CHAPTER – III

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER (1890 - 1980)

Katherine Anne Porter is a major figure in what has become a literary revival in American letters in the twentieth century. If the first American Renaissance, the period roughly from 1850 to 1855, occurred in the mid-nineteenth century with the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, James, and Twain, the second would include such contemporaries of Porter as Theodore Dreiser, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Sherwood Anderson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck. The chapter starts with a note on Porter’s life and works and her place in Southern literature followed by a discussion of the themes of family, history, place, past and memory in two of her novels.

Porter is an American woman of letters, a master stylist, and the author of flawless, standard-setting short stories. As a non-practicing Catholic and a liberal Southerner, Porter found the principal themes in her fiction in the tensions provided between fixed social and moral positions and the necessities of movement and alteration. Within a broad framework, she dealt subtly with the distinctions between orthodox Christianity and revolution, between Roman Catholic and Protestant attitudes, between reality and the dream. In brief, she utilized the divine vision, but qualified it by focusing sharply upon “the human condition”. In the words of Ray B. West, Jr., “her fiction portrays a small but inclusive, grotesque but convincing, world, rendered as at times absurd, always pathetic, but rendered,
finally, with compassion” (1974: 434). Many of her Southern contemporaries have also written on similar lines, and she remains one with her region.

Porter contributed gem-like fiction to American literature for over fifty years. Yet she is hard to place. Literary history would make her the contemporary of Hemingway and Fitzgerald; she experienced all the “millennial change” that thrust America into the twentieth century and she experienced more of this change than her male counterparts could, since the first quarter of the century gave to women particularly a greater freedom and mobility and, most important, a political voice. She accomplished her best work during the twenties and thirties; lived the bohemian life in Mexico and Europe, as much expatriated as any of that generation could claim to be, although she did not flaunt that position. She is justly called a Southern writer, believing as she does that all literature comes from “myth and memory” and setting many of her stories in the Southwest, her native country.

Porter ranks among the most celebrated story writers of the twentieth century. She produced twenty-seven stories and short novels, one long novel, several volumes of miscellaneous pieces, and an assortment of individually published book reviews, essays, and poems. From the time she burst onto the broad American literary scene in 1930 she was acclaimed for her crystalline prose and her incisive probing of the human condition. “My one aim,” she once said, “is to tell a straight story and give true testimony” (Darlene Harbour Unrue).

Porter is known for her flawless prose and penetrating psychological insight. The themes of her fiction were the search for truth, betrayal (including self-betrayal), the ordeal of living in a changing and indeterminate social order,
and the value of art and the artist. She instills her work with profound irony, and her thematic considerations revolve around the workings of the heart and emotions, the difference between appearance and reality, and the consequences of self-deception.

Supporting herself with journalism and “hack” writing, Porter published her first story in _Century_ magazine. Though _Century_ provided her with a good sum for the story, Porter was rarely to return to popular magazine publishing, choosing instead the freedom of little magazines. A perfectionist concerned with controlling every word of her stories, Porter gained a name in American literature. In 1930 Harcourt Brace published her first book, _Flowering Judas and Other Stories_. Though a masterly collection of short stories, it had only modest sales. It was not until almost ten years later that she published in 1939 her second book, a collection of three short novels, _Pale Horse, Pale Rider_. She followed it in 1944 with _The Leaning Tower and Other Stories_ and _The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter_ (1965). Concerning herself overtly with the rise of Nazism, Porter was able to further investigate the dark side of the average person. It was not, however, until nearly twenty years later that she was able to address the topic in greater depth.

Younger Americans had known Porter primarily as the author of _Ship of Fools_ (1962), a novel unremitting in its intensity. The story is based partially on a trip to Germany and attacks the weakness of a society that could allow for the Second World War. Porter’s work is infused with profound irony, and her thematic considerations revolve around the workings of the heart and emotions, the difference between appearance and reality, and the consequences of self-deception.
In 1977, fifty years after her protest at the trial of the two Italian revolutionaries Sacco and Vanzetti,* Porter wrote an account of the event entitled *The Never-Ending Wrong.* Three years later she died at the age of ninety. Outliving most of her contemporaries, the strong-willed Porter left behind a slender but insightful body of work. Her flawless prose and harsh criticism of not only her times, but of human society, made Porter a major voice in twentieth century American literature.

Porter belongs to Texas and lived in New York, Mexico, Paris, and for short periods elsewhere in the United States and in Europe. From her second to eleventh year, she lived in the secure dominion of her Protestant, strong-willed grandmother, who told romantic stories about her affluent, slave-holding family in antebellum Kentucky and unvarnished accounts of the hard times in Texas during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Her grandmother’s independence, view of good and evil, and Victorian manners constituted an important influence on Porter’s life. For most of her life Porter’s relationship with her native state was a complex and strained one, characterized by mistrust and suspicion on both sides. She felt that she was a prophet without honor in her own country, and her own country in turn felt that by living abroad and finding the stuff of her fiction elsewhere she had failed to do it honor.

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* Sacco Nicola, 1891-1927; anarchist in the U.S. together with Bartolomeo Vanzetti charged with murder and pay roll theft in 1920: their conviction and execution aroused international protest, being regarded by many as the result of political bias.
Born and educated in the South, reared as Roman Catholic, Porter retained Catholic and Southern habits of mind. Christian morality in a world where traditional values are threatened is at the heart of all the stories of *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* and they are, ultimately, complex fables in which the tensions between the old order and the new provide a dramatic framework for the events. As Ray B. West, Jr. says, “the problem of the modern wasteland, as Porter displayed in all her stories, is the pathetic inability of man to live according to his dreams” (1974:435). Her central imagery is taken from the concept of Christian atonement, but with overtones of the pagan ritual that preceded the sacrament, derived certainly from Eliot’s poem. Her awareness, as she said of Miranda in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, was a “powerful social sense” that detected special and subtle meanings in experience and translated them into fiction. As with most Southern families, Porter’s family also retained a strong sense of family unity as well as an awareness of its place in the framework of Southern history and Southern society.

Porter’s second volume of stories, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels*, consisting of *Old Mortality, Noon Wine*, and the title story, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* appeared in 1939. In two of these stories, *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the events concern a character named Miranda who appears for the first time in this book. In Porter’s later stories too the character of Miranda is continued. In the third, *Noon Wine*, the narrator appears to be Miranda (or the author herself) in a remembered incident from childhood. These facts are of little importance so far as a reading or an evaluation of the works is concerned, but they may be of considerable interest to anyone curious about the manner in which
Porter composes her stories. She has called her method *writing from memory*. Once, in describing how she had come to write the story *Old Mortality*, her tongue seemed to have slipped and instead of saying “Miranda’s father said... “, she made the remark, “My father said... .” Laura in “Flowering Judas” — although appearing to resemble Miranda in the Catholic background, the experience in Mexico, the interest in social causes, the relation to Mexican children’s art — was actually modeled on an American friend of Porter’s, a schoolteacher in Mexico during the author’s residence there. She was not, of course, merely a portrait of that girl; she was, Porter supposed, a combination of a good many people, just as was the character Braggioni in the same story. Many of the events in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* were actual events that took place when Porter was working as a reporter on the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver during the First World War.

One of the important things to notice about Porter’s characters is that all her central figures exhibit qualities that have some point of similarity with her own experience. If they are Irish or Mexican, they are also Roman Catholic, or they are political liberals. They are usually Southern. This may account for the relatively small amount that Porter has written, but it also could account for the consistently high level that her work represents. As Ray B. West, Jr. says, “when necessary she displays a range of perception of ordinary mannerisms that is almost uncanny; but usually such qualities as are rendered are attached to persons well within the limits of her own experience” (1977: 129).

