Flowering Judas

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

The descendant of frontiersman Daniel Boone and the writer O. Henry (real name William Sidney Porter), Katherine Anne Porter grew up in convents in Texas and Louisiana before running away in 1906 to pursue a career as an actress and singer. Upon returning to Texas in 1914, she joined the staff of the magazine *Critic* and later *Rocky Mountain News* out of Denver Colorado, where she wrote book articles and the occasional piece of political analysis. During the 1920s, she traveled to Mexico to aid various left-wing causes, an experience mirrored in "Flowering Judas," the title story of her first collection of short stories and the winner of a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship. Although more well-reviewed collections followed (including *Hacienda* in 1934 and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in 1942), Porter was largely ignored by the public until her only novel, the best-selling *Ship of Fools*, was published in 1962. Just as the stories in *Flowering Judas* were informed by her experiences in Mexico, *Ship of Fools* was indebted to her journey by boat to Bremerhaven, Germany, in 1932. Porter continued to fight for social justice and women's rights and took aim at these subjects in her later works. Porter's reputation continued to grow, culminating in a Pulitzer Prize for her *Collected Stories* in 1966. She died in 1980 in Silver Spring, Maryland, leaving behind the correspondence that would later be collected in *The Letters of Katherine Anne Porter*, as well as her famous recipe for Mole Poblano with chili and chocolate, which she had learned during her time in Mexico.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although not explicitly stated, Laura has come to Mexico to aid in the Obregón Revolution, so named for Álvaro Obregón Salido, a general in the Mexican Revolution who served as president between 1920 and 1924, and was assassinated in 1928 after winning election to serve a second term. This was a period of enormous upheaval in Mexico, with the Revolution (which lasted from 1910 to 1920) still fresh in the minds of the people. Hence Obregón represented comparative stability, as well as credibility for having served with fellow revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, though he broke with their policies in 1914. During a long clash between the Zapatistas (as Zapata's followers were known) and Obregón's own army, Obregón lost his right arm in a blast (the arm was later embalmed and placed in a monument to Obregón at the site of his assassination). Obregón's election brought huge reforms to Mexico, as well as signaling the end of ten years of near-constant warfare. Education, labor relations, and Mexico-U.S. relations flourished under Obregón and these are largely the causes with which Laura aligns herself in "Flowering Judas." However, Obregón's government was perceived as hostile to the Catholic Church in upholding strict separation of church and state, hence Laura's secrecy regarding her faith. It is possible that the story takes place after Obregón's assassination and the ensuing power vacuum, as Braggioni mentions "General Ortiz," which likely refers to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, who succeeded Obregón as President in 1930. Ortiz Rubio had been a brigadier general in the Constitutionalist Army during the Revolution, but his presidency was marked by accusations that he was merely a puppet of another ex-President Plutarco Elías Calles, so he resigned in 1932. Thus the post-Revolutionary Mexico of "Flowering Judas" is one of fragile political stability, marked by cynicism, corruption, and turmoil.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Katherine Anne Porter was among the first wave of female American writers to receive critical praise, though it took time for sales to catch up. Morally complex and sharply detailed, with disillusionment as a central theme, "Flowering Judas" bears some resemblance to work by contemporaries like Willa Cather, whose story "Paul's Case" also features an idealist's run-in with reality to disastrous effect. Another near-contemporary, Jean Stafford, won the Pulitzer for her *Collected Stories* four years after Porter received the same honor for her stories. One of Stafford's best-remembered stories is "The Interior Castle," which deals with religion as respite from the world in a manner reminiscent of "Flowering Judas." The Interior Castle of the title is a phrase coined by the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Avilla, and the story itself deals with a woman immobilized after a car crash who retreats inward as she lies in a bed inside a seedy hospital plagued by mismanagement and misdiagnosis. Other prominent female short story writers of the period were Eudora Welty, whose "A Worn Path" received the O. Henry award in 1941, and Flannery O'Connor who, like Porter, was raised Catholic and incorporated religious themes into stories like "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Altogether, writers like Porter, Stafford, Welty, and O'Connor went a long way toward redefining the American short story, tackling politics while frequently featuring sensitive characters of immense interiority. Whereas previously the province of magazines, the short story collection as it is known today came about in part due to their *Collected Stories*, which received attention normally reserved for novels.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Flowering Judas
- **When Written:** 1930
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1930 in *Hound and Horn* magazine
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, American literature, revolutionary literature
- **Setting:** Mexico City, c. 1920s
- **Climax:** Laura has a dream about Eugenio, who calls her a murderer.
- **Antagonist:** Braggioni
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Close Call. Porter very nearly died in the 1918 flu pandemic and spent months in the hospital, where she lost most of her hair. When it grew back, it had turned completely white and remained so for the rest of her life, making her highly recognizable in the literary world.

Tinsel Town. Porter's novel, *Ship of Fools*, was made into a feature film in 1965, starring Vivien Leigh and Lee Marvin. It wasn't Porter's first brush with Hollywood, as she worked frequently as an extra in films beginning in 1915.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Flowering Judas" represents a snapshot of the life of a 22-year-old American woman named Laura, who has come to Mexico to aid the Socialist cause in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution.

As the story opens, Laura returns home to find her benefactor, Braggioni, waiting for her. Braggioni plays his guitar and sings off-key, with Laura as a reluctant audience. Braggioni pays for Laura's room and board and regularly attempts to seduce her, forcing Laura to politely refuse him night after night. Braggioni is an embittered former revolutionary who has succumbed to materialism and prides himself on his elegant clothing and the power that he exercises in the neighborhood. Laura fears that she will become like Braggioni, cynical and compromised. Meanwhile, Laura teaches at a school for indigenous children, attends union rallies, and visits political prisoners, for whom she smuggles letters, cigarettes, and narcotics. She also furtively prays at a ramshackle Catholic church, hoping not to be seen by her comrades who would make a scandal of it.

Braggioni isn't the only man bewitched by Laura. When she visits the nearby town of Cuernavaca, a former captain in the Zapatista army tries to teach Laura how to ride a horse (despite her already having learned how to do so in Arizona), but only succeeds in scaring the steed. A ragged minstrel, head of the Typographers Union, sings outside Laura's house every evening until Laura's maid, Lupe, tells her that she must throw the blossoms of **the Judas tree** at him to make him go away (which, unbeknownst to Laura, only leads the boy on).

Braggioni continues to enjoy his authority and manipulates two rival factions, those of the Polish agitator and the Roumanian agitator, off of each other. Braggioni shows Laura his **silver ammunition belt** and taunts her for her naiveté, telling her that "everything turns to dust in the hand, to gall on the tongue." Laura feels herself to be idealistic to a fault and "not at home in the world," and wonders if she will become like the long-suffering realist Mrs. Braggioni, who marches in picket lines and fights for the rights of the girls who work in the cigarette factory, but spends her nights crying for Braggioni, who returns from his philandering to placate her.

