

# **Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels Study Guide**

**Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels by  
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# Old Mortality, Part One, 1885-1902

## Old Mortality, Part One, 1885-1902 Summary

Miranda and Maria are two little girls living in Kentucky around the beginning of the Twentieth Century. They are fascinated by romantic and poetic stories, especially the tragic life of their Aunt Amy.

Miranda and Maria are always surrounded by their extended family and they love to listen to the adults reminisce about times gone by. The girls desperately hope that someday they will be beautiful like many of their cousins, dancing all night and flirting with beaux. The family trains the girls in how to appreciate the elegant, refined styles of true Southern gentility, so that they will not disgrace the family. For example, the girls need to speak perfect Latin so that they can be as eloquent as John Wilkes Booth crying "Sic semper tyrannus" after he shot Abraham Lincoln. Whenever Miranda's relations are witnessing some wonderful performance or accomplishment, the old people have a tendency to recall better performances from a bygone era, so that the present pales in comparison. Miranda sees this as a romantic way of seeing the tragic poetry in real life, but it saddens her to see the real, physical remnants of old times, because the heirlooms are never as pretty as the stories.

Above all other dainty young women presides the memory of Aunt Amy, who died young. Aunt Amy was more beautiful, more spirited, more flirtatious, more popular, and more exciting than any young woman before or since. Amy was a willful girl, often defying the advice of her elders that she behave more discreetly. Instead, she partied as often as she could, often embarking spontaneously on adventures while her family tried to protect her. Although she went through a string of engagements, her cousin Gabriel always begged her to marry him. Despite Gabriel's unwavering attentions and his good prospects, Amy wanted nothing to do with him and in fact would alter her behavior to drive him away. When Gabriel complimented Amy's long hair, Amy shocked everyone by cutting all her hair off, mutilating herself in Gabriel's eyes.

One night, so the story goes, Amy's flirtation got herself and her brother Harry into trouble, when Harry shot at one of Amy's admirers. Even though she had a fever, Amy decided to sneak off, early in the morning, so that she could say goodbye to Harry before he fled the state. Her flighty decision led to a long-running illness, and eventually she even wished for a visit from Gabriel. When Gabriel admitted to Amy that he was suddenly penniless, she surprised everyone by suddenly agreeing to marry him. They swiftly went down to New Orleans to enjoy Mardi Gras on their honeymoon, and Amy enjoyed defying Gabriel's orders to stay safely away from the party. Six weeks later, Amy overdosed on pills and no one even knew whether it was suicide or an accident.



## Old Mortality, Part One, 1885-1902 Analysis

Although the reader knows right away that Aunt Amy died young, there is still some dramatic tension as the reader wonders how Amy died or why it matters. Amy herself foreshadowed her own death several times, melodramatically claiming that she was about to die. Her relations also saw disaster coming, but they did not realize how right they were to worry that Amy's capricious ways would lead to her downfall. Amy seems like a template for what can happen if a person truly tries to live life to the fullest, without worrying what will happen in fifty years. It is natural that the old people remember her so worshipfully, because they have had to watch one another fade with the years, while Amy remains frozen in time, because she died in the prime of youth.

Amy herself seemed inscrutable, just as Miranda can not truly understand her late aunt based on rotten keepsakes and dusty memories. To symbolize Amy's mysterious identity, the narrator tells several stories in which Amy dressed up in costumes. Masks and costumes are a common literary symbol for a hidden identity, and often when a person wears several different masks, it indicates that they are not really sure of their identity. Amy's willful, spontaneous behavior implied that she did not really know what she wanted from life, except to have a good time, and when she took a few pills too many, her family was left with a collection of clothes and photographs, and memories of a perfect young woman. This memory is also a sort of costume, inspired by Amy's tombstone, which falsely describes her as a singing angel. Every person who outlives Amy is free to imagine her however they wish, and for once, Amy can no longer defy their expectations.



# Old Mortality, Part Two, 1904

## Old Mortality, Part Two, 1904 Summary

Miranda and Maria are forced to spend their winters at a Catholic boarding school in New Orleans, where they live dull, sheltered lives. They like to imagine that they are tragically shut up in a dungeon-like convent, with skeletons in the closets, but in fact their school is wholesome, safe, and boring. The girls play in the walled gardens and imagine that they live dangerous, exciting lives. They live for Saturdays, when they often have the chance to go on outings with their relatives, if they have been good that week. If they have not been good, they are crushed when no one comes to pick them up. Usually on these outings, the girls are taken to the horse races, and they are each given a dollar to bet on a horse of their choice. Miranda secretly hopes to become a jockey herself someday, since her sister assures her that neither of them will ever be a great beauty.

One Saturday, the girls are delighted when their father unexpectedly shows up to take them to the races, and he tells them that today they must all bet on Miss Lucy, the horse of their Uncle Gabriel. The girls meet Uncle Gabriel for the first time, and are confused and disappointed when Aunt Amy's romantic husband turns out to be a fat, crude drunkard. It is the first time that either girl has ever seen anyone drunk. Against great odds, Miss Lucy wins the race, breaking a long streak of bad luck for Uncle Gabriel. After the race, Miranda sees Miss Lucy, and notices that the horse's nose is gushing blood, as the mare tries to recover from the physical strain of winning the race. Miranda feels sick for celebrating the victory, and instead feels that the horse has been defeated, and she decides that she does not want to be a jockey after all.

Uncle Gabriel insists on taking Miranda's father to his home to visit his second wife, Miss Honey, although Miranda's father protests that he really must get the girls back to school. They take a cab into a very seedy section of town, and Miranda notices unfamiliar, disgusting smells. They go to a shabby hotel and unceremoniously enter a small room, where Miss Honey receives them. It is clear that Miss Honey is a bitter woman, worn down by her marriage, and she does little to hide her hatred of her husband's guests. Uncle Gabriel's attempts at cheerful conversation inevitably involve comparing everyone to Amy, and reminiscing about how superior Amy was. When Uncle Gabriel happily tells Miss Honey that they have won a lot of money that day, and that now they can move to a better hotel, Miss Honey answers that she will stay right where she is. She points out that they will just have to move again when the money runs out, and Miranda is horrified that Miss Honey and Uncle Gabriel are having such an argument in front of outsiders. Finally, her father says that he has got to get the girls back to boarding school, and they are all relieved to leave.

Back at the boarding school, Miranda and Maria resign themselves to the dull routine of lessons and plain food with the nuns. They understand that they both still long for



adventure and excitement, but they are happy to be back in their safe little world, viewing themselves as tragic, imprisoned heroines.

