

GRANDMOTHER'S (DIS)HONESTY IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S «THE OLD ORDER»

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Katherine Anne Porter's life experience was partly conditioned by her problematic feelings for her homeland and by her complex understanding of her family ties. Since her youth, these two terms had been synonyms of the oppression and the lack of understanding which she felt she had had to overcome in order to develop her artistic career and pursue her literary interests; but at the same time she could never stop feeling an unconscious wish for the home, the family and the kind of protection which both terms also represented for her. This is probably one of the reasons why her life was one of endless travels and intense wandering both in Europe and in America escaping from her homeland and her family, and at the same time indefatigably searching for both. According to Janis P. Stout,

[t]he homeless one [Katherine Anne Porter] longed for a home but found herself unable to feel really at home anywhere for very long. Time after time she found a place that she pronounced perfect—beautiful, quiet enough for working, accessible enough for visiting with friends, utterly congenial. Within months or even weeks she would find these same places inconvenient or lonely or frightening, in some way intolerable. (108)

This complex attitude towards the home and the family is possibly the origin of Porter's contradictory feelings about housekeeping.

All along her life Porter kept a fluent correspondence with some of her relatives, especially with her elder sister, Gay. Her letters to Gay give proof not

only of her eagerness to maintain the family ties alive, but also of the domestic interests which both sisters shared. In these letters Katherine Anne and Gay usually gave each other information about different aspects of their ordinary life, about their domestic problems, «about particularly good meals they had cooked and enjoyed and about especially beautiful flowers blooming in their gardens» (Stout 23), that is, about all those aspects related to housework which the writer otherwise consciously despised as «a handicapping burden for a literary woman» (Stout 188).¹

Porter's complex approach to housekeeping derives basically from the connotations traditionally associated with this activity. What she seems to have despised was not the everyday quality of housework itself but its imposition on her as a woman's duty: «Porter admitted that she “simply hate[d] the thought of cooking and house work,” which “takes your time and your forces”» (Stout 188). As long as housework constituted an obligation that she as a woman was supposed to fulfill, it would represent an obstacle for her literary career, and she would reject it.

Katherine Anne Porter's mixed feelings about housework and housewifery find their most evident fictional expression in her presentation of Miranda's Grandmother—«a fictional caricature of [her] Grandmother Porter» (Tanner 66)—in «The Old Order» as an old female character who feels that her honesty depends almost exclusively on her role as a housekeeper, and who seems to have utterly repressed and forgotten her «(dis)honest» youthful yearning for a life outside the home.

In «The Old Order» Grandmother spends most of her time trying to set her domestic world in order. The first section of the story, «The Source,» is the narration of her visit to the farm every summer with the only aim of reestablishing there the order lost in her absence. As soon as order is regained in the countryside, she is ready to return to the house in town to restore there the order lost while she was in the farm:

It would then come over her powerfully that she was staying on idling where there was so much to be done at home... There would be a last look at everything, instructions, advices, good-bys, blessings. She would set out with that strange look of leaving for ever, and arrive at the place in town with the same air of homecoming she had worn on her arrival in the country, in a gentle flurry of greeting and felicitations, as if she had gone for half a year. At once she set to work restoring to order the place which no doubt had gone somewhat astray in her absence. (CS 325)²

¹ In *Katherine Anne Porter. A Life* Joan Givner explains Porter's delight in cooking for people, arranging dinners, «serving delicious meals and giving memorable banquets» (492), as well as her fascination with furnishings, decorations.... etc.

² From now on we shall use the abbreviation *CS* to refer to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

In «The Source» we also learn that Grandmother's order is essentially domestic, and although it demands a collective activity, she is the unquestionable authority giving orders and instructions to the rest of the characters. According to Nance, «[this] sketch portrays the Grandmother as the center of the family and its absolute authority» (81). Moreover, the title of this first section suggests that Grandmother is the source of the family, and since she is the main incarnation of the housekeeper in the story, we may conclude that housekeeping and its domestic ritual constitute the original pillars on which the essence of the family order rests.

As a housekeeper, Grandmother's power is restricted to the domestic environment, a space where male authority is completely ineffective, as the negative consequences of Harry's domestic arrangements make evident. In spite of this spatial restriction, the narration of the whole episode of Grandmother's activities in the farm suggests an enhancement of her role. As a maker of order she achieves the stature of a divinity; she is the «semidivine wise woman» who, according to Levy, «presides over the home place» in the fiction of many American women writers (3). DeMouy offers a similar interpretation of this character when she affirms that «[s]he is a benevolent, if distant, divinity whose nature is fulfilled by taking care of others» (120):

Stepping up with a pleasant greeting to all, which in no way promised *exemption from the wrath to come*, she went into their kitchens, glanced into their meal barrels. . . .

Every mattress cover was emptied of its corn husks and boiled, every little Negro on the place was set to work picking a fresh supply of husks, every hut was thickly whitewashed, bins and cupboards were scrubbed, every chair and bedstead was varnished, every filthy quilt *was brought to light*, boiled in a great iron washpot and stretched in the sun; and the uproar had all the special character of any annual occasion . . . Whoever wished to complain now seized his opportunity. Mister Harry had clean forgot to buy shoes for Hinry, look at Hinry . . . Mister Miller . . . had skimped them last winter on everything you could think of . . . All these annoyances and dozens like them had to be soothed at once.

