



Reading Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in the Time of COVID-19: A Psychological Reader's Response Study

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at Katherine Anne Porter's collection of short novels *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* through a Psychological Reader's Response lens with particular reference to the condition of life during corona times. By taking into account the factors of life during COVID-19 and the general inclination of people towards pandemic literature, this dissertation focuses on the psychological impact of these works on the readers. All three novellas *Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine*, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* constitute varied illness narratives that act as a source of consciousness-raising in addition to helping us understand the complexity of our situation. We tend to judge and interpret a literary text based on our association with it. Psychological Reader's Response theory provides an understanding of this judgment. So reading this novel during COVID-19 brings attention to one's situation and societal position. This dissertation argues why reading pandemic fiction like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* at a time like this can both negatively impact and provide a sense of companionship to readers. Like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the first two short novels *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine* are also psychologically impactful. Separate chapters are dedicated to each of these short novels.

(**Keywords:** COVID-19, pandemic literature, storytelling, consciousness-raising)

Introduction

Published in 1939, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* by Katherine Anne Porter is a collection of three short novels *Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine*, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Each of these stories beautifully covers the themes of fear of death, hope, and survivor's guilt. *Old Mortality* talks about generational lies that serve as an eye-opener for the protagonist Miranda whereas *Noon Wine* emerges as a scandalous and thrilling story about the family of Thompsons. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, with its remarkably realistic depiction of life in a pandemic combined with war, is a heartbreaking story of a grown up Miranda and her boyfriend Adam, a soldier whose departure to the war front is delayed by the outbreak of the Great Influenza Pandemic, also known as the Spanish Flu of 1918.

If one were to read this collection of short novels on a usual day in 2018 or even most of 2019, it would have been perfectly entertaining. However, things have changed since then. When the first case of coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China on 31st December 2019 our daily life routines took a massive blow. "The World Health Organization declared this COVID-19 break as a global pandemic on 11th March 2020" ("Pharmaceutical"). Everywhere, life came to a standstill. Governments, all over the world, had to impose lockdowns that resulted in unemployment, inflation, and a major setback to their economies. Every second country was forced to seal its borders. People were told to remain in isolation and self-quarantine. Many suffered from various mental illnesses



during this time. Racial crimes also became more frequent. Many had to bear the loss of their loved ones whom they could never have imagined saying goodbye to this soon and this abruptly. Writers like Sumithra Prasanna anticipated a kind of “narrative collapse” especially as far as the writers were concerned (“COVID-19”). India was one of the countries affected most by the second wave of coronavirus in South Asia. Funerals around every street corner, a severe shortage of hospital beds and oxygen cylinders for the sick, space constraints in crematoria, all these scenarios exposed the human ability to cope with sudden pandemics as in the past.

Keeping all of the above in mind, reading a novel like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* while living through a pandemic has turned out to be a case of mixed blessings, a choice both good and bad. When I came across this collection during quarantine, I experienced mixed feelings, sorrow being the dominant emotion in my case. The expressive writing seized my imagination and kept me spellbound till the very end. I can vouchsafe for the fact that after reading *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, a reader is possessed by a seemingly insatiable curiosity to find out more about the author. Porter herself suffered from influenza flu which makes this last novella in the collection a semi-autobiographical narrative (Charles).

Literature produced during the pandemic can comfort us but also make things worse. *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe shows life during the Great Plague of 1665 and the human inability to deal with it. Reading it today, it feels that the measures adopted by the Londoners against the bubonic plague could also have worked well in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, except for the fact that the earlier pandemic or plague was caused by rats. Living during this COVID-19 pandemic, it is normal that we try to find validation in and through literature. However, sometimes instead of feeling validated, our worst experiences come to the fore, old traumas are revived and this prevents us from seeing the positive side of things.

It is important to put oneself in the shoes of other people suffering similar ordeals, whether in the past or the present. That is how one can understand what the other person is going through. This is one of the many aspects of the intrinsic tie between life and literature that I plan to explore in my dissertation. Reading reduces 70 percent of the stress in readers according to a study made in 2009 but the case might reverse in current times, especially with kinds of literature like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (“GMS”). There are certain elements in these stories like the death of Adam, the suicide of Mr. Thompson, and the potential suicide of Aunt Amy that might trigger melancholic feelings in the readers making it difficult for them to enjoy such a piece of writing. But at the same time there are certain aspects in the lives of these characters that provide a narrative of hope. The reason for this is that we are also living through a pandemic where everyone has their own set of good and bad experiences. The psychological impact is highly subjective.

The objective of this research is to determine all the possible scenarios, whether positive or negative that the reader might have experienced, reading this novel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Research drawing “parallels among the two pandemics” already exists (Sethi et al. 1). Comparisons of the symptoms, social stigmatizations, and traumatic effects of the Spanish flu and coronavirus analyzing the “striking similarities between the two pandemics” is also there (Singh 68). Critics also discuss the symbolism in Katherine Anne Porter’s collection of novellas (Smith “Symbolism”).

Elizabeth Outka, the author of *Viral Modernism*, in her chapter “Untangling War and Plague: Willa Cather and Katherine Anne Porter”, directs our attention to the various dimensions of Willa Cather’s and Katherine Anne Porter’s works and appreciates the authors for making the pandemic trauma a central theme. According to Outka, “Porter’s work more directly narrates how the pandemic invaded home-front expectations of masculine death and

feminine safety, and she places a female body experiencing overwhelming pain – pain that arises from illness rather than war – at the center of the work” (45).

Research is also available on “[t]he repercussions of a pandemic in Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*” that focuses on the protagonist of the third novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Miranda (Wanjari and Rohankar). Priya D. Wanjari and Akshara Rohankar call our attention to the semi-autobiographical nature of this novella by linking the traumatic experience of Miranda’s suffering due to influenza flu to that of Porter herself. The importance of the historical perspective of this short novel is also highlighted. The researchers connect different pieces of literature to justify what Porter must have gone through while creating a character like Miranda. This is similar to the research that explores “how Porter recalls, re-members, and narrates the trauma experienced as a victim and as a survivor of the pandemic” (Bhangu 80). It focuses on a better understanding of this crisis.

Jane Elizabeth Fisher, the author of *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War*, in her chapter “Vision, Plague, and Apocalypse in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*” talks about the destruction caused by World War I and the influenza pandemic simultaneously. In addition to this, Fisher analyzes the character of Miranda as representative of women affected and neglected during war and pandemic. She writes: “Porter’s novella is most original in its portrayal of increasing wartime social control over female characters who demonstrate bravery by opposing the subtle violence of war propaganda” (114).