## **Old Mortality, Part Two, 1904 Analysis**

When Miranda and Maria first stumble upon a book of anti-Catholic propaganda, they are fascinated with the dark, gothic tales of innocent maidens forced against their wills to become nuns. The little girls have never known any religion other than Catholicism, and yet they understand that the stories are entirely fictional, having no connection to real Catholicism. The girls think that a tragic life spent "immured" in a convent, with no real chance to enjoy life outside the cloister walls, is still exciting and romantic. They do not realize that Miss Honey is living the life described in the book, wasting away in a small room like a forgotten nun. Miss Honey is ironically named, since she is defined by her bitterness. While Miranda knows that real life is not as romantic as the world she reads about in books, Miranda has not yet realized that real life, outside of her safe nunnery, is just as ugly as anything she might find in a novel. Although Miranda has never been to such a sleazy area before, it is not her trip into the slums that makes the day an eye-opening experience for Miranda. Instead, she notices Uncle Gabriel's drunkenness, and the awkward way that Miss Honey quarrels in front of strangers, and Miranda begins to understand that sometimes, life is more pleasant within the safe and boring walls of a convent.



# Old Mortality, Part Three, 1912

## Old Mortality, Part Three, 1912 Summary

An eighteen-year-old Miranda boards a train on its way to Texas, so she can attend the funeral of Uncle Gabriel. Miranda finds herself seated next to a grouchy old lady, and Miranda is horrified when the lady demands that Miranda stop sitting on the lady's hat. After more awkward interaction, they realize that the old lady is Miranda's cousin Eva, who taught her Latin as a child. Cousin Eva is also on her way to the funeral.

Eva has lived an interesting life. She starts talking to Miranda about her experiences, especially her ongoing fight to make it legal for women to vote. This has made her into a social pariah, and she has gone to jail three times for her efforts, but she tells Miranda that she would go as many times as she needs to if it would get women the vote. Miranda admires Cousin Eva for her bravery, but does not understand the deep conviction which motivates her cousin. Eva goes on to talk about old times, especially the dances and parties that all the young people used to attend when she was younger. Eva has always been ugly, and she complains bitterly about the thoughtless teasing her family has always inflicted upon her. It is little surprise to anyone that she is an old maid, but she exudes a certain confidence and sureness of herself, which springs from having to stand up for herself so many times.

Eva recalls the same exciting stories of Aunt Amy, but from a completely different perspective, and she hints that Miranda has never heard the real version. Eva does not remember Amy as a beautiful, charming sprite, but instead recalls a shameless flirt, constantly demanding all the attention of the people around her. Eva scoffs at Amy's prized complexion, which was caused by Amy continuing to party when she had tuberculosis. Eva implies that Amy got pregnant at a memorable dance, and that Miranda's father killed the other man to defend Amy's honor. Eva also suspects that Amy eloped and committed suicide to hide her shame over her pregnancy.

As Miranda is adjusting to this new information, she reveals that she has recently eloped from school herself and has been married for a year now. When the train arrives in Texas, Miranda's father meets them at the train, but he does not hug his daughter, because he is still angry about her running away. Miranda listens to the easy camaraderie between Eva and her father, who speak as peers, remembering the old times. Miranda thinks about how she can no longer listen to the filtered memories of others, but must now experience life for herself, carving out her own experiences.

## Old Mortality, Part Three, 1912 Analysis

In this section, Miranda seems to be simultaneously repeating the past, while creating her own unique experience. Like Aunt Amy, whose memory dominated Miranda's childhood, Miranda has capriciously defied her father's wishes and run away. However,



Miranda is now beginning to understand that Amy was not as exciting and wonderful as she sounded in all the stories, but a spoiled girl who did not think about consequences. In contrast, Cousin Eva, who always seemed so dull and safe, has truly put herself in danger for the right to speak up as a woman. Eva also fulfills one of Miranda's childhood fantasies, since Miranda was always dreaming about some crazy career, while Eva is one of the few women she has ever known to have a career. However, Miranda is now grown-up enough to realize that she can not become Cousin Eva, any more than she can become Aunt Amy. Although as a child, Miranda always viewed death as an end to aim at, she now sees that it is more important to live her life.





# Noon Wine, Section One, pp. 93-112

## Noon Wine, Section One, pp. 93-112 Summary

In 1896, a travelling man named Olaf Helton arrives at a small farm in the south of Texas. Mr. Helton steps over the two little boys playing in the dirt and approaches the porch, where the farmer sits churning butter. The farm is neglected and dirty, and the farmer spits tobacco juice all over the porch as he churns, coating the steps. Helton introduces himself and says that he is looking for work.

The farmer introduces himself as Royal Earle Thompson and he asks Mr. Helton what he can do and what kind of wages he wants. Mr. Thompson laughs when Mr. Helton asks for a dollar a day, but offers him seven dollars a month, instead. Mr. Thompson has an opening because his two hired hands recently got into a knife fight, so that one is dead and the other in jail. Mr. Thompson loves a chance to take advantage of his hired hands by paying them very little and he feels that this is justified because most hired men let the farm fall even more into disrepair. As it is, Mr. Thompson has to help his wife, Ellie, keep up with her own work because she is sick a lot. Mr. Thompson admits that he has invested in dairy to please his wife, and Mr. Helton assures him that he knows how to do dairy work.

Mr. Thompson can not place Mr. Helton's unfamiliar accent, and Mr. Helton answers that he is a Swede. He is the first Swede Mr. Thompson has ever met, which Mr. Thompson thinks is funny. Mr. Thompson tells Mr. Helton that he can start out by finishing churning the butter, while Mr. Thompson goes into town to get groceries. As he starts out, Mrs. Ellie Thompson admonishes him not to spend time in town drinking.

Ellie Thompson, who is lying down with a headache and other pains, is lulled to sleep by the sound of the churn, but when she wakes up, she hears a different sound. Going outside, she sees the new hired hand sitting in his shack and playing harmonica, and although she is impressed by his skill, she assumes that he is too lazy to work. Ellie goes to the run-down milkhouse, where a spring of water keeps the milk and butter cold. She is surprised to find that, not only has Mr. Helton finished making butter and fed the animals, but he has also cleaned years' worth of filth from the milkhouse. Ellie feels bad about judging him so harshly.

Ellie introduces herself to Mr. Helton, and notices that his only possessions are a collection of shiny harmonicas. Ellie warns Mr. Helton to store the harmonicas out of reach of her two sons, and he quickly moves them to a high shelf. Although Ellie tries to make conversation, it is obvious that Mr. Helton can barely speak English, so she leaves him alone to play music. Later, Mr. Helton does the evening milking without being told.

Mr. Thompson comes home from town and Ellie reprimands him for the liquor on his breath, reminding him that she has never had a sip of alcohol. Mr. Helton joins the



family for dinner, eating politely but quietly. After he leaves, Mr. Thompson sends his two rambunctious sons to bed. Ellie complains that her husband is not gentle enough with her or the boys and further complains that Mr. Helton does not eat enough to continue working at such a pace.

## **Noon Wine, Section One, pp. 93-112 Analysis**

Although the members of the Thompson family seem to love one another, their entire farm seems categorized by neglect and carelessness. Ellie does not usually refer to her boys as her own sons, but rather as though they were obnoxious visiting nephews. She herself is in bad health, which could be seen as a symbol for the condition of the farm. The cold spring in the milkhouse could be a valuable asset to them, since it is the only one in the area, but the family has never gotten around to even building a decent milkhouse to replace the shack. The little boys are old enough to go to school, but instead they run wild, unsupervised. Mr. Helton could be seen as an example of the prosperity the Thompsons could achieve with their own resources, if only they cared about it enough to develop their farm better.



