

The Jilting of Granny Weatherall



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russel Porter. Her mother died when Katherine was only two years old, and after her death, the family moved to live with her father's mother, Catherine Anne Porter. She died when Katherine was eleven, and a few years later, Katherine legally changed her own name to Katherine Anne Porter. Her grandmother was clearly very important to the young Katherine, and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is not the only story of hers to feature a grandmother figure. The misfortune of her childhood seemed to follow Katherine throughout her life. She was married at only sixteen to an abusive husband, John Henry Koontz. She converted to his religion, Roman Catholicism, but they were divorced in 1915 and she turned against religion shortly afterwards. Porter would marry three more times throughout her life, but all would end in divorce. Following her first divorce, Porter became very ill. It was thought that she had tuberculosis, but it turned out to be bronchitis. She spent two years recovering, before being struck down again by the 1918 flu pandemic. She survived, but she came very close to dying, and this experience is also reflected in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." Porter was all too familiar with the experience of not only of losing relatives to death, but of being frighteningly close to death herself. She also tragically lost several children, suffering multiple miscarriages. Despite her misfortune, Porter did enjoy great success in her writing career. *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, her first short story collection, was published in 1930 to great critical and public acclaim, and her later novel *Ship of Fools* was an even bigger commercial success. Her stories were adapted for radio and film, and in 1966 she received both the Pulitzer Prize and the U. S. National Book Award. She was also nominated three times for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is a fairly timeless story, given that the narrative swings constantly back and forth between present and past, and old men become children just as suddenly as old women become their daughters. Nevertheless, the story depends a lot on its historical context. The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, a particularly lethal pandemic that infected 500 million people—including Porter—provided her with a very close-hand experience of death. The short story form in itself also owed a lot to the era. The rise of magazine culture since the late nineteenth century revolutionized the form in the U.S. in particular, with early proponents such as

Edgar Allan Poe and O. Henry driving its popularity. These earlier short stories were characterized by a "twist" or surprise ending. With the rise of Modernism in the early twentieth century, which was in many ways a reaction to the horrors of World War One, authors sought to look *inside* the minds of their characters. The modern short story was less about the twist ending and more about the "epiphany" moment of its protagonist. By 1929, at the time of writing "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," the modern short story was a well-established form, and Porter in fact first published her story in *transition* magazine, a Modernist magazine based in Paris. Porter uses Granny's epiphany at the end of the story (when she is jilted for a second time) to powerfully drive home her message about the futility of life and the strength of her female protagonist.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Katherine Anne Porter can be placed alongside many different areas of literature. As a Southern female short story writer, it is easy to compare her to Flannery O'Connor, whose stories, such as [A Good Man is Hard to Find](#), also often deal with darker themes of death, and with Roman Catholicism. Porter can also be positioned in the Modernist tradition, which was in full swing in the 1920s. She is not as overtly modern as contemporaries like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but her use of stream of consciousness and uncertain perspective in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" certainly echoes the style of, for instance, Woolf's [Mrs Dalloway](#), or Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss." Perhaps a less obvious comparison can be made with Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died." In this poem, Dickinson's protagonist is also on their deathbed, and like Granny, gains an acute sense of clarity because of this. The spiritual and the earthly mingle together, and then just before the protagonist dies, Dickinson focuses in on the buzzing of a single fly. The mundane details of earth seem to get in the way even of death, just as is the case in Porter's story. Porter's own story "The Source" is also quite similar in subject matter to "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." In this story, another grandmother figure tries to keep her life ordered and controlled in the face of her decreasing health. The repetitive pattern of the story, as the grandmother moves back and forth between town and country, contrasts with the lineal decline of the old woman, just as the contrasting images of birth and death in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" serve as reminders of the cyclical nature of life in the face of Granny's own decline.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Jilting of Granny Weatherall

- **When Written:** 1929
- **When Published:** 1929
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The deathbed of Granny, probably in the American South
- **Climax:** Granny's death and "jilting" by God, at the very end of the story
- **Antagonist:** George
- **Point of View:** Third person limited (stream of consciousness)

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Family. The renowned short story writer O. Henry was actually Porter's father's second cousin. His real name was William Sidney Porter.

A New 'Do. After she recovered from the Spanish flu in 1918, Porter's hair, which she had lost during her illness, grew back completely white. It would remain that way for the rest of her life.



PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with the eighty-year-old Granny Weatherall despairing of a patronizing doctor, Doctor Harry, who is inspecting her. She maintains that she is in full health, and would be fine if only he would leave her alone. Granny feels the same way about her daughter Cornelia, whom Granny hears whispering outside her bedroom door with the doctor. The narrator notes Granny's hazy perspective; she sees the doctor float around the room and feels her own bones float around her body, in the first hint that the narrative is not entirely rooted in factual reality.

There are also hints that Granny is more ill than she thinks she is. She finds waving goodbye too strenuous to manage, and her eyes close of their own accord. She begins to think of everything that she should do tomorrow—Granny likes to keep her life well-ordered, to have everything neatly put away and in its place. She remembers a box full of letters from her old fiancé George and her husband John, and then thinks uncomfortably of death, but decides that she has spent so much time preparing for it that it can now "take care of itself."

Granny calls Cornelia to ask for a drink, and then hears Cornelia whisper to her husband that she's acting childishly. Granny feels bitter at this and recalls a time when her children were much younger, and she was their sole provider. She then imagines her husband John, who died when he was younger than the children are now. Granny thinks back to her achievements, recalling when she once fenced a hundred acres

with only the help of one boy. She remembers all of the sick people and animals that she has cared for, and feels pride that she managed to save most of them.

Granny's thoughts travel back to when the children were young, and she remembers lighting a lamp so that they wouldn't have to be scared. Suddenly the narrative shifts and she is telling the children to pick all of the fruit, and to make sure nothing goes to waste. Her mind wanders to other food that has gone to waste, more specifically to a white cake, which she had laid out ready for a man who did not come. This is Granny Weatherall's jilting. She was left at the altar by a man named George over sixty years ago, and the memory of it still haunts her, as much as she tries to forget it.

