CHAPTER IV

THEMES: MIRANDA STORIES

FROM INITIATION TO ESTRANGEMENT
The first seven short stories in *The Leaning Tower* and two stories of the collection, *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, deal with the life of Miranda. In these stories, Katherine Anne Porter has created a type of fictionalized autobiography. These stories are different from the others and their style is also unusual. They could therefore, be considered as forming a group by themselves. These stories have been regarded as seven sketches. The three sketches *The Circus*, *The Grave* and *The Fig Tree* record the initiation process through which Miranda moves towards maturity. *The Source* and *The Old Order* are a study of Miranda's Grandmother and of the society which produced her. Old Nannie, her lifelong companion and Uncle Jimbilly, the family servant, appear in *The Last Leaf* and *The Witness*. All these sketches together depict Miranda's confrontation of the complex and confusing adult world, and also the serene and orderly life of the old South which provides the contrasting background. Parts of
Old Mortality and the seven sketches are written in the form of recollections. The story of Miranda is concluded in Pale Horse, Pale Rider.

All these sketches depict the protagonist's constant preoccupation with the dead, the past, the realm of the dead. Right from the sketches to the concluding story when Miranda is a young woman, the centre of interest is the mind of the protagonist.

The Circus is the first sketch in which Miranda plays a major part. In this story she is quite young. Miranda's large family goes to see the circus. The small Miranda is frightened by a clown performing acrobatics on a wire. She gets no comfort from the fact that she is in the midst of her family. The very atmosphere of the circus appears outlandish and queer to her:

"An enormous brass band seemed to explode right at Miranda's ear. She jumped, quivered, thrilled blindly and almost forgot to breathe as sound and color and smell rushed together and poured through her skin and hair and beat in her head and hands and feet and pit of her stomach. "Oh!', she called out in her panic, closing her eyes and seizing Dicey's hand hard. The glaring lights
burned through her lids, a roar of laughter like rage drowned out the steady raging of the drums and horns". 1

The fact is that Miranda does not know the name "clown", if she did she would not be so disturbed at the acrobatics. The clown's dress and overall deformity frighten her. From his first sight, he suggests death to her, with his "bone white skull and chalk white face with tufted eyebrows far apart in the middle of his forehead, the lids in a black sharp angle, a long scarlet mouth stretching back into sunken cheeks, turned up at the corner in a perpetual bitter grimace of pain". 2 She cannot bear to see that the clown is earth bound like the other man and his life depends on a tiny wire. In other words, so long as the performer could be treated as a figure in romance doing strange deeds, she was not surprised. But the instant she recognizes the connection he has with solid earth, she is frightened. And she is unable to place her experience, which is neither that of romance nor a reality she knows.

1 The Leaning Tower and Other Stories, p. 23
2 Ibid.
This experience also marks her contact with mass emotions. The descriptions of the responses of Miranda and of the crowd to the same act indicate the gulf between her world and the adult world.

"The crowd roared with savage delight, shrieks of dreadful laughter like devils in delicious torment . . . Miranda shrieked too, with real pain, clutching at her stomach with her knees drawn up . . ." ¹ And the coloured servant Dicey removes her from the circus-tent at the command of the grandmother. On the way out she encounters the dwarf:

"Miranda almost touched him before she saw him, her distorted face with its open mouth and glistening tears almost level with his. He leaned forward and peered at her with kind, not-human golden eyes, like a near-sighted dog; then made a horrid grimace at her, imitating her own face. Miranda struck at him in sheer ill temper, screaming. Dicey drew her away quickly, but not before Miranda had seen in his face, suddenly, a look of haughty, remote displeasure, a true grown-up look. She knew it well. It chilled her with a new kind of fear: she had not believed he was really human." ²
Obviously this is Miranda's first awareness of human deformity and it has a deep effect on her. The circus vaguely makes her aware of the difference between her and the adult responses and thus isolates her from her family. Nance aptly sums up the meaning of the story:

"The explicit theme of The Circus is Miranda's initiation into a new dimension of experience and her failure to cope with it satisfactorily because of her inability to distinguish illusion from reality. Her slight brush with the mystery of sex in the form of boys looking up through bleachers is also beyond her understanding at the early age. The result of her day at the circus is fear, which in itself is both ordeal and mystery — an initiation process and also a permanent inseparable part of her life". 1

The circus experience makes Miranda aware of the harsh realities of life and it is a step towards wisdom; it makes her keenly aware of the mysteries of the adult world.

