

Existential Crisis behind the Plague Writing in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

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Abstract. American author Katherine Anne Porter's novelette *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* takes the First World War and the Great Pandemic of 1918 as the background. Through some modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness and non-linear narrative, the story focuses on the chaotic and broken feelings of the heroine Miranda during her illness. The illness experience offers an opportunity for Miranda to think about life. In this case, Miranda's existential crisis, haunting and difficult to solve, is revealed through the psychological description during her illness and the implication of the modernist narrative techniques. In addition, descriptions of people's lives during the war exposes great oppression of the war on people, suggesting social cause of Miranda's existential crisis. Through analysis of the plague writing and the social situation in the text, this essay will conclude that modernist plague writing is a manifestation of the existential crisis, and the plague has symbolic meaning in the text, implying the existential crisis of Americans under the influence of the First World War.

Keywords: plague writing, existential crisis, modernist narrative, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

1. Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter is an American novelist, short story writer and stylist, with great achievement in short stories that received much critical acclaim. Born in 1890, she is a writer of the early 20th century, passionate about social affairs and actively involved in the social changes and cultural waves of the time. Porter's stance is in a state of flux in the eventful twentieth century, especially in the twenty and thirty years. Since the 1920s, she has been interested in Marxism and social revolution, however, after the Great Depression, she turns to conservatism. There are contradictions and conflicts in her gender conception, religious view and political consciousness: she is a pursuer of women's rights, but also an opponent of feminist movement; she is both a disciple of Christianity and a skeptic of religion; both a eulogist of struggle against exploitation and a holder of racial consciousness; neither part of the old South nor supporter of the new South. Porter's thinking about politics, religion and other themes is reflected in her novels, such as *Thief, He, and The Dove of Chapacalco*. And her own inner conflict, the pursuit of truth and its failure reflect "the pursuit and confusion of a generation of intellectuals" (Wang 114). She also represents a generation of American in the early 20th century that falls into loss of meaning and confusion of self-identity.

This spiritual crisis of that generation can be represented by existential crisis, which means inner conflict in psychology and psychotherapy. It is characterized by the impression that life lacks meaning and is accompanied by various negative feelings, such as stress, anxiety, despair, and depression [1-2, 8]. Existential crisis is a serious mental problem hanging on the generation of the early 20th century, represented in many of Porter's works, including *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).

Pale Horse, Pale Rider is considered semi-autobiographical and draws directly from her near-death experience the 1918 flu pandemic, constructed on the context of the first World War and the 1918 flu pandemic. It is about the relationship between a newspaper woman, Miranda, and a soldier, Adam. Miranda, lonely, cash-strapped, and questioning the meaning of war, becomes sick and delirious. She recovers, only to find that Adam has died of the disease at camp, which he likely caught while tending to her. The novelette is a realistic representation of the 1918 pandemic and an autobiographical novel that reflects the author's own experience with the disease. As a plague literature, identified by Leavy (1992) as those whose themes are related to infectious or fatal physical diseases and to social or psychological diseases, it has significant plague writing with symbolic meanings.

Previous studies focus on Porter's writing style appreciation, literary influence, her characterization and themes. Researches on *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* mainly include trauma of war and plague [3,11], the relationship between plague and society and illness narrative [7, 9-10], and the theme of death [4].

The studies on plague are always based on new historicism, viewing the text as a complement to history. Apart from these, some studies focus on the role of modernist narrative techniques in the description of disease. Most of previous studies analyze plague writing's practical significance, and ignore the background role of war. This essay will take the modernist plague writing as a symbol of existential crisis, and split two story lines: war and plague. Through discussing modernist narrative techniques and its implication and cause, the conclusion will be reached that the existential crisis of Americans is revealed in the plague writing, and it is a social issue caused in the context of war.

2. The Implication of Existential Crisis: Modernist Plague Writing

This chapter will discuss modernist narrative techniques used in the text. They not only illustrate painful experience during the illness, but also show that the plague is a symbol: the illness experience offers an opportunity for the heroine to explore and express, in the way of modernist narrative, her broken mental condition, confusion about herself and the world, and struggle between life and death.

2.1. Stream of Consciousness

The foremost technique is stream of consciousness, which occupy the main part of the narration during Miranda's illness. In her free association and inner monologue, her thoughts flow through everything in her life, from her job, endless war to the imminent and inexorable death. All of these chaotic and sometimes illogical thinking flows into one point that she is confused and tries to figure out the meaning of life and the identity of herself.

