ANALYSIS

Penhally (1931)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"I depended a lot on style for atmosphere"

Gordon (1934)
Ann Waldron, *Close Connections* (1987)143

"I am not sure that the average intelligent reader will ever see what I've tried to do."

Gordon
Letter to Josephine Herbst, undated

"Hers is the curious experiment of telling a necessarily slow and languid tale in quick modern staccato-short-sentences, brief feverish references to this and that… She has rushed 'a multitude of persons…before our eyes, like a motion picture.' There is 'much fine feeling in this'."

Anonymous
Review of *Penhally*
Boston Transcript (18 November 1931) 2
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan
Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide
Robert E. Golden and Mary C. Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 203

"'The history of the family is brought through the rise of the New South and down to the present.' In narrative method 'the story diverges somewhat from the Old South conventions, introducing more reporting and a less sentimental attitude'."

Anonymous
Review of *Penhally*
Springfield (Mass.) Republican (4 October 1931) 7e
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide*

"If the philosophy of the Agrarian Movement 'is sincerely believed in, it is a blessing to the novelist,' whatever else it is or isn't. *Penhally* has a 'certain internal consistency' though one might object to Gordon's 'ancestor religion.' Yet 'her story is credible at all points, her single scenes are good… All in all, *Penhally* is 'good fiction'."

Anonymous
"A Southern Mansion"
New York Times Book Review (20 September 1931) 6-7
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 203-04

"A 'skillfully fictionalized chapter of American cultural history,' based on 'a genuinely significant theme': the 'ownership of land and its influence upon the lives of people.' Though this is a 'complicated story, covering a full century and touching upon the lives of so many people in different generations,' Gordon has 'the pattern always quite clear in her mind.' She naturally sympathizes with her characters but 'she does no pleading for them, preserving her objectivity quite successfully. Her prose is polished and rhythmic, a good instrument'."

Herschel Brickell
New York Herald Tribune Books (27 September 1931) 7
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 204

"Penhally the plantation is the true protagonist… The novel is a genealogy of hard-bitten commonsense and quixotic passions in the vivid and diverse Llewellyns from the first bitterness at the breaking of the

patriarchal ideal to a final desperation when at last and forever the land is 'lost to the blood.' Hence, there is 'something almost Biblical' about this novel, against the background of a sort of 'Southern exodus.' Gordon 'has built her story firmly out of patterns like the dramas of Isaac and Jacob, and Abel and Cain,' using the following Biblical elements: the diverse tribe, the intermixed blood, the passionate determination to hold the land, the half brother, and finally, the fratricide. 'The ultimate tragedy comes, not because of this hardbitten commonsense (the decision to sell the land) but because of a love of earth, fine and beautiful but, in a world of material standards and farming impotence, quixotic.'

The novel is 'the best American treatment…in that field of modern fiction associated commonly with Mr. Galsworthy's Forsythes.' Gordon points human weakness 'by a penetrating native comedy.' Perhaps the best scene is that in which Nicholas, who accepts slaves as property, 'kills a Yankee soldier who is tormenting a Negro hag'…. Old Nicholas Llewellyn is a supreme character for any book'."

Jonathan Daniels
"Love of Earth"
Saturday Review (21 November 1931) 309
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 204-05

"In the United States there is 'something like a literary movement' today, and it is 'being reinforced by the South.' The publication of *Penhally* marks 'a very definite stage in the evolution of American literature' and Gordon is one of the five American writers who interest Ford most. 'As befits the work of a woman who has served a long apprenticeship to her art *Penhally*, though dealing with the tragedy of a race and the disappearance of a deeply in-bitten civilization, is a work of great composure and tranquility.' It deserves the label 'novel' and 'is *the best American novel* that I know,' though this statement 'need not be taken as appraising.' *Penhally* 'curiously unites attributes' of *The Spoils of Poynton, The Red Badge of Courage,* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, and is an achievement at once of erudition and of sombre and smoldering passion.' It is 'the epic of a house and its fugitive generations of inhabitants' and 'the doom is pronounced in the first few words.' It 'differs from other historical works' in that Gordon has 'lived herself into the past of her race and region'; hence, the novel 'is a piece of autobiography,' a 'chronicle of reality,' a '*great literary achievement*' [italics added]."

Ford Madox Ford
"A Stage in American Literature"
Bookman 74: 371-76
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 205

"Gordon 'produces in the reader by cumulative effect a sad and powerful sense of changing time and interrupted destiny' in the old South where the unit 'was the family and not the individual.' The novel is neither sentimental nor disparaging. Gordon has 'taken the middle way of implicit praise and censure, of divination by sympathy, of sensitive observation and honest reporting.' The truth about the South 'is a question of relation and proportion,' as Gordon has realized. 'Her characters are not saints and villains.' John Llewellyn is 'the finest single study in a complex book.' Chance has 'no call' to murder his brother… *Penhally* is 'a novel far above the ordinary' and important 'because it condemns by worthier example' novels of the South which are 'too saccharine or too brutal'…. Gordon's mind 'is in quality distinguished and lovely'."

Virginia Moore
"The Changing South"
Nation (7 October 1931) 367-68
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 205-06

"'This is an intricate group history… Told in 'impressionistic flashes, episodically,' *Penhally* gives 'an illusion of contemporaneity to nineteenth and twentieth-century happenings'…. There are some 'quite perfect scenes'."

Evelyn Scott
Review of *Penhally*
New Republic (4 November 1931) 332-33
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 206

"A distinguished book...amazingly vivid, how solid, how beautiful... In no other book that I've read has been captured the superb flash and shatter of the Civil War.... The way you start a line and retract it to converge in other themes provides a fusion of immediacy and recollection that is like a cloaking atmosphere."

Lincoln Kirstein
Letter to Gordon (5 September 1931)

"Miss Gordon's first novel *Penhally* (1931) maps out the territory in which her naturalistic [Realistic] method will operate for about the first decade and a half of her work. In its first pages, the nostalgia for a lost grandeur which was the ante-bellum South is expressed obliquely through the thoughts of Nicholas Llewellyn surveying his Kentucky plantation one fine day in 1826.... The drama of...'breaking up' is enlarged by Nicholas' memories of his boyhood, of his parents' tales, so that the perspective is pushed back some sixty years into the eighteenth century. Thus the structure of life at Penhally in the nineteenth century gains the melancholy richness of depth and distance, as if its tragic destiny were already lurking in the luxurious ambiguities of its past....

In the fratricide committed by Nick's twentieth-century descendant, Chance Llewellyn, who turns against his brother Nick, the legal heir to Penhally, for selling the estate to rich Northerners, Miss Gordon was clearly...pointing a parable. Chance (the name is useful) cannot stay the hand of time except by violence. And death to his brother is the final destruction of one link to the past he so loves. Nostalgia succumbs to the ironies of chaos."

