AN ANALYSIS OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S NOVEL
SHIP OF FOOLS: A STATEMENT TO OUR TIME

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SHIP OF FOOLS: A STATEMENT TO OUR TIME

Capable of "sending herself out of herself, of thinking herself 'into the thoughts and feelings of beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different' from her own" describes the subtle power of Katherine Anne Porter.¹ Hers has been a strange career. Born in 1893 she had published only three volumes of short stories, Flowering Judas and Other Stories (1935), Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels (1939), and The Leaning Tower and Other Stories (1944), and one book of personal essays and criticism, The Days Before (1952), prior to Ship of Fools. Yet, on the basis of these she has been hailed as one of the writers who have "perfected the forms of the modern short story in America, who stand at the top of the list in what has been called the American short story's most brilliant period."² She has been a physically weak woman, spending some time in a sanitarium with tuberculosis as a young woman and spending other periods of time recovering from physical illnesses caused by overwork,³ but she is a dedicated artist and does not write to please the critics or the public.

³Wescott, "Katherine Anne Porter," p. 44.
It is true that I place great value on certain kinds of perceptive criticism but neither praise nor blame affects my actual work, for I am under a compulsion to write as I do; when I am working I forget who approved and who disapproved, and why. The worker in an art is dyed in his own color, it is useless to ask him to change his faults or his virtues; he must, rather more literally than most men, work out his own salvation.  

Ship of Fools was first mentioned in the preface to an edition of Flowering Judas and Other Stories published in 1940. In it Miss Porter mentioned that the stories were:

fragments of a much larger plan which I am still engaged in carrying out, and they are what I was then able to achieve in the way of order and form and statement in a period of grotesque dislocations when the whole world was heaving in the sickness of a millenial change.

Actually, the struggle with her novel began in 1931 when she took a voyage to Germany. According to Glenway Wescott the novel found its beginnings in a letter Miss Porter wrote to a friend describing her voyage. Originally the book was to be published under the title No Safe Harbor and excerpts appeared in various magazines under this title over the years.

In April of 1962 the book was finally published under the title Ship of Fools. The title was taken from Das Narrenschiff, a moral allegory by Sebastian Brant published in 1494. In the introduction to Ship of Fools Miss Porter explains why she chose the title:

I read it in Basel in the summer of 1932 when I had still vividly in mind the impressions of my first voyage to

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2 Harry John Mooney, Jr., The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter (Pittsburgh, 1962), p. 56.
4 Ray Benedict West, Katherine Anne Porter (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 32.
Europe. When I began thinking about my novel, I took for my own this simple almost universal image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity. It is by no means new -- it was very old and durable and familiar when Brant used it; and it suits my purpose exactly. I am a passenger on that ship.¹

In its final form, the novel has three parts and covers 497 pages. It tells of the voyage of a German ship the Vera (truth), from Vera Cruz, Mexico, to Bremerhaven, Germany, with stops at several ports along the way. The characters are the passengers and crew of the Vera as well as several minor persons in the ports. The captain and crew are German, as are many of the passengers. Among the German passengers are Professor and Frau Rutten, an obese couple with an equally obese bulldog, Bebe; the grotesque "pink and pig-snouted" Herr Rieber who is constantly chasing the screaming "pea-hen" Lizzi Spuckenkieker; Dr. Schumann the ship's gentle doctor; the suave and presentable Herr Wilhelm Freytag; and Julius Lowenthal, a Jew who sells "Catholic furnishings."

There are several Americans on board. The most important are a pair of lovers, David Scott and Jenny Brown, and a 45 year-old divorcee, Mary Treadwell, who is pinched by an irate beggar woman in the opening pages of the book. The Spanish element is formed by a company of Zarzuela dancers and singers who "ran in a loose imperfect domestic group,"² and a pair of twins, Ric and Rac, who belong to two of the dancers.

There are also Swiss, Cuban, Mexican, and Swedish passengers on board. In the steerage there are 876 Spanish laborers who are being returned to their native homes after the failure of the Cuban sugar market. Miss

¹Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools (Boston, 1962), introduction.
²Ibid., p. 13.
Porter manipulates her huge cast of characters in an episodic method. She tells their stories by moving from one passenger or group of passengers to another.

