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Hearing Adam: Gender Relationships in the Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Linda Elaine Griffin Hipple

December 2007

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Keywords: Caroline Gordon, Short Fiction, Gender Relationships

ABSTRACT

Hearing Adam: Gender Relationships in the Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon

by

Linda Elaine Griffin Hipple

Writer and critic Caroline Gordon has been a participant on the Southern literary scene since the early 1930s, yet her works have been neither studied nor appreciated as frequently as the works of her male contemporaries. Her novels and short fiction never received the critical acclaim that they merited due to the perpetuation of the erroneous idea that women have little to say. While at the time other female writers were exploring their emancipation, Gordon retreated to the consistent confines of male-dominated tradition and created fiction embodying her conservative philosophy. This thesis will examine five pieces of her short fiction, “The Petrified Woman,” “Tom Rivers,” “One More Day,” “The Brilliant Leaves,” and “The Presence,” to explore gender relationships and how Gordon’s background and personal beliefs impacted her body of work.

DEDICATION

For Steb. Forty Years is a long time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

FAMILY, ALLEN TATE, AND GOD

Writer and critic Caroline Gordon has been a participant on the Southern literary scene since the early 1930s, yet her works have been neither studied nor appreciated as frequently as the works of her male contemporaries. A traditionalist among modern writers, she is recognized for her “controlled craftsmanship as well as her conservative attitudes” (Kaplan 523). As a woman writer, Gordon experienced an identity conundrum whether to “stress separation from the masculine literary tradition or to pursue her resemblance to it” (Diamond and Edwards 28-29). It is clear from Gordon’s nine completed novels and three collections of short stories that she chose to submerge her identity and gender in her fiction. Her ideas on the complex relationships between men and women are found throughout her fiction but are clearly illustrated in her short fiction. As a clue to her viewpoint, before her death in 1981 she directed that her tombstone be inscribed with the words from her friend and colleague Jacques Maritain: “It is for Adam to interpret the voices which Eve hears” (Waldron 369). Gordon looked for authority from the men in her life and she sought recognition from them.

Caroline Gordon was a product of her time and her environment. Always looking for acceptance and listening for Adam’s voice, she was most influenced by her family, her husband Allen Tate, and her conversion to Roman Catholicism. Anne Boyle acknowledges the contradictions that beset her as follows:

In considering the life and art of Caroline Gordon, one needs to consider not only national trends regarding women’s lives and work, but also her very powerful familial and regional influences . . . Ann Waldron’s 1987

biography, *Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance* . . . recognizes Gordon's generosity and her conflicting passions, her devotion to her craft, and her need for relationships, for "close connections" to both people and place. The financial, professional, and personal exigencies that led to frequent relocations, interruptions in her writing, and partings from friends and family help define the tensions and contesting desires that plagued Gordon throughout her life. (20-21)

Caroline Gordon always maintained a strong familial bond, especially with her mother's people, the Meriwethers. According to Makowsky, she was born at Merry Mont (or Merimont), a family farm in Trenton County, Kentucky, near the Tennessee border (19). Waldon notes that her mother Nancy's family was considered aristocracy in their region as they could trace their lineage back to early Virginia settlers. The Meriwethers were tobacco farmers and came to Kentucky in 1809 looking for fertile, inexpensive land (33). The family was large and boisterous. Informally, they divided themselves into two distinct groups: the Kinky Heads and the Anyhows. "The Kinky Heads took up causes like abolition and spiritualism and did good works. They went to church. The Anyhows did 'any how they pleased'" (Waldron 34).

The first man to influence Gordon died before she was born. Jonza notes that Douglas Meriwether, Caroline's grandfather, was a Kinky Head who valued learning and always bemoaned the fact that the Civil War had interrupted his formal education. The Meriwether support of the Confederacy during the War Between the States all but destroyed the family fortune, and following the war Douglas was a haunted, sickly man

(3). He eventually committed suicide by consuming an “overdose of his headache medicine, crying, ‘If I only knew! If I only knew!’” (Waldron 33-34).

At that time, Kentucky lacked a comprehensive public school system, and Douglas had aspirations that his four children, Robert, Loulie, Nancy, and Margaret, would have the education that he craved. Prior to his death, he hired a private tutor for the family, James Maury Morris Gordon. Gordon came “from a good but suitably eccentric family in Louisa County, Virginia” and there was some vagueness about why he did not actually graduate from the University of Virginia. Following Douglas’ death, the lessons continued. The Meriwether children were apt students, but they were smothered by their oppressive mother who unwittingly fostered in them a need for rebellion and escape.

Loulie, the oldest daughter, created her own religion; her brother, Rob, refused to bathe and repeatedly muttered about the tyranny of women. The youngest, Margaret . . . played the part of the southern belle and surrounded herself with plenty of beaux. The middle daughter, Nancy Minor, known as Nan, retreated into fundamentalism and scholarship.
(Jonza 3-4)

Waldon observes that Nancy Meriwether was an enthusiastic student who delighted in Greek and Latin while possessing a reading proficiency in French and German. As the lessons progressed, Nancy began to look at James Gordon as something more than a teacher and as a means of escape from her mother’s domination. Eventually, they were married. True to the family tradition, James and Nancy stayed close to the farm and set up housekeeping at Merry Mont in a cottage that had formerly belonged to the

overseer. On October 6, 1895, Caroline Ferguson Gordon was born (34-35). Thus Douglas Meriwether's love and concern for education eventually resulted in Caroline Gordon's birth.

In 1902, the Gordon family left Merry Mont and moved to nearby Clarksville, Tennessee, where James Gordon opened a boy's preparatory school that focused on history and the classics. It was here that Caroline, the only girl pupil, "began her lifelong love of the classics, a love that she later admitted probably had more to do in shaping her critical positions than anything else" (Brinkmeyer 120).

Brinkmeyer explains that always restless, James Gordon determined to leave the school to begin his new endeavor, the study of religion and ministry in the Church of Christ. This venture necessitated a series of family moves that took them to Wilmington, Ohio; Lynchburg, Virginia; and finally back to Kentucky. Throughout his life James Gordon doted on Caroline, and she was devoted to him. He instilled in her the love of learning, sport, hunting, and fishing, which she maintained throughout her life (121).