Porter’s memory is not “mere memory,” not only a memory of something that occurred, but something that happened within the long history of personal,
family, and regional events; finally within an even longer history. In referring to a friendship between Miranda’s grandmother and a Negro maid in *Old Mortality*, Porter writes: “the friendship between the two old women had begun in early childhood, and was based on what seemed even too them almost mythical events” (1977:130).

Porter treats her memories also as “mythical events.” In her fiction myth refers to a form of tribal memory, a preserving of events of the past as a means of justifying and explaining the views of the present. As Ray B. West, Jr. says: “every society adapts “myth” to its own purposes, either myths that it has transported from elsewhere and uses as a means of organizing its memories, or myths that it has created from its own past” (1977: 130).

When Porter left her home state of Texas for New York, she brought with her the hard edge of a Western pioneer. Passionate and intelligent, it was this edge more than anything that made her name as a writer. Despite her self-imposed exile from her home and Southern background, Porter used this distance as a means of coming to terms with the memories she sought to escape. In the words of Ray B. West, Jr., “there can be no better phrase to describe Porter’s special sensibility than to call it historic memory” (1977:131).

The rendering and utilization of myth in Porter’s stories is both subject matter and method. Neither as a Southerner nor as a Catholic is she orthodox; for her Catholicism becomes only another kind of reality. Perhaps the most complete instance of a short novel that utilizes a specifically Southern background and memory for the creation of this larger, more generalized “truth” is *Old Mortality.*
Here Porter’s subject matter is Southern attitudes as expressed through family history, and where the theme is concerned with the nature of reality – particularly with self-definition. Porter’s Southern history, whether legendary or actual, provides the concrete experience through which “historic memory” may function. Such memory, though it does, as Melville explained, “go far backward through long defiles of doom” (quoted in Ray B. West, Jr. 1977:131) begins with the specific present: the young girl finding a carved dove in an abandoned grave and trading it for a gold ring, another remembering the image of a dead aunt preserved in a family photograph as family memory and contrasting it with the living present, the memory of illness and death during the influenza epidemic, the memories of Mexican revolutionaries, of moving picture companies on location, of Mexican women and West Texas farmers stirred to violence by passion. Partly these memories are controlled by a Catholic sensibility that seeks out the ceremony and order in the events, partly by a Southern habit of thought that metamorphoses reality into “romance,” not the romance of “inferior” (1977:131) Southern authors, who see the events as picturesque and quaint manifestations of peculiar social order, but something nearer the “romance” that Nathaniel Hawthorne sought in the New England novels, a romance that links man of the present with his ideals, the long legendary concepts of man in a continued and continuing past.

Much of Porter’s work is associated with the past; and one of the most exciting lines of development in her fiction is concerned with the special dispositions toward the past. Her fiction may be discussed under the title “The Miranda Story” because it revolves round the girl Miranda in a significant manner. Semi-autobiographical at the very least, through this character Porter examines the
past of her family, adjusts to her disillusionment with some of the memories and ritual clichés she has been asked to accept, and somehow settles into the image of herself as a person occupying space and moving through time. But Miranda is no ordinary, run-of-the mill, *Gone with the Wind* type of heroine.

Porter did not produce autobiography in the order of *The Woman Within* or *One Writer’s Beginnings* but she attempted to represent herself within works that combined self-analysis and cultural critique. Her work *The Never-Ending Wrong* has been read and interpreted in meaningful ways. The memoir has suffered a peculiar fate: rarely has it failed to create problems for readers and rarely have intellectual historians privileged it in their attempts to chart the course of modern American (or Southern) history and culture. Porter notes an affinity between herself and the generation of the late twenties; she does not provide any direct reference to her Southern upbringing (though certain values she expresses might best be illuminated by comments she has made elsewhere on her Southern past); nor does she allude to the many friends or companions in her life at the time. Porter insists that hers is the story of what happened, not of what should have been – and as a writer she could resist the inclination to reconceptualize the past. Such a comment by her reveals the complexity of defining one’s true or deepest sense of self, for it shows that what never took place can figure as prominently in a sense of personal identity as what actually occurred.

It is in this background that the novels - *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* and *Old Mortality* are analyzed in the following pages.
PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER

In the fall of 1927 and the winter of 1928, while Porter was living in Salem, Massachusetts, and completing genealogical research for a biography of Cotton Mather, she was inspired to research her own family history as a first step toward an autobiographical novel she intended to write. Although that novel, which she tentatively titled “Many Redeemers,” was never completed as a coherent whole, parts of it became the basis for various sketches, short stories, and short novels. *Old Mortality, The Old Order,* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* all sections of the unfinished novel, constitute the so-called “Miranda Cycle” within Porter’s oeuvre.

*Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* published in the *Southern Review* in 1939, was the last segment of the cycle to be written, and it takes up six years after the conclusion of *Old Mortality* and several years after the coda of “The Grave”, the last piece of “The Old Order”. Set in Denver, Colorado, during the influenza epidemic of 1918 and World War I, the story opens in the surreal world of Miranda’s dream - ridden, feverish consciousness. In a series of flashbacks and additional dreams and nightmares, Miranda’s story unfolds as structured stream of consciousness, full of symbols, distortions, and fragments of time. Imagining first that she is in her childhood house surrounded by family members and ghosts of family members, she believes she is going on a journey she does “not mean to take” on her horse “Graylie”, who “is not afraid of bridges” (PH, PR, 181).

* Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels.* New York: Harcourt, Brace. 1939. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition.
A pale-faced stranger, who is obviously Death, will accompany her. Chronological
time is impossible to determine in this story. Past mingles with present, day with
night, showing that the past is never really dead. The interest in this story centers
around Miranda’s consciousness – in her reactions to past and present events, in
her efforts to relate one to the other, mostly depicted in her nightmares and
reveries.

The story of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is based on an actual incident in
Porter’s life. It is a fictionalized autobiographical account like *Old Mortality*. In
1918, Porter was in Denver working as a drama critic on the *Rocky Mountain
News*. In the same year, she contracted the dreaded influenza and ran a temperature
of 1050°F for nine days. She was so ill that her father and sister had already made
plans for her funeral. She was saved accidentally, when a group of young
doctors decided to experiment upon her and gave her a strychnine injection. Like
Porter, in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Miranda recovers only to find that Adam has
died of the same disease. Commenting on *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* Jane Krause
Demouy says:

> Told in the metaphor of the wasteland and the charnel house, the story
> inverts the Edenic potential of human union to dust and death and
> completes the cycle of Miranda’s education. As always in Porter’s
> complex stories, these three images are braided; until the end of the
> story the reader must consider simultaneously the oppressiveness of the
> wasteland, the threat of death from war and pestilence, and the
> possibility of love and life inherent in Eden. They move the story
> forward concentrically (1979: 158).