Rugs were heaved forth in dusty confusion and returned flat and gay with flowers once more; the kitchen was no longer dingy and desolate but a place of *heavenly order* where it was *tempting* to linger.

Next the barns and smokehouses and the potato cellar, the gardens and every tree or vine or bush must *have that restoring touch* upon it. (CS 323-324; emphasis added)

Housekeeping allows Grandmother to create new harmony out of the surrounding chaos, thus emulating the divine act of creation in the Scriptures: she is the source of life and the creator of order; she brings light and clarity; she is the authoritarian God who governs His/her servants with determination, as well as the merciful God who offers them relief. Therefore, the first section of «The Old Order» becomes the origin, «The Source,» the *Genesis* of the family history, of the family

Bible. Significantly, it is in one of the orchards which Grandmother planted as well as in the small cemetery which she set up in Texas that Miranda will become a young Eve ready to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree and discover the dark knowledge of life and death in «The Fig Tree» and «The Grave.»

In order to stress Grandmother's characterization as a biblical God, Katherine Anne Porter makes her the symbolical creator of Nannie in «The Journey»:

[Aunt Nannie] did not know the year of her birth, and would never have had a birthday to celebrate if Grandmother had not, when she was still Miss Sophia Jane, aged ten, opened a calendar at random, closed her eyes, and marked a date unseen with a pen. So it turned out that Nannie's birthday thereafter fell on June 11, and the year, Miss Sophia Jane decided, should be 1827, her own birth-year, making Nannie just three months younger than her mistress. Sophia Jane then made an entry of Nannie's birth-date in the family Bible, inserting it just below her own. «Nannie Gay,» she wrote, in stiff careful letters, «(black),» (CS 328-329)

Grandmother gives birth in time to Nannie when she writes her birthday in the family Bible, and when she writes her name there she is symbolically creating her as God created the things of the world by *naming* them in the *Genesis*.

«The Source» defines the family order not only as a domestic kind of order but also as a manifestation of the old Southern order. In this sense, Grandmother exemplifies the difficult experience of those Southern women who were brought up as ladies and then saw the promise of their ladyhood destroyed by the Civil War.³ In her old age, the summer visits to the farm allow Grandmother to recover her past identity as a Southern lady. Every year she becomes again Miss Sophia Jane, a belle of the prewar South: «Hinry came running to open the gate, his coal-black face burst into a grin, his voice flying before him: "Howdy-do, Miss Sophia Jane!", simply not noticing that the carry-all was spilling over with other members of the family» (CS 322). As soon as she arrives at the farm her black servants greet her calling her Miss Sophia Jane, and then they ignore the other members of the family. Their attitude obviously suggests that this scene is a recreation of the past when Grandmother was actually Miss Sophia Jane, and her children and grandchildren were insignificant or, to be more accurate, inexistent. The act of revival of her *ladyhood* culminates with her evocative «yearly gallop with Fiddler» and her «long-promised easy stroll in the orchards with nothing to do» (CS 325).

For Grandmother this «annual occasion» means then a combination of the two different kinds of order which define her life: the domestic order and the old Southern order. As a consequence of this combination, every year her visit to the countryside becomes an attempt to return exclusively to the domestic order of

³ For a concise description of Southern ladyhood and its effects on Southern literature see Prenshaw's «Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance.»

the old South: in the farm she assumes the role of a Southern lady just as the efficient housekeeper of a household full of black servants. In other words, what Grandmother tries to recover every summer is basically the old Southern daily life, not the romantic and heroic ideals which decorated the economic and political order of the Southern past.

In spite of her temporary nostalgic moments in the farm, Grandmother is the only source of authority for her grandchildren because she is the only member of the family who keeps them close to reality and to the practical world of everyday life: «They loved their Grandmother; she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge, since their mother had died so early that only the eldest girl remembered her vaguely» (CS 324). Grandmother's practical and realistic sense of life stems basically from her direct contact with the domestic activities which characterize housekeeping, and which are clearly at odds with the absurd romantic heroism of her husband, who died as a consequence of his chivalric ideals in a war enhanced as historical fact. Even if the practical domestic order which she pursues is despised and trivialized by the men of the family –as Harry's sometimes disrespectful attitude shows–, Grandmother's experience is one of creation, order and domesticity, while her husband's causes only destruction and chaos.