*Ship of Fools* deals with human folly. It is a political novel—political in the broadest sense of the word. Miss Porter has done a study of human relations and she is very much aware that "the impulses which lead human beings to mistreat one another in private relations are not generically different from the impulses which cause world wars."\(^1\)

She has peopled her book with human beings who are so trapped and isolated in their own particular blind searches for happiness that they are totally unaware of and indifferent to the problems of their fellow passengers or the hurts they unconsciously heap upon each other. R. B. West considers Miss Porter to be viewing man "as a pathetic creature struggling . . . to overcome his limitations and . . . to organize the actions of his life around an impossible dream. In each case, he is more to be pitied than condemned."\(^2\) The true impact of human folly or failing is demonstrated by the actions of many of the characters who are involved in major struggles with others and themselves. The two American painters, David and Jenny, are caught up in a struggle of love and hate. They are at least partially aware of the destructive quality of their relationship but they continue to torment each other as they wait for a final wrench to terminate their affair.

Another character used to show human folly in the struggle to gain happiness is Mrs. Treadwell. Mrs. Treadwell fails because she refuses

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\(^1\)Mooney, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
\(^2\)West, *Katherine Anne Porter*, p. 33.
to become involved with life and the living. She is searching for happiness by running from life and maturity. She becomes involved with others by accident in those brief moments when she unconsciously drops her studied indifference to them. The Germans are a chilling and frightening group as they exhibit qualities of extreme nationalism and the race superiority views of Nietzsche in their quests for happiness. They foreshadow the rise of Hitler and make the destination of the ship even more frightening when the horrors that followed Hitler's accession to power are recalled.

The book also presents a study of evil and the hint of the possibility of good. The Spanish dancers and the twins are a study of evil, developed (dancers) and natural (twins). They contemptuously ignore the other passengers, but their presence is always made known to their fellow travelers. Wherever and whenever they appear the others are aware of and apprehensive, almost subconsciously afraid, of them. There are hints of possible good, but the characters who suggest happiness and contentment are not fully developed. They are the Mexican newlyweds who are absorbed in each other and their personal bliss and contentment; the Indian nurse who is simple and primitive to the extent that her life seems to have no connection with or relation to the mad whirl which surrounds the other characters; the simple Basque wood-carver who is happy creating small wooden figures and is acknowledged by the two American painters, David and Jenny, to be a better artist than they are.

*Ship of Fools* is a novel of theme and character. It is the development of the theme through intensive character studies rather than through the plot of the story. It is characteristic of Miss Porter to
write stories of theme and character. In 1942 she wrote:

First, have faith in your theme; then get so well acquainted
with your characters that they live and grow in your imagi-
ation exactly as if you saw them in the flesh; and finally,
tell their story with all the truth and tenderness and
severity you are capable of. . . .1

This is exactly what she has done in her novel. She recently told an in-
terviewer, "I am nowhere and everywhere, I am the captain and the seasick
bulldog and the man in the cherry-colored shirt who sings and the devil-
ish children and all of the women and lots of the men." 2

Miss Porter made her voyage in 1931, and her novel deals with this
time period. The actual voyage takes only 26 days, August 22 - Septem-
ber 17, 1931, but the book covers a longer time span through the use of
flashbacks and hints of the future.3 In 1931 the world was in a state
of turmoil and confusion. The United States was in the middle of the de-
pression; this was the day of the soup lines and of the bread lines.
There were various political eruptions in Latin America.4 In Spain the
military dictatorship of Rivera was replaced by a republican government
with definite communistic tendencies.5 The French situation was unstable
and chaotic as one premier after another filed into and out of office.6

Germany was approaching complete chaos. Hitler and his Nazi Party were
gaining more and more control. By 1933 Hitler had been appointed

1Porter, The Days Before, p. 135.
2Rochelle Gibson, "The Author," Saturday Review, XLV (March 31,
1962), 15.
4Stanley Kauffmann, "Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning Work," New
5Walter Phelps Hall, Europe in the Twentieth Century (New York,
6Ibid., p. 204.
Chancellor of Germany.\textsuperscript{1} The world was filled with fear and confusion. The condition of the world and of mankind in the 1930's disturbed Miss Porter a great deal. In 1939 she stated:

Political tendency since 1930 has been to the last degree a confused, struggling, drowning-man-and-straw sort of thing, stampede of panicked crowd, each man trying to save himself— one at a time trying to work out his horrible confusions.\textsuperscript{2}

Each of Miss Porter's characters is struggling and striving to reach an anticipated dream of happiness but the destination of most of them is Germany. They are not heading into their anticipated dream world but into a world of nightmares. The passengers are trapped by their own foolishness. They are heading for greater disasters than those they are leaving, and worst of all, they are so involved and absorbed in their own situations that they are not aware of or apprehensive about what lies ahead of them. During the voyage the Vera passes by the Isle of Wight. The Isle of Wight, or isle of living beings, is depicted in an illusionary manner. One character states, "When I was little I thought maybe heaven would be like that."\textsuperscript{3} All of the passengers are searching for their own heaven, and they are all hunting for illusions.