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953, 1966) 327-28

"In *Penhally* (1931) Miss Gordon developed at still greater length the theme of the grandeur of the southern past compared to the diminished present. The novel has for central presence a place rather than a person; and Penhally, in its flourishing state before the Civil War and in its fall from power after the Reconstruction, is a symbol for the South, the antebellum way of life, and the attenuated survival of southern traditions into the present. In its heyday Penhally irradiated the security and the sense of purpose present in southern civilization before the war. Part I of the novel ends appropriately with some account of the Llewellyn men during the war. Penhally endures the depredations of war; and the stoic force of the house is inseparable from that of its owner, Nicholas Llewellyn.

As a psychological novel, *Penhally* dramatizes the division between Nicholas and his half-brother Ralph and the parallel conflict between Nick and Chance Llewellyn in the fourth generation of the family. Nicholas, traditional in point of view and tenacious of the land, believes in primogeniture and dispossesses Ralph. He is opposed to the war, for he regards land as a responsibility and does not want to participate in a venture that threatens his property. He does provide admirably for his dependents, including his slaves, during the war; and symbolically perhaps, he dies in 1866, when the South is conquered and Penhally's greatness is declining, though he is richer than at the war's beginning.

Ralph is improvident and less responsible than his brother in everyday affairs; and he lacks Nicholas' determination to hold his property at all costs. Yet there is much to admire in Ralph, since he despoils himself to support the Confederacy. Miss Gordon respects his devotion to principle, country, and heritage as much as she respects Nicholas' devotion to the soil. Ralph gives that his country may have life; Nicholas refuses to give so that he can keep life in the land. Some of the war sequences which end Part I are forceful—those concerned with the courtship by Charles Llewellyn of Alice Blair, his marriage to her, and his death as a cavalry officer. Other of these episodes relate loosely to the society and the characters presented in the novel and contribute little to its forward motion. Still, the impression registers that at no time was the South so great as in the hour of defeat.

Part II develops, at the Reconstruction, the first stage of the decline of Penhally and is the most moving section of the novel. John Llewellyn, who survived the war, inherits the estate but lacks the energy of his

uncle Nicholas. Lassitude prevents him from functioning effectively, although he, too, loves the land and guards it jealously. His fatigue is matched by the instability of the cousin he marries, Lucy, the daughter of Ralph. She turns against John as a result of her misplaced energies and neurotic indisposition; but she survives into the 1920's as a twisted representative of tradition. The inability of John and Lucy to so achieve a sympathetic relationship emphasizes the hopelessness of these years. The suicide of their son Frank, who had alienated Lucy by marrying a promiscuous cousin, adds to the oppressiveness of this part of the novel. Defeat in the war has been total, material and spiritual, local and national; and it goes beyond the conquered to infect the conquerors. John's decline is in part the result of inner debility, and this debility has its parallel in a nation weakened by a materialistic ethic. Thus John perceives 'his own personal misfortunes monstrously shadowed in those of the nation.'

In Part III Penhally remains, in the 1920's, a covert influence and a monument to a culture. The land has been entailed to Nick, grandson of John, although his brother Chance has the ancestral passion for the soil and Penhally house. Nick has, as it were, defected and uses his intelligence not to improve his inheritance but to establish himself in banking. The elder Nicholas splits in two in his twentieth-century descendants; Chance has his forebear's love of the farm and Nick his practical sense. Since Chance is a passionate man and since he is on the defensive about his values, he looms as a figure destined for involvement in tragic violence.

In the twentieth century harmonious human relationships are more possible than they were for the boys' grandparents, since war-induced trials of the spirit are now over. But in a deeper sense, a greater disunity prevails. Chance and Nick have strong affection for each other, yet Nick, because he has aligned himself with an aggressive materialism, is his brother's antagonist. The infection which had begun in Reconstruction has now reached the substratum of American life. Eastern millionaires overrun the region. Nick and his wife Phyllis cater to them; and he sells Penhally to Joan Parrish, who organizes a hunt club to take in the most fertile farms. The agrarian economy disintegrates as a new wealth, based on industrialism, takes over….

The impressionistic technique…allowed Miss Gordon to etch her characters brilliantly and to present individual scenes with much precision and evocativeness…[*Penhally*] possesses an imaginative fullness that Miss Gordon was to control for notable results as her novels grew away from an episodic organization."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 14-17

"Caroline Gordon's first novel, *Penhally*, sheds a good deal of light on her later and more difficult fiction; but it is also a successful and well-written novel. There are none of the usual first novel faults: patches of bad writing, careless shifts in tone, or obvious manipulation for meaning's sake; for *Penhally* is a solidly built, fully realized novel. The opening paragraph, for example, is finely turned, lucid prose; and it also sets exactly the mood of the novel and states poetically the course the main action is to take: 'The shadows that laced the graveled walk shifted and broke...'

To many readers in 1931, *Penhally* might have seemed, however, merely another family-chronicle novel of the type made popular by the fiction of John Galsworthy; and, to some extent, *Penhally* does fit that pattern. It depicts the decline of the Llewellyns, a once energetic and prosperous Tennessee [Kentucky] family; and it demonstrates how each generation, though retaining some of the old qualities, becomes less prosperous and less able to change with the changing times. The resemblance to the standard chronicle formula, however, is superficial. Indeed, though *Penhally* can hardly be called a 'debunking' novel, it implicitly disputes the major assumptions about history and morality upon which the most popular family-chronicles are based. The ordinary family-chronicle novel aims to show the inevitability of change and the necessity for keeping up with the times, but *Penhally* shows that the decline of the Llewellyn's fortunes, though inevitable, is also tragic.

Part I of *Penhally* begins in 1826 and focuses on a quarrel between Nicholas Llewellyn and his younger brother Ralph. Nicholas is the son of the Llewellyn who left Virginia, went west in the latter part of the

eighteenth century, and bought the large tract of land on which the house 'Penhally' was built. Since Nicholas is the eldest son, born and bred in Virginia under the old laws of primogeniture and entail, he maintains that the 'Penhally' lands have, in effect, been left entirely to him. His brother, Ralph, who has grown up in Tennessee where these laws have never obtained, insists that the land should be divided between them. Nicholas is hot-headed and irascible; and, when Ralph has the temerity to suggest that the land be divided, Nicholas flies into a rage and orders Ralph to take his plate, his furniture, and his servants and leave 'Penhally.' Ralph leaves; and, except for two brief confrontations with Nicholas over settling the estate, the two brothers do not meet face-to-face for almost forty years. Nicholas resolutely refuses to discuss the division of the property with intermediaries. Ralph busies himself with his own affairs, mainly the raising of blooded horses on land that he has bought across the road from 'Penhally.'

Since Nicholas never marries and, consequently, has no direct heirs, he wills the land to the son of a third brother who has gone farther west to Arkansas, a nephew named John Llewellyn who has all of the best Llewellyn qualities. Part II of the novel deals with John Llewellyn's tenure as head of the Llewellyn clan and, to some extent, with his adventures during the Civil War. When John's son Frank dies at the age of twenty-eight years, the property is then settled on Frank's eldest son, Nicholas Llewellyn. With the passing of the estate to young Nicholas, the history of 'Penhally' is brought up to the 1900's.

