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Epidemic as Metaphor in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

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Abstract

Through the lens of Susan Sontag's theory of illness as metaphor, this article examines Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1938) and argues that written in the 1930s, the Spanish flu in the novella serves not only as a symbol of the social devastation wrought by World War I but also as a reflection of the interwar social anxieties that foreshadowed the outbreak of World War II. First, the article examines how the novella employs disease as a metaphor for social instabilities during WWI, particularly in its portrayal of the pervasive atmosphere of death mirroring war casualties, the intertwining of Miranda's illness with the worsening social conditions, and Adam's ironic death from the flu instead of battle. Then, the article investigates how the epidemic serves as a metaphor for deeper societal maladies during interwar years, especially xenophobia, disillusionment, and isolation, that foreshadowed the onset of World War II. The article concludes that this dual significance further illuminates the novella's importance among disease narratives in American literary history.

Keywords

Katherine Anne Porter; *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; Susan Sontag; Disease narrative; Spanish flu

1. Introduction

Based on her own personal narrow escape from the Spanish flu, Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* has been widely recognized as a significant epidemic narrative in American literary history. Most research on this novella centers on its poignant portrayal of the 1918 influenza pandemic and its exploration of personal and collective trauma. David A. Davis (2011) argues that the novella serves as an important historical and aesthetic record, preserving the memory of the forgotten pandemic and manifesting the emotional aftermath of such disastrous world crisis. Tania Chakravertty (2023) builds on this by examining the interplay between memory and death in the novella, using trauma theory to highlight Miranda's personal struggle with guilt, love, and loss. Further, Bailey Rhodes (2022) explores how the narrative reimagines literary conventions of elegy, particularly in the context of death and war and analyzes Miranda's post-traumatic identity, offering insights into how the novella anticipates modern responses to trauma.

Building on these insightful studies, this article employs Susan Sontag's theory of illness as metaphor to examine how Porter uses the Spanish flu as a symbolic vehicle. In her influential works *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), Sontag examines the pervasive use of disease as a metaphor for moral, social, and political decay. She asserts that diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer have historically been used to symbolize broader societal anxieties, often embodying fears of weakness, moral decay, and societal collapse. Sontag's analysis suggests that these diseases were not just biological conditions but became metaphorical symbols of cultural fears, framing them as indicators of societal crisis. As she notes, "The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the

disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things" (Sontag, 1978/2001). Thus, disease metaphors transcend their biological realities, reflecting the social and political dynamics of the time and becoming powerful tools for expressing collective anxieties and ideological commentary. Drawing on Sontag's theories, this article analyzes *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and argues that written in the 1930s, the Spanish flu in the novella serves not only as a symbol of the social devastation wrought by World War I but also as a reflection of the interwar social anxieties that foreshadowed the outbreak of World War II.

2. Disease as a Metaphor for Social Instabilities During WWI

In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the protagonist Miranda's experience of illness during the influenza pandemic is not only a personal ordeal but also a metaphor for the broader psychological and physical traumas of World War I. Through the lens of Sontag's critique of disease metaphors, Miranda's suffering with the flu becomes more than just an episode of sickness; it embodies the pervasive social, emotional, and psychological devastation caused by the First World War. The metaphoric significance of the epidemic in the novella is revealed in the following three ways: the pervasive atmosphere of death paralleling war casualties, the intertwining of Miranda's illness with the worsening social conditions, and Adam's ironic death from the flu instead of battle.

2.1 Pervasive Atmosphere of Death as a Metaphor for WWI Casualties

The first way the novella conveys the metaphoric significance of the epidemic is through the depiction of the epidemic's severe death toll, mirroring the countless lives lost in World War I. This connection between illness and war creates a backdrop of widespread mortality, which underscores the social devastation of the time. The story frequently references the high number of funerals, with Miranda and Adam observing funeral processions on a regular basis. Adam remarks men "are dying like flies out there" from a new disease (Porter, 1938/1979), a grim image that parallels the mass casualties and constant presence of death during the war. His description of the "funny new disease" as something that "simply knocks you into a cocked hat" can be seen as a metaphor for the war itself, which brought unprecedented death and destruction (Porter, 1938/1979). The characters display a certain numbness towards death and suffering. Miranda and Adam, for instance, "hardly glanced" at a funeral procession (Porter, 1938/1979), a reaction that signifies a population overwhelmed and desensitized by the relentless scale of death and loss during the war.