The plot of the novel is developed in three parts. Each part is prefaced by an epigram. Part I, "Embarkation," moves from Vera Cruz to Havana. The epigram used for Part I is a quotation from Baudelaire, "When do you sail for happiness?"\textsuperscript{4} As the story begins, all of the passengers are described as believing that "they were bound for a place

\textsuperscript{1}Hall, op. cit., p. 186-187.
\textsuperscript{2}Porter, The Days Before, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{3}Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 493.
\textsuperscript{4}West, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 16.
for some reason more desirable than the one they were leaving." It is evident that they are not interested in their fellow travelers, for "each chose to maintain his pride and separateness within himself." And, "It was as if, looking forward to the long voyage before them, they had come to the common decision that one cannot be too careful of chance-met, haphazard acquaintances."

As Part I unfolds, certain relationships begin to form and patterns are set. The involvements occur not because of a change in the attitudes of the characters but as a result of the close quarters and confined living which accompanies living on board a ship. Mrs. Treadwell begins to run from involvement with others because she finds herself reacting to the grief of Frau Schmitt who is taking her husband's body back to Germany. David and Jenny quarrel almost immediately and their customary cycle of quarreling, reconciling, and waiting for a chance to get even is soon established. Jenny quickly becomes acquainted with Freytag, although neither one of them really cares for the other. Try as they might to avoid each other, the passengers are forced into relationships and situations very quickly.

Part II, "High Seas," takes the ship and its human cargo from outside the Havana Harbor to within sight of one of the Canary Islands, Tenerife. This section of Ship of Fools has been referred to as "The Wasteland Section" of the novel. The epigram for this section is the

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1 Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 10.
2 Ibid., p. 11.
3 Ibid.
4 West, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 35.
title of a song by Brahms, "No House, No Home."

All of the passengers are between their old homes and their intended destinations; they are indeed houseless and homeless. Here the relationships of the characters are examined and the theme of the novel developed and studied as the passengers constantly encounter each other, often by accident, on the ship.

David and Jenny establish a cycle of quarreling, reconciling, and plotting to better the other one at the first opportunity almost immediately. After each fight, and their quarrels are frequent, Jenny turns to Freytag to get solace and to irritate David. Freytag talks incessantly about his beautiful wife, whom he plans to bring from Germany to Mexico, to anyone who will listen, and this someone at times happens to be Mary Treadwell. It is to her that Freytag conveys his secret -- his wife is Jewish. The fact that Mrs. Treadwell, who refuses to be involved with anyone, in turn informs her obnoxious and rabid race fanatic roommate, Lizzi, about Freytag's wife in an unconsciously irritated reaction to Lizzi's religious prejudices provides one of the major events of the book.

Her action results not only in Freytag's removal, voluntarily, from the Captain's table but a change in the attitude and the treatment he receives from his fellow Germans. The portrayal of the German group and their treatment of Freytag is a frightening examination of the concept of German race and religious superiority. Freytag, who exhibits all of the qualities of the well-bred German, becomes totally and irrationally

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1West, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 31.
un-German and unacceptable to his fellow Germans simply because he is married to a Jewess. His ensuing encounter with the repulsive Lowenthal demonstrates that irrational hatred extends to Jews also. Lowenthal is as adamant in his hatred of Gentiles as the Germans are in their hatred of Jews. Once again human folly through blind adherence to a concept aimed at producing happiness is demonstrated.

The second major event in Part II occurs when the twins (natural evil) cause the death of the simple wood-carver (good) when they throw the Huttens' dog, Bebe, overboard. The wood-carver jumps overboard and saves the dog, but he himself drowns. The attitude of the passengers, the Huttens in particular, toward the death of the wood-carver, who is a Christ-figure, is examined. They reject the man and they resent his actions because they don't understand him. The Huttens resent his death because of their feeling of indebtedness to him for saving their pet. The passengers try to rationalize the action of the Basque by claiming he actually committed suicide to escape his wretched condition. The wood-carver's death becomes a wasted sacrifice.

