Pale Horse, Pale Rider

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Katherine Anne Porter was born Callie Russel Porter on May 15, 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas. Porter's mother, Mary Alice Porter, died when she was very young, and her father, Harrison Boone Porter, Katherine, and her four siblings moved in with their grandmother, Catherine Ann Porter, in Kyle, Texas. Porter would eventually assume her grandmother's name as a sign of the great influence she had on her upbringing. Porter attended public school but received no formal education after her early teenage years. In 1915, Porter and her abusive husband divorced. Porter spent time working in Chicago as a movie extra before moving back to Texas to work as an actress and singer. Later that year, Porter was diagnosed with tuberculosis (later amended to bronchitis) and was institutionalized for two years. It was during this time that she decided to become a writer. Following her release from the hospital, Porter worked as a drama critic and gossip columnist (like Miranda and Towney in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"). In 1918, while working for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, she fell ill with influenza and nearly died. After this, she worked as a ghost writer of children's literature in New York City and a magazine editor in Mexico, where she met Diego Rivera and other members of the Mexican leftist movement. Porter moved between New York and Mexico for the next decade, during which time that she began to publish short stories and essays. Porter became an elected member of National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1943, and she served as a writer in residence at the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and the University of Virginia. In addition to this, she taught at Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Texas. Though she is better known for her short stories, Porter did publish a successful novel, *Ship of Fools*, in 1962. She died in 1980 after a vast and accomplished life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Pale Horse, Pale Fire" is Porter's semi-autobiographical account of the influenza pandemic of 1918. The outbreak was incredibly deadly, killing between 50 and 100 million people around the world, or almost five percent of the world's population. In the United States alone, the disease impacted over a quarter of the population and killed between 500,000 and 675,000. Though previous speculations inferred that the virus was particularly aggressive, more recent research suggests that overcrowding, malnourishment, and poor hygiene may have contributed to the deadliness of the outbreak. The pandemic occurred in the midst of World War I, and early coverage of the disease was temporarily concealed in order to maintain morale. Spain was not involved in the war at this time, so its papers were more willing to cover the spread of the disease. For this reason, it was incorrectly inferred that the disease had origins in Spain, and it become known as the Spanish Influenza. While most strains of influenza typically kill the very young and very old, the 1918 outbreak affected disproportionate numbers of young adults—in the United States, almost half of all fatalities occurred in individuals 20-40 years old. The pandemic affected everyday life, even in areas where mortality rates were comparably low. Adults (like Miranda in the story) were disabled by their illness, and business operations could not go on as they once had. There were too many dead to be buried and not enough healthy workers to bury them—mass graves were common sights.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is perhaps the best-known work of literature written about the 1918 influenza pandemic. Curiously, there isn't much literature dedicated to this moment in history. Other significant works include Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* and William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows*, both of which, like "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," are largely autobiographical accounts of the pandemic. The surreal, stream-of-consciousness style of the story, along with its major theme of alienation, place it within the larger tradition of literary modernism. Modernist literature was a response to the inadequacies of the older, more conventional modes of representation present in so many realist works. Modernists embraced the notion of subjectivity (that reality is determined by what exists inside one's mind – not necessarily by what exists in the physical, outside world), and developed literary techniques to convey the depth of characters' internal thoughts. Authors like William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*), James Joyce (*Ulysses*), and Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse*) employ this technique in many of their works. The first-person sections of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," in which Miranda goes off on winding, abstract tangents contain elements of the stream-of-consciousness technique. Further, Porter's emphasis on alienation demonstrates another core modernist concern. With the industrial revolution came the development of increasingly urbanized cities. Modernists generally regarded urbanization somewhat skeptically and felt that, like the cities in which they lived, individuals were becoming more insulated and impersonal towards one another. Other works that grapple with the alienation of the modern world are T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*, and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Pale Horse, Pale Rider
- **When Written:** 1930s
- **Where Written:**
- **When Published:** 1939
- **Literary Period:** Late Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Denver, Colorado
- **Climax:** Miranda falls ill with influenza.
- **Antagonist:** War, death
- **Point of View:** Third person, first person

EXTRA CREDIT

Strong Roots. Porter is a descendent of American frontiersman Daniel Boone and American author O. Henry.

Art Imitates Life. Porter recovered from the flu (just as Miranda does) but the illness left her completely bald. As she regained her strength, her hair grew back—not black, as it had been before, but a pale silver.

PLOT SUMMARY

Miranda dreams of a familiar bed, a familiar house, and a familiar "stranger." On a **gray** horse, she embarks on a journey to escape Death and the Devil and the stranger rides beside her on his own gray horse. Miranda wakes from her troubling dream to a reality equally as troubling: the world is in the midst of World War I and the influenza pandemic.

Miranda goes to work at the newspaper office where she is employed as a drama critic. At the office, there are two Lusk Committeemen (temporary government employees who ensure loyalty during wartime) waiting for her at her desk. The men confront Miranda and harass her for not purchasing a **Liberty Bond** to support the war effort. Miranda refuses to buy one and is tempted to reject the war entirely.

The narrative jumps forward as Miranda is back home, exhausted and relaxing in the bath. She has a horrible headache and thinks back at what might have caused it. She remembers what occurred yesterday after the committeemen left: Mary Townsend (Towney) and Miranda anguished over what could be done to them for not buying bonds, and Miranda left work to visit the wounded soldiers in the hospital—a task she dreads and finds phony and forced.

The narrative shifts back to the present, where Miranda wraps up her bath and daydreams about Adam Barclay, her love interest. Adam, a young soldier, moved into Miranda's building the week before and the two have seen each other nonstop over the past 10 days. Adam surprises Miranda by waiting outside her door. The two walk to lunch, where they discuss the war and the flu. The outing is romantic, but Miranda is troubled by an increasing fear that she is growing ill and by her inability to fully connect and relate to Adam.

Later, at work, Miranda discusses the war with her work friends Towney and Chuck Rouncivale. Everybody has a lot to say, but none of them manages to say how they really feel about the war and their roles in it. After work, Chuck and Miranda attend a show she must cover for the paper. An actor for whom Miranda gave a less than stellar review confronts the pair outside the theatre. Miranda feels badly about the encounter, and on top of this, the show is rotten. Echoing her strange dream and anxieties during her outing with Adam, Miranda continues to feel as though something bad is going to happen to her.

Later on, Miranda waits for Adam so they can spend the evening together. While she waits, Miranda questions the significance of her relationship with Adam in light of the uncertain fate his role in the war presents for him. Adam and Miranda see a horrible show together. A man trying to push bonds on the audience interrupts the show before its third act. Miranda is disgusted by the man's theatrical sales pitch, though Adam is more sympathetic. They leave the show to go dancing.

The next thing Miranda knows, she is delirious and sick in bed. Adam arrives and cares for her. The couple sings and prays together while Miranda slips in and out of deliriousness. They admit their love for one another before Adam leaves to bring back ice cream and hot coffee. Miranda falls asleep, and wakes up to find herself in a hospital, and Adam gone.

In the hospital, Miranda slips in and out of consciousness, dreaming of death, oblivion, and utopia. At first Miranda is afraid of death and the eternity of darkness it presents, but her vision pulls her in different, more hopeful direction. The darkness changes to light, and Miranda sees the familiar faces of people close to her who had died. This utopic, beautiful dreamscape presents a world in which Miranda is able to fully connect with and be understood by others—something of which she has never before been capable.

Miranda eventually regains consciousness. She learns that World War I has ended and that she is on the road to recovery. She discovers that Adam was called to duty and died of influenza in a military camp hospital. Towney and Chuck come to see her bringing with them letters from friends who are overjoyed to hear that Miranda is no longer ill. Everybody wants Miranda to be overjoyed at her miraculous recovery, and she knows she should be. Yet, Miranda cannot forget the ethereal images of eternity and connection that she glimpsed in her dream. The conscious, real world—and all of its death and misery—is dreary and grim in comparison to this impossible world of the sublime she hallucinated. Though Miranda knows she should be happy to be alive, she is overcome with grief and

dejection.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miranda – Miranda is the protagonist and narrator of the story (though the text switches between her first-person point of view and a third-person perspective). She is 24 years old and works as a drama critic at a newspaper in Denver. The job is arduous and she walks about in a perpetual state of exhaustion. Miranda often would like nothing more than to sleep, and "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider" delves into the dreams she has. Miranda is an enigmatic character—the reader never learns much of her past, only that her life hasn't been particularly happy. She is intelligent and sharp-witted, but she is also guarded and tends to overthink things. She is attracted to Adam, a soldier who moves into her building, but hesitates to fall fully in love with him because she is afraid he will be called to combat at any moment and die. Throughout the story, Miranda is plagued by feelings of perpetual alienation. She feels tragically unable to connect with other people—including Adam—and she thinks that communication is inadequate. Miranda's deepest desire is to know and be known by others completely. Miranda is critical of the war and the forcibly cheery acts of volunteerism she sees throughout Denver. She sees fundraisers, **Liberty Bonds**, and parades as the insincere and misplaced actions of those who only want to appear patriotic. Throughout the story, Miranda suffers from frequent premonitions that something horrible will happen to her, and these premonitions eventually come true when she falls ill with influenza and is quarantined in the hospital. While sick, she suffers from constant hallucinations in which she dreams of death, oblivion, and utopia—other anxieties that figure largely into Miranda's psychology. When Miranda recovers from her illness, she is disappointed to be returned to the land of the living. The utopia she saw in her fevered hallucinations makes the world seem dull, grim, and all the more imperfect. Also of note is that Miranda is Porter's autobiographical double—Porter, too, worked as a drama critic in Denver and nearly died during the influenza pandemic.

Adam Barclay – Adam is Miranda's love interest. He is a 24-year-old soldier during World War I. Miranda describes Adam as "all olive and tan and tawny, hay colored and sand colored from hair to boots." He is tall and muscular. He cares about his appearance—he admits to Miranda that he gets his soldier's uniform made by "the best tailor he could find." Miranda initially paints Adam as the tall, dark, and handsome idealized man, though he's far from perfect. He adores Miranda, but they don't quite connect with each other all the time. Adam makes dark jokes about the fate that will likely await him if he is called to fight in the war, revealing that he is uncomfortable at the prospect and thus making light of it in order to avoid confronting his mortality head on. While Miranda is staunchly critical of the feigned acts of patriotism she sees in Denver, Adam is more sympathetic towards the things people need to do to feel less afraid and helpless in the face of the horrific war. Adam cares for Miranda when she first becomes sick. He brings her coffee and ice cream and water, and they sing and pray together. He kisses her on the mouth despite the risk of infection. When Miranda is moved to the hospital he is no longer allowed to visit her. After Miranda slips into unconsciousness, Adam is summoned to fight. At a military camp, he falls ill with influenza and dies. Adam's death affects Miranda profoundly, and she grieves for him when she learns of his fate.