At the conclusion of the story, Laura is wracked with guilt over the death of a prisoner named Eugenio who overdosed on pills Laura brought to him rather than wait for Braggioni to make a deal for his release. Braggioni writes off Eugenio as a fool that they are well rid of, but to Laura he represents a martyr possessed of the purity that she has otherwise found lacking in Mexico. She goes to sleep and dreams of the ghost of Eugenio, who calls her a murderer and says he has come to take her to death. He bids her to eat the flowers of the Judas tree, then tells her that it is his body and blood. The story ends with Laura awakening and trembling, afraid to go back to sleep.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Laura – Laura, the protagonist of the story, is a twenty-two year-old American woman of deep "political faith," who has come to Mexico to aid the Socialist cause. She teaches largely indigenous students in nearby Xochimilco and visits political prisoners, for whom she smuggles cigarettes, letters, and narcotics. A lapsed Catholic, Laura hides her occasional visits to a crumbling Mexican church while attending regular Union meetings. "Flowering Judas" is largely the story of Laura's disillusionment, as she nurses the feeling that "she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be." A virgin, she wards off the affection of many would-be suitors, particularly the loutish ex-revolutionary Braggioni, to whom she is all but indentured. Braggioni pays her room and board and serenades her nightly while bragging of his power and taste. Said to be "not at home in the world," Laura suspects herself of being too idealistic for such a corrupt world. She even suspects herself of becoming corrupt in her own way after a prisoner named Eugenio overdoses on pills that she has brought him in jail. This event prompts Laura's dream of the **Judas flower**, which shows her that she has betrayed both her religious faith and her political

convictions.

Braggioni – A self-styled "leader of men," Braggioni is the story's antagonist and Mrs. Braggioni's husband. Hypocritical, vulgar, and corpulent, Braggioni is extremely influential in local politics and has become addicted to power, wearing elegant clothing in stark contrast to the largely impoverished workers he aids. Physically described as possessing "true tawny cat's eyes," Braggioni positions himself as "a good revolutionist and professional lover of humanity," but in fact has long-abandoned his political convictions and views the locals with contempt. He has drained his wife with his infidelities and long absences and attempts to court Laura, for whom he represents the ultimate betrayal of idealistic thinking. He promises Laura that she will become as disappointed and "wounded by life" as he is and flirts with her shamelessly, hoping to wear down her defenses. Porter allows a glimpse of the man that Braggioni was at one time, the scrawny and serious young man who dreamed of revolution and whom the women called "Delgadito." But he is now little more than a power broker who manipulates the local political agitators and wears a **silver ammunition belt**. Much of the story consists of his taunting of Laura, who runs mysterious errands for him that increase his stranglehold over the neighborhood. Singing off-key as he plays his guitar, Braggioni is a grotesque harbinger of what happens when revolution turns to bitter complacency.

Eugenio – A prisoner who dies in prison of an overdose, Eugenio barely appears in the story as himself. Rather, his main importance is his appearance in Laura's dream, where he bids her eat the **Judas Flower**, telling her that it is his "body and blood," which invokes the Eucharist. Unwilling to wait for Braggioni's machinations to free him, Eugenio takes the entirety of the pills that Laura has provided with him and dies before the guards can find him. Braggioni calls him a fool and is glad to be rid of him, but for Laura, who nurses extreme guilt for her part in his death, Eugenio becomes something of a martyr, a figure of purity and deliverance.

Mrs. Braggioni - Braggioni's long-suffering wife, Mrs. Braggioni is still active in the Socialist cause, organizing the girls who work in the cigarette factories and marching in picket lines. However, Laura's sense of freedom is foreign to Mrs. Braggioni, who accepts her second-class citizen status without question. Her "sense of reality is beyond criticism," meaning that she is free of the idealistic illusions that plague Laura. She is also devoted to her unfaithful husband and spends nights crying alone, until Braggioni comes home and placates her. Her main function in the story is to represent for Laura what she could become if robbed of her independence by yielding to Braggioni.

The Roumanian and Polish Agitators – The Roumanian (as spelled in the story) and Polish agitators are two largely interchangeable protest organizers who scheme against each other but are firmly in Braggioni's power. Both flirt with Laura, with the Pole "hoping to exploit what he believes is her secret sentimental preference for him" and the Roumanian lying to her "with an air of ingenuous candor, as if he were her good friend and confidant." Both serve to illustrate the decline of revolutionary politics into divisive and petty squabbles.

The Minstrel – "A brown, shock-haired youth" who stands outside Laura's house and sings "like a lost soul" for hours on end. He introduces the concept of **Judas flower**, which, as Lupe tells Laura, she must throw at him to make him leave. Instead, he begins to follow Laura around town and leaves her poems. He is also one of the organizers of the local Typographers Union and therefore straddles progressive politics and local tradition.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Young Captain – A young hero who professes love to Laura, but ends up a figure of fun, trying to teach Laura to ride horses (which she already learned back in the States) only to lose his own horse in the process.

Lupe – Laura's "Indian maid" who announces Braggioni's presence at the beginning of the story.

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.

IDEALISM VS. REALITY

Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas" is the claustrophobic account of Laura, a 22-year-old American teacher of deep "political faith," who finds her idealism tested by a series of painful realities in the largely poor Xochimilco borough of Mexico City. Laura has come to Mexico to aid the revolutionary cause by working with local unions, educating the underserved native population, and embodying a sense of "what life should be." But when Laura is introduced, these convictions have already been shattered, leaving her feeling both betrayed and foolish. In this story, the author addresses the question of whether idealism can survive harsh political realities, concluding bleakly that one will inevitably betray their internal idealism when faced with the external and imperfect world. Porter strongly implies that giving up one's ideals can be just as bad as naively holding on to them.

Laura's clash with reality is embodied by the grotesque and hypocritical figure of her would-be suitor Braggioni, a one-time radical who has become addicted to money, power, and sexual conquest. Braggioni "has become a symbol of [Laura's] many

dissolutions, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues." Braggioni, however, is anything but. Instead, he is presented as a lecherous and bloated oaf who spends the bulk of the story serenading Laura off-key and bragging of his wealth. Just as Braggioni's attentions strain the hapless Laura, so too does he take up most of the story's length. His large frame and wanton manners are significant for their impact on Laura, and he is described as sporting **a silver ammunition belt** and tells Laura that he is "rich, not in money [...] but in power. Thus, Braggioni confronts Laura with the gulf between her expectations and crude reality. Laura has come to Mexico out of principle and an association with the Leftist struggle, hoping to find comrades and a sense of purpose; instead she finds intractable poverty and exploitation by the likes of Braggioni, who images himself "a leader of men," but is described as being clad in "elegant refinements" and is vain as well as boorish.

Braggioni confronts Laura with the possibility that she will surrender her ideals and become likewise disillusioned and bitter. As the story progresses, Braggioni emerges as more than an insufferable caricature. Like Laura, he seems to have once been possessed of genuine ideals, and he tells her "I am disappointed in everything as it comes [...] You, poor thing, you will be disappointed too." Reality has caught up with Braggioni, leaving him corrupted by the very forces he once took up arms against. His "specialized insolence" threatens Laura not only because of his sexualization of her but because he represents the natural culmination of her ongoing process of disillusionment with her ideals. Laura "wears the uniform of an idea and has renounced vanities," which, on the surface, couldn't be further from Braggioni's ostentatious style of dress and pride. But taxed by her students and frustrated by the futility of her political sympathies, she is coming to see her ideals as "full of romantic error" and the cynicism of her colleagues as "a developed sense of reality." That reality is one of compromised ideals. Laura struggles to hold on to her principles, but suspects herself of naiveté.

The clash between idealistic thought and the gradual creep of painful reality is further explored via the tertiary character of Mrs. Braggioni. She retains a romantic view of her husband and continues to tolerate his obnoxious behavior out of misplaced loyalty. Laura spurns Braggioni partly out of fear that she too will wind up "bogged in a nightmare" like Mrs. Braggioni, who refuses to come to terms with her difficult reality.

