

Responses to Porter's Depiction of a Near-Death Experience in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"

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1

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider"¹ was published in 1939. The theme of the short story is 'dying.' The story is about a girl who lives during the First World War, and experiences near-death in 1918, when she gets sick during the influenza epidemic which claims many lives. Miranda, Katherine Anne Porter's autobiographical protagonist, is twenty-four years old. She is earning her own living as a newspaper reporter and has a boy friend Adam, a soldier. The story starts with a dream symbolic of the whole plot. There, the pale rider on the pale horse of the title appears as a symbol of death. Death comes to her in the flu but somehow she outruns him: she is near death but parts from it and comes back to life. While the flu ravages her mind, she has a few lucid moments and dreams come in succession. These dreams are stages in the process of dying. And the last dream before she recovers, the scene of heaven, seems to be a "Near-Death Experience."

The term, Near-Death Experience (NDE), was first coined by Raymond A. Moody Jr. in *Life after Life* (1975) (Morse 113).² In her article "Life after Life: Katherine Anne Porter's Version," Sonia Gernes explains how well the last dream in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" fits as a case of NDE (Gernes 669).³ Referring to Porter's statements in an interview, Gernes thinks the story is about Porter's real experience in the form of fiction (669). Porter once told an interviewer about her being taken ill with the flu: 'I knew I was dying. I felt a strange state of—what is it the Greeks called it?—euphoria... But I didn't die' (Hendrick 76).⁴ More than anything else, Porter wanted to be an "artist" (Unrue xxviii).⁵ As an artist, in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," she challenged to describe what is regarded to be indescribable: a dying person's mental state and the scene of heaven. The story was written about twenty years after she experienced dying in 1918. It was more than thirty years before the term, Near-Death Experience, came to the world.

First, I would like to show how Gernes illustrates that the latter part of the story can be an example of NDE. According to Gernes, Moody enumerates fifteen common stages of NDE based on one hundred and fifty interviews he conducted with persons who experienced NDE. Of the fifteen, Gernes says, Miranda experiences eleven in some form; eight of them are quite typical. Gernes doesn't explain what all eleven stages are. But I am going to explain six of the stages Gernes mentions, and compare three of them in terms of Gerne's and Ellen Matlok-Zieman's discourse. In

my terms, the six stages are: dark tunnel stage, out of body stage, seeing / meeting the light stage, meeting with the dead stage, deciding to go back to earth stage, and finding difficulty in adjusting to new life stage. According to Morse, there are variations on each stage (118). For example, at the 'dark tunnel' stage, where the dying person usually goes rapidly through a long dark tunnel, in Miranda's case, she sinks easily through "deeps under deeps of darkness" (PH 310). Also, at the 'out of body' stage, where the person sometimes sees his own body from a distance as resuscitation is being attempted (Morse 118), Miranda is only aware of death itself :

"...there it is, that is death and there is nothing to fear" (PH 310). According to Morse, in the seeing / meeting light stage, the phenomenon appears as a dim light and grows brighter and brighter. It sometimes takes a form of personal being from whom love and warmth emanates. Seeing the light, the dying person experiences an ineffable bliss he has never experienced in the earthly world, being at ease and feeling accepted by it (116). Miranda however, does not meet a personal being. Instead, she sees the light spread and become a rainbow through which she sees the landscape of heaven: "a deep clear landscape of sea and sand, of soft meadow and sky, freshly washed and glistening with transparencies of blue" (PH 311).

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The next three stages of NDE are also common and Miranda experiences them thoroughly. They are "meeting with the dead she knows," "deciding to go back to earth," and "finding difficulty in adjusting to new life after coming back." These three stages are dealt in detail in an article by Ellen Matlok-Ziemann, although she doesn't call them stages of NDE but just scenes. Ziemann calls Miranda's near-death experience a "nightmarish influenza-induced dream" (Ziemann 89)⁶. From now on, I would like to discuss Ziemann's interpretation of the three stages I just mentioned, and compare Gernes and Ziemann. To understand Ziemann's interpretation it is necessary to know her feministic viewpoint.