Research is also available on the narrative of hope provided by Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (Alagiya). Kavisha Alagiya particularly talks about the positive role literature performs during global pandemics. Naturally, she focuses on the character of Miranda in the third short novel. She argues how her fight and her behavior are inspirational in times like these.

Laurel, Bollinger in “Trauma, Influenza, and Revelation in Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*” covers the interviews and biographical works on Porter to find the inspiration behind her collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Joan Givner’s *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* provides detailed analysis of Porter’s statements and her biography. Givner draws connections between Porter and Miranda based on the nature of their traumas. “Miranda’s vision at the climax of the story becomes either a record of Porter’s own visionary experience . . . [t]hat movement between the imaginary and the actual functions as Porter’s attempt to cope with the trauma of her experiences” (Bollinger 367-8).

Elizabeth Outka, in “How Pandemics seep into Literature”, highlights a writer’s innate need to record their experience while going through a historical crisis. From W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming”, William Maxwell’s elegiac novel *They Came Like Swallows*, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* to Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, she talks about the importance of these pieces of literature which help us build our perspective during these uncertain times. Similar to these writers who recorded their influenza pandemic experiences, a century ago, we are also recording our experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic which is bound to echo into the future (Outka “How Pandemics”).

Despite the plethora of work available on Porter, very little has been said about the experience of reading this classic text, offering us an evocative literary representation of a devastating pandemic as one is living through a pandemic. This dissertation attempts to render this wholly unique experience in the form of formal critical discourse. My decision to include the other two novels in this discussion is based on the fact that they also offer insight into issues related to tuberculosis and mental health. I focus on the experiences narrated in these novels in terms of their relevance to battling illnesses during COVID-19.

I have produced a Psychological Reader's Response study of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in this dissertation. Putting myself in the shoes of readers experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, I provide an account of reading a narrative dealing with a pandemic and other health related matters while living through a health crisis.

Research Questions

I focus on the following research questions throughout my dissertation:

- How are Aunt Amy's character, her potential suicide, and Miranda's rebellious attitude related to life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How and in what ways are Thompsons' family's isolated life, their relationship with Mr. Helton, and Mr. Thompson's suicide triggering for someone leading an isolated existence during this pandemic?
- Are the overall scenarios (Miranda's fight against flu, outbreak of virus, etc.) in the last novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* inspiring or traumatizing/upsetting in terms of their psychological impact?

Theoretical Framework

For this dissertation, I use the Psychological Reader-Response theory proposed by Norman Holland. Reader-response theory generally deals with the response of the reader to reading the text. This Psychological Reader-Response theory is one of its types. "Holland believes that we react to literary texts with the same psychological responses we bring to events in our daily lives" (Mambrol "Psychological"). We try to project our identities and experiences into a literary text so that the text becomes a manifestation of our insecurities and desires. This manifestation is what we usually call our interpretation of a text. So, this makes the process of interpretation of a literary text a psychological one more than intellectual. First, we try to defend our anxieties and fantasize about a favorable outcome upon coming across a text. After this emotional response, we try to balance it out by intellectually analyzing it. This makes the intellectual interpretation an outcome of the emotional ones which we hardly realize while assessing a literary text. Similar to dealing with a real life disaster, our personal experiences also account for understanding a given literary text. In other words, our interpretation of a literary text (which is primarily psychological) is not necessarily a reflection of its meaning but our personal experiences.

Based on the above understanding of this theoretical framework, the Psychological Reader's Response analysis of any literary text requires the writer to share their account of personal experiences that lead to a particular interpretation of the text. This is the reason why I must state my experience of living through the COVID-19 pandemic while analyzing the various illnesses' narratives in the novellas of Katherine Anne Porter. These illness' narratives, especially in the case of *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine*, have not been addressed before. The experience of living through a pandemic, I believe, brings out a judgment that is not plausible under normal circumstances. With the help of the Psychological Reader's Response theory, I look further into the interpretation of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* as a text that has the potential to be both positively and negatively impactful. As much as I am confined by the qualitative fact of not being able to speak on other readers' behalf, I am hopeful that my understanding of this text reflects to some extent the feelings of those readers who have gone through the experience of COVID-19 like me and relied on illness narratives like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* to gain an understanding of the situation.

Norman Holland's Psychological Reader's Response theory is similar to David Bleich's understanding of a literary text and the reader's role in its interpretation. Bleich proposes two objects, real and symbolic. The real ones are considered physically accessible while the symbolic objects are considered abstract such as language. When readers read a book (real object) and try to interpret the language (symbolic object), they are trying to understand the meaning based on their respective experiences. Bleich calls this act of interpretation symbolization. "Symbolization occurs when our experience of the text produces in us a desire for explanation. Our evaluation of

the text's quality is also an act of symbolization; we don't like or dislike a text; we like or dislike our symbolization of it . . . it's the text in our mind" (Mambrol "Subjective"). The reader tends to judge a literary text based on their associations and memories of a certain incident. The Psychological Reader's Response theory provides the understanding for this judgment. Both David Bleich and Norman Holland have contributed to this model of criticism. However, Norman Holland has identified and explained the role of psychology when readers come across a literary text. He says that "the individual apprehends the resources of reality (including language, his own body, space, time, etc.) as he relates to them in such a way that they replicate his identity" (Mailloux 24).

Psychological responses can be positive and negative. Holland proposes that "DEFT" (defenses, expectations, fantasies, and transformations) acts as some kind of coping mechanism in the readers (24). Readers tend to defend their anxieties and worst-case scenarios by thinking positively. In the same manner, they might look for a silver lining in an already concluded case. For instance, when someone comes across a story where the protagonist appears to be moving towards their definite death, then they might still look for some miracle that could change the fate of their favorite character. This is a fantastical psychological response in readers. Similarly, readers can also take in a particular event as part of a series of events (24). This makes them expect the best and worst at the same time depending on their personal experiences. Transformational psychological response in readers occurs when they try to make sense of the text by uniting its elements i.e. "meaningful totality" (25). As Holland says "[u]nity is not in the text but in the mind of a reader" (25). It is because of this unity, that a reader can interpret a literary text according to their understanding. This can also be called "interpretive synthesis" when a reader derives a meaning to satisfy their desires that conforms to their personal experiences as well (25). Norman Holland's concept signified as DEFT allows for the possibility of varied readers' responses/interpretations without any restrictions. A story, no matter how simple or complex, is re-created in the process of its interpretation. In simple terms, "meaning is the output of a psychological process; the input to that process is the story" (28).