Laura is "not at home in the world," and her dreams reflect the better world she imagines. The world can change a person for the worst, like Braggioni, and sap out the will to oppose injustice. Despite this bleak reality, the story also suggests that ideals are still worth hanging onto. At the story's conclusion, Laura dreams of Eugenio, a revolutionary who dies in prison, quite possibly from pills that Laura provided him with. As both a suicide and an act of martyrdom to the cause, he is a figure of almost unattainable purity for Laura, and the foil of the prideful Braggioni. As a figure encountered mainly in dreams, he represents Laura's insistence on hanging on to ideals, if only in her imagination, the one place where she is free from the cynicism of her day-to-day life. Laura also dreams of the blossoms of **the Judas tree**, which symbolizes not just her guilt over Eugenio's death, but the betrayal of her ideals just as Christ was betrayed by Juda Iscariot, who hung himself from one of these trees, giving it its name. Laura's dreams regarding the martyred Eugenio and the Judas tree present a stark contrast between the purity Laura aspires to and the cruel reality she encounters. However, Porter does not depict belief in ideals as entirely useless: if one can imagine a better life, and a better world, they can still retain their virtues and avoid being seduced by materialism like Braggioni. Laura is not entirely broken but remains primarily a dreamer, and capable of goodness and sympathy, smuggling letters in and out of prisons and houses where the rebels hide in secret, and teaching children of "opportunistic savagery," more interested in their exotic teacher than their lessons.

Ultimately, Laura's idealism extends beyond mere politics and into a dream-place where her "higher principles" are intact and she consumes the flower of the Judas tree, an act that hints at her guilt for allowing her ideals to run aground in reality. Yet overcoming naiveté is not the same as surrender, and so there is hope for Laura, who has learned by the story's end that forgetting one's ideals, like Braggioni, can be just as costly as high as holding onto them.

RELIGION VS. POLITICS

Raised Catholic, Laura has exchanged religion for politics—yet she finds herself in a church contemplating the image of a saint. Moreover, her dream of the Judas tree and the deceased Eugenio illustrates the manner in which she still thinks religiously about Leftist politics. The question of how political faith coexists with religion is addressed throughout the story, even beyond Laura's internal struggles, as in the case of the May Day parade where the Catholics are marching in honor of the Virgin Mary from one side of town, while the socialists march from the other side in honor of their fallen heroes. Ultimately, Porter suggests that politics and religion can coexist, if tenuously, and that politics is largely a disguised form of religion despite the seeming animosity between the two groups.

Braggioni and the rest of the left-wing revolutionaries that Laura associates with see religion and politics as inherently conflicted and incompatible. At one point in the story, Braggioni tells Laura of the May Day parades and pats his **ammunition belt**, as he anticipates what will happen when the two parades collide: violence. Clearly, Braggioni has no understanding of how both convictions, religious and political, can coexist, and thus assumes one must oust the other. Laura's other comrades

appear to feel the same way. When exiting a church, Laura is "fear[ful] that she might be seen by someone who might make a scandal of it," emphasizing that her politically charged community won't take kindly to Laura entertaining any thought of religion.

While Braggioni bristles at Catholicism, Laura comes to see her religious upbringing and adult political activities as proof that the one may be motivating the other. She has "encased herself in a set of principles derived from her early training, leaving no detail of gesture and personal taste untouched"—that is, strict Marxist beliefs. However, the way she "encase[s] herself" physically, through clothing, has both political religious undertones. Her "private heresy" is not wearing lace made by machines, instead opting for the handmade material. To her mind, the machine is "sacred and will be the salvation of the workers," which reveals her fierce political convictions. However, as lace is traditionally the fabric that facsimiles of saints are dressed in, Laura's penchant for handmade lace perhaps points back to her Catholic roots, forming yet another instance of how the two creeds co-exist in Laura despite the local socialists' presumed disdain for religious thought.

Laura's dream is a crescendo of religious and political allegory that illustrates her uneasy loyalty to both belief systems. Central to the dream is the figure of Eugenio, a prisoner to whom Laura brought a bottle of pills, which he impatiently devoured, dying soon afterward. Braggioni writes Eugenio off as a fool, but Laura regards him as a saint or martyr. In the dream, he is taking Laura to death, which in her guilt, she accepts. There is also a **Judas blossom** in the dream, which Laura devours because she feels she has betrayed Eugenio, along with her convictions, just as Braggioni predicted she would. Eugenio calls her a murderer and tells her the flowers are his body and blood in a reference to the Catholic Eucharist. In Laura's dream, her Catholic beliefs and political convictions—and her fear of betraying both—finally become merged.

Another way to read the story's religious implications is with Braggioni as a classic betrayer type, akin to Satan or Judas Iscariot, who hung himself from the Judas tree. That a political figure like Braggioni can be read through a religious lens suggests that politics is a kind of religion, and that the two have more in common than one might think. Though Laura spurns Braggioni's sexual advances throughout the story, she feels herself succumbing to his cynicism and depends on him financially, causing her to feel as though she is entirely in the clutches of an evil power. She fights those who would lead her into temptation, including Braggioni, by saying, "No," and it is only "from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil." The story thus aligns Braggioni with temptation and corruption, suggesting that he is like the biblical serpent who tempted and corrupted Eve—only this time, Eve is equipped with the word "No."

Braggioni also bears resemblance to Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus and set in motion the events leading up to Jesus's Crucifixion. In the story, Braggioni expresses nothing but contempt for the peasants he gives gold coins to in order to ensure that he continues to be seen as a lover and benefactor of the people, which is perhaps a gesture to the way that Jesus was betrayed with thirty pieces of silver. A supposed man of the world, Braggioni "has the malice, the cleverness, the wickedness, [...] stipulated for loving the world profitably. He will never die of it." Like Judas, who was paid off by Jewish authorities to reveal Jesus's whereabouts, Braggioni is motivated by money rather than love or justice. In painting Braggioni as a Satan or Judas figure, Porter suggests that the internalization of religion and politics have similar hallmarks and aren't as incompatible as initially meets the eye.

"Flowering Judas" may not be optimistic about either Catholicism or revolutionary politics, as both can be betrayed or corrupted by a figure like Braggioni. What is certain is that they both inform Laura's worldview and her work for the poor and imprisoned is an example of both Christian charity and revolutionary brotherhood, suggesting that one can hold dual loyalties to both religion and politics. The story works equally well as a religiously flavored parable and a socially perceptive view of Mexican politics. This is, after all, how Laura sees things, as her struggle with the town's rebels come to seem intractable from her rich grasp, and belief in, the sacred.

MISOGYNY AND FEMININITY

Laura, of "notorious virginity," seeks primacy and independence, but finds herself constrained by Braggioni's forwardness and privilege. Taken for granted by her students and hemmed in by Braggioni's sexual advances, she fears she will become a prisoner akin to Mrs. Braggioni. Misogyny on the part of her comrades means that Laura is seen more for her looks than her loyalty to the Zapatistas and other left-wing workers, foiling her attempts at attaining equality for all. "Flowering Judas" shows how misogyny—both culturally and on the individual personal level—creates a harmful environment in which women are not considered for their actions as much as they are for their looks.