This sense of societal breakdown is further emphasized by the hospital's overwhelming lack of beds, which can be seen as a metaphor for the broader instability caused by the war. The hospital, like society at large, is strained to the breaking point. The absence of sufficient resources of both medical personnel and facilities illustrates the war's drain on societal infrastructure, as supplies and personnel are diverted to the front lines. Miss Hobbe's threat to place Miranda on the sidewalk in desperation underscores a breakdown in the social order, revealing how the usual systems of care and compassion fail under the weight of the crisis. The scarcity of hospital resources and the chaotic conditions within the healthcare system symbolize a society overwhelmed not only by the disease but also by a broader sense of instability and crisis, exacerbated by the war.

2.2 Miranda's Illness as a Metaphor for the Worsening Social Conditions

The second way the novella illustrates the metaphoric significance of the epidemic is through the intertwining of Miranda's illness with the worsening social conditions, representing the war's impact on individual life and the societal fabric. The metaphorization of disease is evident in the way Miranda's illness progresses in tandem with the intensification and even the end of the war. Even before the flu fully takes hold, Miranda is already burdened by the pervasive weight of the war, both in the external pressures around her and the internal turmoil she experiences. The Liberty Bond salesmen who confront her at work embody this oppressive atmosphere, their coercive rhetoric demanding patriotism and sacrifice, mirroring the relentless expectations of the war imposed on civilians. Their aggressive appeals, which frame financial contribution as a moral duty equivalent to the soldiers' battlefield sacrifices, only deepen Miranda's growing resentment toward the war and its encroachment on every aspect of civilian life. It is in this moment of psychological strain that Miranda experiences her first symptom, a headache, signaling the simultaneous onset of both her physical affliction and her internal struggle against a world consumed by war. As she herself comments, "it seemed reasonable to suppose it had started with the war" (Porter, 1938/1979), linking her deteriorating physical condition to the all-encompassing pressures of the conflict.

As Miranda's flu symptoms worsen, so too does the social chaos around her, as the epidemic pushes hospitals

beyond their limits and death becomes an ever-present reality. The overwhelmed medical system, which leaves Miranda to drift between life and death in a world already ravaged by loss, epitomizes the breakdown of society under the dual weight of war and disease. Her near-death experience mirrors the destruction brought by both the Spanish flu and the war, reinforcing the idea that her illness is not an isolated affliction but part of a greater, indiscriminate catastrophe. In her fevered delirium, she clings to the haunting refrain of a Negro spiritual, "*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, done taken my lover away" (Porter, 1938/1979), a chilling acknowledgment of death's omnipresence, be it from the flu, from war, or from the inescapable convergence of both.

The trauma Miranda endures during the pandemic extends beyond the physical to a profound psychological shift. Her fevered delirium is filled with violent, war-related hallucinations that blur the lines between illness and conflict. In one disturbing vision, Adam, her lover, is repeatedly killed by arrows, symbolizing the constant threat soldiers face in combat. These nightmarish images are not simply manifestations of her physical fever but reflections of her emotional turmoil and the anxiety she feels about the war and the precariousness of life. The feverish hallucinations of Dr. Hildesheim as a menacing figure committing atrocities further highlight the mental anguish Miranda faces as the horrors of war pervade her subconscious.

