David Richter: [00:00:00] In this moment, she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible. Things lost or broken by her own fault, things she had forgotten and left in houses when she moved, books borrowed from her and not returned, journeys she had planned and had not made, words she had waited to hear spoken to her and had not heard, and the words she had meant to answer with.

Bitter alternatives and intolerable substitutes, worse than nothing and yet inescapable, the long, patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love. All that she had had and all that she had missed were lost together and were twice lost in this landslide of [00:01:00] remembered losses.

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. Today, I'll be talking with David Richter, who has selected Katherine Anne Porter's short story &quot;Theft&quot;, published originally in 1929, and then republished with an important additional passage in her 1935 book, \_Flowering Judas and Other Stories\_.

The 1935 version was then republished in Porter's \_Collected Stories\_ in 1965, a volume that won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction that year, and David will be reading the version in the \_Collected Stories\_. David Richter is Professor Emeritus at Queens College of the City University of New York and at the CUNY Graduate Center.

David is a polymath whose knowledge [00:02:00] of literature and critical theory is both broad and deep. I'm continually amazed by how much David knows. He's an expert on The Bible, on 18th century British literature and culture, on narrative theory, and on critical theory more broadly. His single authored books are \_Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction\_, \_The Progress of Romance: Literary History and the Gothic Novel\_, and \_Reading the Eighteenth Century Novel\_.

David's edited books have also been extremely influential, and they include \_Falling into Theory\_, \_The Critical Tradition,\_ and \_Ideology and Form in Eighteenth-Century Literature\_. David has also written essays on biblical narrative, detective fiction, irony, film, and many, many other subjects. So David, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

David Richter: Great to be here.

Jim Phelan: Is there anything you'd like to say to introduce Porter's s tory?

David Richter: One thing is that the protagonist of the story that we're going to meet seems to be [00:03:00] unmarried, and Porter was indeed unmarried around the time she wrote the story, but she had been married and divorced three times during the period from, 1906 when she got married to about 1917.

So, this story falls into a period when she was having various lovers, but not undertaking matrimony.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: She then after writing the story, she married and divorced twice more.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

David Richter: The other thing about the story that you, you, you might want to notice is there's a lot of drinking in the story.

And, yeah, they're not having a glass of Chardonnay. The story is set during the American period of Prohibition.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: So what they're drinking is bathtub gin and the whiskey that would get imported into New York from places like Bermuda.

Jim Phelan: Okay, good things to keep in mind. Okay, so now here's David Richter reading Katherine Anne Porter's [00:04:00] &quot;Theft.&quot;

David Richter: She had the purse in her hand when she came in. Standing in the middle of the floor, holding her bathrobe around her and trailing a damp towel in one hand, she surveyed the immediate past and remembered everything clearly. Yes, she had opened the flap and spread it out on the bench after she had dried the purse with her handkerchief.

She had intended to take the Elevated, and naturally she looked in her purse to make certain she had the fare, and was pleased to find 40 cents in the coin envelope. She was going to pay her own fare, too, even if Camilo did have the habit of seeing her up the steps and dropping a nickel in the machine before he gave the turnstile a little push.

And sent her through it with a bow. Camilo, by a series of compromises, had managed to make effective a fairly complete set of smaller courtesies, [00:05:00] ignoring the larger and more troublesome ones. She had walked with him to the station in a pouring rain because she knew he was almost as poor as she was, and when he insisted on a taxi, she was firm and said, you know, it simply will not do.

He was wearing a new hat of a pretty biscuit shade, for it never occurred to him to buy anything of a practical color. He had put it on for the first time, and the rain was spoiling it. She kept thinking, but this is dreadful, where will he get another? She compared it with Eddie's hats that always seemed to be precisely seven years old, and as if they had been quite purposely left out in the rain, and yet they sat with a careless and incidental rightness on Eddie. But Camilo was far different. If he wore a shabby hat, it would be merely shabby on him, [00:06:00] and he would lose his spirits over it. If she had not feared Camilo would take it badly, for he insisted on the practice of his little ceremonies up to the point he had fixed for them, she would have said to him as they left Thora's house, Do go home.

I can surely reach the station by myself. It is written that we must be reigned upon tonight, said Camilo, so let it be together. At the foot of the platform stairway, she staggered slightly. They were both nicely set up on Thora's cocktails. And said, At least, Camilo, do me the favor not to climb these stairs in your present state, since for you it is only a matter of coming down again at once, and you'll surely break your neck.

He made three quick bows, he was Spanish, and leaped off through the [00:07:00] rainy darkness. She stood watching him, for he was a very graceful young man. Thinking that tomorrow morning, he would gaze soberly at his spoiled hat and soggy shoes and possibly associate her with his misery. As she watched, he stopped at the far corner and took off his hat and hid it under his overcoat.