Mary Townsend (Towney) – Miranda's friend from work. She is the newspaper's Society Editor and writes a column called "Ye Towne Gossyp." Towney and Miranda have a lot in common. Miranda reveals that she and Towney used to be "real reporters" but were demoted to more frivolous, "feminine" positions when they failed to exploit the female subject of a scandalous, failed elopement. It is implied that the "recaptured" bride-not-to-be had been beaten and was suffering, and Towney and Miranda chose sympathetically not to include "the worst" details in their story. A rival paper included these sordid details, and Towney and Miranda were "degraded publicly to routine female jobs." The (likely majority-male) staff at the paper considers them to be "nice girls, but fools." Like Miranda, Towney is critical of the showy patriotism so prevalent throughout Denver, though she doesn't let her distaste be known.

Lusk Committeemen – Two men who confront Miranda at work in the beginning of the story. Porter implies that they were hired temporarily by the government to further the war effort by pushing citizens to buy bonds. The men bully and ridicule her for not buying a **Liberty Bond**, insisting (untruthfully) that she is the only one in the newspaper office who hasn't bought one. Miranda observes the "borrowed importance" obvious in the way the men present themselves and their case, and looks down on them with both rage and pity. Though they don't appear after this initial scene, the two men introduce the performance of patriotism that is present throughout the story.

Chuck Rouncivale – Chuck is the sports reporter at the paper. Miranda and Towney like Chuck because he is frank and funny. Chuck was assigned to write for sports because he's a man, though he admits to Miranda that he could care less about sports and prefers to see "womanly" shows. Chuck was rejected to fight because of a medical condition, and he copes with this by adopting a nihilistic and blasé attitude towards the war—something Miranda observes that "all rejected men" have in common.

Dr. Hildesheim – A doctor who treats Miranda when she is ill. He is used to treating influenza patients and is unfazed by Miranda's condition. Miranda finds his demeanor to be

"altogether too merry and flippant." While in the hospital Miranda hallucinates that Hildesheim is a German soldier with a skull where his face should be. He carries a bayonet with a speared infant on its end and a "huge stone pot marked Poison." Miranda's hallucination of Hildesheim conflates war with illness, reconfiguring Hildesheim as the villain standing in the way of Miranda's desire not to recover and return to a world of so much illness, suffering, and death.

Miss Tanner – A nurse who cares for Miranda when she is ill. Like Dr. Hildesheim, Tanner has cared for so many influenza patients that she's adopted an almost overly-objective, no-nonsense attitude towards the ill. Miranda hallucinates that Tanner's hands are "**white** tarantulas." At the end of the story, Tanner inserts a needle into Miranda's arm and returns her to consciousness once and for all.

Disgruntled Actor – An actor described as a "small man," about whom Miranda wrote a negative review in the morning paper. Though "he might have been a pretty fellow once," he's now dried up and faded and hasn't had a successful run in a decade. The has-been confronts Miranda as she and Chuck enter a theater to watch a show for work. Miranda doesn't care about the man but she feels bad for hurting him, and perhaps feels mournful at the idea of old stars fading with age. This, in turn, makes her think of war, death, and suffering.

Bond Salesman – Another man temporarily hired by the government to push **bonds**. He appears before the third act of the show that Miranda and Adam see together. Miranda describes him as "a local dollar-a-year man, now doing his bit as a Liberty Bond salesman." He would otherwise have been a painfully mediocre man, but his stint as a bondsman makes him feel important. His sales pitch is all dead metaphors and theatrics, and Adam says he "looks like a penguin."

Graylie – One of the three horses that appear in Miranda's dream in the beginning of the story. In her dream, Miranda must borrow one horse to take on a journey to "outrun Death and the Devil." Though one of the other horses can "jump ditches in the dark and knows how to get the bit between his teeth," Miranda selects Graylie "because he is not afraid of bridges."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Old Man Gibbons – Old Man Gibbons is an editor at the newspaper where Miranda works. He is very particular about grammar, which he gets across to his reporters by shouting.

Bill – The city editor at Miranda's newspaper. Bill is perpetually angry and an incessant smoker of cigars.

Miss Hobbe – Miranda's landlady. She is horrified when Miranda falls ill with influenza. She seems somewhat concerned for Miranda, but mostly terrified that the disease will spread to her other tenants.

The Stranger – A man with a "**pale** face" fixed in "an evil trance" that appears in Miranda's opening dream. The stranger represents death.

THEMES

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THE PERFORMANCE OF PATRIOTISM

World War I serves as the historical backdrop across for "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider." The story takes place in Denver in 1918, over a year after the United States entered into the war. Though fought overseas, the war pervades every facet of life in Porter's Denver, and an overwhelming sense of uselessness, shame, and guilt weighs on those unable to contribute directly to wartime efforts. The war even affects the characters who are opposed to it, such as Miranda: Miranda doesn't put on patriotic airs, but she does feel shame at thinking (or avoiding thinking) about the very real possibility of the death of Adam, the soldier she is in love with. In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Porter argues that many Americans put on a show of patriotism in order to make themselves feel less helpless in the face of a horrific war. Porter's assessment is critical but not dismissive: she accepts the phoniness of patriotism, positioning it as a legitimate coping mechanism humanity adopts in order to deal with the death and destruction that war presents.

Liberty bonds (investments sold to citizens to aid in the war effort) feature prominently in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as help that any concerned citizen could (and should) offer, "to help beat the Boche." Porter depicts purchasing a Liberty Bond as a gesture that requires little physical effort while still carrying great symbolic weight. She introduces the significance of the bonds early on, establishing immediately the connection between patriotism and performance. In the beginning of the story, Miranda arrives at the newspaper office where she works as a dramatic critic and finds two men waiting before her desk. She notes their expensive-looking clothes and the "stale air of borrowed importance" the men have about them. That Miranda describes the men's importance as "borrowed" suggests that their importance is not genuine or innate, but put-on or performed. These falsely important men identify Miranda as "the only one in this whole newspaper office that hasn't come in" to purchase a bond. They inform Miranda that investing in a Liberty Bond is "just a pledge of good faith on her part [...] that she [is] a loyal American doing her duty." In other words, it's not so much the $50 it would cost Miranda to buy a bond that

matters ($50 won't win the war), but the *symbolic gesture* that Miranda's money represents. By lending $50 to the government, Miranda would prove to her cohort that she *acts* as a virtuous, loyal patriot ought to act. But Miranda adamantly refuses, as $50 is ludicrously outside the budget her $18-a-week salary affords her. What's more, when the men accuse her of not being supportive of "our American boys fighting and dying in Belleau Wood," she denounces (in her head) the phony principle of Liberty Bonds: "Suppose I asked that little thug," she muses, "What's the matter with you, why aren't you rotting in Belleau Wood?" Miranda reflects on the hypocrisy of these men: who are they to demand that she do more for her country when they, themselves, are only doing the bare minimum? Miranda's criticism solidifies that the men's patriotism is all show and no action—in other words, it is only a performance.

Porter utilizes language that evokes theatrics and display when describing the war, which also makes patriotism seem performative. When Miranda walks into the hospital where she has volunteered to visit with a wounded soldier, she describes the row of wounded soldiers as "a selected presentable lot, sheets drawn up to their chins, not seriously ill." There is no immediacy or emotion in Miranda's description of the soldiers; on the contrary, she seems to view them as actors merely cast in the role of wounded hero. In turn, the women who volunteer to visit these "picturesquely bandaged soldiers" enter the hospital accompanied by "girlish laughter meant to be refreshingly gay." The women imbue their laughter with a cheerful, "girlish" tone in order to improve the soldiers' spirits, but their mood is not genuine; Miranda notes that "there was a grim determined clang in it calculated to freeze the blood." By describing the women's laughter in terms of its "determined clang" and "calculated" nature, Miranda reveals the truth about the women's seemingly cheerful demeanor: that it is insincere and put-on. Miranda shakes her head "at the idiocy of her errand" because she sees it as useless. The wounded men will not be consoled by her, nor she comforted by the fact that she is supposedly helping them. The "errand" of visiting the wounded is but a virtue-signaling display of patriotism.

Throughout "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Porter's treatment of Liberty Bonds and the theatrical language she evokes to describe Miranda's experience as a volunteer betrays the emptiness and futility of patriotism. Though she doesn't maliciously condemn acts of patriotism, Porter remains critical of their underlying symbolic currency.

ALIENATION

Throughout "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider," protagonist Miranda suffers with the feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and depression that result from a perpetual sense that she exists separately from the rest of the world. For Miranda, love and companionship are not enough to bridge this divide; she walks about in a daze of misery and isolation, and the only moments of comfort and understanding come when she is unconscious—either in the realm of dreams, or in the midst of the feverish hallucinations influenza forces upon her. Miranda's internal alienation persists even after her external sufferings—war and influenza—have been resolved. At the end of the story, her fever breaks just as the war ends. Her friends and the medical staff who cared for her are overjoyed at her recovery, but Miranda feels hollow and unable to relate to the others and their happiness. In Miranda's persisting alienation, Porter seems to suggest that an absence of explicit, external sufferings (war, hunger, sickness) does not guarantee a corresponding absence of internal discontent. In the war and illness-ridden setting that Porter portrays in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," alienation is the default condition.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" unfolds across a dreary landscape riddled with war, illness, and death. Such tangible problems have a significant impact on the characters in the short novel and result in real, lasting consequences. Miranda, falls ill with influenza and is institutionalized. Adam, a soldier and Miranda's love interest, also falls ill and dies before she regains consciousness. Every day the streets of Denver swarm with endless funeral processions for victims of both the war and the influenza pandemic. But at the core of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" lies a misery harder to pin down or understand: the wretched plight of alienation. In her thematic treatment of alienation, Porter explores the invisible, internal miseries that fester in an environment of heightened external suffering.