# Noon Wine, Section Two, pp. 112-154

## Noon Wine, Section Two, pp. 112-154 Summary

Mr. Helton settles into life on the Thompson farm, and little by little, he brings modest prosperity to the family. Mr. Thompson has very specific ideas about what counts as "men's work," so he has allowed the farm to fall apart, with old piles of junk everywhere. Mr. Helton never does start talking, but he transforms the farm into something the family can be proud of. Nonetheless, Mr. Thompson can not help but feel a little contemptuous when he sees the careful, scrimping habits that Mr. Helton uses to save money. Mr. Helton earns two raises and with his help, the family can even afford to have indoor plumbing installed.

The only incident when the family does not get along with Mr. Helton happens one day when Ellie is gardening. She happens to see Mr. Helton ferociously shaking both of her little boys, and finds out that the boys were spitting in his harmonicas, and damaging them. Although she knows that her sons are naughty, she insists that from now on, Mr. Helton leave the children's discipline to their parents.

Nine years pass, and the little boys turn out to be respectable men, to their parents' relief. One day, a fat stranger comes to see Mr. Thompson. Mr. Thompson instantly feels suspicious of the man who seems to laugh out of spite rather than merriment. The man introduces himself as Homer Hatch, and he starts asking questions about Mr. Helton. Eventually, Mr. Hatch reveals that Mr. Helton is an escaped mental patient from up north. Mr. Hatch makes a living collecting bounties for lunatics, and he has tracked Mr. Helton down after Mr. Helton sent a huge quantity of money to his mother. The old lady bragged about her son to Mr. Hatch, who has come all the way to Texas to capture Mr. Helton. Mr. Hatch says that long ago, Mr. Helton murdered his own brother after the brother lost one of his harmonicas.

When Mr. Hatch tells Mr. Thompson that he intends to arrest Mr. Helton, whether or not Mr. Thompson agrees, Mr. Thompson decides to throw him off the property. Suddenly, Mr. Hatch brandishes a large knife, threatening Mr. Thompson and Mr. Helton runs between them to protect his boss. Mr. Hatch stabs Mr. Helton in the stomach, and Mr. Thompson tries to defend his friend by grabbing an axe and bringing it down on Mr. Hatch's head. Ellie runs out to the yard to find that Mr. Helton has run away and her husband has split open Mr. Hatch's head. She gives thanks that her sons are not home to see it.

## Noon Wine, Section Two, pp. 112-154 Analysis

Mr. Hatch tells Mr. Thompson that the song that Mr. Helton always plays on the harmonica is a Scandinavian song about drinking wine in the morning while working. In the song, a farmer enjoys drinking so much that he can not wait until noon to drink, but



instead drinks up the day's liquor in the morning. It is a metaphor for enjoying oneself and partying early on, only to face the consequences later. It seems that this song could refer to the lives of most of the characters, who have wild and joyful youths before they settled down into routine and mediocrity. Ellie has gone from a delicate Sunday School teacher to a worn-out wisp of a woman, while Mr. Helton seems to have led a very destructive and violent existence before settling down into a model farm worker. By talking so much about the song, Mr. Hatch is implying that Mr. Helton's fun times of drinking are over, and now he must go back to the asylum.

Mr. Hatch and Mr. Thompson discuss exactly what makes someone a violent lunatic and Mr. Thompson postulates that any man can behave in violent and crazy ways, depending on the circumstances. This is illustrated all too clearly when both Mr. Hatch and Mr. Thompson turn out to be capable of murder, and such a confusing scene further shows that maybe the story about Mr. Helton murdering his brother is more complicated than it sounds. Although this seems like obvious evidence that Mr. Helton is murderous concerning his harmonicas, in fact Mr. Helton has certainly changed from his violent youth. When Mr. Helton catches the two little boys messing up his harmonicas, he shakes them so that they will not do it again, but he has learned to control his anger so he does not hit or hurt them.



## Noon Wine, Section Three, pp. 154-176

### Noon Wine, Section Three, pp. 154-176 Summary

Mr. Thompson loads Mr. Hatch's body into the wagon and goes into town to tell the sheriff and coroner what has happened. They agree that it was self-defense, and escort Mr. Thompson back to his farm, picking up his wife along the way. Mr. Thompson convinces her to claim that she saw everything, so that he will be sure to be found innocent. Meanwhile, a large group of men goes looking for Mr. Helton, who has run off. They finally corner him, but he fights them off. When he stoops to pick up a harmonica, they beat him down, and he dies from his wounds. Ironically, he has not been harmed at all by Mr. Hatch's knife.

Mrs. Thompson lies in court and so does Mr. Thompson, at the advice of his lawyer. He is found to be Not Guilty, but he still feels guilty afterward. Ellie blames him for making the situation more violent than it needed to be, and for making her lie, and she finds it hard to even be near the man she sees as a murderer. To deal with his guilt, Mr. Thompson insists on going to all of their neighbors, and telling them his side of the story, but he senses that no one believes him.

Finally, the contempt of his neighbors is too much and Mr. Thompson decides that it is time for a change. As he lies in bed, he tries to think of any way that he could have not killed Mr. Hatch, and still protected Mr. Helton. As he begins a nightmare about grabbing his axe and swinging, Ellie starts screaming and rolling around in bed. Mr. Thompson calls his sons into the room as she faints, and they angrily accuse their father of trying to hurt her. As Ellie calms down, Mr. Thompson tells his sons that he is going for the doctor.

Mr. Thompson dresses in his best suit and walks away with his shotgun. Eventually he comes to a secluded field, and he sits down and writes a suicide note. He writes that this is the only way to prove to his friends and family that he is not a murderer and then he puts the note in his pocket. Mr. Thomson takes off one sock and shoe and lies down with the gun under his chin, using his big toe to pull the trigger.

### Noon Wine, Section Three, pp. 154-176 Analysis

Mr. Thompson kills himself because he believes that it is the only way that anyone will believe he is innocent. Ironically, he does not realize that this simply tells everyone that he is guilty and deserving of death for committing murder. It is also ironic that Mr. Thompson is wracked with guilt, worried that his neighbors do not believe his story. He thinks he has had a fair trial, but it was not fair, because he and Ellie both lied on the witness stand, providing a version of the truth more likely to produce a verdict of Not Guilty. The neighbors do not believe his story because he and Ellie are obviously lying, especially since Ellie is nearly blind, and she claims to have seen the entire episode.