Laura's individuality is second to her sexuality in the eyes of Braggioni, and she feels herself becoming something less than human while she's around him. Braggioni even admits that all women are the same to him. After staring at Laura's breasts and speaking of her eyes, Braggioni tells her that "One woman is really as good as another for me, in the dark." This dehumanizing behavior is typical for Braggioni, and he acts as though he is paying her compliments when he forgives her for being a "gringa" or "gringita," a disparaging term for a white woman in Latin America or Spain. This is the lack of respect and the emphasis on feminine sexuality that a culture of misogyny has wrought.

Braggioni makes it further clear that he thinks of all women as the same when he talks of trying to drown himself for the love of a girl in his youth, something he says he has made every other woman since then pay for. This is hatred of an entire gender that belies how Braggioni thinks of himself as a romantic troubadour, "a judge of women," or savvy seducer of young girls. Forced to fend off Braggioni nightly, Laura has been worn down. This constant intrusion disgusts her, even as she must depend on his money. Misogyny gains a great deal of its power from making women dependent on men, or dismissing their capabilities, just as Braggioni does here.

Laura is contrasted with the long-suffering Mrs. Braggioni, who fights for the welfare of women who work in cigarette factories but feels ruined by her marriage. Mrs. Braggioni retains the spark of progressive zeal that has completely left her husband, and so she works in picket lines and gives speeches. However, she cannot "be brought to acknowledge the benefits of true liberty." Given the overarching structures of misogyny that imprison her, such freedom seems impossible, if not absurd. Braggioni waves off discussion of his wife by calling her an "instinctively virtuous woman" and says if she weren't, he would lock her up. The suggestion that a woman can only be virtuous or else expect imprisonment demonstrates gross misogyny on his part. But it is also something that Mrs. Braggioni has become accustomed to, and thus she cannot understand Laura's expectation of something better. And yet, Mrs. Braggioni appears to have something like love for her philandering husband, even as she cries at home constantly and laments her fate, which alarms Laura. Laura fears for her independence, which Braggioni has already taken steps to hamper. Mrs. Braggioni is the kind of woman that Laura dreads becoming, little more than prop for men.

Outside of her interactions with Braggioni, Laura's gender hinders her mission in Mexico more generally, and she feels unsafe as she carries out her daily meetings and visits with prisoners. This reflects the specialized and limiting role misogyny forces women to abide by. Laura wants to be more than her sexuality or gender, but even men who share her political ends, like the Polish agitator, hope "to exploit what he believes is her secret sentimental preference for him," while the Romanian agitator "lies to her with an air of ingenuous candor, as if he were good friend and confidant." It is clear that no woman can be anything other than a woman in the eyes of the story's men.

Laura feel unsafe at night, sure that she will be killed or mutilated. Her fear has almost become a part of her. Misogyny is partly the enforced threat of violence, and it is certain that any of these horrific ends really *could* happen to her. As a foreigner, Laura is something of a celebrity in town, but the locals can't understand what she's doing in Mexico, so she essentially becomes a subject of gossip or seen a prize to be won, as does the young Zapata soldier who tries to lift her out of her horse's saddle, but only succeeds in scaring the horse. The irony is that Laura is experienced on a horse, likely more so than this would-be "rude folk hero." The Zapata soldier goes on to declare his love for Laura and ignores her capability, just another would-be-suitor blind to Laura as anything but a woman. His childishness is underscored when Laura thinks to herself that she should send him a box of crayons.

The limitations placed on a young girl abroad in Mexico are painfully apparent in the story, as again and again, the brilliant and sensitive Laura is reduced to her gender. Braggioni benefits from misogyny, both with his wife and Laura, whom he continues to pursue despite her lack of interest in him. Laura, meanwhile, has been left exhausted and has come to question herself due to the many barriers to her revolutionary work, which includes the very threat of danger she feels crossing the street. Unable to be accepted as a full comrade rather than an object of (often lascivious) attention, she feels her freedoms dissipating. In "Flowering Judas," Porter draws a vivid portrait of a woman being denied all that she deserves even as she soldiers on, with which Porter communicates the reality of misogyny, and how any one woman risks being dragged down by the narrow definition of what a woman can say, do, or be. Like many women prized only for their beauty, locals like Braggioni, completely overlook her mind or spirit.

SYMBOLS

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

THE JUDAS TREE

The Judas Tree and its blossoms are the guiding symbols of "Flowering Judas," representing not only Laura's guilt over the death of the imprisoned Eugenio, but her own betrayal of her political convictions and Catholic faith. When Laura first encounters the Judas Tree in the story, it is as part of a local custom where a minstrel who stands outside singing can only be warded off by the throwing Judas blossoms. Laura's maid, Lupe, advises Laura to do so, but it only results in the minstrel following her and returning night after night, which Laura eventually reconciles herself to, though she reflects that she knows better. Here, the Judas blossoms represent the gradual surrender of Laura's will when faced with the alienating realities of her life in Mexico.

When the Judas blossoms reappear in the dream that is the culmination of the story, they're given deeper significance. The Judas tree is so-called because legend states that Christ's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, hung himself from one of its branches, thus aligning the tree with betrayal. In Laura's dream, the dead prisoner Eugenio appears to Laura and tells her to eat the blossoms, echoing the words of Christ when he says "This is my

body, this is my blood." Thus, Laura's politics and religion—and her intense fear of betraying both—are woven together into the fabric of her dream. The Judas tree speaks to the way that both religion and politics inform her worldview and reveals her deep-seated anxiety about betraying both sets of convictions.

THE SILVER AMMUNITION BELT

Nothing communicates the corrupt nature of the loathsome Braggioni like his silver ammunition belt, which he likes to show off to Laura. Once an impassioned revolutionary, Braggioni is now rich both in power and money, having grown fat and cynical. Although he brandishes the belt when speaking of the two parades, Catholic and Socialist, that are destined for collision, it is clear that the belt is largely for show. That Braggioni would wear an ammunition belt in combination with his expensive clothing and imported perfume also speaks to his vanity. Laura eventually calls him on his hypocrisy, handing him his belt and saying "Put that on, and go kill somebody in Morelia, and you will be happier." Of course, this seems unlikely, as Laura understands that the silver ammunition belt is really just for show, and Braggioni is all talk.

The belt also has biblical underpinnings: given the story's frequent allusions to Judas Iscariot, the silver ammunition belt recalls Judas betraying Christ in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. Braggioni, too, has betrayed his ideals and the people under his power.

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.

Flowering Judas Quotes

Laura, who haunts the markets listening to the ballad singers, and stops every day to hear the blind boy playing his reed-flute in Sixteenth of September Street, listens to Braggioni with pitiless courtesy, because she dares not smile at his miserable performance. Nobody dares to smile at him. Braggioni is cruel to everyone, with a kind of specialized insolence, but he is so vain of his talents, and so sensitive to slights, it would require a cruelty and vanity greater than his own to lay a finger on the vast cureless wound of his self-esteem. It would require courage, too, for it is dangerous to offend him, and nobody has this courage. Braggioni loves himself with such tenderness and amplitude and eternal charity that his followers—for he is a leader of men, a skilled revolutionist, and his skin has been punctured in honorable warfare—warm themselves in the reflected glow, and say to each other: "He has a real nobility, a love of humanity raised above mere personal affections."

Related Characters: Laura, Braggioni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

This passage characterizes the fraudulent but fearsome Braggioni as cruel and insolent for his betrayal of those who rely on him for charity and political leverage. Even something as small as a smile could set him off. Braggioni, whose music is "miserable," sharply contrasts with the idyllic description of the beggar boy. Braggioni's followers praise him as a humanist and revolutionary, but he maintains his power through terror and is a dangerous man to cross.

