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“Readers’ Disappointed Expectations: Religious Symbols in ‘The Jilting of Granny Weatherall’”

The short story “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” by Katherine Anne Porter is the account of a devout Catholic woman on her death bed who dwells on being jilted at the altar sixty years earlier. It is commonly accepted among scholars that the “jilting” in the title also refers to a second jilting at the end of the story. Although it could be debated that the jilting referred to in the title could only refer to Granny’s jilting at the altar, over ten peer-reviewed articles about this short story suggest or acknowledge that the jilting in the title also refers to Christ jilting Granny on her deathbed, and I agree with scholars on this account. To demonstrate this point, Elizabeth Piedmont-Marton explains that the second jilting of Granny Weatherall at the conclusion of the story refers to Christ as the bridegroom: “Just as Granny herself had thought that being left at the altar was the worst thing that could have happened to her, as readers we have believed until now that the jilting in the story refers to that horrible day sixty years ago. Several critics have pointed out however, that in this second jilting, the absent bridegroom is not the hapless George, but the Christ of Matthew 25:1–13 in the New Testament” (116–17). Even though many scholars acknowledge that the ending of this story alludes to Christ’s absence when Granny dies and how disappointing this absence is, no scholars have addressed the issue of what additional elements in the narrative contribute to the reader’s disappointment felt at the conclusion of this story. I argue that a reader’s disappointment stems from the belief that if a Christian does not receive a reward in the afterlife for following their religion, then it seems that

God has let them down. As a result, when Christ does not come to visit Granny on her deathbed, readers often feel disappointed because they feel she deserved to have him be there. Though scholars acknowledge that Christ not coming to Granny as her “bridegroom” causes the reader to feel disappointment, what makes this story’s ending truly disappointing is that readers expect Christ to be at Granny’s deathbed because of Granny’s religious nature. In other words, readers are disappointed when Christ is absent at Granny’s death because she has lived a religious life that has merited Christ meeting her when death comes. Readers feel this disappointment because Porter has placed religious references in this short story to show that Granny is a religious woman, including the numerous references to saints, religious rituals, religious objects, concern for the state of the soul, and even God throughout the short story. I will examine these religious references in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” in order to demonstrate how a reader would believe Granny to be a religious woman and then be disappointed by her non-reward at her death.

An element of religiosity used in this story to show how devoted Granny Weatherall is to her religion is the references to Catholic Saints and the Virgin Mary. Granny has practiced her religion of Catholicism during her lifetime enough to feel comfortable declaring that she is sure of her relationship with certain Catholic Saints: “She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her. All as surely signed and sealed as the papers for the new Forty Acres” (Porter 84). Granny also exclaims, “Hail, Mary, full of grace” in the story, further illustrating that she feels comfortable with the Virgin Mary (82). This relationship with some saints that Granny feels can make a way for her to get back to God shows that she is a religious woman: She has gone to church enough in her life to learn about different saints and what they can do for her in terms of salvation. Geraldine Paulk

DeFelix uses this same quotation from the text to illustrate the point that Granny “considers herself a staunch, respectable Christian” due to her relationship with these saints. However, the idea that Granny can get to God through her relationship with saints illustrates that she is more than just a “respectable Christian.” She is a very devoted Catholic with a deep connection to the saints she knows, which will lead her to God. Therefore, Porter seems to have placed this reference to saints and Granny’s relationship with them in order to demonstrate that Granny Weatherall is a devout Catholic woman.

The assurance that Granny Weatherall feels from her association with the saints and the Virgin because they have “cleared a straight road to God for her” is important in the context of the story because of what transpires at the end. By placing this statement of Granny’s thoughts in the text, Porter causes the reader to expect that Granny has been saved and will be able to go to heaven in the end. She will be able to do this because she is a good Catholic that has worked out her salvation. When Granny realizes in the end that there is “again no bridegroom,” and that the relationships she had formed have failed her, the reader’s expectations of Granny being saved are disappointed. This disappointment comes because Granny is set up as a religious woman with a clear way to God through her saintly relationships. Thus, it is likely Porter has placed references to Catholic saints and the Virgin in order to raise the reader’s expectations and then fails to meet them with the ending of the story.