In The Grave the mysterious adult world reveals itself again. This story is regarded as one of the

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1 William L. Nance, p. 87
best by Miss Porter. The complex symbolism has emphasized the thematic motif of the story. The events depicted in the story are close to reality.

The story concerns Miranda, when she is nine years old, and her brother Paul who is twelve. Grandmother has been dead for some years.

During the time of her widowhood, Sophia Jane had thrice moved the body of her husband first from Kentucky to Louisiana, and then to a farm in Texas. In Texas she set up a small cemetery in a corner of her first farm. As the family connections grow, and several more members come over from Kentucky to settle, its cemetery contains at least about twenty graves. But after Grandmother's death, a part of her land which had the cemetery, is sold "for the benefit of certain of her children".¹ Now the bodies are removed to the new public cemetery, where Grandmother was buried beside her husband according to her wishes.

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¹ *The Leaning Tower*, p. 69
Once on a very hot summer day, Miranda and Paul are out with their rifles hunting for rabbits and doves. Miranda finds a ring there, and Paul shoots a rabbit and expertly skins the dead animal. Miranda reaches down to feel the exposed muscles, when Paul notices the "oddly bloated" belly, and realizes that the rabbit was going to have young ones. He then slits the sac containing the baby rabbits from the rabbit's abdomen. They see the tiny creatures. Miranda "looked and looked", excited but not frightened, for she was accustomed to the sight of animals killed in hunting. She is filled with awe and fascination:

"Oh there is blood running over them, she said, and began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted more deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along". 1

This isolated experience makes her aware of the meaning of life and death. To Miranda, "quietly and terribly agitated", the vision becomes a bloody heap, 2 and she wants no part of it. Paul puts the baby rabbits back into the tomb of their mother's body, to bury them together. And it would seem that the experience, too is to be buried in Miranda's mind. She thought about the whole affair with confused

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1 Ibid., p. 76
2 Ibid., p. 77
unhappiness for a few days. "Then it sank quietly into her mind (its new burial place), and was heaped over by accumulated thousands of impressions".1

But twenty years later walking through a market in a Mexican market place, "the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind's eyes".2

"An Indian vendor had held up before her a tray of dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures: birds, baby chicks, baby rabbits, lambs, baby pigs... It was a very hot day and the smell in the market, with its piles of raw flesh and wilting flowers, was like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day in the empty cemetery at home: the day she had remembered always until now vaguely as the time she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded, and she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands."3

In its totality, and in the image of the rabbits, the young buried in the tomb of their mother's body,

1 Ibid., p. 78
2 Ibid. cit.
3 Ibid. cit
the story acknowledges the mysterious interdependence of life and death. It is a very significant story because it transcends the usual thematic preoccupation of its author by achieving the universality of truth.

The Fig Tree has close similarity with The Grave in its emphasis on Miranda's initiation into life, Miss Porter herself commented on this story:

"The Fig Tree is typical of the sketches. It is composed largely of generalized narrative and comments on many aspects of life of the family. Chronologically it would have to be placed no later than The Circus, since in it the grandmother is still alive. Miranda's apparent age in the story would seem to place it near The Circus and before The Grave, since the latter story, in which she is nine, indicates a greater understanding of death than does the present one. But it seems more fitting to place The Fig Tree last among the sketches, for it forms a balancing contrast with the first and it seems to carry Miranda further than do any of the others toward independence from the family and mature understanding of life". 1

The Fig Tree opens with an account of the family's preparation for one of their annual summer visits to the country. As usual, in this story, old

1 Katherine Anne Porter, "The Fig Tree", Harper Magazine CCXX, 'June 1960, pp. 55 - 56
Nannie and the Grandmother dominate Miranda and curb her eager high spirits. Miranda, and her grandmother and father, with the servants, leave their house for the farm in the country. Just before the departure, Miranda buries a dead chick near a big tree and then thinks she hears it crying "weep, weep" from the grave. Nannie and Grandmother force her to leave immediately and she runs to get into the carriage. But the incident upsets her. Continuing to hear in her mind the tiny cry, she is in a frenzy of fear that she might have buried the chick alive. She cries during the trip and asks to be taken back. The family reaches the farm and an unspecified time passes.