Again in contrast with her husband's, Grandmother's time is not the time of history and external historical facts; hers is the domestic time of housekeeping and everyday life. As Ann Romines explains in *The Home Plot. Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual*, the daily quality of housework is a consequence of the transient aspect of the domestic order, which transforms housekeeping into a never-ending process of ends always followed by new beginnings: «what these women do is essential yet *impermanent and invisible*» (Romines 6; emphasis added).⁴ As a logical result of her obsession with this temporary order Grandmother's time is one of constant cyclical repetitions: her visit to the farm «[o]nce a year, in early Summer» (CS 321) is defined as an «annual occasion» (CS 323); then she returns to the house in town where she spends every winter; every summer she sits sewing with Nannie «under the mingled trees of the side garden» (CS 326), where life becomes a «perpetual round of events» (CS 327). In contrast with the great single occasion that God's creation of order out of chaos represents in the Bible, Grandmother's order constitutes a «cyclical occasion,» which brings her life close to nature and the natural cycle: it is the «perpetual round» of the earth, the sequence of days and seasons, that determines the rhythm of her life. This is probably the reason why DeMouy describes her as «an ancient goddess who descends to earth cyclically and with her restoring touch breathes new life into a dormant world» (121).

⁴ Ann Romines also analyses how the daily quality of housekeeping has contributed to its trivialization within the dominant male culture: «In much male literature of the nineteenth century, domestic ritual is presented as a paradigm of triviality and limitation» (13).

The circularity which defines Grandmother's order is emphasized in the story by the reiterative quality of her daily conversation with Aunt Nannie, a quality somehow recalled by the rhythmical pattern of repetitions which characterizes the text at the beginning of «The Journey»:

They talked about the past, really—always about the past. . . .

So they talked about God, about heaven, about planting a new hedge of rose bushes, about the new ways of preserving fruit and vegetables, about eternity and their mutual hope that they might pass it happily together, and often a scrap of silk under their hands would start them on long trains of family reminiscences. . . .

They talked about religion, and the slack way the world was going nowadays, the decay of behaviour, and about the younger children, whom these topics always brought at once to mind.

This was about all there was to say about children in any generation, but the fascination of the theme was endless. They said it thoroughly over and over with thousands of small variations, with always an example among their own friends or family connections to prove it. (CS 327-329; emphasis added)

The old women often talked about how strangely things come out in this life. (CS 332; emphasis added)

In the presentation of Grandmother and Nannie's conversation the repetition of the expression «they talked about» at the beginning of each new paragraph represents a subtle rhythmical narrative pattern which corroborates the repetitive and cyclical nature of their talk, and suggests the existence of a parallelism between their conversational rhythm and the reiterative rhythm of one of the basic domestic activities which they perform in their old age: sewing.

Sewing represents a peculiar expression of Grandmother's creation of order in the story:

They shared a passion for cutting scraps of the family finery, hoarded for fifty years, into strips and triangles, and fitting them together again in a carefully disordered patchwork, outlining each bit of velvet or satin or taffeta with a running briar stitch in clear lemon-colored silk floss. (CS 326)

This «carefully disordered patchwork» constitutes a clear symbol of Aunt Nannie and Grandmother's attempt to impose not simply their order, but more specifically their domestic order on the past which both shared: through their cutting and sewing they give a new shape to the old «family finery,» to the old family past. The description of the «extraordinarily complicated bit of patchwork,» «the patchwork case» and the «sort of envelop of cut velvet and violet satin, held together with briar stitching» (CS 326) which Grandmother uses to cover and contain her family relics confirms her unconscious wish to keep the past under the control of her domestic

order symbolized here by her patchwork itself: «[every quilt] is both a product and an emblem of domestic ritual» (Romines 15).

As we have just noticed, in the story Grandmother and Aunt Nannie's talk about the past is juxtaposed to their sewing, which represents a significant evidence of the fact that their linguistic manipulation of the past is parallel to their stitching: as Helen Fiddymment Levy points out in *Fiction of the Home Place*, «[m]ost often, as the quilt is made, the stories are recited and the memories of family members, living and dead, are reunited» (28). Thus, the «scraps of the family finery» and the «running briar stitch» of Grandmother and Nannie's patchwork become symbolical references to the words which they use in order to transform the past into a legend exclusively designed on the basis of their domestic order and purposely blind to the Southern order of external historical facts. As they talk they weave their words in a rhythm which partakes of the domestic repetitive quality of sewing: each word in their conversation is a new stitch that joins the strips and triangles of their family memories into a new pattern.⁵ Therefore, both their patchwork and their conversation become two parallel representations of the past: as Tanner suggests, «together they quilt a pattern of the past» (72). Although the product of Nannie and Grandmother's linguistic activity is not literature, the whole situation may recall those cases in which «sewing serves as the metaphoric tie between the literature produced by artist-woman and the domestic arts produced by the woman's community» (Levy 155).⁶

Through her patchwork and her talk Grandmother tries to give new shape to the past; but she is also interested in keeping the present scene under her strict control. The «bed and couch covers, table spreads, dressing table scarfs» (CS 326) which she and Nannie sew represent a clear allusion to their attempt to *cover* and control not only the relics of the past, but also the surrounding present reality with their domestic order. In the case of their attempt to control the present their sewing is excessive, and consequently useless:

They had contrived enough bed and couch covers, table spreads, dressing table scarfs, to have furnished forth several households. Each piece as it was finished was lined with yellow silk, folded, and laid away in a chest, never again to see the light of day. The Grandmother was the great-granddaughter of Kentucky's most famous pioneer: he had, while he was surveying Kentucky, hewed out rather competently a

⁵ Their conversation is an example of what Levy calls «artistic communication» (17).