Another religious element that Porter seems to have purposefully placed in the story to show Granny’s extreme devotedness to Catholicism is the allusions to religious rituals, particularly Catholic rituals. Even though taking part in religious rituals does not always mean an individual is inwardly devoted to their religion, I will assume that in Granny’s case she is showing her internal conviction through her participation in external ordinances. For example,

Granny mentions the ritual of Holy Communion in particular right after Father Connolly arrives: “I went to Holy Communion only last week. Tell him I’m not so sinful as all that,” (84). By having Granny Weatherall declare that she just attended Communion the week before, Porter sets up Granny Weatherall as a religious woman because she attends her church meetings. Porter also is able to set up Granny as a religious woman because Father Connolly comes to give her the last religious rites. Granny reports that he “murmured Latin in a very solemn voice and tickled her feet” while performing the ritual (84–85). By receiving her final religious rites before she dies, Porter also wants to show her readers that Granny is a devoted religious woman who is interested in receiving the ritual religious ordinances she needs in order to be prepared for death.

By letting the reader know that Granny Weatherall regularly attends mass and that she has received her final religious rites, Porter illustrates that Granny is an extremely devout Catholic. She has taken the necessary steps to receive important ritual ordinances to prepare her for death, most likely by attending mass weekly and by letting her children know she wanted to receive her last rites on her deathbed. Eleanore Britton has pointed out that Granny Weatherall is religious in that she attends church meetings and that she has received her saving ordinances: “She has observed the traditional practices of the church, has gone to confession, and received the last rites” (39). However, she fails to acknowledge that Porter creates the expectation for the reader that Granny is prepared for death because she has performed all the necessary rituals. Thus, when Christ fails to meet Granny at her deathbed, the reader is disappointed because they have been led along to believe that Granny was prepared for death by passing through the necessary ordinances of the Catholic Church. In fact, the reader finds out that Granny has not been rewarded in death proportionately to how faithful she was in life.

A reader simply cannot read this story without noticing that Porter seems to have purposefully placed many references to religious objects in Granny's possession in this story in an effort to set up Granny Weatherall as a dedicated Catholic woman. The text refers to a candle and a crucifix near Granny's bedside, which implies that these are important objects to her since they are in a place where she would see them often: "The table by the bed had a linen cover and a candle and a crucifix" (84). Porter has also placed a rosary in the story twice, which seems very important because it is on Granny's person in the first mention of this religious object: "She put her hand in the bosom of her dress and pulled out a rosary. . . . The rosary fell out of her hands and Lydia put it back" (84-85). Porter even tells the audience that Granny has a religious object that she intends to donate to the church: "I meant to finish the altar cloth . . ." (85). This object of the altar cloth is significant because it shows that Granny not only possesses religious objects for herself, but she is also interested in sharing them with others, including the congregation at church that would see the altar cloth every week during mass services. This interest in wanting to benefit others by sharing religious objects has not been addressed by scholars and demonstrates that Granny is a more religious woman than she has been given credit for. Thus Porter has carefully crafted her story to show that Granny Weatherall is a very Catholic woman because she owns religious objects and is also disseminating them amongst others.

Granny's possession of religious items not only demonstrates that she is a religious woman, but also that she wants to outwardly show that she is truly pious. Porter seems to have dropped subtle hints of these religious items while writing this story in order to show that Granny is internally and externally religious. By characterizing Granny in this way, Porter additionally creates the expectation in the reader that Granny Weatherall is a religious woman who should be prepared for death because she even owns all of the right religious items that prove her inward

religiosity. By creating this expectation for the reader, the ending of the absent bridegroom is even more disheartening because Granny Weatherall seemed so prepared for death by possessing so many Catholic objects.

Granny Weatherall's concern for the welfare of her soul after death is another important facet of religion that Porter uses to show that Granny Weatherall is a more religious woman than scholars have noted. The story begins with Granny saying that she is "on [her] feet, morally speaking," meaning that she is in the right morally and has no reason to fear death. (80) Granny then seems to be worried about dying because "while she was rummaging around she found death in her mind and it felt clammy and unfamiliar" (81). Granny seems to be saying this because she is afraid of dying, which is a natural human instinct. But she resolves that she should not be afraid of death. She hopes that "she had better sense now" because she "has already "spent so much time preparing for death there was no need for bringing it up again" (81). But the reader really sees Granny as a religious woman when she expresses true concern for the well-being of her soul when thinking about George leaving her at the altar years before: "For sixty years she had prayed against remembering him and against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell" (82). In this moment, it is clear that Granny does express concern for her soul, which is what any religious person would do that has held a grudge against someone. She hopes she is going to heaven in the afterlife, despite her negative feelings against George. However, Granny seems resolved by the end of the story that she has nothing to worry about concerning the state of her soul: "Granny felt easy about her soul" (84). It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss what the true state of Granny's soul is and whether she is truly "saved" or not. It is only important here to acknowledge that Porter has placed references to Granny being concerned about her soul in order to demonstrate that Granny is more religious than just a confused old woman on her

deathbed. This concern about the state of the soul illustrates that Granny Weatherall is a religious woman because she worries about whether or not she has done well enough in this life to merit going to heaven.

