

Where There is Light, There is Life

Light Symbol in Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"

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Abstract—"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", one of Katherine Anne Porter's best short stories, majorly depicts Granny Weatherall's interior world of the last moment by adopting different kinds of symbols, among which light plays an important role in revealing her love, faith and life.

Keywords—Katherine Anne Porter; symbol; image; light

I. INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter is widely acknowledged to be one of the finest short-story writers in America. As a winner of Pulitzer Prize for her short story, she constructs her works skillfully. In her essay "The Eye of the Story", fellow southern writer and critic Eudora Welty observes that "most good stories are about the interior of our lives, but Porter's stories take place there; they show surface only at her choosing" [1]. Her use of exterior world is to meet her needs, so images and details involved in her stories are precisely and deliberately chosen. "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is certainly one of these interior stories, in which Porter attaches importance to the unique use of images, which are endowed with profound symbolic meanings. Here my paper will be devoted to the symbolic image of light in it.

II. LIGHT SYMBOL

The image of light and dark as well, clarity and confusion, recurs in various forms throughout the story. Its aesthetic values are colored with subjective emotions and symbolic meanings. Light often symbolizes birth and hope while dark symbolizes the contrary. In the Holy Bible, light is the first image created by God. "God said, 'I command light and shine!' [...] He separated light from darkness and named the light 'Day' and the darkness 'Night'" [2]. In this story "Jilting", the time of action is one day from morning to night, suggestive of an 80-year life cycle. During the 80 years, light does not die out until the last moment of Granny's life. It embodies different symbolic meanings, such as love, faith, and life in the end.

A. Light of Love

When Granny Weatherall, dying, recalls the day of her jilting sixty years ago, her memory begins with "such a green day" [3], which symbolizes a hopeful and happy beginning of her life. However, George, her fiancé does not appear at the altar. Thus, on that should-be green day, "a whirl of dark

smoke rose and covered it, crept up and over into the bright field where everything was planted so carefully in orderly rows" [3]. The dark smoke symbolizes her doubt and desperation overwhelming her best planned life, which is symbolized by the neat rows. And that place where the smoke rises is hell. Her faith in love is smashed. She is jilted, and that wedding becomes her nightmare and stings her. She feels "The [the] whole bottom of the world dropped out, and there she was blind and sweating with nothing under her feet and the walls falling away" [3]. It is John who rescues her out of the dark hell and prevents her from physically and spiritually falling. Though she marries John, she does not love him at first for her light of love is extinguished by George; after many years of marriage life, she comes to love him and, in addition, John gradually becomes the light of love again shining in her life. John gives her everything George has taken away, such as a good husband, good children and a good house, and most importantly love. Hapsy is the fruit of their love, which "came in good time" [3]. Ellen gives birth to her when she is nearly 40 years old. For Ellen, "[i]t should have been born first, for it was the one she had truly wanted" [3], because Hapsy in a sense witnesses her revival of love and happy marriage. However her husband leaves her when Hapsy is still a little girl, so she has devoted her whole love to her children. Though Hapsy is her favorite, she does not ignore other children and takes good care of them. In her last-moment memory surfaces her lighting the lamps with children in the orchard. "Lighting the lamps had been beautiful. The children huddled up to her and breathed like little calves waiting at the bars in the twilight" [3]. For her, gathering with children is a beautiful and happy thing. And one of the most successful achievements in her life is bringing up her kids with good health and education. But her happiness is like a falling star, when her beloved dies, the light of her love and hope also dies, and she is pulled into darkness again.

B. Light of Faith

Although George has the ability to pitch "her soul in the deep pit of hell" [3], John dies and leaves her alone to fence in "a hundred acres" [3], and Hapsy is absent when "it was Hapsy she really wanted" [3], she does not give up her life yet because she believes in God. God is the light of faith in her life. In the Bible, Jesus speaks to the people "I am the light for the world! Follows me, and you won't be walking in the dark. You will have the light that gives life" [2]. Light is

the image of God, illuminating her life in the world. She believes that it is God who helps her go through all difficulties and lead a positive and meaningful life. “God, for all my life, I thank Thee. Without Thee, my God, I could never have done it” [3].

