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The Cigarette and the Tragic Pursuit of Death in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter explores the depths of human feeling and suffering by illustrating the complexities of human behavior in the face of death. Set in the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, the central character of the novel, Miranda, is subjected to the intricate forces of war, disease, and love. From the outset, Miranda suffers from the absence of interest and passion; she is employed at a position she loathes and is short on money, unwillingly immersed in and obligated to support a war she detests. Miranda is thus on the path of “the pursuit of death” – she finds no reason to continue living, and thus each moment shifts down the winding path to death. Adam, a soldier Miranda has been seeing for a few days, is more directly committed to the pursuit of death; he is set on serving in the military during the war, knowing that he will likely die. Miranda and Adam form a romantic relationship made strong by their mutual pursuit of death; they indulge in their shared pains and fears. Ultimately, Adam’s engagement in Miranda’s life both breathes into her a new life and accelerates her pursuit of death. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* explores the relationship between Miranda and Adam most strongly with a recurring piece of imagery – the cigarette. The cigarette, a symbol of slow, addictive death, appears three times in the novel; in each instance Miranda and Adam share a cigarette among themselves, although in meaningfully different settings and forms. Manipulating

the symbol of the cigarette, the novel suggests that the pursuit of death is a lonely, painful journey – one that cannot be accompanied.

Søren Kierkegaard's theory on the differentiation between fear and anxiety, articulated in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is useful in its application to existential questions and death.

Kierkegaard proposes that fear stems from a physical and concrete entity, but that anxiety is more abstract – “namely, nothingness itself” (Peters & Besley 5). Thus, when an individual faces fear, they are occupied by how to confront it; however, anxiety is more elusive and thus more difficult to discover and address. The distinction of fear from anxiety, then, is of the nature of knowledge possessed; fear is embedded in tangible and clearly experienced or articulatable entities, whereas anxiety is not tangible nor clear in the knowledge it stems from. Anxiety is an extreme extrapolation of existing knowledge into the ether of unknowingness, existing without definite form but nevertheless being very present. As such, when forced into materialization, anxiety appears in bizarre manifestations that resemble a severe distortion of some knowledge. The root of anxiety, then, can never truly be located and uprooted; instead, it lingers, disrupting and augmenting an individual's knowledge-making capabilities. In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, while Miranda is drawn to Adam as a vessel to alleviate her fear in the pursuit of death, her attachment to him and his commitment to death exacerbates her fears into an anxiety. Her knowledge of death becomes extrapolated from the conscious, concrete fear into the abstract space of grief-stricken paranoia and loneliness in its pursuit.

The symbol of the cigarette appears first when Miranda and Adam walk together in an afternoon. Miranda notes that Adam smokes constantly and understands the deathly effects of smoking; nevertheless, Adam rationalizes it with his commitment to the war: ““does it matter so much if you're going to war, anyway?”” (199). Miranda responds, ““No ... and it matters even

less if you're staying at home knitting socks. Give me a cigarette, will you?" (199). Just at this moment, a funeral procession approaches, casting the setting into the somber background of death. Miranda's gesture of asking for a cigarette is an act of indulgence in Adam's pursuit of death; it is a reaching out from parallel paths to alleviate the loneliness that has plagued her pursuit of death. Miranda opens to Adam about her dislike for her job: "'I do worse,' she said, soberly; 'I write pieces advising other young women to knit and roll bandages and do without sugar and help win the war'" (200). The discussion of their mutual misery and the war is made comical and light-hearted, a stark contrast from Miranda's nervous prior interaction with two men demanding Miranda purchase Liberty Bonds. The conversation turns to the war; Adam notes that the average life expectancy of a sapping party is about nine minutes, to which Miranda responds, "'Make it ten and I'll come along'" (204), followed by laughter. When their miseries and fears – concrete unease and fright at something visceral, like monotonous work, paying Liberty Bonds, dying in the trenches in battle – are shared, they become companions in their pursuit of death and alleviate the fear it is beset with. After the tête-à-tête concludes, Miranda returns to being miserably occupied with her tedious work and Adam sits, "under his brows fixed in a strained frown, his eyes were very black" (205), when their union had incited laughter in their mutual suffering just moments prior. Their bond is materialized in the form of a cigarette: a subtle instrument of slow death, an intoxicating experience to make what is left of the pursuit of death somewhat bearable, if not enjoyable, before the bright flame flickers out. Indeed, Miranda knows that the flame will cease to nothing eventually; she notes after the encounter that "he was not for her nor for any woman ... committed ... to death" (205). But, in this moment, she is engrossed in Adam as a vessel of her suffering from which life, even if just momentary, can

dance. Here, the flame of Miranda and Adam's relationship burns the brightest in an intoxicating companionship over the mutual pursuit of death.