Characters interact with each other in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," but they never quite seem to fully connect and understand one another. Miranda and Adam epitomize this struggle, as they pursue a romantic relationship with one another, but they both have trouble articulating their feelings. When Miranda and Adam are at a bar together one evening, she observes a young couple near them and notes that she "envie[s]" the girl." The couple sits at a "corner table," tucked away, "their eyes staring at the same thing, whatever it was, that hovered in the space before them." Miranda envies the fact that these two separate people could stare into the void "at the same thing" and connect with one another. The girl's face is "a blur with weeping," and her date wordlessly, yet knowingly, brings her hand to his mouth and kisses it. Miranda reflects on the significance of the boy's wordlessness: "At least [the girl] can weep if that helps, and he does not even have to ask, What is the matter? Tell me." Miranda's alienation would be absolved if she could make herself heard and understood with simple human gestures (crying, kissing). With Adam, in contrast, she must express herself using clunky words and rhetoric—methods of communication that Miranda finds faulty, inadequate, and ultimately alienating. Love—a force that is so often depicted as the coming-together of two separate souls—is imperfect and inadequate for Miranda, as it fails to rid her of the alienation she feels every day.

In contrast, Miranda's frequent slips into the unconscious feature idyllic scenes where she is understood without having to speak. This represents the unattainable ideal of comfort and connection she knows she will never be able to achieve in the real, conscious world. While institutionalized for influenza, Miranda feverishly dreams of oblivion (death). The prospect of death is frightening to Miranda: she visualizes oblivion as "a narrow ledge over a pit," which she compares to "her childhood dream of danger." She moves away from the pit and towards the sea, where amidst the "burning blue" of the water and the "cool green of the meadow on either hand" she comes across "a great company of human beings." Without speaking to these humans, Miranda understands, instinctually, that she knows them: "They were pure identities and she knew them every one without calling their names or remembering what relation she bore to them. They surrounded her smoothly on silent feet, then turned their entranced faces again towards the sea, and she moved among them easily as a wave among waves." To "know" (that is, to connect or relate to) another human without having to speak to them is Miranda's dream. Miranda "move[s] among them easily" because she understands them effortlessly and completely. In her unconscious mind, Miranda rids herself of her alienation. Ultimately, Miranda must leave this land of comfort and connection behind, as her instinctual will to live surpasses her intellectual need for complete human connection. Yet she feels hollow and unhappy despite her miraculous recovery, lamenting at "the dull world to which she [is] condemned." Miranda recalls the light, beauty, and connection she experienced in her hallucination and knows she can never achieve it in her waking mind.

Miranda's unhappiness at the end of the story—despite the end of both the war and her illness—reflects how heavily alienation weighs on her. In her final juxtaposition of joy (patriotic celebration, miraculous recovery) with sorrow (Miranda's depression) Porter seems to suggest that the alienated life is a life not worth living.

THE DENIAL OF DEATH

Death surrounds Miranda. It confronts her in her dreams, in the funerals that fill the streets each day, in the ongoing war, and in the raging influenza pandemic that antagonizes her city and the rest of the world. Yet she refuses to acknowledge death upfront, choosing instead to allude to death indirectly: consciously through humor, and unconsciously in her dreams. In "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider," Porter explores the pervasive fear of death that plagues humankind. Through Miranda's staunch avoidance of death, Porter suggests that denying death is unproductive and even harmful, as it blocks the path towards a healthy acceptance of mortality.

Miranda and Adam refuse to acknowledge the real possibility of death Adam faces as a soldier. The uncertainty of Adam's future pains Miranda; to think that the man she's falling in love with could be dead in a week, a month, or a year causes her great suffering. The solution she and Adam settle on is to not acknowledge death as a possibility. In place of explicit acknowledgement, they allude to death with dark humor. One such example is the couple's jokes about the dangers of smoking. Although Adam smokes "continually," he never fails to "explain to [Miranda] exactly what smoking [does] to the lungs." Adam flaunts his contradictory behavior—smoking while being fully aware of its health risks—because he has bigger concerns to worry about. "Does it matter so much if you're going to war, anyway?" he asks Miranda. Adam knows it's highly likely that will die in combat, so the prospect of lung disease is hardly worrisome. Despite the darkness of their humor, though, an explicit nod to death is notably absent in the exchange. Miranda and Adam joke about a long-term concern (lung disease) in order to distract themselves from the horror of the short-term concern (the real possibility of Adam's imminent death) lurks ominously before them. What's more, pushing aside the possibility of Adam's death doesn't actually rid Miranda of her suffering; on the contrary, her avoidant behavior invites a new problem. Miranda's fear of death ultimately distances her from her love. She remains guarded and tepid in her emotions, unable to love Adam as fully as she would like. Reflecting on her feelings for Adam, she says 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." Adam is "not for her nor for any woman" because it's highly likely he won't be living for much longer. Miranda cannot bring herself to think of death in these real terms, though, so she ultimately closes herself off from thoughts of death *and* thoughts of love.

Miranda generally uses indirect, metaphorical language to contemplate death. Adam and Miranda discuss "what war does to the mind and heart," and Miranda finds Adam's blindly optimistic and simplistic viewpoint (he reasons that if he returns wounded it's not the end of the world, only a case of bad "luck") to be willfully naïve and avoidant. Miranda might criticize Adam's statements about the harms of war, but she is also guilty of avoidant thinking, describing Adam as "Pure [...] as the sacrificial lamb must be." She cannot allow herself to imagine the reality of Adam's death directly, so she evokes an archetypal construct (the sacrificial lamb) to contemplate his death in an indirect, less painful way.

The only way Miranda can accept the reality of death is in the unconscious realm of her dreams and fevered hallucinations. This illustrates the fear she feels—and her intense desire to repress it. The story opens with a dream of death. In her dream, Miranda wakes up in a house that seems to be out of her past—she recalls "hanging about the place" with various relatives, and recognizes the bed in which she awoke to be her own. These familiar details are important because they show

the reader that this dream and any messages it might convey are personally significant to Miranda. As she wakes (still inside the dream), Miranda instantly realizes that she must embark on an imminent journey to "outrun Death and the Devil." Dream-Miranda's explicit acknowledgement of death is common in her dreams but a rarity in her consciousness.

Throughout the story, when Miranda is conscious, she makes indirect references to death through humor or allusion (or in the case of the scene from which the story's title is derived, through song). In contrast, when Miranda is unconscious, she contemplates death directly and productively. In constructing this binary, Porter suggests that a strategic avoidance of death is just as pervasive as the inevitability of death itself.

THE PAIN OF LIVING

Although death appears to be Miranda's greatest trouble, she ultimately realizes that there is an equal and opposite horror to be found in the pain of living. In "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider," Miranda undergoes a journey from healthy to dying and back again. From the beginning of the story, Miranda predicts that all is not well, and that something horrible will happen to her. Her premonition comes true when she falls gravely ill with influenza and is quarantined for a long time. Though her prognosis hasn't been favorable, she makes a miraculous recovery near the end of the story. Her friends expect Miranda to greet her restored health with gratitude and exuberance, yet she feels strangely hollow and disappointed at the return of her health. Miranda's disappointment stems from a fresh perspective on what it means to be granted life when so many others have been subjected to death. This is exemplified in the song Miranda sings with Adam while she is sick, "Death always leaves one singer to mourn"—that is, the gravity and tragedy of death is not felt by the dead but by those left behind to mourn them. Through Miranda's ultimate disappointment in her recovery, Porter shows that the grief and misery one experiences in life is just as destructive as the prospect of death.

Life exhausts Miranda. Her job as a newspaper reporter requires her to keep arduous, inconvenient hours, and she often longs only to catch up on sleep. Miranda and Towney, a coworker, fret that they will be reprimanded (Towney even worries that they will be thrown in jail) for not buying **Liberty Bonds**. Miranda remarks that getting thrown in jail wouldn't be all bad because in jail they could "catch up on [their] sleep." Though ultimately made in jest, Miranda's remark gets at Miranda's incessant exhaustion. In another instance, Miranda takes a bath, relishing in this rare moment of peace and "wish[ing] she might fall asleep there, to wake up only when it [is] time to sleep again." This is impossible, of course. In reality, Miranda has a horrible headache and she must exit the bath and dress quickly to attend to her work. Miranda's perpetual exhaustion reveals how heavily the simple task of living weighs on her. Miranda frets about death throughout the story, but the pain and exhaustion of life take just as great a toll on her well-being.

In addition to the exhaustion of simple day-to-day existence, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" explores the weight of death incurred by the living. Porter shows that death is only truly known by the living. Once the dead are dead, there is no more time for contemplation. One cannot realize or grieve their own death—one can only mourn and respond to the death of others. Miranda and Adam sing the song "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" together while she is sick in bed. The song laments the "pale horse, pale rider" that with each subsequent verse takes away another of the narrator's loved ones (the "mammy, pappy, brother, sister, the whole family"). "But not the singer, not yet," remarks Miranda, noting that "Death always leaves one singer to mourn." The song's theme and narrative technique demonstrate the different relationships to death that the living and the dead hold. Though everybody eventually meets death (the "mammy" and the "brother" alike), only those left behind (the lamenting narrator of the song) may feel death's full impact.

Miranda's ultimate disappointment at recovering from her illness and returning to the exhaustion of life brings home the point that life is just as painful as death, if not more so. The last lines of the text are particularly important: "No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything." The story ends as Miranda leaves the hospital; the war is over, and she is cured of her illness. By conventional standards, this ending should be a happy one. But such details as the "dazed silence," the "houses with the shades drawn," the "empty streets," and the "dead cold light" convey Miranda's depression and disappointment. She dreads life and the exhaustion, alienation, and sadness she knows it will bring. The final sentence, "Now there would be time for everything," seems to allude to Ecclesiastes 3 from the Old Testament. The original passage presents a series of opposites: "a time to be born and a time to die [...] a time to weep and a time to laugh," and so on. It's meant to be hopeful: it's okay to feel joy as well as sorrow because God will be there in the end, there's hope, and all will be well. However, it seems that Porter's allusion to Ecclesiastes 3 is meant to be taken ironically. Miranda's observation that "there would be time for everything" is not joyous—it is cynical. There will be time for life, yes; but there will also be time for death, and death, and yet more death.

