

## ANALYSIS

“Magic” (1928)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“Magic” is unique among Miss Porter’s stories in its brevity, its fiercely ironic monologue technique, and the sordidness of its subject matter, yet it is not as remote from the mainstream of her work as this suggests. The extreme example of her early experimental and highly objective approach, it is a minor technical masterpiece.

Ninette...who contrasts with Maria Concepcion in almost every respect except participation in a bitterly oppressive union, is pathetically impotent to free herself. Since the reader knows her only as victim, however, the emphasis of the story is not on sympathy with her but rather on the horror of her situation. Everything contributes to this effect—the detachment of the glib, callous narration; the doubly callous curiosity of the listener; the irony of the greeting, ‘Welcome home, Ninette,’ when she returns; the understatement of the last line, ‘And after that she lived there quietly.’

The failure of her attempted escape re-emphasizes her enslavement, and the ambiguity of her return—whether by magic or merely through the determinism of her situation—is a master stroke of further emphasis. This ambiguity arouses the reader’s curiosity and holds it suspended, not quite free to rest in certainty of the answer, which is also the theme: Ninette’s imprisonment is no mere matter of locked doors and barred windows, but an enslavement of the spirit. Meanwhile, the preparation of the spell has added symbolic resonance to the young prostitute’s degradation.... The loathsomeness with which Ninette’s subjection is portrayed is exactly the commentary one would expect from Miss Porter on this utter frustration.”

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U South Carolina 1963) 15-16

“‘Magic,’ told by a Negro maid, once a servant in a bordello but now employed in the home of Madame Blanchard, is one of the best examples of Miss Porter’s use of Jamesian narrative techniques. The maid was a woman who prided herself on her French blood and her good character, but she worked where work was to be found. Her narrative about a bit of magic at the house of prostitution where she once worked was told to amuse Madame Blanchard, whose hair she was brushing. Madame Blanchard had remarked to the laundress that the sheets wore out so quickly they were obviously bewitched, and the maid had her own story of magic to tell.

Acutely aware of her role as an entertainer, the maid in her narrative emphasized the scenes of violence, the peculiar monetary system the Madam used, the exact details of the making of the charm to bring Ninette back. The maid had, she insisted, seen too many things, terrible events which she willingly and frivolously told to her new mistress, a Madame who had only an *e* to distinguish her from the Madam. Madame Blanchard, a lady with a French name which in earlier times meant linen, the qualities of whiteness and coolness being particularly appropriate, sat at her dressing table, apparently a little bored. The maid hoped, she said, the violent, perverse story she was going to tell would rest her mistress.

Madame Blanchard obviously did not object to hearing the story; in fact, at two different times she asked the maid to go on with the story. The first interruption is of special interest: Madame Blanchard complained that her hair was being pulled at the time when the maid was telling that the Madam had a complete understanding with the police and that the girls stayed with the Madam unless they were sick (an obvious euphemism for venereal disease). Later, as more violent episodes were told, one would imagine that the brushing might have become more violent, but Madame Blanchard did not protest. While it may be true that the maid did pull the hair, it is just as likely that the mistress was distressed by the implications of

the story, for the institutions of middle- and upper-class life were being undermined, and she may have used the hair pulling as a rather nervous protest. Madame Blanchard, showing no compassion for the prostitutes, was as cold and expressionless as her sheets, qualities...she held in common with the Madam.

As the maid continued with her long narrative about life in the brothel, she and Madame Blanchard provide the frame for the story of a life which was, perhaps, not much different from any other life. The household was controlled by the Madam who had no human feelings, was constantly cheating the girls, arguing over money, fighting by unfair means. When Ninette, the most called-for girl, announced, independently, that she was leaving, the Madam beat her furiously and kicked her in the groin before turning her out into the street. Ninette was engaged in a profession which was, as the narrator saw it, just a business. An outcast of society, Ninette was courageous in defying the Madam, who had the police and pimps on her side; but her revolt was, from the first, doomed.

A magic brew to bring Ninette back was made by the Negro cook, a woman with much French blood, also, but a woman with bad character, the narrator insisted. After the maid had finished with the lurid details of the making of the magic brew, Madame Blanchard interrupted again, thus returning the reader to the frame; closed her perfume bottle, although all the scents of Araby would not wash away the horrible story; and asked, 'Yes, and then?' Yes, the maid said, the charm worked; Ninette returned, was ordered upstairs to dress for work.