Brinkmeyer continues that eventually, Caroline attended tiny Bethany College from 1912 to 1916. After her graduation, she taught high school in Clarksburg, Tennessee, and then worked for a while at the *Chattanooga News*. In 1924, while James and Nancy Gordon were living in Guthrie, Kentucky, Caroline came home for a visit. It was at this time that she met another influence in her life, Allen Tate, who was in town visiting his friend Robert Penn Warren. By this time, Caroline was tired of teaching and the newspaper, and she was determined to be a writer. In awe and pursuit of Tate, she moved to New York City, the artistic and literary heart of the United States. Gordon and

Tate were married in New York on May 15, 1925, and their only child, Nancy, was born three months later in September (120-21).

Allen Tate would eventually influence Gordon's prose, first through his philosophy of writing and later by his antics before, during, and after their divorce. Throughout her marriage to Tate, Gordon became acquainted with the key personalities involved in two regional scholarly groups. The Fugitive and the Agrarian literary movements were a part of the climate that influenced the Southern writing of that era, and Tate became a part of both when he entered Vanderbilt University in 1918. While there, he first became a member of the group known as the Fugitives, along with John Crowe Ransom, Alec B. Stevenson, Stanley Johnson, Walter Clyde Curry, Sidney Hirsh, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and others. The group began as a philosophical discussion group and later changed into an organization devoted to critical interpretations of poetry. Makowsky writes that

From these critical discussions emerged the idea of publishing the best poems, and so a new little magazine was born. The magazine's initial manifesto reflected the youth of its editorial board. Although they were not sure what they were "for," they certainly knew what they wanted to rebel against: a southern literary heritage that they perceived as moonlight-and magnolias nostalgia for the antebellum. "Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern Literature has been stopped up. . . . *THE FUGITIVE* flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South." (50-51)

Makowsky notes that as the group mellowed and matured many of these same men would retract their earlier statements, and “as Agrarians of the early 1930’s, they would even promote the values of a Southern heritage” (51).

J. A. Bryant states that the Agrarian community articulated a belief that the problem in the South was caused by “the attempt by science or technology to reduce an older holistic agricultural society to one narrowly focused on productivity” (49). He continues that Tate, however, was only an Agrarian in theory:

He knew nothing of farming, and he had no taste for gardening. His admiration for the agrarian South was essentially patrician, something he inherited from his Virginia-born mother. . . his self-conscious southernness had been fueled by exposure to an unsympathetic Northeast. . . but being patrician, he adjusted more readily to alien northern ways . . . When it became clear that the Agrarian brethren would never focus on a practicable strategy, Tate turned abruptly to fiction. . . but he remained a southerner in the modern world, keenly aware both of his heritage and of his need to adapt it for survival in a world of communities understandably indifferent. (50)

Makowsky considers that Tate “had acquired a literary family that he found much more satisfactory than his blood kin.” Through Tate’s agrarianism, Gordon found an abundant world for her fiction, yet she would also use their personal relationship as her criterion for the subject matter of her creative writing (53).

As writers, Tate and Gordon were plagued by lack of money from the beginning of their marriage. To make ends meet and to provide time for Tate to write, Gordon

became a secretary to Ford Maddox Ford, who was in the habit of encouraging young writers. Gordon continued with her writing, but she did not readily show her work to Ford as she had “the kind of perfectionism that makes obtaining constructive criticism, or completing a work, quite difficult” (Makowsky 73). Finally, while in Paris, she began an apprenticeship with Ford whose support and authority came at a critical time for her as she was unsure about her craft. Reminiscing about that period, Gordon writes,

“Ford took me by the scruff of the neck . . . set me down in his apartment every morning at eleven o’clock and forced me to dictate least five thousand words.” (Brinkmeyer 121)

Brinkmeyer remarks that Gordon continued with her writing and in 1931 published her first novel, *Penhally*. However, her literary success did not compensate for the troubled Tate-Gordon marriage plagued by professional jealousies, Tate’s infidelities, and both partners’ over-indulgence in alcohol. Finally, in 1946 they were divorced, remarried three months later, and divorced a second and final time in 1959 (123-24).

Jonza explains it was between divorces in 1947 that Gordon joined the Catholic Church. This conversion had a profound influence on the remainder of her writing. She enjoyed the tradition, rites, and mysteries of the church. Trying to express what her conversion meant to her, she wrote “It’s like suddenly being given authority to believe all the things you’ve surmised” (271). Makowsky, however, believes that Gordon’s conversion was influenced by her estrangement from Tate, who was an authority figure for her. She points out that Gordon’s contemporary, Flannery O’Connor, complained that Gordon’s fiction following her conversion suggested that “Faith is unintentionally made to seem like chiefly a refuge for the losers in the battle of the sexes” (185).

Bryant notes that Gordon always comprehended

the craft of fiction better than any other southern novelist of her generation and in her view she always gave craft priority in her practice. Nevertheless, her convictions about southern history and, in later years, about the Catholic religion were the inflexible priorities of her life, and these rather than art became the ultimate determinates in almost everything that she did. The novels that she wrote during the 1930s all supported in one way or another her views about the south's unique role as the preserver of Western culture as she understood it, and thereafter her writing tended to serve as an apologetic for the Catholicism that she embraced formally in the late forties. By 1950 these two preoccupations had become inseparable in her mind. (63)

McDowell believes that as Gordon began her profession she was Agrarian "and she tried through her fiction to offset the empiricism, skepticism, and impersonal aspects of an industrial society" (5). He points out that Gordon's works are Christian "in hope" as they illustrate the "need for both social hierarchy and individual responsibility," and they "celebrated the stability to be found in the southern past and the dynamic quality of personal relationships at their best" (6).

Bryant continues that Gordon's authentic ability was seen not in her novels but in her works of short fiction. In concise works rather than longer ones,

she most effectively presented her understanding of the daily exchanges that perpetuate the solidity of clanlike southern family life and could there employ her genius for unifying a composition of manageable length with

symbolic detail . . . her short stories were uneven in quality, but the best of them were jewels of their kind, equal to any that had been written in America up to that time. (65)

Tom Landess believes that even undisciplined writers can create a novel, and he appreciates the skill needed to create a successful piece of short fiction. He notes that Gordon's talent and dedication to her craft enabled her to create stories of considerable quality:

. . . the short story demands a special piety, a studied devotion to the intricate technique of fiction; and consequently only the finest craftsmen can successfully practice this special art.... Such a writer is Caroline Gordon, whose artistic discipline has always been adequate to control the wide range of vision she brings to her fiction. Indeed she tends to crowd into her stories more than their formal limitations would seem to permit: the total experience of a region's history, the hero's archetypal struggle, the complexity of modern aesthetics. In every instance, however, she succeeds in bringing the broad scope of her narrative into focus and in creating the ideal fictional moment, when form and subject are at war and the outcome hangs forever in the balance. (1)

Waldron agrees that Gordon's novels have not received the critical acclaim that has been given to her short fiction. However, Gordon disliked writing short stories, and she writes to a friend: "I can face a lifetime of incessant toil writing novels, but each short story takes as much out of you - - - me, anyhow, as a novel and then you have to start over again" (169). Ironically, in the finest of these short stories Gordon's best ideas

about family, marriage and the redeeming value of the Catholic Church are found.

