

## ANALYSIS

“The Grave” (1934)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“The greatest gift of Miss Porter is her consummate mastery of detail. Whatever may be her structural or emotional limitations, she has the uncanny power of evoking richness from minutiae. The gift is manifested everywhere in her work, but no more astonishing bit of observation can be found than in ‘The Grave,’ a simple and tremendously powerful little story of two children’s contact with the mysteries of life and death.... Such an evocation of beauty from anatomical detail is not often excelled anywhere in the language.”

Lodwick Hartley

“Katherine Anne Porter”

*Sewanee Review* XLVIII (April 1940) 201-16

“In ‘The Grave,’ the mysterious adult world reveals itself again, when Miranda’s brother Paul shoots a rabbit and exposes the litter it had been about to bear. Miranda ‘looked and looked—excited, but not frightened, for she was accustomed to the sight of animals killed in hunting—filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty. ‘Ah, there’s blood running over them,’ she said and began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along.’ And she loses her experience in the vast abyss of memory, only to recall it twenty years later, walking through a market in a strange city.

Though the Miranda who appears in these sketches is still only a young child (in ‘The Grave,’ the last of the six pieces [about her], she is nine years old), she is very much aware of the complex, baffling world of adults and of the isolated experiences which point towards the knowledge of adults. Meanwhile she lives with her father or her brother and sister in the town house or the country house or the farm. And while the Grandmother and Nannie are present, she is safe. But they must inevitably disappear.

In the last two of these six sketches [about Miranda], the Grandmother is dead, and her loss is felt as keenly as her presence had been. She was indeed ‘the source,’ just as she had represented ‘authority.’ She imposed her own order and design on the world. She was the last of the waning pioneer stock, and she had been full of courage because she had known the failure of love and hope. What she most represented, of course, was strength and fortitude (very high values in Miss Porter’s scales...), but these she passed on to one of her grandchildren. Miranda, too, is a moral aristocrat, and her life, different as it is to be from her Grandmother’s, reveals how much of the older woman’s training and personality the small child absorbed.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.

*The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*

(U Pittsburgh 1957) 19-20

“Writing like this is a triumph of recovery, of remembering.... The meaning of ‘The Grave’ derives from the epiphany Miranda obtains from her sudden recollection of ‘one burning day’ twenty years earlier... The structure of the story consists of a series of analogies, the principal one being between the opened graves, where the children are united by a tacit, secret bond of knowledge and kinship, and the human mind as a burial place, which, when opened, yields secrets that restore the individual to communion and love.... Miranda calmly placed on her finger [*sic*] a ring that doubtless had slid from a bone when the bones were moved... The old myths were on her thumb.”

Edward G. Schwartz

“The Fictions of Memory”

*Southwest Review* (Summer 1960)

“‘The Grave’ has mythic undercurrents, with Miranda’s yielding up of the Dove [Holy Spirit] for the wedding ring (Love) and her subsequent discovery that love means birth means death. But this interpretation reminds us again of how symbolic guessing games can get out of hand. [This critic admits here that his own interpretation is merely guessing.] ‘The Grave’ is obviously, and simply, the story of a young girl’s first realization of the nature of love and sex; and the ring and dove, as objects from the grave, underline the poignance of this emotional step toward maturity and death.”

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

“In later stories featuring that...somewhat autobiographical Miranda—the best of which is perhaps ‘The Grave,’ an episode of almost mystical childhood, having to do with the closeness and connectedness of life and death, womb and tomb (as in medieval religious imagery)—all is self-possessed and responsible, thoughtful and indeed philosophical. What I call her impersonality applies even to the painting of her own portrait, when it is fictitious.”

Glenway Wescott  
“Katherine Anne Porter Personally”  
*Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*  
(Harper and Row 1962) 36

“‘The Grave,’ which is the last of the Miranda stories...suggests the movement from innocence to knowledge, from the innocence of the dove (which is one of the objects found in the grave), to the gold ring (which is Miranda’s sign for the luxury of her own femininity), to the dead mother rabbit (the mystery of birth and death). In the awareness of decay and death comes the important knowledge of the mature self, felt but not understood, recognized in its completeness only later.”

Ray B. West, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Minnesota 1963) 29

“‘The Grave’ is the finest of the sketches. Like ‘The Circus’ and ‘The Fig Tree,’ it recounts one episode in Miranda’s life; but of the three ‘The Grave’ is the most fully realized and richly suggestive.... It describes events which might easily have occurred within the space of an hour. These events are of the greatest simplicity, beautifully true to reality, and are portrayed with such minute honesty that they come closer to perfection than any other passage of comparable length in Miss Porter’s writings. This sketch is the best example of her ability to find and present natural symbols....

The first sentence, describing the kneeling children, frames the scene and suggests ritual, and the episode is precisely that—the ritual of Miranda’s entrance into maturity.... In one short lesson ‘the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body’ are crystallized in the knowledge of birth, and this knowledge is instantly filmed over with the chilling fixative of death. Death is the real meaning of this story.... To Miranda, ‘quietly and terribly agitated,’ the vision becomes a ‘bloody heap’ and she wants no part of it. The young rabbits are buried again in the tomb of their mother’s body and Miranda, after thinking about ‘the whole worrisome affair with confused unhappiness’ for several days, lets it sink into her unconscious, its new ‘burial place.’ Later she recalls it in another setting of ‘mingled sweetness and corruption’ and realizes for a painful moment that, lying under all these years under a pleasant memory of ‘the time she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves,’ was this frozen vision of another open grave which had yielded up its ambiguous treasure—the knowledge of life and death.

‘The Grave’ achieves a universality of truth by which it seems to transcend the usual thematic preoccupations of its author. This brief moment in the life of the young heroine is one which she shares in some way with every girl.... It is one of the early signs of Miranda’s advance toward maturity that the possession of the gold ring found by Paul arouses in her a desire for more feminine clothing. Up to this time she hasn’t cared for dolls and has liked to accompany her brother on hunting trips.... Another passage descriptive of her character has been misunderstood by some readers. It follows the statement that neighbor women were shocked by her boyish clothes.... This social sense of Miranda’s will never lead her to adapt her conduct to the opinions of her neighbors... The Miranda of ‘The Grave’ is not yet very much the

strong, self-sufficient one who sees through and rejects the narrow and oppressive. She is a little girl of nine....

The children's discovery of the old family graves in the first part of the story is closely related to their next experience. It adds the dimension of retrospective history to the day's revelations, just as Miranda's later recollection of the scene extends the story into the future. The gold ring, a relic of family femininity, is a gentle hint to the motherless girl that she must become a woman and begins her initiation into the mystery of all that is involved in that role. The ring awakens in Miranda 'vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure.' The present reality is something quite different. 'It was said the motherless family was running down, with the Grandmother no longer there to hold it together.... At the present moment the dawning artist in [Miranda] is completely occupied with 'shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty'; and the emerging woman in her, as she 'scrambles out' with the dove of knowledge from the grave of her childhood, is spellbound by the mystery of life and death."

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 102-07

"After leaving the burial ground, Paul shot a rabbit about to give birth; and for the first time Miranda understood the process of birth. The limited point of view—sometimes swooping close to Miranda, entering into her mind, recording her feelings and emotions; at other times withdrawing, increasing the air of objectivity; and sometimes shifting to the point of view of Paul, thereby portraying him in more depth and also giving the reader another view of Miranda—is particularly skillful....