Part III deals with the most recent history of the family. Frank's eldest son, Nicholas, who inherits 'Penhally,' does not like to farm. Since he is a businessman, he turns the running of the farm over to his younger brother, Chance, who loves the land more than anything else in the world. Through a combination of circumstances, including economic conditions unfavorable to farming, Chance is unable to make money from 'Penhally.' When a rich Yankee woman offers Nicholas a large sum of money for the land, he sells it. Chance and his mother move into an apartment in town, 'Penhally' is remodeled into a hunt club for rich strangers, and the fertile land that once grew prime tobacco is now planted thick with turf. Chance wants nothing more to do with 'Penhally'; but, when he is urged by his fiancee to attend the opening-night celebration of the new hunt club, he goes. But, before leaving home, he slips a pistol into the pocket of his evening jacket. At the club that night, when he is taunted by his brother Nicholas, Chance shoots his brother to death....

One of the intentions of the novel is to trace through the history of this period the causes of the destruction of 'Penhally' and the kind of life it exemplifies. Among these causes must be included the discarding of the laws of primogeniture and entail, as well as the Civil War which not only beggared the South but hastened the disintegration of the old land-based human relationships and in time made the South over into an image of the North. These are the main historical causes. A less important one, which is also related to the first main cause, is permitting women to inherit riches without the responsibility that such wealth traditionally carries with it.

Penhally, however, is not primarily an attack on social changes or a lament for an older way of life. Like Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, it is a tragedy. The changes in the laws of inheritance, though they took place even before the opening of the novel, are like the breaking of a divinely appointed law; and the consequence is that the land and the men living on it are doomed to live under a curse. The curse has to do with the division of the land, the scattering of the families, and the ultimate perversion of ancient human values. The law cannot be reversed, no expiation can be made, and no cathartic resolution can exist. The heroic individual, who is not himself responsible for the curse, can only hurl himself in senseless fury against his antagonist, who is, ironically, his elder brother.

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. Under the older system, a man did not inherit the land to do with it as he pleased; he held it in trust for his family and his descendants. As a consequence of this trust, and always assuming the right kind of character, the inheritor of the land felt a sense of responsibility to those dependent upon him; and, consequently, he expected, sometimes unreasonably, a sense of loyalty from his dependents. The older system, however, instead of setting one brother against another, as happens in the modern world, made one brother the head of the family and consigned others to positions of subservience. Naturally, the system did not always seem fair to those excluded from inheriting the land, but it did at least preclude the tragic quarrel that finally ends the Llewellyn dynasty.

In the earlier quarrel between old Nicholas Llewellyn and his brother Ralph, Nicholas never thinks of the land as his own. It is, he thinks, 'ours'; and what hurts him is Ralph's unwillingness to share 'it all between them' because he must have his own house on his own land. The issue in the quarrel between the two brothers is, simply stated, a quarrel between two different ways of life; life lived as part of a family relationship in which there are both rights and responsibilities, and life lived as an isolated individual for whom responsibilities exist only to one's self. To be sure, Ralph Llewellyn is more concerned for the welfare of others than is his descendant Nicholas; but Ralph's concern tends to be less personal and more abstract, an attachment to his nation rather than to his clan.

The fate of the two brothers makes clear which is the sounder way of life. Nicholas holds on to his land. Ralph squanders his, indulging his taste for luxury and later, his patriotism by outfitting troops to fight in the war. Frederick P. W. McDowell seems to believe that in this novel the Civil War is shown to be a noble cause. On the contrary, the war is shown to be destructive and divisive, a war launched by landless Southern politicians who had 'nothing to lose and everything to win.' Ralph's contributions to the Southern cause were generous and high spirited, to be sure; but in the context of his character and in the issues of this novel, they are additional manifestations of his extravagance and lack of responsibility to both his family and his heirs. It is also significant that, in his will, Ralph divides his property between his son and daughter, though there is nothing to divide after his death.

Nicholas Llewellyn, however, not only keeps 'Penhally' intact during the war, but, because he converts his currency into gold and buries it in the forest, he also enables his heir, John, to keep the estate going after the war. Such an act in another character and under different circumstances might be reprehensible, but Nicholas Llewellyn's first concern is to save the land that has been put in his trust; and it is his conviction that, if all men had done the same, there would have been no war.

The tragic end of the Llewellyn line and of 'Penhally' is however, not simply the result of historical events. John Llewellyn is wearied by the Civil War in which he fought long and valiantly, and his lassitude seems to him to be reflected in the general weariness and the defeat of the country. The reader sees, however, that, whatever the cause of that weariness, John's personal failures also contribute to the tragedy that overtakes his son and eventually his grandsons. John fails his wife. Exactly how, we are not told; but his wife knows, and he knows; and, as a consequence, he feels guilty. To atone for that guilt, he pays a kind of emotional blackmail by pleasing his wife rather than by acting in his son's best interests: Lucy, John's wife, discovers that their son is in the bedroom of a young female cousin who is visiting them. Lucy's sense of propriety is outraged, and she sends her husband to settle the matter.

Instead of handling the situation responsibly, with an eye on the future, he forces his way into the girl's bedroom and precipitates an elopement that begins a marriage that is disastrous for Frank and for 'Penhally.' The girl, whom John has completely misjudged, is not much better than a prostitute. Frank has to leave home in order to live with her, which cuts him off completely from 'Penhally' and eventually leads to his suicide. The marriage also introduces into the Llewellyn strain a fatal corruption.

Modern prejudice to the contrary, *Penhally* shows that what counts in this world is blood, a man's or a woman's breeding. If corruption is admitted into a family, it inevitably appears in succeeding generations. Frank's wife was notoriously promiscuous and, though the marriage produced one sound son, Chance, the elder son seems to have inherited more of his mother's qualities than his father's. At least, when the real test of his character comes, he is willing to sell out for money. Just as corruption once introduced into a family line crops out, so does fundamental strength of character. Chance inherits his forebears' inbred sense of principle, but he does not inherit the land. And this accident of circumstance, along with the growing corruption of the times, precipitates the tragedy in which the hand of one brother is turned against another.

In popular political discussion, when distinctions are made between liberal and conservative, it is usually said that conservatives are concerned mainly with property rights and liberals with human rights; and the implication is that these are mutually exclusive. Miss Gordon's contention in this novel seems to be that, in the kind of society she is writing about, a concern for land necessarily involves the proprietor (he is not the owner) in a concern for human rights. Men like John and Chance Llewellyn who love the land and have a sense of responsibility to their successors, also have a sense of responsibility to the living. In his

will, John provided that 'Penhally' was to 'offer asylum to infirm and dependent kinsmen and kinswomen....' Also, the family graveyard on 'Penhally' land was to be maintained by the heir to the property.

In the modern world, the concept of property ownership is usually bound up with feelings of exclusiveness and personal vanity. Nicholas' wife, a town girl whose father made a fortune in wheat (presumably speculating), cannot stand the thought of her husband's helping Negro servants out of personal difficulties, nor can she abide the thought of relatives burying members of their families in the graveyard her husband maintains at 'his' expense. She wants him to circulate a letter telling relatives that they must pay 'so much a head' to keep up the graveyard. Chance, of course, immediately feels the rightness of the responsibility that his brother owes to a Negro foster brother whose mother had nursed him...

