

# The powerful force of affection: short fiction from Faulkner and Porter

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



When love is apparent in a relationship, individuals are willing to make sacrifices for their loved ones. While no relationship is perfect, some are inherently grounded in an unwillingness to make sacrifices for each other; in this regard, American Literature is a potent resource from which observations can be made about the relationship between man and woman. Two relevant examples of these relationships are found in Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas" and William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun," which depict relationships between characters Braggioni and Laura and between characters Jesus and Nancy, respectively. While both relationships are tainted by an unwillingness to make sacrifices for each other, these relationships affect the woman involved differently; while Laura gains even more independence, Nancy is led to a delusional sense of dependence.

Although the relationship between Braggioni and Laura is a potentially romantic one, it is not based off true love. Even though "he wishes to impress this simple girl who covers her great round breasts with thick dark cloth, and who hides long, invaluable beautiful legs under a heavy skirt," he shows little to no evidence of his affection for her (Porter 872). He even has the audacity to say that "one woman is really as good as another for me, in the dark, [he] prefer[s] them all" (873). Braggioni's words contradict themselves. While he expresses a desire to pursue Laura, other women easily distract him. In addition, Laura's lack of desire to be part of this relationship is an indication of the problem. She recognizes the shallowness of his desires, and thus, she dreads interactions with him. After leaving the prison from her routine visits, she began "to find reasons for avoiding her own house until the latest possible moment, for Braggioni [was] there almost

every night” (866). In all, the core of this relationship is based upon Braggioni’s selfish motives.

Nancy and Jesus’ relationship is also founded on selfish desires. While working in the kitchen of the Compson family, Nancy and Jesus are discussing her recent pregnancy. Nancy suggests that he is not the father, and he curtly responds, “ I can cut down the vine it did come off of” (Faulkner 957). This powerful euphemism suggests that Jesus is willing to violently punish the man with whom Nancy cheated on him. This conversation represents a two-fold explanation of this flawed relationship. While Jesus’ reaction represents his tendency to abuse the power he has in this relationship, Nancy’s actions that led to this talk represents the unfaithfulness she has for her loved one. In this relationship, they fail to love each other in a selfless way. While no human is perfect, this behavior only continues throughout the story. The narrator mentions that while “ sometimes the husbands of the washing women would fetch and deliver the clothes, Jesus never did that for Nancy” (956). Mr. Compson suggests that Jesus would cheat on Nancy too. He says that Jesus is “ probably in St. Louis now. Probably got another wife by now and forgot all about [Nancy]” (959). The continuation of this poor treatment symbolizes the weak foundation of their relationship.

While both of these relationships are harmful, Laura does not allow her connection with Braggioni to define her. Rather, she learns to become a stronger woman. She sticks to her values, and does not succumb to his attempt to woo her with music. Instead, she “ listens to [him] with pitiless

courtesy, because she dares not smile at his miserable performance" (Porter 867). Smiling at Braggioni will most likely only encourage his selfish desires. However, she is stronger than that. Another way in which she does not give into his demanding desire for affection is telling him no. She knows that if she gives him enough time, he will be distracted by his own thoughts. She thinks to herself, "there is nothing to do but sit patiently and say "no" when the moment comes" (872). Her ability to apathetically listen and patiently say no represents the strength of her character. Not only does she ignore his deceptive signs of affection, but she also grows more as an individual by developing her personal values. This is evident in Laura's stream of consciousness the narrator explains at the beginning of the story: The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni [had] become a symbol of her many disillusionments, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues. This [was] nonsense, she [knew it then] and [was] ashamed of it... she [made] a secret truce with herself, determined not to surrender her will to such extreme logic. (867) Braggioni's perverse motivations and virtues helped Laura to define her own. Through this twisted relationship, she found that she valued true heroism, true love, and independence.

Unlike Laura, Nancy allows her relationship with Jesus to ruin her. Nancy has the potential to be a strong woman, independent of and not controlled by her husband. She makes a living as a prostitute, and when Mr. Stovall neglects to pay her for her services, she boldly reprimands him in public. He kicks her in the mouth, knocks out some of her teeth, but she merely "turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, 'It's been three times

now since he paid me a cent'" (Faulkner 957). But because of Jesus, Nancy is paranoid. Because of Jesus, Nancy puts the Compson children in danger. Because of Jesus, Nancy becomes a different person. One way she copes with this paranoia of Jesus is to repeatedly emit the sound. The sound is "not loud, not singing and not unsinging" but it represents the point of insanity to which Jesus has driven her (963). Metaphorically, Jesus has sent Nancy to another world, a frightening and distant world. While telling the children a bedtime story, "she talked like her eyes looked, like her eyes watching us and her voice talking to us did not belong to her. Like she was living somewhere else, waiting somewhere else" (963). On top of this delusional behavior, Jesus even leads her to literally prepare for death. She has her "coffin money saved up with Mr. Lovelady" because she is convinced that Jesus will kill her (966). She is no longer the woman who could carry laundry with "her head rigid, uptilted, the bundles steady as a rock or a balloon" (956). No, she is a paranoid woman, who is stuck in another world, willing to risk the lives of children because she is convinced hers is almost over.

In all, both of these relationships are flawed: they are premised on sex, abuse, violence, miscommunication, and selfish motivations. While no human relationship can reach perfection, these two have little hope of redemption. Thankfully, Laura does not let this relationship define her as a person. Sadly, Nancy does. The difference in these two females represents the power of relationships, whether it is the power to kill and destroy or the power to build up and strengthen.