Stuckey finds that it is unusual that Gordon's work has received so little critical attention and he suggests that Gordon is a "demanding writer" who requires "moral and esthetic responses that many readers are unable to make" (11-12).

Stuckey continues that Gordon began writing during the time referred to as the "Southern literary renaissance." This period of creativity rejected the sentimental moonlight and magnolia view of southern history. It lamented increased industrialization as a solution to both social and economic difficulties, and it defended agrarianism as the significant lifestyle for any society (17). It is important that Gordon either "directly or by implication . . . has always celebrated the stability to be found in the southern past and the dynamic quality of personal relationships at their best" (Stuckey 5-6).

Boyle recognizes that Gordon led a conflicted, complicated life as she multi-tasked: balancing her professional activity with her roles of wife and mother. She wanted to be accepted by Tate and his colleagues, and to achieve this end Gordon felt pressured to write in a neutral or masculine manner. Boyle identifies her as a

marginal figure of the southern Renaissance; as a "woman writer" who resisted that label and worked to write "masculine" prose; as a writer of historic and biographical fiction; as a modernist; as a Catholic; as a careful critic of narrative technique; and as a strict but generous teacher of creative writing. More often she is painted beside her husband, Allen Tate, and is drawn as the hostess who entertained the poets, painters, and novelists who often visited their home in Tennessee. Less frequently, she is depicted as a mother

who struggled to maintain professional identity while passionately,
but at times, distantly caring for her daughter. (18-19)

Boyle continues that Veronica Makowsky employs a feminist perspective to evaluate Gordon's craft and to highlight the fact that Gordon was and is relatively unknown outside select literary circles. Makowsky discusses how the domination by Tate and his associates impacted Gordon's literary themes and her choices of subject matter. She speculates on whether or not Gordon's male mentors were an asset or a hindrance to her creative ability as she

was constantly troubled and sometimes paralyzed by early-twentieth-century ideas regarding women and the arts and . . . she explored her uncertainties and distress in her fiction. (Boyle 21)

In the end, Gordon finally "internalized her cultures' attitudes toward women and writing, both in her life and work" (LeRoy-Frazier 64).

NancyLee Novell Jonza examines how family, gender, traditions, and professional connections influenced Gordon, and she employs the metaphor of an underground stream to illustrate a "mysterious, creative element" present in Gordon's work. She "sees in Gordon's fiction a reflection of the inner turmoil that sometimes frustrated, sometimes sustained, yet always defined her life as a woman and an artist" (Boyle 21).

Gordon's skill is shown with the care and exactness that she employs in her short fiction. McDowell notes that Gordon studied the technique of Henry James and his use of "a restricted point of view and its importance for determining both form and spiritual authority" (9). Gordon's combined use of naturalism and symbolism provide for dramatic images. McDowell continues that Gordon believed her fiction should be about

“the conduct of life, especially with the relationships of people to one another and with the changes in these relationships” (9). Gordon’s craft uses stunning detail and a single point of view to create mood, to convey subtleties of psychological shading, and to establish the “expansiveness of meaning that in literature we associate with symbolism” (11).

Caroline Gordon continued with her writing until her death in 1981. Although she is considered a serious, talented writer, her works are largely ignored by modern readers. Whether it is because she is demanding of her readers or because her subject matter is not relevant, some of her works were allowed to go out of print in the 1960s. Stuckey and McDowell are male critics who were writing in the 1960s and early 1970s, and their thoughts are influenced by their own gender bias. Feminist writer, Veronica Makowsky, considers that Gordon was thwarted in both her creative development and in her growth as a person by the men in her life. Anne Boyle concurs and emphasizes that Gordon was forced to write in a masculine voice that denied her sex. Nancy Lee Jonza recognizes the turmoil present in Gordon’s personal life and notes how this affected her fiction and themes. Waldon notes there was independence in Gordon shown by the fact that she “kept her maiden name, worked all her life, was anything but a stay-at home housewife. She acted like a feminist, talked like a Southern ninny” (357).

From the beginning, Gordon’s work was influenced by the fact that she came from a Southern family that still remembered the War Between the States (the Recent Unpleasantness), and her writings reflected the prejudices of the time. Furthermore, her fiction was shaped by the fact that she was a woman with a family and a troubled

marriage and ultimately sought salvation through a conversion to a religion whose authority enabled her reconciliation with the distressing influences in her life.

Marie Fletcher discusses Gordon's female characters in relation to the choices that their place in Southern culture bestowed upon them. In a perfect world

A woman should commit herself to a man completely and unquestioningly and that he should be compelled by her commitment never to betray her faith. . . Miss Gordon tells of the joys of love but indicates that they are likely to end in bitter suffering. (18)

Fletcher contends that for Gordon there were only two options available for women who failed to find fulfillment in love: death or denial of one's sex (20-21).

I think that all of the previously mentioned critics miss a key element in their interpretations of Gordon's short stories, and that is the negative fate of the women following a blighted relationship. While Gordon was a master of the memorable image and the use of naturalism, it is in her depictions of relationships between men and women in the context of the Southern family that her craft excels. Gordon listened for Adam to guide her, but when Adam failed, she was forced to rely on her own resources. By implication, her female characters, too, will survive. When Adam is unsuccessful in maintaining his role as a man, the women are forced to the extreme measures that originate from the complex relationships between men and women found in five of Gordon's best short stories: "The Petrified Woman," "Tom Rivers," "One More Day," "The Brilliant Leaves," and "The Presence." In these stories the troubled, tragic, and sometime comic lives of husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, lovers, and cousins,

are seen but have been subjected to a misreading by those before me. Several of the women in these stories fare much better without the troublesome men in their lives.