She felt she had betrayed him by seeing, because he would have been humiliated if he thought she even suspected him of trying to save his hat. Roger's voice sounded over her shoulder above the clang of the rain falling on the stairway shed, wanting to know what she was doing out in the rain at this time of night, and did she take herself for a duck? His long, imperturbable face was streaming with water, and he tapped a bulging spot on the breast of his buttoned [00:08:00] up overcoat. Hat, he said. Come on, let's take a taxi. She settled back against Roger's arm, which he laid around her shoulders, and with the gesture, they exchanged a glance full of long, amiable associations.

Then she looked through the window at the rain, changing the shapes of everything and the colors. The taxi dodged in and out between the pillars of the Elevated, skidding slightly on every curve, and she said, The more it skids, the calmer I feel, so I really must be drunk. You must be, said Roger. This bird is a homicidal maniac, and I could do with a cocktail myself this minute.

They waited on the traffic at 40th Street and 6th Avenue, and three boys walked before the nose of the taxi. Under the globes of light, they were cheerful [00:09:00] scarecrows, all very thin, and all wearing very seedy, snappy cut suits and gay neckties. They were not very sober either, and they stood for a moment wobbling in front of the car, and there was an argument going on among them.

They leaned toward each other as if they were getting ready to sing. And the first one said, when I get married, it won't be just for getting married. I'm going to marry for love, see? And the second one said, Oh, go on and tell that stuff to her why don't you. The third one gave a kind of hoot and said, well, this guy, what the hell he's got?

And the first one said, ah, shut up your mesh. I got plenty. Then they all squealed and scrambled across the street, beating the first one on the back and pushing him around. Nuts, [00:10:00] commented Roger. Pure nuts. Two girls went skittering by, in short, transparent raincoats, one green, one red, their heads tucked against the drive of the rain.

One of them was saying to the other, Yes, I know all about that, but what about me? You're always so sorry for him. And they ran on with their little pelican legs, flashing back and forth. The taxi backed up suddenly and leaped forward again, and after a while, Roger said, I had a letter from Stella today, and she'll be home on the 26th, so I suppose she's made up her mind and it's all settled.

I had a sort of letter today too, she said, making up my mind for me. I think it is time for you and Stella to do something definite. When the taxi stopped on the corner of [00:11:00] West 53rd Street, Rogers said, I've just enough if you'll add ten cents. So she opened her purse and gave him a dime, and he said, That's beautiful, that purse.

It's a birthday present, she told him, and I like it. How's your show coming? Oh, still hanging on, I guess. I don't go near the place. Nothing's sold yet. I mean to keep right on the way I'm going, and they can take it or leave it. I'm through with the argument. It's absolutely a matter of holding out, isn't it?

Holding out's the tough part. Good night, Roger. Good night. You should take aspirin and push yourself into a tub of hot water. You look as though you're catching cold. I will. With the purse under her arm, she went upstairs, and on the first landing, Bill heard her step and poked his head out with his hair tumbled [00:12:00] and his eyes red.

And he said, For Christ's sake, come in and have a drink with me. I've had some bad news. You're perfectly sopping, said Bill, looking at her drenched feet. They had two drinks, while Bill told how the director had thrown his play out after the cast had been picked over twice and had gone through three rehearsals.

I said to him, I didn't say it was a masterpiece, I said it would make a good show. And he said, it just doesn't play, do you see? It needs a doctor. So I'm stuck, absolutely stuck, said Bill, on the edge of weeping again. I've been crying, he told her, in my cups. And he went on to ask her if she realized his wife was ruining him with her extravagance.

I send her 10 every week of my unhappy life, and I don't really have to. She threatens to jail me if I [00:13:00] don't, but she can't do it. God let her try it after the way she treated me. She's no right to alimony, and she knows it. She keeps on saying she's gotta have it for the baby. And I keep on sending it because I can't bear to see anybody suffer, so I'm way behind on the piano and the Victrola both.

Well, this is a pretty rug anyhow, she said. Bill stared at it and blew his nose. I got it at Richie's for 95, he said. Richie told me it once belonged to Marie Dressler and cost 1, 500, but there's a burnt place on it under the divan. Can you beat that? No, she said. She was thinking about her empty purse and that she could not possibly expect a check for her latest review for another three days.

And her arrangement with the basement restaurant could not [00:14:00] last much longer if she did not pay something on account. It's no time to speak of it, she said, but I've been hoping you would have by now that 50 you promised for my scene in the third act, even if it doesn't play. You were to pay me for the work anyhow out of your advance.

