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To cite this article: Andre Ye (2022): The Wartime State and the Cigarette: Darkness and Temporality in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, *The Explicator*, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.2022.2063706](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2022.2063706)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2022.2063706>



Published online: 18 Apr 2022.



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The Wartime State and the Cigarette: Darkness and Temporality in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

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ABSTRACT

Although often overlooked due to its sparse occurrence, the symbol of the cigarette offers a new model to understand key themes of darkness and temporality in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Adam is Miranda's metaphorical cigarette, a device of light and relief from a society pervaded by the darkness of war and sickness. Despite Miranda's pleas, Adam is committed to his guaranteed extinguishment serving in the war. The driving motion throughout the novella is that of an unspoken but relentless temporality - the metaphorical cigarette flame ceases into darkness as Adam's departure nears. This temporality can be understood as a creation of the wartime state, whose systematic movement and organization of human life dominate Adam's being and hence controls Miranda's psychological being and self-relation to her world. Porter's work illustrates the devastating power of the wartime state to impose the metaphysics of inevitable darkness upon its citizens.

KEYWORDS

Cigarette;
light;
darkness;
temporality;
state

For all the literary criticism that has been devoted to Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, critics have passed over the symbol of the cigarette as deserving of serious exploration. Although appearing in explicit form only three times throughout the novella, its brief appearances offer a new model to understand concepts of darkness and temporality in relation to the wartime state. Set in 1918, Miranda – the central character – struggles to reconcile her individual agency and purpose within a society stricken by World War I and the Spanish Flu. Adam, a soldier Miranda has been seeing for a few days, is committed to a noble death serving in the military. Despite knowing this, Miranda cannot quell her love for Adam. From their first interaction, Porter's writing casts their relationship in a disturbing setting, gesturing toward the inevitability of the unfolding tragedy. Adam is symbolically the cigarette Miranda relies upon, an instrument offering brief moments of light and respite to its consumer. The tragedy of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* rests in the inherent

temporality of the cigarette and its parallels in the behavior of the wartime state; it is a profoundly dark device, for any flame it begins to burn is destined for imminent extinguishment. Its metaphysical philosophy is as such: time marches forwards, and light is temporary; darkness is the natural state. The machine of the wartime state controls this temporality, mechanically feeding human life into the war – enforcing the extinguishment of hundreds of thousands of cigarette lights in a fashion as scientific and calculating as the laws of physics. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* narrates a young woman whose tragic experience with love forces her to confront – and ultimately collapse under – the supreme power of the wartime state to dominate the temporality of her world.

The cigarette appears first when Miranda notes that Adam smokes constantly, despite fully understanding the hazardous implications of such behavior. However, Adam rationalizes this practice with the inevitability of his death, asking Miranda, “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). At this moment, a funeral procession approaches, casting the somber shadow of death over the setting. The two share a dark conversation cloaked in lighthearted banter and humor, the cigarettes offering momentary relief from Adam’s inevitable obligation to war and separation and Miranda’s wearying work. When Adam notes that the average life expectancy of a sapping party is about nine minutes, Miranda responds, “make it ten and I’ll come along” (204), followed by laughter. Even in this budding romance – the first lighting of the cigarette – Adam has, despite not having explicitly recognized the power hierarchy, internalized the temporality of the wartime state as a willing subject of its machinations, accepting death. Temporary light will invariably be followed by extinguishment and darkness. Miranda is somewhat aware of this instillation – “She liked him, [...] but it was no good even imagining, because he was not good for her nor any woman, committed without any knowledge or act to his own death” (205) – yet her love, at this moment, still reigns.

After Miranda and Adam attend a play interjected by a patriotic advertisement for Liberty Bonds presented by an elderly man, the two 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’re safe,” Miranda angrily laments. “It’s you they are sending instead” (223). She pleads for Adam not to commit to the war, for her sake: “the worst of war is the fear of suspicion... It frightens me; I live in fear too, and no one should have to live in fear” (223-224). This is an initial acknowledgment and attack on the temporality of inevitable darkness: a desire to suspend the state’s extinguishing machinery, which she

recognizes will eliminate the light that provides her meaning and joy. Adam responds, posed as the archetypal model of patriotism and duty, with a definitive justification: “If I didn’t go, I couldn’t look myself in the face” (224). Miranda frantically attempts to decelerate the force of temporality isolating her from Adam. “Adam, come out of your dream and listen to me,” she desires to beg. “I am in pain all over, and you are in such dangers I can’t bear to think about, and why can we not save each other?” (226) She desires to procreate a new temporality in which extinguishment is not inevitable – a temporality of eternal romance. The desperation and almost adolescent hopelessness with which the new temporality is thrust indicates its deafening impossibility: it is a fairytale dream of sorts. Adam’s patriotic instillations derive from the very war machinations Miranda despises – Adam is a packaged, disposable product from the state’s manufacturing lines. Her defiant hope for a new temporality metamorphoses into a deepening dread, and she begins to acknowledge the metaphysics of the wartime state imprinted in Adam and thus imposed upon her.

In a later scene, Miranda lies weakly on her bed, ridden by influenza, asking Adam for a cigarette. In the cigarette’s third and last appearance in the novella, Adam lights it 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, extinguishing the cigarette light. In a cruel irony, it is at this moment – after the cigarette flame has been smothered – that Miranda and Adam express their love to each other explicitly and intimately for the first time. The pinnacle of the arc of romance is presented temporally as overlapping with their most honest mutual acknowledgement of separation – Miranda knows she holds no hope of welding the new temporality she had hoped for. Their romantic embrace is laced with hopelessness and darkness. This distortion proves fatal: Adam leaves to get ice cream and hot coffee, but soon after his egress, Miranda is taken to the hospital. The two never see each other again. Without Adam, Miranda recedes into a profoundly isolated psychological state, confronted in unprecedented magnitude by the darkness of her life without the cigarette that had, at least in her mind, promised to make her existence bearable. Miranda materializes the deep anxiety this absence imposes upon her in the form of disturbing dreams: 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). Miranda would rather exist with Adam in the darkness of death itself than exist in the gray intermediate state of suffering

under the temporality of a looming darkness that has yet to arrive. . This conceptual understanding of Adam and Miranda's separation illustrates the pained depth and gnashing contradiction of the novella's seemingly tranquil concluding words: "Now there would be time for everything" (264). The wartime state has taken Adam as it ceases; in its absence, Miranda can create the new temporality she longed for all along, but without the partner of procreation the dream has become empty, devoid of meaning. Thus, as the novella draws to a close, Miranda tragically concludes in a condition of deeper suffering than the one she was introduced in, deprived of an instrument of relief and escape. The concept of the cigarette allows us to connect themes of scientific rigidity and humanity; the wartime state machine is responsible for the destruction of human bodies – soldiers – through geography as they navigate the calculations of wartime politics. The cigarette is significant to humanity for the temporary relief and escape it provides, serving as both a vessel of human bonding and as a symbol of slow but inevitable death. It is dually significant in its metaphysical philosophy on the starkly temporary nature of light, respite, and life. The state has, by the processes of defense that enforce the mechanical extinguishment of hundreds of thousands of human 'flame lights', imposed the dark temporality of the cigarette upon the worlds of its consumers. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* demonstrates the staggering sacrifice of war is consists not only of the smothering of lives in combat, but also the blinding darkness that envelops those it leaves behind.

Reference

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