Although Mr. Thompson and Mr. Helton are very different people, Mr. Thompson comes to realize that sometimes a person's temper gets out of control, and makes that person act in terrible ways. Mr. Thompson learns to sympathize with Mr. Helton's plight, as he learns how it feels to try to continue living after killing someone. Mr. Thompson even ends up scurrying through fields at night, just like Mr. Helton did when he was being hunted down. Mr. Thompson is forced to face his own violent nature when he realizes that, just as he never intended to kill Mr. Hatch but did, he also never intended to hurt Ellie, but he ruined her life.



# Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section One, pp. 179-205

## Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section One, pp. 179-205 Summary

The story begins with a confusing narrative about a young woman waking up early in order to go riding. The scene seems to be from the point of view of Miranda's Aunt Amy and as the main character saddles up her horse, she is accompanied by a mysterious stranger. The woman, who turns out to be Miranda herself, wakes, and reveals that this is a dream.

Miranda gets up and sleepily goes to her job as a reporter at a newspaper office. She never gets enough sleep, because her job keeps her up at all hours. Although Miranda and another woman, Towney, used to be legitimate reporters, their humane ways lost them a scoop once, and they were punished with demotions to covering Theater and Society. There are a lot of women in the offices, because many men have gone to fight in World War I.

Lately, there has been a lot of pressure for each of the employees to purchase a fifty-dollar Liberty Bond, but Miranda has been putting off buying one because she can not afford it. This morning, two men are sitting on Miranda's desk, waiting to harass her into buying a bond. They threaten that she might lose her job if she does not demonstrate her support of the war by buying a bond, and Miranda says that she will try to buy one next week. Secretly, Miranda hates the war and resents the many sacrifices she must make for it. Towney is also worried because she can not afford a Liberty Bond either.

Miranda goes along with a group of socialites to bring gift baskets and flowers to wounded soldiers in a nearby hospital. Miranda feels stupid, and thinks the exercise is pointless, especially since the soldiers were not wounded in combat. Soon, she is free to spend her lunch break walking with Adam, a handsome soldier on leave. Adam is staying in the same rooming house as Miranda, and the two of them have been inseparable in the ten days that he has been in town. Adam is very good-looking, and Miranda loves dancing with him.

There is a tacit understanding between Adam and Miranda that they must not act melancholy, but instead make jokes about the war. There is an epidemic of influenza going around, and as the couple walks, they see several funeral processions. Adam makes jokes about the prevalence of death, and decides that he might as well smoke a lot of cigarettes, since he is probably going to die soon anyway. Despite how much Miranda likes him, she knows that Adam is not for her or any woman, because as a soldier, he is committed to death. Miranda goes back to work, feeling sick.



## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section One, pp. 179-205 Analysis**

In Miranda's dream, she seems to be living the life of her own Aunt Amy, who died young. She goes riding with a stranger who is familiar yet, and at the end of the dream, she tells the stranger that he can move on, because she is not going to accompany him today. The stranger is never identified, but he seems to be a metaphor for death. In the book of Revelation in the Bible, the personification of Death is described as a pale rider on a pale horse. Miranda's dream seems to be saying that she lives with the possibility of death, but that she is going to live at least a little longer. This could refer to her own death, or the many deaths around her. However, the stranger in the dream could be seen as a symbol for Adam, a young man whose easy camaraderie and wry jokes bely his imminent departure for war.





# Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Two, pp. 205-225

## Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Two, pp. 205-225 Summary

Miranda arrives back at the newspaper office to find Towney and Chuck, the sports reporter, sitting on her desk. Towney and Chuck laugh as they discuss the rumors that the Germans have sent over a cloud of deadly germs to kill everyone in New England. Towney acts as though she loves supporting the war effort, with no evidence of her desperation earlier. Chuck himself acts quite defensive about the fact that he has not been allowed to go to war because he has bad lungs. He wants everyone to know that he is a real man, and not a coward. Chuck makes very little money, and any that he has left over goes to his alcoholic father to buy booze.

As Towney and Chuck chat, Miranda desperately wishes that she had some time to think about Adam. She is always so busy with work, and every spare moment she has is spent with Adam. Miranda is overwhelmed by the brief intensity of her romance with him, and she keeps trying not to fall in love with him, because she knows he is leaving in a few days. As she contemplates his departure, Miranda feels a sense of impending doom, as though she is going to die very soon. Certainly, she feels that a dramatic change is imminent and she thinks about leaving her job at the newspaper.

Bill, Miranda's chief editor, is in an angry mood as usual, and he informs her that a vaudeville performer is looking for the theater reporter. Although Miranda tries to avoid the man, he is waiting in the doorway for her as she leaves to go to another play. The man insists that she has no taste, and makes her look at a stack of newspaper clippings raving about his performances. The actor worries that the bad review Miranda gave him will hurt his professional reputation, and finally Miranda has to tell him she does not care, and brush past him. All of his newspaper clippings are ten years old anyway, because he is washed up. Miranda takes Chuck with her to the play, and he volunteers to write the review for her. Chuck is much more interested in the theater than in sports, but he is already insecure about appearing masculine enough. Finally, the two go back to the office, where Miranda waits for Adam to come pick her up.

Adam, on the other hand, is a perfect picture of dashing, healthy young American blood, bravely facing the prospect of going to war. To Miranda, he seems fresh and green, in his uniforms sewn by a private tailor for a more attractive fit. Adam gets bored, waiting for Miranda to be off work, because he does not like reading. Really, Adam's chief passion is driving his fancy roadster, or going boating. He wishes he had access to his car, and he implies to Miranda that she has never really seen him as himself, because she has never seen him driving. When he tells Miranda that he could not look himself in the face if he did not go to war, she sees him as a perfect sacrificial lamb, pure and spotless, and willingly going to the slaughter.



The play is boring and long, but Adam holds Miranda's hand and waits patiently for her work to be done so that they can go dancing. Between acts, there is a dull presentation that Miranda has seen dozens of times before. A fat man, too old and unhealthy to go to war, urges the audience to buy Liberty Bonds. The speaker admonishes everyone to "give till it hurts," and reminds them that their noble sacrifices will help win the war to end all wars. He also points out the very real sacrifices that the soldiers are making, and tells everyone that it will be worth it to not have to worry about babies being stabbed with bayonets.

Walking home, Miranda tells Adam that she thinks the worst part of the war is the way it puts everyone into a state of fear, all the time. She is not talking about fear of death or invasion, but rather the fear of being blacklisted for not seeming patriotic enough. She herself hates the war, and she wonders whether the people around her also wish they could stand up and admit how they feel about it. Adam points out that, while mental and emotional trauma are pretty bad, they are still not as bad as getting killed in battle. He implies that he might be able to survive the war and might want romance someday in the future, but Miranda feels sure that he is going to die soon.

## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Two, pp. 205-225 Analysis**

When the speaker at the play is urging the audience to buy Liberty Bonds, he stands in front of a backdrop with an American flag nailed awkwardly in place. To Miranda, the treatment of the flag seems inappropriate, and this could be seen as a symbol for the way war spokesmen use the defense of freedom as an excuse to destroy civil liberties. In the name of freedom and justice, Miranda and other American citizens are treated as enemies of the state if they do not "give till it hurts," and past that line. Since one of the founding principles of the United States is freedom of speech and freedom of expression, certainly Miranda should feel that she has the right to speak out against the war. It is ironic that Miranda's job is to report the truth around her, yet she must carefully suppress the truth within her, for fear of being seen as anti-American.