Cornelia appears again, washing her mother's face. She says that the doctor has returned to see her, and Granny is confused about how much time has passed since his last visit. The doctor gives her a hypodermic, and Granny starts to hallucinate about Hapsy, who is the only child she really wants to see. She imagines Hapsy holding a baby, and then sees herself as Hapsy, and Hapsy as the baby. Cornelia interrupts, asking if there is anything she can do for Granny. Granny decides that she would like to see George and tell him of her success in life without him. She suddenly realizes that there was something missing from her life, before feeling a sharp pain and asking her former husband John to fetch the doctor, confusing the earlier birth of Hapsy with her own oncoming death. Instead, a priest, Father Connolly, arrives, which unnerves Granny as it again reminds her of her failed wedding day (Father Connolly was to perform the ceremony). She thinks of the wedding cake, which was never eaten, but thrown away. She again imagines Hapsy, but this time standing by her bed, and thinks about Hapsy getting ready to give birth.

Granny focuses on a picture of John, but the picture, she decides, is nothing like her husband. The priest starts to speak, and she realizes that all of her children are surrounding her. She drops her rosary and clings instead to Jimmy's thumb, feeling that she needs something alive to hold instead of beads. Death has come upon her much more quickly than she imagined, and she tries to ask God for some more time while also giving the children instructions for arrangements after her passing. She feels herself becoming a small light, leaving behind her shadowy body, and begs God for a sign. But Granny is jilted once more, as God gives no sign. She declares that nothing could be crueller than this, before blowing out the light of her own life.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Granny / Ellen Weatherall – Granny Weatherall is the protagonist of the story, an eighty-year-old woman on her

deathbed. While the narrative is in fact written in the third person, its stream-of-consciousness style closely follows Granny's wandering thoughts through the present, the past, and the imaginary as she contemplates her oncoming death. At first, she is not a particularly sympathetic character, given that she is fairly rude to and dismissive of the people trying to look after her. As the story progresses and more is revealed about her life, however, her plight becomes increasingly sympathetic. Granny was "jilted" at the altar sixty years ago by a man named George, and despite trying her very best to move on with her life, she is still plagued by the painful memory. Nevertheless, she has remained remarkably strong, and her enduring spirit has carried her through life. She married a man named John, was a very attentive mother to her children, and kept an excellent home. She remains proud of her achievements, and has always tried to remain in control of things through the strength of her will. She can't help feeling, however, that something was missing from her life, which leads her back to George. In her dying moments Granny is once again jilted, only this time by God when she asks Him for a sign and He fails to provide one. In spite of this cruelty she manages to reclaim her own agency once again, and the story ends with her seemingly dying of her own accord, blowing out the "candle" of her life.

Cornelia – Cornelia is Granny Weatherall's daughter, and is the child seemingly most involved in caring for her sick mother. Readers are not told much about her other than through Granny's (mostly irritable) opinions of her, but Cornelia seems exceptionally kind and patient, and is trying her best to make her mother comfortable despite Granny Weatherall's constant criticism.

Doctor Harry – Doctor Harry is another character who attempts to care for Granny Weatherall despite her objections. He is fairly patronizing towards Granny, but this is arguably a natural reaction to her defiance, and because he knows how ill she truly is. Granny, however, describes him in very childlike terms. Though his actual age is unclear, she sees him as too young to warrant any respect from her.

Hapsy – Hapsy was seemingly Granny's favorite child, and certainly the child she most longs to see in her dying moments. Hapsy died years previously, possibly as she gave birth to the baby that Granny sees her holding during one of her hallucinations. Granny later imagines Hapsy standing over her bed as she dies. She hopes to see Hapsy again after she passes.

George – The story reveals little about George, other than that he is the man who jilted Granny Weatherall at the altar many decades earlier. Despite this, he plays an extremely important role in the story, given the effect that this has on the protagonist. Granny sees him as a negative force, conflated in her memory with a dark cloud that seems like hell itself.

Father Connolly – Father Connolly is the priest who comes to visit Granny Weatherall before her death. He is also the priest who was originally going to marry Granny and George, and he

even offers to kill George when he abandons Granny, but Granny tells him not to. He seems like a fairly relaxed priest, as Granny also recalls his cursing and fondness for gossip.

MINOR CHARACTERS

John – John was Granny Weatherall's later husband, and the father of their children. The story doesn't reveal much about him, other than the fact that he died fairly young, had blue eyes, and was a good man. Granny loved and respected him.

Jimmy – Another of Granny's children, whose hand she holds as she dies.

Lydia – Granny's daughter, who rushes to see her before her death.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ORDER AND CONTROL

Since being jilted at the altar sixty years ago, Granny Weatherall has found peace in carefully controlling her life, creating order and structure for herself and her family. Now, on her deathbed, she is afraid of dying, but she reassures herself through small acts of control, such as making a will and organizing her possessions. However, Granny's attempts at control are no match for death: she dies much more quickly than she was expecting, and without the sign from God that she had hoped for. Nevertheless, she regains some control at the end of the story by blowing "out the **light**" of her own life, rather than letting someone else do it for her. Ultimately, Porter seems to suggest that although the world can never truly be controlled, people can still seek happiness and solace in their own sense of order and purpose.

Sixty years ago, when her fiancé George abandoned her on their wedding day, Granny came to learn just how harsh and unpredictable the world can be. She remembers feeling that "the whole bottom [had] dropped out of the world" when he didn't turn up, and since then George has represented to Granny the aspects of her life that she cannot control. "The thought of him," Porter writes, "was a smoky cloud from hell" that "crept up and over the bright field where everything was planted so carefully in orderly rows." This carefully planted field represents Granny's deliberately structured and reassuring world, and the memory of George constantly threatens this order because it reminds Granny that she can never fully control her life no matter how hard she tries.