In the same sense, Katherine Anne's portrayal of various illnesses (tuberculosis, mental health, influenza) in the case of Miranda and Adam, as well as other characters, is bound to affect readers reading these texts in contemporary times. My dissertation offers a Psychological Reader-Response analysis of Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* to showcase the experience of reading an illness narrative while living through a pandemic.

READING OLD MORTALITY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Psychological Reader-Response theory, as mentioned before, suggests that readers interpret a literary text based on their experiences.

Keeping Norman Holland's proposed modalities (Defenses, Expectations, Fantasies, and Transformation) in mind, I analyze *Old Mortality* with specific reference to the time spent during the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that the rapidly sweeping nature of this pandemic has been responsible for the psychological as well as mental health disorders among the people. It has been more than two years now since the first case of coronavirus appeared in 2019 and changed the course of the whole world. With the increased levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression during the imposed lockdowns all across the world, many people find it natural to escape into the world of books. It is, without a doubt, true that literary texts provide a necessary escape and comfort to their readers. But with the recent developments i.e. life during the COVID-19 pandemic reading some literary texts would be the same as torturing oneself. Then again this depends on the personal experiences of the readers. This takes me to *Old Mortality* which is a tale of Aunt Amy as told through the eyes of Miranda's grandmother and Cousin Eva. On the surface level, it is like any other captivating story but taking into account my experience of living during COVID-19; this short novel is re-created in its meaningful and understanding sense.

During the peak of COVID-19 with lockdowns all over the world, there came the general "narrative collapse" as mentioned in the introduction (Prasanna). People began to spread fabricated information regarding the cure of the

virus. All of this was a defensive mechanism to calm their nerves. We see something similar in *Old Mortality*. The grandmother of Miranda and Maria always presents a role model image of her daughter Amy in front of the girls. They grow up listening to the tales of their Aunt Amy. “Maria and Miranda, aged twelve and eight years, knew they were young, though they felt they had lived a long time” (Porter “Old Mortality” 4). This shows how frequently they had to listen and experience something they had never witnessed. A person stuck in their house due to the COVID-19 pandemic might feel a sense of understanding towards the grandmother who used to fabricate these stories. This understanding comes from the need for “something to do” (Smith “Intimations” 16). Due to the “moral anxiety” that comes with having plenty of time, both Zadie Smith and Katherine Anne Porter flesh out the importance of storytelling addressing the common human need to fill out time back then and now (16). Miranda’s grandmother tells stories of Aunt Amy’s life to give a sense of purpose to her life by passing on the legend to the next generations. Zadie Smith, in a similar sense, finds validation in doing anything to not waste her time during this COVID-19 pandemic as she talks about in “[s]omething to do”.

Aunt Amy had been “much loved, unhappy, and she had died young” (4). Miranda especially admires her whole personality. “She believed for a quiet while that she would one day be like Aunt Amy, not as she appeared in the photograph, but as she was remembered by those who had seen her” (10). This is all because of the charismatic image that is presented to Miranda of Aunt Amy. Amy was a great horse racer, a fantastic dancer, and the life of ball parties. I find her life in the first part of the novel somewhat depressing, as a quarantined person. Loneliness is one of the main issues observed in people during COVID-19. So, reading something like this, acts as a kind of a reminder of our daily busy lives before the quarantine. The psychological impact can be negative and positive depending on the practical experiences of the readers. Some might feel relieved having this ample time as a break while some might long for everything to go back to normal. As a woman, going through the life of Aunt Amy is depressing since it was charming only at the surface level while she struggled daily to merely exist. This is similar to the E (expectation) psychological response. Based on their personal experiences, people can expect things to be different sooner or later.

Moving forward, we also get to know of “romantic beau” Uncle Gabriel who is revealed to be a “drunkard” in the second part of the short novel (54). Not only does he marry Miss Honey shortly after Amy’s death but also treats her without much concern giving Miranda a hint of his not-so-admirable nature with Aunt Amy either. Miranda going to these races and meeting Uncle Gabriel, at the age of ten, acts as the first step to the revelation of the truth about her beloved Aunt Amy. Her encounter with Cousin Eva as an adult and married woman acts as a plot twist. She is faced with the bitter truth that her aunt was not loved and admired as told by her elders. In the words of Cousin Eva Parrington “[s]he 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” (71).

Her life, whether narrated in a positive sense or negative one, tells us that she is a romantic. She becomes an icon of womanhood because of her looks and delicate manner. Therefore, it is kind of a given that she dies in the end from a famously known “romantic disease”, tuberculosis (Melzer). The association of numerous artistic figures such as John Keats, Lord Byron (who desired to die from consumption), etc. with T.B. made it a symbol of beautiful death. The “consumptive aesthetic” that includes dramatically pale skin, red cheeks along with the feverish glow is one of the major reasons why people ignored Amy’s failing health (Clarke).

People who believed COVID-19 was not authentic faced a life-long trauma when their close relatives or even themselves; contacted the virus. Psychology is very important in fighting against any disease. The first step requires accepting the ground reality instead of staying in denial. In the case of the pandemic, this denial resulted from sheer hopelessness and helplessness in people. So, just like Miranda, it came as a complete shock to such people who got aware of the destructive nature of coronavirus. Miranda is never informed that Aunt Amy suffered from tuberculosis in her last days. Her illness was ignored just like people ignored COVID-19 in the beginning by

treating it as regular flu and not taking the necessary precautionary measures. Reading the case of Miranda is triggering and validating at the same time for someone like me who had first-hand experience of dealing with COVID-19 which I did not believe in before.

Moreover, regardless of the different versions of Aunt Amy's life, the poor condition of her health is admitted both by her mother and Cousin Eva. There are constant hints that Amy was losing interest in her life because her health was slowly but surely deteriorating:

Mammy, I'm sick of this world. I don't like anything in it. It's so dull . . . [s]he had never been tearful, even as a child, and her mother was alarmed. It was then she discovered that Amy had fever. (30)

During quarantine, many people lost their sense of direction. Many, on the other hand, found themselves. Though Amy was not stuck in isolation her general existential crisis is relatable to people going through a prolonged period of contemplation and reflection on health and other life expectancy related matters in isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are further hints that Amy's sickness was ignored by people around her "[s]he was really ill by now, but in the gayest of humors" (31). When Uncle Gabriel comes to Amy, Cousin Eva sends him away by saying she was ill (34). "She had been ill, her chest was weak" (17). Just after the six weeks of her marriage, Amy dies.