Death is crucial to understanding "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," but the reader must also take into account the critical role that the *living* play in understanding death. Porter's treatment of Miranda's exhaustion, her remarks on the song "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and the ultimate sadness she feels at her restored health all suggest that people's anxieties about death are only a

small piece in the larger tragedy of life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PALENESS

Paleness, or grayness, symbolizes death in the story. The Pale Horse in the story's title is a reference to one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, in which the pale horse also symbolizes death. The pale horse appears twice in Miranda's initial dream: in the horse, Graylie, that Miranda decides to take on her journey to "outrun Death and the Devil," and in the horse of the familiar stranger who rides alongside Miranda. In the biblical interpretation of this myth, the Four Horsemen (four riders on white, red, black, and pale horses) symbolize pestilence, war, famine, and death—four ills that would ravage humanity in the final days of life on Earth. When Miranda sees a pale horse in her dream in the beginning of the story, thus, the reader may assume that she has death on her mind. The same symbolic association exists when Miranda describes certain objects or ideas as pale, gray, or ashen in color. For example, when Miranda dreams "oblivion" in her final hallucination, she sees "a whirlpool of gray water turning upon itself for all eternity." As gray is typically associated with paleness and a lack of vitality or blood, thereby connoting death, Porter's choice to describe the water as gray saturates the image in lifelessness. In contrast, Miranda describes Adam as "all olive and tan and tawny, hay colored and sand colored from hair to boots." Each of these tones evokes warmth and saturation of color—the opposite of paleness. In this notable *absence* of paleness, Porter demonstrates Miranda's tendency to *avoid* thinking about Adam's mortality.

THE COLOR WHITE

In "**Pale Horse**, Pale Rider," the color white represents illness. Whereas the pale horse of the apocalypse (and paleness in general) signifies death, the white horse represents pestilence, or sickness. Porter evokes the color white in scenes that deal directly with influenza: when Miranda is in the hospital, she is surrounded by whiteness: she is treated by medical staff in white uniforms, she is cloaked in white sheets and blankets, she hallucinates that Miss Tanner's hands are "white tarantulas." In this way, the symbolic weight Porter places on paleness and whiteness are very much connected: whiteness (illness) often leads to paleness (death). The connected symbolism of paleness and whiteness adds a layer of depth to the misery Miranda feels when she recovers at the end of the story. When Miranda finally wakes from her fevered hallucination of a glistening, hopeful eternity to find that she the war is over and she will recover from her illness, she is gravely disappointed. In her dream of eternity, Miranda was presented with an afterlife that promised hope, complete understanding, and an absence of pain. In contrast, the finite world of reality to which she awakens is riddled with suffering, alienation, and the pain that comes with death and grief. When Miranda wakes up in her hospital room, she finds that "the human faces around her seemed dull and tired" and "the once white walls of her room were now a soiled gray." In other words, what was once white and clear has been muted to a grayish pallor. In this sense, white has given way to paleness and sickness has thus led to symbolic death: Miranda has recovered from her illness, but she must now submit herself to the pains and hardships of life, each of which are symbolic deaths in their own right.

LIBERTY BONDS

Liberty Bonds symbolize the larger problem of performed patriotism that is so prevalent throughout "**Pale Horse**, Pale Rider." Liberty Bonds serve as a particularly apt representation of this larger problem because they simplify a more complicated set of actions and assumed attitudes into a neat, tangible object. Miranda frets over Liberty Bonds, not only because her limited financial means make it nearly impossible for her to purchase a bond, but also out of principle. For Miranda, a Liberty Bond is the quintessential example of the hypocrisy exhibited by individuals wanting to appear helpful without actually administering much help. Miranda finds it appalling that people assume an air of false importance for performing even the simplest acts of volunteerism. To Miranda, "patriotic" gestures such as Liberty Bonds, parades, fundraising dances, and visiting uninterested soldiers in the hospital, though helpful and nice in their own right, ultimately serve the purpose of making the volunteer feel warm, fuzzy, and superior inside. The Liberty Bond is the most tangible representation of the empty gestures employed to convey the appearance of patriotism, despite not being in and of itself.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt Brace edition of *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* published in 1979.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider Quotes

❝ The stranger swung into his saddle beside her, leaned far towards her and regarded her without meaning, the blank still stare of mindless malice that makes no threats and can bide its time.

Related Characters: Miranda, The Stranger, Graylie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene of the story, Miranda dreams that she wakes up in a house from her past. She reflects on loved ones who have "welcomed" a mysterious stranger as she prepares to take a journey to "outrun Death and the Devil." Although this opening dream sequence may seem opaque and difficult to understand on an initial read, when considered within the context of the entire story it becomes clear that the stranger (and the pale horse on which he rides) symbolizes death, and the loved ones he has "welcomed" are people who have died.

As the stranger rides beside Miranda, she gets her first chance to contemplate death. Her initial observation is that the stranger "regard[s] her without meaning." In other words, death is cruel but not vindictive—it meaninglessly and indifferently chooses its victims. The stranger's "blank stare of mindless malice" further emphasizes this point. Miranda sees "malice" in the stranger's expression because she thinks it is particularly malicious of the stranger to inflict the unfairness of death and the pain of grief on her. Still, that Miranda sees this malice as ultimately "mindless" refigures the malice of death as random and impersonal, however personal and vindictive death may seem to someone in mourning. In other words, though experiencing the death of a loved one may seem unfair and personal, one has to accept that there is ultimately no reason for death. Death afflicts everyone—it's nobody's fault, and one shouldn't regard the death of a loved one as an atrocity committed against oneself.

This scene also establishes some of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider's" central themes. It proposes that contemplating death and grief are burdens only of the living—in other words, once someone is dead, it's too late for them to worry about death. It also establishes Miranda's recurring habit of turning to dreams and hallucinations as a means to contemplate death from a safer, unconscious distance.

❝ He might be anything at all, she thought; advance agent for a road show, promoter of a wildcat oil company, a former saloon keeper announcing the opening of a new cabaret, an automobile salesman—any follower of any one of the crafty, haphazard callings. But he was now all Patriot, working for the government.

Related Characters: Miranda, Lusk Committeemen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

In the beginning of the story, Miranda remembers the previous day at work when she was harassed for not buying a Liberty Bond by two Lusk Committeemen. Miranda observes the men coldly and critically. She disapproves of their bullying and air of self-importance. The men cite patriotism and loyalty as their motivations, but Miranda sees the men and their supposed "patriotism" as smarmy and egotistical.

As the older of the two men inquires as to why she's yet to purchase a bond, Miranda considers what kind of man he would be if he were not assigned to this temporary job. "He might be anything at all," Miranda speculates, emphasizing the man's mediocrity. She embellishes on this point, listing a sequence of "crafty, haphazard" jobs that might otherwise suit the man—"[a] promoter of a wildcat oil company, a former saloon keeper announcing the opening of a new cabaret, an automobile salesman." The rhetorical purpose of this sequence is to convey the man's opportunistic motivations. Despite what the man says, he's not pushing Liberty Bonds for the sake of morality or patriotism. Rather, he's pushing bonds because of the smug air of self-importance it gives him. In other words, it's the status of the job that motivates this man to harass people in the name of "patriotism," not patriotism in and of itself. Porter's ironic capitalization of the word "Patriot" further emphasizes the tacky and overblown self-importance of this man.

❝ Does anybody here believe the things we say to each other?

Related Characters: Miranda, Chuck Rouncivale

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Miranda and Chuck walk through the crowd as they leave a vaudeville show. Miranda observes the chaotic mess of preoccupied people and wonders how much she can truly know about others by merely watching the things that they do and listening to the things that they say. Miranda offers her question "Does anybody here believe the things we say to each other?" in desperation: she doesn't believe in "the things we say to each other"—her disapproval of showy wartime do-gooders makes this clear—but it would temporarily suppress her overwhelming sense of alienation to know that others feel this way, as well. In other words, Miranda would like to believe there are others who share in her distrust of the images people present to the world. To accept that she is the only person who "believe[s] the things we say to each other" would be to burrow deeper into her already alienated existence.

"I don't want to love," she would think in spite of herself, "not Adam, there is no time and we are not ready for it and yet this is all we have—"

Related Characters: Miranda (speaker), Adam Barclay

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

As Miranda waits for Adam to arrive to take her out, she frets over the rapidly growing affection she has for Adam. She declares boldly that she "[doesn't] want to love" Adam in an attempt to convince herself out of her burgeoning affection. Adam may be called to fight in the war at any time, and there he will face the very real possibility of death. Miranda wants to protect herself from the grief that would come with Adam's death, so she distances herself from him. She tries to provide herself with logical methods of persuasion, reasoning that "there is no time and we are not ready for it."

Still, Miranda's feelings have grown too large to ignore, and her driving need for human connection is too great to suppress. When Miranda says that her likely short-lived relationship with Adam "is all that [they] have," she makes the case for accepting her feelings despite the grief and sorrow they will eventually bring her. To Miranda, any amount of time spent connecting with and truly knowing another person is worth all the grief and sorrow in the world.

Overall, Miranda is conflicted. On the one hand, she'd like to allow her love to grow into something powerful, something that would rid her of her crippling sense of alienation; on the other hand, though, if she were to open herself up to Adam's love only to have death rip him away, the loss of such a connection would only intensify the alienation she feels.

"Adam," she said, "the worst of war is the fear and suspicion and the awful expression in all the eyes you meet...as if they had pulled down the shutters over their minds and their hearts and were peering out at you, ready to leap if you make one gesture or say one word they do not understand instantly."

Related Characters: Miranda (speaker), Adam Barclay, Bond Salesman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Miranda and Adam are leaving a show that was interrupted by a bond salesman's pitch. He gave a theatrical, clichéd speech, persuaded the audience to purchase Liberty Bonds, and then everybody joined together to sing "There's a Long, Long Trail." Miranda and Adam initially poke fun at the salesman's self-importance and the audience's willingness to buy into it, but the whole experience troubles Miranda, and she considers the salesman's speech within the larger context of the psychological impact of World War I.

War kills soldiers and civilians abroad, but it harms those back home, too. Miranda states that the war breeds "fear and suspicion" in people. It discourages them from being genuine with one another. It's possible that other people in the audience—like Miranda and Adam—also thought the salesman's speech was hokey and disingenuous; however, the threat of being perceived as disloyal and unpatriotic is seen as too great a risk, and everybody follows along out of fear. Miranda already feels alienated by this type of groupthink, and she believes that the war only exacerbates it. People already walk around with the windows of their minds closed to one another; the addition of wartime tensions causes them to "pull[] down the shutters over their

minds," as well.