Laura perceives the gulf between what Braggioni pretends to be—a war hero and revolutionary thinker—and his endless self-esteem and exaggeration of his own talents. Braggioni is not just vain; he is a narcissist devoid of the very traits that his followers praise in him and is likely incapable of loving anyone but himself. What Braggioni means for the story—that he is a symbol of Laura's disillusionment—is here laid bare in the person of the hypocritical and even loathsome Braggioni.

The gluttonous bulk-of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusions, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues. This is nonsense, she knows it now and is ashamed of it. Revolution must have leaders, and leadership is a career for energetic men. She is, her comrades tell her, full of romantic error, for what she defines as cynicism in them is merely "a developed sense of reality.

Related Characters: Braggioni, Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Laura examines both her own naiveté and her misgivings about Braggioni as a true "revolutionist." Rather than hold Braggioni accountable for his corruption, she blames herself for espousing lofty ideals that have nothing to do with reality. Her comrades in the struggle against injustice position their cynicism as simply having a better sense of how things really are. Laura's idea that leanness and "heroic faith" are the correct attributes of a real leader seems now to her "nonsense."

Yet Laura's idealism is what sets her apart from someone like Braggioni and distinguishes her as an altruist and driven member of the resistance. One can assume she came to Mexico expecting to find a revolution led by "energetic men." Instead she found the lazy, slothful Braggioni and reproaches herself for believing in the romance of the revolutionary hero. What's more, she suspects that her character is flawed in comparison with her comrades who have lived and taken up arms in Mexico when she was living a more sheltered life in the U.S.

She has encased herself in a set of principles derived from her early training, leaving no detail or gesture of personal taste untouched, and for this reason she will not wear lace made on machines. This is her private heresy, for in her special group the machine is sacred, and will be the salvation of the workers. She loves fine lace, and there is a tiny edge of fluted cobweb on this collar, which is one of twenty precisely alike, folded in blue tissue paper in the upper drawer of her clothes chest.

Related Characters: Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Laura clearly permits herself few luxuries but, visiting a local church, she is taken with the soft, elegant-looking clothes of the doll-like saints set above the altar. As a person of devout principle, she balances her political faith with her Catholicism, to the would-be-ire of her comrades, and knows that her "heretical" fondness for something as simple as lace would appear like too much of an extravagance. She is also meant to prize machines as the salvation of the workers—even "sacred."

The religious language in this passage reflects Laura's Catholic roots, suggesting that she never left her faith, only changed the object of her worship. But there is part of her than can never be completely shaped to the party line she espouses, and so she hoards lace collars in her closet. Laura is depicted as in a constant state of self-examination, changing herself to suit her "early training," which has upended most of her inclinations toward fine things or selfish desires, but to her God is god and a machine is a machine.

"I am disappointed in everything as it comes. Everything." He shakes his head. "You, poor thing, you will be disappointed too. You are born for it. We are more alike than you realize in some things. Wait and see. Some day you will remember what I have told you, you will know that Braggioni was your friend."

Related Characters: Braggioni (speaker), Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Braggioni plays on Laura's fear that she has too high expectations for life. At the same time, Braggioni's admission makes clear that he actually was once a less cynical and hypocritical person, one who once dreamt of more only to find himself disappointed. It may be that this disappointment is what has twisted him into such a morally depraved, corrupt person—still, his taunting of Laura has an air of salaciousness when he tells her that she will look back on him favorably once she has finished the cooling of her zealous attitude. He seems to take pleasure in the prospect of her corruption, so his words constitute a threat. A subtle

battle is playing out between Braggioni the realist and Laura the idealist. Laura has already recognized that she may be as compromised in some ways as Braggioni, and by toying with her in this manner, he taps into her sense of their disquieting similarity.

> "Let them sweat a little. The next time they may be careful. It is very restful to have them out of the way for a while."

Related Characters: Braggioni (speaker), Laura, The Roumanian and Polish Agitators

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides evidence of Braggioni's ruthless attitude, as he refuses to use his power to its full extent and free the incarcerated revolutionaries—whom he implies were not "careful" enough—that depend on him. While Laura is engaged in smuggling everything from narcotics to letters to the imprisoned, Braggioni's response drives home his utter immortality and Machiavellian scheming. He always does what is most convenient and serves his own interests, such as keeping certain parties out of the way and leading astray the Polish and Roumanian agitators in order to play them off one another. With Braggioni unwilling to employ his influence to rescue or house refugees hiding from firing squads in desperate conditions, Laura takes it upon herself, doing everything she can to serve the broadest number of dissidents. Braggioni's chiding further distances his goals from Laura's, as he is more interested in political expediency than basic humanity and the cause to which he has nominally pledged himself.

> "If you will throw him one little flower, he will sing another song or two and go away."

Related Characters: Lupe (speaker), The Minstrel, Laura

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The flowers of the titular Judas tree first appear when Lupe, Laura's maid, tells her to throw the flowers at the minstrel singing outside of Laura's house to make him leave. Internally, Laura scoffs at this local custom, but she relents and the minstrel leaves—only to return nightly and follow Laura around the city. Like Laura, the minstrel is engaged in progressive causes—he is an organizer for the Typographers Union—and like Laura, he nonetheless observes tradition. In Laura's case, she is split between politics and her faith, in in the minstrel's he partakes of cultural ritual by night and organizing by day.

The Judas tree is an extremely loaded symbol in the story. Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Christ, was said to have hung himself from its branches. It is notable then that Laura feels she is betraying herself by playing along with the minstrel. However, she comes to look fondly on the minstrel, noting later that he "is observing a convention with all propriety, as though it were founded on a law of nature, which in the end it might well prove to be." In other words, everybody to some extent treats seriously the "convention[s]" or habits that they ought to know better than.

> She is not at home in the world. Every day she teaches children who remain strangers to her, though she loves their tender round hands and their charming opportunist savagery. She knocks at unfamiliar doors not knowing whether a friend or a stranger shall answer, and even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger. No matter what this stranger says to her, nor what her message to him, the very cells of her flesh reject knowledge and kinship in one monotonous word. No. No. No. She draws her strength from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil.

Related Characters: Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Laura goes about her rounds, teaching the native children with a sense of nagging futility and continues to knock on the doors of wanted men in order to warn them. But the sense of being profoundly alone is almost overwhelming, as she finds herself surrounded by strangers. Laura is vulnerable, as a young and desirable American woman in the slums of Mexico, and she meets that vulnerability with refusal. She says "no" so often that it

has become a talisman, something she brings with her everywhere for luck and protection. Readers are left to imagine what exactly Laura is saying "no" too, but it is clear that she is treading potentially dangerous ground. Finally, the phrase, "led into evil" paraphrases The Lord's Prayer, which contains the line "lead us not into temptation," a reminder that Laura's is still an essentially Catholic imagination.

"They are stupid, they are lazy, they are treacherous, they would cut my throat for nothing."

Related Characters: Braggioni (speaker), Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Braggioni seems to describe himself while castigating the poverty-stricken men who ask him for money and favors. By punching down to the most helpless members of society, he reveals just how morally depraved he really is. Braggioni has just described for Laura his childhood, back when the local girls called him *Delgadito*, or "skinny man," which paints a picture of a very different (and distant) Braggioni. In the present, he distributes coins from his pocket among the needy, whom he promises work and tells to watch out for spies. Then comes the denigration of the "fellow man" Braggioni purports to serve, finding them guilty of being "stupid," "lazy," "treacherous," and liable to turn on Braggioni on an instant.