The famous phrase in *The Second Sex* by Beauvoir, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," seems to be the basis for Ziemann's argument. Ziemann thinks that women have been forced to act womanly by society. Either consciously or unconsciously, they are brought up in their family and educated in school to be a good woman. And in this male-dominated society, this 'good' means 'good for men,' beautiful and submissive. Miranda's (and Porter's) admiration for the Southern belle, framed in the Old Order in the South is a good example of becoming a woman. Under the condition that women can not attain financial independence, when they are under the protection of parents or husband, they have to obey or accept their protector's intention to survive in the society. And once the concept of being a

woman is settled in a woman, it gets its own power to control the woman's psyche. Also characteristics and functions of a woman's physical body reinforce the power.

Ziemann's argument here centers on identity. Her concept of identity must have come from the part, "They were pure identities" (PH 311), the description of the dead people Miranda sees in paradise. Ziemann thinks that Porter describes how her Grandmother, Amy (her aunt), and Miranda struggle to have their own identity which does not perfectly fit with the identity of the Southern belle and with the Old Order (84). By 1918, the Old Order together with the Southern belle has begun losing its power. And Miranda can be free to earn her own living as a journalist. But Miranda fails to attain this separate free identity, a modern social identity. And she confuses separate identity with pure identity (94). Ziemann says that pure identity does not "simply intermingle" and lose "its purity" (95). But, if a woman falls in love, she does intermingle and loses her pure identity. In other words, when in love, a woman wants to become one with her man losing her identity. Ziemann says the desire comes from her body and "for a woman 'her body is something other than herself'" (84). Being in love, Miranda wants to be with Adam, and at the same time she wants to attain her pure identity.

Now I would like to compare the two different interpretations by Gernes and Ziemann concerning the three scenes I mentioned before—Gernes thinks they are all about NDE, while Ziemann thinks they are about Miranda's nightmare and its aftereffect. The three scenes are: meeting the dead in heaven; deciding to go back to earth; finding difficulty in adapting to life on earth right after her return from heaven. The first scene is:

Moving towards her leisurely as clouds through the shimmering air came a great company of human beings, and Miranda saw in an amazement of joy that they were all the living she had known. Their faces were transfigured, each in its own beauty, beyond what she remembered of them, their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather, and they cast no shadows. They were pure identities and she knew them every one without calling their names or remembering what relation she bore to them. They surrounded her smoothly on silent feet, then turned their entranced faces again towards the sea, and she moved among them easily as a wave among waves. (PH 311)

According to Gernes, this scene describes how the dead people are in heaven. They move silently like clouds do and their faces are beautifully transfigured and entranced; their eyes are clear and untroubled. They seem to be in perfect peace and supreme bliss. They don't need their names or positions on earth any more to be recognized. After surrounding Miranda, they turn their entranced faces towards the sea. They want to lead Miranda to the sea, the border between life and death. This seems to

be their role in heaven: encourage the dying person to cross the border. They never force her to do anything, they only keep her freely among them as she moves easily as a wave (672). Porter's depiction is so vividly poetic and artistic that no reports from informants of NDE can compare with it.

From Ziemann's viewpoint, on the other hand, this scene describes how pure identities are. She only concentrates on the term, pure identity, ignoring other parts of the scene. Furthermore, she criticizes Porter's depiction of a paradise as stereotypical. It is a paradise of nothingness where Miranda escapes to. Miranda had difficulty in her socialization in patriarchal society. Becoming self-destructive as Amy did, she had her death wish. A pure identity is selfless and "untouched by societal demands" (93). Miranda first wished to develop a separate identity. In heaven, she confuses separate identities with pure identities. Then, she soon notices that they are different. The pure identities are just an illusion of a society; they have no names or relations, and it is a paradise of nothingness (92-93).

But in my view, it is not convincing to say Miranda, being a journalist, makes such a mistake as to confuse separate identities with pure identities even in her dream. However, in Ziemann's view paradise is the society where "dialectical process of 'becoming'" (95) doesn't work. Ziemann seems to think modern society should be studied in the light of dialectics (95).