Weeping, Jesus said Bill, you too? He gave a loud sob or hiccup in his moist handkerchief. Your stuff was no better than mine after all. Think of that. But you got something for it, she said. 700. Bill said, do me a favor. Will you have another drink and forget about it? I can't, you know, I can't. I would, if I could, but you know the fix I'm in. Let it go then, she found herself saying almost in spite of herself, she had meant to be quite firm about it. [00:15:00] They drank again without speaking, and she went to her apartment on the floor above. There, she now remembered distinctly she had taken the letter out of the purse before she spread the purse out to dry.

She had sat down and read the letter over again. But there were phrases that insisted upon being read many times. They had a life of their own separate from the others, and when she tried to read past and around them, they moved with the movement of her eyes and she could not escape them, thinking about you more than I mean to.

Yes, I even talk about you. Why were you so anxious to destroy? Even if I could see you now, I would not. Not worth all this abominable. The end.

Carefully, she tore the letter into narrow strips and touched a lighted match to them in the [00:16:00] cold grate. Early the next morning, she was in the bathtub when the janitress knocked and then came in, calling out that she wished to examine the radiators before she started the furnace going for the winter.

After moving about the room for a few minutes, the janitress went out, closing the door very sharply. She came out of the bathroom to get a cigarette from the package in the purse. The purse was gone. She dressed and made coffee and sat by the window while she drank it. Certainly the janitress had taken the purse and certainly it would be impossible to get it back without a great deal of ridiculous excitement.

Then let it go with this decision of her mind. There rose coincidentally in her blood a deep, almost murderous anger. She set the [00:17:00] cup carefully in the center of the table and walked steadily downstairs. Three long flights and a short haul and a steep short flight into the basement where the janitress, her face streaked with coal dust, was shaking up the furnace.

Will you please give me back my purse? There isn't any money in it. It was a present and I don't want to lose it. The janitress turned without straightening up and peered at her with hot flickering eyes. A red light from the furnace reflected in them. What do you mean, your purse? The gold cloth purse you took from the wooden bench in my room, she said.

I must have it back. Before God, I never laid eyes on your purse. And that's the holy truth, said the janitress. Oh, well then, keep it, she said, but in a very bitter voice, keep it, if you want it so [00:18:00] much. And she walked away. She remembered how she had never locked a door in her life on some principle of rejection in her that made her uncomfortable in the ownership of things.

And her paradoxical boast before the warnings of her friends that she had never lost a penny by theft, and she had been pleased with the bleak humility of this concrete example designed to illustrate and justify a certain fixed, otherwise baseless and general faith, which ordered the movements of her life without regard to her will in the matter.

In this moment, she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible. Things lost or broken by her own fault, things she had forgotten and left in houses when she moved, books borrowed from her and not returned, [00:19:00] journeys she had planned and had not made, words she had waited to hear spoken to her and had not heard, and the words she had meant to answer with.

Bitter alternatives and intolerable substitutes, worse than nothing and yet inescapable, the long, patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love. All that she had had and all that she had missed were lost together and were twice lost in this landslide of remembered losses.

The janitress was following her upstairs with the purse in her hand, and the same deep red fire flickering in her eyes. The janitress thrust the purse toward her, while they were still half a dozen steps apart, and said, Don't ever tell on me. I must have been crazy. I get crazy in the head sometimes. I swear I do.

My [00:20:00] son can tell you. She took the purse after a moment and the janitress went on. I got a niece who was going on 17 and she's a nice girl and I thought I'd give it to her. She needs a pretty purse. I must have been crazy. I thought maybe you wouldn't mind. You leave things around and don't seem to notice much.

She said, I missed this because it was a present to me from someone. The janitress said, He'd get you another if you lost this one. My niece is young and needs pretty things. We ought to give the young ones a chance. She's got young men after her, maybe will want to marry her. She ought to have nice things.

She needs them bad right now. You're a grown woman. You've had your chance. You ought to know how it is. She held the purse out to the janitress saying, You don't know what you're talking about. Here, take it. I've changed my mind. I really don't want it. [00:21:00] The janitress looked up at her with hatred and said, I don't want it either now.

My niece is young and pretty. She don't need fixing up to be pretty. She's young and pretty anyhow. I guess you need it worse than she does. It wasn't really yours in the first place, she said, turning away. You mustn't talk as if I had stolen it from you. It's not from me, it's from her you're stealing it, said the janitress and went back downstairs.

She laid the purse on the table and sat down with a cup of chilled coffee and thought, I was right not to be afraid of any thief but myself. It will end by leaving me nothing.

Jim Phelan: Thank you, David. That's quite the ending, and we'll want to come back to that. But perhaps we should begin by, highlighting the passage that Porter added between the original publication of the [00:22:00] story in 1929 and then the version in 1935 with Flowering Judas and other stories that then, obviously, was retained in the collective stories in 1965. The passages from the scene between the protagonist and Bill after he tells her the price of his rug, he asks, Can you beat that, and she answers, No, and that's when Porter inserts the new material. Do you want to just maybe read it or review it?

