

Reconciling the Ending of Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"

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Katherine Anne Porter concludes her long story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939) with Miranda, now about twenty-nine but still a relatively young woman, facing the prospect of the remainder of her life seemingly holding nothing in store for her except empty time, a future only bleak and desolate. Although the terrible war (the first world war, 1914–1918) is over and the terrifying plague (the epidemic of influenza that took thousands of lives in 1918) no longer threatens her, she has lost the one thing dear to her with the death of Adam in that epidemic. No longer will she have Adam to love and to love her; in contrast to the little time and brief opportunities that she and Adam had been afforded to spend together, she now has nothing but time itself:

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. (CS 317)

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is a companion piece to the preceding story in the Miranda cycle, "Old Mortality" (1937), not only in terms of length but also of a shared theme, that of Miranda altering her perception of reality through living experience. Both stories conclude with Miranda's interpretations of the lessons of her experiences appearing to us as disturbing or flawed. "Old Mortality," published about two years earlier than "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," ends, somewhat like the later story, with Miranda here also holding a rather discomfiting view of how she will deal with her future. Here Miranda, after a brief period of marriage, has decided to renounce the bonds of marriage and family that would confine her, especially as a woman (and also given her awareness of the limitations imposed by the expectations of the "Southern lady" cultural mentality on women's roles), to a life of stifling restrictions on her:

She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She knew now why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid

her making her own discoveries, that said "No" to her. (220)

Indeed Miranda has decided to renounce not only family ties but romantic love (the kind of love that she would later embrace and for which she would desperately cling to life in her struggle with the deadly influenza that almost kills her, only to lose it when she learns upon her recovery that Adam has died, in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"). Her decision is disturbing because she believes that in order to make "her own discoveries" she must renounce love, romantic love and even all familial relationships:

I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it.-And her disturbed and seething mind received a shock of comfort from this sudden collapse of an old painful structure of distorted images and misconceptions. "You dont know anything about it," said Miranda to herself, with extraordinary clearness as if she were an elder admonishing some younger misguided creature." You have to find out about it." (220-21)

As Suzanne K. Jones in her essay "Reading the Endings in 'Old Mortality'" (1993) reminds us, Porter's narrator "undercuts Miranda's decision to renounce love with the phrase, 'as if this were the answer' . . ." (Jones 38). Jones points to this decision as being "a direction the narrator judges very problematic" (Jones 38). And in the very concluding sentences of the story we see that Porter's narrator again interjects her own negative assessment of Miranda's interpretation of the family's narratives of its truths and of her experience so far into the narrative:

Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (221)

By means of the phrase "in her hopefulness, her ignorance" Porter's narrator again undercuts Miranda's decision to renounce love.

Jones interprets the ending of "Old Mortality" as ambiguous; indeed she identifies two endings in the story. One is Miranda's decision to renounce love and the other is the narrator's undercutting of Miranda's resolve. Appealing to Western literary tradition and Porter's own personal ambiguousness toward the feminist movement Jones finds with regard to the ending of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as well as that of "Old Mortality" that Porter's two endings are unconventional in that Porter's narrator "undoes" traditional plot outcomes:

"Porter is clearly frustrated with the available plots for women, but in neither her life
(255)

nor in her fiction is she able to imagine a love relationship that is mutually supportive of each individual's work. As a result, Porter undoes the marriage plot in "Old Mortality" and the quest plot in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," although in both she resists the conventional fictional closure for women's lives--marriage or death. (Jones 38)

Perhaps one can argue that Porter never personally resolved the conflict she felt between her love attachments and the freedom to do her work as a writer. But I do not think Jones would disagree that a more conclusive ending to "Old Mortality," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and the other stories of the Miranda cycle comes in the ending of the short story "The Grave," published some years later, in 1944. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. says, "In the epiphany at the end of 'The Grave,' Miranda recovers much of the wonder and mystery of life that she had lost at the conclusion of 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider':

Now about twenty-nine . . . Miranda suddenly sees again a long-forgotten experience she had with her brother, Paul, twenty years before. Miranda's experiences that day had deeply disturbed her, giving her a brief and forbidding glimpse into what the future held for her as a woman, but in her revived memory of the occasion, she transforms the events into a celebration of self and memory. (Brinkmeyer 179)