Contrary to the "romantic" illness that Miranda's grandmother portrayed it was the opposite (77). Amy coughed blood as she suffered from tuberculosis but she never gets proper treatment for that. She led her life like a normal healthy person despite being this sick. It shows she might be in denial as well. The letter of her caretaker nurse reveals that she used to beg for more medicine irrespective of the doctor's orders indicating towards her anxious and depressed mental state. And later Cousin Eva also reveals "I have every reason to believe she killed herself with the drug they gave her to keep her quiet after a hemorrhage" (76). Keeping in mind, that Amy was already sick with her life and to top that she got tuberculosis does not make it completely unbelievable that she committed suicide. People can find this situation relatable to a dangerous level. It is not hidden that suicide rates increased exponentially during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Santoni et al.). The tendency for self-harm has become more frequent due to this pandemic. So anyone going through this novel might start to feel validated in their sense of self-harm, especially with the depressive outcome at the end of *Old Mortality*. Many people did not want to accept their states when they caught the virus just like Amy who kept on going to the dances despite being sick. This is something that made me expect a miracle to happen in the end in terms of her recovery which might be likely representative of the general readers' response. The final scene where Cousin Eva is "sinfully cheerful" at the thought of getting together with her family at Uncle Gabriel's funeral is generally triggering since funerals are not allowed for the burial of people who die from COVID-19 and at the same time is remindful of their significance (84).

We, as readers, can look at the bright side and feel hopeful at the ending just as Miranda resolves to remain true to her life in the end (89). But we cannot ignore the "raw materials" in this short novel that can greatly have a similar negative psychological impact on people living during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mailloux 27). When people face similar situations, they tend to get influenced by similar things as told by Norman Holland. So Aunt Amy living a dull life while being stuck in a loveless marriage just to protect her image and finally dying of tuberculosis is psychologically triggering enough to make a person, stuck in quarantine, lose interest in their life as well. But the title *Old Mortality* itself has a connotation with immortality. The surface level meaning is death by an old age but Aunt Amy becomes immortal by becoming a symbol of beautiful woman dying young from tuberculosis. Regardless of the negative impact, this short novel can also act as a reference of experiences of people in different eras during different pandemics for the readers. Miranda's firm resolve to live her life in her own way is a warm ray of light in these times. Ending this chapter on the poem by Uncle Gabriel for Aunt Amy in the hope it might be consoling for people who lost their loved ones to COVID-19:

She lives again who suffered life

Then suffered death, and now set free

A singing angel, she forgets

The griefs of old mortality. (17)

PSYCHOLOGICAL READER'S RESPONSE ANALYSIS OF NOON WINE

In comparison to *Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine*, with its much more explicit writing and situations, can prove to be more positively or negatively impactful as one is living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Starting with Mr. Helton eagerly looking for a job can make the readers in isolation desperate as well. Due to the pandemic, about 97 million more people have been living on less than \$1.9 a day increasing the global poverty rate from 7.8 to 9.1 percent (Sanchez-Paramo et al). So, the immediate scene of Mr. Helton asking for work at a cheap rate acts as a reality check instead of providing a momentary escape. "I can do everything on farm. Cheap. I need work" (Porter "Noon Wine" 95). Mr. Thompson, while concluding the deal with Mr. Helton, decides to give him special favors (allowing him to eat with them, etc.) which he did not offer to his former black slaves. I felt this racist stance and inequality to be negatively triggering for myself which is probably representative of the negative psychological impact on the minds of readers particularly due to the increase in racial crimes during COVID-19. The most prominent example is the case of George Floyd who was deprived of his "universal right to breathe" because of his skin color (Mbembe 1). His last words "I can't breathe" intertwined the history of the coronavirus i.e. the struggle for air that often comes with it, and the history of racially inflicted police violence (Crawford 1).

Time and again, my attention is brought to the unique and peculiar state of the Thompsons' dairy farm in *Noon Wine*. "No one else in the whole countryside had such a spring on his land. Mr. and Mrs. Thompson felt they had a fortune in that spring, if ever they got around to doing anything with it" (101). The fact that they lived in the countryside speaks for itself about their isolated lifestyle. "Twice a week he drove the spring wagon to market with fresh butter, a few eggs, fruits in their proper season, sold them, pocketed them . . ." (112). Despite a comparatively large number of cattle (cows, calves, hens, horses, hogs, and goats) to be taken care of on the farm, Mr. Thompson still hires only one man. This could be an indication of his miserly nature along with his disapproval of change in their lifestyle. "He looked forward to the boys growing up soon; he was going to put them through the mill just as his own father had done with him when he was a boy; they were going to learn how to take hold and run the place right" (115). The farm becomes much more organized and neat due to the hardworking nature of Mr. Helton. All this shows the isolated state of the Thompsons' dairy farm in South Texas.

Reading during the time of the present crisis, the story further exacerbates my feelings of isolation. With the spread of coronavirus, governments all over the world were forced to take precautionary measures by imposing lockdowns and making people self-quarantine. Not only the farm is sort of isolated but the Thompsons' family also does not seem to socialize much throughout the short novel. Mr. Thompson only goes out of the countryside to sell his farm products. His sons play all day long amongst each other, and Mrs. Thompson only interacts with her husband.

On top of that, Mr. Helton himself is not a very gregarious and sociable person. Looking at these "raw materials" from *Noon Wine*, I, as a person living through the COVID-19 pandemic, expect (DEFT) the worst to happen to this family (Mailloux 27). Defenses, expectations, fantasy, and transformation (DEFT) is a reading tool created by Norman Holland to psychoanalytically analyze a literary text. Readers tend to subconsciously use these modalities to defend their anxieties. During the pandemic, generally negative experiences are associated when it comes to isolation, quarantine, and lockdown. Expecting the worst while looking at the somewhat isolated and unsociable

situations of the Thompsons' family in *Noon Wine* acts as a defensive strategy. Despite the smooth flow of the story, there remains a hidden uneasy feeling after the arrival of Mr. Helton at the farm. Hence, this naturally aggravates the psychological conditions. This isolated state of the farm and the Thompsons' family can potentially negatively or positively impact someone who is trying their best to cope with the current going pandemic in their respective confined spaces. Living like this protects the Thompsons' family from any unnecessary outside conflict so far which can positively impact the readers during these times. It depends on their sets of experiences during the pandemic.

Moving forward, the character of Mr. Helton holds the potential to be hated and pitied at the same time. He is introduced as a peculiar yet very dedicated farmer. His poor social skills might remind a reader living through the COVID-19 pandemic, of their secluded state. I am asserting this because with the worldwide imposition of lockdowns, people were forced to shift to online modes of communication (Gabbadini et al.). As a result, many found it difficult to connect upon meeting someone in person. The already anxious state of mind does not help in this particular case. Looking at Mr. Helton from the perspective of a COVID-19 survivor induces feelings of annoyance and fear. "Now here was Mr. Helton, who was a Swede, who wouldn't talk, and who played the harmonica besides" (105).