⁶ Levy establishes a parallelism between quilting and the fiction written by women writers such as Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Gloria Naylor, Eudora Welty, Sarah Orne Jewett and Katherine Anne Porter: «The central figure for female literary creativity is the quilt, which represents the rejoining of diverse female experience into literature and reflects the less linear nature of this narrative by women. In the writings of these women, the text resembles the quilt» (27). «The Old Order» is a perfect example of this parallelism since each of its sections seems to be a «scrap» of the family past which Porter sews into a new whole.

rolling pin for his wife. This rolling pin was Grandmother's irreplaceable treasure. She covered it with an extraordinarily complicated bit of patchwork, added golden tassels to the handles, and hung it in a conspicuous place in her room. She was the daughter of a notably heroic captain in the War of 1812. She had his razors in a shagreen case and a particularly severe-looking daguerreotype taken in his old age, with his chin in a tall stock and his black satin waistcoat smoothed over a still-handsome military chest. So she fitted a patchwork case over the shagreen and made a sort of envelope of cut velvet and violet satin, held together with briar stitching, to contain the portrait. The rest of her handiwork she put away, to the relief of her grandchildren, who had arrived at the awkward age when Grandmother's quaint old-fashioned ways caused them acute discomfort. (CS 326)

Except for the «handiwork» used to protect the relics of the past, Grandmother's accomplished works are useless, which suggests that her effort to control the present is vain. She can manipulate the past because the past as such is just an absence, it is deprived of immediate presence and, as a consequence, in the present of her old age it can only exist in the represented versions of her patchwork and her discourse; in contrast, the present is not an absence, and it is endowed with some sort of immediacy which cannot be utterly contained in any kind of representation. This is probably the reason why the narrator emphasizes that there is always something that escapes Grandmother's and Nannie's control in their present lives (CS 327).⁷

The uselessness of Grandmother's handiwork also underlines the fact that the products designed to *cover* reality are never as relevant for her as their making process: what matters is not the product of sewing but the practical process of sewing. Deprived of their usefulness, the accomplished items become absurd: therefore, what gives meaning to Grandmother and Aunt Nannie's works is the practical communal activity which characterizes their making process. This sense of community is essential because, as Levy has pointed out, it marks the difference between the home place and the bureaucratic world. According to her, only the home place can offer «a vision of a purer American democracy, one which admits cooperative communal relationships and undertakings» (10). Moreover, the supreme importance of the process itself does not allow Grandmother and Nannie to stop sewing: each finished product, that is, each end means for them just a new beginning. Thus, as a consequence of the relevance of the process over the product, the activity of sewing becomes for Grandmother an eternal cyclical process of constant ends followed by constant new beginnings.

The end of «The Source» corroborates the significance of the practical collective activities and the cyclical order in Grandmother's life. Her private evocative

⁷ Brinkmeyer considers that «Sophia Jane's life is out of balance, primarily because memories utterly dominate her perspective, overruling all other concerns and values,» and «[she] gives herself entirely to the demands of memory and represses all challenges to what she sees as its realm of completeness and finality» (153).

moment of nostalgia for the leisure of the old Southern life is very short: as soon as the communal process of creation of domestic order has been accomplished in the farm, she does not linger there to enjoy the product of her activity, but quite on the contrary she leaves to start her communal work again in the «place in town» (CS 325).

In a similar way, the product of Grandmother and Aunt Nannie's conversation, their personal account of the old Southern order, would have lost part of its significance in the story if Katherine Anne Porter had not emphasized the process of their talking, that is, the communal process of elaboration of this account, as parallel to their sewing and partaking of its basic qualities. What Porter offers us in «The Old Order» through their talk is not simply an idealized version of the old South, but its process of elaboration, and this process is communal and deeply immersed in the cyclical rhythm of daily housekeeping which constitutes the essence of Grandmother's and Aunt Nannie's lives in their old age.

Grandmother's hope for a future that could bring her back to the past, to the beginning, confirms the cyclical pattern which characterizes the order of her existence:

Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it. They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly, but by the mysterious logic of hope they insisted that each change was probably the last; or if not, a series of changes might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known. (CS 327)

This circular development has much to do with one of the basic thematic proposals in «The Old Order»: the proximity of beginnings and ends, birth and death in the life of human beings. The understanding of life as a cycle in which each end represents a new beginning is suggested by the structure of the story itself: «The Source» means the origin and accordingly it is the first section of the story, but it deals with the old age experiences of Grandmother; «The Grave» means death and accordingly the end of the story, but it deals basically with a childhood experience of initiation, that is, with the origin of a new life.

It is the domestic process of ends followed by new beginnings that keeps Grandmother and Aunt Nannie alive. This is the reason why Grandmother starts life again after the death of Miranda's mother, which significantly happens at childbirth:

When Harry's wife died –she had never approved of Harry's wife, who was delicate and hopelessly inadequate at housekeeping, and who could not even bear children successfully, since she died when her third was born– the Grandmother took the children and began life again, with almost the same zest, and with more indulgence. (CS 339)

The death of Miranda's mother means a renewal of life for Grandmother: in her old age she becomes a mother again symbolically giving birth to her new children thanks to her daughter-in-law's death.