The name of the editor of *Rocky Mountain News* was Bill and this name is
used for the editor even in the story. Adam’s counterpart in real life, according to
Porter, was an army lieutenant Alexander Barclay, with whom Porter had a love
affair before her illness. The first pages of the story *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* link Miranda irreversibly to the protagonists of the earlier stories by alluding to family, home, oppression, and death. The wealth of family relationships that were a comfort and a defense against the outside world to the very young Miranda has become incredibly confining: everyone is “tangled together like badly cast fishing lines” (PH, PR, 179). Faceless relatives ask the same questions that intimidated both the Grandmother and the younger Miranda: “Where are you going, What are you doing, What are you thinking, How do you feel, Why do you say such things, What do you mean?” (PH, PR, 179). Her sense of oppression is translated metaphorically into a physical pressure on her chest – “her heart was a stone lying upon her breast outside of her” (PH, PR, 179) – which is at once the physical image of the oppression she feels from the war, a foreboding of the moral illness to come, and an implication of the danger she faces in a love relationship. She thinks of the horses she might ride in her race with death – Fiddler, Graylie, and Miss Lucy – unwittingly invoking the presence of her grandmother, whose horse was Fiddler, and Amy, who owned Miss Lucy. Having established her link to them, she chooses Graylie, because he is not afraid of bridges. Since it is folk belief that evil spirits will not cross water, Miranda perhaps unconsciously believes she can outrun death and the devil if she makes it to a bridge. Spurring her horse forward, she establishes the journey motif which prevails in her dream sequences; all the while, the familiar stranger rides easily beside her and passes her by when she reins in and shouts, “I’m not going with you this –ride on!” (PH, PR, 181).

In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* many artistic elements have been painstakingly woven together to express a powerful and illuminating statement about Porter’s
vision of the human condition during the war. Thus, she achieved the epitome of her development as an artist in several ways. First of all, the somewhat autobiographical experience has been enriched and elaborated on by the author’s imagination which makes it have the reality of actual experience lived. Porter stated in an interview:

“I was quite young during World War I in Denver and I had a job on Rocky Mountain News. Bill the city editor, put me to covering the theaters.”

“I met a boy, an army lieutenant, . . . Our time was so short and we were much in love . . . I was taken ill with the flu. They gave me up. The paper had my obit set in type…. I felt a strange state of — what is it the Greeks called it? — euphoria…. But I didn’t die. I mustered the will to live. My hair turned white and then it fell out…. But I was determined to walk and live again. And in six months I was walking and my hair was grown.”

To the interviewer’s question about the boy, she answers,

“It’s in the story. (At the sudden memory she fought back tears — and won gallantly.) He died. The last I remember seeing him . . . . It’s a true story. It seems to me true that I died then, I died once, and I have never feared death since . . . .” (1965: 76).

Secondly, the unique quality of the story is achieved through the penetrating depiction of Miranda’s character, the rich figurative language, and the very effective design of the short novel. Porter uses a modified form of the stream-of-consciousness technique within the framework of the third person point of view to probe deeply into Miranda’s character. It presents the flow of thoughts, sensations, associations, fears, reflections, and memories of Miranda from full consciousness to semi-consciousness to unconscious delirium. Since she is intelligent, thoughtful, independent, and heroic, this is especially suitable. In the story Miranda is introduced while she is in a dream where she is in her childhood home:
How I have loved this house in the morning before we are all awake and tangled together like badly cast fishing lines. Too many people have been born here, and have wept too much here, and have laughed too much, and have been too angry and outrageous with each other here. Too many have died in this bed already, there are far too many ancestral bones propped up on the mantelpieces, there have been too damned many antimacassars in this house, she said loudly, and oh, what accumulation of storied dust never allowed to settle in peace for one moment (PH, PR, 179).

‘Storied dust’ is a powerful image Porter used in her novel giving scope for layers of significance. Miranda recollected the people who were born in her childhood home and how they shared their emotions. Many of her ancestors died on the bed where she was now. She recollected all the events one after another; they are like layers in her memory and increasing day by day haunting her. And they never permit her to have peace of mind because they are forever alive, not dead. With this wealth of precise, concentrated detail, the author hints at important ideas that will be developed more fully and richly in the story. There is the impression that Miranda’s childhood was a happy one, yet the house saw an accumulation of sad and death-like encounters. In the second part of the same dream, there is a premonition of death, when the pale, evil, greenish stranger beckons Miranda on a journey, but Miranda says that she is not ready this time. Since she already knows this man, he is no stranger to her.

The stranger rode beside her, easily, lightly, his reins loose in his half-closed hand, straight and elegant in dark shabby garments that flapped upon his bones; his pale face smiled in an evil trance, he did not glance at her. Ah, I have seen this fellow before, I know this man if I could place him. He is no stranger to me (PH, PR, 181).

This threatening dream begins the story and sets a tone that pervades Miranda’s subsequent waking hours like a fateful curse. There is no question that she is threatened by death – the 1918 influenza epidemic has made hearses a
common sight in the city streets – but the Great War is an even more potent manifestation of a diseased society and its instinct for death. Not only does it kill numbers outright, it corrupts all who are touched by it: it encourages sentimental patriotism and thoughtless chauvinism; it requires senseless conformity and meaningless rhetoric. Its evil is personified not only in the “lank greenish stranger” who invades Miranda’s dreams, but in the grotesque Lusk Committeemen who sell Liberty Bonds by intimidation and force the public to buy bonds even if they had no savings.

Porter effectively uses the dream to foreshadow the evil and tragedy that will affect Miranda and to underscore the troublesome, fearsome, and bewildering world that she lives in. After the dream Porter swiftly moves the reader from the world of Miranda’s imagination to the real world by stating an indirect everyday thought: “But let me get a fine yawn first” (PH, PR, 181). The dream world of the story is used by Porter to represent the real world. An atmosphere of desperation, despair and gloom is prevalent. There is the nightmare aberration of the war with American boys fighting and dying. For instance, Miranda and the society ladies go to the hospital to cheer up the injured, bored and restless soldiers, but meet with a hostile reception.

Then there is the incessant processions of funerals which pass by making her head spin. To Miranda, the influenza epidemic seems like a plague from the Middle Ages. The only comforting aspect of this frightening world is Miranda’s growing love for the innocent and healthy Adam. Yet, Porter’s use of the Negro spiritual, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider done taken my lover away” (PH, PR, 240), is an
evil intuition of death for one of them. The spiritual parallels Miranda’s first dream where the pale, greenish stranger tempts her to death or evil.

The biggest problem that Porter faced while writing the novel was the depiction of the revelation that occurs to people who come back to life from the death-bed. In this, Porter drew on another personal experience. In 1928, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian revolutionaries, were executed at the Charlestown Prison. Porter had long fought for their cause and having failed, was at the Charlestown prison when Sacco and Vanzetti, were put to death. There was a light in the tower of the prison, which winked on and off – this corresponded to the number of charges of electricity sent through their bodies. This flickering light is used in the story to depict Miranda’s desire to live.

The novel faithfully depicts the condition of the United States of America during World War I, illustrating Porter’s ability to absorb and reflect the past. The influenza that swept the countryside; the hypocritical Liberty Bond salesman that spoke in clichés, the rejection and horror of anything German, created by war propagandists – the paranoia of wartime – are all part of the story and part of real life too. Miranda, who looks at every man on his own merit, has war propaganda penetrate her subconscious. In her delirium, during her illness, she dreams of her German doctor as an executioner! Chuck Rouncivale, Miranda’s colleague, is pictured as typical of those who have been rejected from military service – he constantly apologizes for his bad lung which keeps him out of the war. The condition of the hospitals and the society of the newspaper people, are all faithfully depicted, true to life.
The novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is about dying and coming back to life. Unlike any other novel, this novel successfully captures the perspective of the beauty of death eclipsing the beauty of life. The novel further develops this theme to explain how our perspective shifts back towards favoring life, as the memory of death retreats. Like all great novels, this one transcends its obvious theme into a broader one – the meaning of the inevitable death that ends each of our lives – and what life means in this context. One of the fascinating plot complications that she uses in this novel is showing how ‘duty’ to life usually means increasing the likelihood of death. Miranda is concerned over the chance of losing her job because she has refused to buy a Liberty Bond. She feels she cannot afford it, and she does not want to buy one anyway. The reason she cannot afford one is because she has been demoted for refusing to write a story about a young woman that another paper ran. As she races from social event to social event, while scribbling her short columns in between, she longs for a personal life and a future. Meanwhile Miranda is attacked with an influenza epidemic that is taking many lives. Miranda feels unwell and says drowsily to Adam:

But I think I have been asleep all day. Oh, I do remember. There was a doctor here. Bill sent him. I was at the telephone once, for Bill told me he would send an ambulance and have me taken to the hospital. The doctor tapped my chest and left a prescription and said he would be back, but he hasn’t come (PH, PR, 229).