For example, the story opens with her free association:

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. (120)

In this passage, Miranda's consciousness flows from the house to generations' life and death in this house, and that the cycle never ends. Then her mind goes with death: "and the stranger? Where is that lank greenish stranger I remember hanging about the place...What else besides them did I have in the world? Nothing. Nothing is mine, I have only nothing but it is enough, it is beautiful and it is all mine" (121). "The stranger swung into his saddle beside her, leaned far towards her and regarded her without meaning, the blank still stare of mindless malice that makes no threats and can bide its time" (121).

The stranger, a pale rider on pale horse, is the representation of death, which comes from the Revelation. These descriptions expose Miranda's question on death and meaning, and she gets the conclusion that only death is eternal, and nothing belongs to her in the world. The question shows her pursuit of truth of life, while the answer falls into existential nihilism that people can get nothing, and life signifies nothing.

When Miranda is dancing with Adam in her early stages of illness, she has the thought that "the music was gay; and life is completely crazy anyway, thought Miranda, so what does it matter? This is what we have, Adam and I, this is all we're going to get, this is the way it is with us... why can we not save each other" (152)? This description directly shows her definition about life that the world outside is crazy. It is also shown that in the vast lonely world, both outside and inside, the only thing she can hold is Adam, her lover. She has already given up to find hope and value from the outside world, but turns to find peace from her lover's soul, which signifies that life has no meaning for her, but she is still desperate to draw comfort from a man same as herself.

Adam is the anchorage of Miranda's hopes, and the only thing she can rely on in this chaotic world, as she thinks: "they...have the same expression on their faces while they looked into the hell they shared, no matter what kind of hell, it was theirs, they were together" (154). Before she goes into a coma, she thinks that "there was only that pain, only that room, and only Adam. There were no longer any multiple planes of living, no tough filaments of memory and hope" (163). She points out the tough nature of life, but it seems that with the anchorage, the hell-like life can be merciful, which actually emphasizes the meaninglessness of life and thus her existential crisis. Miserably, Adam dies of the plague in the end, which suggests the death of Miranda's hope and a cruel fact that there is no hope in this world.

Her inner thoughts during serious illness also suggest the world, full of danger and war, is without meaning or purpose: "the air trembled with the shattering scream and the hoarse bellow of voices all crying together, rolling and colliding above her like ragged storm-clouds, and the words became two words only rising and falling and clamoring about her head. Danger, danger, danger, the voices said, and War, war, war" (157).

Miranda's ambivalent attitude towards life and death exposes her confusion about life. She wants to reach eternal peace, while spontaneously keeps struggling to survive. She says: "I'd like to sit down here on the curb, Chuck, and die, and never again see—I wish I could lose my memory and forget my own name...I wish" (145). During her disease, she keeps thinking why she must

struggle: “the road to death is a long march beset with all evils, and the heart fails little by little at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step, the mind sets up its own bitter resistance and to what end” (169)? “Why can’t I consent now, I am lost, there is no hope for me. Look, she told herself, there it is, that is death and there is nothing to fear. But she could not consent, still shrinking stiffly against the granite wall” (171). These descriptions not only illustrate body struggles, but also imply her failure to figure out any meaning and confusion about the direction of life.

In a word, Miranda’s skepticism towards life, and her negative feelings, such as anxiety and despair, signify her existential crisis.

2.2. Nonlinear Narrative

The second main technique is the nonlinear narrative. The order of time and space is destroyed, and two storylines—war and plague—intertwine with each other, which enhances the expressive effect of plague writing, highlights the disorder of the world, and implies Miranda’s broken inner world.

There are two storylines, the first one is the process of her disease; the second one is her normal life around war, including Liberty Bond, patriotic propaganda play, visit to the soldier, discussion about the war. All of these are connected by her love story with Adam. However, there is no sign of time or space change between different events. The story jumps freely from one scene to another. The part about the war is more obvious and prominent than the part about the plague. But a great deal of stream of consciousness during Miranda’s illness breaks story time, highlighting the principal position of plague writing. Of this writing, plague is invisible at the beginning, because the narrative carefully avoids words of the plague, only implying Miranda’s disease, for example, she sprays too much perfume because she cannot smell. However, the shadow of death and fatality hangs everywhere, including negative psychological descriptions of Miranda, and several emphases on the color gray, such as pale horse illusion, gray gloves, and “one pair of gray suede gauntlets without straps, two pairs gray sheer stockings without clocks—” (178) that she asks after recovery. These gray objects reveals that the plague and war in people’s inner world never ends.