David Richter: I'll read it again. Yeah. She was thinking about her empty purse and that she could not possibly expect a check for her latest review for another three days, and her arrangement with the basement restaurant could not last much longer if she did not pay something on account.

This very explicitly makes us understand exactly how in what a hand to mouth way the protagonist is living.

Jim Phelan: Right, it's also a way [00:23:00] which Porter gets the purse into this scene too, right, and the purse has been with Camilo and with Roger and now we're with Bill and here she's thinking of the purse.

David Richter: Otherwise the, I mean previously it says with her purse under her arm she went upstairs and on the first landing Bill heard her step. So in a sense, the purse has been in a paragraph with Bill before, right here, she's with Bill and thinking about exactly and that the 40 cents in it that were there before she paid her subway fare that's about that's all everything that's in there and that she owes the basement restaurant. She's not going to be able to eat, perhaps if she doesn't pay them something. This is what she then raises. It's no time to speak of it as though kind of apologetically.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: She's saying, it's no time to speak of it, she said, but I've been hoping you would have by now that 50 you promised for my scene in the third act. Even if it doesn't play you were [00:24:00] to pay me for the work anyhow out of your advance. And so, the point is if Bill has spent on the rug from reaches, but has not paid the girl, the 50 that he owes her for you know, working on his play, which he got an advance for 50 is about 50.

1929 is about 1, 000 today. So if you want to get a vague idea of what dealing with, a large amount of money, if somebody owed me a thousand dollars, I would be, I wouldn't just say pardon me for mentioning this, but. And he says do me a favor have another drink and forget about it, you know, I can't I would if I could but you know the fix i'm in, let it go then she found herself saying, almost in spite of herself.

Porter in in this version brings up explicitly the money that she's owed by Bill, I [00:25:00] think possibly when she published the first version, she thought it might be implicit in the fact that he bought, that he's paying a lot of money for a rug.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

David Richter: But here it's very explicit that the money for the rug would have almost twice paid her the money he owes her.

And yet he's buying, he's furnishing his apartment rather than paying her what she is going to need to eat. And then, and also that she says, let it go then, explicitly.

I think Porter wants to have her explicitly say, forget about it.

Jim Phelan: There's another thing I'm losing. I mean, in retrospect.

David Richter: I'm not going to get exercised about the fact that I'm losing.

Jim Phelan: Right. Yeah. And then the, the last part there, she had meant to be quite firm about it.

David Richter: Let it go then, yes. She, she found herself saying almost in spite of herself, she had meant to be quite firm about it.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: And it's sort of the conflict [00:26:00] between meaning to be quite firm and yet at the same time saying letting go is sort of what we get. It's a little later in the story, where she realizes that the janitress must have taken the purse. And she says, certainly the janitress had taken the purse and certainly it would be impossible to get it back without a great deal of ridiculous excitement. Then let it go. And so she's choosing that phrase.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: With this decision in her mind, there rose coincidentally in her blood, a deep, almost murderous anger. So the, the internal conflict in the protagonist between desire not to make a big thing out of things that she loses or is entitled to, or wants.

And something else, the opposite of that, the [00:27:00] part of her that wants to assert that, that she, that she is important, that her feelings are important. Her life is important. That conflict is in that sentence, and that is what comes out in that finally against the janitress, she's able to, to say, you stole this from me. I want it back.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. It's the flip. It's the flip of the scene with Bill, right? Where she says, let it go. But then she meant to be quite firm about it, and this time, she's initially saying, let it go. But then she is quite firm about it, and she's angry, right?

David Richter: And she's angry.

And she goes down but when the janitress said, I never saw your purse, I never laid a hand on it.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: She says, well, then let it go.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, right, right. We get it played out. Yeah, so I think we want to...

David Richter: That ambivalence, it's an ambivalence that at the very end she realizes is emptying her life of things of real value.

Jim Phelan: [00:28:00] Right, So she kind of transcends the ambivalence.

David Richter: It's an epiphany.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right. Right.

David Richter: It's an epiphany about that ambivalence.

Jim Phelan: Right. Exactly.

David Richter: That's creates this tension within her, in all of her relationships between what she wants and deserves and what she's willing to give up.

Jim Phelan: And settle for and all that. Yeah, right, right. Yeah, good. So I do think we want to come back to the epiphany and sort of the way in which it gets extended in that final scene, but maybe we could go back to the beginning and think about, Porter starts in the middle of things, right?

