



PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER

A Modern Allegory of an Encounter with Death

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter’s literary prowess, earning her the title of “a writer’s writer” for her stylistic mastery, has consistently garnered critical acclaim. Darlene Unrue’s seminal works, *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter’s Fiction* (1985) and *Understanding Katherine Anne Porter* (1988), encapsulate this critical attention, linking Porter’s life to her thematic explorations of regionalism, female characters, trauma, and modern age motifs, including alienation, paralysis, apocalypse, sexuality, war, and death. This article delves into the allegorical treatment of death in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, examining its rich tapestry of archetypal symbols, from Biblical motifs to Freudian figures, gaining renewed relevance amidst the COVID-19 pandemic’s recontextualization of literature on disease and mortality.

The recent health crisis has prompted a retrospective analysis of historical pandemics. Notably, the Black Death (1348–1720) is estimated to have claimed 50 million lives. The 1918 Spanish flu, with recorded deaths of 20 million and actual figures likely higher, infected nearly half of the then-global population. Characterized by its high infection and mortality rates, the flu wreaked havoc before the advent of vaccines and antivirals in the 1940s. Compounded by a shortage of medical staff due to World War I, it escalated into a grave public health crisis. The pandemic’s impact, often overshadowed by World War I narratives, remains under-

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represented in historical accounts. Davis notes that the influenza's toll on soldiers was greater than combat-related fatalities, yet its significance is frequently diminished in war histories: "The history of World War I overshadows the history of the pandemic, and many histories of the war ignore or downplay the virus's impact on the war even though more soldiers died of influenza than combat wounds" (Davis 2011: 63).

Pale Horse, Pale Rider by Porter, a modernist writer, attempts to make sense of these twin tragedies of humankind continuously weighing one against the other in the narrative. "*Pale Horse, Pale Rider* connects the reader to the pandemic, and in contrast with historiography, it renders the story of the pandemic into aesthetic forms at the same time that it also documents the pandemic by recording one individual's personal experience" (Davis 2011: 62). The novel resonates with the elegiac (or mourning) spirit of the age—a dismal worldview and general barrenness of life signifying a spiritual vacuum, fragmentation of the mind and the consequent broken narrative structure. In articulating the concerns of her age, Porter is more in league with T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who are the major precursors of Modernist literature. Porter greatly admired her contemporaries Woolf and Joyce, as stated in her interviews and their work bears many similarities to hers. But her materials can be traced to her Southern roots, family tradition and the maladies afflicting America. Porter never fails to show ownership and original technique while placing her characters in the American context. She deftly uses modernist tools to articulate her close encounter with death as her consciousness oscillates between sleep and wakefulness. Her extraordinary gift to perceive larger patterns in the affliction of mankind and her tragedy elevates *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* to the status of a modern allegory of man's journey from this world to the other world. *Pale Horse* is the third in the eponymous series of three novellas including *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine*. Although the novellas exhibit continuity in theme and characters, *Pale Horse* is unique because of Porter's use of an introspective, psychological protagonist and beatific visions.

PORTER'S UNUSUAL LIFE AND OBSESSION WITH DEATH

A masterpiece of craftsmanship and modern narrative technique, this short novel offers a glimpse into Porter's extraordinary

life and the consequences of her near-death experience. Porter's obsession with death can be traced back to the "Miranda cycle," where, in one of the stories—"The Fig Tree"—the child protagonist, Miranda, invents her own burial ritual for a dead chick. Eversince, death, in its various aspects, is omnipresent in Porter's works. The young Miranda of the *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* dreams of her ancestral house where "too many ancestral bones are propped up on the mantelpieces" (Porter 1939: 180). Porter's close shave with death makes her particularly sensitive, and thereby also uniquely equipped to examine the mystery and rituals of death. The novel dives deep into her experience of making it through the influenza pandemic and World War I itself, thus rendering her vision relevant to the perceptions of the post-pandemic years.

The fear of the unknown illness, shortage of hospital beds, fever-induced hallucinations, phobia of the contagious plague and violence of World War I stayed as a repressed memory in Porter's mind until she moved to Basel in the 1930s. This painful memory of Porter's assumed a cosmic significance during her stay in the heart of Europe. According to Jewel Spears Brooker, Porter's stay at Basel was significant as she found ample Medieval and Reformation-time material to translate her nightmare into a narrative (Brooker 2009: 215). Basel itself stands for the coexistence of the past and the present, the Medieval and the modern. It inspired Porter to look back and reorient the events in her personal—and global—history into a larger, meaningful, pattern that led Porter to believe that only art and religion could save the world. Her novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (first published in 1938), is a tragic, surreal, and striking portrayal of being faced with death during a tragic pandemic and a testimony to a painful period of American history that had already been scarred by the immense death and devastation of World War I.

