

Trauma and Redemption: “She” in *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*

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This paper examines the excellent short story *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* by Katherine Anne Porter, an American 20th century female writer. It is found that the novel uses the stream-of-consciousness narrative method, through the multi-level communication between the external objective world and the internal subjective world, and between the third-person narrator and the first-person reflector, to describe the physical trauma suffered by Ellen, and the mental trauma of being “jilted” for four times in her life. This paper will explore how she bravely and strongly faces the reality, and changes her destination of “plenty of girls get jilted”. Based on the trauma perspective to analyze the image of Ellen Weatherall, enlightenment can be given to contemporary people.

Keywords: *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*, Katherine Anne Porter, trauma

Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), born in Texas, USA, was a prominent female writer of short stories in the American South in the twentieth century. Her works often depict “depressing scenes of poverty, greed, death, desperate love, bitter encounters, and the collapse of the old order” (Lu Jin, 1984), and many of which deal with psychological trauma. The traumatic experience of Granny Weatherall in *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* is a reflection of the plight of women’s lives in the socio-historical situation of the time. The novel published in 1929 tells the story about an eighty-year-old woman on her deathbed arguing with her doctor and with her caregiver daughter Cornelia as internally she withdraws into memories of past achievements and disappointments which are driven by her illness and regrets through the omniscient and free indirect narration (Duan Jingwen, 1998). This paper analyzes the process of how Granny Weatherall grows up from an jilted young girl full of fantasies to an independent and strong granny from the perspective of trauma.

I. Traumatic Experiences and Representations: A Life of “Being Jilted”

Looking at Ellen Weatherall’s life in its entirety, at the age of forty she suffered the physical torture of “milk-leg and double pneumonia” (Porter, 1972, p. 80), for which there was no cure, and she suffered the mental trauma of “jilted” on four separate occasions over a sixty-year period.

The "jilting" that is mentioned most extensively throughout the text, and which hurts Ellen the most and for the longest time, is that of her fiancé George, who jilts young Ellen in front of the altar of the church. The young and ignorant Ellen full of fantasy is looking forward to the happy ceremony, "she has put on the white veil and set out the white cake for a man" but "he doesn't come" (Porter, 1979, p. 84), and "the wedding cake was not cut, but thrown out and wasted" (Porter, 1979, p. 87). Then she felt that "The whole bottom dropped out of the world, and there she was blind and sweating with nothing under her feet and the walls falling away" (Porter, 1979, p. 87). According to the trauma theory, traumatized person tends to force himself not to think about the past and not to contact the things and people concerned in order to avoid remembering the past trauma, and these selective memories or selective amnesia are exactly the typical manifestations of his mental trauma (Ma Xiaoying, 2016). The wedding day's traumas always linger in her mind because "for sixty years she had prayed against remembering him" (Porter, 1979, p. 84). The old granny reproduces the disaster scene to us with incomplete and illogically related language expressions, even completing the traumatic narrative of this event (Ma Xiaoying, 2016).

Although her memories are fragmented, the description of the traumatic scene and the desperate traumatic feelings of being unable to cope with indicates that she struggles not to "lose her soul in the deep pit of hell" (Porter, 1979, p. 84). Under this traumatized shadow, Ellen Weatherall adheres to the life principle of "you waste life when you waste good food" (Porter, 1979, p. 84), and does not forget to ask her children "to pick all the fruit this year and see nothing is wasted" (Porter, 1979, p. 84), which can be seen that her eliminating the waste of food is also a traumatic symptom of this event.

Weatherall's youngest, the most beloved child, even "the one she had truly wanted" (Porter, 1979, p. 86), Hapsy, whose untimely death makes her jilted again. And the gradual estrangement of her living children as they grow up also brought her great psychological trauma. At the age of eighty, granny Weatherall still remembers the panicked resuscitation of her youngest daughter Hapsy, in her dying moments: "sometimes in the night one of the children screamed in a nightmare, and they both hustled out shaking and hunting for the matches and calling" (Porter, 1979, p. 87), the traumatic experience recurs in her mind, thus renewing her fear and pain. When Ellen cries out "John, get the doctor now, Hapsy's time has come" (Porter, 1979, p. 87), it is clear that the treatment is not working or that the doctor is delaying, and therefore Ellen Weatherall no longer trusts the doctor or even resents him. Ellen largely wishes that Hapsy was still alive, having the illusion that "there was Hapsy standing by the bed in a white cap" (Porter, 1979, p. 87) by her side. She desperately misses her departed child Hapsy, and wants to be reunited with her, but this is also ultimately a fantasy of her dream: "She had to go a long way back through a great many rooms to find Hapsy standing with a baby on her arm" (Porter, 1979, p. 85). The granny, physically exhausted and delirious, has hallucinations of herself living with her deceased child in her deep subconscious.