She wanted to say, "Adam, come out of your dream and listen to me. I have pains in my chest and my head and my heart and they're real. I am in pain all over, and you are in such danger as I can't bear it think about it, and why can we not save each other?"

Related Characters: Miranda (speaker), Adam Barclay

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

Adam and Miranda are out together at a club, but Miranda is having a hard time distracting herself from the turmoil that surrounds her—she feels sick, there's a war going on, and each new day fills the streets with yet another funeral procession. Unlike Miranda, though, Adam—along with many of the other club-goers—seems to be able to "Pack Up [His] Troubles," as the song being played by the jazz orchestra invites them all to do.

This quote illustrates an instance in which Miranda differentiates between what she would like to say versus the words she actually speaks. As Miranda and Adam get up to dance, Miranda wants to shake Adam out of his "dream" and bring him down to reality. Miranda recognizes both her and Adam's behavior as evasive: they both choose to ignore the difficult realities in front of them (Miranda likely falling ill with influenza, the likely fate Adam will suffer as a soldier), believing that if they don't bring up these problems they might go away. Miranda knows she should acknowledge the warning signs her body is giving her: that the pains she feels are not mere hallucinations. She knows that not talking about Adam's death won't make it any less likely to happen. Most of all, she knows that every time she hides the truth behind an opaque, happy mask, she loses a chance to truly connect with another person. But Miranda doesn't voice these concerns to Adam, and she takes his hand to dance. Despite the closeness of their bodies, Miranda and Adam remain emotionally very far away from one another.

Miranda [...] noticed a dark young pair sitting at a corner table, [...] their heads together, their eyes staring at the same thing, whatever it was, that hovered in the space before them. Her right hand lay on the table, his hand over it, and her face was a blur with weeping. Now and then he raised her hand and kissed it [...] They said not a word, and the small pantomime repeated itself, like a melancholy short film running monotonously over and over again. Miranda envied them. [...] At least [the girl] can weep if that helps, and he does not even have to ask, What is the matter? Tell me.

Related Characters: Miranda, Adam Barclay

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

While Miranda and Adam are dancing at a club, Miranda notices "a dark young pair sitting at a corner table." She compares their relationship to her own—specifically, the degree to which the couple is able to communicate with one another and make themselves understood. Miranda marvels that they can communicate so much to one another without saying "a word." She illustrates how great a feat this wordless communication is by emphasizing "the space before them." She stresses that the man and the woman are two separate bodies—there is a "space before them" that sets them clearly apart—yet they are able to communicate their needs to one other.

The woman might be weeping, but Miranda doesn't see this as a somber detail; on the contrary, she notes, "At least she can weep if that helps, and he does not even have to ask, What is the matter?" In other words, the woman's weeping is alleviated by her partner's instinctual ability to understand and calm her effectively. Miranda "envie[s]" the couple because she does not have this type of relationship with Adam. Not only do she and Adam avoid broaching difficult subjects with one another, they lack the ability to ascertain all that goes unsaid between them. They joke and make light of Adam's career as a soldier and of the likelihood of his death; Adam barely reacts to Miranda the few times she voices her own health concerns out loud. Despite her love for Adam, his presence does not negate her sense of alienation.

"Death always leaves one singer to mourn."

Related Characters: Miranda (speaker), Adam Barclay

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

While Miranda is sick in bed, Adam sits by her side and cares for her. Miranda suggests they sing a song called "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," which Adam knows, as well. The song is sung from the perspective of a narrator who laments the passing of first his "mammy," then his "pappy, brother, sister," and eventually his "whole family," as death (presented symbolically as the pale horse, pale rider) steals them away, one after the other.

When Miranda says, "Death always leaves one singer to mourn," she points to the crucial role the narrator plays in the song. Death kills every character but one—the narrator. The mourning that the song recounts would not be possible if there were no one left to realize and participate in the grieving process. In this way, death weighs most heavily on those left alive to feel the pain it creates through grief and loss. The dead do not share in this burden: once they die, they are no longer around to suffer its consequences. This theme—that death places its burden on the living—is central to Porter's story. In the end, Miranda learns that it is less painful to accept her own death than to remain alive, knowing that she will have to suffer through the deaths of others again and again.

> Granite walls, whirlpools, stars are things. None of them is death, nor the image of it. Death is death, said Miranda, and for the dead it has no attributes.

Related Characters: Miranda

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

Miranda hallucinates while she is sick with influenza in the hospital. In this particular hallucination, she contemplates oblivion and tries to meditate on the idea of her own death. Death is too large and abstract a concept for her to imagine in and of itself, so she visualizes death and oblivion in metaphorical terms: death as a whirlpool, eternity as farther away than the farthest star. Miranda is still too afraid to imagine her own death, so she imagines herself on the edge a gray whirlpool (death), pressed desperately against the safe ledge of a granite wall (life). But Miranda comes to the realization that imagining these images she has constructed is not the same thing as confronting the reality of her own death: "None of them is death," she states, "nor the image of it." Death evades description, and the ones who try to describe it clearly haven't experienced it firsthand: "Death is death," Miranda states, "and for the dead it has no attributes." If Miranda is truly to accept her own death, she must realize that there is nothing to understand. Death is only meaningful to the living—it is only the living who must mourn and suffer the tragic consequences of death.

In this passage, Miranda builds on her comment in an earlier section of the story, when she and Adam sing "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." Miranda observes then that "Death always leaves one singer to mourn." In other words, the event of death gains significance only through the reactions of those left behind "to mourn." In this passage, Miranda seems to accept her own death as a better outcome than remaining alive and being forced to live through the grief of experiencing others' deaths.

> Their faces were transfigured, each in its own beauty, beyond what she remembered of them, their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather, and they cast no shadows.

Related Characters: Miranda

Related Themes:

Page Number: 311

Explanation and Analysis

Miranda is gravely ill with the flu. In her feverish state, she grows delirious and consumed by hallucinations. In this particular hallucination, Miranda imagines a world in which human beings can connect with and know one another without having to speak. Miranda realizes that the humans in her dream are familiar to her—she recognizes them as loved ones who have died. But Miranda doesn't just recognize these people as part of her past—they are familiar to Miranda in a new, deeper way. When Miranda observes that "their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather," she means that the faces of these people are transparent and completely readable. That these people

"cast no shadows" implies that they tell no lies. In contrast, the humans Miranda sees in the real world refrain from speaking their minds—they put on airs of patriotism, and they avoid talking about difficult issues. Miranda's interactions with these people are unsatisfying and alienating. The "clear and untroubled" people of her dream present the possibility of absolute connection that Miranda so desires.

> There was no light, there must never be light again, compared as it must always be with the light she had seen beside the blue sea that lay so tranquilly along the shore of her paradise.

Related Characters: Miranda

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Miranda recovers from her illness and reflects back on the hallucinations she had while she was sick. She realizes that everything that surrounds her is duller than it was before, especially "compared as it must always be with the light she had seen beside the blue sea that lay so tranquilly along the shore of her paradise." The white hospital setting that had surrounded her during her illness has been rendered dull and ashen (or pale). The reader might interpret this as evidence of Miranda's symbolic death. Although she didn't literally die from her sickness, the grief she feels at being ripped from the bright, clear euphoria of her hallucinations causes everything she sees in the real world to appear dull, or pale. Thus, the story emphasizes a transformation from white to gray and pale, or from sickness to death.

In her "paradise"—meaning her hallucination—Miranda experienced a world where there was no pain, death, or loneliness. The people that surrounded her were familiar to her, and their eyes were transparent and genuine: nobody put on airs or spoke falsely. In her hallucination, Miranda was finally able to see beyond the alienating constraints of the self and understand the inner-workings of others. When Miss Tanner's injection brings Miranda back to life, therefore, Miranda's sudden recovery disappoints her. Miranda sees her life as dull and unfulfilling, and she recognizes the "light" and clarity she experienced in her hallucinated "paradise" as impossible to achieve.

> 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.

Related Characters: Miranda, Adam Barclay

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final paragraph of the story. By this point, Miranda has recovered from her illness and the hallucinations it caused, and the war is over. She should be happy, but she feels more disappointed than overjoyed. In comparison to the euphoria she experienced in her hallucinations, the real world seems dulled, hazy, and unreal. If Miranda felt alienated from others before her illness, the feeling is now magnified: how can she go on living when she knows how drab and unspectacular the mortal world is in comparison to the ecstasy of eternity? Plus, Adam is now dead. Miranda describes the renewed disconnect she feels upon her recovery as "only a dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns." She emphasizes her alienation by evoking the same imagery she used earlier in the story to describe how the war causes people to hide their true thoughts from one another. Now, as before, there are only "noiseless houses with the shades drawn." Miranda's recovery hasn't provided her with a renewed opportunity to connect with others—it has doomed her to a future of experiencing alienation again and again.

In the last line of the story, when Miranda notes that "Now there would be time for everything," she further emphasizes her overwhelming sense of depression and disappointment. In an ironic nod to Ecclesiastes 3 in the Old Testament, Miranda observes that now that she's alive again, there will be time for "everything"; that is, there will be time for her to incur the grief of even more tragedies. In its original biblical setting, this line is a hopeful one: amidst all the world's suffering, God also allows "time" for moments of joy and redemption. Miranda's rendition, however, rejects the notion that darkness is bearable if there is a light on the other side of the tunnel. The story ends with Miranda bleakly in the dark.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER

In her dream, Miranda lies in a bed that she knows, somehow, is hers. The bed is in a house with which she is also familiar: "Too many people have been born here," she thinks, "and have wept too much here, and have laughed too much, and have been too angry and outrageous with each other here."

Porter's choice to begin the story in a dream foreshadows the important role dreams play in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." That Miranda wakes up in a familiar bed in a familiar house implies that the content of her dream is relevant to her life—that the dream broaches real problems or concerns Miranda is dealing with in her conscious life.

Miranda's thoughts turn to her memory of a "lank greenish stranger […] hanging around the place, welcomed by "my grandfather, my great-aunt, my five times removed cousin, my decrepit hound and my silver kitten." She wonders where the stranger is now, noting that she saw "him" outside her window that evening.