Bill, Miranda's chief editor, is described as exactly fitting the movie stereotype of a newspaper editor. The narrator questions whether Bill is trying to be like those fictional editors, or if perhaps the movies take their inspiration directly from Bill. In this way, the narrator makes a self-referential joke, pointing out to the reader that this is a work of fiction, and that Bill never existed. It is obvious that Bill is modeled after movie characters, and so the reader can easily guess how he will act in any given scene. This is an interesting device, because the narrator has not gone to the trouble to create an original character, but openly admits this, pointing out that the character has already been written by others.



# **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Three, pp. 225-245**

## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Three, pp. 225-245 Summary**

Miranda and Adam sit in a crowded and smoky nightclub, dancing and smiling at one another when the music is right. Miranda figures that it does not matter that their surroundings are tawdry, because life is crazy, so she might as well go with it. She is terrified of losing Adam, but feels that she can not say anything about it. Nearby, a couple sits hand in hand, with the woman silently weeping. Miranda envies them, able to share the moment as they look in the face of impending death.

The next day, Miranda stays home sick. Adam wakes her by bursting into her room, and he learns that a doctor has sent a prescription for medicine, after a call from Bill. Adam goes out to fill the prescription, and comes back with various foods for the sickbed. When Miranda vomits up her pills, Adam makes her take more, and he stays in the room with her for several hours. When Miranda's landlady hears that Miranda has influenza, the woman is terrified, and threatens to turn Miranda out on the sidewalk. Adam insists that he will take care of Miranda until an ambulance can come take her to a hospital. All over the city, public businesses are closed and the streets are filled with ambulances and funerals. All the hospitals are full, and there are no doctors, beds, or ambulances to spare.

Miranda fights her way through a delirious haze of nightmares, trying to talk with Adam. For the first time, they talk about real issues in their lives and Miranda says that if she is about to die, then her life was not worth living. She blurts out that she loves him, and Adam says that he has been trying to tell her the same thing. Miranda keeps worrying that Adam will catch her illness, but he does not worry about it, and instead kisses her for the first time. They try to think of all the prayers they can remember, and they end up singing a song called "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," which is about the gloom of being the only one left alive after loved ones have all died.

Miranda has a nightmare in which Adam keeps being shot through the heart with arrows and in the dream, she feels that it is dreadfully unfair that he gets to always be the one to die, even when she tries to die in his place. Upon waking, she is unable to explain the dream to him, and he gets up to go get more coffee for them, promising to be back in five minutes. While he is gone, two doctors show up to take Miranda to the hospital, and as they carry her down the stairs, she worries that Adam will not know where she has gone.



## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Three, pp. 225-245 Analysis**

The influenza pandemic of 1918 was one of the worst natural disasters in history, killing between 50 million and 100 million people all over the world. Ironically, it has been largely forgotten, partly because of the media coverage of World War I, which overshadowed the pandemic. In addition, the disease killed people so quickly that there was little newspaper coverage of it. One unusual feature of this strain of influenza was that it primarily killed young, healthy people, rather than the old, sick, or very young as typical influenza does. Miranda's landlady is right to be terrified of having a diseased person in her house.

Miranda and Adam do not seem to realize the morbid nature of the prayers and songs they are singing, with lines like, "If I should die before I wake." They are like star-crossed lovers, always connecting at exactly the wrong time. They meet just before Adam is to go to war, and before their time is even up, Miranda gets deathly ill. She spends much of her time with Adam wishing that she could have more of a connection with him, and they realize that they love one another, right before he has to leave. In the few minutes that Adam leaves her alone in her room, Miranda is finally able to go to a hospital so that Adam will have trouble seeing her again.



# Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pp. 245-264

## Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pp. 245-264 Summary

Miranda wakes up in the hospital, and the doctors promise her that Adam has visited her and left a note, and will be back soon. Miranda does not believe them, and so Miss Tanner, the nurse, reads the note to her. Adam has not been allowed to see Miranda, but will hopefully get in to see her before he has to ship out. As soon as she has heard the words, Miranda forgets them, lost in a feverish haze. There are no beds free, so she lies on a stretcher in the hallway. Miranda wakes up later and uncomprehendingly watches two orderlies wrap up a dead man and cart him away, only to replace him with someone raving with delirium.

Miranda hallucinates that her doctor, Dr. Hildesheim, is a German spy, and she sees him bayoneting a baby and poisoning a well. Terrified, Miranda begs Miss Tanner not to touch her with her white tarantula hands. Miranda dreams that she is lying on a narrow stone ledge over a bottomless pit, and she understands that she is staring at death. She desperately wants to live, but she can not escape the infinite depth of the abyss. Miranda is paralyzed, blind, and deaf, and only a tiny spark remains in her which is still struggling to remain alive.

Suddenly Miranda sees a beautiful rainbow, and she joyfully steps forward into a magical meadow. Everyone she knows is there, and the people surround her in love. She is so happy, and stares at the lovely blue sky overhead. A seed of doubt creeps into her mind, and instantly, she is cast into a wasteland, and wakes up to the agony of Miss Tanner injecting her with something. After the doctors had given up all hope, Miss Tanner has just barely saved Miranda's life.

A month passes while Miranda gets better. One day, she hears a loud clamor outside, and Miss Tanner tells her that the war is over, and everyone is celebrating. Miranda knows that she should celebrate too, but she can not. She keeps remembering how happy she was when she was so close to death, and she longs to go back to the beautiful field. After her vision, everything in the living world seems ugly and terrible. Miranda knows she must hide from the world the fact that she wishes she had really died.

One day, Chuck and Towney, Miranda's co-workers, come to see her in the hospital. They bring a stack of letters with them, and Miranda gives Towney a list of things that she will need before she can leave the hospital. Miranda forces herself to act cheerful and thankful to be alive. After Chuck and Towney leave, Miss Tanner insists that Miranda read her letters, although she does not want to. There are countless get-well greetings from friends and acquaintances. One letter from a stranger tells Miranda that



Adam died of influenza in an army hospital, and wanted to make sure someone wrote to her.

Miranda prepares to go home from the hospital, and mentally steels herself for social contact again. She knows that she must continue her ruse, and pretend to be glad to be alive. Miranda thinks of Adam, and for a moment, he seems more alive and real to her than anything else. The moment is gone and the image of him fades and Miranda prepares to go back to real life, still hurtling toward death.

## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pp. 245-264 Analysis**

Just as the story "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" begins with a confusing scene which turns out to be a dream sequence, Miranda's fever state leads the reader on a wild goose chase, teasingly warping reality. Just like Miranda, the reader is not aware whether or not she has really died. However, the two sequences seem to share meaning. In the earlier dream, Miranda tells the "stranger" that she will not be going with him just yet, and if the stranger represents death, the scene is a reflection of the moment when Miranda is pulled back from death's door by Miss Tanner. At the same time that Miranda is miraculously recovering, Adam dies, moving on like the stranger from Miranda's dream.