In the Ellen's ward of the objective world, apart from the late arrival of the children, the daughter Cornelia and Dr. Harry fail to provide proper geriatric care and instead keep stimulating Weatherall's traumatization of death despite that she prepared herself for death when she was sixty. Although Cornelia "was always being tactful and kind" (Porter, 1979, p. 81), and "so good and dutiful" (Porter, 1979, p. 81), Weatherall thinks "therein lay the trouble" (Porter, 1979, p. 81), because Cornelia's excessive thoughtfulness and filial piety often reminds Ellen that she is old and not far from death. From the beginning and ending of the story with Dr.

Harry's treatment of his reluctant patient, the doctor fail to provide medical care and protect the patient's psychological health. Since Ellen at the age of about forty experienced "milk leg" (Porter, 1979, p. 80) without doctor, the painful swelling of the leg after childbirth, she shouts at Dr. Harry "Where were you forty years ago when I pulled through milk-leg and double pneumonia?" Additionally, her daughter Cornelia's whispers and small talk with Dr. Harry that Weatherall is "deaf, dumb, and blind" (Porter, 1979, p. 82) and talks about her behind her back all the time. Therefore, to Granny Weatherall, Cornelia's excessive thoughtfulness and filial piety, and Dr. Harry's neglect are nuisances, depriving her of the clarity and peace of "rest" (Porter, 1979, p. 81) in the last moments of her life.

After that, the untimely death of her husband John makes Mrs. Weatherall a "jilted" widow, bringing her mental and physical burden and pressure because she lives in an era where her husband is the pillar of the family. The loss of her husband at a young age is not only a great emotional shock, but also means a difficult life for her. From then on, being "jilted" by her husband, she has to take on duties of taking care of the family and providing for the children alone. Mrs. Weatherall's work of digging holes and erecting pillars, driving in the winter months, delivering babies, and reorganizing the household transforms the woman's body and mind.

At the end of the novel, Ellen's lifelong faith in God "jilts" her on her deathbed, which is the last straw in her psychological defense. When death comes, granny Weatherall waits for God's sign, and her faith is the support behind her strong image. The granny says, "God, give a sign!" but "For the second time there was no sign" (Porter, 1979, p. 89). There is no foreshadowing and God does appear in the house. And the statement shows the fragile betrayal of Ellen's faith, inspiring the traumatic experience of sixty years ago to reappear, "Once again, there was no groom or priest in the room" (Porter, 1979, p. 89). Porter points out that George's abandonment of Ellen may not just be the loss of her husband, but also her loss of her Heavenly Father (Grogan, 2019, p. 58). God's jilting shattered all her illusions, so she "stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light" (Porter, 1979, p. 89).

In a word, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" offers a glimpse into a woman's final hours as her repressed memories of rejection and pain flood her consciousness. Unsuccessfully in feinting off memories of being stood up at her wedding, Ellen is also unable to stop time and her impending death.

II. Trauma Recovery and Healing: A Life of "Self-Help"

Porter uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to explore the psychology and interior point of view of a single character, including realistic ward and subjective memories of the past. Facing physical and mental traumas, whether as a young girl, a middle-aged woman or an old granny, Ellen Weatherall revolts against herself and rewrites the destiny of a new woman in a society.

At about age twenty, Ellen was left standing at the altar when George, her bridegroom-to-be, did not come to the church on the day set for their wedding. In the face of the silent disappearance of true love, the young and ignorant Ellen does not choose to hate, take revenge, or indulge in pain and give up life because of "wounded vanity" (Porter, 1979, p. 84). Fragmentary memories over sixty years still revisit in flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive ways (Caruth Cathy, 1996). Ellen Weatherall reassures herself and even makes excuses for her disappeared fiancé: "I swear he never harmed me but in that", "he never harmed me but in that... and what if he did?" (Porter, 1979, p. 84).

Ellen then married John Weatherall, and they had three or four children: Cornelia, Lydia, Jimmy, and, probably, Hapsy. According to Judith Herman, trauma causes people to lose their strength and connection to others, and thus healing requires regaining strength and making new connections (Judith Herman, 1992). Ellen therefore chooses to marry another man, John (of the Weatherall family)—a new source of support—as her way of trying to get over her trauma: to find a new husband, to establish a new emotional connection with him, to create a new sense of security, and to return to a normal life. Young Ellen's active fight against the fact of the particular society where "plenty of girls get jilted" (Porter, 1979, p. 84), suggesting that she has not always been passive and tolerant of the frustrations of the patriarchal world. She is determined to let behind the traumas of the past, and strives to create a new future.