Even after Miranda survives the flu, the psychological trauma lingers, revealing the lasting effects of the war on both the individual and society. The lingering psychological trauma serves as a testament to the war's insidious influence on both individuals and society, highlighting the profound and pervasive impact of the war. Her recovery is not marked by a return to normalcy, but by profound emotional detachment, echoing the fractured state of the post-war world around her. Miranda feels alienated from the world, unable to reconcile the relief of survival with the deep grief brought on by the wartime loss that has ravaged society. When she receives the news of Adam's death, she reacts not with emotional release, but with disbelief and numbness, as if trying to protect herself from the overwhelming pain. Instead of breaking down, she turns to practicalities, asking Miss Tanner how long she has been hospitalized, attempting to frame Adam's death within a logical structure rather than allowing herself to fully confront the emotional weight of his loss. This distancing indicates her struggle to process grief in a world that has been irreparably altered by the war. Her detachment is further emphasized by her reluctance to engage with the world outside her suffering. The letters waiting for her remain untouched for days, as she "continued to shrink from them" (Porter, 1938/1979), a clear desire to postpone the pain they might contain. This delayed response underscores the broader metaphor of the flu as a representation of the social chaos and emotional distortion caused by the war. The influenza pandemic, like the war, does not just claim lives but fractures the emotional realities of survivors, leaving Miranda's psyche fractured and shattered by both the loss of her lover and the pervasive impact of the war.

2.3 Adam's Death from the Flu as a Metaphor for the Senseless War

Adam's death from the flu, rather than in battle, serves as the third poignant metaphor for the war itself. His untimely death in the camp hospital less than a month after his deployment underscores the dehumanizing, senseless, and arbitrary nature of both the epidemic and the war. Like the war, the influenza strikes unexpectedly and indiscriminately, spreading without warning, devastating without regard for circumstance, and claiming lives at random. Adam is initially portrayed as exceptionally healthy, boasting that "he had never had a pain in his life that he could remember" (Porter, 1938/1979). Miranda recalls that Adam seemed perfectly fine the day before she realized something was terribly wrong with her. Even in the brutal and dangerous conditions of war training, Adam appears strong and resilient. Yet, even those who seem to have everything to live for, such as the healthy, vital Adam, fall victim to this invisible and unpredictable enemy. In this way, his sudden death represents the countless lives cut short by the war. This sudden and unexpected turn of events highlights the brutal, arbitrary, and indiscriminate nature of both the war and the epidemic, drawing a powerful parallel between the two.

3. Disease as Metaphor for Interwar Societal Decay Leading to WWII

In the autumn of 1918, Porter left her hometown and began working at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver. However, she unexpectedly contracted the Spanish flu, which was sweeping across the world at the time. Her condition rapidly worsened, and she hovered on the brink of death. Local newspapers even prepared her obituary, and her family made arrangements for her funeral. Yet, against all odds, Porter managed to survive, narrowly escaping the clutches of death. This near-death experience marked a pivotal moment in her life. Looking back on the illness decades later, she described it as a profound turning point to Babara Thompson, her secretary and assistant during the

1940s and 1950s: "It simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, really" (Givner, 1987). Despite the immense personal significance of this experience, it was not until 1938—twenty years after surviving the epidemic—that Porter transformed it into literature with *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Why the long delay?

Porter's acute political sensitivity and sense of impotence in the face of social turmoil during the interwar years may explain the delay in her literary treatment of her brush with death. Though Porter consciously distanced herself from direct involvement in political movements or campaigns, she remained a keen observer of the political landscape, using her writing as a platform for critique. Her opposition to war was firm, as demonstrated in her description of war as "a frail superstructure built over the bottomless pit of natural evil" (Porter, 1990). In the early 1930s, during a visit to Germany, Porter witnessed firsthand the rise of authoritarianism. She recounts seeing "Hitler going along in that great six-wheel wagon of his down the street, standing in the middle while people went right up to him throwing rose petals and violets and confetti and screaming at him with hysterical joy. I stood there and I knew—I went through five revolutions in Mexico—what was happening" (Givner, 1987). Her acute political awareness led her to recognize that the world, still reeling from the trauma of World War I, was on the brink of yet another devastating conflict. Yet, Porter was frustrated by her inability to convey the urgency of the threat she had witnessed firsthand: "I was not a newspaper reporter. I was not a woman known for her political views. Even if I knew what I was saying and even if I had proof, it was hard to make anyone listen" (Givner, 1987). By the time she wrote *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the world was once again teetering on the edge of war. The painful memory of World War I's social upheavals, combined with her heightened political awareness, prompted Porter to revisit her personal encounter with death and weave it into a narrative about the looming dangers of the next global conflict. Her intention to warn against the impending war is further evidenced in her transference of her own views on war and the political climate in Germany to her autobiographical figure, Miranda, who echoes Porter's sense of impotence by calling the war "a filthy war" (Porter, 1938/1979) and asking, "What does it matter what I think?" (Porter, 1938/1979).