Laura has already reflected on the "wickedness" and "cleverness" needed for "loving the world profitably," and here is the proof, as Braggioni scorns the poor and makes them empty promises. Laura is the one who *actually* aids the people, who find her baffling, and her humanity is in stark contrast to Braggioni's bitter words and unforgiving world view. Braggioni expects to be betrayed, likely because treachery comes naturally to him now.

There will be two independent processions, starting from either end of town and they will march until they meet, and the rest depends…" He asks her to oil and load his pistols. Standing up, he unbuckles his ammunition belt, and spreads it laden across her knees. Laura sits with the shells slipping through the cleaning cloth dipped in oil, and he says again he cannot understand why she works so hard for the revolutionary idea unless she loves some man who is in it.

Related Characters: Braggioni (speaker), Laura

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

The story's twin channels of religious and political commitment are literalized in the two parades set for collision. The Catholics are celebrating May Day with a procession to honor the Virgin Mary, while the socialists are mourning fallen comrades who have been elevated to the status of martyrs. Throughout the story, politics and religion have been treated as two sides of the same coin who nonetheless cannot bear each other. Braggioni characteristically takes the opportunity to posture and brandishes his silver ammunition belt, implying that violence is soon to erupt between the two groups and he will be there when it does. But Laura knows he is all talk, even while he entreats Laura to clean his belt, which symbolizes Braggioni's desertion of his original values and his current state as a pretender to battle-tested heroism.

Actual revolutionary action is so distant to Braggioni that he cannot understand why Laura would take up a struggle outside her own country unless she is trying to impress a man. By this point in the story, Laura has fended off numerous men and, at 22, is still a virgin. Instead, her driving force is something Braggioni can never understand, namely the ability to act unselfishly and entertain two possibly conflicting ideas. Like the coming processions, however, the two ideas are about to collide.

"Today, I found Eugenio going into a stupor. He refused to allow me to call the prison doctor. He had taken all the tablets I brought him yesterday. He said he took them because he was bored."

Related Characters: Laura (speaker), Eugenio, Braggioni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

The source of Laura's uneasiness is revealed to be her culpability in the death of a revolutionary prisoner named Eugenio. Eugenio had grown tired of waiting for Braggioni to set him free and overdosed on tablets that Laura provided for him. As a result, Eugenio died in Laura's presence and she left before his jailers could find his body. Laura's powerlessness causes her to think of Eugenio as a martyr and, indeed, in his lack of self-preservation he is Braggioni's opposite.

Braggioni, for his part, considers Eugenio a fool and is indifferent to his death saying that they "are well rid of him," after which he finally takes is leave of Laura. His callousness is at this point all Laura would expect but, once he exits, she is left alone with her guilt. Still acting as Braggioni's counterpart, she has effectively traded one unwanted guest for another, as Eugenio lingers in her mind as both sacrifice and specter.

> Murderer! said Eugenio, and Cannibal! This is my body and my blood.

Related Characters: Eugenio (speaker), Laura

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Laura is dreaming of a ghoulish Eugenio who asks her to take his hand so that he can lead her to death. He then asks her to eat the flowers of the Judas tree, only to admonish her that they are his body and blood, a phrase that hearkens back both to Christ's words at the Last Supper and the Catholic Eucharist, in which bread and wine are transformed into Christ's blood and flesh. Laura's twin faiths have finally merged into uneasy series of associations, as heavily Catholic imagery is used to represent Laura's sense of having betrayed both Eugenio and herself.

Eugenio's admonishment of Laura is also notable for revisiting the minstrel earlier in the story. Just as the Judas blossoms caused the minstrel to follow Laura, now Eugenio follows Laura in dreams. The story culminates with Laura's dream, which distills the many trials she's been through and the numerous betrayals she has both suffered and perpetrated.

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.

FLOWERING JUDAS

Every night, Braggioni waits for Laura in her house and sings to her "in a furry, mournful voice." Laura tries to avoid going home at night, but even when she stays out late in the hopes of evading Braggioni, he's always there waiting for her, guitar in hand.

Braggioni's constant presence is a reminder that Laura's time is not her own, nor does she have the run of her own house.

Tonight, Lupe, Laura's "Indian maid," warns her that Braggioni is waiting for her upstairs. Even though Laura is exhausted, she lets Braggioni sing to her. As usual, she asks him first if he has a new song to sing for her; if he says no, she asks him to sing the song that she knows to be his favorite. She also always offers him part of her dinner, but he always declines.

Braggioni and Laura have fallen into a routine where she feels she must tolerate him, placating him with requests for a song that she couldn't care less about. By being forced the say the right thing, Laura is clearly compromised.

Braggioni launches into his song, which he sings abrasively off-key, but Laura "dares not smile" or laugh; she listens with "pitiless courtesy." In fact, no one "dares to smile at [Braggioni]" because he's so ruthless and mean. Braggioni is a deeply self-centered man who thinks himself extremely talented. He's a political leader and a "skilled revolutionist" who has sustained injuries in warfare, and his followers grovel at his feet.

Braggioni is a has-been revolutionary whose desires are decidedly un-revolutionary, as he accumulates followers and sustains his power through fear. There is a hint that Braggioni may have been more devoted to the revolution in the past, but those days are well behind him.

Unfortunately for Laura, Braggioni has recently set his sights on her, which puts her in a precarious position, as she "owes her comfortable situation and her salary to him." When he's in a good mood, he tells Laura that he will "forgive [her] for being a *gringa*. *Gringita*!" Whenever he says this, Laura wants nothing more than to slap him right across the face.

Laura is an exotic figure for Braggioni, being a young American woman in Mexico. Thus he has turned her into a kept woman who is permanently in his debt and must therefore resist the urge to express her true feelings.

Laura knows she must "resist tenaciously" Braggioni's advances "without appearing to resist," and she tries to not let herself think about what his intentions with her are. Braggioni has come to represent Laura's "many disillusions"; to her, a powerful revolutionary leader should be energetic and fit, "a vessel of abstract virtues" and "heroic faith." Everyone thinks Laura is full of romanticized ideas like these. And though she finds them cynical in return, they claim to simply have "a developed sense of reality."

Laura acknowledges the gulf between what she expects of a revolutionary hero and Braggioni, and blames herself for her unrealistic expectations. Yet she still maintains her ideals, even in light of more cynical peers like Braggioni who essentially exploit her, seeing her only as a prize to be won. This puts Laura in a precarious position, as she must fend off Braggioni without offending him and risking her livelihood.

Although Laura is "determined not to surrender her will," she grudgingly acknowledges Braggioni's logic in contrast with her unrealistic expectations and nurses a sense of betrayal "by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be." Laura momentarily wishes to run out of the house, leaving Braggioni without his captive audience.

Laura has high expectations for life, though she suspects herself of naiveté. She wishes she could escape Braggioni, not just because he insists on lecturing her, but because she wishes to return to the innocence that she has known, a sense of justice that has nothing to do with somebody like Braggioni.

Instead, Laura continues to humor Braggioni with her knees clutched anxiously together. Laura wears a blue serge skirt and a collar that is inadvertently nun-like. However, she feels that what she really wears is "the uniform of an idea" and, unlike Braggioni, has "renounced vanities" like expensive clothing and cosmetics.

While Braggioni dresses himself in fine clothes, Laura wears plain, conservative garments and sees her political faith as her true "uniform." She wants to be seen as a good socialist instead of simply a beauty. It's also significant that Laura's knees are clutched together, as she's clearly not interested in Braggioni's advances.