Soon after the birth of their children, John died and left Ellen to raise the children and to manage their farm by herself. Mrs. Weatherall is once again forced to deal with pain and trauma. "She" symbolizes the androgynous Madonna (Guerin, 2010) who not only plays the traditional role of a mother, but also makes up for the lack of a father figure, being the backbone of the family. She not only does the housework: "she thought of all the food she had cooked and all the clothes she had cut and sewed, and all the gardens she had made" (Porter, 1979, p. 83), but she also does the men's hard work: "She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires" (Porter, 1979, p. 83), painstakingly supporting the whole family.

In the dying room of the objective world, facing her children with their new families, Granny Weatherall thinks that "It was Hapsy she really wanted" (Porter, 1979, p. 85). Unlike the "dutiful" Cornelia, who is most likely conceived out of obligation, Hapsy is probably conceived out of love, suggested in the line: "When this one was born it should be the last. It should have been born first, for it was the one she had truly wanted" (Porter, 1979, p. 86). The traumatic event of Hapsy's untimely death causes her to hallucinate, indicating her deep guilt and longing for Hapsy, even following death's lead by, "Granny made a long journey outward, looking for Hapsy... Her heart sank down and down, there was no bottom to death, she couldn't come to the end of it" (Porter, 1979, p. 88). Some scholars have argued that Death takes Granny Weatherall in the name of Hapsy, so in a sense Weatherall is envisioning trauma healing in the process of reuniting with Hapsy.

By the age of eighty, and in the present time of the story, she is on her deathbed in the house of her oldest and most dutiful daughter, Cornelia. From time to time, Cornelia's thoughtful caregiving reminds Ellen of the impending death, but Ellen doesn't have all of her worldly chores finished, and putting things off until tomorrow is repeated throughout the course of the story. For example, left undone are sorting through her letters which "would be tomorrow's business," (Porter, 1979, p. 82) specifying in her will who will get the Forty Acres, and finishing the altar cloth and sending wine to the nuns. Her uncompleted tasks could indicate that spiritually Ellen is not ready to meet her God.

Just as granny dies, she looks for some indication that God is going to take her soul for its reward in Paradise. For most readers, Weatherall appears to have a strong faith both in her religion and in her God. When she is thinking about her children and about her hard life, she says something to herself that also implies a great reliance on her religious faith: "God, for all my life I thank Thee. Without Thee, my God, I could never have done it. Hail Mary, full of grace" (Porter, 1979, p. 84). In general, granny Weatherall feels good about her roles as mother and about her success with her neighbors. She remembers "riding country roads in the winter when women had their babies... sitting up nights with sick horses and sick negroes and sick children and hardly ever

loosing one” (Porter, 1979, p. 84). We also know that she was working on an altar cloth for her church and that she had meant to “send six bottles of wine to Sister Borgia for her dyspepsia” (Porter, 1979, p. 88).

Nevertheless, God abandons her in the end. The reasons why is Granny jilted by God and why is Granny’s soul condemned to hell are followed. According to the scholar Christine’s comments, the elder Ellen does not seem to be living a Christian life as she criticizes everyone who is trying to help her: Doctor Harry, Father Connolly, and her children, especially Cornelia who is nursing her unappreciative mother (Grogan, 2018). Another scholar Darlene Harbour Unrue focuses on Ellen’s vain efforts to save herself through the systems and patterns of religion (French, 1995). Therefore Ellen dies in a state of disconnection from virtually everything and everyone except her own thoughts: frustrated with her children and male onlookers, unable to reconnect with Hapsy, and not fully reconciled with God.

Granny Weatherall finally realizes that she herself is the source of all strength and of all faith, and that the very act of fighting all her sufferings fulfills the unique meaning of her life. God’s jilting awakens her sleeping self-consciousness. God falls, but the strong “she” “on her feet now, morally speaking” (Porter, 1979, p. 80); faith collapses, but “she” finds the independence and dignity of life. At the last moment, the granny “stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light” (Porter, 1979, p. 89) and embraces death calmly. This moment shines brightly because of her autonomous choice as an independent person, who transcends the trauma of her life and realizes the self-redemption of her soul.

Conclusion

According to the theory of trauma, Granny Weatherall’s recollection of her traumatic experiences in her last day is in itself an attempt to get rid of her trauma through reminiscence, because it is in this process that she bravely faces the past and accepts reality and herself. It can be seen that Ellen Weatherall never gives up despite she suffers the physical and mental trauma in her life. She is strong and courageous in the face of reality and heals herself by establishing new social relationships, finding security and revolting against the female dilemma.

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