ABSTRACT

CASSANDRA ELIZABETH HAWKINS. Katherine Anne Porter's "Struggle For Coherence:" Racial Ambivalence In The Old Order and "Old Mortality". (Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.)

Most critics of Katherine Anne Porter's The Old Order and "Old Mortality" focus on the stories' functions as coming-of-age tales in which Miranda discovers her gendered identity and realizes her position within a patriarchal society. However, the gendered aspect of coming-of-age, for a postbellum white woman in the South, was fused with race—an element that critics have largely neglected. Porter grew up in an era when many Southern whites struggled to redefine themselves in the midst of shifts among the social orders in the aftermath of the Civil War, and thus recast their history as romanticized myths of idyllic plantations, romantic slave holders, and "happy darkies." When the Gay family stories "The Old Order and "Old Mortality"—along with their author—are properly positioned within the historical context of the post-Reconstruction South, they reveal not only a preoccupation with gender within familial and societal structures, but also a fixation on conceptions of whiteness and racial order in the early decades of Jim-Crow segregation. Miranda, along with the narrator of the stories, struggles with a deep racial ambivalence: as often as the narrator purports white superiority, she also subverts it by continually revealing ruptures in the Old South myth and by acknowledging the lived experiences of African-Americans, and Miranda comes to a cognizance of her own guilt and complicity through metaphorical representations of white exploitation of black bodies. Such racially ambivalent stories at first appear confusing from Porter, who lived an outward life of frank racism and aristocratic extravagance. However, if the narrator is an autobiographical character in addition to Miranda, the stories may loosely mirror the relationship between an adult
Porter and her childhood self as she deciphers her experiences and struggles with the knowledge of her own complicity and duplicitousness in racial oppression.