They are joined at the farm by Sophia Jane's sister, Eliza. Great-Aunt Eliza is so unlike Grandmother that it is hard for the children to understand how they can be sisters. Grandmother is slight, fine featured, and despite her energy and will, feminine in every way. Eliza is big and homely; she dresses in rough tweeds, climbs ladders like a man, talks in a most unladylike way and dips snuff. She cultivates amateur scientific interest which attracts Miranda to her. Eliza lets her look through
the telescope at the moon and tells her that the sky contains "a million other words". The same evening Miranda hears the cry of "weep weep" near another fig tree and is filled with joy when Aunt Eliza informs her that the sound is made by tree frogs.

The symbolic approach to the story lends a certain depth to the theme of negation which is embodied in the psychological details, description and the language. The story emphasizes Miranda's liberation from the ignorance. Nance compares the two stories *The Grave* and the *Fig Tree* and interprets them thus:

"... There is a parallel between *The Fig Tree* and *The Grave*, in the fact that in each story Miranda emerges from a grave into a new phase of development. Her complete emergence from the grave of her grandfather in the first symbolizes her advance from the childhood toward maturity, with its bitter knowledge of death, the final oppressor. In the second, her spirit is released from the grave of ignorance and narrow limitations, just as it is released from the little grave under the fig tree, where it has been imaginatively confined". 2

One may note that the experience of Miranda in

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1. *The Fig Tree*, p. 58
2. William L. Nance; p. 114
The Grave, conveys the fact of the immanence of death, and death may even shorten life by coinciding with birth. The Fig Tree begins with the theme of death, but carried the protagonist to a wider understanding of life. In their totality, all the three stories The Circus, The Grave and The Fig Tree, have the same dominant theme: theme of initiation into the world of reality, into the mysteries of life — evil, sex, life and death, the past, the insignificance of man. These stories are unique in the sense that they point out the gradual development of Miranda's consciousness which has profound influence on the evolution of her attitude toward life reflected in the stories of Pale Horse, Pale Rider.

The Source portrays the Grandmother as the centre of Miranda's family and its absolute authority. In The Source and The Old Order of Miranda stories, the Grandmother appears as a central character. The story begins with an account of Grandmother's journey to her farm when she undertakes the vast business of setting it in order, after which she returns to her town house, ready to set to work restoring to order the place which no doubt had gone somewhat astray in her absence.
As the title suggests, Grandmother is the actual source of all stability in the world of her son and his three children. "The children loved their grandmother; she was the only reality to them in a world that seemed otherwise without fixed authority or refuge, since their mother had died so early that only the eldest girl remembered her vaguely. Just the same, they felt that Grandmother was a tyrant, and they wished to be free of her, so that they were always pleased when, on a certain day, as a sign of that her visit was drawing to an end, she would go out to the pasture and call her old saddle horse, Fiddler." ¹

The Source depicts a pleasant nostalgic story of agrarian life in the old days. It introduces a self-reliant character in the grandmother. This story also illustrates the quality of the Southern culture in its reference to the "shabby old sets of Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Dr. Johnson's dictionary, the volumes of Pope and Milton and Dante and Shakespeare which were dusted off and closed up carefully again".²

1 The Leaning Tower, p. 8
2 Ibid., p. 7
It is obvious from The Source that Miranda's grandmother Sophia Jane occupies the central position and establishes a matriarchal rule in the family. The position of authority that Sophia Jane occupies in the family implies that the children must define their relationship with her with what she stands for. The Old Order illustrates the life and achievements of Sophia Jane. Edward Schwartz thinks that The Old Order and The Jilting of Granny Weatherall portray the stable, orderly world that Miss Porter knew as a young girl. The affinity between the two stories is obvious because the Southern family in The Jilting of Granny Weatherall is very much like Miranda's family in The Old Order. Ellen Weatherall, the Granny in the former story is strikingly similar to Sophia Jane, the grandmother in Old Mortality and in the stories of Miranda.

The Old Order is the centre of the sketches and occupies the most significant position in her stories. It opens with the conversations of the grandmother and Nannie. The conversation is full of irony and always about the past.

1 Edward Schwartz, The Fiction of Katherine Anne Porter, p. 70
"Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it. They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly, but by the mysterious logic of hope they insisted that each change was probably the last; or if not, a series of changes might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known."

Through their reminiscences we learn that Miss Sophia Jane was the great granddaughter of Kentucky's most famous pioneer. She had been married off when she was seventeen "in a very gay wedding",² The grandmother saw in her husband several faults and developed a dominating and self-reliant character in trying to discipline others. This made people dislike and fear her.