The passion for money and selfishness are obviously not modern phenomena, but the passing of the old society based on the land and the rise of the new class have reversed the old values. What used to be considered a serious failing, if not actually a vice, has now become a standard of respectable conduct; and the old concern for the weak and the unfortunate has given way to selfish, monied snobbery. Money--or making money the basis of human relationships--is the sign of modern corruption. This view is shared by other Southern writers, notably William Faulkner; but Miss Gordon's method, like her material, differs from Faulkner's. Whereas Faulkner attempts to overwhelm us with the horrors of Snopesism, Miss Gordon tries to make us see the good qualities of the old order and to feel the tragedy of its destruction.

Indeed, it could be said that the novel is constructed with this end in mind. The first two sections constitute what Miss Gordon calls the complication of the action; the final section, the resolution. The care with which the novel has been constructed can be seen by the way the resolution repeats, in a sense, the old quarrel between Nicholas and Ralph Llewellyn, but the moral position of the two brothers is reversed. It is now the younger brother who loves the land and the older brother who wants to destroy it. In the earlier section, the love of the land preserves it; in the later section, love of the land is not only ineffectual but actually precipitates a murder. This inversion is Miss Gordon's way of dramatizing a moral judgment.

The structure, style, selection of incidents, and the tone of *Penhally* are calculated to make us feel the tragedy of the loss of this older way of life. The book is arranged and the action is managed so that the wisdom of the old way is plainly manifest. If old Nicholas Llewellyn had not been reared to believe in the justness of primogeniture and entail and if he had divided the property, the Llewellyn estate would have been squandered in the Civil War. Moreover, if Nicholas Llewellyn in 1930 had not been able to sell the property, 'Penhally' would not have been turned into a hunt club, and Nicholas Llewellyn would not have been killed.

The action of the novel, however, does not seem contrived in order to illustrate a thesis. The book convinces in the way that fiction must convince if it is to be successful, by making us believe in the reality of these characters and these events. Miss Gordon's principal technique in the contrivance of this illusion is realistic detail. She makes us see vividly 'Penhally,' the people, and the life that goes on there. And, if we feel as well as see the reality of the fictional world, that is as much as she asks us to do.

Penhally is an unusually fine first novel. It is somewhat looser and less technically accomplished than Miss Gordon's later fiction, but its freshness still remains undiminished. It is no wonder that, when Ford Madox Ford in 1931 surveyed the promising young American novelists, he should have made *Penhally* a springboard for his discussion. Of course, Caroline Gordon was a protegee of Ford's, but Ford Madox Ford was never prone to give indiscriminate praise. *Penhally* deserved all of the good things that were said about it. For students of Caroline Gordon's fiction, *Penhally* is especially interesting because it contains themes that appear in later novels. We find it in the tragedy of the Civil War, the destruction of the small farmer, the disintegrative effects of sexual promiscuity--these and other themes that are developed more fully in later fiction are present in *Penhally*. But 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 who would not only embody qualities of courage and bravery but would also display a sense of responsibility for the welfare of other human beings.

Nicholas Llewellyn is the first of such heroes; his nephew John and his great-grandson Chance Llewellyn are paler copies. With the destruction of 'Penhally' and the way of life that it represented, the possibility of realizing that kind of heroism was all but finished. From here on Miss Gordon looked in other places for her hero--to the soldier in wartime, to the pioneer on the frontier, to the small farmer fighting the drought, and to the fisherman battling the practical minded, work-obsessed world. Whatever his calling, his time, or his place, Miss Gordon's favorite hero was to be a better-than-average man caught in a situation that brought forth his best qualities. And almost always--and it is this that produces the tragic, the elegiac tone of her fiction--the superior man is destroyed because of his superiority. The cautious or self-seeking man always survives.

In her preoccupation with the tragic hero, Miss Gordon has something in common with other American novelists of her time, but the kinship may have less to do with a common nationality than with a commonly shared culture. For, though Miss Gordon's heroes almost always fit the traditional patterns, as do the protagonists of Hemingway and Faulkner, the nature of her heroes' struggles, their relationship to their societies, and the grounds upon which they are to be pitied are different from those of her countrymen's. In *Penhally*, the career of Chance Llewellyn fits the traditional pattern. He is a better-than-ordinary person who is destroyed by forces that...represent the corrupt values of his society.... But...Llewellyn is not that popular version of the Romantic hero--the alienated outcast at odds with conventional or respectable society. The conflict is not personal or emotional. He is not recommended to us because of his capacity to feel more tenderly than those who destroy him.

Llewellyn is morally superior because, in the eyes of the author, he represents a superior way of life. His moral value, then, lies more in what he represents than in what he feels as a private person. He is the hero of a culture that has been destroyed, and it is as much the destruction of that culture as the death of the hero that gives the conclusion of *Penhally* its elegiac tone."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 24-32

"After the climactic Civil War…the self-serving supplanted the dignified but decrepit adherents of the Old Order…. The legend of the Old South is already menaced by the gray… That gray—the color of the Confederate troops—is also the ominous sign of age and decay. Time, the enemy of a declining social order, is the antagonist of Caroline Gordon's *Penhally*, a novel spanning nearly a hundred years of southern history. Like an album of photographs, the novel pictures the Llewellyn family over the years, magnifying those moments that most clearly frame the changes in their community....

Ford Madox Ford...lauds the episodic nature of Caroline Gordon's first novel, a quality that has since been criticized. Ford finds *Penhally* remarkably organized and praises its interwoven themes, holding that the story 'progresses forward in action and back in memory so that the sort of shimmer that attaches to life attaches also to the life of the book.' Indeed, the episodic structure, by creating an interplay of time, makes history ever present. Gordon juxtaposes moments in the past to reveal the essential conflicts in southern history and finally to suggest a method for recovering meaning in the present age. But the Old South provides but one example of a society brought to ruin because of its faulty values. Allusions to the myths of the house of Atreus and of Cain and Abel, as Jane Gibson Brown explicates in great detail, reinforce the identification of the South with other familial and social orders.

Those who uphold the legend of the Old South after the war has exposed its weaknesses are heroic though their ideals are imperfect. In the advent of industrialism, even a flawed agrarian society seems preferable, and consequently, those who sacrifice themselves to ceremony and order are admirable. The fault of these protagonists, however, is their inability to imagine new courses of action or new patterns of belief that could revitalize the failing culture. Men of action, prepared to die for their cause, have literally nothing to live for, and men of learning escape into their contemplations, constructing a narcissistic world apart from the chaotic society.

So many years are covered in *Penhally* that the novel, in effect, outlines Caroline Gordon's view of southern American history, while focusing in particular on the disintegration of one family. Beginning in

1926 when Nicholas Llewellyn quarrels with his brother Ralph over primogeniture, the action shifts quickly to the Civil War when the menace to society comes from both within and without. The second section of the book is predominantly the flashback of Nicholas' nephew John. Through memory, John reconstructs the events of the years following the war until the suicide of his son Frank some twenty years later. Paralleling the quarrel between their forebears Nicholas and Ralph, in the final part of the novel John's grown grandsons fight over the land.