Suzanne K. Jones reminds us that "[a]lthough 'Old Mortality' ends before Miranda discovers anything more about love, life, stories [the stories told to her by her father and grandmother about her Aunt Amy in the image of the Southern belle and disputed by cousin Eva Parrington] or reading [interpreting the truth from these stories and other family legends], Porter is not finished with Miranda" (Jones 38). One may add to this observation the assertion that although "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" ends with Miranda seemingly having nothing but time because (in Brinkmeyer's words) "everything has become nothing" (Brinkmeyer 178), Porter is still not finished with Miranda and we must look to "The Grave" for a closure to the Miranda stories.

Jones in her essay analyzes Porter's undoing of the marriage plot in "Old Mortality" and submits that she undoes what is a quest plot in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." All of the Miranda stories show Miranda actively engaged in a quest for knowledge and self-discovery, for truth and then for love, tracing a pattern of discovery and development from early childhood well into adulthood. Against this background but more specifically regarding the characterization of Adam and Miranda's response to him in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," in what follows I seek to confirm Jones' categorization of the story as a quest story undone by the narrator. Taking "The Grave" to be the culmination of this process of discovery, I touch on the modern, feminist sensibility which leads to the undoing of the plot (the main thrust of Jones' analysis of Porter's undoing of the traditional marriage plot in "Old Mortality"), but I mainly wish to point out literary allusions to the traditional quest story and suggest their role in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

It is useful to take into account the chronology of the Miranda stories according to

Miranda's growth and development and the sequence in which they were published. We have already noted the 1937 date of old "Old Mortality" (Jones, 29) and, some two years later, the publication of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The eight stories grouped as "The Old Order" were included in the collection *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories*, published in 1944. The first three stories of the eight, "The Old Order," "The Source" and "The Journey," deal with the grandmother and her black servant Nannie. These stories present the family background. The first story in which Miranda appears, as a small child (but not as the protagonist) is "The Witness"; it is followed by "The Circus," in which Miranda, still a little girl, is the protagonist; "The Last Leaf," the story of Nannie after the grandmother dies; and "The Fig Tree," once again about Miranda, still a little girl. "The Grave," the final and concluding story in the cycle, presents an incident of initiation and self-discovery involving Miranda, now nine, but, as we discover at the very end of the story, recalled by the now adult Miranda almost twenty years afterward. The latter story acquires great significance as a part of the Miranda stories in that its key event, Miranda's epiphany, serves as the conclusion of all the Miranda stories, about five years after the final scene of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" Miranda is a twenty-four-year-old drama critic for a Denver, Colorado newspaper. The time is 1918, near the end of World War I. She is quite disenchanted with a job not of her own choice on the newspaper, one to which she has been relegated because, as a woman, she is supposed by her boss to be lacking in the emotional toughness deemed necessary for a news reporter to possess. The daily routine of her existence wearies her and provides little incentive to excel.

Before the story opens Miranda has met Adam, a young second lieutenant in the Engineer Corps from Texas who by chance has taken a room in the house where she lives. He has come to Denver to spend a brief leave before being shipped abroad to the battlefield. Miranda has fallen in love with this extraordinarily gentle and good-looking young man.

On the day Miranda and Adam first openly acknowledge their love, she contracts influenza. Because of the raging influenza epidemic no hospital space is available, and Adam takes care of Miranda for a few days, bringing her food and medicine. Finally he succeeds in getting her into a hospital shortly before his army outfit is transferred.

For weeks Miranda hovers between life and death, in a long, feverish delirium. On her recovery the nurse hands her a letter from a man in Adam's camp informing her that Adam contracted influenza and died of it. For a time the still weak Miranda is unable to reconcile herself to the fact of Adam's death; in her half-dreams her still delirious mind conjures up his ghost, pleading with him to let her see him once more. She tells him that she has struggled back to the world of the living only because she had him to come back for. At last she abandons her fantasy, facing the reality of a bleak and empty future, "the dead, cold light of tomorrow."