The second scene, deciding to go back to earth, is described as:

Miranda felt without warning a vague tremor of apprehension, some small flick of distrust in her joy; a thin frost touched the edges of this confident tranquility; something, somebody, was missing, she had lost something, she had left something valuable in another country, oh, what could it be? There are no trees here, she said in fright, I have left something unfinished. A thought struggled at the back of her mind, came clearly as a voice in her ear. Where are the dead? We have forgotten the dead, oh, the dead, where are they? (PH 311-312)

Gernes says that this is how dying people decide to come back to earth in NDE. They remember their responsibilities or relationships left behind on earth. They don't want to neglect their duty on earth before entering heaven where they can be in perfect peace being free from everything (672). Again Porter here is poetic and psychological. Gernes thinks this part shows how Miranda refrains from crossing the sea, the border. Miranda notices with disturbance that she left "something valuable in another country." Then she tries to remember what that something is. Gernes thinks it is Miranda's relationship with Adam (673): their love was only starting. The trees relate Miranda's thought to Adam. In her earlier dream, she and Adam were wandering through a wood. There, Adam was killed by arrows which passed

harmlessly through Miranda's body. She notices Adam is not here, and that she must return to where he is, to another country (673).

According to Ziemann, before coming to a paradise, Miranda refused to participate in "being-in-the-world" (86). She was discontented being a working woman who felt degraded given only routine female jobs in the newspaper. Ziemann regards this as one example of the case that women are "reduced to their female bodies" (86). Another example is the housewives in the war time. They were considered dangerous without their men unless they were given something to occupy their minds with, for instance, rolling bandages and knitting sweaters for men (86). Although it was not as harsh as in the Old South, the network of relationships in society was still based on the male dominant man-woman relationship.

Adding to Miranda's resistance to society, there was her anxiety about Adam. Ziemann thinks that Miranda doesn't really want to be in love with Adam. To Miranda, Adam is the embodiment of a pure identity: he is the sacrificial lamb being so pure and flawless. Ziemann here says that Adam is like Christ. Like Christ, Adam is not for her nor any woman (88). The Father-son relation from God-Christ is the backbone of the present patriarchal society. Resisting society, she resists Adam (91).

Under these circumstances, according to Ziemann, Miranda came to a paradise. And there she suddenly realizes that she had left "something valuable" in life (95). She left the trees and the dead. She realizes that the Old Order and her past relationships with people, "being-in-the-world," are valuable to her. At the same time, she finds that the paradise is her illusion of a society that does not commit itself to "the dialectical process of 'becoming'" (95). So she decides to leave the paradise and go back to the world. In my view, Ziemann doesn't give sufficient reason for Miranda's decision to come back to earth. For, when Miranda goes back to earth, she would only be indignant at patriarchal society and in ambivalence about Adam. These would not be good situations for her to choose to go back to.

The next is the third scene. In emotional depression which often follows after coming back from heaven in NDE, Miranda finds difficulty in adopting to life on earth:

The body is a curious monster, no place to live in, how could anyone feel at home there? Is it possible I can ever accustom myself to this place? She asked herself. The human faces around her seemed dulled and tired, with no radiance of skin and eyes as Miranda remembered radiance.... Miranda looked about her with the covertly hostile eyes of an alien who does not like the country in which he finds himself, does not understand the language nor wish to learn it, does not mean to live there and yet is helpless, unable to leave it at his will. (PH 313)

The explanation about the difference of appearance of human faces between those in heaven and those on earth is distinctive here in the interpretation by Gernes in view of NDE. In heaven, human faces are in heavenly radiance beautifully transfigured. Compared to them, faces on earth are dull and tired with no radiance. To Miranda on earth, everything around her appears to be dead; she has no interest in life, yearning only to go back to the radiance of light in paradise. Again, this attitude is typical of NDE. It is also typical that those who experienced NDE do not openly talk about it because although they are convinced of the reality of their experiences, they are afraid that if they talk, people will become skeptical and think they are mentally unstable. Besides, their experiences are so ineffable that they just don't know how to describe them. So, Miranda finds herself being like an alien who cannot leave the country which he doesn't like. She knows that her life is not at her will: there is something, like fate, that decides when she is to die. Until that time comes, she is doomed to continue living (674).