The message of this story is quite morbid. All along, Miranda has seen Adam as being marked for death, because he was about to go fight in a war. Instead, he has ironically died from exactly the same thing Miranda has conquered, which reinforces the moral that death is the inevitable conclusion of every life. Miranda has felt, up till now, that her life was basically a waste of time spent preparing for something to happen and yet, now she wishes she had died. Miranda believes that for the rest of her life, she will be secretly longing for death.



# Characters

## Aunt Amy appears in Old Mortality

Although Miranda's Aunt Amy is dead long before Miranda is born, Amy dominates the entire story. Amy is the sister of Miranda's father, Harry, but she dies young. As a child, Miranda is always hearing about how beautiful and spirited Amy was and nothing is ever as charming or lovely as Amy. No fine example of horsemanship, elegant dress, or graceful dancing can favorably compare to Amy and Amy seems to be a sort of goddess to Miranda, who wishes she could be more like her deceased aunt. As an adult, Miranda learns that Amy was not the angel everyone remembered, but a thoughtless and selfish girl obsessed with her own popularity, who lived for partying. Miranda also learns that Amy may have committed suicide in disgrace, after getting pregnant and then eloping with a man she did not love.

Amy plays an interesting role in the story as she shows how glamorous it is to die young, in the peak of one's youth. Amy never has a chance to get old and fade and she never has to face the consequences of her capricious behavior. Instead, Amy becomes sweeter, more entertaining, more beautiful, and funnier in memory, so that no living family member can ever compare to her. Most people forget that Amy was always getting into trouble or how she flirted with every man around.

## Royal Earle Thompson appears in Noon Wine

Mr. Thompson is a farmer in south Texas in the early Twentieth Century, but not a very good one. He marries a delicate Sunday School teacher, but is disappointed when the life of a poor farm wife prematurely wears her down, leaving her sick most of the time. They have two sons, Arthur and Herbert, but Mr. Thompson does not spend much time with his sons. Mr. Thompson is preoccupied with a notion of looking dignified, and to this end, he only does certain types of work which he considers to be appropriate for the man of the house. Unfortunately, this leaves a lot of work undone, and he lazily frets about what to do about this, while his farm falls apart for neglect. Mr. Thompson does not worry about the appearance of being a bad farmer and a bad provider for his family. He does what he can to keep from paying real wages to his hired hands. Mr. Thompson does not like to admit to himself that he is a violent, harsh man, but his actions show that he is, through his rough treatment of his wife. Finally, Mr. Thompson kills a man in a moment of passion and confusion, and afterward is wracked with guilt, wondering if he is a murderer. The only way out that he can find is to kill himself.

## Mr. Olaf Helton appears in Noon Wine

Mr. Helton is a hard-working Swedish farmhand who loves to play the harmonica. He talks so little that no one knows he is an escaped mental patient who killed his own brother.



## **Miranda appears in Old Mortality and Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

"Old Mortality" is told through Miranda's point of view. Miranda is a little Victorian girl who craves adventure and romance, but is instead protected and kept safe. She and her sister feel that their convent boarding school is unbearably dull, so instead Miranda daydreams about becoming a jockey or a tightrope walker who plays violin. Miranda loves hearing glamorous stories about her Aunt Amy, who died young, and as a child, Miranda imagines losing her freckles and being like Aunt Amy someday, with an appropriately beautiful death. Once she is older, Miranda realizes that she must live her own life, not repeating the experiences of the people who have gone before her. Nevertheless, Miranda defies her parents and elopes, which is just the sort of thing Amy would do.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" also takes place later in Miranda's life, when she is struggling to make ends meet as a newspaper reporter. Miranda feels helpless to admit that she does not want to support World War I, and she feels a sort of desperation. After she almost dies of influenza, Miranda wishes she were dead.

## **Miss Honey appears in Old Mortality**

Miss Honey is Uncle Gabriel's second wife. She is very bitter about her lot in life and she hates his family.

## **Cousin Eva appears in Old Mortality**

Miranda's Cousin Eva is an ugly old maid, and suffers cruel taunts in the family's social circle. However, she becomes even less popular when she decides to work for votes for women. Eva goes to jail several times in her fight, but she does not regret it.

## **Uncle Gabriel appears in Old Mortality**

Miranda's Uncle Gabriel finally convinces Aunt Amy to marry him, only to have her die six weeks later. Gabriel spends his second marriage mourning Amy.

## **Ellie Thompson appears in Noon Wine**

Ellie is a worn-out farm wife who finds that life is usually too hard for her. When her husband kills a man and makes her lie about it, she feels that she can not go on.





## **Mr. Hatch appears in Noon Wine**

Mr. Hatch is a bounty hunter who rounds up escaped mental patients in order to collect rewards. He is a fat, despicable man, and Mr. Thompson kills him when he attacks Mr. Helton.

## **Adam appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Adam is a dashing young soldier on leave for two weeks. He and Miranda fall in love, but then he dies of influenza.

## **Mary Townsend, or Toney appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Toney is the gossip reporter at Miranda's newspaper. Toney and Miranda have both been demoted for being too kind-hearted.

## **Chuck appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Chuck is the sports reporter at the newspaper, and a friend of Miranda's. He can not go to war because he has bad lungs.

## **Bill appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Bill is the editor-in-chief at Miranda's newspaper. He orders an ambulance for Miranda when she has influenza.

## **Miss Tanner appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Miss Tanner is the nurse who saves Miranda's life.

## **Maria appears in Old Mortality**

Maria is Miranda's sister who is four years older. They go to boarding school together.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Miss Lucy appears in Old Mortality, Part Two**

Miss Lucy is Miranda's Uncle Gabriel's horse. Miss Lucy wins a race at hundred-to-one odds, winning a lot of money for Uncle Gabriel.

### **Kentucky appears in Old Mortality**

Growing up in Kentucky, Miranda is taught to have Southern pride and to love horse racing.

### **Convent of the Child Jesus appears in Old Mortality**

Miranda hates having to go to her boring school in New Orleans where she is safely watched over by nuns.

### **The Thompson Farm appears in Noon Wine**

The Thompson family has a small farm in south Texas where they keep dairy cows. It is neglected and run-down until Mr. Helton starts fixing everything up.

### **Noon Wine appears in Noon Wine**

Mr. Helton plays a Scandinavian drinking song about using up all of one's liquor in the morning, so that none is left by noon. It refers to playing and partying too much at first and having to face the consequences later.

### **Mr. Helton's Harmonicas appears in Noon Wine**

Mr. Helton's only possessions are his collection of harmonicas, which he uses to play a few songs he knows. Long ago, Mr. Helton killed his brother for losing his harmonica.

### **Influenza Pandemic of 1918 appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

In 1918, a wave of deadly influenza killed between 50 million and 100 million people worldwide. The disease killed primarily young, healthy adults.