Adam's characterization has caused a measure of puzzlement among some of Porter's critics, it seems, in that in his perfection he is seen as an anomaly among Porter's protagonists. He is portrayed seemingly as the embodiment of masculinity and the perfection of his character and sensibility is often suggested. He is handsome and physically powerful: he is

"tall and heavily muscled in the shoulders, narrow in the waist and flanks (279). Miranda is "always delighted at the sight of him" (278). In the cool October sunshine Miranda observes that "he was all olive and tan and tawny, hay colored and sand colored from hair to boots" (279). On that clear October morning Miranda observes him, delighting in the "radiance which played and darted about the simple and lovely miracle of being two persons named Adam and Miranda, twenty-four years old each, alive and on the earth at the same moment" (280): he looks "so clear and fresh" (282) and "[h]e really did look, Miranda thought, like a fine healthy apple this morning" (280).

Adam is thoughtful and considerate; when Miranda falls ill he is full of charity and self-sacrificing. As Miranda's landlady tries to put Miranda out of the rooming house after Miranda has fallen helplessly ill with the influenza, Adam insists he will take care of her himself. He nurses her for a few days until he can find a hospital which can offer her a bed. But before she falls ill, already on that October morning, Adam is to Miranda's mind her hope for happiness: "His image was simply always present in more or less degree, he was sometimes nearer the surface of her thoughts, the pleasantest, the only really pleasant thought she had" (278).

In their next meeting, Miranda realizes that Adam is "pure--all the way through, flawless, complete, as the sacrificial lamb must be" (295). Adam is the sacrificial lamb in Miranda's eyes for he, rather than the obnoxious middle-aged Liberty Bond salesman whom Miranda despises, must go to the war, where Miranda fears he will fall on the battlefield, never to come back to her. Adam must go: "'If I didn't go,' said Adam in a matter-of-fact voice, 'I couldn't look myself in the face'" (295).

Adam seems to be portrayed almost as an overly idealized being. And Miranda has been uncharacteristically swept off her feet by him. Adam's ideal qualities have been noted by some of Porter's critics, as we have said, and treated by them as problematical, as a flaw or weakness, for instance, in Porter's characterization, unlike in any other of her portrayals of people. John Edward Hardy points out that William Nance (1964) and other critics found the characterization of Adam "shallow and unconvincing" (Hardy, 83). Hardy offers a more considered response to the question of Adam:

It is impossible to say whether Miss Porter meant, and failed, to give him credibility as a flesh-and-blood lover. But his function in the story as it stands is clear enough. He represents, as opposed to her newspaper friends, Miranda's last and best hope for accomodating her personal needs to the demands of sociey. (Hardy, 83)

Hardy's recognition of Adam's role is a step in the right direction toward understanding that his idealized portrayal is deliberate. Viewing "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as a quest story permits us to recognize that Porter modeled Adam as a quest story hero. That Porter never forgot that such a hero cannot exist in real life is confirmed by the necessity of Adam's death. Hence the undoing of the traditional quest story plot noted by Jones appears inevitable.

George Hendrick's monograph on Porter (1973) remains a valuable tool for helping us

distinguish fiction from autobiography in the Miranda stories. He shows that the Miranda stories contain a wide array of literary allusions from numerous sources, artistically integrated into the fabric of the stories. He identifies influences from classical to English and American works of literature. It is not surprising that one can discover allusions to the medieval quest story in Adam's characterization.

Adam's name seems to be an allusion to the biblical Adam of the book of Genesis. It is from Miranda that Adam contracts the influenza, which takes his life, as he cares for her during her illness. It is as if Miranda is his unwitting and unwilling Eve, the one who precipitates his fall from the couple's brief weeks of happiness together. Miranda (the "seeing one" in Spanish) seems to have the capacity to foresee Adam's future; in the dim light of a greasy-spoon restaurant as she looks at his face she has for an instant a terrifying glimpse of what was to be, and yet, the narrator adds, would not be in his life:

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. For just one split second she got a glimpse of Adam when he would have been older, the face of the man he would not live to be. He saw her then, rose, and the bright glow was there. (295)

Adam as well, in a private moment, seems burdened, perhaps by the dim prospects for his survival once he is on the battlefield, but perhaps more acutely by a more acute awareness – one shared with Miranda, even if never in words exchanged between the two – that such bliss as theirs can never last in reality.