Nonetheless, since George left her Granny has been carefully structuring her life in the hopes that she can regain some of the agency that she lost with her jilting. Porter takes care to describe in detail the mundane domestic tasks, such as lighting lamps, sewing clothes, cooking food, and tending to the garden, that Granny has spent her life obsessing over. She decided long ago that it is “good to have everything clean and folded away,” and to “spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly.” Once everything has been put into order, she believes, only then can a person enjoy a small moment “for peace.” Granny’s ordered “plan of life” makes her feel more in control, which makes her happier and more relaxed as a result.

While Granny maintained the illusion of control over her life, in facing death she is more powerless to manage her fate. Nonetheless, she does what she can to create order. In an early passage, for example, she finds “death in her mind,” which makes her very uncomfortable, so she turns her mind to familiar things that she can control. She thinks of her father, who lived to be “one hundred and two years old” and had “drunk a noggin of strong hot toddy” every day of his life. As if she hopes that this will extend her own life, Granny quickly asks her daughter Cornelia for the same drink.

Granny also asserts control on her deathbed by trying to manage others, particularly by treating them like children. She constantly treats Cornelia, her adult daughter who is caring for her, as if she were a child—claiming, for example, that she would like to “spank her.” She also treats Doctor Harry as if he were a petulant child, telling him to “take [his] schoolbooks and go” and calling him a “brat.” Granny does this because she knows that she is very ill—so ill that she cannot take care of herself—but she is trying to reassure herself by belittling the people with control over her and pretending that she still has power over them, as she did in her prime.

To emphasize that Granny’s attempts to control death are doomed to fail, Porter draws a parallel between death and Granny’s first jilting. When Granny asks God for a sign and God fails to deliver, Porter describes God’s absence as, “again no bridegroom and the priest in the house.” Her first bridegroom, George, failed to show up to their wedding, but in the Bible, Jesus is also referred to as a bridegroom, so when God does not appear to Granny, it is as if her bridegroom has jilted her a second time. In this way, Porter suggests that, just as Granny’s pointless preparations for her first wedding could not alter its disastrous outcome, her attempts to prepare for and control death are ultimately futile. She has spent “so much time preparing for death” that she thinks it could “take care of itself now,” but when death finally arrives, Granny becomes panicked and suddenly starts noting all of the tasks she hasn’t had time to finish.

However, thinking of order provides Granny little comfort, and so she wrests control in a more tangible way: at the close of the story, Granny herself blows “out the light” of her own life.

Earlier in the story, Porter mentions that only once all the household chores have been completed is there a little “margin” left over for “peace,” and the story gives the sense that as Granny finally decides to take death into her own hands, she is allowed a moment of rest before she dies.

In light of this, Porter suggests that even though life and death can never truly be controlled, some peace and reassurance can still be found in maintaining a personal sense of order. Granny’s domestic structure certainly offered her contentment in life, and even though misfortune plagued her, she still managed to live and die on her own terms because of it. Her jilting at the altar and her eventual death both took her by surprise, but she found comfort in those things she could control, like her home, her children, and the last moment of her life itself.



DEATH AND OLD AGE VS. LIFE AND YOUTH

Although “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” is a story about a death, it is also, by consequence, a story about life. Porter deliberately juxtaposes life and death, and old age and youth, so that each emphasizes the other. The story acknowledges the fear and sadness that comes with death and old age, but also makes a point of emphasizing all of the rich experiences of life that come before death, encouraging the reader to appreciate life while it still exists.

In the story, death is an undeniably tragic and fearful presence. Granny does not want to die, and she tries her best to act as if everything is normal. She does this partly by moving back and forth in time in her own head. She often has flashbacks to her youth, and she fondly recalls her children as they were when they were much younger, rather than the adults they are now: “Little things, little things! They had been so sweet when they were little. Granny wished the old days were back again.” She even imagines Doctor Harry as if he were a child, referring to him as a “brat” who “ought to be in knee breeches.” By reducing everyone around her to childlike status, Granny is able to pretend that she is not old or sick, and that she is still in control of her life, even as she approaches death.

Porter balances the despair of death and old age with a more positive view of life and youth, which means that the story isn’t quite as hopeless as first implied. For instance, the title of the story leads a reader into thinking of Granny as just that, as an old woman and grandmother, but as the story travels back in time it is revealed that her name is actually “Ellen” Weatherall. The reader is encouraged to expand their view of the protagonist, and to think of her not just as a “Granny” but as a woman who was once young, and who has led a full and rich life just like anyone else. Just because she is now dying, it doesn’t mean that she must be restricted to this one point in her life.

The occurrence of Granny’s death itself is made more positive and complex in the story by paralleling it with imagery of birth.

When Granny is about to die, she confuses this with her memories of giving birth, crying out “John, get the Doctor now, no more talk, my time has come.” Later in the story, she declares that “Hapsy’s time has come.” Hapsy was Granny’s daughter, and it is implied that she died during childbirth many years ago. By replacing these deaths with Granny’s memories of birth, Porter manages to imply that death needn’t be as final or as hopeless as Granny might think. Instead, it is linked with the hope and optimism of new life.

Porter’s own near-death experience, in the Influenza Epidemic of 1918, probably influenced the message of “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” Being so close to death and then surviving is almost comparable to dying and being re-born, and her experience would have enabled her to appreciate the true value of life. This is, in turn, what Porter implores the reader to do. After all, Granny’s life is just as important to the story as her death. Throughout the tale we learn about how Granny has lived: the family she has raised, the home she has kept, and the tragedies of her past. When her death finally arrives, it arrives simply as a part of life, rather than as the main event itself. Readers are encouraged to expand their view of the possibilities of life, rather than only focus on the end of it.