Laura was raised Roman Catholic and occasionally goes into one of the borough's crumbing churches and says a Hail Mary with a gold rosary that she purchased in the city of Tehuantepec. She hides these visits from her comrades, whom she knows would "make a scandal of it." In any case, her attempt to feel something is a failure, as she is too "encased" in her political training. She does, however, admire the lace-trimmed drawers of the doll-like saints that adorn the alter. Laura's own "private heresy" is that, a lover of fine lace, she refuses to wear any made on machines. She knows this would rankle her fellow socialists because they treat the machine as "sacred" and believe that it "will be the salvation of the workers." For this reason, Laura hoards homemade lace in the upper drawer of her wardrobe.

Laura's peers reject Christianity, as they likely follow Marx in seeing religion as "the opiate of the masses." But Laura's Catholicism still lingers, and she struggles to resolve it with her political faith while hiding her visits to the church from the others. To the socialists, machines are holy because they are the tools of the working masses. Laura, however, insists on handmade lace, which she associates with the figures of the saints in the church. Her balancing act between religion and politics, machine labor and craftsmanship, is represented by her many lace collars, which she buries in her wardrobe, figuratively stuffing down her competing loyalties.

Back in the present, Braggioni's song reaches its crescendo. The song's lyrics are exceedingly melodramatic and recounts the life of a person who is lonely, orphaned, and friendless. While he sings, he balances his considerable paunch between his knees, sweats profusely, and "bulges" inside his flashy clothes, consisting of a purple tie encircled by a diamond loop, yellow shoes with leather thongs, and silk pantaloons. He also wears a **silver-encrusted ammunition belt** as a reminder of his status among the revolutionaries.

Braggioni's song rings entirely false, as he is neither lonely nor friendless—the narrator has already pointed out that Braggioni has a whole slew of adoring followers, and will later reveal that he has an even more adoring follower in his doting wife. The content of the song is also at odds with his plump figure and his fine clothes. His ammunition belt further speaks to his hypocrisy, as it is worked in silver, implying that it is largely for show. Braggioni plays the part of the troubadour and revolutionary but is really just a power-hungry nuisance.

His song finished, Braggioni focuses his "yellow cat's eyes" on Laura and boasts of his power, which he has used to feed his desire for "small luxuries" and "elegant refinements." He makes Laura smell his handkerchief, rank with imported Jockey Club perfume from New York. But for all his show of wealth and contentment, Braggioni admits that he is "wounded by life." He tells Laura that "everything turns to dust in the hand, to gall on the tongue" and laments that he is disappointed in all things, a sentiment that he says Laura will come to share. Braggioni sees himself as Laura's mentor and predicts that Laura will one day look back and see how right he was.

Power is how Braggioni measures wealth, and by that standard he is rich. His comforts now are his "small luxuries" like fancy perfume and other goods that set him apart from the largely poor Mexicans whom he uses to consolidate his power. In this passage, Braggioni opens up and confesses his disillusioned philosophy and deep disappointment in human nature. Like Laura, he once held lofty sentiments, which he feels life stripped from him. He expects the same will come of Laura, and warns her that she, too, will wind up a crushed realist. While this may be well-intended advice, Braggioni's predatory demeanor and "yellow cat's eyes" suggest that he's also trying to break down his victim.

Laura feels "chill[ed]" by Braggioni's words and a nameless fear that she will suffer "violence, mutilation, a shocking death." However, she reminds herself that her personal fate is nothing, and that she lives only as "testimony of a mental attitude," though she resolves not to die in a meaningless manner like being hit by a car. She thinks that she's as corrupt, in her own way, as Braggioni, but has nowhere to run to, as there is "no pleasure in remembering life before she came here," nor does she feel like she can simply move to another country, now that all her commitments are in Mexico.

Laura is gripped by a nameless fear and remembers that she is at risk every day as a woman and could easily wind up killed. She wants her life, and death, to stand for something and resolves not to die dishonorably. She also reproaches herself for betraying the commitments that brought her to Mexico, where she is now essentially trapped. Her horror of Braggioni comes partly from seeing too much of herself in him.

Laura can no longer explain her devotion or true motives. She spends her days with "Indian children" at a school in the nearby borough of Xochimilco teaching elementary English. Her leisure time is spent engaging in revolutionary activities like visiting political prisoners who spend their days "counting cockroaches, repenting of their indiscretions, composing their memoirs" and "writing out manifestoes." Laura smuggles food, money, and cigarettes into jail for them, and acts as courier for letters from their comrades on the outside. She also brings them narcotics, as many of them complain of sleeplessness. Laura is a comfort to these prisoners, and her poor Spanish amuses them. Even though they know they can depend on Laura to help them in small ways each day, they all wonder why Braggioni won't come to their aid.

Laura wonders what all her efforts are for, as she hardly makes a difference teaching English to native children. Yet she continues to go through the motions, carrying out revolutionary errands for political prisoners, as well as simply keeping them company. She also brings them drugs, a detail that foreshadows a tragedy later in the story. However, all of Laura's work with the imprisoned dissidents is nothing compared to what Braggioni could easily do by insisting on their release, once again highlighting Braggioni's obsession with accruing power. They wait for Braggioni to come through for them, but he bides his time in order to bind them to him further.

Laura goes on smuggling letters from the Party's headquarters to the fugitives who hide from firing squads in desolate conditions. Braggioni, however, is content to "let them sweat" and finds having them out of the way convenient. Laura does her best to warn these wanted men when the authorities are closing in, giving them money to flee to Vera Cruz.

Laura helps wanted men escape the firing squads and makes sure they have enough cash to make it to the relative safety of Vera Cruz. This is in contrast to Braggioni, who shrugs off their needs and plays his cards carefully to ensure he remains in control while having to do very little.

The Polish and Roumanian agitators attempt to feed each other misinformation through Laura, though Braggioni is content to have both in his power and plays them off one another. Both flirt shamelessly with Laura and each believes that Laura favors them over the other. Laura goes about her errands to the bafflement of the locals, who find her beautiful and cannot understand what she is doing in Mexico.

The ridiculous agitators spend more time trying to outsmart one another rather than opposing the state apparatus, further depicting the Mexican political scene as corrupt and focused on power. Each man thinks he is more clever than the other, and both flirt with Laura, with whom they imagine a connection. That Braggioni gamely manipulates both men again points to his moral depravity and obsession with gaining power. Laura, meanwhile, continues to be seen as woman first and person second, as the idea of a woman of abiding political commitment is unheard of for the locals.

Among those who fall for Laura is a young captain who served in Zapata's army. One day, the captain attempts to gallantly help Laura off her horse, but he only succeeds in scaring off her steed and his own. Later he writes her a letter professing his love, and Laura thinks to herself that she ought to send him "a box of colored crayons."

Emiliano Zapata Salazar was a hero of the Mexican Revolution, meaning that the young captain in this passage has considerable prestige. However, he proves foolish and vain, attempting to help Laura off her horse, something she can do quite well herself, only to embarrass himself. When he writes Laura professing his love, she thinks of sending him crayons because, to her, he is little more than a child.