CHAPTER 2

BETTER WITHOUT HIM

“The Petrified Woman” (1947) is an initiation story told through the voice of a woman recounting an incident from her past. It involves the event of a family reunion, and it includes references to Gordon’s childhood, the relationships within a family, a young girl’s coming of age, and the disintegration of a marriage. Tom Landess notes the importance of the family as a subject for Caroline Gordon.

For southern writers of her generation, the family was a natural symbol of the order of existence, the basic analogue for everything of importance; and therefore it provided a key to the meaning of community, history, politics, morality, the transcendent and the timeless. (1)

The setting of the story is much like the location of many similar gatherings that Gordon attended as a child. Waldron observes that the Fayerlee family resembles Gordon’s Meriwether relatives, and the site of Arthur’s Cave is much like Dunbar Cave of Gordon’s youth. The annual Meriwether reunion was a time when Meriwethers “‘of the name and blood’ came back to the Old Neighborhood to breathe the sacred air” (256).

John Alvis agrees that the relationships are important to Gordon, and he uses the term “dominant chord” to refer to what Andrew Lytle calls “the stress between the sexes” (93). Alvis continues that Gordon is interested and

is most concerned with the relative roles of man and woman, with that fundamental need of woman to find a source of strength in the man, with connection between sexual love and nature’s bounty, with the subtle

rhythms of the enamored soul awakening to love or maturing in it, with the strong passions of the blood for family, place, honor, vengeance. (86)

Cousin Tom and Eleanor are a mismatched couple, and it is surprising that they were married in the first place. Eleanor is from Birmingham, and she left the city to come and live in the country at The Fork. She is first seen wearing a cool white dress that complements her distant attitude. While Tom is looking forward to the festivities, Eleanor dreads the occasion, and she expresses her disdain through sarcasm:

“And in August the Fayerlees repair to Arthur’s Cave,” she said.

“Five hundred people repairing en masse to the womb --- what a sight it must be.”

Cousin Tom went over and put his arm around her waist. “Do they look any worse than other folks, taking them by and large?” he asked. . . .

“I’d rather not take them by and large,” she said. “Do we *have* to go, Tom?” (“The Petrified Woman” 3-4)

Clueless Tom does not notice Eleanor’s irony; he is looking forward to food, drink, and kissing all of the girls. The two types of kisses that the couple gives to Sally and Hilda tell a lot about their dissimilar characters. Eleanor’s goodnight kiss is stiff and formal “French fashion . . . first on one cheek and then on the other” (“The Petrified Woman” 4). Tom’s exuberant kisses to each girl on the lips are sexually aggressive (Millichap 112).

That night in bed, the girls excitedly discuss the boys they will see at the picnic. The talk of boys and the kiss from her uncle cause Sally to have a troubling dream in which she sees Cousin Tom not as a relative, but as Tom, a man. Clearly, Sally is

beginning to have some grown-up thoughts, and she is in a “precarious balance on the threshold of womanhood” (Millichap 113).

The day of the picnic arrives and brings with it relatives from near and far. A returning relative, Cousin Robert D. Owen Fayerlee, who moved to St. Louis and made his fortune, has donated the whiskey for the event. Alcohol consumption was a large part of Fayerlee (and Meriwether) occasions. Gordon viewed drinking as a part of life and she acknowledged her own drinking as a way to “get a little ease . . . by tanking up” (Jonza 202-03). The white and the black Fayerlees equally partake, but the established cultural roles of racial groups are known by everyone and upheld. Sally comments that she and Hilda “like to be around the Negroes” (“The Petrified Woman” 5). The blacks are not outsiders and are recognized as part of the family, with names such as Aunt Rachel and Uncle Jack, but they are of the acknowledged *lesser* family. Katherine Prown notes that Gordon “like her Fugitive/Agrarian associates . . . regarded the subordination of blacks to whites and women to men as crucial to the maintenance of southern identity” (81). In her book *Entitled to the Pedestal*, Nghana Tamu Lewis argues that Gordon viewed blacks with a paternalistic attitude.

Gordon felt responsible for all of the blacks in the county; she looked upon them as recalcitrant children. Yet she trusted them, enjoyed their society, and recognized differences among them in talent and intelligence . . . it is not proper to pretend that Caroline Gordon was more advanced in her thinking about race than most of her contemporaries. (109-110)

There are very few persons at the reunion who are considered to be outsiders to the family. Even Giles Allard, the cousin who is “not quite right in the head” (“The

Petrified Woman” 8), is included in the festivities, although Tom makes certain that Sally and Hilda are not left alone with him. Everyone has a place and a role in the family hierarchy.

Besides Eleanor, the other obvious outsider is Sally’s father, Professor Aleck Maury, a thinly disguised portrait of Gordon’s own father, James Maury Gordon. As James was not of Meriwether blood, Maury is not a Fayerlee. Maury reacts somewhat like Eleanor and is aloof about the festivities. He knows that he is not of the lineage. In fact, young Sally realizes that her father is “not connected,” and she had not expected him to attend as he commented: “All those mediocre people, getting together to congratulate themselves on their mediocrity. I ain’t going a step” (“The Petrified Woman” 6).

However, Maury does come to the reunion, and he stays to himself observing the people because “he likes to watch them make fools of themselves” (“The Petrified Woman” 6). Again, as the outsider, Maury plays his role and mocks the activities.

Sally feels some degree of not being connected to the family because she is introduced with reserve as “Sally Maury” rather than the informal “Cousin Sally.” Perhaps she also feels self-conscious just because she is an adolescent. She runs, plays, and eats with her female cousins, yet she refuses to dance because she “thought it better not to try than to fail” (“The Petrified Woman” 6).

Hilda and Sally discover a run-down, shabby carnival wagon near the reunion site, and they join Cousin Giles and an increasingly inebriated Cousin Tom to investigate. It is here that they see Stella, the one hundred sixteen year old petrified woman. They can tell that Stella is a hoax, and Cousin Giles blurts out, “How come her bubbies move if she’s been dead so long?” (“The Petrified Woman” 10) In his advanced state of

drunkenness, Tom is fascinated with Stella, and he stays with her after the others have left. Tom's intoxicated state could be a reason for his not returning to the picnic as Hilda says that Eleanor does not approve of his behavior: "It just drives her crazy when he drinks." Her cousin replies, "She'd better get used to it. . . All the Fayerlee men drink" ("The Petrified Woman" 12). It is acknowledged that men drink to excess, and it is recognized by the family, including the women. As an outsider, Eleanor views the drinking as evidence of Tom's lack of character, but she remarks that wine will be served at dinner: "There's no use for us to deny ourselves just because Tom can't control himself" ("The Petrified Woman" 13).