Apart from that, the narrative is fixed on Miranda, and the narrative is dominated by the past tense, interspersed with a large number of psychological descriptions in the present tense. It seems that everything is intertwined, and there is no clear distinction between story time, the time of the narrative and the time of the narrating.

In this way, although the plague is hidden behind various events and psychological descriptions, it is there all the time. The writing suggests the failure, embodied by the plague, of pursuit of truth and meaning, and that existential crisis has always been there, unaffected by time or space.

In a word, the plague writing of this text has characterized by modernist narrative. Not only does modernism provides profound clarification of plague, but the plague is also the setting for these depictions. Through the analysis of the existential crisis exposed in the narrative, it can be seen that the plague writing plays a symbolic role.

3. The Cause of Existential Crisis: War and Its Influences

This chapter will illustrate existential crisis as a social issue. In the text, it is a result of the First World War and its influences. As mentioned before, the story is composed of the plague writing and the life under the war. Miranda’s normal life is full of derivatives of war, both physically and mentally. From depictions of the war’s influences and that of Miranda’s reflection and question on them, it can be drawn that the war is one of the causes of her existential crisis.

3.1. War as a Social Issue

Firstly, war and death are given a strong political ideology by the state apparatus, occupying the position of dominant discourse, manipulating public’s value into radical patriotisms and causing mass aphasia. Aphasia is a mental condition, referring to the loss of the ability to understand or produce speech; mass aphasia means individuals’ ideas are suppressed by dominant discourse.

In the story, people’s discussion and activities are closely around the war. The war has great influence on public values. At the beginning, there is a discussion about Liberty Bond in her office, a man “had inquired why she had not bought a Liberty Bond” (123). He persists to querying, whose voice is “persuasive and ominous” (124), and interrupts: “that’s no excuse” (124) when Miranda explains her personal financial crisis. The man is a representative of the mainstream value of that time that everyone must buy Liberty Bond to do his or her part for the country, and that “everybody was suffering, naturally. Everybody had to do his share” (125).

Apart from that, the dominant position of the war’s political ideology can be seen in a dialogue between Miranda and girl after they “picturesquely” visit the wounded:

After a short silence, the girl said in a puzzled way, “I don’t know what good it does, really. Some of them wouldn’t take anything at all. I don’t like this, do you?”

“I hate it,” said Miranda.

“I suppose it’s all right, though,” said the girl, cautiously.

“Perhaps,” said Miranda, turning cautious also. (130)

Both of them think this hypocritical activity is meaningless, but neither of them dares to express their opinions. The increasing power of the dominant culture gradually silences the public—everyone is under the watch and threat of a certain dominant discourse. The silence is directly pointed out in Miranda's thought: "we dare not say a word to each other of our desperation, we are speechless animals letting ourselves be destroyed" (148).

However, despite Miranda's doubts about the meaning of the war, she unconsciously sings patriotic songs with the passionate audience around her, encouraged by war propaganda, and writes articles as a newspaper reporter urging female readers to braid and wrap the soldiers.

The war's manipulating power is also directly shown by people's attitude towards soldier and death: "what's the idea of petting soldiers and binding up their wounds and soothing their fevered brows? That's not war. Let 'em perish where they fall. That's what they're there for" (142). It shows a ridiculous value that only death is the glory of valiant and the meaning of war. This heavily patriotic and politicized ceremony promotes nationalism by emphasizing the sacrifice of soldiers, which exposes "the forced nature of patriotism under the pervasive war propaganda, and the public's forced identification with it" (Luo 155).

Secondly, efforts of ordinary people for the war are vanity projects, without practical meaning. During a visit to help the wounded, Miranda finds that it is full of fake: the patients are selected carefully; the business is not needed by anyone. "The men, a selected presentable lot...not seriously ill, were bored and restless...They were for the most part picturesquely bandaged as to arm or head" (129). The objects, "wilting bouquet and her basket of sweets and cigarettes" (129), taken by Miranda are not needed by patients, for she sees clearly impatience and refusal in a man's eyes: "Not having any, thank you and be damned to the whole business, his eyes said plainly to her, and will you be so good as to take your trash off my bed" (129)? In addition, cock-eyed bandages rolled by women "in Red Cross wimples" "will never reach a base hospital", and sweaters knitted by them "will never warm a manly chest" (147). Those efforts are only beautiful but futile social comfort.

The sacred Liberty Bond is also useless but heavy load for ordinary people, as Miranda rationally holds the view that "it wasn't so much her fifty dollars that was going to make any difference. It was just a pledge of good faith on her part. A pledge of good faith that she was a loyal American doing her duty" (125).

