

A SOUTHERNERS SAGA: CAROLINE GORDON

Dr.Manju Jose

Associate Professor

School of Technology

GITAM (deemed to be University)

Abstract

There was a time when it was necessary to ask: "Who is Caroline Gordon?." She was the author of nine novels, two volumes of short fiction and other non-fiction works. Besides she was an author whose reputation for crafting fiction has earned her the title "writer's writer." She was a master whose teaching of the techniques of fiction was well known. Her techniques had a lasting impact on writers as diverse as Madeline L' Engle and Peter Taylor. Caroline Gordon must be seen as a conservative in the contemporary Southern fiction of the great classical tradition of the nineteenth-century novel as formulated by Stendhal, Flaubert and later, Henry James. Her prose is perhaps the most unaffected and uniformly accomplished that has been written by an American woman today. Gordon's sense of her role is inherent in the instructive critical comments on the art of fiction which she makes in her analysis of stories of other writers in her anthology *The House of Fiction*, co-edited with Allen Tate. Though the editorial material is a joint contribution, the matter of it so faithfully reflects the principles by which Gordon has won her reputation as a brilliant teacher of writing at various Universities around the country that one can easily tap the author. Her fiction is universal and not temporal, her concern is with human emotions and not political opinions. In her fiction, she has made creative use of the tragic dimensions of human life.

Key Words: Civil War, Southerner, Intellectual Transformation

Chapter I is introductory in nature and it traces the evolution of Southern fiction in the U.S.A. It records the racial and religious concerns and places Caroline Gordon in proper perspective among the other writers of the South. Gordon's fictional writing is surveyed and focus is laid on the projected themes in her novels. The impact of Southern agrarianism on the writers of the time, particularly on Caroline Gordon is insightfully presented. The focus of the thesis is discussed and defined and the novels chosen for in-depth study are briefly analyzed.

Chapter II deals with Gordon's first novel *Penhally*, published in the year 1931, which is set at first in the antebellum South and which depicts the curse involved in "false

domestication of a Universe." The fated collapse of the South is richly anticipated in *Penhally*, in the figure of John Llewellyn. This novel illustrates the incapacity of couples to unite on the basis of love. That emerges as the defining symptom of the wound within being itself, a gap that, without a bridge of mercy, finds the hero plunging into the abyss. *Penhally* is not simply about the defeat of the Old South but about the defeat of a way of life that had the possibility for meaningful and satisfying human relationships. The causes for the destruction of *Penhally* are the discarding of the laws of primogeniture and entail as well as the Civil War. The Civil War beggared the South and hastened the disintegration of the old land-based human relationships. It also made in time the South over into an image of the North. The most significant thing about the novel is that it marks the beginning of what was to be a lifelong quest in Caroline Gordon's fiction for heroes. They not only embody qualities of courage and bravery but also display a sense of responsibility for the welfare of other human beings.

Chapter III is devoted to her second novel *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934) which recounts her fathers' life. In *Aleck Maury*, the female characters point out the limitations of Maury's selfish pursuits. The hero Maury is selfish and self-absorbed but his passion for hunting and fishing cannot sustain him. Too old and infirm to pursue the sport, Maury is increasingly dependent on others. Aleck Maury is a man isolated from other men because of extraordinary responsiveness to the natural pleasures of the sport. It is indeed one of a special breed of literary heroes who very early become passionately devoted to a life of sport. It is a passion that cuts across regional, natural, and racial barriers. In his passionate response to nature and in his devotion to his craft and the ritual of fishing, Maury embodies qualities and attitudes that are traditionally associated with religious devotion.

Chapter IV, *None Shall Look Back* (1937) describes the Civil War experiences of her grandfather and great uncles. The novel measures the devastation of the war by contrasting her accounts of a soldier's life with that of Lucy Allard, the young woman he left behind. This novel reflects the haunting sorrow of the South's fate. It does so through the lives of two fictional characters Lucy and Rives Allard. Since the sadness is objectified in the lives of these characters, it never becomes sentimental. Death and suffering, loss of love and loss of life are the inevitable lots of man.

Chapter V deals with *The Garden of Adonis* (1937) which shows the degeneration and death of those who lose touch with the land. Here she describes that religious faith can change individuals habits but cannot affect the greater community. The use of the mythical paradigm employed in *The Garden of Adonis* is a technique different from anything Gordon had used before. In Principle it is significantly like the historical paradigm in this novel there are a number of town people whose basic values and way of life are antagonistic to and destructive of the agrarian values represented by Allard. The novel creates characters and actions which dramatized the antagonistic culture and make us feel its destructiveness.

In Chapter VI, Gordon examines the impact of infidelity in *Green Centuries* (1941). It demonstrates how people destroy themselves with itinerant, rootless lives. But in this

novel, Gordon creates more positive images of the power of religious faith. Caroline Gordon's imagination was deeply involved in the creation of two characters namely Rion and Dragging Canoe. She was able to see them, create them in all illusion of their physical reality, but at the same time shape them to the bent of her own heroic vision. *Green Centuries* is intellectually uncomplicated, but it works powerfully on the emotions. The futile struggle of a single powerful individual who is determined to fight on for the things his society has already surrendered produces the melancholy ending of *Green Centuries*.

In Chapter VII, Gordon develops the idea that women of faith can lead men to salvation in her subsequent novel, *The Strange Children* published in 1951. None of the female characters in this novel are cast in a sympathetic light. They are helpless, ineffectual or even insane. Yet the men are no better, relying solely on themselves and their intellects. Through references to Saint Martha and the Virgin Mary, Gordon exposes the limitations of such reliance. In this novel, the conflicts among the adults are brought into focus principally through Lucy's experience. The protagonist of the novel is Lucy. On the allegorical level, Lucy is classified as a kind of innocent young setting out on the road of life. On the way, she encounters forces of good and evil contending the possession of her soul. The evil ones are represented by Isabel and Tubby, the good by Kevin Reardon. *Strange Children* on its highest level is a novel about evil and about the necessity, for those who would escape it, of religious faith.

In Chapter VIII, *The Malefactors*, published in 1956 reflects the turmoil in her life. The characters in this novel are thinly disguised portraits of Gordon and Tate, their difficulties and failures. Combining Jungian archetypes with stories of Christian saints and classical heroes, Gordon creates a highly symbolic world underpinning her conversion story. This novel is Caroline Gordon's most ambitious, most complex, and technically her most accomplished long work. The impressive technical accomplishment in this novel is the way Gordon abandons straight forward chronology in favor of a more poetic compositional method. Here the protagonist has undergone a spiritual, moral or intellectual transformation. This novel is Southern in its character and theme. It exhibits a strong sense of community, strict morality and respect for the sacredness of life.

Chapter IX is the concluding chapter which sums up all the arguments and attempts to place Caroline Gordon as a great advocate of southern agrarian involvement. The life lived by people in the South with all their concerns, conventions, traditions and values, is brought into focus to highlight the southern milieu.

A microcosmic view of American life, especially which of the South, is graphically presented by Caroline Gordon in all the seven novels under examination. The social life in the South with its customs, traditions, and religion is portrayed for its rich cultural heritage. Her fiction is universal, and not temporal; her concern is with human emotions and not political opinions. Her fiction has remained distinctively Southern in character and theme and recorded the concerns of the society for the benefit of posterity.

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