The narrator's account of the story, toned down in language but with certain of the violent scenes emphasized, is not to be considered the truth, but a dramatic version of what happened. The narrator, for instance, was never aware of the ironies involved: she referred to the bordello as a fancy house; she believed that the magic potion had brought Ninette back; she missed the significance of the man's greeting, 'Welcome home,' to Ninette on her return. The story ends on a final note of irony: Ninette, who had dared to revolt, to flee the corruption of the sordid house, found no haven in a world itself corrupt and sordid; she returned therefore to the Madam, where she would again be cheated, but where she was in demand by the customers. The maid ended the story as if it were a fairy story and everyone lived happily ever after: 'And after that she lived there quietly.' The story of five pages is of great complexity, uniting Jamesian point-of-view; the frame with its characterization of the maid and the mistress; the story with the Madam, the maid, and Ninette; subtle psychological probings; and bitter social criticism. A major achievement, this story is too little appreciated."

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Twayne 1965) 93-95

"In this exquisitely wrought satiric vignette, a scant three pages long, the story is told all but entirely by implication. The frame situation involves a New Orleans lady of quality, Madame Blanchard, and her personal maid. The loquacious servant is dressing her mistress's hair. She has overheard Madame's remark earlier, to the laundress, that she thinks someone must have bewitched the sheets because so many of them fall apart in the wash. Now she feels prompted to tell an anecdote on the theme of witchery. Her people, she explains, are the Louisiana Negroes of mixed French blood among whom the practice of sorcery is traditional. The sordid story she tells is of an episode in the 'fancy house' where she formerly worked as a chambermaid.

The ruthless madam of the brothel had habitually cheated her whores. When she was accused of this by one Ninette, who announced her intention of leaving the house, the madam mercilessly beat the frail girl, with special attention to her private parts, and threw her out bleeding, penniless, and half-naked, into the street. After a few days, when men coming to the house repeatedly asked about the missing whore, the madam realized that she had made a business mistake in giving way to her rage. She enlisted the help of a Negro voodoo specialist among her servants in an effort to find Ninette and lure her back. A potion was made and due rituals performed. Sure enough, after seven nights the girl returned, still sick, but happy to be back. 'And after that she lived there quietly.'

It is sufficiently obvious that Ninette was not brought back to the bawdy house by the power of the magic spell. She came back, of course, simply because she had learned that there was nowhere else for her

to go. Similarly, Madame Blanchard's maid, whose relationship with her mistress is the center of the story, has another than her ostensible motive for telling the anecdote. How much she 'believes in' magic remains questionable. But she certainly cannot actually intend, as she ironically suggests, that the dreadful tale will 'rest' Madame Blanchard while her hair is brushed.

The story begins with the servant's saying, 'And, Madame Blanchard, believe that I am happy to be here....' At the end, she remarks that the wretched Ninette, returning to the brothel and the cruel madam, was 'happy to be there.' The repetition of the phrase is significant for defining the servant's subtly malicious intent in telling the anecdote. She is routinely flattering to her mistress and solicitous of her comfort. She assures her that she is happy in her place in the 'serene' household of the Blanchards. She begs her pardon when the lady protests that her hair is being pulled in the brushing. And so on. But all the while she is slyly undercutting the flattery. She pretends to think, and obviously expects Madame Blanchard to *know* she is only pretending, that perhaps the grand lady does not even know what a fancy house is. She digresses briefly from her story to note that, although she is 'colored,' she has some of the same French blood in her that is the proud heritage of the Blanchards.

Madame Blanchard's superiority, defined in her name, is one of caste as well as color. But the maid, who has seen in the lady's sarcastic remark to the laundress a genteel version of the brothel madam's abuse of her whores, is determined that her mistress shall not be allowed to think that her 'whiteness' is impervious to all stain of human misery and depravity. Madame Blanchard listens to the ugly story without apparent distress. After interrupting to protest at having her hair pulled, she even prompts the maid to go on with the narrative. She is either callous, or smug, or remarkably self-possessed. It is an essential part of the author's design that we not know which.