It becomes apparent as the story unfolds that the stranger is meant to represent death. Porter hints at this with the sequence of people and animals from Miranda's past. When Miranda observes that the stranger had been metaphorically "welcomed by" these characters, the implication is that they are people who have died.

Still in her dream, Miranda pulls herself out of bed to embark on a mysterious journey "to outrun Death and the Devil." She considers which horse to take: Graylie, Fiddler, or Miss Lucy. She settles on Graylie, "because he is not afraid of bridges."

Graylie is a gray, or pale-colored horse, pointing to the story's title. Miranda's earlier thoughts about the stranger "welcomed by" her (presumably) deceased loved ones prompt her to embark on this sudden journey "to outrun Death and the Devil." This detail supports the speculation that the stranger embodies death. Miranda's instinctive decision to "outrun" death introduces the reader to her recurring tendency to deny or avoid death.

Miranda and Graylie head out. The mysterious stranger Miranda recalled earlier materializes, riding off beside her on his own gray horse. The stranger has a "**pale** face" that is fixed in "an evil trance." As Miranda looks more closely at the stranger, she realizes that she has seen him before: "He is no stranger to me."

Porter's use of the word "pale" to describe the stranger's face further implies that the stranger represents death, drained of all vitality. When Miranda realizes that the stranger is in fact "no stranger," she means that she is familiar with death: that she has experienced the death of loved ones.

Miranda wakes from sleep and immediately recalls the reality of her conscious life: "A single word struck in her mind, a gong of warning […] the war, said the gong." She worries about the war and her own financial anxieties as she readies herself for work.

Miranda's dream might have been morbid, but her reality is not much different: the country is in the midst of World War I. There is no escaping the reality of this; the realization that the country is at war hits Miranda like "a gong" the minute she wakes up.

Miranda reflects back to the previous day: she arrives at the newspaper office where she works as a drama critic to find two men waiting impatiently before her desk. She describes the men as "too well nourished," and with "a stale air of borrowed importance" about them. Miranda observes that the older man "might be anything at all, […] any follower of any one of the crafty, haphazard callings." The men are Lusk Committeemen, temporary government men hired to make sure citizens remain loyal to the US. The men bully Miranda, questioning why she hasn't yet bought a **Liberty Bond**. "With our American boys fighting and dying in Belleau Wood," they argue, "anybody can raise fifty dollars to help beat the Boche."

Boche *is a derogatory term for Germans, in particular German soldiers. Miranda's description of the men as "too well nourished" and with "a stale air of borrowed importance" betrays how she really feels about them and the work they do. The men are bumbling and unremarkable, their importance "borrowed" only by virtue of the tedious, temporary job the government has hired them to do. The men cite "our American boys fighting" in order to make Miranda feel guilty—that forking over a puny $50 is really the least Miranda can do, and what's more, it's nothing compared to the dangerous work of these "boys" are doing. But Miranda sees the men's rhetoric as hypocritical. In her observation that the older man "might be anything at all," she implies that that he is motivated by the power and status this job provides him—not by virtue, patriotism, or genuine concern for the "boys fighting and dying."*

The committeemen insist that Miranda is the only employee in her office who's yet to purchase a **bond**. Still, Miranda refuses, fuming inwardly: "Suppose I said to hell with this filthy war?" she thinks, "Suppose I asked that little thug, What's the matter with you, why aren't you rotting in Belleau Wood?"

Miranda is disgusted by these men, though she doesn't say so aloud. In her head, Miranda throws the men's own words right back in them, asking why they "aren't [] rotting in Belleau Wood?" Miranda's scorn minimizes the supposed importance of the committeemen. Although they act as though they are concerned, patriotic citizens (and try to make Miranda feel that she is not), it's not as though they're fighting and dying in the war. They're hardly any better than Miranda—they only talk the talk.


Back in the present, Miranda takes a bath, and "wish[s] she might fall asleep there, to wake up only when it was time to sleep again." She has a headache and searches for its origins. She recalls what happened yesterday at work after the committeemen left. She and her friend Mary Townsend (nicknamed Towney) fret about not being able to afford **Liberty Bonds**. They wonder if they'll be fired or thrown in jail. Miranda remarks wryly that if they were thrown in jail, at least they'd "catch up on [their] sleep."

Miranda constantly longs for sleep. This shows how exhausted she is by the task of living. It also foreshadows the illness that lies in her near future.

After commiserating with Towney, Miranda heads out to fulfill her volunteering duties. She reflects on the overwhelming presence of wartime good deeds. Miranda is critical of it all, describing her fellow volunteers as the "young women fresh from the country club dances [...] wallowing in good works." These women, reveals Miranda, "gave tea dances and raised money [...] bought quantities of sweets, fruit, cigarettes, and magazines for the men in the cantonment hospitals." Miranda sets herself apart from these young, cheery girls; she is not "fresh from the country club dances." She hates these forced acts of patriotism and finds them terribly uncomfortable.

Miranda's distaste for volunteering mirrors her earlier frustration with the committeemen. She believes that the supposed patriotism that motivates all these "fresh" young women to volunteer is insincere and symbolic at best. That these women are "wallowing in good works" suggests that they get more out of what the works do for them than what it does for the soldiers. To Miranda, what these women like most is to appear patriotic and selfless; in reality they are self-indulgent. Although Porter converted to Catholicism when she married her first husband, she would eventually grow critical of religion. The reader could interpret Miranda's criticism of the volunteers' selfish motivations as Porter's critique of the role of selfishness in religious salvation. To act charitably in order to achieve salvation involves an element of selfishness, inviting the reader to question whether selfishness diminishes the integrity of charitable acts.

Miranda, carrying a bouquet of flowers, pushes through the women "uttering girlish laughter meant to be refreshingly gay" and makes her way into the hospital. She observes the injured soldiers "picturesquely bandaged" in neat rows of beds. Miranda approaches a young soldier with an "unfriendly bitter eye." He doesn't seem to want Miranda's company. Miranda sits with him briefly, places the flowers she's brought with her on his bed, and leaves. On her way out she passes a tired-looking girl and laments, "I hate it."

As further evidence that the women's patriotism is staged, Miranda points out that the girls' laughter only seems *"refreshingly gay." The laughter is not sincerely cheerful; rather, it is manufactured to appear that way. Even the hospital possesses a staged quality: though wounded, the soldiers are perfectly, "picturesquely bandaged." To Miranda, everything about this loathsome scene is constructed so that the volunteers may leave feeling warm, fuzzy, and important.*

The story shifts back to the present, after Miranda has finished her bath. Yesterday—the committeemen's harassment, the uncomfortable volunteering—was decidedly gloomy, she observes, except for "the hour after midnight she had spent dancing with Adam." Miranda reveals that she thinks of Adam, a soldier who's recently moved into her building, constantly. As she thinks about Adam, Miranda studies her reflection in the mirror and notes that "her uneasiness was not all imagination." Looking in the mirror confirms that the headache and tiredness Miranda's suffered from the past few days are real, physical problems.

Adam is a ray of sunshine in Miranda's otherwise grim, frustrating existence. Still, daydreams of Adam don't fully erase Miranda's ongoing anxieties. Adam—and the possibility for human connection he comes to represent—isn't enough to rid Miranda of life's troubles: she remains sick, anxious, and alienated. When Miranda looks in the mirror and sees that her earlier "uneasiness was not all imagination," she confirms that the presence of love cannot completely erase the pains of living.

To her surprise, Miranda finds Adam waiting in the hallway outside her apartment. "I don't have to go back to camp today after all," he informs her. Miranda is pleased. They spend the afternoon together and head out to lunch. Adam is "all olive and tan and tawny, hay colored and sand colored from hair to boots, [...] tall and heavily muscled in the shoulders." His soldier's uniform, he admits, is made by the best tailor he could find.

If paleness symbolizes death, then Miranda's description of Adam as "all olive and tan and tawny, hay colored and sand colored" suggests that she disassociates Adam from death. This description exudes warmth and color—it is in striking contrast to the pale, gray imagery Miranda uses in passages that concern war and influenza. Consciously or unconsciously, Miranda avoids thinking about Adam's mortality.

The couple talks and smokes as they walk. Adam smokes nonstop despite his knowledge of the health concerns of smoking. "But," he argues, "does it matter so much if you're going to war, anyway?" Adam and Miranda discuss other health concerns: "This funny new disease," remarks Adam. "It seems to be a plague," replies Miranda. "Did you ever see so many funerals, ever?" A funeral procession drives by. Miranda and Adam walk into a drugstore for lunch.

Adam also avoids thinking about his mortality, but in a different way. He defends the health concerns of smoking with the inadequate, humorous excuse that he might just die in battle anyway, so there's no use in worrying about lung disease and all the other health problems that smoking can bring about. When Adam refers to the 1918 influenza pandemic as a "funny new disease," he minimizes the true horror and downplays the seriousness of it. Adam's use of humor suggests that he (like Miranda) is uncomfortable with the real possibility of death, so he must minimize death into a joke.

Over lunch, Miranda tells Adam that she "feel[s] too rotten. It can't just be the weather, and the war." Adam only vaguely responds to Miranda's concern, focusing his attention, instead, on the ongoing war. To Adam, the war is "simply too good to be true." He talks about his training, learning to use the bayonet, and crawling around. Miranda worries some more about her health, and tells Adam that she'd "like to run away." The couple makes plans yet also anguish over Adam's leave, which is "nearly up."

Again, Adam avoids a problem—Miranda possibly coming down with an illness—by moving the conversation in a cheerier, shallower direction. He ignores Miranda's concerns, choosing instead to talk about the war. When he talks about the war, though, he doesn't bring up its heavier aspects, such as death or illness. He focuses instead on the "good" elements, like his fun training exercises. Both Miranda and Adam are clearly anxious—about illness, war, Adam's upcoming deployment—yet both leave these anxieties unspoken.


It's nearly time for Miranda to return to work, so the couple part ways "until tonight." Miranda turns around as she leaves Adam, explaining that "she could not help turning sometimes for one glimpse more of the person she had been talking with, as if that would save too rude and too sudden a snapping of even the lightest bond."

Miranda feels as close as she can to Adam in this moment. She looks back at him one last time because she doesn't want to sever the rare moment in which she feels even "the lightest bond" with another human. She doesn't want to return to the solitude and alienation that is her default condition.