During these apparently one hundred years, admirable men of action become rare. Broken men who wander without purpose, merchants who prey on their fellow human beings, caricatured versions of the gentleman and sportsman--none of these truly preserves the ideals of the landowners of the Old South. Men's roles weaken so much that by the twentieth century women are usurping masculine duties and activities. Although the antebellum South imagined itself as following the model of the traditional hierarchical society of Europe, the agrarian way of life did not necessarily unite the landowners as a cultured and civilizing class. Old Nicholas' obstinate stand against changes in the agrarian system helps to destroy the very life-style he would defend. Because Nicholas despises his brother so much for wanting to divide the family property, Ralph refuses to remain on the family estate, Penhally, and moves to Mayfield.

Just as Nicholas' beliefs permanently separate him from his brother, so, when the Civil War breaks out, he alienates himself from his community by refusing to support the Confederate cause. Although he does supply horses to individual members of the family and hides Charles while he recuperates from a wound, Nicholas will not endorse the war because it endangers the land. Believing that the war is not being fought for self-defense but for economic gain, he finally blames the whole conflict on 'new-fangled politicians, landless men, with nothing to lose and everything to win.' In some respects Nicholas is right: there are many like old Mr. Atkins who are 'ready to go to war now to get the steamboat trade back.' Nicholas protects his economic interests from such mercenaries, and he does endure the war. Ralph, in contrast, is ruined because of his altruism; he is able to maintain a hospital for wounded Confederate soldiers only by selling off his land and finally he goes bankrupt refusing to exchange his Confederate money for gold.

Despite the selfishness of his efforts to protect himself and his land, Nicholas is capable of heroism. When he shoots the Yankee soldier who taunts Mrs. Brady, his brave defense of the woman's honor upholds a code recognized both by southerners and by the Union men who do not harm Nicholas for shooting their comrade. In this incident Nicholas again acts not as a Confederate patriot but as the protector of his property and defender of the women who have put themselves in his trust.

Nicholas fails to perceive the limitations of agrarianism. The omniscient narrator, however, makes us aware from the first page of the novel of the inevitable decline of the system. Walking about his grounds, Nicholas recalls his family, some of whom have long been dead, and, significantly, passes beneath a large sugar tree that suggests the broad spread of his family tree. Besides linking Nicholas with the novel's future generations, this image implicates Nicholas in the decaying order that underlies the family history: '1826. The shadows that laced the graveled walk shifted and broke and flowed away beneath his boot soles like water.... Passing the big sugar tree he tapped it smartly with his cane. It must be rotten at the heart by this time, though it did not sound hollow'.... The 'rotten' heart of the sugar tree, like the flawed social order resting on slavery, may not sound hollow in 1826, but with time its fall is certain. By the Civil War the depravity shows itself in monetary greed and in the desire to serve self above all else--motives Nicholas detects among his secessionist friends.

Nevertheless, the war does offer real opportunities for heroism. Both of Nicholas's nephews, Charles and John, learn how serious are their responsibilities as men of action. Charles, who formerly spent his time in the stables or gaming in town, becomes a fine officer; and John, who once regarded himself as Lucy's cavalier, regains some of the original meaning of that term when he joins the cavalry. Yet war inevitably destroys the soldiers, whether literally or figuratively. Charles dies in battle, and John, though he physically survives, is dominated after the war by his wife, Lucy. As his grandson Chance notices, John seems to be too tired to be fully the man: 'There was some sort of compulsion on him that made him do her least bidding...without argument.' John's guilt in marrying Lucy for convenience has given her power over him.

John's impotence in personal relationships is only part of a larger pattern for the Confederate veterans. The Reconstruction government attempts to keep the war-enervated men weak by denying them social responsibilities. Chance remembers that his grandfather was deprived of the franchise because he had fought on the Confederate side: 'It had pretty near killed the old fellow not to be allowed to vote.' Two generations later, Chance himself is much less political, but by volition: 'He wondered if his grandfather would care so much about voting if he were alive today.... He himself would not give a damn if they took his vote away from him for the rest of his enduring life.'

Since the Civil War the men have become increasingly cut off from a real community. Frank, John's son and the father of Chance and Nick, is a transitional figure who, having left his home and family, tries to make his love for a woman the meaning of his life. When his parents find Frank with his cousin Fanucil in her bedroom at the Allards' house, the two lovers are forced to run away and marry. Although Frank has had a university education and eventually does find a job in a law practice, he drifts without any real sense of vocation or belonging. Love is the primary value for Frank, and when his wife is unfaithful he kills himself. Appropriately, when John broods over his son's suicide, he recalls the image he always had of him, 'wandering over the face of the earth.' John 'seemed to see him on dark, interminable slopes, or walking down street after street of some city, rain falling...'

Frank's sons, Chance and Nick, suffer no less from confusion over their roles as men, although, of the two, Chance is more conscious of his loss of vocation and community. Nick, a banker, regards the family property as no more than a commodity. Chance inherits a love for the land, but he cannot make it productive because legally the estate is not his; moreover, the land is no longer fertile. Desperate, Chance turns to violence, his idealistic belief in the land's importance to the family leading him to murder Nick. By the 1930s then, the image of the Lady of the Old South is defiled by her own devotees. Those 'dreamers' who used to serve her well were 'Not less than men, not wholly,' but her twentieth-century worshippers have a less ambiguous status: they are certainly less than men. As the men in the society become weaker, the women wield their power destructively. The increased power of the women does not equalize relations between the sexes; it only shifts the locus of authority without redefining the terms of the relationship.

Not all of the women intentionally supplant masculine authority in order to gain power. But even Emily Kinloe's romanticizing of the Confederate soldiers undercuts their true heroism. At least Emily examines her views and recognizes that her chauvinism is, in part, a defensive reaction to people like the Parrishes who thrive on the defeat of the old southern order. Escorting the despised Parrishes around Penhally, she probes her feelings.... As Emily observes, 'you cannot let a little girl spend all her time reciting Father Ryan with Confederate veterans without having her turn out a little queer.'

Emily's fiancé, Chance, holds a more complex view of the Confederate soldiers because of his grandfather John. Although he admires his grandfather's bravery and free thinking, he also realizes that Lucy dominated him. Certainly Chance's analysis is closer to John's own perspective just after the war. John realizes that his weariness prevents him from meeting Lucy's emotional needs and compares himself to 'The tired horses of the Second Kentucky,' who 'in their last charge had been able only to breast the fences, not to clear them.' John had to live 'by the consequences of that fatigue' for the rest of his life. Emily, however, overlooks the failure of the war heroes to revitalize personal relationships and the South after the war. She dwells instead on her grandfather's tales. Admittedly her sentimentality is a fault. She seems quite silly, for example, to have cried over the miserably written poems about the South that she found in a book collector's apartment in Paris.

If Emily remembers the Confederate soldiers only as 'gallant,' others do not cherish the past for even those naive but moving memories. The 'time of debauchery and carnival' that characterized the Reconstruction continues into the twentieth century as both southern and northern people turn the traditions of the old order into rules for a pretentious social game. Unlike Emily, Nick's wife Phyllis does not resent the northerner Joan Parrish but emulates her. Thus, bored and rich Joan Parrish finds that she can persuade southern women into any scheme. As Emily realizes, 'If she stayed here long enough she would have to do something about Gloversville at large...organize a hunt club, perhaps.... Well, no matter what she did, they would follow her like sheep.' When Joan persuades Nick to sell Penhally to her, she does, in fact, transform

the estate into a hunt club, ironically mocking the legend of the South as the last sanctuary of European genteel traditions.