Soon after the death of the wood-carver the seeds for the culminating action of the book are sown. The Spanish dancers begin planning a dance. They coerce and frighten the other passengers into buying tickets for their party. While the dancers (developed evil) are in the process of preparing for their party, they are defeated by the twins (natural evil). The adults have been planning to steal the pearl necklace of one of the passengers in order to sell it after they reach port. The twins, however, thwart their plans by stealing the pearls on an impulse and throwing them overboard. It is on this note that Part II ends.
Part III, "The Harbors," begins in the harbor at Tenerife and ends in the harbor at Bremerhaven. In Tenerife the Spaniards proceed to steal the prizes they plan to raffle off at their party. Many of the passengers are involved in the theft because they stand quietly by, even follow the company from store to store, and watch them pilfer and steal. They, then, are party to the thefts. Between Tenerife and Vigo, where the main passengers begin to depart, the party is held. It is the climax of the story. After constantly colliding with each other since the start of the voyage, the passengers react to the created strain of the situation by exploding in various emotional and violent ways at the party. The entire established routine is upset when the Spaniards confuse the created atmosphere and bring all of the passengers together.

Jenny and Freytag experience a frustrated and drunken attempt at love-making while David spies on them. Mrs. Treadwell in an uncontrollable frenzy beats an intoxicated fellow American with the spike heel of her slipper when he mistakes her for one of the Spanish dancers, because of the heavy make-up she has applied, and attempts to force his way into her stateroom. The passengers antagonize each other, their children, their spouses, and themselves in uncontrollable outbursts of emotions.

After the party, the passengers retreat into their earlier aloof relationships as they prepare to disembark at various ports. A statement by Mrs. Treadwell, the greatest part of which Miss Porter put into italics, sums up the foolishness and total failure of man in his pitiful attempt to exist side by side with others:

What they were saying to each other was only, Love me, love me in spite of all! Whether or not I love you, whether I
am fit to love, whether you are able to love, even if there
is no such thing as love, love me.¹

The passengers once again, "lapsed rather comfortably into their natural
relation of strangers, as separate as silkworms in their cocoons."²

They prepare to leave the ship as one by one the final harbors are
reached. Some, the Zarzuela company, the rest of the steerage passengers,
a Cuban couple, and the Mexican newlyweds leave at Vigo, Spain. Others,
Mrs. Treadwell, a Mexican diplomat's wife and baby, the Indian nurse, and
six Cuban medical students, go ashore at Boulogne, France. The rest of
the passengers, a Swiss family, a Swede, David and Jenny and a fellow
American and the crew continue to Bremerhaven, Germany.

It is as the passengers prepare to disembark and walk down the
gangplank that the importance of the third epigram is realized. The
third section of the book is prefaced by the following quotation from
St. Paul, "For here we have no continuing city ... ." The true fool-
lishness of man and the knowledge that the passengers will not find their
dreams in the harbors is demonstrated in several ways. First of all,
Miss Porter did not include the rest of St. Paul's statement, "... but we seek on to come."³ There is, then, no reason to suspect that
the passengers will realize their dreams in their chosen harbors.
Secondly, none of the passengers are seen or described actually reaching
their chosen land, or anticipated heaven. The passengers are described
climbing into the boat which will take them ashore, walking down the

¹Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 480.
²Ibid., p. 486.
³West, Katherine Anne Porter, p. 35.
gangplank, and standing on the deck waiting for the ship to reach shore; Miss Porter leaves them in the boat transporting them to shore, walking down the gangplank, and standing on the deck.

That man is foolish can, therefore, be seen throughout the plot of the book. From start to finish the characters do foolish things and treat each other miserably, and their complicated relationships and inner reactions remove any doubt as to whether or not man in his present condition is foolish. Miss Porter's passengers are skillfully and forcefully drawn. They demonstrate her theme conclusively as they blunderingly love, hate, and irritate each other on their voyage in search of their dreams. Each is wrapped up in his own plans; each is obsessed with his own problems; each is trapped in his own misery; and each makes those around him miserable. The theme is developed through the stories, thoughts, and actions of the characters as separate human beings, as couples, as small cliques, and finally as a conglomerate group of foolish people on a ship sailing to eternity. The separate and inter-related parts played by David Scott, Jenny Brown, Mary Treadwell, Wilhelm Freytag, and Julius Lowenthal illustrate the complexities of Miss Porter's characters and their parts in developing the theme of Ship of Fools.