FEMALE STRENGTH

Porter’s strongest female influence while growing up was her grandmother, and several of her stories, including “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,”

feature a strong grandmotherly protagonist. Granny was able to face the humiliation and heartbreak of having her fiancé jilt her at the altar and still go on to lead a very successful life as wife, mother, and caregiver. Even after her later (and kinder) husband John dies, Granny pushes herself on to maintain her livelihood and family. Ultimately, Porter’s story is a testament to the remarkable strength of women, especially in the face of injustice or personal tragedy.

When George abandoned Granny at the altar sixty years ago, she was left to overcome the ordeal by herself. Even though she had felt as though “the whole bottom dropped out of the world,” she “had not fallen.” She held her head up high and carried on with her life, despite the continual pain of the memory of her jilting. Before Granny dies, she claims that “she would like to see George,” so that she can show him that she “had [her] husband just the same and [her] children and [her] house just like any other woman.” Granny prides herself on having upheld these traditional roles, but she has also gone above and beyond them. She has not been “just like any other woman,” because she has been so determined to re-build her life after George, and to prove to herself that she didn’t need him.

Granny was clearly very successful as a mother, and she regards this as a big part of her success in life. She may have been tough, but all of her children gather around her bedside as

she dies, so they are obviously attached to her and respect her. Granny’s daughter Lydia drove “eighty miles for advice” when one of her own children “jumped the track,” and her son, Jimmy, still asked her for business advice even in her old age. Granny was also a midwife by trade, so not only did she care for her own children, but she also helped other mothers with their own. She also remembers how she once fenced one hundred acres of land, “digging the postholes herself and clamping the wires” with the help of only one boy. In other words, Granny has been an exceptionally strong woman in both her personal and professional life, and it seems like people respect her for this. Perhaps Porter was trying to illustrate the type of woman that she herself was hoping to emulate in the face of her second divorce (which she was still recovering from at the time), as well as the type of woman that her own grandmother was.

Though Granny is proud of her strength and determination, she also believes that God (a traditionally male figure) is ultimately responsible for these qualities. She says directly to God, “without Thee, my God, I could never have done it.” At the end of the story, however, Granny asks for a sign from God to reassure her in the face of her approaching death, but he does not give her one. Just as George, her first bridegroom, failed to be there for her on their wedding day, God, another bridegroom of sorts, fails to be there for her at her death. She is left in a situation in which, once again, she has been abandoned and has to look after herself. Yet once again she manages this. The story closes with Granny blowing “out the **light**” of her own life, taking matters into her own hands once she has been abandoned by God. Her steely will has not failed her, even in death.

Ultimately, Granny Weatherall is portrayed as a credit to her name: she has weathered all that life has to throw at her, and stayed resolutely strong until the end. Even when she is abandoned by God in her dying moments, she is able to pick herself up and die with dignity, on her own terms, acting as a testament to Porter’s affirmation of the strength of women.



RELIGION VS. HUMANITY

Porter was highly critical of religion at the time of writing “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” She had abandoned Roman Catholicism when she divorced her first husband, a Catholic who was physically abusive to her. Her views are reflected very clearly in the story, with God himself featured as the second and cruelest of Granny Weatherall’s jilters, failing to give her a sign of reassurance when she needs it most. In the moments before Granny’s death, religion has nothing to offer her, but the people around her—her children and her doctor—are working tirelessly to make her comfortable. By consistently paralleling the present and comforting human world with the failures of spirituality, Porter advocates a belief in humanity and human relationships as the path to happiness and redemption.

The most obvious way in which religion and humanity are paralleled in the story is through the figures of the two jilters, George and God. George, Granny's first bridegroom, fails to be there for her at their wedding. Granny also refers to God as a bridegroom ("Again no bridegroom") when he fails to give her a sign of reassurance before her death. Jesus as a bridegroom is a traditional Christian idea, so when God does not appear to Granny, it is as if her bridegroom has not turned up for a second time. The two jilters, George and God, are thus made effectively equal.

This parallel (which is clearly unfavorable to God and religion) is made worse by the fact that George is actually associated with hell, as Granny imagines him in her mind as "a smoky cloud from hell." Since God and George are parallel figures, and George is seen as satanic, then God is, by proxy, associated with a vision of hell itself, which completely undermines a fundamental aspect of Christian faith. Porter thus suggests that if heaven exists at all, it is no better than earth (and might actually be closer to hell).

Porter also emphasizes the importance of humanity over religion by praising things that are human and "alive" over the spiritual and lifeless. Father Connolly, for example, is portrayed not as a particularly pious priest, but as a down-to-earth, normal, man. This might make him a bad priest, but it does make him a far more sympathetic character. Granny enjoys his funny stories about people's confessions, and he likes a cup of tea and a round of cards just as much as the next man. Overall, he is a likeable figure, so it's notable that he is associated more with humanity than God.

Moreover, throughout the story, Granny has a growing need for "something alive" and human, rather than lifeless or spiritual. Most obviously, she drops her rosary as she dies and instead holds on to her son Jimmy's thumb. "Beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive," she thinks. In the face of her death, her human family can offer her far more comfort than her lifeless rosary, and this is Granny's first clear rejection of the spiritual in favor of the human.

Overall, it is clear that Porter was far fonder of humanity than she was of religion at the time of writing "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." Not only is Granny abandoned at the altar by her former fiancé, George, but she is also abandoned on her deathbed by God himself. Religion fails her, and instead she seeks comfort in the people that surround her. After all, "beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive."



THE WEDDING CAKE

As Granny thinks back to the day that she was jilted at the altar by her former fiancé, George, sixty years ago, one of the first images to spring into her mind is that of a "white cake," which was "not cut, but thrown out and wasted." "What does a woman do," she asks, "when she has [...] set out the white cake for a man and he doesn't come?" For Granny, the wasted wedding cake embodies all of the meticulous preparations that she had made for her wedding day, only for them all to end up as a tragic waste when George didn't turn up—"not cut, but thrown out and wasted."