At what level of moral awareness *Madame* permits herself to ponder the validity of her superiority to the whores' *madam* we are not informed. And we are hardly to suppose that the maid is aware of all the fine ironies and the universal implications of her narrative. But hairdresser Porter tugs both hard and deftly enough that any reasonably sensitive 'Blanchard' of a reader must be left wary of assuming the permanent safety of any escape from the bawdy house of the world."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 41-44

"She based 'Magic' on a tale she heard from a black maid who had worked in a house on Basin Street in New Orleans. Although it was again someone else's story she shaped it deftly to her own use. It is a dramatic monologue by a maid who, hoping to relax her mistress as she brushes her hair, tells the story of a villainous madam who cheats and bullies the prostitutes in a New Orleans brothel. The point is that the madam's activity is made possible by those around her—the male clients, the police, and the cook—who do nothing. Not only are these people as guilty as the one who perpetrates the violence but so too are the woman and the maid who relish the story.

The woman sniffs scent (the detail is intended to suggest her desire to hide the unpleasant realities), stares at her blameless reflection in the mirror, and urges the storyteller on whenever she pauses. Lest there be any doubt about the equation in guilt between both madams and both maid, they resemble each other so closely as to invite confusion. When the storyteller describes the cook of the brothel it might well be herself she is describing: '...she was a woman, colored like myself with much French blood all the same, like myself always among people who worked spells. But she had a very hard heart, she helped the madam in everything, she liked to watch all that happened' .... It is a first version of the theme, the passive promotion of evil by innocent people, which would run through her works in a steady unbroken line until it reached its fullest expression in *Ship of Fools*."

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*  
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 197-98

"In 'Magic,' as in 'The Martyr,' Porter focuses on a kept woman who, like Isabel, tries to escape her circumstances. A compactly ironic gem, 'Magic' is about a woman who has the courage to rebel against her

physical entrapment but who still ends bound to a life she hates. Although the story is told in a direct, realistic way by a black maidservant who believes in charms and magic, the reader recognizes that the title is used ironically and that the maid's rendition of the poor prostitute's return to the fancy house is meant to be balanced against the reader's own perceptions of the situation. The story, whose brevity prefigures that of some of the 'Old Order' stories, appears slight, but it has been called highly complex, 'brilliant Jamesian experiment in point of view.' It unites the characterization of maid, mistress, the madam, and Ninette with 'subtle psychological probings' as well as 'bitter social criticism.'

Once again Porter forces us to look beyond the type suggested by the girl at the center of the story. A prostitute, she is obviously a temptress or a fallen woman, well liked by the men who visit the house. Although Violeta, Isabel, and Ninette, the prostitute, are all, irrespective of their class, in circumstances in which they must trade their sexual charm for their livelihood, Ninette is most blatantly a sex object. But she is a person as well. She is spirited and independent in challenging the madam who is cheating her of her earnings, even to the point of tolerating physical punishment in an effort to get what is due her. In effect, Ninette refuses to conform to the role her microcosmic society establishes for her.

Ironically, Ninette is overseen by an authority figure who is a woman. Again we have the paradigmatic situation in Porter: a woman who wishes to assert her integrity or identity must combat a woman who defines herself by her sex, although in this case the madam represents a larger authority, both male and female, which conspires to keep women in their 'place.' For her part, Ninette finds, like other Porter women, that trying to run her own life is mortally dangerous. She barely survives the madam's beating when she tries to buy her way out of the house and finally ends in the street, badly injured and penniless.

Eventually the madam wishes Ninette back and seeks charms from the black cook for the purpose. Ninette returns, supposedly irresistibly drawn by a potion made of her leftover face powder, hair, blood, and fingernail trimmings. Porter's ironic implication, however, is that Ninette comes back for the same reason she probably came in the first place: she is sick, she has no money, and she has no prospects. Furthermore, if she tries to live outside the circle where her way of life is the norm, she will be a pariah, she cannot escape what she is in the eyes of society. Nor can she be herself in the microcosm of the bordello, unless she behaves as she is expected to, all will conspire to thwart her.