It is difficult to separate the characters of David and Jenny, yet each has an individual place in Miss Porter's complex view of mankind as it is portrayed in Ship of Fools. David Scott is an aspiring young artist who is having an affair with another young artist, Jenny Brown. David is foolish for several reasons and it is his foolishness that makes him miserable. David wanted to go to Spain and the character which he tries to present to others is rugged, roughtewn, and cold -- much as
the pictures Spain would be. He is going to Germany as a compromise made with Jenny, and he illustrates human failing and foolishness because he keeps punishing himself and Jenny for the compromise. Because David is inhibited, Jenny constantly embarrasses him by her unconventionality. He fails himself and Jenny and undermines their relationship because he cannot accept Jenny as she is and admit that part of their problems are because of him. David is striving to present himself in the image he would like to be, and he foolishly refuses to admit that he has human failings; he renders himself unable to love.

David is constantly striving to remove himself from relationships with others. He admires Mrs. Treadwell because she seems cool and aloof. To be happy he must not feel guilty, and every time he and Jenny have a scene he has to convince himself that Jenny is wrong and deliberately plotting against him. He constantly tries to dominate her and he feels dominant and successful only when he finds something to hold over her. He gets this information by skulking around in shadows spying on Jenny and Freytag. David is foolish because he is unable to love; in seeking happiness he destroys and hurts others. David cannot participate in life; he cannot give of himself and he knows it.

David's attention was fixed on those who were not dancing: the born outsiders; the perpetual uninvited; the unwanted; and those who, like himself, for whatever sad reason refused to join in. He ranged himself with all of them; they were his sort, he knew them by heart at sight.\footnote{Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 125.}

Jenny represents another type of human folly. Like David she is searching for happiness, but unlike David she realizes that part of their
trouble is caused by both of them. She considers their relationship to be a death struggle of love and hate and remembers a fight she had seen from a bus window in Mexico:

As the bus rolled by, Jenny saw a man and a woman, some distance from the group, locked in a death battle. They swayed and staggered together in a strange embrace, as if they supported each other; but in the man's raised hand was a long knife, and the woman's breasts and stomach were pierced. The blood ran down her body and over her thighs, her skirts were sticking to her legs with her own blood. She was beating him on the head with a jagged stone, and his features were veiled in rivulets of blood. They were silent, and their faces had taken on a saintlike patience in suffering, abstract, purified of rage and hatred in their one holy dedicated purpose to kill each other. Their flesh swayed together and clung, their left arms were wound about each other's bodies as if in love. Their weapons were raised again, but their heads lowered little by little, until the woman's head rested upon his breast and his head was on her shoulder, and holding thus, they both struck again.¹

In her dream about the struggle the faces of the two Indians become the faces of David and Jenny. The sad thing is that because of her human failings Jenny cannot break off the affair. She simply waits for the final destructive blow knowing full well what she is doing.

Jenny, unlike David, is completely uninhibited and to some extent amoral. She has no true deep convictions but joins causes, has joined picket lines, and has had several meaningless affairs because of whims. Jenny had wanted to go to France and she pictures it as misty and romantic; much as she wanted to be. Jenny, too, is foolish. She is completely unconscious of herself and the effect or impression of her actions. She has no true deep convictions or reasons for her actions but relies on emotion and whims. Her relationship with Freytag is a perfect example of this weakness. Perhaps her most foolish trait lies in her

¹Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 144.
realization of the destructive quality of her relationship with David and her inability or refusal to end the affair. Instead, Jenny goes on knowing that:

We will go on for a while, and it will be worse and worse, and we will say and do more outrageous things to each other, and one day we will strike the final death-giving blows. There is nowhere to go back and begin again with this... there is no place to go. The past is never where you think you left it: you are not the same person you were yesterday -- oh where did David go, I wonder? The place you are going towards doesn't exist yet, you must build it when you come to the right spot. ¹

Not only does she recognize her own folly but she sees the folly of mankind. Despite her insights, it is doubtful that Jenny will ever begin building a place of existence or even recognize the right spot if she should happen to stumble onto it.