Darlene Harbour Unrue says that, “in a state closer to feverish unconsciousness Miranda remembers events of the previous day at the newspaper office where she works as theater critic” (<litencyc.com>). “The two men slid off the desk, leaving some of her paper rumpled, and the oldish man had inquired why she had not bought a Liberty Bond. Miranda had looked at him then, and got a
poor impression” (PH, PR, 184). Miranda began to explain that she had no money, and did not know where to find any when the older man interrupted: “That’s no excuse, no excuse at all, and you know it, with the Huns overrunning martyred Belgium” (PH, PR, 186). She recalls the worrying encounter with the Liberty Bonds salesman. Craving only to return to the soothing world of sleep, Miranda is aware of a burning headache that she thinks started with the war. She recalls going as a Red Cross worker to the army hospital with baskets of flowers, cigarettes, and candy and feeling foolishly cheerful in the presence of a young, hostile, wounded soldier. She resolves never to go again. A contrasting happy memory is of Adam, a handsome, young, Texas-born soldier she met ten days earlier and thinks she loves. Miranda and Adam, resplendent in his new uniform, have walked out together into fine fall days, sipped coffee together at drug store counters, eaten in greasy little restaurants, hiked on a nearby mountain, gone to museums, “danced to the urgent whine and bray of jazz orchestras” (PH, PR, 207), and attended vaudeville shows Miranda was reviewing.

When Miranda wakes temporarily she knows she has been asleep for a long time. Adam, who has tried futilely to reach her, arrives at her boarding house and sees that she has come down with the dreaded influenza. While he goes in search of an all-night drugstore, the feverish Miranda slips into a yet deeper sleep crowded with fearsome shadows, wants to go home and felt that it was better with the family at the time of death. “I suppose I should ask to be sent home, she thought, it’s a respectable old custom to inflict your death on the family if you can manage it” (PH, PR, 231).
Porter’s method of rendering Miranda’s illness shows clearly in the above lines. She uses a kind of stream of consciousness, introducing us directly to Miranda’s thoughts, and then goes on to give us her own evocation of the scenes Miranda’s imagination conjures up. This mixture of a direct transcription of the embodiments of those thoughts is used throughout *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. There are two kinds of methods interwoven to carry us forward, the mental image, seen or longed for, reinforced by the description of its physical attributes. The story proceeds in the same way in the delirious moments of illness, when the images of fantasy and those of reality are merged in Miranda’s mind. She lies reflecting, thinking and imagining.

I wish I were in the cold mountains in the snow, that’s what I should like best; and all about her rose the measured ranges of the Rockies wearing their perpetual snow, their majestic blue laurels of cloud, chilling her to the bone with their sharp breath. Oh, no I must have warmth—and her memory turned and roved after another place she had known first and loved best, that now she could see only in drifting fragments of the palm and cedar, dark shadows, and a sky that warmed without dazzling, as this strange sky had dazzled without warming her *(PH, PR, 231)*.

The artistry and style of the above passage results from the artistic blending of several elements of fiction: the cold, warmth, and color imagery, the rich figurative language combined with the language of everyday bodily feelings, the interweaving of the present with the past, and fantasy with reality.

In a review of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* one reader said: “What happens next is described in some of the greatest writing about illness since Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*.” He goes on to suggest: “After you have finished reading this novel, I suggest that you consider how you view death. Consider the
event from several perspectives: emotional, intellectual, as an ending, and as a beginning. Also, look at other peoples’ deaths as well as your own. If you do this carefully, I think you will see new perspectives that will be helpful to you” (<barnesandnoble.com>). Miranda imagines herself

In a writhing terribly alive and secret place of death, creeping with tangles of spotted serpents, rainbow-colored birds with malign eyes, leopards with humanly wise faces and extravagantly crested lions; screaming long-armed monkey tumbling among broad fleshy leaves that glowed with sulphur-colored light and exuded the ichor of death, and rotting trunks of unfamiliar trees sprawled in crawling smile (PH, PR, 232).

And she hears “two words only rising and falling and clamoring about her head. Danger, danger, danger, the voices said, and War, war, war” (PH, PR, 232). Coming to life again, Miranda hears bells, horns, and whistles mingling, and discovers that this “far clamor” is the armistice, the end of war but not of life. But her greatest tragedy, her final disillusionment, the last gratuitous sacrifice is yet to come. When her co-workers Chuck and Towney come to take her home, to secure the things she wants to begin her life again, Miranda opens the pile of letters that have accumulated during her illness. Then she realizes how long she has been ill, for time itself has been a blur of delirium and semi-consciousness. One of the letters “was from a strange man at the camp where Adam had been, telling her that Adam had died of influenza in the camp hospital” (PH, PR, 261).

At this moment, perhaps, Miranda comes full circle and meets her grandmother, whose heart had broken in two when she knew her sons were hungry. Now, at last, she is more than ever the granddaughter of the ancestor whose own children she had rejected, and whose strength now passes on to her. Miranda, too,
will lead a joyless life, threatened and insecure, armed only with her fortitude to face the emptiness of a life to which she has heroically regained her right. And so she goes again into the world, another Miranda altogether from the one she had been in the past: with the mark of tragedy in her heart, she turns again to the vagueness and sorrow conveyed in the final, ironic lines of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*:

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 (PH, PR, 264).

Porter unfolds another aspect of Miranda’s personality in her growing relationship with the pure, strong-minded and innocent Adam. This twenty-four year old Second Lieutenant in the Engineer Corps is described as very handsome and healthy, an allusion to Adonis. In contrast to Miranda, he is more innocent and pure, an allusion to Adam in the Garden of Eden: “No there was no resentment or revolt in him. Pure, she thought, all the way through, flawless, complete as the sacrificial lamb must be” (PH, PR, 224).

After Miranda’s descent into the delirium of the final stage of her illness, with an act of will and determination, she heroically resists the final threat of death and evil. At the end of the novel Miranda, desperately ill, almost dead, was to see heaven. Porter herself, at the end of World War I, had experienced this part of what she had created this heroine to experience and to make manifest; and because, no doubt, it really was heaven, she found herself seeing it again with her lively, healthy eyes. Elements of Porter’s artistic style – the distortion of the conventional
time sequence in the interweaving of past, present and future time and the blending of fantasy with reality in order to render the sub-surface complexity of Miranda’s personality – are illustrated in the following passage at the end of the novel:

At once he was there beside her, invisible but urgently present, a ghost but more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart; for knowing it was false she still clung to the lie, the unpardonable lie of her bitter desire. She said, “I love you,” and stood up trembling, trying by the mere act of her will to bring him to sight before her. If I could call you up from the grave I would, she said, if I could see your ghost I would say, I believe . . . “I believe,” she said aloud. “Oh, let me see you once more.” “Your taxicab is waiting, my dear,” and there was Mary. Ready to go (PH, PR, 264).