At the age of nine, Miranda was still largely innocent, seemingly little influenced by the terrible discoveries she had made earlier in 'The Fig Tree' and in 'The Circus.' With the coffin gone, the grave was merely a hole in the ground; and she leaped into it, scratching about as if she were a young animal.... The ring Paul found in the corrupt earth was a gold band, probably a wedding ring, engraved with flowers and leaves, fertility symbols. They traded, and Miranda wore the ring on her thumb, literally because she was young and it fit there, but symbolically because she was not then ready to wear such a band on the correct finger. They then fled the cemetery, for the land was no longer theirs, and they were afraid of being called trespassers.... Paul claimed the right to shoot first if they saw a rabbit or dove, and Miranda asked idly if she could fire first if they saw a snake.

Immediately after this unconscious Eve-slaying-evil and Freudian sexual image, Miranda lost interest in shooting; she became interested in the gold ring on her thumb. She was then dressed asexually in hired-man's hat, thick sandals, and overalls, the wearing apparel she preferred, since she had not yet had any feminine stirrings and since her father did not object—it saved her dresses for school. But the ring made her want to return to the house, bathe, dust herself with violet talcum powder, and put on her most feminine dress. Actually, this was not all she wanted to do: she was infected with the desire for the lost luxury and grandeur of the family, and the symbolic acts she envisioned brought her into this fantasy world.

Before she could tell Paul she was returning to the house, he saw a rabbit and killed it. Miranda admired her brother's skill in skinning rabbits, and she often had Uncle Jimbilly tan the skins so that she could make fur coats for her dolls. She did not enjoy playing with dolls, but she had been taught that luxurious tastes were rightfully hers. Miranda was then too innocent to see the connection between the destruction of the fur-bearing rabbit and the fur coat, between slavery and the ante-bellum family plantations, just as she could not see that the 'dark scarlet, sleek, firm' flesh of the rabbit was now prematurely destined to decay. The children found in the dead body of the rabbit...unborn rabbits, each tiny thing enveloped in a 'scarlet veil.' After the membrane had been removed, they could see them clearly, the down 'like a baby's head just washed.' Upon seeing them, Miranda instinctively knew the process of birth....

Almost twenty years later...while she was going through a market, the smells of decay and a tray of sugar sweets in the shape of tiny animals, including baby rabbits, plunged her into a Proustian re-creation of the long-forgotten scene. She could smell in the market—which by extension becomes the world, just as

the circus tent does—the long-ago scent of sweetness and corruption which brought to her mind the incidents and the knowledge she had gained that day. In the midst of teeming life and rapid decay and confronted by the Indian vendor with his visible symbols of fertility, Miranda sees clearly the implications of these almost forgotten incidents....

Her vision in the market was to see that long ago she had learned that life is subject to corruption and death, that life builds on other life and on death, and that the world is filled with chaos, disaster, and destruction. As her horrible vision faded, she saw her twelve-year-old brother still standing in the blazing sun, smiling soberly, turning the flawed dove in his hands. This second image in the market is a return to the symbol of the flawed innocence of her brother Paul.”

George Hendrick  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Illinois 1965) 69-71

“If I had to choose a particular short story of Katherine Anne Porter’s to illustrate her genius as a writer—the first choice is not an easy one—I think that I would choose ‘The Grave.’ I did choose it some months ago for a lecture in Athens, where the special nature of the audience, whose English ranged from excellent to moderately competent, provided a severe test. The ability of such an audience to understand and appreciate this story underlines some of Miss Porter’s special virtues as a writer. Hers is an art of apparent simplicity, with nothing forced or mannered, and yet the simplicity is rich, not thin, full of subtleties and sensitive insights. Her work is compact and almost unbelievable economical.

The story has to do with a young brother and sister on a Texas farm in the year 1903. Their grandmother, who in some sense had dominated the family, has survived her husband for many years. He had died in the neighboring state of Louisiana, but she had removed his body to Texas. Later, when her Texas farm was sold and with it the small family cemetery, she had once more moved her husband’s body, and those of the other members of the family, to a plot in the big new public cemetery.

One day the two grandchildren, out rabbit hunting with their small rifles, find themselves in the old abandoned family cemetery.... Miranda’s brother recognizes what the curious little ornament is—the screw-head for a coffin. Paul has found something too—a small gold ring—and the children soon make an exchange of their treasures, Miranda fitting the gold ring onto her thumb. Paul soon becomes interested in hunting again, and looks about for rabbits... The little girl is thoroughly feminine, and though she has enjoyed knocking about with her brother, wearing her summer roughing outfit, the world of boys and sports and hunting and all that goes with it is beginning to end.

Then something happens. Paul starts up a rabbit, kills it with one shot and skins it expertly as Miranda watches admiringly. ‘Brother lifted the oddly bloated belly. “Look,” he said, in a low amazed voice. “It was going to have young ones”.’ Seeing the baby rabbits in all their perfection, ‘their sleek wet down lying in miniature even ripples like a baby’s head just washed, their unbelievably small delicate ears folded close,’ Miranda is ‘excited but not frightened.’ Then she touches one of them, and exclaims, “‘Ah, there’s blood running over them!’” and begins to tremble. ‘She had wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along.’

The meaning of life and fertility and of her own body begin to take shape in the little girl’s mind as she sees the tiny creatures just taken from their mother’s womb. The little boy says to her ‘cautiously, as if he were talking about something forbidden: “They were just about ready to be born.” “I know,” said Miranda, ‘like kittens. I know, like babies.’ She was quietly and terribly agitated, standing again with her rifle under her arm, looking down at the bloody heap.’ Paul buries the rabbits and cautions his sister ‘with an eager friendliness, a confidential tone quite unusual for him, as if he were taking her into an important secret on equal terms. “Listen now.... Don’t tell a soul”.’

The story ends with one more paragraph, and because the ending is told with such beautiful economy and such care for the disposition of incidents and even the choice of words, one dares not paraphrase it.... The story is so rich, it has so many meanings that bear close and subtle relations to each other, that a brief summary of what the story means will oversimplify it and fail to do justice to its depth, but I shall venture a

few comments. Obviously the story is about growing up and going through a kind of initiation into the mysteries of adult life. It is thus the story of the discovery of truth. Miranda learns about birth and her own destiny as a woman; she learns these things suddenly, unexpectedly, in circumstances that connect birth with death.... One might say that the story is about the paradoxical nature of truth: truth wears a double face—it is not simple but complex. The secret of birth is revealed in the place of death and through a kind of blood sacrifice. If there is beauty in the discovery, there is also awe and even terror.

These meanings are dramatized by their presentation through a particular action, which takes place in a particular setting. Something more than illustration of a statement is involved—something more than mere vividness or the presentation of a generalization in a form to catch the reader's eye. One notices, for example, how important is the fact of the grandmother's anxiety to keep the family together, even the bodies of the family dead. And the grandmother's solicitude is not mentioned merely to account for the physical fact of the abandoned cemetery in which Miranda makes her discovery about life and death. Throughout the story, birth and death are seen through a family perspective.

Miranda is, for example, thoroughly conscious of how her family is regarded in the community. We are told that her father had been criticized for letting his girls dress like boys and career 'around astride barebacked horses.' Miranda herself had encountered such criticism from old women whom she met on the road—women who smoked corncob pipes. They had always 'treated her grandmother with most sincere respect,' but they ask her "What yo Pappy thinkin about?" This matter of clothes, and the social sense, and the role of women in the society are brought into the story unobtrusively, but they powerfully influence its meaning. For if the story is about a rite of initiation, an initiation into the meaning of sex, the subject is not treated in a doctrinaire polemical way. In this story sex is considered in a much larger context, in a social and even a philosophical context.

How important the special context is will become apparent if we ask ourselves why the story ends as it does. Years later, in the hot tropical sunlight of a Mexican city, Miranda sees a tray of dyed sugar sweets, moulded in the form of baby pigs and baby rabbits. They smell of vanilla, but this smell mingles with the other odors of the marketplace, including that of raw flesh, and Miranda is suddenly reminded of the 'sweetness and corruption' that she had smelled long before as she stood in the empty grave in the family burial plot. What is it that makes the experience not finally horrifying or nauseating? What steadies Miranda and redeems the experience for her?...