The scene in which Chance tours the hunt club--formerly his family home--and comes upon the portrait of Nicholas Allard Llewellyn is the context for a recapitulation of the South's fall. Standing before the painting of his forebear, Chance thinks, If he had not been so hell bent on entailing property and all that business, this red-faced woman would not be walking around in here now. He wished he could remember her name. Something with a hyphen. That meant she was divorced--or English.' By refusing to modify his beliefs, Nicholas Llewellyn perpetuated a flawed system, and his heirs--who have inherited the system along with the land--fail when the old order finally proves false. In the twentieth century, anglophiles reduce social traditions to fashion. The distorted past is useless except as ornament, and Penhally is now a hunt club for Joan Parrish and her cronies.... That sport has been debased is obvious... The puns on 'Play Boy' and 'sporting' highlight the improper roles of these twentieth-century women; yet the men, in allowing their authority to diminish, have encouraged the women to debase themselves.

Before the war, men who shirked their responsibilities as men of action, though tolerated, were considered mad--as the lives of John's father, Jeems, and Cousin Cave both exemplify. Jeems Allard, a scientist whose experiments are potentially beneficial to society, is, as his own son admits, 'mad as a hatter.' In Part I of *Penhally*, when we see Jeems's eccentric behavior for ourselves, we realize that his temperament and pursuits make him a failure as a father and husband. On the morning of his wife's funeral, the family cannot find him because he has gone on his customary morning walk. Although Jeems has had a university education and is even a friend of the learned Thomas Jefferson, most of his projects are unwelcomed by the family. His efforts to poison tobacco worms seem worthy, but the community ridicules most of his projects, including eating mussels from the Mississippi River and drinking a coffee substitute made from soybeans. Jeems's behavior in company, always a real embarrassment to his grown sons, illustrates the scientist's main flaw--his inability to interact with and respond to others. Even his physical appearance sets him apart: 'A tall, stooped, preternaturally thin old man, [who] wore a coat that was bottle green in some places, in others merely frayed. His long, white hair floated to his shoulders. He turned a blue, childlike stare on the company.'

Living some years after Jeems, the classical scholar Cousin Cave is also mad; his learning, as Chance realizes, 'would never be any good to anybody.' The family attributes Cousin Cave's derangement to an 'over-application to his studies when he was a very young man.' Now he is content as long as he has his books, and so Chance pictures the old scholar: 'Probably concocting some of the verses now [for his blank verse translation of 'The Bride of Lammermoor']. Sitting there staring at vacancy... His 'beautiful detachment' Emily called it. The old fellow had never had anything to detach himself from. Life had just gone on past him without his knowing it was there.' Once Cousin Cave was thought harmless enough to instruct the young men in the neighborhood, yet in the changing society there is no place for a crazy classical scholar. When Penhally is sold and Cousin Cave is sent to live with the Kinloe's, he disturbs the family next door with his nightly pacing and reciting of poetry. Emily has to remove him to her house so the neighbors will stop complaining to her parents.

Cousin Cave's insane dependency on his books is markedly different from the value once placed on a classical education. Old Nicholas Llewellyn could remember his father reading Plato under a tree while a slave boy fanned him. Education then was the privilege of a leisured class; however, Nicholas, a practical man conscious of his responsibilities to the land and to family, could find little use for the classics even in his day. In contrast to old Nicholas is the twentieth-century intellectual Douglas Parrish whose studies occupy all his time. Although his parents are southerners, Parrish was raised in France, and thus he knows the South mainly through reading and secondhand accounts. Despite his wish to recover the South's history, he keeps it as past, as artifacts that he can catalogue in his collection. Slightly different from Emily's romanticizing, Douglas Parrish's view of the South is equally distorted. His collection does not impress Chance, a native southerner, who can see no reason for saving' a set of gourd slippers and a set of gourd dishes, carved and stained with pokeberry juice; old smoke-house keys; the flat rock, even, from some South Carolina smoke house.'

When Chance gives the Parrishes a tour of Penhally, Douglas searches through the house, borrows old books, and records dates from tombstones in the family graveyard--with Emily all the while telling her patriotic stories. Nonetheless, Parrish's intellectualism is worse than Emily's sentimentality because he uses it to retreat from personal relationships. Douglas is such a poor husband to Joan that even Emily has sympathy for her. Left to herself, Joan Parrish becomes a real menace to what is valuable in the southern past, a threat that is suggestively foreshadowed as the two couples leave the graveyard at Penhally. As Douglas is busy pocketing his notebook full of dates and facts, Joan walks beside Chance, 'flicking with her crop at the grass that grew beside the path. As extraordinarily beautiful woman, longer legged in riding breeches than you would have thought, but graceful in every movement.... The sun, declining, sent their shadows monstrously before them over the grass. The gigantic woman's hand might have been swinging out to uproot the big sugar tree, or demolish that whole row of ragged cedars...' The sugar tree, the image that began the novel, is endangered by seemingly innocuous people, and certainly Joan's huge shadow can suggest strength only because she threatens a structure already 'rotten at the heart,' a structure that a shadow could topple now. The violent conclusion of that internal deterioration finally erupts when to avenge Nick's selling the family estate, Chance shoots his brother at the hunt club.

Caroline Gordon's fiction, as William Stuckey aptly phrases it, reveals a quest 'for heroes who would not only embody qualities of courage and bravery but would also display a sense of responsibility for the welfare of other human beings.' Not just a hero's action but the quality of his ideals determine his worth. After the Civil War, the southern men do not seem successful in finding ideals large enough to live for; instead they end up dying, or even killing, for mere frustrated dreams. Men of action thus become men of violent reaction. And those with the imagination and intellect to correct the values of society only participate in a more passive kind of destruction. Creating dream worlds, men like Douglas Parrish or Cousin Cave withdraw and allow women, who in Gordon's traditional view lack the necessary experience or wisdom, to determine the direction of society. Thus, in tracing the fall of southern culture through the history of one family, the effaced omniscient narrator not only reveals the pattern of decline but suggests some reasons for such deterioration."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 54-64

"[Ford Madox] Ford's encouragement was extremely important. He not only gave her insights into her craft, but also bolstered her confidence with his enthusiasm. (Gordon once said that she was ready to give up on *Penhally* until Ford started working with her on it.) Ford, moreover, took it upon himself to help get her work published and recognized....

Almost all of Gordon's work up until 1940--which includes her novels *Penhally* (1931); *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934); *None Shall Look Back* (1937); and *The Garden of Adonis* (1937), along with a number of memorable stories, including all but one of those about Aleck Maury--depicts heroic characters struggling to assert order and meaning in an unstable world. At the heart of these solitary stands against death and disintegration lie a Stoic acceptance of man's depraved condition and a desire to forge a code of valor and dignity. In *Penhally*, several generations of the Llewellyn family strive to maintain family order as the social order around them collapses... *Penhally* ends with a fratricide and the family irrevocably split... Gordon's fiction is...a profound exploration of heroic endeavor, which remains honorable even though it is doomed.