The wedding cake thus symbolizes all of the wasted hopes and ambitions that Granny had placed in marrying George. Just as she never even got to cut the cake, let alone eat it, she never managed to marry George or spend her married life with him. Instead, the promise of married life was, like the cake, "thrown out and wasted," and never enjoyed. In fact, ever since George left her, the idea of waste is horrifying to Granny, as it reminds her too much of her wasted wedding day. In a later flashback, she takes care to tell her children to make sure that all of the fruit from their orchard is picked this year and to "see that nothing is wasted." On a basic level, her instruction simply refers to the fruit, as just as was the case with her wedding cake, she doesn't like to see the physical food wasted. But on a deeper level, Granny is also telling her children to make sure that they don't waste their own lives, just as she, in a way, feels that she had wasted hers. "Don't let good things rot for want of using," she says. "You waste life when you waste good food. Don't let things get lost. It's bitter to lose things." Here Granny explicitly connects the ideas of wasted food and wasted life, and details the pain that she felt at losing George when she says that it is "bitter to lose things." This is why Granny also takes so much pride and pleasure in having cared for so many sick animals and children "and hardly ever losing one." She may have lost her life, but she has saved many others.



THE POINT OF LIGHT

As Granny dies, she seems to become a small "point of light" that leaves her earthly body. "The blue light from Cornelia's lampshade drew into a tiny point in the center of her brain [...]" Granny lay curled down within herself, amazed and watchful, staring at the point of light that was herself; 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." At the very end of the story, she then "blew out the light."

On one level, this light seems to represent Granny's life. As she blows it out, she chooses to end her own life, on her own terms. However, the light could also represent Granny's sense of hope. She blows it out after God fails to give her a sign of reassurance in the face of her death, perhaps because she loses



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

her faith in God as a result of this. What is interesting is that Granny herself *blows* out the light, and it is not simply put out. By blowing out the light, she chooses to assert her own agency in the face of God failing her, and demonstrates her strong will in doing so. She chooses to put her faith in herself, rather than in God. Just as she did not lose her determination and agency after her first jilting by her fiancé George, she doesn't stop asserting herself even in the face of death and spiritual abandonment.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt edition of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* published in 1979.

The Jilting of Granny Weatherall Quotes

☞☞ Cornelia was dutiful; that was the trouble with her. Dutiful and good: "So good and dutiful," said Granny, "that I'd like to spank her."

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall (speaker), Cornelia

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Granny is very ill, and her daughter Cornelia is looking after her. Granny, however, cannot stand being ill or feeling powerless, and she takes out some of her frustration at her situation on Cornelia. Being "dutiful and good" are obviously not bad qualities in a person, but it is Cornelia's sense of duty that leads her to look after Granny, and thus to become the target of Granny's frustration. Granny does not dislike Cornelia for being "good and dutiful"—what she actually dislikes is having to be looked after by her own daughter. To fight against these feelings of inadequacy, Granny reduces Cornelia to childlike status, claiming that she would like to "spank her." This helps Granny to feel more in control of her own situation again, as she felt in control of her children when they were young. Of course, Granny won't actually spank Cornelia, but just thinking about it offers her reassurance.

☞☞ Things were finished somehow when the time came; thank God there was always a little margin over for peace: then a person could spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly. It was good to have everything clean and folded away, with the hair brushes and tonic bottles sitting straight on the white embroidered linen.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Granny details her obsession with domestic order. On a straightforward level, this merely extends to her orderly rows of tonic bottles and hair brushes, but on a deeper level, this obsession with household tasks actually gestures towards Granny's much greater need for control in her life. Life has been unpredictable for Granny: she was unexpectedly jilted at the altar sixty years ago, and the shock of it has stayed with her ever since. Since then, she has tried to regain some sense of personal control over her life by organizing its meticulous details, such as these household objects. This is all part of Granny's careful and orderly "plan of life," which is represented here as a perfectly folded and tucked-in cloth. Her technique also comforts her in the face of her oncoming death, which is another aspect of life beyond Granny's control. She is afraid of death, but with careful domestic planning, such as the preparation of her will, Granny feels more comfortable and in control.

☞☞ While she was rummaging around she found death in her mind and it felt clammy and unfamiliar. She had spent so much time preparing for death there was no need for bringing it up again. Let it take care of itself now. When she was sixty she had felt very old, finished [...] she made her will and came down with a long fever. That was all just a notion like a lot of other things, but it was lucky too, for she had once for all got over the idea of dying for a long time.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Granny thinks suddenly of death and the thought of it

scares her, so she attempts to comfort herself by thinking of all the preparations she has already made for death. Given that she has prepared so much, she feels that death can now “take care of itself.” Careful preparations and domestic tasks have always helped Granny to feel more in control of her life, or in this case, of her death. She had thought she would die when she was sixty, and so she made her will, which made her feel a lot more comfortable and prepared. In fact, this helped her to get over her fear of death for a long time, but now she is afraid again, and so she thinks back to this memory in the hope that it will reassure her once more. If she has prepared enough for her death, Granny tells herself that there is nothing to be afraid of.

☞ Little things, little things! They had been so sweet when they were little. Granny wished the old days were back again with the children young.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Granny, who is now a very old woman close to death, likes to revisit the past. She likes to think back to times when her children were young, and when she was a young and capable mother herself. The time when her children were young appears to have been one of the happiest in her life, because she felt strong and capable and in control. Granny finds being in control very reassuring, because when she was jilted at the altar in her youth she felt as though she was completely powerless in her own life. Being a mother helped Granny to regain some of her lost sense of autonomy, and this is why she likes to think of her children as they were when they were very young. Even as the very old woman that she is now, imagining them as “little things” transports Granny back to a time when she was the one in control.