Grandmother's and Aunt Nannie's ideas about human life in general corroborate this cyclical conception: «Childhood was a long state of instruction and probation for adult life, which was in turn a long, severe, undeviating devotion to duty, the largest part of which consisted in bringing up children» (CS 329). Within the life cycle, childhood –a beginning– and adulthood –an end– are interconnected in an indissoluble way through the domestic activity defined as the bringing up of children. Even Grandmother's and Aunt Nannie's «grim and terrible race of procreation» seems to follow a preconceived repetitive cyclical pattern:

Miss Sophia Jane and Nannie had then started their grim and terrible race of procreation, a child *every sixteen months or so*, with Nannie nursing both, and Sophia Jane in dreadful discomfort, suppressing her milk with bandages and spirits of wine. (CS 334; emphasis added)

The cyclical approach to life exemplified by these two female characters is a consequence of the sexual division of labor overtly manifested in the nature of Grandmother's treasures from the past as described at the beginning of «The Journey»: the razors and the daguerreotype of her father «taken in his old age, with his chin in a tall stock and his black satin waistcoat smoothed over a still-handsome military chest» (CS 326) are manifestations of his sexuality, his connection with military heroism and courage, and his participation in the time of external events called history. In contrast, her great-grandmother's rolling pin hewed out by Grandmother's courageous great-grandfather who, as «Kentucky's most famous pioneer,» also partook of the glory of history and historical time, functions as a direct reference to her great-grandmother's housewifery. This reference is especially significant because it gives her ancestor's domestic tasks a prominent place in her perception and understanding of the family past. Moreover, this shows that Porter herself is one of those writers who try to «offer an alternate imaginative narrative of American beginnings, one that challenges the legend of the womanless woodsman moving ever farther away from woman and home» (Levy 241). In Porter's story the woodsman has a wife, whose rolling pin is «Grandmother's irreplaceable treasure» (CS 326). As a consequence of this, the woodsman's wife is restored to her predominant position in the family history. This is probably the reason why Levy observes in Porter's fiction «a conscious, explicit attempt to re-view history by adding the female contribution» (10). Furthermore, the fact that housewifery is defined by a «rolling pin» is meaningful, since this artifact symbolically denotes the cyclical development of housekeeping and even suggests the oppressive quality which Porter sometimes saw associated with the domestic chores.

The identification of housekeeping and its cyclical order with women, as suggested by the nature of Grandmother's relics of the past, is undeniable for this female character:

But she [one of Grandmother's daughters in law] was altogether too Western, too modern, something like the «new» woman who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, *leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living...*

The Grandmother's narrow body shuddered to the bone *at the thought of women so unsexing themselves.* (CS 333: emphasis added)

In leaving her home the new woman is gradually abandoning the domestic order and getting into the world of money. Thus, she enters the labor market, which in Grandmother's mind seems to be directly associated with the slave markets of the past: in the text her reflection on the new woman is framed between Aunt Nannie's reaction to the judge's words about her price as a slave, and Grandmother's answer to her lifelong servant and friend, which seems to suggest that from her perspective the new women are simply selling themselves as slaves for money in a new slave market, the labor market. In fact, in the past the only women allowed to perform non-domestic jobs were slave women like Nannie's mother, who worked in the fields. Moreover, according to Grandmother, in leaving their homes and going out in the world to earn their own living women were «unsexing themselves,» that is, losing the very essence of their female sex.

According to Nance, «ironic light is directed at the fact that this woman who is disapproving of others 'unsexing' themselves has herself led an unsexed life and is by no means free from the subconscious effects of it» (94). As for most Southern women, for Grandmother the female sex was paradoxically defined in social rather than sexual terms. As the narrator suggests, her experience in the «marriage bed» had been a failure:

She sat nursing her child and her foster child, with a sensual warm pleasure she had not dreamed of, translating her natural physical relief into something holy, God-sent, amends from heaven for what she had suffered in childbed. Yes, and for what she missed in the marriage bed, for there also something had failed. (CS 334)

Grandmother's lack of sexual satisfaction helped her assume the old Southern premise that denied the sexuality of the white ladies and demanded their chastity in contrast with the sexual abuse that black women were forced to suffer. Since she could not discover and enjoy her female sexuality in the marriage bed, being a wife became for her just a social role, which left her sexual and natural yearning for immediate contact unfulfilled. But this eminently social position offered Grandmother the opportunity of becoming a mother.