On the other hand, Ziemann here is again picking up only one part. She takes up the last part where Miranda's hostile attitude towards life is depicted. Ziemann says that returning to "bleak and hopeless" woman's life in patriarchy, Miranda again "resorts to the 'making-up' of woman that covers 'the falsity' of life" (97). She is again forced to "live in a sexist society" and she "mockingly" accepts the conspiracy of the sexists (97).

3

Now I would like to discuss the three angles with which to view the scenes of heaven: Gernes's, Ziemann's, and mine. It is not to infer what Porter's position was. In my thinking, Porter is basically free from any trend of thought or religion. Although she was a convert to Catholicism, she does not deal with her religious faith in her works. I think she is rather culturally interested in Catholic thinking and customs. She is more like a journalist or a painter creating her works. When we meet her works, we have our own way of enjoying and understanding them.

Gernes tries to show that Porter's depiction of heaven is very relevant as an experience of NDE. She also mentions that there is a striking fact that "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" was written more than thirty years before the term, NDE came to the world. She seems to suggest that Porter is ahead of her time in describing her experience of near death. Supporting her idea, I would like to refer to an explanation on NDE.

In "The New Face of Death: Postmodernity and Changing Perspectives of the Afterlife" Raymond L. M. Lee treats "death as a movement of consciousness rather its termination" (Lee 138).⁷ And among the several phenomena he explains is

NDE. He says that reports of NDE started in the medieval era. In the modern era however, because of the development of medical technology, documentation of NDE has become systematic. NDE's authenticity is more widely accepted; NDE has become popular in the mass media. In other words, NDE is postmodern (137). It is postmodern in a sense that the modern division between science and popular imagination has become less distinct (138). Lee also mentions the following aspect regarding consciousness.

Modern science has body-mind dualism: the mind only functions in the body. But in some traditional beliefs like shamanism, it is different: consciousness of a shaman can leave his body and later return to it. The idea that consciousness can be independent of the physical body can be reoriented to a new perception of death. It is to perceive death "as an expansion of consciousness outside the physical body rather than the termination of consciousness within that body" (138). As long as identity is concerned, depersonalization in the dying process of NDE—sensibilities of a dying person become peculiar, dreamlike and detached—is related to self-fragmentation in postmodernity (140). Thus I think Gernes's implication that Porter is ahead of her time in her description of heaven is supported by Lee.

Ziemann on the other hand, sticks to her feminism, a trend of rationalism. Unlike Gernes, Ziemann tries to show how Porter is behind her time and not even modernistic. Ziemann criticizes Miranda for losing her modern, separate identity, saying Miranda is in love, and she wants feminine articles like lipstick and perfume, starting a new life on earth. Rationalism is to admit reason only and uses reason as a tool. It makes rules on a supposition that everything can be controlled by prediction. The modern project is to build up rational systems in order to liberate people from tradition. Feminism is to liberate women from male dominant systems. Feminism's rule is to criticize every sexually discriminative act.

But systems and rules treat everything formally in the same way. The feminist criticism lacks flexibility, being rigid. And soon systems and rules get ahead of people who made them; feminists come to lose their individuality. At its last stage, rationalism comes to remove irrational things even from the one who is criticizing. It is the self-collapse of rationalism. The result of Ziemann's feminist criticism of Porter is the disclosure of Ziemann's being irrational, her self-collapse. Porter clearly says that she dislikes feminism. She "disliked the word feminist, calling it a 'slimy' or 'dirty' word and insisting that 'above all' that term could not be applied to her" (Stout 169).⁸ Knowing this, Ziemann rigidly applies the feminist view to Porter, trying to defeat Porter, her opponent: Ziemann treats Miranda as an irrational, childish woman.