There is a bitter irony in Miranda’s final consciousness before she leaves the hospital. The irony strikes very powerfully when Adam, the healthy one, from the Garden of Eden, dies from the influenza he caught from Miranda when he is helping her to recover. His death is her final disillusionment with life and her illumination from it. Her descent into hell has paralleled the deterioration of the world she is living in, which is full of danger, sickness, war, and destructiveness. Paradoxically though, through the passage into death she received the deepest understanding and awareness of human life, and was redeemed through her love of Adam. The facing of and knowledge gained through approaching death and evil is a theme woven through the three stories and links Granny Weatherall in “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall”, Laura in Flowering Judas” and Miranda. In these three protagonists, Carol Atleri opined that, Porter has “extracted from the essence of human experience” (Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistry and Vision).

As Ray B. West, Jr. says, “Porter’s aim is not to reconstruct the past, in the manner of an historical novelist, but to show the disenchantment with the past and
the burdens this experience puts upon the heroine” (1977: 161). The dramatic context of these remarks is in the first and the third parts of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Since Miranda’s mother had died, the grandmother assumed an extraordinary influence on her. Something was missing, and Miranda had to provide it herself; surely her move had to be away from the grandmother, and without the grandmother, and without the mother, she had to improvise the details of the change. If we consider this pattern we find that it is much superior to the ordinary “saga”, because the full weight of psychological analysis is upon Miranda herself. In her first years, she was the ward of an old woman, her grandmother, who sustained herself by the dogma of a legendary past. The grandmother tells several stories of the family’s colourful past.

Porter’s allusion to the apocalyptic horseman described in revelation proves to be appropriate because the story takes place during the influenza epidemic of 1918 suggesting on a symbolic level that death and memory are related in the story. The metaphorical relationship between death and memory in the novel parallels the literal relationship between death and memory in American culture during the epidemic of 1918, the largest event of mass civilian death in American history. As mentioned earlier in this chapter Porter’s memory is not ‘mere memory’ but something that happened within an even longer history. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* bridges the separation between memory and history acting both as a personal recollection of the event and as a document recording the event.
OLD MORTALITY

*Old Mortality,* written in 1936 and published in 1939, is not part of “The Old Order” sequence of short stories. But, it is a Miranda story and deals with her quest for her own identity. The novel is the story of Miranda’s confrontation with the most formidable archetype her society can offer: the Southern belle, a nineteenth century American manifestation of the virgin love goddess. It is in three parts and shows the gradual development of her consciousness. It is a composition of memories, details, and emotions; “floating ends of narrative” which Maria and Miranda patch together as well as they can the “fragments of tales that were like bits of poetry or music.” (OM, 8). And like the memories of “Old Order”, they have been “packed away and forgotten for a great many years” (OM, 38). It is ostensibly Amy’s story, told from a number of points of view, but all is sifted through Miranda’s perception. In actuality, the chronology of the story belongs to Miranda, and the tale depends primarily on what she will do with the legend of Amy and the bitter reality of Cousin Eva.

As discussed in Chapter I, the family is one of the themes in Southern literature. The novel *Old Mortality* centers around the family myth, the legend of Amy. She is a prototypical figure of the Southern belle in the nineteenth century. *Old Mortality* is a mixture of legend and memory. Miranda is Porter’s alter ego. She is the fictional character fully based on the details of Porter’s own experiences in life.

* Katherine Anne Porter, *Old Mortality.* New York: Harcourt, Brace. 1939. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition.
Basing her characters on real people, her events on actual happenings, Porter gives her stories a factual flavor of her times. Of all her stories, *Old Mortality* is one which is typically Southern. It has two prominent themes, which are in themselves, Southern favorites – the family, and the legend the family creates – history transformed into myth. The Southerner attached great importance to the family and its traditions; therefore, he had a sense of the past, a sense of its history. The mythopoeic ability of Miranda’s family is also typically Southern. The Southerner was known for his cultivation of legend and anecdote, for his capacity to create archetypal stories. As Walter Sullivan has observed, “the family in *Old Mortality* is a microcosmic representation of Southern society” (1992: 69). The sexual repression of the Southern white woman is evident throughout the story.

The story is told from the point of view of Miranda between the ages of eight and eighteen, and its details agree with all the other Miranda stories insofar as they relate events in a family that had moved from Kentucky to Louisiana and from there to Texas. At the center of the story are the memories of a girl, Amy, about whose long courtship and brief marriage to “Uncle Gabriel” the aura of romance has accumulated. In the story she is first introduced in a photograph in the family parlor, “a spirited-looking young woman, with dark curly hair cropped and parted on the side, a short oval face with straight eyebrows, and a large curved mouth” (OM, 3). The family legend represents her as vivacious, daring, and extremely beautiful girl, against whom the beauty and grace of later members of the family are forever to be judged. It tells of her using her cruel beauty to tantalize Uncle Gabriel until he despaired of ever winning her, of her precipitating events at a ball that caused a family scandal and disgrace. It tells of her sad
suffering from an incurable illness, of her sudden and romantic marriage to Gabriel, and of her early death.

But the legend, which is more than just a romantic memory of Aunt Amy, is also a reflection of the family’s attitude toward all events of the past – memories which Miranda cannot share and an attitude that she cannot adopt because of discrepancies that she senses between such stories as related by the family and the actual facts that she perceives in the people and events that surround her in the everyday life of the present. As mentioned in Chapter I, there is no pure memory totally faithfully to the past; memory is instead always a reconstruction of the past based on present concerns and purposes. In the photograph of Amy, for instance, “The clothes were not even romantic looking, but merely most terribly out of fashion” (OM, 3-4). Again there is the talk about the slimness of the women in the family; we have the announcement by Miranda’s father that “there were never any fat women in the family, thank God” (OM, 4). However, Miranda is reminded of Great-Aunt Eliza’s huge frame and Great-Aunt Keziah, in Kentucky, who weighs 220 pounds, whose husband, Great-Uncle John Jacob, “had refused to allow her to ride his good horses after she had achieved two hundred and twenty pounds” (OM, 5). Later she will be old enough to recognize that “something seemed to happen to their father’s memory when he thought of the girls he had known in the family of his youth, and he declared steadfastly they had all been, in every generation without exception, as slim as reeds and graceful as sylphs” (OM, 5-6).

In the first part of Old Mortality, the Grandmother is still alive, and representing, as always, the past. She is the guardian of its history and the keeper
of its relics. “Photographs, portraits by inept painters who meant earnestly to flatter, and the festival garments folded away in dried herbs and camphor were disappointing when the little girls tried to fit them to the living beings created in their minds by the breathing words of their elders” (OM, 6). But in watching her grandmother crying over her accumulation of ornaments of the past, Miranda sees only “dowdy little wreaths and necklaces, some of them made of pearly shells; such moth-eaten bunches of pink ostrich feathers for the hair; such clumsy big breast pins and bracelets of gold and colored enamel; such silly-looking combs, standing up on tall teeth caped with seed peals and French paste” (OM, 7).

The past, splendidly romantic and always redolent of a promise that the present never seems to fulfill, is dramatically projected in the figure of Miranda’s and Maria’s Aunt Amy, who died when she was still very young. Her portrait hangs in the living-room and draws the little girls’ eyes again and again. Her beauty is recognized by all her relatives as being superior to that of any other member of the family. The children are forever clamoring to be told this or that fragment of her story, and some relative is always ready to oblige; so that piece by piece, her sad, romantic history unfolds in the minds.

In the year 1902, the little girls are surrounded by Amy’s story, played out seventeen years in the past. There are still some family splendors, like cousin Isabel.

When Cousin Isabel came out in her tight black riding habit, surrounded by young men, and mounted gracefully, drawing her horse up and around so that he pranced learnedly on one spot while the other riders sprang to their saddles in the same sedate flurry, Miranda’s heart would close with such a keen dart of admiration, envy, vicarious pride
it was almost painful; but there would always be an elder present to lay a cooling hand upon her emotions (OM, 10).