David Richter: She starts on the morning of the night before it's an interesting paragraph, that beginning. She had the purse in her hand when she came in. Is this the narrator speaking, or is this unmarked free indirect discourse?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: The story uses a lot of free indirect discourse. [00:29:00] Yes, she had opened the flap and spread it out. This is clearly the narrator saying to herself, I opened the flap and spread it out. The pluperfect there indicates that this is in the form of free indirect discourse.

Jim Phelan: She's thinking, we have a clear, clear internal formulation.

David Richter: The very first sentence seems to be unmarked free indirect discourse.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. And in retrospect I think we can say, Oh yeah, that is free indirect discourse. Once we get to the yes she had open, and we go back and say she had the purse in her hand, it's like a continuation of that first sentence.

David Richter: So she starts, on the morning of the night before, at the moment when she comes out of the, bathroom goes to get a cigarette and sees that her purse isn't there, and it's at this point that she then reviews the day, as though she's saying now, when did I have my purse?

Did I lose it somewhere? [00:30:00] What, when did I have it? And she goes back through not her entire day, but she has been at a cocktail party, I assume late afternoon or early evening at Flora's house. My suspicion is it's it may be in the village because the general movement of warm bodies through the imaginary landscape of New York City is North, from somewhere South. But there's a first scene with, do we, do you want to start with Camilo?

Jim Phelan: Yeah, right, right. We got this sequence of scenes, right as she's, as she's reflecting, she's re recalling, when did I have my purse, et cetera.

David Richter: And we get these scenes in enormous detail. Yeah, it's, it's almost as though Katherine Anne Porter has started a cinematic flashback of the protagonist's evening as she gets on the Elevated, takes a taxi and then has the conversation with Roger and [00:31:00] with Bill. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: Her finding the 40 cents in the corner and love is really all we need to establish the existence of the purse.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: But it goes on to talk about the fact that she would rather have walked to the L on her own, but Camilo insists upon walking with her and she can't stop him from doing this.

He has this melodramatic line. It is, it is written, we must be rained upon tonight. He seems to be a kind of romantic southern, Spanish lover, That is, is escorting the senorita to, through the dark night to the place of safety. But of course that really isn't Camilo.

Camilo is a guy who's as poor as she is, and who is wearing a totally impractical hat . And she even thinks, the next morning when he gets up, he's gonna find that his hat is [00:32:00] ruined and his shoes are soggy and he wished that he didn't know the protagonist.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Yeah. There's that interesting line about, he had managed to make effect through a series of compromises, he had managed to make effect of a fairly complete set of smaller currencies, ignoring the larger and more troublesome ones. Right, right. Yeah, that's pretty telling. And the fact that this is focalized through our protagonist is like, it's not just that Porter is telling us, it's like she's aware of this, right?

David Richter: She is totally aware of this. Yeah, she, yeah. She... his romantic involvement in her is theatrical and has very firm limits that she was not going to be able to budge in past.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: And there's nothing more to be said about that, right.

Jim Phelan: The other interesting detail here is that Eddie appears for the first time, right? When the comparing hats.

David Richter: Yes. Right. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: She's comparing Eddie's hat to Camilo's.

David Richter: Yeah. The man who is present by his [00:33:00] absence in the story is Eddie.

Jim Phelan: Okay, good.

David Richter: He does not appear in the story except here, Eddie's hats always seem to be precisely seven years old and as if they have been quite purposely left out in the rain, and yet they sat with a careless and incidental rightness on Eddie. Eddie is valuable to her.

What she sees in him is this careless and incidental rightness. There's something about him where the gestures are always true. He doesn't care about having a fashionable hat. He is very comfortable in old clothes. And that's, that contrasts with, with poor Camilo, right? Right.

And Eddie will, Eddie will show up, of course, as the author of the letter. How do we know this? I've had students say, how do you know that the letter was written by Eddie?

And the answer is there isn't any way I could prove it in a court of law, but I, I know it, you know, as much as [00:34:00] I know everything else that I know in the story, because if he is the one, the person who impresses her with the genuineness of his life and his reactions to the world, then it is precisely his words that burn when he says, why were you so anxious to destroy? Even if I could see you, I would know.

Jim Phelan: And then we, we also asked the question, who wrote the letter, but

who gave her the purse as a birthday present?

David Richter: Yeah, and of course he must have been the one who gave her the purse. Right.

Jim Phelan: And then, you know, then that connects to why she's, you know, why the purse is in every scene and also why she, the ambivalence.

David Richter: The purse is in every scene. Why she goes to the trouble of, ridiculous excitement of making a scene with the janitress to get the purse back. Because it will be something to remember him by, even though the affair is over.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. So it's almost like this [00:35:00] stand in for Eddie, in a way.

Her relationship with the purse, her relationship with the...