At the table, Tom is intoxicated and grandly tells the group that he has seen a lady with charisma: "Some women are just petrified in spots. . . .She was petrified all over" ("The Petrified Woman" 14). Sally knows the marriage is over as she looks at Eleanor's blue eyes and notes that they resemble frozen violets as she glares at Tom. Drunkenly rising from the table, Tom says that he is going to return to Stella. He stumbles on the hem of Cousin Marie's dress and ends up sprawled on the floor. Sally says,

"He was still lying there when we left, his arms flung out and blood on his forehead from the broken glass. . . I never did even see him get up off the floor." ("The Petrified Woman" 15)

Tom's accident is precipitated not only a woman, but by an outsider, like his wife. Sally concludes the story by relating that following the reunion Cousin Eleanor and Cousin Tom were divorced, and eventually both of them remarried other people. She also shares that one night a drunken Cousin Tom burned down the house at the Fork while

. . . roaming around at night with a lighted lamp in his hand. . . .

I hardly ever think of them anymore. If I do, they are still there in that house. The mockingbird has just stopped singing. Cousin Eleanor, in her long white dress, is walking over to the window, where, on moonlight nights we used to sit, to watch the water glint on the rocks. . . . But Cousin Tom is still lying there on the floor. . . . (“The Petrified Woman” 15)

Was Tom’s excessive drinking the cause of Eleanor’s coldness towards him or is her indifference the cause of his drinking? McDowell writes that “gradually, the reader realizes that Tom’s misbehaving is in large part caused by his wife’s lack of feeling” (132). Jonza agrees and says “that Eleanor was the true petrified woman because of her cold heart and intolerance to the Fayerlees” (270).

“Tom & Eleanor’s failure in marriage is based on their failure to fulfill natural gender roles” (Fritz-Piggott 213). Alvis looks at the reunion as a time that provides an occasion for the family to come together and heal old wounds. If Tom and Eleanor had a good marriage, good in the sense of the natural order, any disagreements that they might have had before the event would be resolved by the time of family closeness. Their marriage is dysfunctional, and

the reunion simply serves as a further irritant which occasions a final wound, rather than a balm to cement their tenuous relationship. . . . the husband’s drinking seems to be associated with a more fundamental failure on his part. He is not capable of exercising the kind of male sovereignty which marriage requires of the husband and which the woman expects, even though, as with Eleanor, she may dispute it. (95)

Feminist critic Makowsky also faults Tom, but for a different reason. She argues that this story contains a common theme in Gordon's work:

a man's selfishness petrifies or makes monstrous the women around him. What is different here is that the story actually emphasizes the pathetic effects of a man's conduct on himself. . .As drunken Tom attempts to rise from the dinner table, he gets his foot tangled in Cousin Marie's dress and falls to the floor. . . Although he might like to get away from women, he is inextricably "tangled" with them. (183)

Fritz-Piggott agrees and suggests that Sally is the petrified woman.

In this reading, the story suggests that sexual stereotypes petrify women and men, fix and freeze them in ridiculous roles: the hard-drinking man, demanding and purchasing female passivity; the white-robed romantic woman on the porch or at the window; the bitch in black. Perhaps the "real" petrified woman is the story's teller, the quickly maturing Sally Maury, who is frightened by the lessons she learns. (213-14)

Gordon recognizes Tom's weakness, but the overt blame is on Eleanor for her frigidity and lack of understanding. Whether the end of the marital union is due to lack of feeling, failure to fulfill natural gender roles, selfishness, or ingrained stereotypical responsibilities, the fact is that it ends, and it is Eleanor, not Tom, who seeks a divorce. Eleanor is not embittered against matrimony since she does remarry, and one hopes to a man more suited to her nature. Tom also remarries, but his antics continue. Tom has learned nothing from this experience, but Eleanor has moved on and away with her life. Eleanor's end is not tragic but hopeful. And when Sally remembers Eleanor, she thinks of

flowers; and when she thinks of Tom, he is sprawled on the floor. As a proper Southern woman, Gordon would not actively support divorce, but perhaps this story is her oblique attempt to envision a woman's success following the end of a marriage.

In "Tom Rivers" (1933) Gordon reveals a similar pessimistic view of the relationship between men and women, yet the story is told in a more comic tone. It must be emphasized from the beginning that Tom Rivers is NOT the Tom Fayerlee in the previous story, although alcohol does play a key role in his actions. Jonza says that the inspiration for this story came from family tales told on the porch at Merry Mont by Gordon's father, James Gordon, and her Uncle Rob Meriwether: "just as they always had, the kin spent long hours sitting on the porch, telling old stories, talking about one another, passing judgments, and speculating on characters and events" (118).

The male narrator, Lew Allard, begins by telling about the times spent under a tree at "Merry Point" just talking. Waldron notes the shadow and light that is described (116). In this instance, Gordon uses the memorable image of a tree as a

traditional symbol which gathers in the larger meaning of her narrative: the old spreading beech which generation after generation, stands in the yard of the family place, filtering the light . . . This image, that of the family tree itself, emphasizes the permanence of the collective memory which binds families together, those dead or absent as well as those living and present. (Landess 58)

This image of stability is employed to call attention to the home and family that Tom Rivers abandons. Tom left the constancy and security of his birthplace to travel to the

unfamiliar lawless frontier in Texas. Lew Allard comments on the permanence that is found at Merry Point:

There is a curious thing that I have observed. If you sit day after day, summer after summer, in a chair under the same tree, you will notice how the light falls under and through the boughs to strike always in the same pattern. You notice how it falls that way year after year, changing only with the seasons, and you think how you might go away and suffer death or torture by fire or flood, and the light always at the same hour in that season will be creeping around the bole of that beech tree. (“Tom Rivers” 25)

According to family lore, Tom Rivers left his Kentucky home because of his girlfriend Barbara’s refusal to marry him.