Her work achieves such depth primarily because of Gordon's own deeply felt admiration and sympathy for her heroes. By standing their ground, by holding their heads high, these doomed figures act out the only heroism that Gordon at this point saw available to modern man--a private assertion of dignity. The bond of sympathy she felt with her heroes (derived in large part from the example of her father and from her extensive early education in the classics) allowed her to maintain a healthy tension between her dark vision of existence and her need to assert some vestige of meaning amidst life's pain and suffering. This tension vitalized her imagination and led to the creation of a number of profound novels and stories. In a broad sense, the struggles of Gordon's heroes to achieve order resemble Gordon's own efforts to maintain stability in a chaotic world...the one Gordon faced during the 1930s.... That Gordon saw her writing career in terms of the ancient warriors perhaps explains in part why she, unlike Tate, did not actively explore political and

religious alternatives during the 1920s and 1930s: the echoes of the heroes gave her, if not transcendence, strength and courage to persevere during the dark times....

Even the potentially meaningful study of the classics, Gordon's early love and the storehouse of human archetypes, appears lost to modern man. Cousin Cave, for instance, a scholar of the ancients in *Penhally*, relishes the classical myths only as fantasy and is hopelessly out of touch with contemporary life.... Even more than Tate, Gordon distrusted romanticizing the past, and often in her art she too directed her skepticism at the Agrarians--at least the hard-liners. *Penhally*, for instance, is in a very real sense an anti-plantation novel that works against the established tradition of the southern manor house where life is ordered, serene, and secure. The novel follows several generations of the Llewellyns as they try to hold the plantation together and keep it free from the encroachments of the rapacious world outside its fences. But their efforts are finally futile, primarily for two reasons. One is that nothing can stop the onslaughts of modernity; times change and the old ways die. The other is that focusing one's life on the plantation, so that all decisions are made according to their utility to the farm (including decisions about marriage, inheritance, and loyalty to the community and nation, ultimately undercuts the stability of human relationships and ends up splintering the family....

Gordon's message here is that there never has been a golden age, and that to idealize the Old South and see its ways as the answer to contemporary problems--as some Agrarians were doing--is to follow the lead of earlier local-color writers who romanticized the southern plantation."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 77, 80, 85-86

"Caroline's grandmother's grandfather, Charles Nicholas Meriwether, who came 'over the mountains' on the Wilderness Trail from Virginia with his father looking for land, is the prototype for Nicholas Llewellyn. John Llewellyn is a portrait of Caroline's grandfather, the Robert Ingersoll-reading dreamer, and her grandmother, who would countermand her husband's orders in the field in front of the farmhands, is the model for John's wife, Lucy…. Meriville was the model for Penhally, the eponymous house, and Nicholas's style was the Meriwether style—sometimes, for that matter, Tate style….

Its first sentences have been often quoted: 'The shadows that laced the graveled walk shifted and broke and flowed away beneath his boot soles like water'…. The novel traces the history of a farm, Penhally, through four generations of owners. In 1826 Nicholas Llewellyn quarrels irrevocably with his stepbrother because he believes in primogeniture, in keeping the land together at all costs. A bachelor, he leaves Penhally to his nephew John, a worn-out veteran of Morgan's Raiders in the Civil War. John's grandsons repeat the old quarrel of 1826—Nicholas, the oldest and therefore owner of Penhally, doesn't like to farm, but Chance, the younger brother, does. When Nicholas sells Penhally, Chance kills him.

Caroline wove…Agrarian themes into *Penhally*. Just as the Civil War is breaking out, old Nicholas Llewellyn reflects: 'But everything was breaking up nowadays. The country was in the hands of the New England manufacturers—men who gave no thought to its true interests'…. He muses that the men who were leading the South to war were 'irresponsible, these new-fangled politicians, landless men, with nothing to lose and everything to win.' The land, primogeniture, the stable society of past times—these are the things that the 'good' characters value. The villagers move to town and go into trade. Farming, even if done poorly, is better than business….

A colorful, readable family saga, *Penhally* is nonetheless a tragedy and was conceived as a tragedy. In her first application for a Guggenheim, Caroline wrote that she wanted to write prose that was 'personal and American and yet derived from the classical models. My study of creative writing began with the Greek tragedians. My ideas of art form have been influenced by their traditions and by the early English novelists'…. Yvor Winters…thought that *Penhally* was one of the five or six best novels of the past two decades but that it should have been written in an entirely different way."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 68, 79, 94-98, 143

"A bald summary of *Penhally*'s plot seems to characterize it as a fictionalized treatment of the Agrarian manifesto. In 1826 two half brothers, Nicholas and Ralph Llewellyn, quarrel when the younger, Ralph, wants to divide the Penhally tract to have a house of his own. Nicholas believes in the pre-Jeffersonian practices of entail and the communal family and refuses to divide the property. Ralph does not press the issue out of deference to his aged stepmother, but moves to a nearby farm, Mayfield, and raises race horses. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the brothers again differ. Ralph beggars himself for the Confederacy and loses his only son in battle. Nicholas buries his gold instead of buying Confederate dollars and manages to keep Penhally together. His heir, John, a cousin, returns from the war and marries Ralph's daughter Lucy.

As John and Lucy face the problems of reconstruction their marriage disintegrates. Their only child, Frank, makes an unfortunate marriage and commits suicide. His sons, Nicholas and Chance, are returned to Penhally to be raised by their grandparents, Lucy and John. Although he later inherits Penhally, Nicholas rejects the life-giving soil for the sterile existence of a banker in town. Chance, a born farmer, manages Penhally for his brother. Nicholas agrees to an advantageous offer to sell Penhally to a fancy hunt club. Chance shoots Nicholas. The pastoral order of antebellum days crumbles into commercialization and fratricide, seemingly according to the Agrarian scheme.

Penhally has usually been read as just such an elegy for antebellum days destroyed by the forces of history, probably because Caroline was the wife of Allen Tate and closely associated with the Agrarians. The forces of history are not the villains of her piece, however. When she studied with Professor Gay at Bethany College, Caroline had immersed herself in what are, after all, Greek family tragedies, and like them, *Penhally* emphasizes the importance of bloodlines. Heredity is destiny and much of the novel hinges on the contamination of 'good' blood by intermarrying with 'bad' blood and the various permutations of inherited traits.

These crucial facts are what Caroline's Modernist method of presentation tends to obscure. Caroline is attempting to relate a multigenerational family saga with a plethora of cousins, neighbors, and plantations with the same or similar names. Such a broad and crowded canvas ordinarily would be presented in as traditional and straightforward a manner as possible, as in the novels of Galsworthy, but Caroline chose instead the Jamesian method she had learned from Ford. The story is told from the points of view of a score of characters. The author does not intrude to convey information; we are expected to glean the facts from the consciousness of the various characters. Important bits of information slip casually down the stream of consciousness as the reader attempts to keep the tribe of Llewellyn and their retainers straight. The reader's need for the facts of the complex family saga is in violent conflict with the author's manner of relating them, or, as Robert Penn Warren puts it, Gordon's 'extensive' subject is in conflict with her 'intensive' treatment.