For most of the Southern ladies motherhood was also defined in social terms:

When they each had produced their fourth child, Nannie almost died of puerperal fever. Sophia Jane nursed both children. She named the black baby Charlie, and her own child Stephen, and she fed them justly turn about, not favoring the white over the black, as Nannie felt obliged to do. Her husband was shocked, tried to forbid her; her mother came to see her and reasoned with her. They found her very difficult and quite stubborn. . . . She had learned now that she was badly cheated in giving her children to another woman to feed; she resolved never again to be cheated in just that way. (CS 334)

Grandmother's stubborn insistence on suckling her children is a scandal and breaks the established order because it transforms motherhood into a natural rather than a social activity. Thanks to her obstinacy Grandmother can enjoy the pleasure of the immediate contact which characterizes the natural experience of motherhood in contrast with the distance between mother and child imposed by the patriarchal social order. As Irigaray suggests, «men are distanced from their bodies. They have relied upon their sex, their language and their technology to go on and on building a world further and further removed from their relation to the corporeal» (48-49). According to her, «the father forbids the bodily encounter with the mother» (39) because he «superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language [*langue*] and symbols» (41), which requires the cutting of the umbilical cord, «this overintimate bond with the primal womb» (39). As a consequence of all this, she concludes that «the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man –god– father killed the mother in order to take power» (47). From this perspective, suckling represents one of the last attempts to preserve the «bodily encounter» with the mother, which is eventually lost when the child stops demanding the mother's breasts and milk. When Grandmother insists on suckling her children she is transgressing the patriarchal order because she is delaying the process of separation from the mother; in Irigaray's words, she is delaying the matricide.

It is precisely the transgressive quality of Grandmother's natural experience of motherhood that forces her to translate her natural physical relief «into something holy, God-sent.» She has been brought up in the old Southern tradition and significantly she cannot help feeling that motherhood can be an honest, acceptable experience only when it is filtered through the patriarchal language of the Father, even if this language contains an attempt to transform her physical relief into something spiritual, thus threatening the value of her motherhood as an immediate experience as Irigaray suggests. The fact that Grandmother resorts to the religious paternal language in order to justify her motherly experience of immediacy announces that, in spite of her rebellious attitude, she will never be able to break completely the bonds which keep her tied to the old patriarchal order. In fact, as we shall see

later, any violation of the essential ruling principles of this order means for her the origin of a disturbing sensation which makes her question even her own honesty. The patriarchal ideal is then the force which determines what is honest and what is not in Grandmother's life, and it is as a consequence of its interference that she cannot «honestly» accept her motherhood as a real expression of her sexuality until it becomes part of the social role assigned to women in the old order: housekeeping. As one of the aspects which characterize Grandmother's housework, motherhood is tamed and socialized, and it becomes for her not only a means of physical relief, but also an «honest» source of domestic power and authority. This is one of the reasons why it was «not until she was in middle age,» when the «terrible race of procreation» was over and her children no longer needed her immediate contact that «she finally emerge[d] into something like an honest life» (CS 336). Even in her old age being a mother is still essential for Grandmother because this originally natural experience allows her to develop the social role which, according to the patriarchal ideal, not only defines the female sex, but also makes her feel honest: housekeeping.

Accordingly, the denial of housekeeping is for her an implicit denial of the female sex and even of motherhood, and she finds proof of this idea in her own life experience: it was after her husband's death, when she saw herself forced to work outside the home, that she began to forget her children, she forgot that she was their mother and she forgot that they were her children. During this period of time in her life she got symbolically further and further away from them until their relationship became almost a purely commercial one as in the labor market. She did not rediscover them as her children until they tried to get physically away from her. Then she was forced to realize that «they were hungry,» that is, that she had neglected her role as nourisher, mother, and housekeeper. As DeMouy suggests, at this point in the story «for the first time, she feels inadequate as a mother» (126):

All the answer they could make as they wept too, was that they had wanted to go back to Louisiana to eat sugar cane. They had been thinking about sugar cane all winter... Their mother was stunned. She had built a house large enough to shelter them all, of hand-sawed lumber dragged by ox-cart for forty miles, she had got the fields fenced in and the crops planted, she had, she believed, fed and clothed her children; and now she realized they were hungry. These two had worked like men; she felt their growing bones through their thin flesh, and remembered how mercilessly she had driven them, as she had driven herself, as she had driven the Negroes and the horses, because there was no choice in the matter. They must labor beyond their strength or perish. Sitting there with her arms around them, she felt her heart break in her breast. She had thought it was a silly phrase. It happened to her. It was not that she was incapable of feeling afterward, for in a way she was more emotional, more quick, but griefs never again lasted with her so long as they had before. This day was the beginning of her spoiling her children and being afraid of them. (CS 339)

After this experience, it is not surprising that Grandmother associates her work outside the home with the possibility of losing her children, her motherhood and her role as a housekeeper. Now, «sitting there with her arms around [her sons],» Grandmother seems to recover her motherly feelings through her immediate contact with her children. But this highly dramatic moment of re-encounter which merges the mother and the children together in an embrace as if they had become one again, is abruptly interrupted by the narrator's final statement which suggests a future deviation in her motherly affection. This statement not only announces Grandmother's spoiling of her children but also suggests that what determines her attitude is fear rather than affection, the fear of losing them or, in other words, the fear of losing again her role as a mother, a loss which could represent a serious threat for her domestic authority and her identity as a housekeeper.⁸ Grandmother is afraid of her children because they are the only ones who can deprive her of this role. This threat is now made evident by the narrator when he chooses to inform us that significantly the moment of immediate contact was brief because the children «began to grow restless under her arms» (CS 339).