Building on her political awareness and desire to warn against the impending war, Porter uses the epidemic in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* not only as a metaphor for the social unrest and collective suffering of World War I, but also as a symbol of the underlying social conditions, particularly xenophobia, disillusionment, and isolation, that would ultimately pave the way for the next world war.

3.1 Characters' Suspicion and Fear as a Metaphor for Xenophobia

Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, in *The Road to War*, argue that during the interwar years, extreme nationalism and xenophobia were "the stock-in-trade of a great many populist and nationalist politicians, stoking the fires of national rivalry and overt racism" (Overy & Wheatcroft, 2009). Xenophobia in the United States fueled mistrust and hostility toward foreign nations, exacerbating international tensions and contributing to the global instability that allowed expansionist powers like Germany and Japan to expand unchecked.

This undercurrent of xenophobia and fear is reflected in the metaphor of the epidemic in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In the novella, the characters' suspicion of foreign influence is embodied in the belief that the disease originated from "germs brought by a German ship to Boston, a camouflaged ship" (Porter, 1938/1979). This paranoia captures not only the fear of foreign threats during World War I but also parallels the pervasive anti-German sentiment of the interwar years. The environment of suspicion that lingered after WWI easily fed xenophobic fantasies, even in those who might not otherwise harbor such prejudices.

Xenophobia during the interwar years not only fueled irrational fears but also distorted people's ability to perceive reality, which is powerfully represented in Miranda's disease. Her feverish delirium, largely shaped by wartime propaganda that stoked xenophobia, distorts her perception of the world. Her distrust even extends to her doctor, Dr. Hildesheim, whose German-sounding name triggers her conditioned fear. In one of her hallucinations, Miranda envisions Dr. Hildesheim as a terrifying figure embodying German militarism and brutality. He appears with a German helmet, carrying a naked infant on his bayonet and a pot labeled "Poison." He then throws both the infant and the poison into a well. Overcome with horror, Miranda screams, "Hildesheim is a Boche, a spy, a Hun" (Porter, 1938/1979). However, in reality, Dr. Hildesheim is a caring and competent physician who, along with Miss Tanner, works tirelessly to save Miranda's life. This stark contrast reveals the way disease metaphor functions in the novella: it symbolizes the distorted mentality created by irrational xenophobia, a mentality that, if left unhindered, contributed to the escalation of European conflict and ultimately the outbreak of World War II.

3.2 Miranda's Detachment and Alienation as a Metaphor for Isolationism

Isolationism is another indirect factor that contributed to the power vacuum that emboldened aggressor states like Germany and Japan during the interwar years. As Overy and Wheatcroft note, "American neutrality and the evident strength of isolationism among the American public gave additional encouragement to Japan and Germany to embark on local programs of expansion, which Britain and France were too feeble to reverse on their own" (Overy & Wheatcroft, 2009).

In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the isolation and alienation experienced by Miranda as a result of the influenza epidemic serves as a metaphor for Americans seeking to avoid involvement in European conflicts after World War I. Miranda's physical isolation due to her illness echoes America's desire to stay out of the conflicts engulfing Europe. Confined to her bed, cut off from the world as the epidemic ravages those around her, Miranda becomes emotionally distant from others. She observes "the awful expression in all the eyes you meet" and how people have "pulled down the shutters over their minds and their hearts" (Porter, 1938/1979). She also notes that "the human faces around her seemed dulled and tired" (Porter, 1938/1979). This emotional detachment symbolizes America's reluctance to confront the war's moral and emotional burdens, particularly in the years leading up to the impending World War II.