A "shock-haired" young minstrel sings outside of Laura's house every night. Lupe tells Laura that he happens to be an organizer of the Typographers' Union, and that it is custom to fling the flowers of the **Judas tree** at a suitor so that he will relent. She does so, but instead he follows her everywhere until she becomes accustomed to his presence, as he is only "observing a convention with all propriety, as though it were founded on a law of nature […]." He leaves poems for her, and Laura tells herself that throwing the flower was a mistake, though she refuses to regret it outright and resolves to become stoic in the face of the unnamable disaster that she senses is coming for her.

Laura embraces local custom in throwing the Judas blossoms at the minstrel, but only winds up encouraging him—like Braggioni, the minstrel won't take Laura's polite and indirect "no" for an answer. She chastises herself for partaking in superstition, another betrayal symbolized by the Judas tree from which Christ's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, is said to have hung himself. Still, Laura adjusts to the near-constant presence of the minstrel and the poems he writes her and tries to keep her composure, much as she does with Braggioni.

Laura "is not at home in the world" and lives in fear, not knowing what waits for her behind the doors she knocks on in the course of her activities. The word "No" is the "holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil," as she turns down the advances of the men she encounters. Braggioni, though, continues to try and impress her. He considers himself "a judge of women" and speculates about Laura's "notorious virginity." He then sings to her of a girl with dark eyes, though Laura's eyes are green. She waits until the inevitable moment when Braggioni will attempt to seduce her, with her "No" at the ready.

Laura's circumstances are increasingly claustrophobic. She sees danger lurking all around her, her only defense being the word "No," which has come to seem to her a kind of holy incantation. She says "No" to the men who proposition her and "No" to Braggioni, who, like the minstrel, is undeterred. Instead, he asserts himself as an authority on feminine beauty and all but harasses Laura outright. He continues to sing ballads, hoping to woo the virginal Laura, while she waits for the inevitable moment when she turns him down and he finally relents for the night and goes home.

Braggioni exists in the guise of "a good revolutionary and professional lover of humanity" and recalls for Laura's benefit his youth, when the girls called him *Delgadito* and he was a "scrawny" poet dreaming of the revolution. Now he is a power broker and "leader of men" who gives small coins to the needy in order to make them dependent on his generosity. In private, thinks them "lazy," "treacherous," and "stupid." He goes on to recall when love of a woman led him to try and drown himself, a rejection he has taken out on all women since and confesses that "One woman is really as good as another for me, in the dark."

Braggioni remembers his youth, when he was scrawny and romantic, an object of desire for the women of his neighborhood possessed of revolutionary notions. This is a sharp contrast to his embittered sensibility as an adult. Delgadito, *or "skinny man," is now a hypocritical and bloated politician who hates peasants and only gives them coins in order to make them dependent on him. Braggioni also demonstrates his blatant misogyny in this passage, as he blames all women for his wounded pride and sees them as interchangeable sex objects.*


Laura's thoughts turn to Braggioni's wife, who campaigns for the women who work in the cigarette factories, walks in picket lines, and speaks at meetings. Still, Laura's desire for total freedom is alien to Mrs. Braggioni, whose "sense of reality is beyond criticism" and who never fails to take Braggioni back. He enjoys his power over her and says that if she ever disobeyed him, he would "lock her up."

Braggioni's wife is a fascinating, if minor, character who commits to progressive causes much like Laura, but is too much of a realist to believe that she can ever be as free as Laura yearns to be. She accepts her second-class status as a woman and yields to Braggioni who clearly torments her and jokes menacingly of the consequences if she fails to please him. Laura sees Braggioni's wife's situation as her potential fate should she continue to fall under Braggioni's power.

Something is bothering Laura tonight, as she has just come from the prison. Braggioni tells her that there are two parades due to come from opposite sides of the city, one of the Catholics and one of the socialists honoring their martyrs. Braggioni displays his **ammunition belt** again and appears to welcome the violence he predicts. He recalls the past, when he dreamed of destroying the city if it opposed General Ortiz, "but it fell into his hands like an overripe pear." Laura retorts, telling him to go "kill somebody in Morelia, and you will be happier."

The conflict between religion and politics is perhaps most tangible in Braggioni's relation of the two parades headed for collision. Braggioni expects and even welcomes violence, despite the fact that the marching socialists and the Catholics are suggestively positioned as essentially two sides of the same coin. By flaunting his gun belt, Braggioni again pretends to be a hero, and even recalls his service for future Mexican President Pascual Ortiz Rubio during the Revolution. (Ortiz's presidency will be a disappointment as, following the assassination of reformist president Álvaro Obregón, he will be little more than a puppet.) Laura uncharacteristically challenges Braggioni to put his money where his mouth is and kill someone in the embattled city of Morelia, where clashes between local farmers, rebels, and the army are common. However, she may mean the comment sarcastically, implying that Braggioni is still behaving like the revolution is still at its peak and he is still a soldier rather than a corrupt oaf full of empty threats and false promises.


Laura tells Braggioni what's been on her mind: the death of a prisoner named Eugenio, who took all the pills Laura brought him at once, rather than wait for Braggioni to get him out of jail. Braggioni calls him a "fool" and says they are "well rid of him." His mood soured, Braggioni finally leaves. With Braggioni gone—at least for the time being—Laura finally feels free. Although she wants to take advantage of this moment of freedom and "run while there is time, "she does not go."

Laura's culpability in Eugenio's death haunts her. This passage reveals that Eugenio took his own life rather than wait for Braggioni to get him out of prison. Braggioni's callousness in calling Eugenio a fool further depresses Laura, who is left alone with her guilt after Braggioni finally leaves. Braggioni is here contrasted not only with Laura, who is in the figurative trenches of the revolution, but with the martyred Eugenio who suffered for his beliefs.

Meanwhile, Braggioni goes home to the long-suffering Mrs. Braggioni, who calls her husband "my angel" and begins to wash his feet. He makes a show of asking for her forgiveness, breaking into tears himself. She continues to cry and asks her husband for forgiveness. "This time," Mr. Braggioni feels "refreshed by the solemn, endless rain of [his wife's] tears."

In a scene reminiscent of Mary Magdalene's washing of Christ's feet, Mrs. Braggioni likewise washes her husband's feet as a way to humble herself before him. Braggioni weeps before his long-suffering wife, a theatrical scene of making-up that is implied to be nothing more than routine because of the phrase "this time." In this way, Braggioni's wife continues to exist as subordinate to the unfaithful and emotionally manipulative Braggioni. Perhaps because he has just had a particularly frustrating interaction with Laura, who refuses to be subservient to him, Braggioni "this time" takes great pleasure in his wife's penitent, submissive tears and feels reinvigorated.

Laura goes to sleep and dreams of a ghostly Eugenio, who calls her a murderer and tries to take her hand to lead her to death, which is "a long way off." He then bids her eat **the blossoms of the Judas tree.** When she does so, he calls her a murderer and cannibal and tells her, "This is my body and my blood." Laura cries out, "No!" in her sleep and wakes trembling, afraid to go back to sleep.

In the story's final scene, Laura's twin belief systems—Catholicism and socialism—are united in her dream of Eugenio and the Judas blossoms. In another echo of Christ, Eugenio tells Laura that by eating the blossoms, she has consumed his body and blood. This is a reference to the Eucharist, wherein Catholic belief holds that wine and bread are transformed into the blood and body of Christ through a process called transubstantiation. Eugenio blames Laura for his death and tries to take her hand and lead her to the death that she has been dreading. When she awakens with her usual cry of "No!" she fears going back to sleep, just as she fears that she can never go home again or escape the circumstances that restrict her freedom and bind her to her thankless, empty existence in Mexico.

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