## **World War I appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

From 1914 to 1918, Europe was ravaged by a war that it was hoped would end war forever. It was also called "The Great War."

## **The Newspaper Office appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Miranda works at a newspaper as the theater reporter. She and Towner often collapse in tears on the shabby wicker couch.

## **The Rainbow Field appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

When Miranda is almost dead of influenza, she has a vision where she is in a beautiful field surrounded by those she loves. After she wakes up, she wants to go back.

## **The Boarding House appears in Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

Adam and Miranda meet because they are both staying in the same boarding house.



# Themes

## Death Is Inevitable, But Desirable

As a child, Miranda learns to admire her dead Aunt Amy above all others. This gives death a very glamorous appeal to little Miranda and she loves morbid stories of people dying tragically and romantically. In fact, death seems much more attractive than getting old. As a young adult surrounded by a world war and an influenza pandemic, Miranda is overwhelmed by feelings of impending doom, and she feels certain that Adam, her soldier boyfriend, will die very soon in battle. She dreams that Adam keeps getting shot through the heart with arrows, and she cries out to him, "No, no, like a child cheated in a game, It's my turn now, why must you always be the one to die?" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Three, pg. 242.)

When Miranda is delirious with influenza, she thinks, "The road to death is a long march beset with all evils, and the heart fails little by little at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step, the mind sets up its own bitter resistance and to what end?" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pg. 249.) Miranda nearly does die, and in fact it is not clear to the reader whether Miranda has died or not, until she painfully comes back from the edge of death. Miranda is not surprised when she learns that Adam has died, not in battle, but from influenza.

When Mr. Thompson hears that Mr. Helton committed murder many years before, he assumes that there must have been some justifying circumstances, because Mr. Helton does not seem like a killer. Mr. Hatch points out that if a man is a killer, he is a killer, and Mr. Thompson reveals his own violent nature by killing Mr. Hatch to protect Mr. Helton. Ellie considers him to be a murderer for not settling the fight non-violently, and finally Mr. Thompson agrees with her, taking his own life to set things right.

## The Bright Flame of Youth Burns Out Quickly

The first time Aunt Amy spoke favorably to Gabriel was when they were defying her father's wish that she dress modestly when she said, "They agreed with kindly tolerance that old people were often tiresome, but one need not upset them by open disobedience: their youth was gone, what had they to live for?" (Old Mortality, Part One, pg. 25.) Amy ended up living this very principle, partying until she overdosed on pills, so that Miranda, the main character, never meets her. Although Gabriel lives many more years after Amy's death, he quickly turns into a pathetic old drunk, constantly comparing everything in his life to Amy. In fact, most people who knew Amy see her as a symbol of the sparkling, bright energy of youth. Miranda sees her as glamorous, but Cousin Eva, who was the same age as Amy, sees her as a symbol of the selfish foolishness of youth, and has lived a fuller life after attaining adulthood and independence. When Miranda is eighteen, she encounters her Cousin Eva, who is an old lady by then. Although Cousin Eva has lived an exciting and ambitious life and she still has plenty of



energy, Miranda cannot help feeling that there is no way to bridge the generation gap. "Across the abyss separating Cousin Eva from her own youth, Miranda looked with painful premonition, saying, "Oh, must I ever be like that?" (Old Mortality, Part Three, pg. 66.)

For those who do not die young, the joys of youth may be fleeting, destroyed by the harsh routine of everyday life. This can especially be seen in "Noon Wine," which takes its title from a song about getting drunk too early in the day, so that there is no liquor left for lunchtime. Ellie Thompson begins as a delicate Texas maiden, but is soon reduced to an invalid by the life of a farm wife. Mr. Helton turns out to have lived a wild and violent youth, leading him to flee to the hard work of a Texas farm.

## Everyone Has Something To Hide

People do not always admit what they are thinking or what they have done, and in these stories, many people have secrets they wish to hide from the world around them. This occurs to Miranda when, as a child, she awkwardly watches her relatives arguing when she is their guest. She thinks to herself, "Nice people did not carry on quarrels before outsiders. Family quarrels were sacred, to be waged privately in fierce hissing whispers, low choked mutters and growls." (Old Mortality, Part Two, pg. 55-56.) As a young adult, Miranda learns that even her sainted Aunt Amy had something to hide, and that she likely committed suicide to hide a shameful pregnancy. Years later, after being brought back from the brink of death, Miranda is horrified to realize that she wishes she had died, and she knows she must hide this realization from others. "For it will not do to betray the conspiracy and tamper with the courage of the living; there is nothing better than to be alive, everyone has agreed on that; it is past argument, and who attempts to deny it is justly outlawed" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pg. 260.) In "Noon Wine," Mr. Helton talks very little and no one guesses that he is an escaped mental patient who murdered his own brother. Mr. Thompson sympathizes with Mr. Helton's terrible secret when he gets away with manslaughter by lying on the witness stand. When Mr. Thompson realizes that no one really believes he is innocent, including his wife, he shoots himself in shame.



# Style

## Point of View

"Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" are seen primarily through Miranda's third-person point of view, which sometimes shifts to first-person stream-of consciousness. In "Old Mortality," Miranda feels like the wonderful experiences of others are explained to her, so that she can almost understand why the old people remember the past so fondly. To Miranda's perception, she is still waiting for the chance to experience life for herself. As the story jumps through Miranda's life, her perceptions and feelings change, and the tone of the story goes along with Miranda's development. Miranda has a moment of epiphany when she understands that she can choose to behave like a grown-up. "Miranda, seeing Maria from the height of her fourteen years suddenly joining with their father to laugh at her, made an instant decision and laughed with them at herself" (Old Mortality, Part Two, pg. 60.) When Miranda is delirious with influenza in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," her dreams mix terrifyingly with reality, which is an example of an unreliable narrator.

When upbraided for her foolhardy behavior, Aunt Amy answered, "And if I am to be the heroine of this novel, why shouldn't I make the most of it?" (Old Mortality, Part One, pg. 31.) This provides an interesting point of view, in that Amy is pointing out to the reader that she is acting out the role of a character in a novel. It is also a sort of sad joke, because Aunt Amy is not the main heroine, but instead a tragic example for Miranda, the real heroine.

"Noon Wine" is told from the point of view of a third-person, semi-omniscient narrator who can read the thoughts of Ellie and Royal Thompson. Mr. Thompson's view is that he must act out a specific, manly role, and he wants little to do with anything outside of his "good-ole-boy" mindset. Ellie cares more about morality, but she is so defeated, that she can do little besides look at her life and despair.