David Richter: The image of the hat, and the purse, well, the purse is the stand in for Eddie.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

David Richter: That's what's valuable. But he appears in the line about the hats in a way that, you know, he's that is just simply without affectation and everybody else is full of that affected. Camilo obviously, Bill obviously, he's all of that self pity is a put on, you know, all of his dialogue seems to be designed to basically say, no, I'm, you are not going to get the 50.

Jim Phelan: Right. Right.

Don't even ask it. If you ask, this is what this is. Here's what you asked. Here's my response.

David Richter: Since you asked I'll tell you now.

Jim Phelan: Oh, weeping Jesus, you too, right.

David Richter: Yeah. Roger in the middle is interesting. He is also slightly affected. I love all of the lines about did she take herself for a duck?

But there's a kind of [00:36:00] comfortable affection between them.

Jim Phelan: Yes.

David Richter: And my feeling and that of a lot of people who read the story is that Roger is somebody that she may have been be having a fling with or have had ~had, or... ~

Jim Phelan: ~Have~~ had a fling with at one point. ~Yeah.

David Richter: Yeah. At one point. And he is going to get together with Stella.

What's interesting is I had a letter from Stella today, and she'll be home on the 26th. So I suppose she's made up her mind and it's all settled. Roger is gonna get back with Stella.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: Yeah, and what she says to him is I had a sort of letter today making up my mind for me.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: I think it's time for you and Stella to do something definite. It almost implies to me that possibly she was an alternative to Stella and she's saying, no, I'm not. I had a letter making up my mind for me. You and Stella should do something. She's taking herself out of this picture implicitly. And I thought it was interesting that [00:37:00] she does so almost as though someone's coming home to me, you know, as Stella is coming home to you, but it's exactly the opposite.

Jim Phelan: Right, good. Yeah.

David Richter: If in any sense Roger was on the hook because of their fling together, she's taking him off the hook.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Yes. Good. Yeah, the other thing that's interesting about the line you just read is that, I did, I did get the 1929 version of the story, and it doesn't have the phrase making up my mind for me. It just, it just says, I had a sort of letter today, too, and then she said, I think it's time for you and Stella to do something definite.

So that, the addition there of making up my mind for me is, is also, I think, quite, you know, worthy of notice, right?

David Richter: Especially since making up my, since making up my mind for me is [00:38:00] precisely that, that letter from, from Eddie is It's the total breakup, the breaking off of the relationship.

Jim Phelan: Right. So, yeah.

Interesting. Yeah, so good. Maybe then we should, we should go to So, you know the the movement of the story we have this, you know cinematic as if it were the cinematic flashbacks And then we come back to sort of where we begin

David Richter: Speaking of cinema. I just want I just wanted to mention this that the the episode with Roger is wonderful In that we not only get the, the, the principals, Roger and, and the protagonist and I guess the cab driver heading north towards 53rd and 6th Avenue, which is seems to be where they, where she gets out of, where they get out of the sub, the, the taxi.

It also has extras. The extras, right? Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: Yeah. Three boys walk before the nose of the taxi. [00:39:00] And they are, they are talking about romance and the first one says, I'm, I'm not going to just get married just to get married. I guess that means doing it. To, to, to have a home and to have sex. I'm, I'm going to get married for love.

Right. And, and the, and, and the other two friends are saying You know, go on and tell that stuff to her. I mean, you're, you know, they're, they're very cynical and they're cynical about her and this guy, what the hell's he got? Do you really think that people fall in love with you? And, and then the first one is, is hostile.

And the, then the other two. shot, push him around when he, when he, when he says, no, I, I, I really mean it. And, and they, they, they push him around. Nuts commented, Roger pure nuts. So apparently the, these, these [00:40:00] issues of you know, love and longing are, you know, they're all place and this, and there, there are some female extras who come in.

Wearing transparent raincoats and saying things like, yes, I know all about that, but what about me? You're always sorry for him.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: This is right. They, they too are you know, skeptical about

Jim Phelan: Yeah, the

David Richter: possibility. Relationships and, and, and how they work and if they work. Right.

Jim Phelan: And, and I think, again, it's important to think, all right, this is info for us and sort of thematic material that Porter's bringing in, but this is also part of what she's reviewing, right?

Yes. This is, so she's got all this, you know, going on in her head as she's thinking about what happened to my purse. I

David Richter: find it, I, I sort of find it hard to believe that That Porter's that Porter, I mean, obviously this is presented as her new, her film of, of what's going on. These are [00:41:00] people who, who appear in front of her taxi and did then disappear into the night or the rain in the night.

But it's. I, I, I almost, I feel like they're almost there for, you know, they're, they're for local color, practically. I mean, it's a this is a New York scene and these are very New York people speaking in New York accents. And I, I feel almost it's there for its own sake, as opposed to telling me about the protagonist.