In addition to this, he also has a repetitive routine. From waking up, feeding the cattle, brewing milk, and cheeses, to taking care of the milk house, he works like a robot. He plays his harmonica daily and eats and sleeps after completing all his chores. "He got up at five o'clock in the morning, boiled his own coffee and fried his own bacon and was out in the cow lot . . ." (115). According to the Psychological Reader's Response theory, readers tend to relate and hate, at the same time, the things they have personally experienced with the things they come across upon reading a literary text. A person who has been advised to self-quarantine after testing positive for coronavirus would probably despise reading something like this. It might give them a feeling of purposelessness. However, this feeling is not guaranteed to be COVID-19 positive person specific. Others who have been trying to make their ends meet due to their failing economic situation might also be triggered negatively. But at the same time, reading Mr. Helton's hectic routine generates feelings of gratitude for this unnatural worldwide break from our daily robotic lifestyle. During quarantine, the sense of day and night was lost. Reading the highly organized lifestyle of Mr. Helton, acts as a reminder of my purposeful life before COVID-19.

Based on Holland's psychoanalytic tool DEFT (Defenses, Expectation, Fantasy, and Transformation), readers might take this event as transformational (T), something that is a part of a more significant event and ignore it as a coping mechanism. When a certain incident/event is taken as transformational, it does not mean it is insignificant. Readers expect that event to act as a contributing factor for a larger incident in the future which can be positive and negative. So, in the case of *Noon Wine*, the organized lifestyle of Mr. Helton at the Thompsons' family farm is itself suspicious considering he is underpaid. It is quite apparent that there is an underlying motive behind his extreme dedication to the farm that leaves no space for complaints from the owners. In the same sense, it stops us from overthinking the situation and encourages looking forward to the story.

Similar to most of us living during this COVID-19 pandemic, the underlying motive of Mr. Helton behind working diligently on that farm at a cheaper rate is to survive and hide. Mrs. Thompson does not like the attitude of Mr. Helton despite his dedicated nature. This generally makes anyone anxious about the unsocial lifestyles they have been forced to adopt during this pandemic. However, they might feel defensive (D) of their anxieties as well after coming across a character like Mr. Helton. The character of Mr. Helton provides a sense of companionship with respect to our similar motive during these times i.e. survival.

Contrary to what Mr. Thompson believes, Mr. Helton never really opens up even after spending years with their family (118). I find this disappointing but at the same time helpful to understand the complexity of our situation especially with regards to living in isolation. We might feel less confident in getting back to our real selves after

the pandemic is over but that is normal. Mr. Helton, in the end, fails to keep hiding on the farm. This can trigger someone who has lost their loved ones to coronavirus despite all the necessary precautionary measures. When I claim readers might pity Mr. Helton, it is because of his failed attempt at having a peaceful life at the Thompsons' dairy farm. Pitying him would mean they have experienced or witnessed something similar, according to the Psychological Reader's Response theory.

Mr. Helton, despite his poor social skills, manages to make a special place in the heart of Mr. Thompson mainly due to his dedicated nature. "There seemed to be nothing the fellow couldn't do, all in the day's work and as a matter of course" (115). We see the admiring attitude from Mr. Thompson here. He increases his pay without Mr. Helton demanding a pay raise. "The man's worth it, Ellie . . . [h]e's made this place pay, and I want him to know I appreciate it" (117). Mr. Thompson justifying Mr. Helton's act of shaking his boys because they were annoying him with their silly pranks also shows how much he begins to trust this Swede guy at this point. "It's a wonder he don't just kill 'em off and be done with it" (126). However, with the nine years passing by, the whole of the Thompsons' family becomes fond of Mr. Helton's presence. When someone has lived with you for almost ten years, it is only natural that you begin to treat them like family. Something similar happens with Mr. Thompson when a man named Mr. Hatch comes in search of Mr. Helton. Through the long encounter with Mr. Hatch, Mr. Thompson gets to know shocking personal details about Mr. Helton. It is revealed that Mr. Helton has killed his brother over his harmonica which leads him to be sent to the asylum from where he runs off. Mr. Thompson still tries to justify everything that was told to them "[w]hy, he's been like one of the family, the best standby a man ever had" (152). His attachment to Mr. Helton is such that he ends up killing Mr. Hatch to protect Mr. Helton. Mr. Helton, on the other hand, runs away from the crime scene. "Why, yonder goes Mr. Helton" (153). Now one might wonder why Mr. Thompson gets this attached to a stranger. He has a jolly good personality true, but that ends up killing him. Unsurprisingly, the isolated manner in which the Thompsons' family lived makes it easier for Mr. Helton, a stranger, to mold and live with them. During COVID-19 lockdowns, people were starving for connections. "Intruders" by Taha Kehar also points out this desperation for human connection. It is a story about online intruders who try to mess up an online marriage ceremony just to get some attention (64). So, such a person reading *Noon Wine* might be triggered by feelings of betrayal and fear. They might feel connected to Mr. Thompson and his need to defend Mr. Helton despite knowing he was not mentally well and required proper treatment.

Based on the DEFT modalities, I also find myself subconsciously expecting Mr. Helton playing the role of hero i.e. saving Mr. Thompson from the suspicious looks of his neighborhood by coming back and retelling the incident. Of all the people, Mr. Helton understands how it feels to be treated as an outsider. Yet he does not come back because the only reason he had been working hard on that farm was to not get fired and to stay alive for as long as possible.

The title of this short novel is itself indicative of this unfavorable outcome. "*Noon Wine* is derived from the single tune Helton plays on his beloved harmonica, a Scandinavian folk song about the regrets of a worker who drank up all of his wine before the noon break" (Butscher). Mr. Thompson, on the other hand, gets the wrong idea thinking Mr. Helton was doing it for the progress of their family. This is the bitter truth that is somehow hard to accept as this pandemic survivor. Just as Norman Holland said, a reader might expect the best to happen till the very end as a coping mechanism. Thinking positively in the worst-case scenarios allows the readers to defend their anxieties as stated by Holland. At this point of the short novel, it is apparent that Mr. Helton will never come back to clear the name of Mr. Thompson but still, readers, just as I did, might look for a silver lining in this already concluded case by hoping against hope.