WHAT IS MODERN IN LITERATURE?

Porter's short novel, demonstrably, employs a variety of devices from the "modernist toolset" to address human trauma. As is well known, modernism is a general term applied retrospectively to a wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in literature and other art forms of the early 20th century. Mod-

ernism rejects the 19th-century literary tradition of a consensus between the author and the reader. The writer deliberately foils the expectations of the reader by adopting a variety of complex forms and styles. Modernist writing is predominantly cosmopolitan, and often expresses a sense of urban cultural dislocation, along with an awareness of (then still new) anthropological and psychological theories.

Analyzing *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, one should also bear in mind that throughout Modernism, techniques such as juxtaposition, multiple viewpoints, and fragmentary forms challenge readers to derive coherence in meaning. Porter's use of medieval symbols in her novel exemplifies T.S. Eliot's concept of the historical sense, which entails recognizing the interconnectedness of past and present literature. Eliot emphasizes the importance of this sensibility in writing, suggesting that "[...] the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Eliot 1962: 294).

The consensus among scholars is that Modernism, which thrived in the early 20th century, reflects a cultural crisis that was both exhilarating and disconcerting. This period introduced new realms of human potential, challenging established methods of conceptualizing and assessing ideas. Modernism is distinguished by its experimental nature, particularly in form manipulation, and by an acknowledgment that knowledge is not definitive. The fiction of this era is characterized by its focus on consciousness, including both the subconscious and unconscious aspects of the human psyche. Hence the structure of external "objective" events [...] is almost completely dissolved, in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection and reverie" (Lodge 1977: 45). Eliot's observation on Joyce's technique in "Ulysses," as referenced earlier, emphasizes the primacy of the *method* over the *material*, which may be ordinary. In the same vein, Porter juxtaposes modern psychology with medieval history to create a verbal equivalent of her experience of illness. The outcome is a brilliantly

synthesized paean to pain and human suffering. The above notwithstanding, she also succeeds in manipulating the modernist tools in the articulation of her near-death experience, interspersing it with memories of her traumatic childhood. This Porterian touch earns her a recognition for her distinct, experimental, style.

A RIDE THROUGH PAST AND PRESENT

The narrative traces Miranda's multi-layered, conscious and sub-conscious journey, as she goes through a crisis. Here the distinction between the past and the present is blurred, and the reader, too, embarks on an Odyssey of confusion and epiphany. The reader accompanies Miranda in her peregrinations leading to the final stage of truth, however painful it should turn out to be, which is possible because Porter deflects from the convention of realism by going beyond the details of her personal experience and focusing only on the intense moments of revelation. This enables her to put her experience into a larger context.

In the narrative, Miranda Gay, a bright yet prematurely disillusioned reporter at Denver's *Blue Mountain News*, is deeply attuned to global events, notably the concluding phase of World War I and the burgeoning influenza pandemic. Her world-weariness, a reflection of living through historical turmoil, finds a brief respite in her intense but fleeting romance with Adam Barclay, an army officer on extended leave, who will, eventually, have to resume his duties. The name "Adam" subtly foreshadows the fate of their relationship. Amidst their love, both Miranda and Adam are acutely conscious of the futility and despair underlying their connection, mirroring the broader existential desolation of their era. "There was only the wish to see him and the fear, the present threat, of not seeing him again; for every step they took towards each other seemed perilous, drawing them apart instead of together, as a swimmer in spite of his most determined strokes is yet drawn slowly backwards by the tide" (Porter 1939: 219). Engrossed in her routine amidst the wartime turmoil, Miranda navigates through her days, engaging in activities like promoting liberty bonds and visiting wounded soldiers. Yet, she remains oblivious to a more imminent threat—the looming influenza pandemic. Her discomfort and persistent headaches, precursors to the impending health

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crisis, go unrecognized as harbingers of the real danger ahead. “Her heart,” Porter writes, “was a stone lying upon her breast outside of her; her pulses lagged and paused, and she knew that something strange was going to happen [...]” (Porter 1939: 179). From the very start, there is a sense of impending doom drawing closer. The narrative is marked by an atmosphere of apocalypse and intrigue, and the inconsequential nature of events reflecting the spirit of Modernism.