To show how irrational Ziemann is, I will repeat the three causes I mentioned in former parts of this essay. First, according to Ziemann, Miranda had difficulty in finding a separate identity in her life. Then she went to a paradise in her dream

because she had a death wish. In paradise, she met pure identities. But pure identities were different from the separate identities she pursued. So, she was disappointed in them and thought that life was better than paradise. Is identity, whatever it is, more important than life and death? It can't be so because without life you can't have identity; without identity you can still have life. Another question is: What is a pure identity and what is wrong with it? Ziemann only explains that a pure identity is selfless. What is wrong with being selfless and being a pure identity in a paradise or heaven? It must be a desirable condition for a person like Miranda who has a death wish.

Second, Miranda decided to go back to earth because she had left something valuable there, the trees and the dead. According to Ziemann, the trees signify the Old Order and the dead, her past relationships with people. Does this mean Miranda is going back to her old traditional society? It is impossible to do so, and if she goes back, she can only go back to the present world where none of her difficulties or problems has been solved. Ziemann seems to suggest that Porter is attracted to her traditional Old South rather childishly.

Third, citing the part where Miranda wants to get lipstick, perfume, and stockings after coming back to life, Ziemann says that it shows how Miranda is getting ready to go back to the sexist society. She says Miranda "mockingly" takes part in the "conspiracy" in patriarchy (97). As Porter is not, Miranda is not a feminist. If Miranda is not a feminist, she can't be cynical the way Ziemann describes. I think the womanish items above only show Miranda's strong will and desire to enjoy being a woman. Porter "once told an interviewer that 'everything' in her life had 'had to do with being female'" (Porter 53)⁹. It is a reckless attempt from the beginning, to apply feminism to Porter while Porter herself dislikes it. Thus as a result, Ziemann accumulates the inconsistencies and contradictions as I mentioned above.

My angle has to do with structuralism. Structuralism appeared in the 1960s in reconsideration of modernism. According to a structuralist, Claude Levi-Strauss, there is a structure or a formation which never comes up to our consciousness, and the structure rules us. The way how a human being lives is decided by and included in the structure. Human beings have nothing to do with the change of the structure. The structure is something we don't know. Structuralism tells us that we don't live of our own will, but we are made to live by the structure (Dictionary 496).¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss uses an example of a big disk. On the surface of the disk, many human beings are standing. On the reverse side of the disk, you can see the pattern of innumerable meshes. Human beings are standing according to the structure of this net. Thus, in structuralism, the free and rational individuality in modernism is denied.

This free and rational individuality is, I think, what Ziemann calls separate individuality (identity) in view of modernism. Miranda is not a feminist, and she is

an intelligent but ordinary girl. She is more interested in love with Adam than in individuality. At the same time, she is conscious of her fate of losing someone whom she loves most: she lost her mother at the age of two. Now she may lose Adam. When she comes back to life and knows his death, she accepts it in grief as though everything happens according to the script written in advance. She had the dream of Adam being killed by the arrows that had harmlessly passed her when they were walking in a wood. The dream can be read as an omen of his death which is written in the script about her life, in the structure. Her feeling about Adam's death seems to be more of reconciliation than of upset, despite her deep sorrow. She must know that there is no other way to continue her living than reconciling with fate. And I think this fate is the structure.

Fatalism is different from religion. To me Miranda doesn't seem to be a religious person as Porter is not. To show that Miranda is not religious, I cite two of the six stages in my terms: seeing the light stage, and finding difficulty in adjusting to new life stage. In the former stage, instead of seeing the being of light, a personal being that many people reported seeing in NDE, Miranda only sees the light which she identifies as the will to live spread and curve out into a rainbow. If she had more Christian faith, she would have seen a religious figure: someone like God, Jesus, or Mary. The fact that she only sees the light and describes it as the will to live suggests that she don't conceive any religious savior in her faith. Instead, she has a strong independent will to live.