On the contrary, things get worse when Mrs. Thompson and her sons start looking at Mr. Thompson as a monster. Despite him winning the trial, nobody believes that he is in the right. "She wished now she had died one of those times when she had been so sick, instead of living on for this" (156). People suffering from coronavirus might be

triggered by this whole situation since she prefers to die here from sickness than face others. Instead of comforting her already distressed husband, she is worried about what others might think. Mr. Thompson suffers from severe survivor's guilt in the process of trying to recall the incident again and again. "Did he have to kill Mr. Hatch?" (170). The only way he thinks that he could work "it" i.e. prove his innocence was by killing himself and so he does (176). Even in his final moments, he truly believes Mr. Helton to be an honorable man. "If I had been in Mr. Helton's place he would of done the same for me" (175). A person who has lost someone dear to coronavirus might be distressed by witnessing Mr. Thompson's situation. Death and suicide have become sensitive topics during this pandemic. Reading this short novel which covers such issues in detail acts as a reminder to check on our loved ones who might be silently suffering during these uncertain times. In addition to this, Mr. Helton not acknowledging Mr. Thompson's heroic deed is an unwelcome reminder of the uncertainty during these corona times. No matter how much a person has done for the treatment of someone dear to them diagnosed with COVID-19, they can never be sure of the outcome. Mr. Thompson's feeling of helplessness is especially relatable for a reader who reads this work during the present pandemic.

This tragic tale of a once simple and happy family of Thompsons is already sad enough. But reading this while stuck in a COVID-19 pandemic makes it even worse. Instead of providing escape, I find the raw materials in this story negatively aggravating my psychological state. However, this short novel also acts as a positive reminder to not lose our sense of control due to our desperation for human connection, a mistake Mr. Thompson made while hiring Mr. Helton without looking properly into his background.

PSYCHOLOGICAL READER'S RESPONSE ANALYSIS OF *PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER*

This chapter analyzes the title short novel of this collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* through a Psychological Reader's Response lens. This short novel covers the life of Miranda powerfully disrupted by World War I and the influenza pandemic of 1918, each creating collective destruction and death (Fisher 111). It is kind of a war romance between a journalist Miranda and a soldier named Adam who's enlisted for the war. The story takes a tragic turn when Miranda and Adam catch influenza virus. Miranda manages to fight it off but Adam, being in the middle of war along with the lack of medical health facilities, dies leaving Miranda questioning her purpose of existence in the end.

Miranda is shown despising the war-pandemic situation she is stuck in. Being a journalist, she is well aware of the political dynamics empowering the elites and bringing suffering to the poor. Despite the chaos around her, she still manages to enjoy the little things in her life. "I have only nothing but it is enough, it is beautiful and it is all mine" (Porter 180). Moreover, she is in a fledgling relationship with a soldier Adam enlisted for the war. "Miranda smiled at him gaily because she was always delighted at the sight of him" (196) These positive bits from Miranda's perspective might act as a comforting pill for people, just as they did for me, who have lost their sense of purpose during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, there are more instances in the short novel that have the potential to trigger melancholic feelings amongst its readers. The war setup does not help. Miranda's and Adam's somehow casual reaction to the passing funerals is triggering. With the second wave of COVID-19 especially, there was a huge death toll. Many countries were not ready to prepare themselves for the attack. India, being one of the unprepared countries, got hit by the second wave of the coronavirus severely becoming "the new epicenter of the global pandemic" after the US (Biswas). Funerals were observed around every corner. Crematoria became scarce to put the dead to their final rest. Despite having all the money in the world, people became helpless due to the shortage of rooms/ICUs in hospitals. It seemed like the whole country was in a physical war similar to the imagery in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. "At first corner, they waited for a funeral to pass, the mourners seated straight and firm as if proud in their sorrow" (196). This scene transpires when Miranda and Adam are out on a date together. The situation during peak corona days was very similar. "The men are dying like flies out there, anyway. This funny new disease. Simply knocks

you into a cocked hat” (200) We can see the “narrative collapse” in Adam’s speech just as we have been observing since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Prasanna) Prasanna argues that narrative collapse happens when we feel a sense of loss of agency and powerlessness during a certain situation resulting in a lack of clarity. We are unable to make sense of our experiences or the things happening around us. Adam’s speech is a good example of narrative collapse in terms of lack of clarity towards influenza virus which as a result leaves the people at that time powerless against this. Coming across reactions like these, act as a source of validation in times of crisis and chaos. Miranda suggests Adam run away with her to the “park bench” or the “mountains”, this shows her desire to have an ordinary and simple life contrary to her current chaotic situation (202). This “raw material” is similar to what people might relate to being stuck in this COVID-19 pandemic i.e. the longing for turning everything back to normal (Mailloux 27)

People at Miranda’s press talking about the conspiracies regarding the flu serves as a reminder of the prejudices circulated in the international media against China when the current crisis broke out. “They say that it is really caused by germs brought by a German ship to Boston, a camouflaged ship, naturally, it didn’t come in under its own colors” (206) This claim is similar to calling coronavirus the “China virus”, or “Wuhan virus” merely due to the detection of the first COVID-19 case in Wuhan, China (Bushman). In case of the Great Influenza epidemic, it was also named Spanish Flu because it was wrongly assumed that since the cases were first reported in Spain, therefore Spain was ground zero for the virus. In fact, the virus started in army camps in Kansas, but because America felt that its chances of winning the First World War would be negatively impacted, the news was made public. It is important to note that people who have lost their loved ones to such diseases are not interested in the use of a “racially stigmatizing language” but its cure (Bushman). Reading something like this serves as a strong reminder of the ridiculousness of people back then as well as today, leaving the present COVID-19 sufferers hopeless instead of hopeful. This conforms to the “E (expectations)” of DEFT by Holland i.e. people tend to expect good and bad based on their respective experiences (24).

According to the Psychological Reader’s Response theory, a reader tends to see the best and worst in a given situation represented in a text based on their practical knowledge. A turn of events takes place in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* when Miranda gets sick with influenza flu. Reading the description of her suffering makes one feel as if we are suffering with her. Such is the expressive writing of Katherine Anne Porter:

I shall not feel or remember, 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 that was her childhood dream of safety, breathing slowly for fear of squandering breath, saying desperately, Look, don’t be afraid, it is nothing, it is only eternity . . . [death] is death . . . (252)

Miranda’s confused state is seen here. She herself becomes an unreliable narrator not because she is consciously lying but because she no longer knows what shape the truth might take or trust herself to find it (107). Furthermore, she has constant nightmares while being stuck in this horrific state. The environment of a hospital is known to make a person even more depressed. “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” (258). Continuously going through the state of sick Miranda, a person stuck in the COVID-19 pandemic might be triggered if they are already traumatized by contacting the virus or have seen someone close to them suffering from it. “She folded her painful body together and wept silently, shamelessly in pity for herself and her lost rapture” (259). The uncertainty of her situation is similar to someone who gets diagnosed coronavirus. These “sly droplets” which make their way into the human body are deadly to say the least (Amin). I expect Miranda to die considering her state based on the “DEFT” of Norman Holland (24). Expecting the worst, in this case, acts as a defense mechanism keeping in mind

her painful illness. Jane Elizabeth Fisher, in chapter four of *Envisioning Disease, Gender, and War; Women's Narratives of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic*, points out that in the world of uncertainty, death becomes the only absolute (107). But she does not die. She fights against the flu valiantly which might encourage the readers like me stuck in the COVID-19 pandemic not to lose hope, to not give up.