On the other hand, there is Cousin Eva, “shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in watching her mother. She looked hungry; her eyes were strained and tired. She wore her mother’s old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches” (OM, 11). Miranda, naturally enough, identifies herself with the romantic side of her family, and “persisted through her childhood in believing, in spite of her smallness, thinness, her little snubby nose saddled with freckles, her speckled gray eyes and habitual tantrums, that by some miracle she would grow into a tall, cream-colored brunette, like cousin Isabel; she decided always to wear a trailing white satin gown” (OM, 9).

At the same time, Miranda wonders about Aunt Amy, looks at her old-fashioned portrait, and listens to the stories of her life. Miranda has never seen her Uncle Gabriel, however, since he has remarried and lives in New Orleans. But she continues to think of his love for Amy as “such a story as one found in old books: unworldly books, but true, such as the Vita Nuova, the Sonnets of Shakespeare, and the Wedding Song of Spenser; and poems by Edgar Allan Poe” (OM, 12). And Miranda also knows the poem he had written for Amy’s gravestone:

She lives again who suffered life,
Then suffered death, and now set free
A singing angel, she forgets
The grieves of old mortality (OM, 17).

Yet despite these disappointing incongruities, the chills, Miranda struggled to believe there was “a life beyond a life in this world, as well as in the next” (OM,
such episodes as members of the family remembered confirmed “the nobility of human feeling, the divinity of Man’s vision of the unseen, the importance of life and death, the depths of the human heart, the romantic value of tragedy” (OM, 14).

In truth, something seems to happen to the memory of all the members of this society when they think of their past: “their hearts and imaginations were captivated by their past” (OM, 6), which is far more significant to them than the everyday world of the present. The Grandmother, who sits all day making memory quilts with Nannie, feels “twice a year compelled in her blood” (OM, 6) to sit by her old trunks “crying gently and easily” over faded finery, pictures, and mementoes. The elderly relative who heard Rubinstein play frequently in the past finds Paderewski lacking in the present. However, it is not just the past but emotion and sentiment that captivate the whole family, and the story of Gabriel’s unrequited love for Amy is the family’s favorite — and collective — legend.

Jane K. Demouy comments that, “what Porter says but does not stress is that this family is Southern. Not only do they revere their past, they aggrandize it in a manner that suggests Mark Twain was right when he accused Walter Scott’s medieval romances of starting the Civil War” (1979:146). Miranda looks at pictures of the young men “in their high buttoned coats, their puffy neckties, their waxed mustaches, their waving thick hair combed carefully over their foreheads” (OM, 7) and thinks no one could have taken them seriously. However, these same young men are romanticized into chivalric heroes whose nobility of purpose defines the whole race. Furthermore, while their eyes and the ears tell them that Cousin Molly Parrington’s charm is aggressive, bold, and sometimes even cruel or
shocking, their imaginations assure them that their women are unequaled not only in their beauty and desirability, but in their purity, gentility, and sensibility. They are the fair virgins of a society whose virtue they both embody and inspire. In actuality, Amy’s circumstances combine the poetry and tragedy Miranda’s family love with their personal history; their pleasure in Amy’s story is like the eight-year-old Miranda’s pleasure in thinking what it would be like “to have the assassination of Lincoln in the family” (OM, 15).

Another view is suggested in the second section of the story, when Miranda and her sister Maria have become schoolgirls in a New Orleans convent. At the convent, no one even hinted that Miranda should become a nun. The most disheartening disillusion during this period came, however, when Miranda met the legendary Uncle Gabriel for the first time. His racehorse was running in New Orleans and her father had taken her to bet a dollar on it, despite the fact that odds against the horse were a hundred to one. “Can that be our Uncle Gabriel?” Miranda asked herself. “Is that Aunt Amy’s handsome romantic beau? Is that the man who wrote the poem about our Aunt Amy?” Uncle Gabriel, as she met him, “was a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes, sad beaten eyes, and a big melancholy laugh, like a groan” (OM, 46). His language was coarse, and he was a drunkard. Even though his horse won the race and brought Miranda a hundred unexpected dollars – an event that had the making of a legend in itself – Miranda saw that victory had been purchased, not as a result of beauty, but at the price of agony; for the mare when seen close up “was bleeding at the nose,” and “Her eyes were wild and her knees were trembling” (OM, 49).
In legend, the past was beautiful or tragic. In art, it might be horrible and dangerous. In the present of Miranda’s experience, it was ugly or merely commonplace. In the first section of *Old Mortality*, the past is seen through the eyes of the elders with their memories, not as it actually was, but as they wanted it to be. In section two, the past is seen through the eyes of Miranda herself, who judges it merely as it is reflected in her present. By section three, Miranda is eighteen. She has eloped and married, but she is still struggling to understand her own relationship to the past. To her, her elopement seemed to be in the romantic tradition of Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel, although the marriage is, in fact, a failure. Miranda is on the train coming home for the funeral of Uncle Gabriel.

As children do, Miranda hopes her father will make it right by welcoming her home, but her father rejects her. She realizes that “It is I who have no place” (OM, 85) and feels “her blood (rebel) against the ties of blood” (OM, 86) those “bonds that smothered her in love and hatred” (OM, 87). She resolves characteristically that she will stay in no place and with no person that might forbid her making “her own discoveries” (OM, 87). Ultimately she promises herself that, barring all else, she will know the truth about her own experiences. Unfortunately, the truth she has yet to know will not make her free, either.

Uncle Gabriel’s body has been returned to lie beside Amy’s as though in a final attempt to justify the legend. This is done even though Gabriel has married again, and there are better and more real reasons for him to be buried beside his second wife, who had shared the greater part of his wandering, homeless, and meaningless existence. On the train, Miranda met Cousin Eva, on their way to
attend the funeral, whose own life had been burdened by a constant comparison with the legend of Amy. While Amy was beautiful, thoughtless, impulsive, and daring, Cousin Eva had been homely, studious, and dedicated to high purposes. When Miranda praised the bravery and courage of her Cousin Eva, she rejected it fretfully and said, “It wasn’t just showing off, mind you”, and she also said, “any fool can be brave. We were working for something we knew was right, and it turned out that we needed a lot of courage for it. That was all. I didn’t expect to go to jail, but I went three times, and I’d go three times, three more if it were necessary. We aren’t voting yet, she said, but we will be” (OM, 69). Amy had died and had been preserved in the romantic legend; Eva had lived to develop a character and a reputation as a fighter for women’s rights. Cousin Eva tells her

In our part of the country, in my time, we were so provincial—a woman didn’t dare to think or act for herself. The whole world was a little that way,” she said, “but we were the worst, I believe. I suppose you must know how I fought for votes for women when it almost made a pariah of me—I was turned out of my chair at the Seminary, but I’m glad I did it and I would do it again. You young things don’t realize. You’ll live in a better world because we worked for it (OM, 68).