The narrative begins with a dream that Miranda is having while lying in her boarding house bed in Denver. In this instance, she seamlessly juxtaposes her childhood trauma and troubled present with the help of Biblical symbols. The narrative voice emphasizes, “Too many have died in this bed already, there are far too many ancestral bones propped up on the mantelpieces” (Porter 1939: 180). She sees herself dreaming in her childhood bed in her old ancestral home when she is awakened from the dream within a dream by Death on a grey horse, accompanied by the Devil. Miranda, however, refuses to go along with Death: she chooses Graylie, the pale and weak horse, who mirrors her own fragile state, to outrun both Death and the Devil. Jewel Spears Brooker observes,

She [Porter] incorporated references to the Middle Ages and the Reformation and, within these, references to biblical archetypes. More specifically, she built into her narrative a running analogy to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and to two works by Dürer, the first—*The Knight, Death and the Devil*—focussed on the individual’s journey through life, and the second—the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*—on the larger sweep of history. (Brooker 2009: 215)

Upon awakening, Miranda confronts the harsh realities of her current historical context. Yet, her dream (a motif, notably, akin to that in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*), reflecting a preoccupation with death and echoes of her past, also foreshadows her impending challenges. As Brooker observes, “Porter signals her artistic intent by including in the dream within the dream an allusion to Dürer’s engraving about the soul’s progress from this world to the next” (Brooker 2009: 216), which ties it to a scene from *The Apocalypse of St. John*, thus further enriching the narrative’s symbolic tapestry. Porter’s medievalism becomes even more evident in Miranda’s direct allusion to the pestilence when, while roam-

ing the streets of Denver with Adam, she encounters a shocking number of funerals along the way. Commenting on the strange phenomenon, Miranda remarks: "It seems to be a plague, something out of the Middle Ages" (Porter 1939: 200). Fusing the past with the present by means of mythological narratives, Porter converts Miranda's personal journey, and implicitly her own experience, into an event of cosmic dimensions, which places her among the leading Modernists of her age.

Throughout the story, Miranda's past, present and future keep impinging on her subconsciousness. The novel unfolds as Miranda experiences four more illness-induced dreams and hallucinations. Porter aesthetically weaves all the threads into the narrative with the help of Miranda's dream visions, indicating Freudian influence. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* thus bridges the consciousness of the individual with the nightmare of contemporary history:

The modernist use of "stream of consciousness," with its reliance on Image association which was often supposed to be driven by the unconscious), is basic to all the arts. It aims at a greater fidelity to private psychological processes, often with the characteristics stressed by Bergson, concerning the flexibility of our experience of subjective time (*durée*) as opposed to public time. (Butler 2010: 51)

The modernist narrative aims to provide a textual equivalent to the stream of a fictional character's consciousness as if the reader is eavesdropping on the flow of conscious experience in the character's mind. This narrative technique mastered by T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf has a variety of stylistic forms. Katherine Anne Porter's narration bears a close resemblance to Joyce's *Dubliners* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, which is further confirmed by Jamie Colwell: "One of the most subtle reminders of Joyce's style in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* series exists in the powerful narrative voice. Both Porter and Joyce use the narrator to undermine character dialogue and seduce the reader to trust narration" (Colwell 2007: 14).

Katherine Anne Porter's mastery in "quoted-stream-of-consciousness" is evident in her writing. This technique artfully renders a character's internal monologue as silent inner speech, essentially a stream of verbalized thoughts, sometimes without the use of quotation marks. This approach seeks to replicate the natural,

unstructured flow of human thought, capturing the intimate and spontaneous nature of inner speech. It is a powerful tool that brings characters' silent self-dialogues to life, offering readers an unfiltered glimpse into their internal experiences. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the writer uses interior monologue alternatively with the third-person narration and dialogue. Her quoted-stream-of-consciousness technique is perhaps best illustrated by a scene, in which Miranda visits a hospital and accidentally bumps into a soldier, who turns out to be as resentful of such visits as Miranda is:

It is like turning a corner absorbed in your painful thoughts and meeting your state of mind embodied, face to face, she said. "My own feelings about this whole thing, made flesh. Never again will I come here, this is no sort of thing to be doing. This is disgusting," she told herself plainly. "Of course, I would pick him out," she thought, getting into the back seat of the car she came in, "serves me right, I know better." (Porter 1939: 193-194)

Even outside of her dreams, Miranda's engagement in an ongoing internal monologue is a key element of Porter's narrative. The novel's action springs from the protagonist's memories, imaginings, and visions, propelling the narrative through her consciousness in a non-linear and enigmatic manner. Amidst the engulfing chaos of war, which dominates her life and relationships, including with Adam, Miranda's internal struggles to resist the overwhelming frenzy are thus poignantly portrayed. The war has taken over every aspect of her life—her mind, her bond with Adam and the world around her.