The madam, her overt adversary, will violently abuse her; the cook will use incantations and hexes to disarm her; the maid, herself completely powerless, must be careful to avoid offending her mistress by so much as a pulled hair and has nothing but indifferent curiosity toward a fellow creature. Madame Blanchard, perhaps something of a whited sepulchre, who is 'kept' by the legal and societal bonds of marriage, offers curiosity rather than compassion, thereby contributing through her tacit acceptance to the existence of the brothel world and the exploitation of women like Ninette. Together they weave a fine web that entraps and subjugates Ninette in a way that is not so magic after all. Ninette comes 'home' to the madam because she can do nothing else.

The point of this brief story is that Ninette and Madame Blanchard are sisters under the skin. Established attitudes are the 'magic' that ineffably confines both of them. The significant message here is that deviating from that confinement is deadly."

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 39-40

"'Magic' was written in 1927, while Porter was living in Salem, Massachusetts, working on her biography of Cotton Mather... Written in a Jamesian style, in which the story's meaning is conveyed through implications, 'Magic' is not an exploration of the supernatural that was said to have brought the girl Ninette back to the brothel. It rather explores social evil that evolves in inhumane class systems. The monologue is delivered by a maid who is dressing her employer's hair. It is interrupted only twice and then by directly quoted remarks by the employer, Madame Blanchard: 'You are pulling a little here...and then what?' and 'Yes, and then?'—questions asked in indifference that illustrate the story's theme of the assistance of evil by passive consent.

The New Orleans setting is well suited to the story's themes, with its mixture of castes and the practice of voodoo common among some of its inhabitants. During the time she was writing the story, Porter would have been reflecting upon evil, both moral and social, steeped as she was in those days not only with Cotton Mather and the Puritan notions of absolute evil but also with Hawthorne's brooding presence in Salem, where she was inspired to re-read all his works. In addition, she had been actively involved the preceding year in protests in Boston against the handling of the Sacco-Vanzetti case and was taking notes about social injustice and the moral evil implicit in it, opinions that finally appeared in her long essay 'The Never-Ending Wrong' (1977).

Ironies in 'Magic' center on the disparity between what the maid says and what she means, which is ambiguous; on Madame Blanchard's surface purity (her name means white) and her inner impurity (she assists evil by her apathy); and on the dramatic parallel between Madame Blanchard with her Creole maid and the brothel's madam with the prostitute Ninette.... The Creole maid establishes her relationship to Ninette by telling Madame Blanchard that she is 'happy to be here' and recalling at the end of the story when Ninette returned to the brothel that she likewise was 'happy to be there.'

The maid flatters Madame Blanchard ('Maybe you don't know what is a fancy house') and is solicitous of her comfort, saying she will tell the story to 'rest' Madame Blanchard while she brushes her hair. The seamy little story could rest Madame Blanchard only if it reinforced her smug remove from the sordid world it recreates; the story actually undermines the institutions of middle and upper class life that allow the Ninettes to suffer by an apathetic indulgence of social evil that does not invade the privileged stratum. There are subtle psychological probings here and bitter social commentary about class systems, slavery, and a loveless, corrupt society, commentary Porter makes also in 'Hacienda'."

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 48-50

"Porter based the story on a tale she had heard from a New Orleans maid.... The story is...a *telling* evocation of hypocritical moralizing.... Most students of the story are baffled by it.... The callousness of Madame Blanchard, who apparently loves sordid gossip, is accounted for by her social position in relation to the maid; the tale of an unfortunate tart would not move her. But the story is much more complex than some critics will allow.

The story is a double structure: (1) a story about a maid telling a story, and (2) a story told by a maid. What then, is the relation of the two parts of the story? Are symmetrical patterns observable, as would be expected in a Porter story? Which part (1 or 2) is predominant? Which character in the complex tale is the genuine protagonist? Finally, is there a moral other than the one pointed out by Givner—that people who do nothing about the injustices they are aware of are themselves guilty of injustice?

The most complete interpretation of the story to appear so far is Helen L. Leath's 'Washing the Dirty Linen in Private: An Analysis of Katherine Anne Porter's "Magic"' (1985). Leath sees the story as one of those Porter tales of 'strong women who struggle to control their environments, who use whatever means that present themselves in order to establish their dominion.' For Leath, the maid narrator is of central focus: 'the narrator of "Magic" uses a threat of magic spells to subjugate the mistress of the house and secure her job.' Leath goes on to note that 'Porter apparently admired women who were strong enough to survive, whether those women were Indian, French Negro, or East Texas transplants from Kentucky or Tennessee.'