I mentioned earlier the richness and subtlety of this beautiful story. It needs no further illustration; yet one can hardly forbear reminding oneself how skillfully and apparently almost effortlessly, the author has rendered the physical and social context that gives point to Miranda's discovery of truth and has effected the modulation of her shifting attitudes—toward the grave, the buried ring, her hunting clothes, the dead rabbit—reconciling these various and conflicting attitudes and, in the closing sentences, bringing into precise focus the underlying theme."

Cleanth Brooks

"On 'The Grave'"

*Yale Review* 55 (Winter 1966) 275-79

"Miranda is nine years old, and her brother Paul twelve. Grandmother has been dead for some years. During the time of her widowhood, Sophia Jane had twice moved the body of her husband, first from Kentucky to Louisiana, and then to the farm in Texas. Over the years, his grave on the farm had become the nucleus of a small family cemetery. But after Grandmother's death, a part of the land, which includes the cemetery plot, is sold 'for the benefit of certain of her children.' The bodies are removed to the new public cemetery, where Grandmother herself is buried...

Trembling, but not so much with disgust or fear as with awe, touched by the beauty of the little forms and by the nameless wonder at the mystery of life and death, Miranda looks with prolonged fascination.... Paul puts the baby rabbits back into the body of the mother, to bury them together.... Twenty years later, in a Mexican marketplace, 'the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind's eye'.... In its compact richness, its unforced handling of a complex symbolism not so much invented as

chosen, its exquisite sensuous and psychological detail, 'The Grave' is one of Miss Porter's finest stories. Its wealth of implicit meaning is inexhaustible....

The ring, probably a wedding band, is associated with the dead past, something representative of the hold that her grandmother's essentially morbid spirit has upon her—that spirit of obsession with the dead that drove the widow to refuse to let her husband's bones lie in peace until they could be beside her own. The dove, which Paul is holding in the mind's-eye picture that comes to Miranda in the Mexican marketplace, is a traditional Christian symbol of the soul's immortality [and the Holy Spirit].... The vitalizing image for Miranda is that of the baby rabbits, her long-buried memory of which is evoked by the sight of the candy animals on the vendor's tray. Emerging from the welter of her other sensations in the marketplace (which first woke a 'dreadful vision' of the old graveyard on the farm), the recollection of the rabbits, and her memory of the communion she had with her brother at the sight of the little bodies he had delivered unborn into death, produce at last a serene and triumphant vision of life.

In its totality, and in the central image of the rabbits, the young buried in the womb of their mother's body, the story acknowledges the mysterious interdependence of life and death. But the final thrust is toward life. The act of memory itself, the fundamental act of human imagination, defeats the power of time. But it is further significant that the controlling image here is a natural one. In Wordsworth's phrase, Miranda's days are 'bound each to each by natural piety'.... The sacred center of her life, the source of her sense of a vital and significant continuity in her experience, is in the fields where she and her brother knelt together in communion over the beauty of the wild creatures."

John Edward Hardy  
*Katherine Anne Porter*  
(Ungar 1973) 20-24

"Although critics and other writers have rated her work among the best, she did not achieve general popularity until her only [long] novel, *Ship of Fools*, was published in 1962. It was a best seller of mammoth proportions and was made into a film.... Porter's style is not so instantly recognizable as, say, Faulkner's or Hemingway's. But her range is tremendous.... Always her language is beautifully exact, pictorial, rhythmically balanced. She is not afraid of adjectives and rich imagery.

The first sentence of the second paragraph of 'The Grave' illustrates her skill. The reader's imagination moves from the abstract ('family cemetery') to a slightly more concrete image ('pleasant, small, neglected garden') to a carefully chosen and precisely qualified description of objects in the garden. At the end of the sentence, the reader is submerged in the 'uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass.' Each noun and adjective brings the reader deeper into the story. This sentence also contains the themes of the story, the intermingling of sweetness and death and corruption. It places the reader, metaphorically and literally, in the middle of the world where the story takes place.

The themes are developed as much through language as through plot. After a graceful, stately opening, the language adjusts to the coarser sensibilities of the children ('scratching,' 'scooped,' 'leaped'). When Miranda puts on the ring, the subordinate theme of women and men is introduced, and the language reflects the difference between the children. Paul talks of 'get[ting] your bird' and 'bulls'-eyes' while Miranda has 'vague stirrings of desire for luxury,' a sensual image which reinforces her emerging awareness of herself. When the experience with the rabbits emphasizes the dominant theme of death and corruption, the language reflects the changed sensibility of Miranda.

The epiphany is borne to Miranda, and the reader, not alone by memory of the rabbits aroused by the little sugar figures but by the vision of her brother 'standing in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a please sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands.' More by means of the sounds and the imagery than by what could be paraphrased as meaning, the reader understands that Miranda has become reconciled with the 'mingling sweetness and corruption' of her life."

Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer, Robert Hoopes, eds.  
*The Short Story: An Introduction*  
(McGraw-Hill 1976, 1983) 359-60

“Focusing upon the few most obtrusive symbols—the ring, the dove, the rabbits, and the grave—criticism has continued to neglect the story’s paradigm of our most primal racial myth, that of the fall of man, which is itself the pattern of a primal experience in the life of each individual.... The mention of eternity in the final sentence of the [opening] paragraph leaves latent the suggestion of a conclusion to the journey that carries beyond death.... It is, of course, difficult to encounter gardens in the work of any writer with a Catholic background without wondering if echoes of Eden are intended, but when the garden contains cedar and cypress trees—certainly existent in Texas, but most commonly associated with the Middle-East—our suspicions increase.... This [neglected] garden which became a cemetery...represents a fallen Eden....

‘Miranda,’ a name employed by Porter in a series of stories, obviously recalls the Miranda of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which made the name almost a synonym for innocence; John Fowles uses it with similar implications in *The Collector*. ‘Paul’ might call to mind the Apostle... We know that he is twelve, the conventional age of masculine puberty, the age at which Christ went to teach the elders in the temple. Miranda, at nine, would just be approaching this period of knowledge. The appearance in the garden of a male child and a female of slightly lesser age might also suggest Adam and Eve in a recapitulation of the childhood of our race....

Miranda leaps ‘into the pit’ that has ‘held her grandfather’s bones,’ and, ‘scratching around aimlessly and as pleasurably as any young animal,’ scoops up ‘a lump of earth’ from the grave. A more chilling and a more tellingly compressed portrait of utter innocence in the face of death could scarcely be produced than appears in that eager leap into the grave of her own grandfather and in that equally oblivious weighing of a palmful of ‘pleasantly sweet, corrupt’ smelling earth. But in the very rotting earth that summons up our mortal clay, Miranda also finds the dove, symbol (as several commentators have observed) of innocence and of the Holy Ghost. Even before Miranda has fallen, and before death has become a reality to her, she discovers a token of her redemption.

At this point, significantly, she does not prize the dove. Trading it to Paul for the wedding ring (a specifically Freudian symbol of marriage and sex) which he has retrieved from another grave, she is clearly trading her innocence—so far through symbols only—for knowledge of the world and of her function as a woman. The suggestion of fertility in the ‘intricate flowers and leaves’ carved on the ring adumbrates her awakening to this function, which at first takes the form of an interest in female luxury, but which occurs in earnest simultaneously with an awakening to sin and death when Miranda is confronted by the unborn baby rabbits. The ritual exchange, in which each child acquires the desired and appropriate token, is further marked by covetousness on each side. Miranda is ‘smitten at the sight of the ring and wished to have it’; she glances ‘without covetousness,’ however, at the token which Paul, when ‘he had got the dove in his hand,’ identifies triumphantly as a ‘screw head for a *coffin!*’ Miranda’s attraction to the ring seems perfectly natural, for ‘it fitted perfectly,’ but the implication is also that Miranda has yielded to an astutely calculated temptation. Satan, we remember, had relied upon Eve’s vanity, and Porter will go on to develop this quality in Miranda.