The gong of war sets the apocalyptic tone of the novel. Miranda grudges having to pay dearly for the liberty bonds to help the cause of war, she sees herself raging against the highhandedness of war "pedlars," and it is only her encounters with her love that serve as brief respites in a broader human tragedy. Adam, prepared to go to war without questioning its rationale, without resentment, without revolt, is portrayed as an innocent "sacrificial lamb." He admits that he wouldn't be able to look himself in the face if he did not go to war, which renders the union of the protagonists, differing in their worldviews, impossible. The conflict's personal cost thus adds to the global toll, emphasizing the drama of the human condition.

Through her protagonist's eyes, Porter lets the reader into a vast "wasteland." Miranda can read fear and suspicion in the expression of all the eyes around her, reinforcing her own angst. Whether embodied in the war or manifest in the flu, death haunts her constantly, and Miranda is overwhelmed by fatigue: "There's too much of everything in this world just now. I'd like to sit down here on the curb [...] and die, and never again see—I wish I could lose my memory and forget my own name... I wish—" (Porter 1939: 214). And soon enough, the unsettling premonition, her ominous dreams, finally assume shape when she gets infected with the Spanish flu.

The novel's climax is infused with a distinctly Modernist touch. Miranda, considered beyond hope, hovers in a liminal state of consciousness. Her mind's landscape, mirroring the narrative style, is fragmented and surreal, oscillating between delirium and clarity. Floating in the twilight zone, Miranda drowns in the whirlpools of delirium and hallucinations. As her condition deteriorates, she alternates between fever and chills. Fortunately, Adam is by her side, looking after her with tenderness and devotion. When he leaves to fetch medicine and food, Miranda, feverish, slips into a dream. She derives comfort from the sublime vision of the white peaks of the Rockies, and soon drifts into a warm jungle, where a wide tranquil river dispels her chills. A ship is moored near her bed; she runs over the gangplank and to the deck only to watch her own figure waving goodbye to herself. When Adam returns, Miranda suggests that they sing an old African American work song, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," whose lyrics bemoan the loved ones, snatched by death one by one. Foreshadowing his own demise, Adam chants: "Pale horse, pale rider done taken my lover away," yet Miranda's assertion that Death always leaves one singer to mourn symbolizes her refusal to surrender. In the context of the scene, the song—alluding to St. John's apocalyptic vision—also epitomizes Everyman's journey, and by virtue of its symbolic charge, energizes questions about the essence of the human condition. Tired, Miranda falls asleep again, dreaming of an "angry dangerous wood full of inhuman concealed voices." A flight of arrows hits Adam in the heart and he falls in front of his lover. Soon enough, however, he rises again, unharmed and alive. This sequence of death and resurrec-

tion is repeated once more, and then, the when the third time comes, Miranda stands between her beloved and the volley of arrows to shield him.¹ The arrows go straight through her heart, piercing Adam's body. Strangely, Adam succumbs to the arrows this time while Miranda is still alive. Miranda wakes up from her dream in horror. Hysterically running about the room, she resists Adam's attempts to pacify her fears. Yet, in spite of all of his efforts, Miranda ends up in hospital.

In her fourth vision, Miranda lies in the hospital bed, surrounded by whiteness. White sheets, white curtains, white walls, and white-robed doctors—all serve to enhance the novel's symbolics of color. Porter's palette, dominated by pale, green, white, and gray, reflects her protagonist's changing states of mind. "What is this whiteness and silence but the absence of pain?" Miranda asks, suspended between life and death (Porter 1939: 247). In her liminal state, she watches another patient being taken away. Relapsing into a dream, Miranda experiences a vivid and haunting vision where an elderly man, pleading for mercy, is forcibly taken away by white-clad executioners. The man's hopeless struggle to shun death resonates with Miranda's own resistance; surrounded by whiteness, both refuse to willingly embark upon the journey towards the afterlife, a journey fraught with distress and agony. However, in her next dream vision Dr Hildesheim, treating her at the hospital, comes into the room carrying a naked infant writhing on the point of the bayonet—the stone white of the surroundings adding to the horror of violence. In the aftermath, Miranda succinctly describes her feelings, asserting that: "[t]he road to death is a long march beset with all evils, and the heart fails little by little at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step, the mind sets up its own bitter resistance [...]." And yet, she finishes the sentence with a rhetorical question: "and to what end?" (Porter 1939: 249).