Her husband died in the civil war. With his wife's money he had bought a sugar refinery in Louisiana. So, after his death, she moved there with her nine children and seven Negroes. She bought a house, got it repaired and planted an orchard but soon realized that the refinery was a failure. Selling
out at a loss, she moved to Texas, where her husband had bought land. The first years in Texas were hard. She built a large house and planted a farm. By the time her children began to marry she was able to start them off reasonably well with gifts of land and money. When her son Harry's wife died at the birth of her third child Miranda, the grandmother took the children and raised them. Before Miranda was nine years old, the grandmother died while on a visit to her third son and his family in far Western Texas, busy interfering and ruling over their household even to the extent of "moving a fifty foot adobe wall".  

This sketch makes a significant observation about the life of those days, by depicting the mind and spirit of the protagonist Sophia Jane who personifies the old order which was centred in authority:

"She knew that it was her duty to portion out activities, to urge or restrain where necessary, to teach morals, manners and religion, to punish and reward her own household according to a fixed code. Her own doubts and hesitation she concealed also, she reminded herself as a matter of duty."

1 Ibid., p. 56
2 Ibid., p. 36
In their conversation about the past Nannie and Grandmother had discussed "religion, and the slack way the world war going now a days, and... the younger children, whom these topics always brought at once to mind". ¹ Nannie and Grandmother had fixed ideas about children and their upbringing. Nannie deplored Maria and Paul and Miranda as "new-fangled grandchildren". ² And they "relied with perfect acquiescence on the dogma that children were conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity. Childhood was a long state of instruction and probation for adult life, which in turn a long, severe, undeviating devotion to duty, the largest part of which consisted in bringing up children. The young were difficult, disobedient, and tireless in wrongdoing, apt to turn unkind and undutiful when they grew up, in spite of all one had done for them, or had tried to do".³

There are quite a few instances of her stern attitude towards the new generation. In The Old Order

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¹ Ibid., p. 38
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
the estrangement and oppression in relationships is apparent on several levels — in the relationship between the Grandmother and her husband whom she always criticised, in the relationship between Grandmother and her children whom she always disapproved and dominated. It is obvious that for all her achievements Sophia Jane's life has been a failure on the level of human relationship. She tried to establish an order in which her will plays an unbalanced role; hence the order does not have for others the same significance that it has for her.

The Last Leaf is a portrait of old Nannie. The earlier sketches suggest the similarities between Sophia Jane and Nannie, but The Last Leaf draws our attention to the difference between them. After Grandmother's death, Nannie pathetically asserts her right to independence by moving out of the big house to a cabin of her own. Nannie has now finally reached the mental state at which she can be indifferent to love. The children, surprised and hurt by her sudden assertion of independence, find it, "almost funny and certainly very sweet to see how she tried not to be two happy the day she left, but they felt rather put upon just the same".  

1 Ibid., p. 60
Like Sophia Jane's marriage, Nannie's too had not been a success. She and her husband Jimbilly (of The Witness) had "stored up no common memories that either wished to keep". "That marriage of convenience in which they had been mated with truly royal policy, with an eye to the blood and family stability, had dissolved of itself between them when the reasons for its being had likewise dissolved... They took no notice of each other's existence". 

The Last Leaf also depicts Nannie's escape from marriage and a sort of alienation from relationship and Nannie's assertion of her identity suggests that the order established by Sophia Jane did not give Negroes a role which really satisfy them. Hence she wanted to escape now "she was no more the faithful servant Nannie, a freed slave. She was an aged Bantu woman of independent means, sitting on the steps, breathing the free air".

The Witness is the shortest of the sketches. It is a description of Uncle Jimbilly, an eccentric

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1 Ibid., p. 63
2 Ibid., p. 64.
3 Ibid., p. 61
old Negro, who has been a family slave since the grandmother's early days. Black characters, all of them servants to white families, figure prominently in three of Miss Porter's stories, *Magic*, *The Last Leaf* and *The Witness*.

The title emphasizes the fact that the old Negro was a witness to the injustice of the white men against the Black in an earlier generation. His account is now delivered in a constant, barely audible mumble. The children knew that "... once upon a time Negroes had been slaves",¹ and so cannot dismiss Jimbilly's stories about slavery as simply fanciful. The terrible account of slavery causes amongst the children, "faint tinglings of embarrassment".² All his accounts pertain to the past, in which they were not directly involved. However, their knowledge of an aspect of the past and their perplexity in not comprehending it is another source of confusion in their growth into experience.