An analysis of Mary Treadwell, as well as exhibiting another form of human failing which Miss Porter develops, illustrates the complexity of the plot and the involvements of the characters. In one sense Mrs. Treadwell's story is isolated and alone because being foolish this is how she wants it. Yet, no one can completely isolate himself and remove himself from the world. This is also Mrs. Treadwell's problem. At points her story crosses David's and Jenny's in the development of the plot because of her inadvertent involvement with Freytag and because David, Jenny, and Freytag form a triangle.

Mrs. Treadwell is a 46-year-old divorcée from a rich and pampered background. She has been taught that life and the future are soft and romantic. An unhappy marriage exposed her to the harsh realities of

¹Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 1146.
adult life. Refusing to accept the realities of life necessitated her withdrawal from human society. Mrs. Treadwell wants no human contact or involvement.

Mrs. Treadwell moved away again from the threat of human nearness, of feeling ... All of it was not good, neither for confidant nor listener ... No, don't tell me any more about yourself, I am not listening, you cannot force my attention. I don't want to know you, and I will not know you. Let me alone.¹

Mrs. Treadwell is foolish because she refuses to accept her relationship to others in the world or the realities of life.

Because of her withdrawal from and refusal to accept life Mrs. Treadwell accidentally releases the information that Freytag has a Jewish wife. Throughout the crisis that follows the slip she cannot blame herself for Freytag's misfortune. The emotion she feels is anger--anger at herself for listening to someone and anger at him for putting her in the vulnerable position of having to listen. Mrs. Treadwell is caught up in the human condition and the foolishness of all men. She refuses to communicate with others and leads a sterile life of make-believe. She lives in a world of isolation because that way, "Nobody is going to suspect that I am that unfortunate girl who couldn't grow up, that under my sober old-lady skin I am hiding carefully my sixteen-year-old-heart."² Even so, Mrs. Treadwell is human and when she finally releases her emotions it results in bizarre behavior, the beating, behind a false-face of make-up, of another passenger with the heel of her slipper. Mrs. Treadwell also is seeking happiness but she will never

¹Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 112.
²Ibid., p. 114.
find it. She leaves the boat quietly in a mist. The world she is trying to create is misty and unreal. She cannot find real happiness in an unreal world.

Wilhelm Freytag's story is interwoven with the three characters mentioned before. Not only does Miss Porter use him to help develop the characters of David, Jenny, and Mrs. Treadwell but she also weaves a story around him. Freytag is the perfect German gentleman -- well-bred, sentimental, intelligent, and handsome. Yet, he has behaved in a most un-German way; he has married a Jewish girl. The attitude of the other Germans toward Freytag when they learn this provides an excellent study of the emotional and completely irrational concept of racist supremacy which will soon grip Germany. The fact that Freytag is such a good German prior to the discovery only enhances and makes more glaring the total irrationality of racist supremacy. Freytag, nonetheless, is also foolish and he too has a place on board a ship of fools. Freytag is another study of the lack of communication between people. He is absorbed in his tragic situation, and he cannot understand why all of the other passengers do not see that his problem is much worse than theirs. He does, in fact, by the end of the book become rather tiring and appears pompous and egotistical.

Freytag is a study of the loss of reality. At first he sees his wife as his happiness and he hopes to find a heaven, or haven, for both of them. Yet, by the end of the journey it is apparent that Freytag sometimes resents his wife's Jewishness and feels that his quest really is hopeless. Although he is constantly thinking and talking about his wife, he discovers that he can no longer picture her in his
mind, "He shook his head as if that might scatter his uncomfortable thoughts, and tried to think of Mary, but the nearer he came to her bodily, the more dimly her image flickered in his mind." Jenny sensed this one evening while she was dancing with him:

Now she knew that all along he had been talking about his wife as people talk about their dead, and in this constant reminiscence of her, he was visiting her grave with flowers and reading there the inscription he had composed for her himself.

At the end of the novel he is standing on the deck of the boat waiting to meet his wife -- still hoping to find a place where they can find peace, happiness, and acceptance.

All of the characters, major and minor, play an important part in Miss Porter's novel. A good example of the use of a minor character is Herr Lowenthal, the lone Jew aboard ship, whose story touches upon Freytag's story as well as playing an isolated part in the novel.