In a sense, Cousin Eva’s good works, too, were part of her own legend of homeliness and dedication. At bottom, Miranda finds her a bitter, prematurely aged woman; but it is Cousin Eva who provides her with a third view of the legend of Aunt Amy. She hints that it was nothing but sublimated sex that caused the young girls of Amy’s day to behave as they did. “Cousin Eva wrung her hands. “It was just sex,” she said in despair; “their minds dwelt on nothing else. They didn’t call it that, it was all smothered under pretty names, but that’s all it was, sex” (OM, 79).
As Ray B. West, Jr. says, “the older generation, then, had two ways of looking at the past: the romantic way of Miranda’s father and of other members of the family, and the “enlightened” way of Cousin Eva” (1974: 440). Each way was different, and each was wrong. But the old did have something in common; they had their memories. Thus, when the train arrived at the station, it was Cousin Eva and Miranda’s father who sat together in the back seat of the automobile and talked about old times; it was Miranda who was excluded from the memories, and who sat beside the driver in the front. “Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people’s memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show” (OM, 88). As mentioned in Chapter I, brooding over the past as legend dominates the Southern fiction. Miranda feels that she has a memory now and the beginning of her own legend – the legend of her elopement. Strangely enough, neither Cousin Eva nor her father will accept it. When reminded by Miranda of it, Cousin Eva said it was shameful and her father resented it “Shameful, shameful,” cried Cousin Eva, genuinely repelled. “If you had been my child I should have brought you home and spanked you” (OM, 74).

In *Old Mortality*, Porter directs the reader to recognize the narrative construct written by the elder members of Miranda’s family. Frequent and repeated use of the words story, legend, narrative, and tale underscores the fictitious nature of the family’s reconstruction of the past. In essence, Miranda’s family has constructed a highly romanticized narrative about the past that depends greatly on the story of Amy. As discussed in Chapter I, memory is more of a constantly updated reconstruction of the past than its faithful reconstitution. Amy, in some
external ways, conforms to the ideals of the Southern belle of the Old South, she
becomes a central and defining element. Although her own personal reality is quite
different from the way she is defined by the family, Amy becomes emblematic of
the romantic ideal “She went through life like a spoiled darling, doing as she
pleased and letting other people suffer for it, and pick up the pieces after her” (OM,
71).

Jane K. Demouy observes that “Old Mortality is a fiction of memory…” (1979: 127). It is significant that Porter never writes from the perspective of the past, from the time that Amy actually lives and dies. It is clear from the discussion in Chapter I, that memory only stores fragments, bits and pieces of the past, that later serve as a foundation for the reconstruction of those past experiences. Amy is presented to the reader through a continual writing (and rewriting) of history, based on the memories of those who knew her. Because others reconstruct her life, Amy never really has a chance to speak for herself, to Miranda or Maria or to the reader; she is, essentially, a silent figure. Aunt Amy is “only a ghost in a frame, and a sad, pretty story from old times” (OM, 4). The girls must sort through the pieces of Amy’s story that are given, as well as the preserved physical evidence (Amy’s photograph, wedding dress, etc.), in order to construct their own narratives, their own interpretations of the story, and then come to some understanding of Amy from the “fragments of tales that were like bits of poetry or music, which indeed were associated with the poetry they had heard or read, with music, with the theater” (OM, 8).
M K Fornataro-Neil comments that, “it is clear that even within this narrative, the carefully constructed illusion of her family’s memory, Amy seems to speak a different language, one that her family is incapable of understanding. Operating as she did outside the societal conventions of her time, Amy’s sign system differed radically from that of her family and community” (1998:2). Gabriel had waited five years to marry Amy. Meanwhile he had sent her presents, and flowers packed in ice, and telegrams. When he sent roses she could not enjoy them though her mother insisted it was sweetness of Gabriel. It was proved to Amy that she was always in his thoughts. “That’s no place for me, said Amy, but she had a way of speaking, a tone of voice, which made it impossible to discover what she meant by what she said. It was possible always that she might be serious. And she would not answer questions” (OM, 18). Not only does Amy reject a white gown for her wedding, she redefines the word wedding as being synonymous with the word funeral. For her, marriage does not mean a cure for her illness, as her mother has assured her. Rather, it means death. She tells her mother, “It is my funeral, you know” (OM, 19).

If the Old Order is a catalogue of the “giants” of Miranda’s childhood who taught her what a woman might be, Old Mortality is the story of Miranda’s confrontation with the most formidable archetype her society can offer: the Southern belle, a nineteenth century American manifestation of the virgin love goddess. Obviously, Amy was once a person who has now become a legend; she was “beautiful, much loved, unhappy, and she had died young” (OM, 4). The mystery in her behavior encourages others to speculate aloud about her and the meaning of her actions. It is interesting that Miranda, studying the old-fashioned
portrait of Amy with her cropped hair and “reckless smile,” is left wondering what was so enticing about this compelling girl, about whom everything and nothing was known.

Ordinarily, a Porter story would end with a death of a kind visited on a woman ill-equipped to get out of its way. But Jane K. Demouy feels that “the story is as much Miranda’s as it is Amy’s, and the second and third parts bring her back into focus, partly by extending the imagery of Amy’s experience to Miranda and Maria. Like Amy, they feel “hedged and confined” by a conventional life in their boarding school. Like her, they suffer a constant surveillance by their chaperones, the nuns, and find their lives incredibly “dull” except for Saturday afternoon trips to the races, where excitement reigns” (1979:154).

The symbolic value of the horses to which this family is devoted is one of the significant links between Parts I and II and between Amy and Miranda. Amy loves to ride and uses horses as a vehicle for excitement and adventure. The races in New Orleans relieve her boredom and furnish her delight when one of their horses wins. More important, however, the way family members use their horses is indicative of their stature as human beings. The family has always enjoyed owning and racing horses, but among gentlemen this is a pursuit of pleasure, not a livelihood. The first inkling Miranda has that Gabriel is less than his legend lies in the episode in which he and his grandfather quarrel over his racehorses. His grandfather fears he will be a wastrel who will use his horses to make a living, and his fear is prophetic; it foreshadows Gabriel’s decline and Miranda’s
disillusionment in Part II (1983: 154). However, these details are only transitions to the large meaning of *Old Mortality*.

The meaning of the second part of *Old Mortality* is quite clear: the cracks are beginning to appear in the legend of the past. The year is 1904, and Maria and Miranda are attending a convent school in New Orleans, in which “they referred to themselves as ‘immured.’” It gave a romantic glint to what was otherwise a very dull life for them, except for blessed Saturday afternoons during the racing season” (OM, 41). On these Saturdays, their father or another relative usually appeared to take them for an outing, often to the racetracks. Miranda, watching the horses circling the track, longed to be a jockey when she grew up, and determined to practice her riding.

On one particular Saturday, however, her father takes her and Maria to a track where one of the horses in the running is owned by their Uncle Gabriel, whom they still know only by the role he had played in Aunt Amy’s legend. The horse is a hundred to one shot, which “Miranda knew well enough that a hundred to one shot was no bet at all” (OM, 45). But she is distracted from thinking of her bet by her first sight of Uncle Gabriel, who hails the girls and their father from a lower level of the grandstand. “He was a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes, sad beaten eyes, and a big melancholy laugh, like a groan” (OM, 46). He looks at his two nieces, and says to Harry, “Pretty as pictures, but rolled into one they don’t come up to Amy, do they?” (OM, 47). The appearance of their uncle disturbs the girls, and they miss most of the race, until their father warns them, “watch Miss Lucy come home” (OM, 48) and they rise in their seats to see Uncle Gabriel’s
horse streak past the judge’s stand. The girls have each won a hundred dollars, but their triumph is hollow in the face of their disillusionment with their uncle, who insists on taking them and their father to visit his second wife. And now the girls, “watching Uncle Gabriel’s lumbering, unsteady back, were thinking that this was the first time they had ever seen a man that they knew to be drunk. They had seen pictures and read descriptions, and had heard descriptions, so they recognized the symptoms at once. Miranda felt it was an important moment in a great many ways” (OM, 50-51).

