come from 'cruel mouths'."

Mary Titus  
*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 204

"Because the South constructs womanhood as supportive of and submissive to the old order, Sophia Jane [the Grandmother] clearly senses how the disorder of the circus may endanger her granddaughter.... for the pandemonium of the circus abolishes degrees and differences, especially the gendered ones that keep Miranda sitting with such decorum.... Miranda becomes a titillating circus sideshow for two licentious boys.... The young Miranda...glimpses the degraded sexual underside of the old order... At the circus a seeming lack of order challenges the old order.... Every belle walks the same tightrope, where a faux pas can be a deadly false step in trying to allure and secure her beau.... Miranda ends 'The Circus' by living in a perpetual circus, the spectacle of model-disciple relationships at a crisis in the old order." [This Atheist critic claims his book is about "divinity" but he never sees any.]

Gary M. Ciuba  
*Desire, Violence & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*  
(Louisiana State 2007) 68-75

"The Circus" is in the tradition of religious masques and morality plays dating from the Middle Ages, such as *Comus* by Milton, in which allegorical characters personify ideas such as Vices. As a young child, Miranda sees the circus performers as real, just as the much older Huck Finn does when he goes to a circus. Since she is not old enough to understand, she responds emotionally with fears generated by the performers and events, archetypal childhood fears of falling, animals, ugly faces, loud noises, and other shocks. Her perspective turns the circus into a metaphor of the fallen human world as experienced for the first time by an innocent child. Ironically, the circus performers in masks and costumes—and the audience and family responses—reveal the usually hidden nature of human beings. When the tightrope walker looks about to fall off the wire, "The crowd roared with savage delight, shrieks of dreadful laughter like devils in delicious torment." This identifies the sadism in human nature with "devils" and evokes Hell, making "The Circus" a morality play. Miranda recoils in "real pain," screams and bursts into tears because she is empathizing with the tightrope walker. For this, her father sends her home.

Miranda is cared for by the black servant girl Dicey, to whom she turns for explanations and protection. "Hanging to Dicey's arm... Miranda pulled Dicey's sleeve.... 'Oh,' she called out in her panic, closing her eyes and seizing Dicey's hand hard." When she is ordered to take Miranda home, Dicey is disgruntled at having to miss the rest of the circus—"almost in tears herself." She resents Miranda and calls her under her breath a "little ole meany...gret big baby...never go nowhere...never see nothin...won't let anybody have any good times." Later, when the other children get home from the circus, they sympathize with "Poor dear Dicey... Dicey had been looking forward for weeks to this day! And then Miranda must get scared..." Yet when Miranda wakes up screaming and "sat up crying for deliverance from her torments," it is Dicey who comes to comfort her. "She hugged Dicey with both arms, crying, "Don't, don't leave me. *Don't* be so angry! I c-c-can't b-bear it!"

Dicey lies down beside Miranda hugging her and sighs, "making up her mind to remember that she was a Christian and must bear her cross." The word *cross* is a motif in the story carried by Dicey. She comforts the frightened little white girl "in her usual warm being-good voice" and promises not to leave her alone. Dicey forgives not only Miranda but the whole human race, demonstrating what it means to be a Christian: "Dicey ain't mad at nobody...nobody in the whole worl'..." Dicey is comparable to Dilsey, the cook in *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner, published ten years before "The Circus." In both the novel and Porter's story, the black servant is a Christ-evoking figure at the end of the narrative, representing hope and salvation. Other echoes of the novel in the story are Dicey's complaints about having to look after the child, which recall the black child Luster who must care for the white idiot Benjy; and Miranda saying "I don't have to mind *you*" to Dicey, as Caddy says to her brother Quentin.

All the critics miss all the religious implications of the ending. None of them even mentions the word "Christian." Among liberal academics that word is a taboo like the N-word. You would think that critics

purporting to interpret the story would read the last paragraph. After all, it is only four sentences long. The only words capitalized within those last sentences are *Dacey* and *Christian*. The Feminist critic DeMouy declares that the “proper context” at the end of the story is “alienation and destruction,” projecting her own belief as an Atheist. Other incompetent critics ignore the last paragraph because it clearly affirms Dacey’s religious virtue. One critic (Stout) grants only that Dacey has “moral status.” The critics quote Miranda’s feelings throughout the story but then ignore them at the climax because she is embracing an embodiment of Christianity, the only “deliverance from her torments.”

Postmodernist critics (1960s-- ) are secularists who do not acknowledge spiritual content in literature for one or more of the following reasons: (1) They are poorly educated in literature; (2) they are too ignorant of religion to know what to say about it; (3) they are dishonest, censoring evidence because religious faith is Politically Incorrect and their academic careers would suffer if they gave any attention to religion; (4) they are ideologues whose personal agendas are hostile or indifferent to religion; (5) their Atheism blinds them to spirituality in literature as well as in life.

Michael Hollister (2018)