She had turned him down because of his drinking. He had appeared drunk at a Sunday-school picnic. . . There had been a lot of to-do about it, of course. She had wanted him to promise her never to touch another drop. “I can’t do that,” Tom said. “Now you know I can’t do that. I know I made a fool of myself before all of those folks, and I hope I won’t do it again, but as for saying I won’t ever touch another drop - - -”

They had argued about it all one afternoon, behind drawn blinds in the parlor at the Stayton’s’, the old folks sitting on the porch waiting to hear the outcome: the next day Tom started for Texas. “Her mother was tickled to death. She said all along she didn’t want her daughter to marry a Rivers.” (“Tom Rivers” 37)

While in Texas, Tom's reputation is enhanced by his amiable nature and his courage. Tom welcomes Cousin Lew, and he wants to hear about the folks back home. Lew represents the family ties and social order that Tom "has publicly abandoned and yet privately continues to cherish" (Landess 60).

Ever the conservative, Alvis admires Tom and supports his audacity in the abandonment of an unreasonably demanding Barbara.

In that case the man's decision seems to be shown as admirable --- it appears to involve a recognition and affirmation of a condition of his manhood the denial of which would entail the negation of his proper sexual role. (95)

Landess writes that Tom "chooses personal honor, the integrity of manhood which is more important to him than the desire of a woman" (61). Stuckey believes that Tom left Kentucky and Barbara because he is a hero who "cannot stop long in any one place because his fearlessness makes him an outlaw" (117).

Makowsky takes a more negative view of Tom's actions, saying that the reason he left Kentucky was to "flee the restraints of a matriarchal family." Fearlessness and restlessness make Tom "unsuited for family life." Makowsky says that in this story Gordon "treats the conflict between freedom-loving males and the demands of the family, characterized as female" (112).

Barbara's reputation as the woman who sent Tom to Texas is also part of the family myth. She is characterized by conservatives as an unreasonable woman who would require that Tom conduct himself with decorum at a church-related event. Makowsky does not address Barbara's role but says that due to Tom's fear of the

matriarchal family, he would have left anyway. Barbara's refusal is as good an excuse as any other. After the confrontation with the Night Riders, Tom rode into the West and disappeared.

Always a member of her family, Barbara surely becomes known for her stance on proper picnic behavior. She does not marry someone her mother dislikes. However, she also does not become attached to someone who was eventually fated to abandon her. Whether she remains single or not, Barbara has the support of her kin, the permanence of the family tree.

The topic of the relationship between men and women in "The Petrified Woman" and in "Tom Rivers" continues to inspire debate from opposing critics. Tom Fayerlee is either an irresponsible alcoholic or a man simply conducting himself as all men do. His behavior is due to his own lack of character or to his wife's lack of passion and understanding. Tom Rivers is either a hero or a female-phobic adventurer. Both Eleanor and Barbara are fortunate because they do not have the liability of a troublesome man. They listen to Adam and reject him. Gordon's exploration into unsuitable marriage partners should be interpreted as hopeful for the women who survive such encounters. Allen Tate vexed Gordon with his drinking, womanizing, and wandering. Again, Gordon is using her fiction to investigate life after abandonment and divorce. Gordon survived the divorces and channeled her energies into her teaching and writing.

CHAPTER 3

DEATH AND HOPE

“One More Time” (1935) demonstrates how a lack of understanding between a husband and wife can affect a marriage. In this story, Adam speaks to Eve, but she does not listen. An aging Aleck Maury, the character inspired by Gordon’s father James, is the first-person narrator, and he “provides sympathetic intelligence by means of which the main character, Bob Reynolds, is presented” (Stuckey 116). It is after Labor Day and Maury has decided to re-visit one of his favorite Florida fishing sites. Although it is late afternoon, Maury chooses to go out on the Elk River.

You come down that path and the first thing you strike is a long, deep pool, the Blue Pool, the natives call it. Must be twenty feet long and ten or twelve from bank to bank. . .I think of Elk River in winter when I can’t do any fishing and it’s this part that comes back to me. And I remember old Bob Reynolds sitting in a boat in the middle of the long pool and looking up to the top of the gorge and then down to the last bend before the Big Eddy and saying that from this one spot you can see nearly a whole mile of the Elk. (“One More Time” 68)

When Maury returns to the boardinghouse, he is surprised to find Bob Reynolds is also a guest. Maury calls a greeting and finds to his dismay that Bob has brought along his wife.

There was a rustle. The woman beside him was putting out her hand.

“They told us you were here, Mr. Maury. Bob’s been telling me about Elk

river so long I told him I'd just have to come along this time and see it for myself." ("One More Time" 70)

For years, the Elk River had been a refuge for both Maury and Bob for fishing without the company of women. Maury remarks, "Now that I came to think of it I'd never heard Bob mention his wife" ("One More Time" 70).

Maury is saddened to learn that Bob is ill and his wife has come along to ensure that he does not over-exert himself. Bird-like Lida Reynolds says that Bob cannot go out in the boat with Maury but that he may fish from the bank. Laughing, Bob notes that his wife, like all women, knows nothing about fishing. At this point Maury observes that the wife is very optimistic about her husband's health but that Bob does not agree. Bob and Lida are not connecting with each other, and there are two agendas present. Lida cannot comprehend that by coming to Elk River she has violated a male-only sanctuary. She speaks for her husband and bullies him, something a healthy man would not tolerate. Bob's illness makes Maury think about his own mortal condition and how he would handle his own bleak diagnosis. Louise Cowan says that this is "the fundamental question about death for the modern" (24).

The season is fall, the year is dying, and Bob is dying. The correlation is not lost on Maury, who is empathetic with both the season and Bob. Maury ponders if it is better to die in the midst of a vigorous life or waste away with a slow lingering death? Gordon enjoyed a close relationship with her father, and she looked to him as a mentor throughout her life. Through Maury/James as a male authority figure, she is exploring her own feelings toward death:

And then I wondered how it would be to know there was something inside you that would give soon and that you could only live as long as it lasted, a year, six months, three. . . .Would you want to stay very quite so you might live longer or would you tell yourself there was nothing the matter and try to have as good a time as you could? (“One More Time” 73)

In the morning, Maury goes out on the river and has a good day of solitary fishing. When he returns to the boardinghouse, the place is in an uproar. Against Lida’s wishes, Bob has taken a boat out on the lake, and the boat has returned without him in it. The next day Bob’s body is found in his favorite spot, the Blue Pool, and there are two five-pound dumbbells in the pockets of his jacket. Bob was a suicide. Maury notes the lack of insight in the Reynolds’ marriage:

Lida Reynolds said she had intended all along asking him what that odd-looking bundle was he was carrying when they got on the train. Now that it was all over she remembered that he had had a queer look on this face when they first started talking about the trip ---when he said he wanted to see the old place one more time. (“One More Time” 75)

McDowell concludes that Lida is “an unsympathetic wife who little realizes that she has driven her husband to suicide” (12). This view is too harsh as Lida never had an opportunity to join Bob and share his passion for sport. In contrast, Allen Tate was not an avid sportsman, but he commonly abandoned Gordon in pursuit of other women. Gordon tried to be an accepting wife in her own marriage and to endure Mr. Tate’s frequent absences. Lida and Gordon share a similar situation: they are both grass-widows, women whose husbands are habitually away from home.