I feel Porter, for Porter, it's, she wants it in the story, but yeah. Obviously, there's so much more in this film than is necessary to establish the whereabouts of the purse. ~Yeah, no, that's right. But, ~

Jim Phelan: ~yeah, right. I mean, again, I agree with you. ~If this were missing, we wouldn't say, oh no, you need more, right?

You wouldn't know it was gone. But at the same time, I think you could make a case that, you know, it [00:42:00] is You know, this is a, this is a story ultimately about love and loss and the consequences of that and here it's, this is all, and this is something that she's rehearsing again. And,

David Richter: and, and it's relevant, I think that one of the, one of the other things she changed is the guy who gets smashed around by the other two in the first version was the, the third young man, the, the one who said, What the hell's he got?

Jim Phelan: Yeah,

David Richter: she changed that in the in the revised version of 1935 to they're pummeling the first guy who says, I'm gonna pray for love.

Jim Phelan: Right. Which makes much

David Richter: more

Jim Phelan: sense. I mean, I was almost

David Richter: like, absolutely. It's like, in terms of the themes of the story, it makes more sense. Yeah. But in terms of what the protagonist is, What's in the protagonist's head, it doesn't really make much difference.

Jim Phelan: No, that's right. That's right. Good point.

David Richter: [00:43:00] It's Porter's themes that are being amplified and

Jim Phelan: Yeah, exactly. All right, so why don't we talk about the encounter with the janitress and the Epiphany. Ah,

David Richter: the janitress. Well, first of all, it's the first, it's the first woman she's had an encounter with.

Jim Phelan: Right. And I'm. She's heard the young girls, but she hasn't interacted with them.

David Richter: They, they're just, they're just freaking by on their little pelican legs. I love that. I love their pelican legs. The, but it's. I, I wonder whether she's able to confront the janitress because it's a woman rather than a man and because of the class difference between them and I, I, I found myself going into a tiny bit of an Irish accent with the with, with the janitressyeah she's certainly speaking in much more She what do you mean your [00:44:00] purse before God I never laid eyes on your purse and that's the holy truth.

Yeah I mean, these, she's, there's a difference in class between them. Also the, she is speaking down class, even though she is as poor as a church mouse. She's a white collar. Yeah, she's a white collar church mouse. Her, she's a person who writes. Reviews and gets paid for them, who helps Bill with his third act that didn't get paid for it, but should have gotten paid for it.

And this was, this is actually what Katherine Anne Porter's life was like in the 19, the late 1920s. She was sending stories out to little magazines, getting, you know, not very much for them. You know, the, the, the, the Harcourt Brace Flowering Judas book was the first thing that brought her really [00:45:00] to public attention.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

David Richter: Put her name up there with the other modernists who around 1930, who are we talking, you know, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner. Yeah. She's, she. She, she doesn't attain their wealth and fame at this time. she, she gets that in the 60s when she publishes Ship of Fools and the Collected Stories.

But from, from 1930 on, she's able to at least cobble together a living as an author. And that's she lives on advances, she goes to Yaddo, she yeah, anyway.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, getting by, yeah. Yeah, so, all right. So now, so we have that different, that class difference and, the back and forth and.

David Richter: I looked that up in the OED. It's, it's, they find it as early as 1864.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

David Richter: There's another version called Janitrix, which Oh. Yes. [00:46:00] We'll go with things like execute tricks. Yeah,

Jim Phelan: So, you know, what's interesting about the dynamic is that she you know, she lets her deny at first, right?

And then as as she's walking up the stairs right after she's moved away and thinks, alright, I'm gonna let it go, even though she's been full of rage. She has this. Her first sort of, you know, recollection of her life, right? She felt she'd been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, et cetera.

And this, you know, long list going all the way to words she had waited to hear, spoken to her and had not heard, words she had meant to answer with bitter alternatives, and intolerable substitutes worth nothing. Yet inescapable, the long, patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark, inexplicable death of love.

All that [00:47:00] she had had and all that she had missed were lost together and were twice lost in this landslide of remembered losses. Yeah, this

David Richter: is I was, I was I was reading this to my wife a few days ago, and I broke down reading that. It's just

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: I started tearing up with it. It's amazing.

Jim Phelan: You know, there's a way in which we could think that she might have ended the story there.

Right? It would be a pretty Powerful ending, at least, you know, affectively, there's some kind of epiphany. Yes. I think, I think Joyce would have

David Richter: ended the story there.

Jim Phelan: Okay, yeah. Alright, well, why does she go on, do you think? ~What's, what's She goes, she goes on ~

David Richter: ~because ~Go ahead. I, I think she goes on to, partly because I think it This is too plotty, but the, [00:48:00] it, it nails down.