At work, Miranda hangs out with her coworkers, Towney, and Chuck Rouncivale, the sports reporter. They discuss the influenza outbreak. Miranda daydreams about Adam, recalling when she first seen him 10 days ago. Though they've only known each other for a little under two weeks, they've already visited a museum, gone dancing, and driven out to the mountains.

In the midst of a conversation dealing with difficult issues (the overwhelming amount of sickness and death caused by the 1918 influenza outbreak) Miranda redirects her thoughts to hyper-cheerful memories of dates with Adam. It seems that Miranda uses Adam to avoid confronting life's difficulties; the fact that Adam and Miranda have fit so many lighthearted activities into the short span of 10 days suggests that Miranda is particularly desperate to escape from the prison of her mind. The war and the influenza outbreak have only increased Miranda's sense of alienation, and she leaps at the chance to forget about her troubles, even if it's only for a few hours spent dancing.

Miranda's daydreaming is interrupted when her friends' conversation moves on to wartime concerns. Towney believes that everybody should do their duty and help the wounded soldiers, "even if they don't want us." Miranda knows that this is only talk, however—Towney could care less about any of this. Chuck speaks rashly: "What's the idea of petting soldiers and binding up their wounds and soothing their fevered brows? That's not war. Let 'em perish where they fall." Towney rolls her eyes at Chuck, who clearly isn't off fighting and perishing, himself. Chuck becomes defensive, citing his bad lung.

Like Miranda, Towney thinks putting on airs of patriotism is phony. Even though Towney looks down on the theatrics of volunteering, however, she doesn't express her distaste out loud. Chuck's words on the war are similarly insincere. Though he speaks harshly ("Let 'em perish where they fall"), it is only because he is bitter and defensive about not being allowed to fight. Miranda, Towney, and Chuck's conversation illustrates the insincerity so often present in communication. Three friends are coming together in discussion, yet none of them say what's truly on their mind.

Later, Miranda and Chuck head to a vaudeville show that Miranda is assigned to cover for work. Chuck warns Miranda that a has-been actor whom Miranda reviewed poorly might be waiting outside the theater to confront her. Sure enough, there he is. The actor tells Miranda, "if [she] was a man [he'd] knock [her] block off." The man is silly and forgettable, yet Miranda is troubled that she hurt someone.

Miranda feels bad about hurting the actor. It's unclear why, exactly, though it's possible she feels upset by wasting or misusing a possibility for human connection. Her words clearly got through to the man—but not in the positive, productive way that would alleviate Miranda's overwhelming sense of alienation.

The show begins. Chuck declares it to be "rotten." Miranda feels rotten, herself: she tells Chuck he can write up the review of the show himself, as she's "getting ready to leave [the newspaper.]" Miranda then revisits the anxieties she'd expressed earlier to Adam, as she thinks to herself, "Something terrible is going to happen to me."

Again, Porter foreshadows Miranda's illness. Porter's use of ambiguous language when Miranda says she's "getting ready to leave" her job makes it unclear whether Miranda means she intends to quit, or that she'll be forced to leave because "something terrible is going to happen to [her]." The reader should connect Miranda's ambiguous remark, "something terrible is going to happen to me," with her previous allusions to feeling uneasy and unwell. The fact that Miranda only alludes to her fears to Chuck illustrates her own reluctance to address difficult issues. It also implicates her in the alienating behavior of others (not saying what one means) of which she is so critical.

Miranda and Chuck leave the horrendous show. As they pass through the bustling crowd outside the theater, Miranda thinks, "What did I ever know about them? There must be a great many of them here who think as I do, and we dare not say a word to each other of our desperation, we are speechless animals letting ourselves be destroyed, and why? Does anybody here believe the things we say to each other?"

Miranda questions how much one can really know about the people around them. Miranda is certain that there are others in the crowd with whom she might have a genuine connection, yet the possibility is shattered because nobody can break free of their public persona. What one "say[s]" is not who they are.

Miranda waits in the cloakroom for Adam to arrive and daydreams: "there was nothing to think about him, after all. There was only the wish to see him and the fear, the present threat, of not seeing him again." She also thinks, "I don't want to love [...] not Adam, there is no time, and we are not ready for it and yet this is all we have—" Her thoughts are interrupted when Adam materializes in front of her. They decide to eat and go dancing after they see a show.

Miranda wants to love Adam, but she won't let herself: "the present threat" that Adam might die in the war is too much for Miranda to bear, so she seals herself off from the possibility of grief and suffering.

The show they see is horrible, but Miranda and Adam enjoy one another's company. Before the third act can begin, the curtain rises and gives way to "a backdrop almost covered with an American flag improperly and disrespectfully exposed, nailed at each upper corner, gathered in the middle and nailed again, sagging dustily." A bond salesman appears onstage and proceeds to give a speech about the importance of buying **Liberty Bonds**. "Looks like a penguin," says Adam. "Oh, why won't he hush," whispers Miranda. After the man delivers his clichéd and theatrical speech, the audience stands and sings "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding" together. Miranda and Adam join in.

The bondsman's position onstage represents the theatricality of patriotism. That the American flag that accompanies him is "improperly and disrespectfully exposed" betrays the man's integrity. Though he speaks of patriotism and supporting one's country, his message is only for show. Adam's mocking comment that he "looks like a penguin" further minimizes the man's self-importance. The audience's song suggests that they have been duped by the man's appearance of patriotism—they've bought the message he's selling, and they demonstrate their allegiance through their trance-like, sung response.

After they've exited the theater, Miranda calls the bond salesman "Just another nasty old man who would like to see the young ones killed." Adam is more sympathetic to the salesman, though, asking, "What *could* you expect of him, Miranda?" Miranda responds, cryptically, that "the worst of war is the fear and suspicion and the awful expression in all the eyes you meet…as if they had pulled down the shutters over their minds and their hearts and were peering out at you, ready to leap if you make one gesture or say one word they do not understand instantly."

Miranda hates how persuasive the man was to the audience. The man's message conveys the false truth that the war is a noble thing, and it is right and just to support it. Miranda shifts her focus beyond her distaste for the man to the larger psychological impact of war. She thinks that war shuts people deeper inside themselves, increasing social and personal alienation.

Later that night, Adam and Miranda sit at a table listening to a jazz orchestra play at a club. Adam suggests they dance. Miranda accepts, though somewhat reluctantly—what she really wants is to tell Adam how sick she feels. But she doesn't want to ruin this night they have together, so she ignores her anxieties and allows herself to dance with him.

Miranda doesn't want to accept that she and Adam might be separated—by illness or by war—so she ignores her symptoms and enjoys the night they have together. Miranda's choice not to voice her concerns also speaks to a lack of depth in their relationship: Miranda and Adam spend most of their time going on cheery, uncomplicated dates, and they rarely discuss the issues that trouble them. Miranda's silence also implicates her in the falseness she criticizes in others. Miranda feels alienated by the disingenuous public demeanors of others, but she is guilty of this behavior, too.

While they are dancing, Miranda notices a couple sitting at a corner table. The girl cries and the boy takes her hands in his and kisses them. Miranda "envie[s] the girl," that she could "weep […] and he does not even have to ask, What is the matter?" Miranda then eavesdrops on another young couple's conversation.

Miranda feels unclose to Adam. There is so much that goes unspoken and untouched between them—they rarely broach difficult subjects, such as her possible illness or the dangers of war. Thus, Miranda envies this couple who—even in silence—manages to understand and comfort one another. Miranda wants this level of depth and connection in all her relationships.

Later, Miranda wakes up in bed knowing somehow that she's "been asleep for a long time." Adam appears before her. He reveals that he's been "called back suddenly to camp." He called Miranda's work and her apartment building and learned from Miss Hobbe that Miranda was sick in bed.

Miranda's premonition that something horrible will happen to her has come true: she has fallen ill with influenza. Porter sets up the reader for this reveal through Miranda's consistent observations that she feels unwell or uneasy, through characters' indirect references to an unnamed disease, and in the constant presence of funeral processions. Still, Porter only uses the word "influenza" twice in the story, so the reader must rely on outside knowledge of the 1918 influenza pandemic to make this connection.

Miranda tells Adam what she can recall of the hazy recent events: she called in sick to work. Bill, the city editor, had arranged for her to take a sick leave and for a doctor to visit her. The doctor tapped her chest and gave her medicine. In the present, Adam finds said medicine and runs out to the pharmacy to get a refill.

Things escalate quickly. Only the night before Miranda and Adam were out dancing, and now everything is different: now, Miranda may be on her deathbed. It's also worth noting that even as she is surrounded by people who care for her—like Bill, Adam, and the doctor—Miranda feels desperately alienated and alone.

Miranda contemplates what the illness means for her. She hallucinates, reflects on memories, and thinks about dying. Adam returns with Miranda's medicine. Miranda runs into Miss Hobbe in the hallway and tells her she might have influenza. Miss Hobbe insists that Miranda go to a hospital or she'll kick her out of her building. Adam cares for Miranda. They sit together drinking coffee and try to sing to pass the time.

Miranda's premonitions have finally come to fruition: "something" has happened to her, and that something is probably influenza. Miranda has had so much time to think about (and avoid thinking about) Adam's death, but now the tables have turned, and she must think about her own. Miranda admits to Miss Hobbe that she likely has influenza, but she is less direct with Adam. Although Adam knows how dire Miranda's condition is, Miranda keeps her bedside interactions with him purposely light and shallow. In the midst of this grave circumstance, Miranda doesn't feel comfortable confiding in Adam. This underscores Miranda's sense of alienation while illustrating the relative shallowness of her relationship with Adam.

Adam and Miranda both vaguely remember the song "**Pale** Horse, Pale Rider." They sing what they can remember of its 40 verses, in which "the rider done taken away mammy, pappy, brother, sister, the whole family besides the lover—" Miranda interrupts Adam to point out that not everybody has been taken away: "But not the singer, not yet [...] Death always leaves on singer to mourn."

The tragedy of death is incurred not by the dead themselves, but by those left behind to mourn them. In the song "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the narrating voice plays the role of mourner.

Miranda tells Adam that she loves him. Adam admits that he loves Miranda, too. Hearing these words aloud for the first time, Miranda observes that "the cloud cleared and she saw his face for an instant."