At the last moment of her life, she is waiting for God or the sign from God, by whom her soul will be taken into heaven. When Father Connolly comes to visit her on her deathbed, she is polite to him. She is so certain she will go to Heaven for she thinks she has been following God’s teaching to forgive her enemy George. God said: “If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” [2]. Granny believes that her prayers and her exemplary life will ensure that she will never again feel like she did on the day she was jilted. It is stated that she “felt easy about her soul” [3]. But she is jilted again and, even worse this time, she is jilted by God. It is cruel for a believer to face a devastating spiritual crisis. It means that she cannot go to Heaven after her death. In fact, she is unconsciously against the teachings. For sixty years, Ellen has been trying to forget and forgive George, but what she thinks is forgotten is not forgotten and what she thinks is forgiven is not forgiven. As time elapses, her love for George is not only evaporated but is changed into hatred also. In revenge for his jilting she wants to show George how happy she is. She is not willing to love her enemy and pray for him. Inevitably she would be punished by God. She implores: “God, give a sign!” [16] But “for a second time there was no sign” [17], and “her body was now only a deeper mass of shadow in an endless darkness and this darkness would curl around the light and swallow it up” [18]. The darkness and obscurity of doubt finally completely destroy her light of faith. Again she is abandoned for “no bridegroom and the priest in the house” [19]. That Christ is compared to a bridegroom is implied here. According to Bible, “a husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it [2]”. Just as Granny was left alone with the priest on her wedding day as a twenty-year-old, at age eighty she faces death alone, accompanied only by a priest who seems unable to offer her spiritual comfort. Ultimately her response is outrage, “Oh, no, there’s nothing more cruel than this—I’ll never forgive it [21]”.

C. *Light of Life*

Just as her name suggests, she has indeed “weathered all.” These hardships and painful experiences make her strong, capable and independent. She does everything well that should be done by John. “In her day she had a better house and had got more work done [22]”. She not only takes care of her family but also manages a hundred acres in farm. Besides, she brings up children with good health and good education, and is a moral guide to them. In addition, she courageously battles with her serious illness in her earlier life and approaching death. After suffering and overcoming all difficulties, she comes to the new understanding at the climactic moment. The person she should depend on is herself. Nobody is her savior, not even God. Therefore when the life of Granny Weatherall comes to an end, although she

is abandoned for the third time by God, who represents the most powerful authority of patriarchy, she does not accept the truth passively. When she is “staring at the point of light [23]”, she is spiritually epiphanic: that light is herself. Her light of life is in her own hand. There is no need to wait for God or the sign from God. It is time for her to make a decision. As in earlier crises, when she is alone with only herself and her strong will to depend on, she shows the same determination and independence on her deathbed when God is absent. She “stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light [24]”. Her final act of puffing out the light of her life is triumphant because she has not only recognized the meaning of the light but also managed her own existence of life, and jilted the patriarchy society for the first time. Her “being jilted” to “jilting” also demonstrates her ultimate resistance to the traditional society and reflects her awakening female consciousness as well.

III. CONCLUSION

“Jilting of Granny Weatherall” is the story not about death and desperation but about life and hope. “In her [Porter’s] essays, hope remains in spite of human error and human history. Love need not die and life can have order and meaning” [4]. Indeed, the light of life is always radiating from her 80-year journey. So in the face of life’s hardships Granny refuses to be a witness of life. What she wants to be is a participant of life. No matter how hard her life is, she stands up to it with her virtues and dignity. What is more, she tries her best to manipulate her traumatic and disorder life with meaning and importance.

Although the theme of life is not particular and the images are not unique either, Porter makes us have a different experience by dramatically using the symbol of light. The alteration of light and darkness runs through the whole story, which not only strengthens the real scenes but also arouses psychological reflections and emotions. Besides, through its different symbolic meanings, we are enlightened that the light in our life is ourselves, and the light of life is in our own hands. In a word, where there is light, there is life.

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