By making Granny Weatherall a character that is seriously concerned about the resting place of her soul after death, Porter is creating a character who has led a religious life, which creates more disappointment in the end for the reader. David R. Mayer states that Granny is religious despite her negative feelings against George: “She had worked hard to put aside her thoughts of George and had kept up her religious practices throughout her life” (34). Even though he is correct that Granny has continued in her religion despite George jilting her, he does not acknowledge that Porter has purposefully placed yet another religious element in the story to show how truly devoted Granny is to Catholicism. Porter has added Granny’s thoughts about the state of her soul after death to create the expectation in the reader that Granny is on solid moral ground on her deathbed. By being concerned about the bad feelings she had harbored against George, the reader sees that Granny is trying to be a religiously strict woman because she is concerning herself with the state of her soul and what she deserves after her death. When the reader discovers that this faithful Catholic woman, who did her best to preserve the welfare of her soul, is jilted by Christ at the end of the story, the reader is disappointed to a greater degree because Granny herself has reassured the reader that “[she] felt easy about her soul” (84).

Finally, Porter shows that Granny is an unusually religious woman because there are so many references to God in this short story. Perhaps the most important reference to God that Granny makes is when she thanks God for sustaining her through her difficult life: “God, for all my life I thank Thee. Without Thee, my God, I could never have done it” (82). This certainly shows that Granny Weatherall is more than average in her faithfulness to Catholicism because

she has relied upon God to get her through her difficult life. Porter has even carefully placed the word “my” in this sentence to show that Granny feels a special connection with God that allows her to claim him as her own. Another important reference to God demonstrates that Granny trusts God’s judgment when she warns the anonymous man to not go after George after he jilted her: “Don’t lay a hand on him, for my sake leave something to God” (84). This statement illustrates that Granny believes in God and that she trusts that God will punish George for mistreating her. Thus Porter wants the reader to know that Granny is extraordinarily religious because she has a personal relationship with God. He has helped her through trials, and she trusts him to be just.

Porter sets up Granny Weatherall as a woman with a personal relationship with God in order to make the absence of the bridegroom a disappointment so great that “she could not remember any other sorrow because this grief wiped them all away” (85). Granny Weatherall is a woman who is so religious that she thanks God for sustaining her through everything. This is the ultimate display of faithfulness. The trust that Granny has in God causes the reader to expect that Granny will be accepted by God on her deathbed. This especially seems likely since she even calls out to God to give her a sign when she is afraid on her deathbed: “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. God, give a sign!” (Porter 85). Instead, God does not give a sign, and she and the reader are sorely disappointed after the buildup of religious elements that seem to define Granny’s character: “For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house” (85). Laurence A. Becker supports the idea that Granny is jilted by God: “At the end of the story, then, she is confronted by the reality that she is utterly alone—she perceives that she has been abandoned by God in death” (Becker 1167). While it is true that Granny has been abandoned by God in death, Becker does not acknowledge how disappointing it is that a woman

who has led such a religious life is abandoned by God at death, leaving her alone and disheartened.

Overall, Katherine Anne Porter places religious elements in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” to illustrate that Granny is an uncommonly good Catholic woman. Porter has crafted her very religious nature through references to saints and the Virgin Mary, religious rituals, religious (Catholic) objects, the state of her soul, and God. By placing these elements in the story, Porter sets up the expectation that Granny Weatherall is sure to be greeted by Christ on her deathbed because she has lived the good life of a devout Catholic. This expectation that Porter has created then makes the ending more disappointing when Christ does not come to greet Granny and is referred to as the absent “bridegroom.” It would be interesting to pursue further what other expectations Porter sets up for the reader and then dashes in this story in terms of family expectations, just as she has done with religious expectations in this story. Porter has masterfully used religious allusions to create the most profound impact upon the reader when he or she discovers the absence of Christ at the end of the life of a very religious person. This story leaves the reader surprised and ultimately disappointed that the bridegroom did not come for someone as religiously devoted as Granny Weatherall.

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