In her final dream, Miranda confronts death intimately, which experience questions the very possibility of her precarious journey back to life. Her brush with death challenges the conventional, inherited, notions of life and death—such as eternity or oblivion—

1. Fisher argues that in this vision Porter alludes to Saint Sebastian, a Christian martyr who had borne the assault of arrows and earned his recognition as the patron saint of all those affected by the plague (Fisher 2012: 128).

with which she, and the whole humanity, grapples. Miranda comes to realize that “[o]blivion [...] is a whirlpool of grey water turning upon itself for all eternity [...]” while eternity itself “[...] is perhaps the distance to the farthest star” (Porter 1939: 251). She sees herself lying on a narrow ledge over a bottomless pit, leaning against a granite wall, her childhood dream of safety. Death is death, she feels, unlike granite walls, stars, and whirlpools, which are things. The narrative flows and ebbs along with Miranda’s stream-of-consciousness, fusing one image with another, without any pause, without any rest. The protagonist, who has nearly descended to farthest bottom of life, shuns death when a “particle of her being,” representing her stubborn will to live, grows into a radiance. The radiance curves into a rainbow—an apocalyptic symbol signifying the portal of a new life—beckoning to a bright landscape of sea and sand. Miranda enters the portal with “serene rapture,” and soon finds herself among the living. Familiar faces give her peace, yet soon a vague apprehension disturbs her tranquillity. She has an uncanny feeling of a loss. “Where are the dead? We have forgotten the dead, oh, the dead, where are they?” (Porter 1939: 255). Miranda regains consciousness after the vision ends, and, having been administered medicine, wakes to the smell of death. Ironically, however, at the same time, the air at the hospital is filled with excited screams of people rejoicing the news of the Armistice that marks the end of the war. Overwhelmed by the odor of death, however, Miranda remains unaffected by the spirit of jubilation: having received a letter informing her of Adam’s death due to influenza at the camp hospital, Miranda feels cheated. Far from jubilant, she comes to terms with being alive, but it is a shadow of a life that she cripples back into. She feels that her body has turned into a body of a monster, one in which she can never feel at home. She also realises that something in her has permanently transformed. No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything (Porter 1939: 264).

The novel’s conclusion, while seemingly anticlimactic, signifies a profound moment of insight for Miranda, and by extension,

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Porter, into the enigma of life and death. This realization enables Miranda to come to terms with her current state. Porter's own experience of alienation after recovering from influenza, which notably altered her appearance with silver tresses, reflects a deep personal transformation. In an interview with Barbara Thompson she acknowledged that the illness represented a pivotal division in her life, marking a distinct before and after, profoundly shaping her identity and perspective. "The plague of influenza [...] simply divided my life, cut it across like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that, I was in some strange way altered" (Porter 1987: 85).

CONCLUSION

This study begins by setting the stage with the novel's autobiographical roots and its embodiment of modernist elements, followed by an insight into the author's narrative techniques and, on the basis of close reading of selected passages, also into the centrality of the existential themes of life and death. It establishes *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* as a notable modernist narrative, adeptly capturing the human experience of agony and trauma amidst death and disease. Utilizing a rich tapestry of symbolism, biblical references, and mythological elements, Porter transforms her personal confrontation with mortality into a profound exploration of life and death. The novel transcends its autobiographical confines, offering an allegorical journey through the thresholds of the otherworld. It extends beyond Porter's individual *story* to engage with the broader human *history*, reflecting on the profound impacts of wars and pandemics as seismic shocks, whose scale transforms a personal tragedy into the turning point in the growth of civilization. As a literary piece, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* adeptly encapsulates the magnitude of global catastrophes, standing as an exceptional work in the canon of war and pandemic literature.

Abstract: The novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, authored by Katherine Anne Porter and published in 1939, is set against the backdrop of the 1918–1919 Spanish flu pandemic towards the end of World War I. It narrates the dual story of individual and societal trauma and survival amidst the pandemic, contributing to the cultural memory of that era in American history. The narrative draws heavily on autobiographical elements, with the protagonist Miranda's experiences closely reflecting Porter's own. As Miranda battles a life-threatening flu, her delirious mind traverses past, present, and future, blurring the boundaries between them. This paper examines Porter's employment of modernist techniques such as dreams, visions, archetypes, biblical allusions, and stream of consciousness to articulate Miranda's harrowing yet transformative passage through a liminal space between life and death. Porter's novelistic approach is distinctly modern in its exploration of mortality and the portrayal of Miranda's near-death experience, aligning her with modernist contemporaries like T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, who also eschewed traditional literary forms to depict the profound dislocations of their time. The enduring appeal of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* lies in its rich symbolism and psychological depth in addressing themes of death and illness.

Keywords: Spanish flu, modernism, pandemic, symbolism, dream, death, war

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