## Setting

"Old Mortality" takes place in the Southern United States, around the turn of the Twentieth Century. As an example of the intricate social fabric of the South, Miranda is taught that fighting duels is all right, as long as it is done elegantly and with good grammar, although it is scandalous for a woman to kiss a man she is not engaged to marry. She spends her childhood going between her grandmother's house in Kentucky, Catholic boarding school in New Orleans and the racetracks for special treats.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" takes place later in Miranda's life, in 1918. Because of World War I, most of the young men are away, leaving many jobs for women. There are many campaigns designed to raise money or supplies, and civilians are strongly urged, sometimes with threats, to give up many luxuries and collect specific kinds of trash for



the war effort. "It keeps them busy and makes them feel useful, and all these women running wild with the men away are dangerous, if they aren't given something to keep their little minds out of mischief." (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Two, pg. 217.) In addition to the fear of war, the populace is ravaged by a terrible influenza pandemic, so there are constantly funerals and ambulances in the streets. Everyone is terrified of getting influenza and hospitals are so full that they have to turn people away.

"Noon Wine" is a separate narrative from the other two novels and takes place at the same time as "Old Mortality," but on a small farm in south Texas. The Thompson farm is falling apart from neglect when Mr. Helton comes and transforms it into a prosperous farm. Unfortunately, the people are close-minded and violent, which leads to tragedy.

## Language and Meaning

Language is a good signifier of class differences, and in "Old Mortality," Miranda's family understands the social effect this can have on her life. This is why her Cousin Eva teaches Miranda that, although murder is technically wrong, at least John Wilkes Booth knew how to recite good Latin after he shot the President. Such an example drives home the importance of class distinctions, which seem to be more significant than morality. In "Noon Wine," the low class of the Texas farmers can be seen in their drawling speech patterns, which put little effort into correct pronunciation or grammar. This casual attitude toward speaking is used at one point, to illustrate the Thompsons' attitude toward taking care of their family and farm. When Ellie Thompson speaks about her sons, she calls them "the little boys," and the narrator points out that, "She had a way of speaking about her sons as though they were rather troublesome nephews on a prolonged visit" (Noon Wine, Section One, pg. 104.) The narrow world-view of the Thompsons can also be seen in their contempt and bafflement regarding Mr. Helton's Swedish accent.

When Miranda encounters her Cousin Eva on a train, the narrator describes Eva's manner of speech, saying, "She sighed with a humorous bitterness. The humor seemed momentary, but the bitterness was a constant state of mind." (Old Mortality, Part Three, pg. 66.) This could also be said of the tone of the entire collection of novels in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." There are many moments of humor, but they are strung together by a wry melancholia that looks at the grave and wonders if life was worth it. This attitude is referenced in the title, which is a reference to the biblical personification of Death.

## Structure

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is the name of a collection of three short novels, which share a running theme of death. The first novel, "Old Mortality," is divided into three parts, which follow the childhood and adolescence of Miranda, a little girl growing up in the South at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The first part focuses on the life of Miranda's Aunt Amy, who died before Miranda was born. Much of this is told in flashback form, as a story being told to young Miranda. The second part focuses on Miranda's school



career and her trips to the racetrack. The third part follows Miranda as she goes to a family funeral and as a young adult, she again is told the story of Aunt Amy, but this version is not nearly as romantic.

The second novel in the collection is "Noon Wine," which is presented in one part, with no chapter divisions. The situation is slowly set in place, letting the reader understand through little observations who the characters are, and how they interact. Nine years pass uneventfully, with gradual growth, until suddenly the story climaxes when Mr. Thompson kills Mr. Hatch. The remainder of the story follows the aftermath of the fight and reveals that the Thompsons are unable to live with the guilt of what has happened.

The third novel shares the title of the book, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and it picks up six years after "Old Mortality," when Miranda is twenty-four and already disillusioned. The novel opens with a confusing dream sequence in which Miranda, the dreamer, seems to be Aunt Amy. Miranda wakes up and goes about her life, but she is constantly stressed about money, her job, the influenza pandemic, and her relationship with Adam. She feels a sense of impending doom, and sees Adam as marked for death, because he is due to ship out soon for World War I. Miranda gets influenza, Adam cares for her lovingly and the two of them confess that they love one another. Miranda goes to the hospital and nearly dies, but is climactically brought back from the brink of death. The book ends on a very anti-climactic note as Miranda finds out that Adam has died of influenza and she goes back to ordinary life, wishing she had died.





## Quotes

"The little girls loved the theater, that world of personages taller than human beings, who swept upon the scene and invested it with their presences, their more than human voices, their gestures of gods and goddesses ruling a universe" (Old Mortality, Part One, pg. 13.)

"She lives again who suffered life,  
Then suffered death, and now set free  
A singing angel, she forgets  
The griefs of old mortality"  
(Old Mortality, Part One, pg. 17.)

"That was the longest and loneliest night and yet it will not end and let the day come. Shall I ever see light again?" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Four, pg. 257.)

"She wanted to believe that tomorrow, or at least the day after, life, such a battle at best, was going to be better" (Noon Wine, Section One, pg. 101.)

"It was enviable, enviable, that they could sit quietly together and have the same expression on their faces while they looked into the hell they shared, no matter what kind of hell, it was theirs, they were together" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section 3, pg. 227.)

"It was his dignity and his reputation that he cared about, and there were only a few kinds of work manly enough for Mr. Thompson to undertake with his own hands" (Noon Wine, Section Two, pg. 113-114.)

"There was a time, she said to herself, when I thought I had neighbors and friends, there was a time when we could hold up our heads, there was a time when my husband hadn't killed a man and I could tell the truth to anybody about anything" (Noon Wine, Section Three, pg. 160.)

"'Sure, I shot the scoundrel,' said Mr. Burleigh's father, 'in self-defense; I TOLD him I'd shoot him if he set foot in my yard, and he did, and I did'" (Noon Wine, Section Three, pg. 161.)

"Above all, though Miranda, no tooth-gnashing, no hair-tearing, it's noisy and unbecoming and it doesn't get you anywhere" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section One, pg. 201.)

"He behaved exactly like city editors in the moving pictures, even to the chewed cigar. Had he formed his style on the films, or had scenario writers seized once for all on the type Bill in its inarguable purity?" (Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Section Two, pg. 211.)



"She sat thus, forever in the pose of being photographed, a motionless image in her dark walnut frame with silver oak leaves in the corners, her smiling gray eyes following one about the room" (Old Mortality, Part One, pg. 3.)



## Topics for Discussion

Why does everyone remember Miranda's Aunt Amy so fondly? Would they feel the same way about her if she had not died young?

Who is more independent: Miranda's Aunt Amy, or her Cousin Eva? What do they do to stand up for themselves?

How is Miranda like Aunt Amy and Cousin Eva? How is she different?

Is Mr. Thompson guilty of murder? What about Mr. Helton?

What role does Mr. Helton play in the lives of the Thompson family? How does he improve their lives?

What types of narration are seen in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider?" How is the narrator unreliable?

What are some examples of the prevalence of death in these stories?

What do you think is the meaning of Miranda's dreams?

How does the character of Miranda change through the years? How does she stay the same?

In "Old Mortality," Miranda says that she has recently eloped, but in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," there is no mention of her husband. Why do you think this is? What do you think happened to Miranda's husband?