In the latter stage, finding difficulty in adjusting to her new stage, Miranda only feels repugnance, and regrets the rapture she left in heaven. To her, the light of the world is dimmed compared to the brilliance of heaven; the people's faces are dull and tired compared to those in heaven. She recognizes that living people around her are really dead and withered. They only believe they are alive, and pity the dead with conceit while they are the ones to be pitied. But she knows it is no use to tell the truth because she would be suspected of being mentally unstable. So, as in many cases of NDE, she doesn't talk about her NDE. What is very different from many other cases of NDE is that, in Miranda's case, her personality or her way of living has not been changed to be that of an ethically better person. People often change their attitude toward others after experiencing NDE: they become more friendly, gentle, and nice.

If NDE is a religious revelation, the person who experiences it can be mentally relieved and satisfied about the end of their life, death. At the end of life, they can go to heaven. There, they can meet the personal being of light fulfilled with love and warmth who accepts them and gives them ineffable bliss. Then there is nothing to worry too much in the rest of their life. To prepare to meet the religious being again, they will live the rest of their lives becoming religiously a better person. On the other hand, Miranda doesn't experience personal love and warmth in heaven. As

a modern, egoistic person, Miranda wants to control her fate making full use of her faculties. But at the end with Adam's death she comes to realize her failure of controlling herself.

Conclusion

In 1918, Porter experienced near-death catching influenza. She says it was no doubt heaven that she saw in her near-death. Despite the difficulty of communicating the experience, she challenged it in her autobiographical story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The short story was published in 1939. Later, the term Near-Death Experience came to the world after *Life after Life* by Moody was published in 1975. In 1981, Gernes explained how well Porter's depiction of near-death fits as a case of NDE. Still, there are people who think NDE is just an illusion, worthless of serious consideration. Ziemann is one of them. In her book published in 2005, she says the scene of heaven is only a part of Porter's nightmare.

Porter has confidence in her skill of depiction. In her writing she manipulates Freudian psychology, the idea of strong will to live, cultural tradition of Catholicism and the Old South, using many symbols in a poetic style. For instance, the relationship between Miranda and Adam—relating to Miranda and her mother—is based on Freudian psychology. And when Miranda becomes a single point of consciousness dying, the point is a stubborn will to live. Also, the pale rider is used as a symbol of death from the Bible and from an old spiritual song of the South.

With her gift of depiction, being an artist was Porter's high priority. Works of art allow us to use various ways of appreciation and criticism. Here, Gernes appreciates the scene of heaven as a case of NDE; Ziemann criticizes it mentioning Porter's lack of feministic point of view; I personally try to apply structuralism to Miranda's psychology since she knows and accepts her destiny. From a structuralist point of view, I think that this scene shows Miranda's unique revelation which has a potent influence on her life.

End-Notes

- 1 Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Stories of Catherine Anne Porter* (San Diego: Brace & Company, 1944): 269-317. Hereafter "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is referred to as (PH).
- 2 Donald R. Morse, "NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: MODERN EXAMINATION, DEFINITION, HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS, PERSONAL TYPES, USUAL STAGES, CASES, RESEARCH, POSSIBLE EXPNATIONS," *Proceedings (Academy of Religion*

- & *Psychical Research*) 2004; 113-132.
- 3 Sonia Gernes, "Life after Life: Katherine Anne Porter's Version," *Journal of Popular Culture* 1981 Spring; 14(4) 669-675.
 - 4 George Hendrick, *Katherine Anne Porter* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1965): 76.
 - 5 Darlene Harbour Unrue, *Katherine Anne Porter: the Life of an Artist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005): xxviii.
 - 6 Ellen Matlok-Ziemann, *Tomboys, Belles, and Other Ladies: the Female Body-Subject in Selected Works by Katherine Anne Porter* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2005): 84-97.
 - 7 Raymond L. M. Lee, "The New Face of Death: Postmodernity and Changing Perspectives of the Afterlife," *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 2003 Apr.; 11(2) 134-147.
 - 8 Janis P. Stout, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995): 169.
 - 9 Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Dalacorte Press, 1970): 53.
 - 10 Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion (Tokyo: Iwanami Inc., 1998): 496.

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