The plot twist which no one expects is the death of Miranda's lover Adam who also catches influenza flu at his camp amidst war. But due to the lack of medical health facilities there, he ends up losing his life. This leaves an unquestionably negative psychological impact when you have witnessed your loved ones losing their lives during the pandemic of COVID-19. This can be true in the reader's context as well due to common pandemic experiences like lockdown, quarantine, contacting the virus, etc.

The reason why this tale of Miranda and Adam feels real while reading this short novel is due to the subtle truth to this story. Katherine Anne Porter confessed that she wrote this short novel for her lover when she was sick with influenza flu in a hospital in Denver:

Oh yes, autobiographical. No, I have nothing, there are only two stories that are really definitely autobiographical something that happened directly to me and one of them is bigger was *Pale Rider* and yet it is really not about me. It's about Alexander Berkeley whose name I called Adam Berkeley . . . that boy came in took care of me just as a saint . . . [h]e was on his way to the war . . . we met each other and we fell in love . . . [I]t was four or five days he took care of me and he must have died himself just a few days after us. ("Porter" 00:11:41:12:41)

It was in an interview about her nearly fifty years as a writer, filled with poetry, prose, and short stories hosted by James Day. She wrote this short novel for him. The description of Miranda in the throes of the influenza virus feels real for the particular reason that Porter herself suffered from this deadly flu at the age of 27.

It is without a doubt that Miranda does feel hopeless at times during her illness as stated "[n]ow if real daylight just as I remember having seen in this world would only come again, but it is always twilight or just before morning, a promise of day that is never kept" still she does not succumb to these thoughts (257). She fights till her last breath against this virus until she is only skin and bones. Psychologically, her fighting spirit comes across as a breath of fresh air during these grave times. At the same time, towards the end of the short novel, when she finds out about the death of Adam, one cannot say with any degree of certainty if she becomes utterly depressed or is looking forward to the future. The final take depends on how readers perceive it based on their experiences. The melancholic vibe of the ending cannot be ignored. After always complaining about not having time to enjoy life, and travel, Miranda's wish finally gets fulfilled. "No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything" (264) There are two ways I see this response of Miranda. The first is the irony of her situation i.e. despite surviving miraculously she is feeling hopeless and purposeless here. This feeling of purposelessness is relatable for a person living during the COVID-19 pandemic looking for "something to do" (Smith 16). But it is her strong resolve and appreciation of little things in life that helps her fighting off the deadly flu so true; she might be in mourning here or feeling dejected but knowing her character who stands against her family tradition/values in *Old Mortality* and survives in a peak war-pandemic situation, she is bound to find a new purpose of her life. This is the positive aspect I find here which I think the reader might also agree with. This is per the DEFT modalities proposed by Norman Holland. A reader tends to take the "raw materials" which have affected him in one manner or the other (27). The similar situations such as quarantine, isolation, getting in contact with COVID-19, etc. that we have all been forced to face since the beginning of 2020 make it evident that this particular incident can become a source of melancholic feelings or the strong firm resolve to keep on surviving, among the readers depending upon their personal associations with it. These raw materials make it easier to predict the particular emotions a reader might feel reading *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

Many instances in the novel like the death of Adam, the outbreak of influenza flu, Miranda's suffering, and her depressive episodes, make it difficult to find a momentary escape through this short novel. But at the same time, Miranda's fighting spirit is a light breeze that acts as a symbol of hope for someone who is fighting this corona virus. This takes me to the poem by Mehvash Amin, "I do not want this sly droplet to insinuate itself into the cells that make me, duping them into turning traitor/Surely my mind can dictate: //you are mine, don't surrender, don't surrender" (1). The resolve shown by this poet is similar to Miranda's fighting spirit. To anyone suffering from COVID-19, a dialogue of Chuck, a senior of Miranda at the publishing house might be of help "Toughen up, Miranda. This is no time to cave in" (214)

This short novel comes across as a package of hope and despair. As much as it provides a narrative of hope, we cannot ignore the fact that it can be depressing for people stuck in this COVID-19 pandemic. As we know, coronavirus has taken millions of lives yet it is still in its on and off phase. We might have almost dealt with the deadly second wave of COVID-19 but there is still no guarantee that there will be the third wave. With the emergence of the omicron variant, the slight rise of COVID-19 cases again, and all the fresh memories of losses because of this pandemic, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* has become ever more relevant albeit with mildly triggering features that could potentially lead one to a state of despair in the present scenario. Coupled with the symbolism of the pale rider as a messenger of death, suicide and illness, these matters have become quite sensitive topics during this pandemic. Acknowledging this fact, *Pale Horse, Pale Horse* with its semi-autobiographical nature strikes more deeply than the other short novels in this collection.

According to the Psychological Reader's Response theory, the interpretation of a text is a reflection of the thoughts and experiences of that person. As someone who is living through this COVID-19 pandemic, I find the instances in this novella reflective of my anxieties and fears. The illness narrative, as represented from a perspective of a resilient female character, Miranda who not only combats it but also manages to stay hopeful during that chaotic time provides a sense of warmth as I am living through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Henceforth, reading *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* while facing lockdowns because of the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing funerals after funerals that you are not even allowed to attend, and the hopeless state of suffering from the virus, provides an opportunity to witness varied facets of human experiences. One not only feels a sense of understanding and validation but also gets to see how a different generation during a different pandemic reacted to all this. Like said earlier, this short novel comes as a package of hope and despair based on the incidents I pointed out above. It solely depends on our judgement based on our memories and associations of living during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

During these grave times, it is essential to take into account the mental health of people around us. The sudden change in the world dynamic after the emergence of COVID-19 is something that cannot be pushed aside. From difficulty in getting the proper treatment to seeing one's loved ones succumbing to this virus, everything has become more complicated. With this, there has been a general shift toward the pandemic literature during COVID-19. We are all aware that through reading one can escape into another world, have a break from their tiring lives, and simply enjoy the essence of the imaginary world conjured in a fictional text. But this specific increase in the reading of pandemic literature indicates the increase in the need for the validation of one's own experience during the pandemic along with a sense of companionship with one's fellow human beings. Along with providing broader human narratives, pieces of literature like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* also serve the purpose of drawing "meaning out of the raw (human) experience of panic, horror, and despair" (Simon). Considering the kinds of experiences people had during these past two years, reading still serves the complex purpose of giving meaning to our existence. A story is a form of healing, a reminder of the existence of sense, so if there is no meaning outside our quarantined zones, literature at least provides meaning within our invented zones (Simon).