Paul’s temptation seems directed toward his role as hunter. His interest in the dove is not yet as a token of immortality, but of death; it is important, therefore, that Paul has been identified as a hunter of doves and that in the breast of this dove there is a ‘deep round hollow’ such as a bullet would make. He is aware, of course, that by means of this aperture the dove is affixed to the coffin, but he does not reflect that the functions of this dove is to convey the spirit to its eternal home. Paul’s attitude to his new possession exceeds the merely proprietorial: ‘I’ll bet nobody else in the world has one like this!’ The desire for supremacy, which was to be derived from the knowledge of good and evil, which brought death into the world, and which would issue shortly in a particularly heinous murder (of Abel, or of the pregnant rabbit), is also a mark of the Fall.

Immediately following their appropriation of the ring and the dove, the children begin to feel uneasy: ‘Maybe we ought to go now,’ she said, ‘maybe one of the niggers’ll see us and tell somebody.’ The change in their condition is signaled by the arrival of self-consciousness, by the fear of being observed and reported, and by the sense of having done something forbidden. As Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, so Paul and Miranda feel ‘like trespassers’ and know that they must leave the garden which is no

longer theirs.’ They take up their rifles and go off to hunt, much as our first parents were obliged to do. Informing us next that ‘Miranda always followed at Paul’s heels along the path, obeying instructions,’ Porter recalls the order of departure from Eden. ‘Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee’ (*Genesis* 3:16). Miranda has yet to learn of woman’s special penalty in childbirth, but it is apparent that she knows already something of the authority of man.

Porter chooses this moment to define for us the difference in Miranda’s and Paul’s attitude to hunting. Paul knows what he is doing when he kills; he knows the act from intention to consequence, and is already a small master in the world of experience. He is leader and teacher not only because he is male and Miranda is female, but also because he is older and more experienced than she. The realm into which Paul has fallen is marked by the fact of death—and more, by the fact of killing; it is a world in which actions have consequence, in which over and over again the apple is eaten and the eater of punished.

Miranda, on the other hand, cares nothing about hitting the mark and is unaware of the consequences of shooting beyond the immediate sensory experience of ‘pulling the trigger and hearing the noise.’ That is, she is innocent. Still the inhabitant of a floating Eden in which life is marvelous and without consequence, Miranda crosses over only when she has seen the rabbits. This apparent confusion about the moment of the Fall—for we have, after all, just witnessed one representation of it, and yet are invited to believe that Paul had fallen before this and Miranda only afterwards—is crucial to the story’s design, according to which everything happens both repetitively and progressively, and in which events are returned to again and again until their proper meaning has finally been understood.

That the Fall has in some sense not yet occurred for Miranda is further indicated by her asking, on the way to the kill of the rabbit, if she can ‘have the first snake.’ The reference here to the serpent in the Garden of Eden is especially pointed because we have been specifically told that Miranda and Paul regularly hunt rabbits and doves, not snakes. No further mention of snakes is made, and this one reference is so clearly artificially obtruded into a surface context to which it does not belong that the author must carefully inform us that Miranda asks her question ‘idly.’ If there has been any doubt that the story is concerned with the myth of the Fall, such a conclusion now seems unavoidable. Miranda asks her question about the snake ‘idly’ also because her interest in the hunt is slackening; it was never great, but now the ring is glittering and directing her imagination elsewhere.

Before Miranda’s ring-induced fantasies of adult womanhood are described, however, the author supplies a digression concerned largely with the progress of sexual differentiation. In the course of this, Porter keeps us mindful of the Fall by references to sin and Scripture and by informing us that ‘the motherless family was running down’ in part because Miranda’s father (and so the children themselves) had been disinherited or ‘discriminated against’ by the grandmother’s will. The suggestions here of matriarchy—nearly of a female God—seem related in a compensatory fashion to the insistence (interesting in a woman writer) that before the Fall there was no difference between male and female. A curious and tattered remnant of unisexuality is contained in the ‘old women of the kind who smoke corn-cob pipes,’ who vociferously admire the departed matriarch of Miranda’s family, and yet who criticize Miranda for wearing pants.

Miranda’s father is responsible for this aberration in the attire of his daughter; women such as those who chide Miranda, as the world progressed or fell, themselves took on the burden of policing the decorum of their sex. That Miranda still wears the same clothing as her brother is of course a reflection of her as yet unfallen state; although change is imminent, it seems ‘simple and natural’ to her that she should dress in this way. The progress of female indoctrination is evidenced also in the case of Miranda’s older sister, ‘the really independent and fearless one, in spite of her rather affected ways,’ who rides bareback and recklessly about the countryside. Maria’s ‘affected ways’ are the function of a proud, adolescent assumption of her role as lady; because she is ‘the really independent and fearless one,’ we are led to acknowledge the power of sexual convention which has begun to operate against her individual disposition and which will have sway also over Miranda.



The authorial insistence upon a gradually developed consciousness (whose movements seem fitful, unsynchronized, or repetitive) is apparent both in the incomplete sexualization of the two sisters and in Miranda's ability to accept (without laboring to reconcile) conflicting data from the world around her. On the one hand, Miranda's 'powerful social sense' causes her to regret the dismay of the crones; and, on the other hand, she feels convinced by her father's arguments concerning the suitability of her attire. If the world of experience is chaotic, it does not appear so in a disturbing way to a child of Miranda's age. Similarly, she knows things without knowing how she knows, yet at this state experiences no itch toward clarification. To establish this complexity of very gradual development—in the consciousness specifically of girls, more generally of children, and finally of human beings at any age—is a basic purpose of the digression. Such complexity, furthermore, is notably congruent with the authorial wheels-within-wheels strategy whereby the history of the race is recapitulated in the history of the individual.

The digression complete, Miranda sees the ring 'shining with the serene purity of fine gold on her rather grubby thumb,' and her feelings are directed 'against her overalls and sockless feet.' In imagination, she turns from Paul to Maria as her model. She wants to abandon the hunt, to return to the house, and to 'dust herself with plenty of Maria's violet talcum powder...put on the thinnest, most becoming dress she owned, with a big sash, and sit in a wicker chair under the trees.' This fantasy obviously works to prepare us for Miranda's acceptance of her destiny as woman, but it is also reminiscent of the Fall. As she was covetous of the ring, so now under its spell she experiences in the background of her apparently modest fantasy 'vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure.

Racial memory, the idea of a golden past belonging not only to the history of the family but also to the history of the race, is hinted at by the imprecision of Miranda's imaginings. In support of such an equation, we have carefully been informed that 'leisure' is no longer the privilege of Miranda's family and that 'she had been brought up in rigorous economy.' The peculiarity here is that Miranda's 'vague stirrings of desire' work backwards and forwards, attaching both to the past and to her desired future as a lady. She yearns for a prelapsarian state, when as a sort of queen she might sit 'under the trees' of Eden, yet her 'desires' are of dominion, restless, and directed toward the future so that simultaneously they express Eve's fall through vanity. Miranda's fantasy is dispelled when Paul shoots the rabbit, and briefly she returns to a child's pleasure in the immediate, amoral moment.

And echo of her fantasy, however, is contained in the information that 'Uncle Jimbilly knew how to prepare the skins so that Miranda always had fur coats for her dolls, for though she never cared much for her dolls she liked seeing them in fur coats.' Clearly, Miranda's present attraction to the idea of womanhood concerns the luxury rather than the maternity which may await her. Since everything happens by accretion in Porter's story, moreover, the ring has represented only a leap forward and not a beginning in Miranda's consciousness of herself as female.