After Miranda and Adam attend a play interjected by a patriotic advertisement for Liberty Bonds, they light their cigarettes a second time and walk down the street, reflecting upon the production. "I hate these potbellied baldheads, too fat, too old, too cowardly, to go to war themselves, they know they're safe," Miranda angrily says, "it's you they are sending instead" (223). She continues her plea for Adam not to commit to the war: "the worst of war is the fear and the suspicion ... It frightens me; I live in fear too, and no one should have to live in fear" (223-224). Adam responds with a definitive justification premised upon a patriotic pride: "If I didn't go, ... I couldn't look myself in the face" (224). Miranda's fear transforms from the fear of angry eyes and suspicion in a war-torn society into a more abstract attachment. Adam has become Miranda's emotional investment, her intimate partner in the pursuit of death. His dedicated acceleration in the pursuit of death is something more than a fear, then, to Miranda; it is the fear of fears and of having nothing, of wandering down the lonely pursuit of death without a fellow traveler. In Adam, Miranda has found a burst of life inextricably tied to a new anxiety of death. Miranda desperately attempts to grasp and retain their companionship, but a deep anxiety and hopelessness swells within her. "This is what we have, Adam and I, this is all we're going to get, this is the way it is with us" (225), she notes. Miranda remains silent, although she wants to tell Adam "I am in pain all over, and you are in such danger as I can't bear to think about, and why can we not save each other?" (226). The bright light on the cigarette is burning out, and the pursuit of death is turning away from love – a union of two travelers on the weary pursuit of death – towards loneliness and nothingness, death an all-encompassing and terrifying void.

Miranda, lying weakly in her bed, ridden by the influenza, asks Adam for a cigarette in its third and last occurrence in the novel. Adam lights the cigarette and holds it to her lips, but Miranda, weak with fatigue and sickness, drops the cigarette under her pillow. Adam finds it and crushes it in a saucer. Here, Miranda and Adam express their love for each other in the most intimate context presented in the novel; yet the flame has been extinguished. Their togetherness was never meant to be, as exemplified by the ironic juxtaposition of this most explicit demonstration of love and the anxiety of death that has overridden Miranda. Indeed, the symbol of the cigarette itself, being a small roll of tobacco with a finite length, provides only a moment of spirituous coping before the burning flame's inevitable extinguishing. The cigarette that Miranda and Adam share is tragically, despite Miranda's wishes, a temporary instrument. Moreover, the brevity of the pleasure induced by the cigarette leaves Miranda with a stronger desire to continue – an addiction to companionship in the journey towards death. In a sickly dream, Miranda envisions Adam being struck repeatedly by arrows in “perpetual death and resurrection” (242). She “thr[ows] ... herself before him, ... crying, No, no, like a child cheated in a game, It's my turn now, why must you always be the one to die” (242)? An arrow slices through her heart without injuring her, but kills Adam; “he lay dead, and she still lived, and the wood whistled and sang and shouted, every branch and leaf and blade of grass had its own terrible accusing voice” (242). Here, Miranda is grasping at a materialization of her anxiety of death, the fears of accusatory glances and the tense atmosphere of war-stricken society projected abstrusely but nonetheless physically onto all entities in her environment. By the nature of death, she and Adam are not meant to travel their pursuits of death together; rather, Adam is dead and Miranda is left alone in the miserable world to dwindle painfully towards lonely demise. Miranda abruptly wakes from her dream and Adam leaves to get ice cream and hot coffee, but

soon after his momentary egress Miranda is taken to the hospital, and the two never will see each other again. Without Adam, Miranda recedes into death in the worst but only way possible – alone. In the hospital, Miranda again dreams of horrific deaths and pains, of abstract anxiety emerging in dreadful and violent manifestations. Miranda is revived from her drifting state and learns that Adam has died of the influenza in a camp, but Adam has already been dead to her since his commitment to the war. Miranda is left “set ... once more safely in the road that would lead her again to death” (260).

Thus, Miranda tragically concludes in a similar condition she was introduced in; apathetic, desolate, devoid of vibrant life. In her pursuit of death, trapped in a societal environment she found obnoxious and frightening, Miranda reached out to Adam, a determined traveler set upon his journey to death. In him, she found a tantalizing openness and cover from fear; yet, her attachment to him as a fellow companion to alleviate the loneliness of the pursuit of death developed into a deep and unsettling anxiety. Adam’s dedication to the pursuit of death both brings him to and away from Miranda, and Miranda is left desiring more, to continue smoking the intoxicating fumes of love amidst death, without any hope of attaining it. To pursue death is to relinquish bonds and attachments, to approach death as an individual with severed ties to the mortal world. To pursue death together, then, is itself an oxymoronic concept and tragically hopeless ambition; it results in the exacerbation of fear and permanent residence of the anxiety of death within the lonely soul.

Works Cited

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Porter, Katherine. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Harcourt Publishers Group, 1990.