It was a present to me from someone. And then the line, he'd get you another, if you lost this one. The irony of she, she, she wants it because it's her only souvenir of Eddie. And of course, what the, what the janitress says, he'd get you another. Is false. He, he has broken with her. There is gonna be no more Right.

Presence from Eddie. It's a, the other thing that it does though is to contrast to, to tell us something about her age.

Jim Phelan: Yes.

David Richter: That which is not made explicit anywhere in the story except here, right. That the Janus. has a, has a niece who is of marriageable age, it implicit. She, she is speaking to the protagonist as though they are of the same age.

They are, [00:49:00] what should we say? Somewhere in, maybe around 38, 40, 40, something in that order. And, and that, and that for that. Her that her love life is and the janitress is saying your love life is over

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: It's my niece that needs the pretty things ~It rubs in the, the, the lesson of the, the, the lost love.~

Jim Phelan: ~Right. ~Right. And that cause it implies that

David Richter: it isn't like something that, well you know, you wash your man right out of your hair and start all over again. Right.

Jim Phelan: Right.

David Richter: You, you can, if you're. You know, Nellie Forbush, but you can't if you're the protagonist because is she, is she going to marry again when, you know,

Jim Phelan: right

David Richter: after 40 right.

Well, actually Katherine Anne Porter did twice. Yeah. But she didn't know

Jim Phelan: that in 1929. She

David Richter: did not know that in 1929. So I think, to a certain extent, it's pushing in that direction that that the [00:50:00] rules of, of it seems like the rules of, of life and love in, in 1930 also suggested that if you were 40, you were kind of past that, especially if

Jim Phelan: you're a woman, right?

Especially if you were a

David Richter: woman, right? And she's, she don't need fixing up to be pretty. She's young and pretty anyhow, right? Right. And

Jim Phelan: there's also something about the fact that, you know, these are two women talking, that they can talk in a way that, you know, this conversation about the niece and so on, and, and they're absolutely,

They couldn't, she couldn't have this if it were a janitress.

David Richter: The first time she's, they're mixing it up.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

David Richter: And and, and the last line, the last vocal line. It's not from me, it's from her, you're stealing it, said the janitress, is horrifically ironic. And so the janitress is saying to the woman, I've given your purse back, the person I've stolen from you, I'm giving it back to you.

But of course you are the one who is [00:51:00] stealing it from my niece.

Jim Phelan: Yes, right, right, right. Wow. Yeah, right. I mean

David Richter: the, it's sort of twisting the knife of irony at that point.

Jim Phelan: Right,

David Richter: Right. And, and laying and kind of, we, she goes for a, shall we say just a short layup rather than a you know a long drive here I was right to be, not to be afraid of any thief, but myself who will end by leaving me nothing.

It's it's really, it repeats the epiphany of the previous sequence. But it repeats it in one

Jim Phelan: sentence. Yeah. It repeats and completes in a way. Right? Yeah. I mean ending with Nada. Yeah. Who, and right. By leaving me nothing. Right. Right. Yes. And I, I'm the one who's, I'm the agency of my own, I'm

David Richter: The agent of that theft.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right, right.

David Richter: Anyway, so I think it's just a, I think it's a tremendously [00:52:00] powerful story.

Jim Phelan: I agree, yeah. I mean it is, you know, you mentioned Joyce before, and we can think about, you know, what modernism is doing with the short story, and sort of the idea of, or what modernist writers are doing with the short story, and how they sort of work with this idea of epiphany.

But there's something in the, the particular execution of it here that's especially powerful, I think.

David Richter: Yeah, she, it's, it's sort of so she, she kind of is already a master of The modernist short story that, that we, you know, you think I'm just beginning with Araby or, you know, or maybe with Czech love, of course, the lady was.

The lady with the dog kind of ends with a kind of epiphany of we, we're, we're definitely somewhere, but we're definitely not anywhere yet.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, [00:53:00] right, right. That's more of an upswing, as I recall.

David Richter: It's not this devastating thing. Don't think the struggle is over, You know, but but the struggle is definitely worth it.

Yeah. Yeah, exactly really in the in the lady with the pet dog. I wish I could read that that was much too long for format.

Jim Phelan: Right, right All right. Well, great. Anything that you'd like to touch on that we haven't gotten to?

David Richter: I cannot remember. I cannot remember anything. I'm out of steam. I think we covered, we covered, we covered a lot of ground with this, with this story, I think.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, thank you very much. I think it was a great choice, and I really enjoyed the discussion. And I want to thank our listeners, and to say, I'm happy to get your feedback, which you can send to me at, projectnarrative@osu.Edu or put it on our Facebook [00:54:00] page, or write to our Twitter account, @PNOhioState. I also like to remind you that you can find now 40 other episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website, or on Apple Podcasts. And if you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. Thank you again.