Miranda's consciousness takes another, giant step forward when the children discover in the womb of the dead animal 'a bundle of tiny rabbits.' This is a brilliantly compressed image, functioning like Yeats's 'dying generations' to express at once the brevity of life and the irony that all our growth (beginning with the moment of conception) is a decline which culminates in death. Seeing these creatures whose tenure upon earth has been so dramatically foreshortened, Miranda loses her innocence in fact rather than in symbol. Whereas previously she had been untroubled by the gradual accumulation of knowledge, now Miranda is trembling at the brink of some absolute attainment: 'she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this.'

Miranda has now assumed the knowledge of good and evil; thus, she will reject the rabbit's skin. Additionally, she has taken on the knowledge of life, birth, and death as they relate specifically to herself as sinner, as woman, and as mortal being. In other words, in the analogy she perceives between human babies (such as she has been and will bear) and the dead-unborn baby rabbits covered with blood, she recognizes her own mortality in all of its key aspects. Miranda's cavorting in the grave like 'any young animal' has acquired a new resonance.

The discovery of the baby rabbits is also significant to Paul, though he speaks 'as if he had known about everything all along.' His particular concern is that Miranda, toward whom his attitude is now conspiratorial, should not cause punishment to descend upon him by revealing to their father her loss of innocence. Similarly, he attempts concealment of his sin when he hides the rabbits. The suggestion is that Paul, although his fall has anticipated Miranda's, has nevertheless persisted in the hope of concealment entertained by Adam, and that he is as yet ignorant of Christ's love as the only means of appeasing God's wrath. Miranda represses the memory of the incident in the grave of her mind, as the commentators also have pointed out, only to have it resurrected by the circumstances of the Mexican marketplace.

The analogy to her grandmother's transportation of her grandfather's corpse is clear. She has herself moved on through the journey of life toward death: she is now twenty-nine, and 'picking her path among the puddles and crushed refuse of a market street in a strange city of a strange country,' she is obviously in exile. All the horror of her own morality is suddenly returned to Miranda by the raw 'flesh,' the wilting, funereal flowers, and the 'dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures'—including 'baby rabbits.' But the 'dreadful vision' fades when she recalls her brother, 'standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands.'

Clearly this vision of the dove is not a repression of the experience with the rabbits, not a retreat into the easier memory of that day, but an awakening to further knowledge. The 'blazing sunshine' strongly suggests revelation. The apostle Paul was on the road to Damascus—Miranda is also on a 'path'—when suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven' (*Acts* 9:3), and he learned exactly what Miranda is shown learning here from the analogous vision of her own brother Paul. Though he was sin-ridden and ignorant of his potential salvation, precisely like Saul of Tarsus, there had come a time both for Paul and for his sister when the final lesson of that Texas day was understood.

And it is entirely fitting, in the context of this miniature myth of the Fall, that the dove should have come out of the grave itself. It was, after all, the loss of innocence and the assumption of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, bringing death into life, that made the dove and what it represents both necessary and possible. Without the Fall and death, there would be no need for redemption and resurrection. So the dove, with its carefully mentioned screw-whorls, implying still another continuing cycle in a dynamically compressed image, suggests at once the brevity of death and the inevitability of new life. With its end in the 'blazing sunshine' of such new knowledge, this is decidedly not the story of a willful self-blinding, but rather an epiphany of the first water."

Constance Rooke and Bruce Wallis  
"Myth and Epiphany in Porter's 'The Grave'"  
*Studies in Short Fiction* 3.15 (Summer 1978)

"The story is one of Porter's most popular ones, frequently anthologized and endlessly explicated.... 'The Grave' is set in the country and takes place just after the death of Miranda Gay's grandmother and the removal of the grandfather's coffin from the family graveyard to the new public cemetery. One paragraph, written for the story but omitted from the final version, describes the three children going into a part of the land which they no longer own to pick some of the fruit from the tree the grandmother planted and their bitter humiliation as the present owners of the land allow them to do so out of unmasked pity for them.... In the final version she simply describes the contemptuous attitude of the country people to the family....

Against this unsettled background Miranda Gay is described, the first incident of the story showing her awakening sense of her own sexual identity. In tomboy fashion, she is following her brother Paul, who likes shooting rabbits and birds. As they wander about they come across the recently emptied family graveyard on the part of the land which has been sold, and they explore the cavity which until recently housed the grandfather's coffin. In it they find a wedding ring and the screw head of a coffin, which in shape resembles a dove. Paul is delighted to possess the coffin screw and Miranda the golden ring. When she places it upon her thumb she becomes suddenly aware of her ragged and grubby appearance and longs to be prettily dressed and scented and to be reclining in suitably female fashion in a wicker chair....

Paul shoots a rabbit, and when he slits open its skin he reveals an interior full of fetal young. The sight seems to Miranda to confirm something she has sensed for a long time but has not articulated fully, and the knowledge makes her tremulous and uneasy. The brother swears her to secrecy about the sight.... Miranda keeps silent. She has no wish to tell about the frightening sight. The actual events on which the story was based diverged from the fiction at this point. Porter did, in fact, tell her father what she had seen and the brother received a savage beating. Whether the exposure of the brother was motivated by vindictiveness or carelessness, it constituted an act of betrayal the recognition of which cannot have escaped her. She was always troubled by any act of betrayal, and her deliberate or accidental betrayal of her brother and his suffering as a consequence must have added considerably to her sense of horror at the entire incident. That it did so is confirmed by the fact that, after the story was published, her brother reminded her of what really happened and she was furious and unbelieving.

The rabbit incident is powerful enough to stand alone as a complete story, but Porter adds another dimension by placing it in the context of Miranda's whole life and showing that the effects of this small event are neither trivial nor transient and that the past is not easily sloughed off. She tells of Miranda walking years later through the marketplace of a strange city in a strange country when a Mexican Indian vendor shows her a tray of dyed-sugar sweets. Suddenly the sights and sounds converge to bring back to her mind, from where it has long lain buried, the memory of her brother and the rabbit. The memory horrifies her and the horror reinforces the frightening nature of the incident and shows the capacity of past experiences to lie dormant and make a sudden unexpected ambush....

Students of [Porter's] work have commented on the grave image which links the episodes and underscores the connection between life and love and death. They have continued to explore the suggestions of such objects as the coffin screw shaped like the dove of Venus (symbol of earthly love) and the womb-grave of the dead rabbit. While their efforts have been useful, such exegesis stops short of explaining the impact of the story, showing what even Edmund Wilson admitted—that the task of uncovering the source of power in Porter's stories is a baffling one. But when the story is seen against the events of her life it becomes apparent that the power derives from the compression of so much intensely felt experience. The experiences were not only compressed but their meaning contemplated over a long period of time, from their happening in 1902 to the time the story appeared in 1934.”

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*  
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 68-71

“Most readings emphasize the initiation itself and ignore the fact that the adult Miranda remembers the experience only with horror and dread. ‘The Grave’ focuses on Miranda's stifled fears about her womanhood, raising a simple story about sexual knowledge to the social and philosophical level, as Cleanth Brooks has pointed out. On the social level, we can observe again a fragile, traditional femininity approved by Miranda's society warring with the sturdy individualism in Miranda's psyche.... Miranda's dim awareness of sexuality and fertility among the farm animals expands to include an understanding of the reproduction of human life. For both her and Paul, birth is a forbidden knowledge. After carelessly intruding on this mystery they both feel guilt and shame. But Miranda is not traumatized until her quick mind sees the link between her femaleness and the precarious, bloody ritual of birth. Giving life means risking death. This is her true legacy from her grandmother and her society.