☞ Why, he couldn't possibly recognize her. She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman. John would be looking for a young woman with the peaked Spanish comb in her hair and the painted fan. Digging post holes changed a woman.

Related Characters: John, Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Granny thinks back to a particular occasion when she fenced a hundred acres with hardly any help. She places great pride in her achievements as a younger woman, and this occasion seems to be the most important to her: so important, in fact, that she claims that it completely changed her as a person. Granny has always tried to be a strong and determined woman throughout her life, and this example is testament to that, but of particular note is the fact that Granny claims that her deceased husband, John, wouldn't have been able to recognize her after the digging of the post holes. The digging episode is representative of a deeper moment in Granny's transformation after the death of her husband. She was forced into becoming independent, and this particular moment was the turning point in this process. Granny could no longer afford to continue as the young woman accessorized with painted fans. Instead, she had to take care of the farm, as she was the only person left to do so.

☞ I want you to pick all the fruit this year and see that nothing is wasted. There's always someone who can use it. Don't let good things rot for want of using. You waste life when you waste good food. Don't let things get lost. It's bitter to lose things.

Related Characters: George, Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Granny thinks of an occasion from her past when she instructed her children not to waste any fruit from their orchard. On a literal level, Granny simply does not like wasted food, but it is clear that her sentiment here goes deeper than just rotting fruit. When she compares wasting food to wasting life, it is made explicit that she is referring not just to the food but to her own life, which she feels was wasted after she was jilted at the altar by her first fiancé.

This is particularly clear in the implicit comparison between the wasted fruit and her first wedding cake, which she elsewhere refers to as having been “wasted” after her jilting. When she explains that it is “bitter to lose things,” she is thus referring to the life that she feels she lost after her jilting, and to the man who evaded her. In a way, she sees herself embodied in the fruit which has been left to rot. She warns her children of the dangers of waste because she doesn’t want the same thing to happen to them, or indeed to the fruit in the orchard.

☞ There was the day, the day, but 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. That was hell, she knew hell when she saw it.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall (speaker), George

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

The day which is referred to here is that of Granny’s jilting at the altar, sixty years ago. The memory of this day is incredibly painful for Granny, to the extent that she can barely even speak of it. Instead it is simply referred to as “the day.” The dark smoke which accompanies the memory is representative of the horrifying lack of control which Granny had over her own life on that day, and this lack of control is something which she has been fighting against ever since. She meticulously orders her everyday life, (often through domestic tasks such as tidying her kitchen, for example), in an attempt to reassert her personal authority. This carefully controlled life is represented by the “orderly rows” in her vision, and the black smoke is representative of the lack of control which so threatens this ordered existence. In fact, being out of control horrifies Granny so much that she associates the memory of her wedding with hell itself.

☞ I want you to find George. Find him and be sure to tell him I forgot him. I want him to know I had my husband just the same and my children and my house like any other woman. A good house too and a good husband that I loved and fine children out of him. Better than I hoped for even. [...] no, there was something else besides the house and the man and the children. Oh, surely they were not all? What was it? Something not given back.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall (speaker), George

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

George is the fiancé who jilted Granny at the altar sixty years ago. She likes to believe that she got on very well in life without him, and that she didn’t need him after all, but in the moments before her death she realizes that she would still like to see him. It occurs to her that, despite all of her efforts for a perfect life without George, he has always been the something missing from her life, the something which was never “given back.” She tried her best to fulfil every aspect of a good life without him: she had what she believes to be a good husband, a good house, and a good family, but it was clearly never quite enough. His memory continues to plague her to her dying day.

Nevertheless, Granny never actually states outright that it was George that was missing. She still questions “what” it was, implying, perhaps, that she is still in denial about George. She never seems quite able to admit to herself how much she needed him after all, but this is probably all part of her steely determination not to let him ruin her life.

☞ Yes, John, get the Doctor now, no more talk, my time has come.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall (speaker), John

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As Granny is about to die, she gets confused with her memories of giving birth. Here she asks her deceased husband John to fetch the doctor because her time has

come to give birth, but she is in fact about to die. Porter's conflation of images of birth and death perhaps makes the idea of death seem less final and more positive, as it encourages the reader to focus on the new possibilities of life, rather than simply the end of it. This is not the only instance of this technique in the story. At other points when she is nearing her own death, Granny thinks that Hapsy, her child, is also about to give birth again. It is strongly implied that Hapsy died during childbirth, so once again images of birth and death are confusingly intertwined. Perhaps Porter suggests that death is not the great ending that people take it to be, after all. Instead it is portrayed as a kind of rebirth.

●● The rosary fell out of her hands and Lydia put it back. Jimmy tried to help, their hands fumbled together, and Granny closed two fingers around Jimmy's thumb. Beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive.

Related Characters: Lydia , Jimmy , Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

This episode is one of the key instances of Granny's rejection of the spiritual over the human. As her death approaches, Granny realizes that the only thing that can really offer her comfort is the hand of her child, Jimmy. It must be something "alive" that she can cling to, not her lifeless beads. Indeed, throughout the story the human and "alive" is consistently given much more credibility and importance than the spiritual and lifeless. Earlier, Granny rejects a photograph of her late husband John, because it

does not capture him as a person. It is a good likeness for a photograph, she says, but it is not her husband himself. This episode is another good example of Granny favoring the alive over the lifeless, even though it is not as overtly religious. The ultimate rejection of the spiritual, however, reaches its climax in the final sentences of the story, when Granny rejects God after he fails her and chooses to put her faith in herself alone by ending her own life.

●● She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light.

Related Characters: Granny / Ellen Weatherall

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final sentence of the story, in which Granny ends her own life. The way in which she dies is significant because it is done on Granny's own terms. She commits the act herself by blowing out the symbolic light of her own life, and in doing so she is able to regain control over her own fate, rather than relying on God to control it for her.