Adam/Bob may have spoken to Lida, but she did not understand. She did not realize that Bob's desire to visit the fishing resort one more time was a desire to go as he had in the past, alone. Not being fond of sport, Lida did not know the joys of male bonding and the intricacies of sport. Lida is shocked and saddened by the death, but she will survive as she has survived during her marriage. When Bob becomes ill, Lida is able to control his activities. A strong healthy man would never allow such things. Lida is now officially free to direct her own activities and perhaps find a partner who shares her interests. Gordon desired communication with her husband and listened for Adam/Allen Tate's voice, but Mr. Tate was silent and offered no comfort either personally or professionally. In "One More Time," the neglected wife survives and the frequently absent husband is dead. In this story Gordon is working through a scenario of a future without Tate, and she can see an opportunity for her own survival and development.

"The Brilliant Leaves" (1937), a story of love and death, portrays a "boy's coming of age, rather suddenly and brutally" (Jonza 175), and the "recurrent theme of failure in regard to sexual role" (Alvis 101). The story begins at a summer resort with two women sitting on a porch, knitting and gossiping about former guests. Gordon again incorporates family stories to illustrate the connection between the present and the past through the oral tradition. Hersh writes that the

two women on the porch are representative of a preceding generation of southern women which "had made a religion of history, the past and the Old South" . . . Despite the fact that they live in the physical present, they devote their intellectual and psychical energies to recounting events which "happened a long time ago." (83)

The story begins as the women are discussing the fate of the formerly vivacious Sally Mainwaring, whose elopement was thwarted by the cowardice of her fiancée. As Sally was climbing down a rope ladder from her room, her father scared the fellow with a gun, and Sally “was an old maid the rest of her life” (“The Brilliant Leaves” 213). It is a beautiful fall day, and Jimmy is anxiously awaiting the arrival of his sweetheart, Evelyn, who has been away all summer. Ever the romantic, Evelyn wants to reunite at their special tree, and Jimmy is restlessly checking his watch because he does not want to be the first one to arrive. He leisurely walks through the fall forest and sees Evelyn impatiently awaiting his arrival.

She heard him, turned, and came running, so fast that they bumped into each other. She recoiled but he caught her to him and held her awkwardly until he had pressed his mouth on hers. Her lips, parting beneath his, felt firm and cool, not warm and soft as they had been when they kissed goodbye in June under this same tree. (“The Brilliant Leaves” 215)

Something has changed in their relationship. Evelyn is subdued and she says to Jimmy, ““it’s different, isn’t it?”” Evelyn laughs and teasingly tells him that the “difference” is the season, as it was green-spring when they parted and now the forest has brilliant leaves of reds and gold. As they talk, Jimmy discovers that Evelyn has been writing to another boy. Jealous, as his male honor has been sullied, Jimmy impulsively asks Evelyn to marry him. She replies that although she is “crazy” about him, she knows that her parents would not approve because they are too young. She refuses his romantic advances and says that she wants to go to the evocatively named Bridal Veil Falls. At first, Jimmy declines, because the falls are “not pretty,” but Evelyn persists. She

questions repeatedly whether or not he likes to do things “with” her. Jimmy would like to become more physically intimate, but Evelyn is speaking of something else. She is rejecting the sexual encounter, but she wants the romance of the bridal veil. At the falls, Evelyn slips and falls on the rocks below. Jimmy panics and runs for help, leaving Evelyn to die alone.

There has been debate on this story that centers on the ultimate responsibility for the tragic trip to the falls. McDowell looks at Evelyn’s actions as a “subconscious drag toward death” and believes that Evelyn “realizes that a change in the relationship has occurred while the boy does not” (11). Andrew Lytle holds Jimmy responsible for allowing Evelyn to provoke him into an imprudent action. Jimmy’s lack of judgment causes her death. Stuckey disagrees and argues that Lytle’s

interpretation seems too moralistic a reading; moreover, the boy is too young to assume such responsibilities. Because he loves the girl and does what she wants to do, “Brilliant Leaves,” it would seem, is about the tragedy of death that comes in the midst of life.” (Stuckey 126)

Alvis, too, refers to Lytle for the thematic similarity of stories of male cowardice in Sally Mainwaring’s aborted elopement and in Jimmy’s lack of masculine control in preventing Evelyn’s foolish deed. Both females, in a sense, descend, one to a life of spinsterhood and the other to death.

According to Lytle, the similarity between the two incidents resides in the similar masculine failures, the first being a failure of courage, the second a failure of foolish indulgence or in the lack of responsibility. For Lytle the

boy's inadequacy seems to consist precisely in his lack of sovereignty.

(Alvis 99)

Alvis suggests another view that is based on Evelyn's repeated requests to do something "together" with Jimmy.

The girl desires now a different sort of love which the boy is unprepared to accept. She wants to establish a better common bond upon some shared intimacy other than merely sexual. She has outgrown the initial ardent ways and now wants the boy to be similarly more mature in his affection . . . She proposes the fatal attempt to ascend the precipice partly, it seems, as a kind of desperate gambit by which she hopes to solidify their bond through a dangerous romantic adventure taking the place of, but equally as intense as, the boy's proposed sexual adventure . . . ultimately the young man's failure in love can be seen as essentially an inability, willful or otherwise, to grow up. (100-101)

In this instance, Makowsky agrees with Alvis and writes that

Evelyn wants to follow the progress of nature to a mature love, but Jimmy is unable to rise to the challenge. . . As is often the case in Caroline's fiction, a man's absorption in his own needs and desires leaves a woman vulnerable to a tragedy from which he cannot save her. (135)

Feminist critics have called Evelyn a "young Diana, in love with her own virginity" (Jonza 175) or an Artemis with her attraction to the waterfall and her "purity,

asceticism, moral intransigence, eternal virginity . . . [associated with] giving one's life in the name of an ideal and in the spirit of sacrifice" (Paris 126).