The personal story related here achieves philosophical significance because it parallels Adam and Eve's archetypal fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden. Miranda's first sexual knowledge is not only forbidden and shocking, but carries with it guilt and the danger of expulsion as well as the sure knowledge of her own mortality.... The grave is also a womb suggesting a beginning rather than an end. It connotes not only burying, but the possibility...of resurrecting.... The grave also suggests the unconscious, where Miranda constantly buries and unburies her secrets and fears.... Maria's absence from the graveyard reinforces the pairing essential to the continuation of life.... The earth smells ‘sweet’ and ‘corrupt,’ suggesting not barrenness and death, but fruitfulness and continued life, which the children also represent, as the second generation to issue from the dead whose graves they play in.... Miranda and Paul find silver and gold in these graves... Miranda and Paul echo the first man and woman, too, in that they owned the garden formerly, but no longer do....

The act of hunting joins the Edenic images in the first part of the story and the sexual symbolism that occurs throughout... When Miranda and Paul leap in and out of the holes, they unwittingly mimic the birth they have received from the ancestors whose bones have rested in the graves.... It is live birds that ordinarily entice Paul, but the silver dove he claims is not only without life itself, it is a death emblem, a screw head for a coffin. Significantly, it is as lifeless as the doves Paul will shoot if he can find them. The Winchester rifles the children carry are phallic... He wants a shot at the first dove or rabbit they see; and evoking simultaneously the primacy of Eden and the phallus, Miranda responds, 'What about snakes?... Can I have the first snake?'

Miranda's inadequacy with the rifle ensures that she is no threat to Paul's masculinity; it demonstrates as well that her tomboyishness is not a pervasive masculinity. On the contrary, her desire for the gold ring and the fact that it fits her thumb perfectly suggest just the opposite.... The overalls, shirt, and sandals she wears for play are identical to her brother's. She and her sister are accustomed to riding bareback astride their horses. All this seems agreeable and comfortable to Miranda since her father approves. But her 'powerful social sense'...makes her feel ashamed when she recognizes that her tomboy clothing shocks the old women who respected her grandmother—even if the clothes are practical and comfortable, and the old women themselves backbiting hypocrites. This is perhaps the clearest statement in Porter's fiction of the paradoxical emotions behind Miranda's warring impulses: Grandmother and her social standards can inflict shame even in the face of a rational understanding that a new standard makes more sense.

Now with the gold ring on her dirty thumb, she is linked to everything it symbolizes: the unbroken circle suggests the preciousness of her virginity as well as the security, love, and honor she will derive from a respectable marriage. She wishes to put aside her overalls in favor of a totally unpractical—but ideal—femininity.... Paul kills a rabbit... Miranda's romantic image is supplanted by the realistic one of Paul with a phallic knife, expertly skinning the rabbit's bloated, pregnant body.... Even if rabbits were not fertility symbols, the image of the tiny fetuses...would be sufficient to suggest burgeoning life aborted.... Her reaction shifts abruptly and without explanation when she sees that 'there's blood running over them.' In that moment of pity and fear, she sees the tragic implications of birth. She begins to tremble with a new insight...understanding distantly that the female prize she has wished to be could not remain dressed in organdy and seated in a wicker chair; she would be claimed in marriage to bear bloody babies who are sometimes aborted and who sometimes bring death to their mother...

The story does not state that Miranda remembers the death of her own mother in childbirth, but certainly she recognizes for the first time the blood rites of womanhood... Whereas the fetuses were before 'wonderful little creatures,' they are now a 'bloody heap'.... Paul, whose guilt already shows in his voice, makes a grave of the mother's body for the young and furtively hides them all away. At last he makes a secret of what they have seen, adding to Miranda's agitation the sense that they have trespassed.... In repressing her earlier memory, Miranda has refused to relinquish her ghost, and, failing that, she has not been able to exorcise it.... [This is an interesting parallel to Granny Weatherall, who cannot relinquish the ghost of the man who jilted her.] It is not the gold ring which hangs in her mind's eye nearly twenty years later. It is the image of Paul...handling the silver dove which was hers first, before she ignorantly traded it away. This time she trades her ignorance, reclaiming the dove in its positive image: the spirit's ability to fly free. With that knowledge, Miranda expects to resurrect her own freedom."

Jane Krause DeMouy  
*Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*  
(U Texas 1983) 140-44

"There is no question that 'The Grave' is the most important story in 'The Old Order' and perhaps in the whole of the Miranda saga, because it includes the last scene in Miranda's rite of passage, beyond even the events in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. It is perfect in its compression and execution, and even though it is explained or illuminated by the stories that precede it, it can stand alone. Ostensibly it takes up where 'The Fig Tree' left off. Miranda is nine years old, and as the story opens, she is seen with her brother, Paul, who is twelve.

The story begins with a paragraph summary of the family's past that centered on 'the grandfather' and 'the grandmother,' confirming again that the viewpoint of the story will be that of the children. But this

story is less realistic in its details than the previous six stories. It is honed, pared, and shaped in such a way that the events seem placed in a spotlight that illuminates only central details and relegates everything else to peripheral darkness.

The changing of orders is implied in the selling of the land which contained the family graves. Miranda and Paul, who are hunting rabbits and doves, happen upon the empty graves and explore the pits with a sense of adventure and with no fear of the death the graves once contained. They find a gold ring and a silver dove that is a screw head for a coffin. Miranda is drawn to the ring, which represents marriage and a luxurious, aristocratic past, and Paul is drawn to the silver dove, which symbolizes a killing for Paul, the archetypal male as hunter.

When Miranda and Paul leave the cemetery, Paul shoots a rabbit, which proves to be a female rabbit about to bear young. Miranda has not fully understood life and death and her own relationship to them, and she has not consciously understood her own femaleness, even though she intuited some portion of these truths in 'The Fig Tree.' Neither she nor Paul can frame the suitable emotion for knowledge of death, having no fear of it because it seems removed from them.

The killing of animals likewise induces no horror in Miranda because she does not see the creatures as living things like herself. She sees them only as targets and likes best about hunting the pulling of the trigger and the noise. Miranda's excitement in seeing the bundle of baby rabbits pulled from their dead mother's flesh is not colored with fear or revulsion. She has only 'pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes.' However, when she sees the blood, she identifies herself with both the female rabbit and the babies and begins to tremble without knowing why; she is 'quietly and terribly agitated.'

Miranda thinks about 'the whole worrisome affair with confused unhappiness for a few days' and then allows it to sink quietly in her mind, where it is 'heaped over by accumulated thousands of impressions.' When the experience is analyzed at this point, it is a troubling one, unmitigated by a larger perspective. When the memory is resurrected twenty years later, however, as Miranda is picking her way through a market street in a foreign city, it combines with another truth that alters the horror. The memory is pulled from its recesses by Proustian associations when Miranda sees a tray of sugar sweets in the form of baby animals. Not only is the visual experience reminiscent of the long ago embryonic sac of rabbits, but also the olfactory experience of vanilla sweetness and decaying flesh recreates the smells of the cemetery that Miranda and Paul had found before the rabbit was shot. The shooting of the rabbit becomes combined with the discovery of the graves in Miranda's grown-up experienced mind, and thus with the memory that they found treasure in the graves the terrible vision fades and she sees her brother clearly in her mind's eye.

In memory, there is whole and eternal truth, the obliteration of time and space. The primary symbols of the story, the grave, the gold ring, the silver dove, and the rabbits, carry the most important meanings. To Miranda the ring suggests comfort and luxury, a life removed from the realities of life and death. But her horrifying association with the rabbits offers the truth of her femaleness, very different from the implied superficial femininity of the ring. It is important that the ring is not a part of the later memory; surviving in the center of the vision is the silver dove, which according to Porter, was a symbol for the holy spirit, or the transcendence over mortality, and it also is a symbol for art, as the Paul of the grown-up Miranda's memory turns it over and over again in his hands with a pleased sober smile'."