*The Witness* is not a full scale characterization

¹ Ibid., p. 15
² Ibid.
of a black person, yet it indirectly criticizes the Southern white tyranny, the conventional hypocritical pretense of their masters that they regard the blacks as real members of the family, and this very sympathetic portrait explicitly indicates the injustice by which the Blacks were denied full human dignity.

In *Old Mortality*, Miss Porter shows an individual's preoccupation with the family life and his struggle to maintain a personal identity. It is divided into three dated sections. In the *first* 1885 - 1902, we come to know about the romantic legend of the family concerning aunt Amy.

**end**

Miranda is eight years old at the *beginning* of the period and Maria is twelve, motherless for many years; their grandmother and father raise them, in a set-up dedicated to the preservation of an idealized picture of the family, concerning the tragic life of Harry's dead sister Amy. Amy was very beautiful, though doomed to early death because of weak lungs. Her disease, however, did not keep her from being the belle of every ball she attended, and the family regarded her as a romantic heroine. Her second cousin Gabriella, a patient and long suffering lover, waited
for five years to marry Aunt Amy. But Amy flirted with another young man whom Gabriel challenged to a duel. Harry prevented the duel by taking a pot shot at the man. He then fled to Mexico to escape the charge of attempted murder. Amy finally got married to Gabriel, though she died six weeks after the wedding.

Miranda's childhood imagination is nourished on the endlessly repeated anecdotes of Amy's romantic escapades. No girl of the present generation, however lovely and accomplished, can rival Amy. No one can match her wit and verve, and her sense of inexhaustible enthusiasm with which she bore the burden of her tragic fate.

The second section contends with the first and refutes it. The meeting with uncle Gabriel brings home to the girls that the family myth was not genuine but concocted. In this section, Miranda now ten years old, is already partially alienated from the family, "immured" in the New Orleans Convent school from whose dullness she will actually escape into marriage.

Section three, in which Miranda is eighteen and
has completed her escape, brings her into contact with cousin Eva, who furthers her disillusionment with Aunt Amy and completes her education in the destructiveness of the family idealization. Miranda sees that cousin Eva's suggestion of escape is one she cannot follow. Her father's cold reception of her and his warmth towards Eva alienate her from the family. She accepts the estrangement, turning towards the future "in her hopelessness".  

One may note that each of the three sections of the story contributes in a distinct manner to its central theme. The first, in which Miranda learns the romantic legend of Aunt Amy, presents the picture of the family, its narrowness and density, and its morbid preoccupation with the past. The irony lies in the fact that in idealising Amy the family is unconsciously praising one whose very life condemns the myth about her, one who resorted to death to escape from it. The contrasting life and escape of Eva establish the fact of the family's being destructive in its cruelty as well as in its kindness. The attitude of the family is

1 Pale Horse, Pale Rider, p. 61
beauty-oriented which looks down upon and relegates ugly Eva.

The essential lack of warmth and love is reflected in several small details which reinforce the theme of isolation. The very fact of Miranda's being motherless reflects her lovelessness. Miranda's and Maria's (her sisters) relationship with their father also lacks genuine love. Miranda describes him as an "everyday sort of father" who approves of them only if they are neat and well behaved. When Miranda arrives home for Gabriel's funeral, she seems to give some evidence of affection for her father. She throws herself upon him, "but he holds her off, and she feels "the same painful dull jerk of the heart" that she had felt before on similar occasions. She walks along beside her father 'feeling homeless' but not sorry for it." This completes her isolation.

_Old Mortality_ is the story of Miranda's escape from her family. The experience of Miranda may be linked up with her previous experiences depicted in

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1 _Ibid._, p. 59
the sketches. As Nance observes, "If the sketches are stories of initiation, Old Mortality is more properly described as one of disillusion".¹

It is obvious from the study of the sketches that they show Miranda's confrontation with the mysteries of life, which are both joyful and sorrowful, though always universal. In the second stage of experience in Old Mortality, the world she encounters is more bitter and humiliating, because it pertains to her particular puritan and parochial society which has double standards and conceits that affect her individual character. This theme of disillusion and estrangement takes another form in the final Miranda story, Pale Horse, Pale Rider.