Thirdly, the war brings meaningless sacrifice and death. At first, although Adam "used to wake up in the night sometimes feeling silly about it" (137), he still takes pride in his soldier identity: "it's the least I can do for my beloved country, not to go around looking like a tramp" (132). Ironically, Adam dies with no pride—he dies of disease in camp rather than fighting on the battlefield. Miranda sees more clearly the senseless sacrifice of war, desperately and sadly thinking she cannot like Adam, "because he was not for her nor for any woman, being beyond experience already, committed without any knowledge or act of his own to death" (138).

3.2. Oppression of the War

The bad influences and meaninglessness of the war is shown in the text, which is background and cause of Miranda's existential crisis.

Firstly, her life is so manipulated by the war that she has no hope for the future. She says: "there's too much of everything in this world just now. I'd like to sit down here on the curb, Chuck, and die, and never again see—I wish I could lose my memory and forget my own name...I wish—" (145). Under the war, she cannot even have a lover. She thinks that "I don't want to love," she would think in spite of herself, "not Adam, there is no time and we are not ready for it and yet this is all we have—" (148). Under the overwhelming wheel of time, individual has no power to resist. The sense of powerlessness causes skepticism of life and self-identity, leading her into the doom of existential crisis.

Secondly, her reflection on the war and incapability to change anything causes her despair of life. As mentioned above, Miranda understands the meaninglessness of the war, which makes her confused about the world and herself. She hates the war: "Suppose I said to hell with this filthy war" (125)? But her life is pushed forward by war and its derivative. Therefore, she prays for the end of war or the end of her exhausting life, but still, nothing is in her control. She grasps love relationship desperately, attempting to hold something in the world, but only to realize the futility soberly and despairingly: "for every step they took towards each other seemed perilous, drawing them apart instead of together, as a swimmer in spite of his most determined strokes is yet drawn slowly backward by the tide" (148). The contradiction between her understanding and the reality leads to her inner conflict, accompanied by stress, anxiety and depression, which are shown in the stream of consciousness.

In addition, the oppression of the war on the whole society is also implied by the plague in the story and the title of the story. The title *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, representation of Death and Hell, refers to both the plague and the war; besides, the plague also implies God's judgment on human's war. Plague is believed as a collective disaster and a judgment on the community, and it is seen not only as suffering, but also as punishment (Sontag 131).

Miranda's life is severely affected and even controlled by the war: her expression is suppressed by dominant discourse; the theme of her life revolves around the war: her work is to write reviews of patriotic propaganda plays, her daily conversations are about war or Liberty Bond, and activities are around soldiers and patriotic propaganda plays; the news of the deaths caused by the war sweeps all over the world; love is silenced under the war, and her lover is doomed to be "sacrificial lamb" (152). Under these pressures, Miranda feels deeply the meaninglessness of war, despair of powerlessness and skepticism towards life, thus falling into existential nihilism. Therefore, the war is an important cause of Miranda's existential crisis, and her personal experience also suggests that the existential crisis is ubiquitous and lingering like the plague in the context of that time.

4. Conclusion

Katherine Anne Porter's novelette *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* can be clarified as plague literature, composed of two storylines, Miranda's feeling and experiences during her illness, and her daily life in time of war. Modernist narrative is used in this text, suggesting that Miranda is facing existential crisis which is represented by the impression that life lacks meaning. The descriptions about her daily activities reveal the great oppression of war on her, suggesting that the war is a social cause of her existential crisis.

In the plague writing, a large part of stream of consciousness, and nonlinear narrative are used to tell this story. In this sense, it can be seen that the world, both inner and outside, is in disorder, and that positive feelings such as meaningfulness and hope are destroyed. This writing, full of modernist consciousness, makes this text show a kind of confusion and uneasiness, and existential crisis in the contemporary life.

Under high pressure of the war, Miranda is tormented by many external contradictions: her condemnation of the war contradicts the dominant discourse; her desire for love contradicts the irresistible force of war; her wish for a stable and happy life contradicts economic pressure, life confusion and survival pressure; her dream of the peace of death contradicts the instinctive struggle for survival. The oppression of these contradictions is internalized into her inner conflicts, forcing her depressed, confused, and powerless in her reflections on war, love, and life and death, which constitute her existential crisis.

In conclusion, Miranda's existential crisis is revealed in the plague writing. It is not an individual problem, but represents a social issue, in America in the early twentieth century, as the result of war and its influences.

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