The debate concerning whether Evelyn's death was accident or suicide can be resolved by interpreting it as an ultimate sacrifice. Evelyn is a romantic, and she tries to urge the rather dull, unimaginative Jimmy, aptly nicknamed "Dimmy" (215), into a wild, untamed adventure. She longs for the action and excitement that Jimmy could never provide. Jimmy's life is stable, solid, and unexciting. He wants to marry Evelyn and then work in the family business. Jimmy is tied to history, family, and the women on the porch. Evelyn has traveled away from the area, and she craves exciting activities. The trip to the falls is her attempt to engage Jimmy in an outrageous exploit. She dies, but she dies in a wonderful, passionate daring act. It is significant that "Eve" is a shortened version of Evelyn's name. Evelyn heard the voices that Adam/Jimmy was incapable of interpreting. Again, Gordon refers to her own life with Tate and demonstrates that, without passion, life is not worth living. Even with the support of the family, one needs excitement: a glorious death is better than insignificance. Gordon and Evelyn do not want to join the ladies on the veranda.

Finally, in "The Presence" (1948), Gordon presents another tale of mortality and a philandering husband, but in this case she offers a glimmer of hope for both men and women. It is significant that the protagonist is Gordon's authority-figure, an aging Aleck Maury. In this story, Maury is yet closer to death. Selfish and egotistical he is now seventy-five years old, overweight, and unable to hunt and fish. His vigorous life is over, yet he continues to survive. Maury has been living for a number of years at the boarding house owned by sportsman extraordinaire Jim Mowbray and his plump but pleasant wife

Jenny. Living vicariously through Jim's exploits and eating well at Jenny's table, Maury has found a pleasant settled place to wait for death.

Old and cranky, Maury takes pleasure in a playful bantering relationship with another boarder, the divorcee Riva Gaines, and he enjoys her young son as an audience for his many tales. On the other hand, he can't bear Miss Gilbert, a dried-up, platitude-expounding transcendentalist who dresses always in white and meddles in the affairs of all the other residents. Maury's admiration is for Jenny, who spoils him with small treats. In his assessment, Jim and Jenny have an idyllic marriage.

However, while domestic goddess Jenny was in Kentucky caring for her ill father, Jim began an affair with the younger, slimmer divorcee. When Jenny learns of Jim's infidelities, she tells Maury that she is selling the boardinghouse and moving back to Kentucky. Suddenly, Maury's settled life is in disarray. The good marriage that he admired was not flawless, and because of the divorce, he is losing his established home. Maury cries at Jenny:

“What about me?” his heart cried out. “You'll run off to Kentucky. I'll have to find some other place to live.” And he could not live just anywhere. She knew that. (“The Presence” 118)

Jenny is a strong passionate woman. When she discovers Jim's infidelity, she immediately makes up her mind to divorce him and return to her family. She would rather be a woman on the porch than a betrayed wife.

In the midst of all this marital drama, a neighbor is dying and Maury is again forced to face his own mortality. This time he recalls his beloved and devout Aunt Vic

who tried to instill in him a foundation of faith. Maury remembers when he knelt beside her deathbed and prayed the Angelic Salutation:

Hail, Mary, full of grace! The lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. . . [At the moment of her death, Aunt Vic] uttered a cry and raised her head from the pillow. Her eyes fixed a point beyond his shoulder. He turned and saw nothing. Another softer sound broke from her and her head fell back on the pillow and she was still. (“The Presence” 120)

In this story, it is Eve/Aunt Vic who hears the voices, and perhaps this time Adam/Maury can interpret them. Maury looks for comfort in the ritual of the Catholic Church. His life is soon to be unsettled, but he does have a foundation for stability in the faith from his youth. Gordon also found comfort in the church during and following her tempestuous marriage with Tate. In this final story, Eve is the interpreter of the voices that Adam hears.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Eleanor Fayerlee, Barbara Stayton, Lida Reynolds, Evelyn Mainwaring, and Jenny Mowbray are all strong, independent women who are better off without the drunken, absent, dull, unfaithful men in their lives. Eve hears the voices, but Adam is incapable of interpreting them. Gordon felt that her own Adam, Mr. Tate, treated her in a wretched manner, and she worked through her anger in her fiction, always combining love and death.

“The Petrified Woman” is the story of the death of a marriage due to a man’s poor behavior. In this instance, Adam/Tom is unable to interpret for Eleanor. At the conclusion, Aleck Maury, father/savior, removes his daughter from the domestic drama. Sally’s final memory is of Eleanor’s cold, determined look of survival and of Cousin Tom lying sprawled on the dining room floor. In “Tom Rivers” love is thwarted by a man’s refusal to conform to social customs, and Adam/Tom disappears into the unknown. A marriage never takes place, and a man is estranged from his family due to his stubborn nature. Tom Rivers rides alone into the family myth, and his Barbara remains in the security of her family. In “One More Time,” Aleck Maury confronts his own mortality while experiencing the death of a good friend. Lida Reynolds survives the suicide of her husband, and Maury, confounded by the lack of understanding between men and women, continues to enjoy his sporting life. “The Brilliant Leaves” contains two aborted marriages, both due to the cowardly, immature actions of the males. For Evelyn, a glorious death is preferable to a life of tedium, and dim Jimmy just keeps on running. As Evelyn lay dying, there was no Adam to comfort her. Finally, in “The Presence” there is

another failed marriage, but talented Jenny Mowbray will make a new life for herself in Kentucky. In the final scene, Gordon uses the father authority figure, Maury, to be the symbolic Adam, who is finally able to understand the voices that Eve hears through a renewal of his faith. In her last moments, devout Aunt Vic's facial expression indicates a vision of salvation and peace. At the end of his life, though faced with disappointment, Maury begins to decipher the voices, and he does this through the faith from his youth. Maury, though flawed, comes to realize what he has known all along, that there is a divine plan for everyone.

Caroline Gordon believed in the inherent strength of women. Each woman possesses her own reservoir of power. Through Eleanor, Barbara, Lida, Evelyn, and Jenny, Gordon was able to explore possible futures for herself following the failure of the relationship with her Adam, Mr. Tate. Gordon confirms that each strong woman deals with disappointment and failure in a unique way. For Caroline Gordon the answer was her foundation in faith. This is Gordon's final legacy for all women: if Adam fails, there is hope.

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