The light may also be representative of Granny's hope, which is finally extinguished at the end of the story. Even if George rejected her years ago, Granny appears to have remained hopeful until her final moments. She is still hopeful that God will give her a sign before her death, but when this fails to arrive she claims that she will never forgive the cruelty and blows out her light. If this light represented hope, it is with God's ultimate betrayal that it is finally extinguished.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE JILTING OF GRANNY WEATHERALL

Granny Weatherall tells Doctor Harry, who is inspecting her, to leave her be. She claims that the “brat ought to be in knee breeches.” In return, Doctor Harry ignores and dismisses Granny himself, telling her to be a “good girl” and calling her “Missy.” He tells Granny that she is ill, but she says that she is not.

Granny feels that her bones are “loose” and “floated around in her skin,” and that Doctor Harry floats too, like “a balloon around the foot of the bed.” She means to wave goodbye to the doctor as he leaves, but finds that it is “too much trouble,” and her eyes close without her meaning them to.

Granny hears Cornelia and Doctor Harry whispering outside in the hallway. They claim that she was never “like this” and dismiss her because she is eighty. This infuriates Granny, as she doesn’t like people whispering about her when she still feels perfectly healthy. She decides that she would like to “spank” Cornelia.

As she starts to drift back off to sleep, Granny thinks about all of the things that need to be done tomorrow, as there is “always so much to be done.” She muses on how it is good to “spread out the plan of life and tuck in the edges orderly,” and to “have everything clean and folded away.” She imagines, for example, “hair brushes and tonic bottles sitting straight on the white embroidered linen,” but then remembers something very important that she must sort out: a box of love letters in the attic from two men, George and John. She decides that she must sort the box out tomorrow, so that her children don’t find out “how silly she had once been.”

Granny is afraid of dying, so she tries to gain control over her situation by treating Doctor Harry like a small child. By belittling the doctor who is looking after her, Granny seeks to diminish her own illness and pretend that nothing is wrong with her health.



These are some of the first signs in the narrative that Granny’s health is not quite as good as she thinks it is. Hallucinations like these imply that Granny is indeed very ill, despite what she likes to tell herself, and that she is not in control of her own body anymore.



Granny once again feels powerless when she hears the doctor and her daughter Cornelia whispering about her in the hallway. She hates to be dismissed as old or ill, so she attempts to assert some control over the situation by imagining Cornelia as a small child that she can “spank.”



Granny often feels powerless in the world, so she tries to control it by carefully ordering her domestic environment. The literal organization of “hair brushes and tonic bottles” therefore also evokes Granny’s wider desire to control every aspect of her life, from her health to her relationships. Her desire to sort out the box of old love letters therefore actually represents, on a deeper level, her desire to regain control over her past relationships. George, Granny’s ex-fiancé, left her at the altar sixty years ago, and she wants to diminish and take control of this painful memory by disposing of the physical letters associated with it.



Granny thinks suddenly of death, and the thought of it feels “clammy and unfamiliar.” She decides that there is no use worrying about death anymore anyway, because she has spent “so much time preparing for death there was no need for bringing it up again.” She remembers a time twenty years ago when she thought she was about to die and prepared her will, but she recovered. She thinks of her father, who lived until he was “one hundred and two years old” and claimed it was because he drank a “noggin of hot toddy” every day. Cornelia comes back into the room, and Granny asks her for the same drink.

Again Granny hears Cornelia talking about her behind her back, saying she is “childish,” and Granny becomes annoyed. She thinks back to a time when she had “kept a better house” than Cornelia. She was a strong mother and wife and housekeeper, and she proudly recalls her achievements. Her children still ask her advice, she thinks. Lydia, for example, drove “eighty miles for advice” about her own children. Granny remembers “all of the food she had cooked, and all the clothes she had cut and sewed.” Once she “fenced in a hundred acres” with the help of only one young boy. She was also a midwife, and remembers “riding country roads in the winter” and “sitting up nights with sick horses” and “sick children” and “hardly ever losing one of them.”

As Granny thinks back to the past, she specifically thinks of her children as they were when they were younger, when she could look after them.

Granny thinks back again to what she must do tomorrow, but suddenly finds that she cannot think properly because a “fog rose over the valley.” This transports her back to a memory of calling her children in from their old orchard, away from the dark fog, so that she can “light the lamps” indoors. As she does this, her children gather around her because they are scared of the dark.

Granny then thinks about another memory of the orchard, when she told her children to “pick all of the fruit this year and see that nothing is wasted.” She tells them not to “let things get lost,” as it’s “bitter to lose things.”

Granny is obviously very afraid of death and her lack of control over it, so she tries to cope with this through little domestic tasks that make her feel more in control. Twenty years ago she did this by preparing her will, and now she asks for a “noggin of hot toddy” like her father, because she hopes that it will help her live longer.



Granny hates to be belittled by Cornelia, especially in her current state of powerlessness. She mentally fights back by revisiting a time when she was young, and a much better mother and housekeeper than Cornelia. This seems to make her feel better. She still prides herself immensely on her achievements as a younger woman, and her memories seem to reassure her in the face of death, serving as a reminder of her strength.



Granny likes to think of her children as being young because it reminds her of a time when she was more in control of her life, unlike now.



The “fog” in Granny’s vision represents everything that Granny can’t control, and so it is a source of great fear for her. This idea moves on to an actual memory of her children being afraid of a dark fog, which makes the darkness seem more literal and physical for the reader. It also positions Granny in a position of control over the darkness, because she is able to banish it by lighting the lamps indoors.



This is another example of a literal memory with a symbolic meaning. On one level, Granny simply doesn’t like the fruit being wasted, as she likes perfect domestic order. On another level, though, Granny doesn’t like “waste” in general because it reminds her of the life that she feels she wasted after she was jilted at the altar.