Pale Horse, Pale Rider is a fictionalized autobiographical account like Old Mortality. It appears from the author's autobiography that in this short novel, the characters and the situations are more a product of her memory than her imagination.

¹ Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection

¹ William Nance, p. 115
The central character, Miranda finds herself caught up in an age of conflicting ideologies, of mass insanities and unscrupulous dictators, of rapidly changing manners and moral codes, — an age of anxiety and insincerity and, for millions, one of stark tragedy.

Miss Porter has selected this story as her best. She has successfully recorded in it the experiences of her life. The central experience of Miranda's fatal illness is autobiographical.¹ This story is different from the other Miranda stories because, as Nance puts it appropriately, "It is filled with the peculiar atmosphere which characterized the United States during the First World War, with its sentimental patriotism, its distorted vision of the enemy, its sometimes brutal pressures for conformity."² These conditions lead to the abnormal state of the protagonist's mind, and Hardy comments on it, "Miranda experiences only more intensely the universal paranoia of wartime".³

The time is 1918, near the end of World War I.

¹ See Chapter I, Introduction.
² William L. Nance, " The Art of Rejection, " Katherine Anne Porter, p. 132
³ John Edward Hardy, " The Art of Rejection, " p. 80
An influenza epidemic has begun to rage throughout the city. Miranda, now twenty-four and alone, has a dream about her childhood; she awakes to the consciousness of her job as a newspaper writer. It pays her $18 a week, barely enough to live on. The war is on, and two lusak committee representatives try to intimidate her into buying a Liberty bond. She had told them she could not afford one and is afraid that her refusal to buy it might cost her her job.

In the morning, Miranda does Volunteer Red Cross work with other young women. At noon she sees Adam Barclay, the only pleasant part of her life. Adam, also twenty-four, is a Second Lieutenant in an Engineering Corps. He is on leave as his outfit is expected to be sent over shortly. She falls in love with him and they have many happy times together. But Miranda has a premonition that Adam is destined to die young.

Miranda's job is that of a theatre critic. One afternoon a man, whose performance Miranda had criticized, comes to the office to have a showdown with her, carrying a bundle of favourable reviews, received in big
cities. The reviews were ten years old and Chuck, one of Miranda's newspaper colleagues, gets rid of the man.

Miranda is constantly obsessed with the horror of war and death. She becomes very ill. Adam visits her and they express their love, talk about their childhood and about what they would like to do. Adam looks after her and finally succeeds in getting her admitted to the hospital before his transfer.

For several weeks, Miranda hovers between life and death in a shadowy state of recurrent delirium in which it is difficult to distinguish between dream and reality. Eventually she is well again, and on the same day the nurse tells her that the war is over.

Miranda does not feel happy to be alive, because she receives a letter telling her that Adam had died of influenza. Terribly distressed, she cannot reconcile herself to the fact of Adam's death which, it seems to her, makes an "intolerable cheat" of her own efforts to come back to life.

1 *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, p. 163
It is obvious that the centre of interest in this story is Miranda's consciousness, in her subjective responses rather than in the action in which she is objectively involved. It is superficially a love story but its dominant emotion is death and not love. The motif of 'death' is at the back of, or is a part of all the important happenings in the story. The vision of Miranda's illness, her state of dreams and delirium bring out the theme of 'death'. Another motif is the sense of isolation from her family. One of the dreams which begin with her illness is marked by a conscious rejection of her return to the family and draws the readers' attention to it. The childhood sense of oppression blends into the present sense of war, death, loss and despair. The dream with which the story opens has setting in the house of her childhood and 'Death' appears to be in the figure of "lank greenish stranger", which is the figure of death in her childhood imagination:

"Where is that lank greenish stranger (death), I remember hanging about the place, welcomed by my grandfather, my great aunt, my five times removed cousin, and my dachshund hound and my silver kitten? What did they say to him, I wonder? And where are they now? Yet I saw him pass the window in the evening, what else beheld them did I
have in the world? Nothing. Nothing is mine. I have only nothing but it is enough.  

The last lines "I have only nothing", emphasizes the idea that death has taken everyone from her.