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 58-61

"In 'The Grave' the modern consciousness that has been developing in Miranda throughout the earlier stories in *The Old Order* emerges... 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....

She and Paul are literally questers, hunters...of rabbits and doves.... Each of the story's two central episodes, the finding of a silver dove in her grandfather's grave and the skinning of a pregnant rabbit, portentously underscores Miranda's inevitable death... The dove promises the fulfillment of a pattern foretold, the resurrection of man's immortal soul through the power of the Holy Spirit... The silver dove...locates Miranda's own death firmly within the whole transhuman history of the world, indeed of the cosmos. The rabbit, on the other hand...is simply dead.... Porter's words themselves reinforce the idea of resurrection. The memory 'leaps from its burial place'."

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

"The terror of death is intermixed with the fear and wonder associated with sexuality. The setting is 1903 on the Texas farm owned by the Grandmother.... Death, hovering always near, pervades this marvelous tale. The unarticulated wonder felt by the two children, Miranda (aged nine) and Paul (aged twelve), constitutes the mournful tone.... The two children examine the open, empty graves. Miranda finds a silver dove, Paul a gold ring; appropriately, they exchange treasures. The silver dove had been the screw-head for a coffin, the gold ring once a wedding ring. The poetic associations of the dove and the ring resound throughout the remainder of the story....

In spite of her dislike of and disagreement with established norms of female dress, she nevertheless suffers from the scornful attitude of those that she considers her inferiors.... The disgust, yet shame, that Miranda feels about hand-me-down clothes is superbly presented in the caricature of the ignorant old Texas ladies.... Miranda is a tomboy and is beginning to become conscious of the fact that such an androgynous existence (we are rather pointedly told that she did not care for dolls) is considered inappropriate, perhaps even anti-Scriptural. When Paul shoots a rabbit and skins it, it is discovered that the female rabbit had been pregnant with young. The horror and wonder of this sight is taken in, the two children understanding the connection between human and animal life. The unborn infant rabbits are described in essentially human terms.... Looking upon this sight, Miranda intuits the knowledge of sexuality. Miranda, feeling pity and horror, refuses to take the fur for her dolls....

Some twenty years later, Miranda, in a strange city (clearly Mexican), comes upon a sight that brings back to her the experience that she had so long ago buried... Suddenly, the buried memory returns to her. The human memory is thus a womb, harboring undeveloped and obscure images that will emerge when the need arises. Birth, death, and sexuality merge.... 'The Grave,' with its treatment of materials buried in the creative mind, reveals the effect of Katherine Anne Porter's Texas childhood... In this story [Porter] establishes a creative connection between Texas and Mexico, showing the reader that the girl was mother of the woman; the sense of place would be carried over from childhood to maturity."

James T. F. Tanner  
*The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U North Texas 1991) 80-84

"Miranda's displacement from the world of childhood began when, after slipping onto her thumb a ring discovered in one of the family's graves, she immediately found herself inexplicably turning against her tomboyish ways and toward the customs of southern womanhood embodied in the family legends.... Further displacing her was the sight of unborn rabbits in the womb of the pregnant rabbit Paul had shot and cut open. What had once only been vague intuitions of sexual birth now became disturbingly real manifestations of blood and death....

Miranda's fascination with the rabbits quickly faded under the pressure of this disturbing realization. Whereas she had first seen the unborn rabbits as 'wonderful little creatures' and had felt 'pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight,' she now saw a 'bloody heap' and stood 'quietly and terribly agitated.' So disturbing were Miranda's thoughts about what she had seen and felt that after a few days of 'confused unhappiness' she let her memories of the day's events sink quietly into her consciousness where they became lost amidst the vast accumulations of other impressions.

Twenty years later, when the vendor holds the tray of sweets before her and she smells ‘the mingled sweetness and corruption’ of the marketplace...her vision strikes her with the anguish she had felt when the events had occurred twenty years before, but as her mind quickly contextualizes the events, striving to understand their significance in light of what she has experienced and learned in the intervening years, her disquiet gives way to wonder.... Miranda’s vision of Paul celebrates the victory of the individual, and of the artist, to forge wholeness, order, and beauty from the secrets of memory. Memory, as the vision underscores, deepens experience, challenging a person to a larger understanding of self and world.... Miranda’s wholeness at the end of ‘The Grave’ [is] achieved by engaging the inner reaches of memory with the self’s multitudinous experiences in the world.... The wholeness of self here mirrors the wholeness of art, with adventures transformed into experience, chaos into coherence.

‘That is what the artist does,’ Porter wrote on December 30, 1942, to her nephew Paul: ‘He sees, he is the witness, the one who remembers, and finally works out the pattern and the meaning for himself, and gives form to his memories.’ That working out is Miranda’s achievement at the end of ‘The Grave,’ the triumphant close of the Miranda cycle.”

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistic Development*  
(Louisiana State 1993) 179-81

“Her own favorite, she told Glenway Wescott, was ‘The Grave’... She would be gratified by the attention the story receives today. It is sometimes read as the key to her works, especially as to the important role of memory and the centrality of childhood (a centrality she recognized in the works of Henry James... The conflict between family pride and actual circumstances can be seen very clearly in Porter’s celebrated story ‘The Grave,’ where Miranda and Paul—two of the three fictional children who regularly represent Porter and her brother and older sister; she always omitted her younger sister, Mary Alice, called Baby, from fictional representations of the family—encounter a poor white family of former sharecroppers who have gained possession of land formerly belonging to the Rae family, including the family burial ground. The uneasiness of the confrontation and the children’s sense of displacement are clear and are powerfully, tersely conveyed.”

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 6, 282

“‘The Grave’ is considered by many to be the finest of all the short stories.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 72

“The story records Miranda’s first move into puberty, recognition of her own connection to female sexuality and womanhood.... After the grandmother’s death, the children are humiliated trespassers when they return to their former garden to gather fruit.... ‘The Grave’...illustrates Porter’s own creative process, seeking in memory and legend rich resources for her art.... Like the marketplace, full of flowers and spoiling meat, the graves also smelled of life and death, ‘mingled sweetness and corruption’.... Hers is not a simple lesson in the facts of human sexuality; it is a symbolic realization of her bondage to childbearing and death. Split open, the body of the rabbit corresponds to Miranda’s own new split, severing her from her former childhood innocence. Moving toward adult sexuality, she moves inexorably toward death... [She] buries the vision deep in her memory ‘for nearly twenty years’....

During a 1960 panel discussion, [Porter] uses the dove as an example of a symbol’s potential multiplicity: ‘The dove begins by being a symbol of sensuality, it is the bird of Venus...and then it goes through the whole range of every kind of thing until it becomes the Holy Ghost.’ Again in 1961, during a classroom conversation at the University of Wichita, she commented on the dove’s richness as a symbol, this time explicitly addressing its role in ‘The Grave.’ As she told a curious student, ‘Of course the dove is a symbol. It’s symbolic of peace, security, love, and lechery. But it’s also the Holy Ghost and the innocent love of children’....

Constance Rooke and Bruce Wallis see the story as a 'miniature myth of the Fall' and find in the dove the promise of 'redemption and resurrection' brought by the Holy Spirit.... It is important to recall that Miranda first drew the dove from the family graves, but encouraged by her gendered upbringing, she traded this treasure for the ring and the visions of traditional, passive womanhood it evoked. Only after the harsh lessons of the eviscerated rabbit, and the subsequent recognition of her own ties to birth and death evident in the images and smells of the marketplace, does she recognize the dove as a better choice, one that can provide, on a symbolic level, a resolution to her conflicts....