If the story is truly a 'dramatic monologue,' as has been suggested by several critics, then it follows—as Leath insists—that the reader must pay close attention to how the narrator reveals her own character and outlook, and not take in too literal a manner the actual 'content' of the story told by the narrator. Indeed, the 'unreliability' of narrators in the tradition of the dramatic monologue is notorious (Browning's narrators will come to mind). And the whole tradition of the tall tale in southwestern humor declares that it is the teller of the tale, not the tale, that is of foremost importance. Leath's argument is convincing simply because it fits the pattern of so much of Katherine Anne Porter's fiction. It seems, in addition, that critics

have not been able to go beyond the black maid's station in life to the psychological complexities that she reveals in the story. The black maid is one of Porter's finest creations.

What many readers miss in the implied social criticism in this story. The maid-narrator of the frame story, as well as Ninette of the story proper, live 'serenely' or 'quietly.' But living in serenity or quietness implies a loss of freedom, freedom being by its nature rambunctious and noisy. Both the maid and Ninette live under tyranny; the police are in cahoots with Ninette's persecutor, the entire social order in league with Madame Blanchard against the black maid, who apparently offers herself as a collaborator. All this economic exploitation works like 'magic.'

But it is not 'magic' that brings Ninette back to the brothel; it is the need for food and shelter. And it is not 'magic' spells by which 'the colored women' get back their men; unemployment and fatigue entice them back to their women who have, at best, subsistence-level domestic work that can offer them some small hope of survival. What is 'magical' about all this is that an uprising to bring down the whole rotten system is perfumed over in gossip, small talk, and offers of collaboration. The 'magic' is in the eye of the exploited only. Class warfare, not magic, keeps Ninette and the maid narrator in line. And, like the stories in *The Old Order*, this narrative illustrates, once again, the absurdity of the Southern tradition that treated blacks with gentleness and tolerance. As Gaston has observed, 'although the mistress is not so stereotyped as to harass the servant, she leaves no doubt about feeling vastly superior.'

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1991) 119-23

"'Magic,' set in New Orleans, concerns the absolute domination exercised by a small-scale business owner over a worker—that is, by a 'madam' over a prostitute—ostensibly by the use of magic, but actually by the power of hunger and utter economic dependence."

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 61

In form "Magic" is a dramatic monologue like "That Tree," both subjective, both from an unreliable point of view, both requiring close analysis to discern the truth. In this brief story Porter unites 5 of the major aesthetic modes in American literary history: Neoclassicism, Realism, Impressionism, Naturalism, and Modernism. Neoclassicism derives from classical Greece and from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Age of Reason. "Magic" is Neoclassical in its (1) economy, at less than 3 pages; (2) parallels: the two fancy houses, the two Creole servants, Madame with the madam, and the opening statement by the narrator that she is "happy" here with the statement at the end that Ninette is "happy" to be back in the brothel; (3) ironic tone, as in the title, the "Welcome home" greeting at the end, and the assurance by the cook to the madam that Ninette "will be dirt under your feet," since she has never been otherwise; (4) appeal to reason and intellect; (5) social value, in exposing the pervasive collusion with evil in society. These Neoclassical values are consistent throughout the fiction of Porter.

Neoclassical values informed the Realist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dominant aesthetic mode of this story is Realism, as always in Porter, with its traditional characteristics: (1) objectivity; (2) authentic language, ethnic style and rhetoric of a specific locale, New Orleans; (3) socially representative characters; (4) debunking of Romanticism, in the form of "magic"; (5) universal truths. The story is also Impressionistic in that (1) the single point of view, except for a few reactions by Madame Blanchard, is very subjective; (2) the Creole servant is trying to make an impression on her mistress with her anecdote, including the impression that she has the power to avenge herself against her mistress if necessary by having a spell cast upon her; (3) the dominant impressions she conveys are 7 images of shocking violence: "The madam would hit her over the head. She always hit people over the head with bottles"; "What confusion there would be sometimes with a girl running raving downstairs, and the madam pulling her back by the hair and smashing a bottle on her forehead"; "the madam...began to lift her knee and kick the girl most terribly in the stomach, and even in her most secret place"; "then she beat her in the face with a bottle"; "there was blood everywhere she had sat"; "at the door she gave the girl a great push in the back with her knee, so that she fell again in the street."