Since, in her making moments, Miranda considered her relationship with Adam as a possible escape from loneliness and despair. She has a dream in which she sees him in a jungle being repeatedly struck by flights of arrows. Each time he is struck down, he rises again unwounded and alive. At last, in an impulse to protect him, she throws herself between him and the arrows to take the arrows into her own body. But this time they pass through her and kill Adam. J.E. Hardy interprets this dream in depth and comments upon it:

"The familiar symbolic association of death with the experience of sexual climax — such an association is embodied in the commonplace ambiguity of this word 'die' in Elizabethan poetry — is involved here. Miranda

† Ibid., p. 114
wants to die with Adam in the erotic sense, but her dreams express her fear that one or both of them will actually die before their love can be consummated.1

The dream expresses Miranda’s thoughts and feelings about actual death. It appears now that her death-wish is not genuine, and the final outcome of dream action indicates her deepest wish not to die. Although in her romantic and ideal thoughts she wants to die with Adam. But the death-wish is repeatedly denied in her bad dreams. This points out at the fact that at the level of her subconscious, she does not want to die.

Miranda’s fevered and tormented imagination works on the German name of her doctor, Hildesheim. Her imagination makes him a figure of monstrous evil, destroyer rather than a deliverer:

"Across the field came Dr. Hildesheim, his face a skull beneath his German helmet, carrying a naked infant writhing on the point of his bayonet. . ." 2

Later, on recovering consciousness, embarrassed

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1 J.E. Hardy, *Katherine Anne Porter*, p. 86
2 *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, p. 156
by the memory of the foul words she had shouted at him in her delirium, she apologizes to the doctor. However, he remains for her an evil figure for having conspired to get her once more safely on the road that would lead her again to death. This episode emphasizes signs of delusions and her yielding to the war-hysteria.

In the last dream of her illness, Miranda discovers in herself an intense will to live:

"Death is death, said Miranda ... Silenced, she sank easily through deeps under deeps of darkness until she lay like a stone at the farthest bottom of life. ... and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that ... set itself unaided to resist destruction, to survive and be with its own madness of being ... Trust me, the hard unwinking angry point of light said. Trust me, I stay". 1

And a heavenly vision of tranquil beauty generated out of the burning particle:

"...Miranda, enchanted, altogether believing, looked upon a deep clear landscape of sea and sand, of soft meadow and sky, freshly washed and glistening company of human beings, and Miranda saw in an amalgamation of

joy that they were all the living she had known. Their faces were transfigured, each in its own beauty...and she moved among them...and each figure was alone but not solitary". 1

But the brief happy vision of paradise soon vanishes:

"Miranda felt without warning a vague tremor of apprehension...something, somebody was missing...There are no trees here, she said in fright, I have left something unfinished...Where are the dead...? At once as if the curtain had fallen, the bright landscape faded, she was alone in a strange story place of bitter cold...oh calling out, Oh, I must go back! But in what direction?" 2

These experiences emphasize an intense sense of loss because Miranda realizes that her paradise was an illusion projected upon an uncertain future by the light of her intense desire. After returning to consciousness she becomes aware of a "sickening smell of death was in her own body". 3 Finally the death of Adam makes it clear that Miranda is bound to a life of utter loneliness, despair and complete estrangement.

1 Ibid., p. 159-159
2 Ibid., p. 159
3 Ibid., p. 160
In *Pale Horse Pale Rider*, Miss Porter has brought out the innermost thoughts of Miranda and emphasized the theme of death and estrangement. One conspicuous feature of the story which the critics have noticed cannot be overlooked, that the story, despite the intensity of treatment and the author's sympathetic attitude to the heroine, fails to rise to the level of tragedy. Her experiences appear more sentimental than tragic. Instead of facing the ironies of life and fighting them, the heroine seems to indulge in a blind instinctive flight from them. Nance thoughtfully observes:

"...the irony which permeates her fiction is not cosmic, tragic irony, for its cosmos is no larger than the locked-in ego. Even Miranda's descent through her purgatorio to her paradise and back to her inferno is basically narcissistic and sentimental". 1

This may be true, but it is not necessarily the less tragic on that account. It will not qualify as Aristotelian or Shakespearean tragedy but it is Chekhovian tragedy at the very least, and it presents the type of tragic experience that befalls a great

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1 William L. Nance, *p. 248*
many people in the world who are forced to lead a
dead kind of life.

The theme of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, bears an
obvious relation to the other Miranda stories. The
sketches reveal Miranda's awareness of and her
confrontation with the realities of the world that
is in fact chaotic, ridiculous and doubt-ridden.
This story and the other one, *Old Mortality*, which
are the last two of the Miranda series, deal
poignantly with the themes of disillusion and of
estrangement.