This same restlessness anticipates the growing distance which characterizes their relationship with their mother in the future:

They went about their own affairs, scattering out and seeming to lose all that sense of family unity so precious to the Grandmother. They bore with her infrequent visits and her advice and her tremendous rightness, and they were impatient of her tenderness. (CS 339)

After having experienced the threat of losing her children, Grandmother never again renounces her motherhood, and even in her old age she is ready to offer them the comfort and relief of her soothing tenderness. Although her children are now away from her, she still needs to defend her motherly role because it is the source of her domestic power and authority.

But Grandmother has not always been a mother and a grandmother, and Katherine Anne Porter is constantly pointing out the existence of a duality in her character through the alternative use of two different names to refer to her: Grandmother and (Miss) Sophia Jane. The Grandmother who sews with Aunt Nannie in the present while they talk about the past was once Miss Sophia Jane, the young girl who was repeatedly taken by surprise by her parents «in a brown study, eyes moist, lips smiling vaguely over her embroidery or her book» (CS 335), dreaming of a forbidden future. The Grandmother whose power resides now in housekeeping and in her uncontested authority as creator of domestic order, hides inside herself

⁸ Nance even argues that «the love which Grandmother feels for the children, both white and black, whom she has nursed seems a strangely cold thing» (95). According to him, «she was activated by a shallower love, by awe at their separateness from her» (97).

the essence of Miss Sophia Jane, the young girl who was willing to get out of the home-prison to taste what she imagined as «the sweet dark life of the knowledge of evil» associated with the «manly indulgences» allowed to young men:

She dreamed recurrently that she had lost her virginity (her virtue, she called it), her sole claim to regard, consideration, even to existence, and after frightful moral suffering which masked altogether her physical experience she would wake in a cold sweat, disordered and terrified. She had heard that her cousin Stephen was a little «wild,» but that was to be expected. He was leading, no doubt, a dashing life full of manly indulgences, the sweet dark life of the knowledge of evil which caused her hair to crinkle on her scalp when she thought of it. Ah, the delicious, the free, the wonderful, the mysterious and terrible life of men! (CS 335)

Miss Sophia Jane suffers what Prenshaw defines as «the tension between the social archetype and [her] own striving for individuality» (79). As a consequence of this, the home means for her not only the protection but also the prison of her virtue, which she identifies with her virginity; and although the world outside represents the threat of the loss of this virtue through the knowledge of evil, she cannot stop dreaming of its sweetness and its freedom. For this reason, keeping herself at home was the only means to secure her virtue in the past. But the oppression of the protection offered by the home and the family made her lie about her daydreams and become «dishonest»:

«Little daydreamer,» her mother or father would say to her, surprising her in a brown study, eyes moist, lips smiling vaguely over her embroidery or her book, or with hands fallen on her lap, her face turned away to a blank wall. She memorized and saved for these moments scraps of high-minded poetry, which she instantly quoted at them when they offered her a penny for her thoughts; or she broke into a melancholy little song of some kind, a song she knew they liked. She would run to the piano and tinkle the tune out with one hand, saying, «I love this part best,» leaving no doubt in their minds as to what her own had been occupied with. She lived her whole youth so, without once giving herself away; not until she was in middle age, her husband dead, her property dispersed, and she found herself with a houseful of children, making a new life for them in another place, with all the responsibilities of a man but with none of the privileges, did she finally emerge into something like an honest life: and yet, she was passionately honest. She had never been anything else. (CS 336).

This passage suggests the existence of some degree of uncertainty about Sophia Jane's «honesty.» This uncertainty seems to have its roots in the daydreams which often led her out of the home and symbolically away from the embroidery and the book which represented her education as a lady of faculty as well as the household

chores traditionally proper to her sex. In contrast with these youthful thoughts, Grandmother's daydreams, that is, her recollections of the past in her conversations with Aunt Nannie are explicitly integrated in their daily domestic ritual of sewing as we have already suggested. If young Sophia Jane's eagerness for «the delicious, the free, the wonderful, the mysterious and terrible life of men» (CS 335) outside the home as opposed to the oppressive, boring life of women at home is understood as the cause of her lack of «honesty,» then Grandmother's assumption of her domestic role as a housekeeper should be understood as the main pillar of her «honest» life. Women's honesty would then depend exclusively on the acceptance of the domestic role stipulated by the old order, partly because in the patriarchal system this role was essential for the development of one of the basic qualities of the Southern lady: her dependency. Sophia Jane's dreams of freedom outside the home place were dreams of independence, and as Prenshaw suggests in her comments on George Fitzhugh's *Sociology of the South*, in the old order «any assertion of [female] independence threatened the whole system» (77). As a Southern lady, Sophia Jane was educated to be always subordinated to and dependent on male authority. Consequently, it is only after her husband's death, after she has been liberated from his authority, that she can find some sort of balance between the role imposed on her, the role of a housekeeper who is ultimately subjected to the male power, and her striving for individuality and independence; and this allows her to «emerge into something like an honest life» (CS 336). It is for the sake of this «honest balance» that she adopts the responsibilities of a man, but at the same time is forced to sacrifice her real yearning for men's privileges and freedom. In Schulz's terms, she eventually accepts that in the old patriarchal system «unlike a man's, a woman's source of happiness is singular and total, and is to be found only in marriage and family» (93). This is probably the reason why Tanner affirms that «Grandmother is, and has always been, a woman unable to avoid continual enslavement by males. No matter how independent of spirit she becomes, that fact remains» (73).