Lowenthal is completely repulsive. To have made him otherwise would have made the novel only a statement against racism rather than a study of modern man. Not only is Lowenthal hated irrationally, but he hates irrationally. He cannot give the acceptance to the others that he demands from them. He wants respect, but he gives none. Freytag describes him when he is seated with Lowenthal after leaving the Captain's table:

He could not help seeing at too close a range Herr Lowenthal's smooth oily face, his large heavy lids over chocolate-colored lightless eyes, the unpleasantly thick mobile lips that

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1 Porter, Ship of Fools, p. 483.
2 Ibid., p. 306.
squirmed as he chewed or talked. Freytag knew the type too well — over-familiar if you made the mistake of being pleasant to him; loud and insolent if he suspected timidity in you; sly and cringing if you knew how to put him in his place. No this one won't do very well as the hero of a Cause, Freytag decided. He's not the one all the row is about.¹

Lowenthal, too, is foolish in the limitation of his human feelings. All during the voyage he hopes only to escape the "goym" and return to Cousin Sarah's in Dusseldorf for a good clean Jewish meal.

The criticism that followed the publication of Ship of Fools was varied. Some critics felt the book was a brilliant portrayal and development of the themes of Miss Porter's earlier work.² Others saw it as flawless in style and one of the most serious novels of 1962.³ Many, however, were not enthusiastic. Granville Hicks took the position that the book was neither a great failure nor a tremendous success. He felt the book, despite its insights, left "no sense of human possibility."⁴ Howard Moss felt that the magic of earlier works was missing and that the book lacked impulse.⁵ The review in the New Republic by Stanley Kauffmann summed up the criticism by saying that if Miss Porter's characters represented western man that wester man should fail because, "There is scant hint in it of what makes his failures worth regret, scant trace of lost possibilities of

⁴Granville Hicks, "Voyage of Life," Saturday Review XLV (March 31, 1962), 15-16.
grandeur.\footnote{1} Kauffmann concludes by saying that the book is satiric rather than tragic and that satire "about a huge complex of civilizations ceases to be satiric and becomes misanthropy."\footnote{2}

It is possible that many of the critics missed the point of the novel. In the first place, it is not a work that can be read hurriedly and conclusions about it cannot be formed immediately after reading it. As a statement, twenty years in the writing, by one of America's foremost authors it deserves to be studied. It has to be studied and carefully analyzed because of its size and complexity.

In discussing her novel Miss Porter answered some of the charges leveled against her by the critics:

Some critics said that none of my people were nice. Well, I'll tell you, I'm not writing about goody-goody people in goody-goody situations. I'm writing about real people in the real world, people who are either unable to see what's going on around them or unable to face up to it, people who get in trouble and come through the best they can.\footnote{3}

Miss Porter's statement explains why the novel is not misanthropic. She has drawn characters who are foolish, yes, but they are also depicted as human beings. They do get in trouble and they do err, but as she has said, they do try to solve their problems. The tragic message of the book is that men do not really see their own problems or are unable to face them squarely. She has also presented characters who suggest good. As well as that, all of the major characters, or foolish people, do have fleeting insights into life and their problems. Sadly enough,

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item Kauffmann, "Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning Work," p. 25.
\item Ibid.
\item Cleveland Amory, "Celebrity Register," McCall's, XC (April, 1963), 134.
\end{itemize}
though, they can't seem to take advantage of their knowledge. The book is disturbing. Miss Porter evidently meant it to be. Some of the characters are repulsive. Some people, whether we like it or not, are repulsive. For the intelligent and honest reader, the book is even more frightening. It is impossible not to identify with at least one character aboard the Vera at least once. No one likes to admit that he is foolish, but this identification forces the reader aboard the Vera also. The book is disturbing, yes, but misanthropic, no. Considering past statements Miss Porter has made about the situation of mankind it is doubtful that she meant the book to be satiric or misanthropic. An example of her thought is seen in a statement she made in _The Days Before:_

> And yet it may be that what we have is a world not on the verge of flying apart, but a uncreated one -- still in shapeless fragments waiting to be put together properly. I imagine that when we want something better, we may have it: at perhaps no greater price than we have already paid for the worse.¹

Miss Porter, in _Ship of Fools_, rather than writing man off as hopeless, has suggested that there is great possibility in him, if he only cares enough to act upon his insights and face up to the responsibilities of life. Man is foolish; the characters in the novel _Ship of Fools_ are fools, but no man, and none of the characters, has to be foolish. It is up to man, it was up to each passenger, to better his state. As well as a statement about or summation of modern man it seems that Miss Porter is offering hints of possibilities and issuing a challenge to modern man. She appears to be asking if he dares to care enough to begin putting the fragments together now, before it really is too late.

¹Porter, _The Days Before_, p. 203.
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