This understanding motivated me to study Psychological Reader's Response theory. Based on this, a reader uses interpretive synthesis to derive meaning out of a given text conforming to their practical knowledge. The outbreak of COVID-19 around the whole world came with certain common issues despite the borders. The quarantine, isolation, loss of dear ones, and the uncertainty of the coronavirus' cure acted as some sort of an equalizer in terms of this pandemic's experiences. Keeping this in mind, when a reader comes across a text, they interpret it in their own way. The text just acts as an input while the interpretation is the output of their psychological mediation of the text. As of fourth of August 2022, a total of 6,428,581 people worldwide have died from the sudden rise in COVID-19 again ("Worldometers"). Reading a novel like *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* helps in raising consciousness by providing varied facts about human experiences in all of its three short novels (*Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine*, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*). Normand Holland says a story is re-created when it comes across a person with a different set of experiences than the original author. Psychological Reader's Response theory allows us to see that, particularly in that sequence free of any restrictions. With quite similar experiences during this COVID-19 outbreak, the raw materials that are a source of positive as well as negative feelings in the already distressed readers surviving this pandemic have become somewhat easier to point out. In my dissertation, I use DEFT (defenses, expectations, fantasies, and transformations) modalities proposed by Holland to analyze this whole collection. The focus is on the 'whole collection' because most researchers only touched on the title short novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* when talking about the pandemic leaving out the other two i.e. *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine* which, according to me, are as impactful as the title one as illness narratives. Psychological Reader's Response theory provides a perfect lens to determine the unity that is not in the text but in the readers' minds.

When I say all these short novels in this collection are impactful, it is because of the shared similarities they possess. The character of Miranda appears in both *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In both the stories, she is looking for some sort of an escape, be it from the generational ties or the war-pandemic chaos. "The composite character of Miranda who emerges from *Old Mortality* consistently acts as a truth-teller, an eyewitness who is equally attracted to and fearful of death" (Fisher 105). *Old Mortality* as a title is ironic in the sense that it makes Amy immortal due to her death at a young age from tuberculosis making her an icon of womanhood for eternity. She did not need to get old to acquire that status. Her romantic nature combined with her romantic illness (tuberculosis) leads to her death as a young beautiful woman. Imogen Clarke in "Tuberculosis: A Fashionable Disease?" talks about the obsession with consumptive aesthetic that peaked in mid-1800. The dramatically pale skin with red cheeks and a slender figure that comes with having tuberculosis ironically became a symbol of sexual attractiveness among women back then (Clarke "Tuberculosis"). Amy, regardless of the manner in which she is remembered by people in her life, becomes a symbol of womanhood. It is always kind of given that Amy would become an old mortal or rather immortal by dying from a fashionable disease like tuberculosis. Aunt Amy's history of flirtation, tuberculosis, and death parallels Miranda's illness in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In the same way Cousin Eva's fight for suffrage parallels Miranda's independence (106). This feeling of escape has increased twofold since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Porter draws on both Amy's attempt to shape illness into narrative and Eva's defiantly independent stance to construct Miranda's character – a single career woman in a wartime urban environment experiencing a nearly fatal illness" (106). Similarly, the "horse imagery" surrounding Miranda's character throughout *Old Mortality* (identity, independence, desire) prepares the reader for her dream within a dream marking the beginning of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (106). This feeling of escape is also palpable in *Noon Wine* in the form of a character named Mr. Helton whose sole purpose is survival no matter what. Just as its title suggests the regrets of a worker who drank up all his wine before the noon break, the characters in this short novel also experience a tragic fate full of regrets. Mr. Helton's regret over killing his brother, Mr. Thompson's regret over killing Mr. Hatch, and his family's regret over accepting Mr. Helton all result in an unfavorable outcome where neither of the characters is able to live peacefully. A situation resembling a lockdown or social distancing is also found in *Noon Wine* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. The remoteness and isolation of the dairy farm of the Thompsons and the peculiar devastation resulting from the simultaneously occurring crisis of pandemic and World War I does not leave much freedom for the characters in these texts. As a COVID-19 survivor, it might get

difficult to cope with these situations. The mysterious and unexpected deaths in all of the short novels in this collection are something quite heart-wrenching even under normal circumstances. So, their impact during these corona times should not be taken lightly. In addition to that, they open our experience in a broader context. The different narratives presented in these stories have the potential to preserve and remake the world as it falls apart. Miranda's firm resolve to find her own life path in *Old Mortality*, Mr. Helton's desperate attempt at survival in *Noon Wine*, and Miranda's resilient attitude when fighting off the influenza virus in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* serve as a testament to what these characters suffered and survived. Then again Aunt Amy's death from tuberculosis in *Old Mortality*, Mr. Thompson's suicide in *Noon Wine*, and Adam's death from influenza flu in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* speak for themselves about the melancholic vibe of this collection. The war imagery in the last short novel is itself triggering. A reader interprets a literary text in light of his or her own experiences. In a sense then the literary text comes to replicate his or her identity. It is because of this reason that the psychological responses can be positive and negative. My experience of reading this text has enabled me to analyze the various illness narratives combined with the snippets of hope coming upon it during the lockdown.

Even though we have been able to vanquish COVID-19 with the advent of vaccines, the possibility of new variants emerging on the scene can never be completely ruled out. This also means that we cannot afford to let our guards down. Some might deem it insensitive to compare every death in this collection with the pandemic times but this is not enough justification to invalidate the harsh experiences many have had facing coronavirus. Elizabeth Outka also speaks against this invalidation in *Viral Modernism* when she says that "[w]e are trained to see the trauma of war but not the trauma of the pandemic" (4). Psychological Reader's Response theory allows us to forge a more meaningful relationship with these texts beyond the merely passive and superficial engagement which is otherwise the norm as far as the activity of reading a novel is commonly concerned. The experience of reading an illness narrative such as *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* during a pandemic and rendering it in the form of an academic dissertation makes this an entirely original, important, and worthwhile contribution to the body of existing literature available on the text.

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