But in Katherine Anne Porter's story «honesty» is a very elusive concept. She does not intend to give this term a well-defined meaning when she uses it; she just plays with it and starts a paradox which blurs the line between «honesty» and «dishonesty,» and forces the reader to question the meaning of these words: who is more (dis)honest, the young Miss Sophia Jane who wishes for the kind of independence associated with men's exciting life away from the home's restrictions, or Grandmother, the housekeeper who assumes these restrictions and eventually adopts «all the responsibilities of a man,» but at the expense of sacrificing and ignoring her most intimate desires? Is there not the same degree of (dis)honesty in the «scraps of high-minded poetry» to which Sophia Jane resorts in order to hide her real wishes as in the «scraps of the family finery» and the words which Grandmother and Aunt Nannie use in their patchwork and their conversation respectively in order to manipulate «the relics of the past»? What does «honest» really mean in this story?

With such questions Porter is subtly undermining Grandmother's argument in favor of housekeeping, because she is suggesting that the old lady is not more

honest for being a housekeeper than she used to be when she was the young Miss Sophia Jane dreaming of a forbidden future away from the home. Paradoxically, what makes Grandmother «honest» in the story is exactly that which makes Sophia Jane «dishonest,» and what makes the latter «honest» is also that which makes the former «dishonest.» In her middle age Grandmother acquires the responsibilities of a man without losing the domestic role assigned to «honest women» by the old social order, that is, without losing her «social honesty,» but this requires the complete sacrifice of her deep inner yearnings: in contrast, in the past Sophia Jane could not feel any kind of attraction for the socially honest role, but she was more true to herself because even if she was forced to hide her feelings she could not utterly repress and ignore her inner wishes as Grandmother does in the present. As a consequence of all this, in this character's life the term «honesty» and its opposite are indissolubly linked: on the one hand, her social honesty requires an act of private dishonesty, and this is exemplified by Grandmother's state; on the other hand, being honest to herself and her real yearnings requires an act of social dishonesty, as Sophia Jane's attitude shows. As the narrator suggests, Grandmother has always been «honest,» but paradoxically this unavoidably means that she has also been «dishonest.» This is the reason why we have resorted to the term (dis)honesty in order to describe her.

The construction of this paradox around Grandmother's «honesty» allows the narrator to take up a contradictory stance in this story: Grandmother is praised and enhanced as an honest housekeeper that exerts her domestic power and authority with a practical sense of life, and in this sense Porter's story seems to partake of what Tate calls the «ability to reconceive women's space as empowering rather than constraining» (10); but at the same time Grandmother's power and authority are subtly contested by the words of the narrator, who chooses to give us evidence of the repression hidden behind her authoritarian disguise. She can enjoy her domestic authority only after having repressed her yearning for an exciting life outside the home, and after having suffered the oppression that the imposition of housekeeping on her as her duty represented when she was the young Miss Sophia Jane. In Prenshaw's terms, she could be one of those «strong matriarchs who gain their strength at the expense of submissiveness and innocence» (82).

Housekeeping is also a source of power and repression for Aunt Nannie, Grandmother's lifelong companion. Their relationship started as a commercial transaction in the slave market when they were children, but it was gradually tinged with affection on both sides: in the story Grandmother's suckling of her servant's baby and Aunt Nannie's decision to stay with her mistress after emancipation are two parallel acts which give proof of their genuine friendship. According to Levy,

The bond between the two women is stronger than that of mistress-servant, longer than life, for it is the bond between women who have come through numerous childbirths, nursed and nurtured each other's babies, and buried each other's

dead, often in defiance of the male-defined rules that seek to separate them. (154-155)

Aunt Nannie sees her life defined in terms of her households: when she was a child she was sent to live in the white house, and as a consequence of this she was deprived of her black mother and her experience of a black cabin; Grandmother became then her white family, and only after her companion's death will Nannie recover her blackness in a black cabin. Only then does Nannie make evident the oppression derived from the white house and its housekeeping:

She had been finicking precise and neat in her ways, and she still was. But she was no more the faithful old servant Nannie, a freed slave: she was an aged Bantu woman of independent means, sitting on the steps, breathing the free air. (CS 49)

As soon as Grandmother dies Aunt Nannie leaves the white house and liberates herself from its household chores; domestic chaos holds the reins of the family and the children's lives now. In the last section of «The Old Order» the old tradition of housekeeping has come to an end after Grandmother's death, and Miranda, the granddaughter, is left alone to discover by herself what lies at the bottom of «The Grave.»

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