

Pale Horse, Pale Rider, by Katherine Anne Porter  
For the Novel Club, January 2021

Catherine LaCroix

Let's start with the essentially autobiographical nature of this story. In 1918, Katherine Anne Porter was 28 years old, working at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver. She met a young soldier who was readying for deployment overseas in the war. She fell sick with the influenza. He nursed her. She was taken to a hospital that was so full that there was no bed for her; she lay in the hall for a time with a fever of 105. She experienced delirium and a beatific vision. Ultimately, she survived, but in the meantime the soldier died of influenza. It is a brief, sad story.

And now let us discuss how these basic facts fare in the hands of a talented writer. How does she use it? What does she tell us?

This is a story about death. It opens with a dream: Miranda, taken back to her childhood home, chooses a horse to ride that will enable her to "outrun Death and the Devil." P. 270. We learn, as she awakens, that there is death in the air, in the form of the war. She remembers the prior day, which included two main elements: the threats of two war bond salesmen, and a trip with some society girls to a hospital to spread cheer among wounded soldiers. We know there is a war. But as she leaves her home in company with Adam, the first thing they see is a funeral. Page 279. We don't yet know why there is a funeral, but we soon learn about the "funny new disease" that has affected the length of Adam's leave (p. 281) and we hear gossip at the newspaper about where the virus came from (p. 284).

The story thus confronts us with two forms of death. Miranda assumes that her affair with Adam will go nowhere because he is destined to die in the war. He is, the story repeatedly tells us, vigorous, healthy, and strong, yet doomed to perish on the battlefield. We know that Miranda opposes the war but is unwilling to say so out loud, so his impending death feels like a waste to her. At the same time, throughout the story Miranda's thoughts are wandering in an almost dreamlike state and she feels a headache. Clearly all is not well with Miranda. But she isn't thinking about the pandemic. She can't oppose a pandemic, in the same way we can oppose a war, and the arrival of a virus is more stealthy than obliteration by a bomb. It creeps up on Miranda when she isn't looking, when she is preoccupied with the stresses of the war. And the cosmos doles out an ironic conclusion: the war ends, but Adam dies anyway, because he has loved and has tended for the contagious Miranda.

Among the most amazing writing in the book is in the telling of Miranda's delirium, leading to the sensation of dying and a beatific vision of the meadows on the other side. She has a heavenly vision; she feels its attraction and yet she resists. In the end, she is pulled back from the brink and awakens to noise and ugly clamor. This hideous sounds signal a joyous event: the end of the war. But she has a feeling of emptiness and grayness that leaves her wondering: why be alive, if all it does is lead to a later death? (Page 314.) I suspect we can all offer an answer to that, while still feeling sympathy for a young woman worn out by disease.

Recall that this is not a completely made-up story. Katherine Anne Porter experienced the influenza, and when interviewed about it said "I really had participated in death." She had a beatific vision, and said "if you have had that and survived it, you are no longer like other people."

So yes, it is a story about death.

But of course, we have more. We are offered ways in which a war abroad warps the culture of life at home. Scoundrels and questionable characters wrap themselves in the flag to hawk war bonds, with seamy high-pressure techniques that sully the name of patriotism. Those who question the war feel afraid to speak; inability to purchase bonds is not an excuse. (Rampant coercive efforts to impose a particular vision of patriotism ... might we see that elsewhere in modern times?)

We also see how gender roles have pernicious effects on men and women alike. Men who are unable to go to war feel ashamed. Women, who could be performing useful work while manpower is scarce, are urged to collect peach pits and knit: "It keeps them busy and makes them feel useful, and all these women running wild with the men away are dangerous, if they aren't given something to keep their little minds out of mischief." (P. 290)

Thinking back to the episode with society girls in a hospital: none of these soldiers has the flu. The scene almost feels like a show hospital, designed for the benefit of young women with baskets of cheer. One soldier, alone, shows a grim face that breaks the façade.

Perhaps the author is saying that war is like a virus; it infects our minds and our culture. Katherine Anne Porter, the critics tell us, did not like the Great War. This story was written on the eve of World War II, perhaps as she reflected on the miseries of World War I, the war that she was told would end all wars.

Another feature of this story is the impact of terrible times on the young. Miranda and Adam are both too young for the trials they are facing. War has that effect, because it preys on the young. We see the way they fight back: light humor, the joy of courtship. (P. 278.) They face each other with facades of light patter, optimism and courage, but we know that Miranda quietly suffers. And a vignette of Adam's face as he waits for her outside the newspaper office shows that he too is hiding his fears: "It was an extraordinary face, smooth and fine and golden in the shabby light, but now set in a blind melancholy, a look of pained suspense and disillusion. ... He saw her then, rose, and the bright glow was there." (P. 295.)

Finally: This tale is one of three in a single volume. Porter refers to her works as "short novels," so in theory we could focus only on *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. But the other two works also deal with mortality, in rather different ways. Or do they?

The first tale, *Old Mortality*, starts with the deceased Aunt Amy, but the story focuses not so much on her death as on the self-deceptions in a family; the mythology that develops around a set of facts, and the perplexity of children as they try to understand. At the end we see Miranda growing up and beginning to glimpse through the mist the actual complex humans who make up her family.

The second tale, *Noon Wine*, feels like a classic case of a mysterious stranger rescuing a family from its own pathologies, although perhaps at the cost of creating new distortions. Death comes at the end, when Mr. Thompson – who begins as a tough and unsympathetic character – kills an intruder in a strange episode that leads to disaster for all concerned. So there is death here, for sure. P.S. What is "Noon Wine," anyway?

Why are these stories in one volume? Miranda appears to be the same person in *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, with perhaps some literary liberties taken with the details of the character. But what is *Noon Wine* doing in the middle?

(Page numbers taken from The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter, Harcourt, Inc.)

Let us, then, proceed to the questions.

Questions:

1. What is the potential significance of the names Adam and Miranda?
2. Is Miranda in *Pale Horse* a Christ-like figure? (Or is it more mythological: a descent to the underworld, a return to the land of the living.) Does Porter use archetypal images, images from nature, or images from religion and mythology? The Pale Rider is pretty obvious. Are there more?
3. There are two scenes involving sales of war bonds. One is an attempt at coercion, possibly sexist in nature. The other is a sales pitch interrupting a play, inflicted on a captive audience. What was your reaction? Why the repeated emphasis on war bonds in this rather short tale?
4. Miranda, apparently, is the same Miranda portrayed in *Old Mortality*, the opening story in this volume. Is this significant at all? (Miranda in *Pale Horse* appears to be the correct age, and she names some of the horses in *Old Mortality*. At the end of *Old Mortality*, she is 18 and married and we have no inkling of a marriage in *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, which offers her recollections only back to age 21. Is she the same character, in terms of personality?)
5. Miranda seems refreshingly modern for a character from 1918. She is based on real life; do you think Porter accurately portrayed the life of a young newspaper writer in Denver?
6. What is the moral of this story? What do we think of the ending: Miranda feels obligated to act grateful and happy to be alive. But there are these last words: "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."
7. Why are these three works in the same volume? What did you get out of reading all three of them?