Miranda and Adam are completely honest with one another. When Adam's face "clear[s]" it signifies that Miranda finally feels the connection she longs for. It also foreshadows the clear eyes Miranda will witness in her later climactic dream of complete human connection. The fact that Miranda only sees Adam clearly "for an instant" suggests that in reality the human connection she craves is a rare and fleeting phenomenon—not the default condition.

After this dizzying exchange, Miranda "float[s] into the darkness" into sleep. She dreams that Adam is in a small wood "full of inhuman concealed voices singing sharply like the whine of arrows." Adam is "transfixed" by the arrows, and they pierce him through his heart. Adam falls but rises up, alive and unharmed "in a perpetual death and resurrection." Miranda cries angrily: "It's my turn now, why must you always be the one to die?" The arrows strike Miranda and she lives; they strike Adam and he dies.

Like in her dream at the beginning of the story, Miranda is able to more clearly confront the big issues—death, illness, and grief—in the realm of the unconscious. All of the issues Miranda has avoided thinking about rise to the surface when she hallucinates. Dream-Adam's "perpetual death and resurrection" represents all the times Miranda has rejected thoughts of Adam's mortality. Psychologically, repeatedly denying Adam's death only causes him to die again and again—that is, denial of death only magnifies the impact of its grief.

Miranda wakes up and Adam is again by her side. He consoles her but shushes her as she tries to tell the details of her dream. They say goodbye as Adam leaves to get them ice cream and coffee. On his way out, Adam tells Miranda to "be very quiet."

Miranda's dream was clearly symbolic of her denial of Adam's death. Adam's refusal to hear the details of Miranda's dream reinforces that Adam, too, is in denial of his death. When Adam instructs Miranda to "be very quiet," Porter shows that Adam doesn't want Miranda thinking about death, further emphasizing Adam's avoidance of difficult issues.

The next time Miranda regains consciousness, she is in the hospital and Adam is nowhere to be found. As Miranda dips in and out of consciousness, she repeatedly inquires about Adam. Hildesheim, the doctor who cares for her, tells her that Adam came to visit her and left a note. The nurse, Miss Tanner, reads the note because Miranda cannot see straight. The note reveals that Adam tried to visit Miranda but they would not let them see her.

In addition to her mental and emotional alienation, Miranda is now physically alienated, sick and alone in the hospital.

Miranda reflects on the hospital setting: noting its blinding, disorienting **white** walls, white beds, white sheets, doctors and nurses dressed all in white: "What is this whiteness and silence," Miranda wonders, "but the absence of pain?" Feverishly, she looks on as two hospital workers, whom she describes as "executioners," push a man down the hall on a hospital gurney. The man, "in a high weeping voice," proclaims "that the crime of which he was accused did not merit the punishment he was about to receive." But the men do not remit, and they continue on their way.

In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the color white symbolizes sickness. When Miranda suggests that the "whiteness" that surrounds her might be "the absence of pain," she insinuates that her sickness—and the death in which it might result—could bring about an end to her alienation and suffering. Still, Miranda reflects on how the unfairness of death taunts the living. The man on the gurney did nothing wrong—he has committed no "crime," yet he cannot evade his "punishment" of death.

Miranda continues to hallucinate, imagining Dr. Hildesheim to be a German soldier. In one hand Hildesheim holds an infant skewered on the end of a bayonet; in the other, he grasps a "stone pot marked Poison." Terrified, Miranda Shrieks: "Dr Hildesheim is a Boche!"

Because this story is set in the United States during World War I, Miranda's vision of Dr. Hildesheim as a German soldier positions him as a an enemy or villain. Miranda reconfigures Dr. Hildesheim as the villain because it seems that she does not want to be saved. Her life is full of alienation, suffering, tragedy, and war—but in death, as Miranda observed earlier, she might be offered "an absence of pain."

Miranda briefly regains consciousness to apologize to Dr. Hildesheim. She sees Miss Tanner at her side and says, "I know those are your hands [...] but to me they are **white** tarantulas." Miss Tanner tells her to sleep, but Miranda resists, "for then I see worse things."

Again, Porter evokes the symbolic color white: Miranda hallucinates that Miss Tanner's hands are "white tarantulas," suggesting that Miss Tanner is not saving her, but inflicting ills on her. Similar to her hallucination of Dr. Hildesheim as "the Boche," Miranda renders Miss Tanner as a villain who stands in the way of her desire to die and be "painless."

Miranda dips deeper into her hallucinations, and this time she dreams of death and oblivion. She imagines "a whirlpool of **gray** water turning upon itself for all eternity." Eternity is "more than the distance to the farthest star," she thinks. She imagines herself at the edge of a bottomless pit, "strain[ing] her back against a reassuring wall of granite."

Grayness, or paleness, is symbolic of death throughout the story. Although Miranda feels that death might offer her freedom from the pains of life, she is still hesitant to die. She sees death and eternity as a chaotic, inescapable "whirlpool," and she is overwhelmed. In contrast to the unknowability of death and eternity, the granite wall that she rests against provides a comforting sense of stability.

But, Miranda realizes, "granite walls, whirlpools, stars are things. None of them is death, nor the image of it. Death is death, [...] and for the dead it has no attributes." Miranda falls deeper into darkness and unconsciousness. She feels herself falling and feels "a minute fiercely burning particle of being" that thrusts her body upwards into the light. This single particle—the instinctual will to live—draws her there. The particle grows and turns into a rainbow, and the scene turns from darkness to light. She rises from the edge of the pit and runs into the light, into "the burning blue of the sea and the cool green of the meadow."

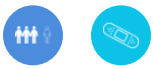
"Granite walls, whirlpools, [and] stars," are only metaphorical or symbolic renderings of death and oblivion. They are yet another way Miranda manages to deny the reality of death. This denial causes Miranda to descend deeper into "darkness," or unknowability. The scene shifts and Miranda's instinct to live (imagined symbolically as a "particle") removes her from darkness and places her in a new, lighter frame of mind. Miranda sees "the burning blue of the sea and the cool green of the meadow"; it seems as though Miranda has been transported from darkness and uncertainty to lightness and clarity. The implication is that the realizations about life and death she makes in this new land will be clearer.

In this utopic scene, Miranda feels the presence of other humans whom she recognizes as people she knows: "their eyes were clear and untroubled [...] they were pure identities and she knew them every one without calling their names or remembering what relation she bore to them."

This scene is so beautiful to Miranda because she can connect to these familiar people so easily and completely. That "their eyes [are] clear and untroubled" is meant to be taken in contrast to the clouded, concealing eyes of the people she interacts with in consciousness—people who do things for show and conceal the truth, such as the artificially cheerful volunteers; the opportunistic, phony Lusk Committeemen; and all those who quietly accept the atrocities of war. All that she finds troubling and disingenuous in life is remedied in this beautiful dream world. For once, Miranda's alienation leaves her.

Miranda's pure joy is shattered by "a vague tremor of apprehension." She recognizes these familiar human presences as people who have died. "Where are the dead?" she wonders. "We have forgotten the dead, oh, the dead, where are they?" Miranda feels a sudden pain as Miss Tanner administers an injection to her arm, and she regains consciousness.

Miranda's state of bliss is shattered when she is ripped away from the dead to be brought back to life. Miss Tanner administers a life-saving injection, but in so doing dismantles Miranda's euphoric moment of human connection.



Once more, Miranda awakes in her hospital room. She hears noises, voices, and commotion. Miss Tanner tells her that the war is over as joyful voices outside sing "My country, 'tis of thee." But Miranda is not so joyful. "Sweet land…oh, terrible land," she thinks, "of this bitter world where the sound of rejoicing was a clamor of pain."

Two conflicts have been resolved: World War I is over, and Miranda has recovered from her illness. Yet, Miranda is still troubled. Her utterance of "Sweet land…oh, terrible land" is a rejection of the crowd's celebratory singing. Miranda rises from unconsciousness more depressed and alienated than ever before; while others celebrate, she feels "a clamor of pain." Despite the resolution of two external conflicts (sickness and war), Miranda's core internal conflict (alienation) persists. This contradiction suggests that an absence of situational hardship doesn't necessarily rid one of one's internal suffering. It also shows that the transformative visions Miranda witnessed in her dreams are useless once she is awake. Confronting her problems in dreams is not the equivalent of confronting her problems in reality: it is only another means of avoiding and denying the big issues.

Miranda realizes she should be grateful to be alive, but she is not. The utopia she had just seen in her hallucinations has dulled the world of the living. Around her, everyone "seem[s] dull and tired, with no radiance of skin and eyes," and "the **white** walls of her room were now a soiled **gray**."

The transformation of her surroundings from white (which symbolizes illness) to gray (which symbolizes death) shows that Miranda's illness has resulted in her symbolic death. Though she recovers from her illness, she is left feeling more alienated, depressed, and dead than before.

Chuck and Towney visit Miranda and bring letters from well-wishing friends. They exclaim how wonderful Miranda must feel to be well again. Miranda disagrees, but knows she can only smile, nod, and respond agreeably to these letters, "for it will not do to betray the conspiracy and tamper with the courage of the living." In a letter from a strange man who was at a camp with Adam, Miranda learns that Adam died of influenza over a month ago.

Miranda feels alienated from all her friends. The ecstasy of her near-death experience leaves Miranda feeling disappointed to be well again. She is sad that she must return to the violence and sadness of the mortal world, and she knows none of her friends will understand this.

Miranda prepares to leave the hospital. She tries to summon forth Adam's image before her eyes. Though she can feel his overwhelming presence, she fails to summon forth his image; around her, the hospital room remains empty. Miranda prepares to leave and reflects on the end of her sickness, the end of the war, and the end of her love: "Now there would be time for everything," she realizes, dolefully.

Adam is gone. Miranda cannot summon forth his image: she can only mourn the loss of him. She also mourns for her own life: for all the alienation, tragedy, and death she will be forced to grapple with for the rest of her life. The final line of story, "Now there would be time for everything," is a reference to Ecclesiastes 3 in the Old Testament. In its biblical interpretation, the line invites the reader to be hopeful, even in the face of tragedy. The world may be full of death and suffering, but God also provides the possibility of life and redemption—there is a time and place for everything. But Miranda's application of the passage is ironic and cynical. To her, "everything" does not include hope or joy or healing—in life, Miranda laments, there is time only for grief, suffering, and death.

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