Adam's most characteristic physical feature is the golden glow of his skin and hair and eyes, the tan and flaxen warmth of his coloring. Repeatedly Porter's narrator takes note of a radiance about his face. In the context of this story these qualities suggest the handsome youth of the ancient quest story of folklore, in which the youth is equated with the sun. Adam seems to be portrayed as possessing these golden sun-qualities, though he himself is not the quester as in the traditional quest myth or quest story but the one sought, by Miranda. His eyes are "pale tan with orange fleckles in them" (280), and his hair is "the color of a haystack when you turn the weathered top back to clean straw beneath" (280). In the traditional quest plot the sun or the golden youth oftentimes represents masculinity, youth, goodness or fertility.

The quester may sometimes appear transformed in appearance, assuming the shape of a beast (Gertrude Jobs, 1312). While Porter's real quester is Miranda, not the golden youth of some of the traditional quest stories, we note however that the thought once occurs to Miranda, who is envious of Adam's extremely good health, that he is so uniquely perfect as to appear as a "monster," albeit one she admires: "One time or another in their talking, he had boasted that he had never had a pain in his life that he could remember. Instead of being horrified at this monster, she approved of his monstrous uniqueness" (280)

Adam's golden radiance contrasts sharply with Miranda's pale coloring. Miranda is associated with the color gray throughout the story. The story opens with Miranda dreaming of a pre-dawn journey. She chooses a gray horse because the other horses available to her are

"no good" to "outrun Death and the Devil" (270). A few days later when she leaves her office to join a group of women visiting an army hospital with gifts, Miranda pulls on gray gloves. Later, when she awakens from her long delirium, the walls of her hospital room seem to have turned from white into "a solid gray" (313). Again, as in her dream mentioned above, gray is associated by Miranda with survival of a near-death experience.

Miranda's sufferings may also suggest an allusion to the plot of the age-old quest story. In the traditional quest story a goal may be reached or a treasure gained after a series of trials endured by the quester. One thinks of Miranda's trials of wartime anxiety and deprivation, and her illness. She loses Adam in Porter's undoing of the quest plot.

The analogies between the characterization of Adam and the quest story hero, on the one hand, and Porter's undoing of the quest story plot, having Miranda as the quester and having her lose Adam, on the other hand, seem to have sprung greatly from Porter's own experiences. Porter must have drawn from her own experience to arrive at the unhappy ending of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," an ending which runs counter to the conventional closure of the quest plot. Porter often spoke of the role of memory in creating her stories. Her biographer Joan Givner reports that she told a group of students that "my fiction is reportage, only I do something to it. I arrange it and it is fiction but it happened" (Givner, 10). She added that "[my] safety ground as a writer is based on what I saw or heard or experienced, a reality which I never get mixed up with fiction, only I elaborate on" (Givner, 10).

Porter made these remarks with regard to her fiction in general. As in her Miranda stories especially, the events in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" seem demonstrably close to events which took place in her own life. According to Givner, Porter was working on the Rocky Mountain News in Denver when the plague of deadly influenza spread rapidly across the United States in 1918. Like Miranda's landlady, Porter's landlady, terrified of contracting the disease, threatened to put Porter out of the rooming house when Porter fell seriously ill. Porter came so near death that she experienced the sensation of dying. And like Miranda she experienced the death of a young man she was in love with, Alexander Barclay. Givner tells us that in 1956 Porter told one of her friends that the young man was a soldier who happened be living in the same rooming house, who nursed her and gave her medicine and came in three times every night to see how she was, and who died of the influenza while she was lying unconscious in hospital. In the same year she gave this version of the incident to the Denver Post:

I met a boy, an army lieutenant. . . . Our time was so short and we were much in love. But we were shy. It was a step forward and two steps back with us. He died. The last I remember seeing him. . . . It's in the story. (Givner, 128)

In 1968 Porter described in the Baltimore *Sun* the real Adam's caregiving at the time of her illness:

He was so patient with me, those nights when I was sick and delirious, getting me things and always just sitting there. After I went to the hospital he sent me two dozen

roses and a note. The took the roses away because they said flowers used up oxygen. And the nurse read me the note, and I could hear that she was reading but I couldn't make out the words. And that was all. He died. And no one seems to think that was important, and it was the mmost important and terrible thing that happened to me. (Givner, 128).