Both the ring and the dove of her finest story of memory's rewards come from a grave.... The dove unites the physical and the spiritual... Through the dove, Porter can wed the oppositions she found so troubling. For unlike the ring, which leads its wearer directly to traditional womanhood, the dove unites the female and the male, the fertile mother and the powerful word.... In the final scene, when Miranda finds peace recalling the dove, she is claiming her own right to fly free rather than follow the paths walked by the women in her family before her.... In Christian iconography the dove is indeed the 'bearer of the word,' symbol of the Holy Spirit impregnating a Virgin Mary so that she may birth the Word as flesh. Just as the dove makes carnate the father's word, so too a woman artist might replicate the mother's fertile labor, creating through words a new order out of the dismembered fragments of legend and memory....

The silver dove, embodying both the father's word and the mother's fertile potential [become] an icon for a woman artist. Her art becomes her creative labor, the child of word and body fused into one.... Submerged beneath the Mexico scene, binding the hot marketplace to the eviscerated rabbit, is an event that explains the anguish associated with Miranda's memory: an abortion Porter had in Mexico sometime in the early twenties. Mentioned in an autobiographical fragment and confirmed by Mary Doherty, one of her closest companions in the 1920s, the abortion repeats the pattern of fertility transformed to death that informs 'The Grave'."

Mary Titus  
*The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Georgia 2005) 90-95, 118-19

"Paul wants the dove that Miranda has found because he associates the coffin screw head with the traditional male ideal of singular achievement. Crying, 'I'll bet nobody else in the world has one like this!' Paul gains supremacy from exclusive possession of the mimetic ideal that distinguishes him from all possible rivals. Since the children had been looking for doves and rabbits, the screw confirms Paul's status as master of the hunt. After obtaining the silver dove, the twelve-year-old lives up to the cultural model by a boyish display of his might: he shoots a rabbit with his rifle, skins her with his phallic Bowie knife, and delicately penetrates her flesh all the way to the animal's womb. The man-child acts out the way masculinity in the old order often finds its expression in violence, especially in the victimization of his gendered opposite. Paul, possessor of the screw, can send females to the grave....

The shining gold ring on Miranda's grimy thumb makes her long to be a thing of beauty. The tomboy wants to leave the hunt so that she might bathe, scent herself with talcum, and sit beneath the trees in her loveliest dress.... This desire to imitate the customary model for southern femininity evokes a desire for the entire culture that supports such an image of womanhood. Although the fortune of Miranda's family has declined after the death of her grandmother, the girl feels 'vague stirrings of desire for luxury and a grand way of living which could not take precise form in her imagination but were founded on family legend of past wealth and leisure.' The would-be grande dame daydreams herself into becoming a disciple of the old order, but as Miranda discovers throughout Porter's stories, such romanticization only hides the way to the grave.... Whereas the ring evoked latent fantasies of how to appear as a lady, the slain rabbit with offspring initiates her into how the female body is interpreted in the old order....

Whereas the ring evoked latent fantasies of how to appear as a lady, the slain rabbit with offspring initiates her into how the female body is interpreted in the old order.... If the gold ring conjures up lovely constructions of gender under the old order, the dead and pregnant rabbit embodies the link between mortality and sexuality deeply hidden in this culture.... After marriage [the culture] values a woman's body according to her rabbitlike ability to reproduce. The culture expects females to bear so many children...that women may die as a result of childbirth (like Miranda's mother), and their babies may die in being born.



And as Miranda learns later in *Old Mortality*, when a woman is not pregnant, the culture fears her menstrual blood as if it were the fluid of deadly pollution.... With the rabbit's blood on her hand—if not also on her hands—Miranda rejects the scapegoating of women by rejecting the pelt even though in the past she had enjoyed having one made into a fur coat for her doll....

The fusion of sight and insight culminates the progression through which Miranda has matured in Porter's fiction—from being virtually unseen to being a passive onlooker and then to being an active observer. Finally, she becomes a visionary, whose glimpse of the most trivial imitation—a candied rabbit—leads to a different form of representation—the composition of the past. Miranda recalls what has been interred deep within the grave of her own self and recovers it as if a framed work of art.... At the end of 'The Grave' Miranda witnesses recollection as if it were resurrection. The young woman comes back to life through reconnecting with a revitalizing past. Miranda regains in lucid memory the treasure that she had years ago traded, but now she has lost the covetousness that first inspired the exchange. The dove becomes for her not the sign of manly violence but of artistic creation. Paul's fingering of the well-crafted object repeats how Miranda years ago handled the silver bird with such connoisseurship....

Miranda must find her handiwork in making, especially the making of meaning through the ordering of memory... When Miranda pairs these separate and dissimilar memories of the grave so that they can interpret each other, she performs what Porter herself described as the integrating work of the artist... The beginning of Porter's fiction is the kind of creative remembering that Miranda achieves at the end of 'The Grave'.... In 'The Grave' Porter uncovers and recovers the very origins of her artistry in Miranda's rediscovery of a treasured scene from two decades ago. Rather than wanting to imitate the past like a disciple of the old order, Miranda orders it by a discipline akin to the artist's. Miranda's rerecognition of her past 'as if she looked through a frame' finds its double in Porter's aesthetic that arranges what is diverse and chaotic 'in a frame to give them some kind of meaning. Miranda finds what would be the source of Porter's fiction, of her mimesis, in memory, not in desire.'"

Gary M. Ciuba

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Out hunting, a traditional metaphor of spiritual questing, Miranda follows her older brother Paul, named after the most active disciple of Jesus. Paul is twelve years old, the same number as the twelve disciples. When they discover the family burial plot, the empty graves evoke the departure of souls and the Christian faith in the eventual resurrection of transfigured bodies. The children find a gold ring, representing spiritual union, and a silver dove screw head for a coffin. The dove is a traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit. Attached to a coffin, an image of death, the dove in flight symbolizes faith in immortality. There is a dove in flight in the stained glass window above the altar of St. Peter's cathedral in Rome. When Paul gives Miranda the gold ring, it unites them spiritually in her memory.

The grave becomes a metaphor of buried memory as it gets "heaped over by accumulated thousands of impressions, for nearly twenty years." Its meaning eludes Miranda, for "She lagged rather far behind Paul." After Miranda matures enough to understand her childhood experience, the sights and smells in the Mexican marketplace revive the memory and "the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind's eye." Her memory is resurrected like Christ.

The story ends with her remembrance of Paul illuminated in bright light with "a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands." Out of all that happened that day long ago, this is the image that comes to her mind as a climax. The conversion of St. Paul began when he got illuminated by a bright light. Here the vision of bright light, the dove and the smiling eyes of "Brother Paul" symbolize Miranda's attaining faith in immortality--the ultimate "treasure." That in this remembered sight Paul is still a child is consistent with the concepts of spiritual rebirth and of believers as children of God. Miranda unconsciously receives this vision of Paul's illumination from the Holy Spirit, incited by the parallel sense impressions. Parallelism is one of the devices by which epiphanies often are stimulated. Porter frequently uses parallelism to render epiphanies.

Implicitly, Miranda's childhood experience was predetermined to be the source of this epiphany and her rebirth almost twenty years later. In effect, she is now where Paul was at age twelve, turning the dove over and over in her head. The "head" must be turned in order to penetrate the coffin, the meaning of the grave. The motifs of turning and bright light begin when Miranda first discovers the dove, "Turning it up to the fierce sunlight..." Spiritual development is sometimes represented by a spiral—as in the individuation process of Jungian psychology and in "The Chambered Nautilus" by Holmes. A screw is a spiral. This screw head dove also has "whorls" in its breast. Now free of the coffin, the dove has transcended death. At the end of the story Miranda's "dreadful vision faded" and is replaced by Paul treasuring the dove in the bright light. "She had not realized that she was learning what she had to know."

Michael Hollister (2017)