Additionally, before and during her illness, Miranda expresses a desire to escape, longing to run away with Adam or retreat to a peaceful, beautiful place. She tells him, "I'd like to run away...let's both" (Porter, 1938/1979), demonstrating her wish to flee from the overwhelming weight of her circumstances. However, she remains trapped in a world of the epidemic. This yearning for escape symbolizes America's initial impulse to avoid involvement in the war and preserve its own sense of security. Miranda's wish that she could remain untouched by both the epidemic is shattered as her illness deepens. Similarly, America's early belief that it could stay safe and prosperous while the rest of the world descended into chaos proved to be untenable.

3.3 Miranda's Trauma as a Metaphor for Disillusionment

The third significant indirect cause of World War II was disillusionment, which played a crucial role in fostering the political instability and aggressive nationalism that allowed extremist ideologies to flourish. World War I shattered the "comfortable, ordered, prosperous life of bourgeois Europe" and destroyed the "confidence in progress", replacing pre-war idealism with the brutal realities of war (Overy & Wheatcroft, 2009). This widespread disillusionment eroded faith in traditional political and social structures, paving the way for fascism, which, in turn, rejected these same traditions while promoting extremist values.

This sense of disillusionment is resonated in Miranda's experience after her illness. In the aftermath, she laments the absence of true daylight, symbolizing the loss of hope and the enduring darkness that has overtaken her world: "Now if real daylight such as I remember having seen in this world would only come again, but it is always twilight or just before morning, a promise of day that is never kept. What has become of the sun? That was the longest and loneliest night and yet it will not end and let the day come. Shall I ever see light again?" (Porter, 1938/1979). Even in moments that might seem warm or secure after her survival, Miranda is haunted by a sense of loss, epitomized by her question, "Where are the dead?" (Porter, 1938/1979). This embodies the lingering trauma of the epidemic and the impossibility of fully recovering from the devastation of disease. She finds that her feeling of a world irrevocably changed, combined with a sense of being trapped on a path towards an inevitable and unwelcome fate, which is being irrevocably changed by xenophobia, isolationism, and disillusionment with the traditional values. In this way, her sense of loss mirrors the broader historical disillusionment that contributed to the political and social instability leading to World War II.

4. Conclusion

In her 1926 essay "On Being Ill," Virginia Woolf lamented that illness, particularly the flu, had not become a central theme in literature, remarking that "it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (Woolf, 2022). This observation held true for American literature. Despite the heavy toll the 1918 flu exacted on both civilians and servicemen, only a few literary works centered on the pandemic. As a result, it is frequently called the "forgotten" pandemic, a term used in the title of Alfred W. Crosby's influential book *America's Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*. Among the few notable works that address the epidemic—such as *One of Ours* (1922) by Willa Cather, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) by Thomas

Wolfe, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) by William Keepers Maxwell, and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1938) by Wallace Stegner—*Pale Horse, Pale Rider* stands out as "the most significant American literary work set during the pandemic" (Davis, 2011).

The significance of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is often attributed to its authentic portrayal of the social chaos caused by the flu epidemic. Its accuracy is so striking that historians like Crosby use the absence of nurses in Porter's novella as persuasive evidence to highlight the severe shortage of medical staff during the pandemic (Crosby, 2003). While this observation is important, Sontag's concept of illness as metaphor provides a new and valuable lens through which to analyze *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. From this perspective, the novella's vivid accounts of the epidemic become a metaphor for the broader social upheavals caused by and extending beyond World War I. Furthermore, the story serves as a powerful symbol of the disorienting social conditions, particularly rising xenophobia, disillusionment, and isolation, that would contribute to the onset of World War II. In this way, the novella's significance extends beyond its faithful depiction of the United States during World War I; it also acts as a chilling premonition of the political and social forces that would eventually lead to the Second World War. Thus, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* functions not only as a poignant reflection on the aftermath of World War I but also as a stark warning about the conditions leading to WWII. This dual significance further underscores its importance within the disease narrative in American literary history.

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