In action and sentiment, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" reflects these happenings in Porter's life. Adam dies and leaves Miranda "to mourn" (304). Looking at these parallels alone, one could conclude that Porter intended no allusion to the traditional quest plot or meant an undoing of it by means of the unhappy ending of the story. And clearly Adam's gentle and caring nature bears a close enough resemblance to Alexander Barclay's actions to suggest the latter as a model for the fictional character. Yet just as clearly, it seems arguable, Porter intended Adam to be an extraordinary being, a kind of ideal man. She seems to hint at this, as when her narrator characterizes Miranda's feeling about him, that: "She liked him, she liked him, and there was more than this but it was no good even imagining, because he was not for her nor for any woman, being beyond experience already" (283).

Adam's radiance is intensified by its contrast with Miranda's grayness. But throughout for Miranda the light is pale and gray. The narrator regularly refers to the cold, weak quality of the light, its lack of warmth, its paleness. The only incidence of brilliant sunlight occurs in Miranda's delirium, her vision of death in her dream, where a single point of light stemming from her will to live survives. In the depths of her darkness "there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone . . . being composed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live" (310-11). This "hard, unwinking angry point of light suddenly expands into "a fine radiance, spread like a great fan and curved out into a rainbow through which Miranda, enchanted, altogether believing, looked upon a deep clear landscape of sea and sand, of soft meadow and sky, freshly washed and glistening with transparencies of blue" (311). Miranda experiences "an amazement of joy" as "a great company of human beings," passes before her eyes and she realizes that "they were all the living she had known" (311). Then suddenly "Miranda felt without warning a vague tremor of apprehension, some small flick of distrust in her joy; a thin frost touched the edges of this confident tranquillity; something, somebody was missing, she had lost something . . . oh, what could it be?" (312-13). This miraculous vision is gone with Miranda's return to consciousness and awareness of reality. Significantly, she has experienced the feeling of loss before she learns of Adam's death.

Her consciousness returned, she wishes for the "real daylight" she had known before her illness:

Now if real daylight such as I remember having seen in this world would only come again, but it is always twilight or just before morning, a promise of day that is never kept. What has become of the sun? That was the longest and loneliest night and yet it will not end and let the day come. Shall I ever see light again? (313)

The sunlight seems now to Miranda to be "colorless": "Sitting in a long chair, near a window, it was in itself a melancholy wonder to see the colorless sunlight slanting on the snow, under a sky drained of its blue" (313). Even when her nurse, Miss Tanner, remarks on the beauty of the brilliant morning, the sky Miranda sees is colorless, without warmth: "It's beautiful,' Miranda would answer, even turning her head to look . . . 'beautiful, I always loved it.' And I might love it again if I saw it, she thought, but truth was, she could not see it" (314).

Miranda does not see the brilliant sunshine again, we may believe, until on that day in the market of a far-off place, probably in Mexico, where the sights and smells of the vendors' wares bring up from its burial place deep in her mind the long-ago vision of the burning hot day when as a nine-year old girl she went hunting with her older brother Paul. This is the epiphany Miranda, now twenty-nine, experiences and which is described at the end of "The Grave." On that day, almost twenty years earlier, she and Paul had explored in pits that once were graves, where they had found a silver dove and then a wedding ring that had stirred in her the first awareness of her femininity; it was on that day that Miranda had looked in shocked delight as Paul cut open the body of a pregnant rabbit and revealed the perfection of the tiny unborn rabbits inside. Now in the adult Miranda the dreadfulness of the signs and souvenirs of death she had felt as a child fills her mind again, but it is replaced by a sunlit vision after only an instant:

Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded, and she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands. (367-368)

This is the moment of Miranda's reconciliation with her childhood and family past, and we may believe that the vision of Paul as he was on that day brings joy to Miranda just as the vision of the company of all those she had known living brought joy to her in her delirium. This time, however, Miranda is alive and the situation is real. And though only the memory of Adam remains, the return of the sunlight in Miranda's vision signals Porter's undoing of the dark ending of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

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