The failure of the great legend becomes complete when Harry and his daughters meet Honey, Gabriel’s second wife, and Gabriel’s demoralization is apparent. The uncle and his wife are living in a dingy, third rate hotel lost in the back areas of New Orleans, beyond the Negro quarter. Honey shows no joy at all in the arrival of her husband’s nieces, for she is beyond all joy. Gabriel informs her that his horse has won, and says, “We’ll move to the St. Charles tomorrow. Get your best dresses together, Honey, the long dry spell is over” (OM, 55). But Honey knows better: “I’ve lived in the St. Charles before, and I’ve lived here before,’ she said, in a tight deliberate voice, ‘and this time I’ll just stay where I am, thank you. I prefer it to moving back here in three months. I’m settled now, I feel at home here” (OM, 55). Maria and Miranda “sat trying not to stare, miserably ill at ease” (OM, 55), until finally their father rises to leave. The girls cannot wait to be gone, and in the taxi on the way back to school, “Miranda sat thinking so hard she forgot and spoke out in her thoughtless way: ‘I’ve decided I’m not going to be a Jockey after all’ “ (OM, 59).
In the third part of *Old Mortality*, the time is 1912, and Miranda is eighteen; she has eloped from school the year before, and married, and she is on the train, coming home for Uncle Gabriel’s funeral. In the train she encounters an old lady who has “two immense front teeth and a receding chin” (OM, 62), but who does not “lack character” (OM, 62) and who turns out to be Cousin Eva, the feminist, who had symbolized, in Miranda’s childhood, the ugliness of the family. The two women naturally fall to talking of the past and of their relatives, for Eva has been away a long time. When Eva thinks of herself, she becomes all the more bitter towards her family.

‘All my life the whole family bedeviled me about my chin. My entire girlhood was spoiled by it. Can you imagine,’ she asked, with a ferocity that seemed much too deep for this one cause, ‘people who call themselves civilized spoiling life for a young girl because she had one unlucky feature? Of course, you understand perfectly it was all in the very best humor, everybody was very amusing about it, no harm meant – oh, no, no harm at all. That is the hellish thing about it. It is that I can’t forgive,’ she cried out, and she twisted her hands together as if they were rags. ‘Ah, the family,’ she said, releasing her breath and sitting back quietly, ‘the whole hideous institution should be wiped from the face of the earth. It is the root of all human wrongs,’ she ended, and relaxed, and her face became calm (OM, 81).

Miranda listens to all of this, and Cousin Eva says finally, “I wanted you to hear the other side of the story” (OM, 82). Then Miranda retires for the night, and falls instantly asleep. In the morning, her father is on the platform, waiting for her, and he and Eva begin to lament Gabriel. Miranda, sitting with the Negro boy in the car that is taking her to her old home, hears her father and Eva chattering on in the rear. They are talking about the only subject they can ever discuss: family history. Miranda realizes abruptly how sick she is of these same old narratives, how smothered she has been by her family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and
cousins, how little she shares their interminable interest in the past. She determines in her mind to leave her old home once and for all, and not to return to marriage:

She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She knew now why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said ‘No’ to her. (OM, 87).

Ultimately, the story of Amy and the truth regarding her identity become parabolic, reflecting Porter’s concerns about the way history and identity are constructed. Porter suggests that Miranda, is probably too young to understand. Miranda, recognizing the contradictions in the stories of the past she has heard, wrongly assumes that she will be able to recognize and hold onto the truths of her own life. In Porter’s world, there is no absolute, objective truth.

*Old Mortality*, says Ray West, “emerges as a story putting forth dialectic of history and the slipperiness of truth” (1974: 441). It is the Southerner, Miranda, a child from the South, who is caught up in its history. *Old Mortality* completes the story of Miranda’s role models. As John Flanders has noted, “Miranda’s Aunt Amy and her Cousin Eva, who dominate the story, have equal, if different, reasons for repudiating the Old Order” (1976:58). Their experiences demonstrate that to be a legendary beauty like Amy in such a society, one must sacrifice freedom, and even life. To be independent, a bluestocking, and a suffragist like Eva is to become ossified in bitterness. Part of the point of the story is that everybody in the family has long since decided what to think about Amy and Eva. The only person who has
not is the one still capable of learning something about them: Miranda. Behind the history of these women is the curious, quizzical figure of Miranda, sifting and balancing, from the vantage point of adulthood, what she knew when she was eight, then ten, and finally eighteen. It is not Amy’s life but Miranda’s heritage that one learns about in the three segments of time which end with Miranda’s promise to herself to find her own truth, made “in her hopefulness, her ignorance.” (OM, 89). Those last words are the judgment of the older narrator, Katherine Anne Porter, on eighteen-year-old Miranda’s limited view, just as they are the reader’s clue. As Jane K. Demouy says, “Old Mortality is a fiction of memory in a double sense: it is the memory of her forebears, but it is also Miranda’s memory of what she has been and, therefore, what she has become” (1979: 145).

In Old Mortality, a Northerner may mind the extremely regional feeling, the patriotism of the South, which is group subjectivity. But even this is so much less soft and heady and spicy than the accounts that other fiction writers have given of that important part of the world, its premises, its problems, that it seems almost bitter, like a medicine, like a lesson. At the end of it the protagonist Miranda realizes how much of her girlhood she has spent “peering in wonder” at other people’s notions of the past, and she resolves to close her mind stubbornly to all such secondhand remembrance, spiritual predilection.

Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people’s memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show. Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don’t want any promises, I won’t have false hopes, I won’t be romantic about myself. I can’t live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don’t care (OM, 88).
Ray West says, “Miranda is not merely a Southern child, in Southern history, reflected through the sensibility of a Southern author, even though she is, partly at least, all these things. She is any child, anywhere, seeking definition of herself through her past and present” (1974: 441). Thus when Porter wrote the concluding sentence of Old Mortality, she was expressing, not the dilemma of Miranda alone, but the dilemma of all who seek understanding. “At least I can know the truth about what happens to me,” Miranda assured herself silently, “making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance” (OM, 89).

Old Mortality is about the dyslectic of history and the slipperiness of truth. Pale Horse, Pale Rider shows a child of the Old Order, who had promised herself to know the truth about herself, caught in personal grief and the social horror of the New Order.

The two Southern autobiographical novels Pale Horse, Pale Rider and Old Mortality are important as they bring out vividly Porter’s use of Southern life in fiction that is best described as personal and family history. They give the flavor of the South as it existed after the Civil War. They give a developing picture of America during World War I. They tell of the glories of the South and its tradition of chivalry. They project the life of the Negroes and the attitude of the aristocratic white Southerners towards them. They deal with the social order and myths of the past, and in a larger context they deal with the conditions prevalent in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Porter’s output may not be great if we consider the years that she had been a writer, but there is probably no other writer of fiction in America who maintained
her high level of consistency as a writer. Her subjects are drawn from her own background in the South, life in Mexico, in the urban East, in Europe, and, in one case at least, in the Rocky Mountains. Porter’s method, as she herself has confessed, is to write “from memory,” even in certain instances to employ her past self as principal character. There are many similarities between Porter and the character Miranda. What happened in her life in the past also took place in the life of Miranda. Thus, Porter represents her past through the principal character Miranda. At some point in the process, all the details seem to merge into a pattern. With her notes about her, but seldom used, she writes the story. Most of her notes begin simply: “Remember!”

Porter’s novels *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and *Old Mortality* reveal that she was concerned about the burden of the past and tries to perspectivise her memories in a semi-autobiographical form. Her stated intention to write from memory is quite amply borne out in her fiction where she draws from a long history of personal, family, and regional events. Along with past and memory Porter used narrative techniques like stream of consciousness and dreams to enrich her narration. Porter’s fiction has the power to stimulate profound feelings and an intellectual understanding of life and death.