The story dramatizes the two main themes of Naturalism: (1) determinism and (2) victimization; and (3) it stresses the signature metaphor of Naturalism: life is a trap. Contrary to pure Naturalism, however, Porter does not deny free will, as Ninette exhibits free will by rebelling against the madam and leaving the brothel and the madam does also by changing her mind and taking the girl back. The traditional Naturalist argument against free will is also contradicted here by the subjective choices of Madame and the powerful will of the madam. Some critics have claimed that the story is Marxist because it criticizes an unjust class system. Marxists are reductive Naturalists in believing that lives are determined exclusively by a capitalist economic system. Since they believe no one really has free will in a capitalist system, Marxists think nothing of taking away democratic freedoms. Porter soon became disillusioned with Marxism, as expressed in "Flowering Judas" and "Hacienda," depicting the failure of Marxist revolutions in Mexico. Likewise, the revolution of Ninette against the brothel is futile. Marxists locate evil in an economic system, whereas Christians including Porter locate evil in human nature and the individual, as exemplified by the madam, Madame Blanchard, both servants, the police, and patrons of the brothel.

"Magic" is Modernist in its (1) focus on states of consciousness—interior Realism; (2) complexity, telling two stories at once, and comparing the Creole narrator not only with the brothel cook but with the madam, when she pulls the hair of her mistress in a parallel to the madam pulling the hair of prostitutes; (3) unreliable narrator; (4) non-linear, incremental revelation of essential facts; (5) symbolism: fancy house, prostitute, chamber pot, perfume, magic; (6) allegory, of the futile rebellion by Ninette as a representative victim; (7) egalitarian feminism criticizing the madam for reinforcing a corrupt patriarchal social order: "She could make men work for her too, but she paid them very well for all," in contrast to her cheating her women employees and paying them little.

Magic is power not understood. The fiction of Porter is magical to many critics. Lacking social power they do not understand, the blacks and Creoles who practice voodoo and cast spells claim to have spiritual power instead, but this story clearly implies that Ninette returns to the brothel for reasons that may be understood rationally. Though Porter does not believe in such magic, the characters do. "Colored women do it to bring back their men." This "New Orleans charm" would be common knowledge in a brothel. Ninette may fulfill the prophecy that she will return in seven days because she is sick and fears that the spell will kill her if she does not. In this story magic is a weapon used against people, a force of evil in the absence of true religious faith.

The servant narrator emphasizes that she is like the cook in the brothel, saying three times that she is "like myself." In fact, she may *be* that cook. Implicitly she is "like" that cook in having "a very hard heart" and in telling on the girls. The cook "helped the madam in everything," an accomplice to all her injustice and cruelty. The narrator has an immoral view of the way they ran the brothel: "It is a business, you see, like any other." She flatters Madame Blanchard while also implying that she is naive—"Maybe you don't know what is a fancy house?"—and at the same time uses the anecdote to intimidate her mistress indirectly by planting the idea that she can do harm to her comparable to that inflicted by the madam on Ninette. She pulls Madame Blanchard's hair "a little" as if by accident, then describes the madam pulling the hair of her prostitutes with great force. Implicitly she likens herself to the evil madam.

The servant narrator says in the first sentence of the story that she enjoys working in this fancy house because it is so "serene." The scene recalls the one in *Benito Cereno* by Melville in which the Captain of a slave ship is being shaved by Babo after the slaves have rebelled and taken over the ship, murdering the white crew. Babo wields a straight razor and might cut the Captain's throat any time he pleases. Madame Blanchard (white) is more serene than Captain Cereno, yet could be just as much in jeopardy from a pair of hair scissors. It is unknown how much of her situation she understands. She may well be like the obtuse American witness of the shaving, Captain Delano, who thinks Cereno is still in command.

In the Christian context of Porter's work as a whole, the New Orleans of this story is a hell on earth. The madam and the magic there are Satanic. There is no God in the consciousness of this narrator, as there is none in that of the journalist in "That Tree."

Michael Hollister (2018)