Granny then drifts into a memory of her jilting at the altar sixty years ago. “What does a woman do,” she asks, “when she has put on the white veil and set out the **white cake** for a man and he doesn’t come?” As she tries to think of her failed wedding day, a “whirl of dark smoke rose and covered it” and creeps “into the bright field where everything was planted so carefully in orderly rows.” This, she decides, “was hell,” and she realizes that the thought of George himself is mixed up with this idea: “The thought of him was a smoky cloud from hell.”

Granny is brought back into consciousness by Cornelia wiping her face with a cold cloth. She thinks to herself that she doesn’t like having her face washed in “cold water,” and seems disappointed that it is Cornelia before her and not one of her other children. She notices that Cornelia’s “features were swollen and full of little puddles,” and tells her to wash her face because she looks “funny.”

Cornelia seems to be speaking to Granny, but Granny can’t understand what she’s saying. Cornelia explains that Doctor Harry has returned to see Granny. Granny is confused and thinks that he has only left “five minutes ago,” but Cornelia tells her that that was this morning, and it is night now. Granny thinks that she is speaking, but no one seems to be able to hear her. The doctor gives her a hypodermic.

Once the doctor has administered the hypodermic, Granny has a hallucination in which she goes through various rooms to find her daughter, Hapsy. She sees Hapsy holding a baby, and then imagines herself as Hapsy, and Hapsy as the baby.

Granny slips back into reality as Cornelia asks her if there is anything Granny wants. Granny replies that she has “changed her mind after sixty years” and would like to see George after all, to show him everything that she has achieved without him: a “good house,” a “good husband” and “fine children.” Nevertheless, Granny cannot help but think that there was something else, something more than all of this, that was missing from her life.

Granny’s failed wedding was the main event in her life which she couldn’t control. The memory of the wedding and her ex-fiancé George are therefore represented by the dark smoke which symbolizes a lack of control in Granny’s life. If the carefully planted rows illustrate Granny’s attempt at order, the smoke threatens to overcome this, and this is such a horrifying thought for Granny that she connects it with hell itself.



Granny maintains a thick skin throughout the narrative and seems like she is quite harsh on the people who are caring for her. Here it is obvious that Cornelia has been crying, but Granny only tells her dismissively to wash her face. This is likely only because Granny is trying not to let herself get emotional in the face of death. She is scared and mournful herself, but doesn’t like to think about it as the thought alone would be too much to bear. Instead, she simply dismisses any show of emotion as a way of coping.



This passage again demonstrates the true extent of Granny’s illness. She has lost any sense of time, and can’t even hear people as they speak. It is implied that she is probably quite close to death.

This fairly confusing image illustrates just how easily time can pass. Granny slips effortlessly from being an old grandmother into being a young mother holding her newborn baby, Hapsy, even though Granny must have given birth to Hapsy many years ago and Hapsy herself is implied to have died.



Granny has tried to live her life since George in defiance of him, as a way of proving that she is fine without him. However, it still seems like something was missing, and this may well have been George. As becomes clear here, she is still not over the pain of losing him, and sixty years later she would still like to see him again.



Father Connolly, the priest, arrives. He was also the priest who was supposed to marry Granny and her former fiancé George. Granny remembers Father Connolly as a man fond of gossip and cursing, rather than as a particularly pious priest. Nevertheless, she seems quite assured in her religion. She “had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favorite saints who cleared a straight road to God for her.”

As she comes close to death, Granny gets confused and has flashbacks to the time that she gave birth to Hapsy. She then imagines Hapsy giving birth.

Granny becomes very aware of the room around her. She thinks it looks like a picture. She then notices an actual picture on the side, a photo of John, her husband. She doesn't like it, because she doesn't think it captures him as a person. It is only a photograph, not “my husband,” she says.

Granny drifts in and out of reality but manages to pull a rosary out of her dress. Her children, Lydia and Jimmy, arrive. Granny drops her rosary and holds instead to Jimmy's thumb, claiming that “beads wouldn't do, it must be something alive.”

Granny comes closer to death and quickly tries to instruct her children as to what to do with her possessions after she dies. She reassures Cornelia that she won't die yet.

Granny feels as if she has become a **small blue light**. As she dies, the light leaves her body and floats upwards. She asks God to give her a sign of reassurance.

God fails to give Granny a “sign,” and instead abandons her in her time of need, just as George did sixty years before—“again” there was “no bridegroom and the priest in the house,” because this is also what happened at her failed wedding. Granny claims that she will never forgive this cruelty, and instead blows “out the light” of her own life.

The character of Father Connolly is not an especially pious priest, because the story ultimately favors the human over the spiritual. By making her priest seem like a very down-to-earth and human character, Porter implies that this is preferable to an overly pious outlook.



This image suggests that death and birth are much closer than they seem. Porter often links these two concepts in order to make death less negative, and to encourage the reader to appreciate life in the face of Granny's death.



Granny's dislike of the photograph, because it is not human enough, illustrates Porter's wider preference for the alive over the lifeless in this story.



This image represents Granny's ultimate rejection of the spiritual in favor of the human. A rosary will no longer do, as Granny can now only find comfort in the people around her.



Granny attempts to assert control over her oncoming death by organizing trivial domestic details. These are things with which she is familiar and which she can control.



As Granny dies, the “small blue light” signifies Granny leaving her earthly body, perhaps implying that she is heading toward the spiritual realm.



This is the occasion of Granny's second jilting, because she is abandoned by God just as she was once abandoned by George. In the face of this, Granny feels more abandoned and powerless than ever. However, she regains control by choosing to die of her own accord, blowing “out the light” of her life and dying on her own terms.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Rainbow, Sophie. "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Aug 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rainbow, Sophie. "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." LitCharts LLC, August 29, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020.
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-jilting-of-granny-weatherall>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*. Harcourt. 1979.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*. New York: Harcourt. 1979.