Even though she often felt 'sick' over *Penhally*'s flaws, Caroline had the satisfaction of finally completing and publishing a full-length work. She was also heartened by letters from friends and fellow authors, such as Josephine Herbst and Stark Young, who appreciated the novel's densely interwoven texture of imagery and setting."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 103-05

"*Penhally* is an exceptionally good first novel and an introduction to the rest of Miss Gordon's fiction. Almost all of the themes which appear in her later novels are first sounded here. In her beginning she had discovered the locus of her very Southern vision of modernity.... *Penhally* is a painfully honest account of what happened to one part of the South and of how certain residents of Todd County, Kentucky contributed to the destruction of their world.... *Penhally* is, on one level, a summary of the central moments of Southern history, a microcosm of larger patterns moving from frontier to secession to defeat and its ruinous aftermath...

Penhally is a dynastic novel and another Southern book where place is almost the protagonist, a conjunction of place with a particular set of people. Penhally belongs to the Llewellyns only so long as they are possessed by it. The practice of entailing family property is a way of perpetuating this relationship. It is

a premise of this work that, separated from the plantation, the influence of the Llewellyns disappears and that there can be no location to deserve that name without the proprietary stewardship of the family situated there, making *that earth* fruitful....

This story is of four generations in interaction with a specific house and holding--a mixed heritage, flawed from its beginnings by both too much and too little of the personal, private spirit which insists on the primacy of selfhood. Thus the narrative in three parts contained in *Penhally* is tragic, concerning the noble enterprise of family continuity brought to ruin by an invisible weakness closely related to Llewellyn virtues--an action symbolized in the novel by the fate of the big sugar tree growing near the great house where the theme of Llewellyn is unfolded...

The action moves from too private (putting family ahead of everything), to even more private (putting self first, as with the father of Nick and Chance) to isolation (excluding all human relations, the land of Nod). In a rage at how his brother has destroyed him by selling Penhally, Chance, the other grandson of John Llewellyn, kills Nick Llewellyn the banker, a man who sees the plantation as nothing more than property which can be converted into cash.... Chance is the last of the magnanimous proprietors who 'had felt themselves more a part of the whole,' rather than isolated agents. In the quarrel between the elder Nicholas Llewellyn and his brother Ralph the seeds of this ruin had been sown: in the division between two partial truths, neither of which could sustain a healthy society without its antithesis....

For those who know the history of the plantation novel from John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms to William Faulkner and Stark Young, there is a temptation to demonize Ralph Llewellyn, the formal antagonist in the plotting of *Penhally*. Yet he is no selfish beast.... 'Miss Gordon respects his principle of devotion to country and heritage as much as she respects Nicholas' devotion to the soil'.... It is Ralph who, out of brotherly love, defers to this brother and withdraws from Penhally rather than dispute with Nicholas, either in person or in court, the issue of their father's intentions regarding an entail of his property. Furthermore, when war breaks out, he has a full sense of his larger responsibilities to his culture... It becomes him that he goes down with the South....

Llewellyn as family needs both Nicholas and Ralph to survive. One in full dominion over the other is [a disaster]. Which is a fact we will not recognize clearly until John Llewellyn comes to preside at Penhally, before he has made a half-hearted marriage for the sake of family continuity--a marriage which is misery both to himself and his wife Lucy, his uncle Ralph's daughter.... The son of John and Lucy, Frank...throws his life away by sleeping with (and then marrying) his cousin Faneuil, who betrays him and brings about his suicide. For her sake, he has given up Penhally, father and mother. All of which amounts to both an endorsement of the romantic view of marriage and, at the same time, a warning against the destruction it can bring, if love is given to those who exhibit 'bad blood' (i.e., selfishness, greed, vanity or lust). John and Lucy have been foolish to abandon their son at nineteen because an adventuress deceived him....

Part II of *Penhally* is dominated by the formal traditionalism of John Llewellyn, who has returned home after heroic service in the War Between the States. Even before he turns to Lucy for shelter he is a man broken in spirit and certainly a lesser figure than his wife. A quiet gentleman with a transitional occupation, his grandson remembers, he 'had never regarded himself as owning a stick or stone of Penhally'.... John Llewellyn is virtuously disinterested... Outside forces, of course, have much to do with the corruption of Penhally and its environs, but the family is not altogether at the mercy of these powers....

Nick is really like his predecessor and great-uncle, 'set on having his own way.' Only when both Penhally and his place there are gone does Chance kill Nick. For his act has defied the Llewellyns and their home. The novel begins in the effort to sustain the family, but comes to the opposite conclusion--an irony rendered not only in the murder but also in the strained dispersal of the Penhally inhabitants and in Nick's hollow claim that he has acted only to benefit the family....

Part III of *Penhally*...is a comment on the declension of the culture of Kentucky in the 1920's which inherited that other Kentucky made by their ancestors. No hero was present to check the erosion, no cultural unity strong enough to pull all of the Llewellyns in one direction. In the action of *Penhally* that loss of meaning is the proper consequence of decisions made by independent and stubborn men and women:

decisions reflecting not only pride but also myopia. Little is left for Nick and Chance to decide, once their ancestors are finished.

At the end a Southern expatriate, a wealthy aesthete attempting to gratify the whims of his spoiled and beautiful wife, concludes the narrative of the Llywellyns.... Nick has sold away his patrimony almost by accident because of Joan Parrish's impulse to purchase whatever catches her fancy. The patriarchate is thus negated and cannot once again exist except by a conscious decision of the entire culture, supported by the independent freeholders who define it. Such a possibility the Agrarians wrote about in *I'll Take My Stand*. That not enough of their fellow Southerners were ready to listen should surprise no one who has read *Penhally* with care....

Penhally is actually Caroline Gordon's third novel, the first two not having satisfied her own sense of the requirements of her craft. She worked on this book for at least three years; and the labor of its production was painful and exacting--in the midst of a busy life as wife and mother, and advisor to literary friends. For she had so much history and so many people to bring together within the compass of one volume--*her* people and *their* history, as lived out along the southern border of Kentucky just above Clarksville, Tennessee. Caroline's ancestors, the Meriwethers, Barkers and Fergusons inhabited a small insular world all their own into which the first of them had arrived in the second decade of the previous century, coming out from Virginia to occupy a grant of several thousand acres....

Because it begins classically in the midst of a story, because it contains so many characters and is told from so many points of view, *Penhally* is not an easy book to read. But its effect is certainly accumulative, brought into focus by the violence of its conclusion. According to Andrew Lytle, 'The central meaning of the book is its complexity, striking like alternating current, back and forth among the characters, the situation, the historic changes'.... William Stuckey has argued that 'the book is arranged and the action is managed so that the wisdom of the old way is plainly manifest'.... And if an episodic structure is sometimes confusing it is also true [as] 'it makes history every present'."

M. E. Bradford
Introduction
Penhally (J.S. Sanders 1991) vii-xiv

"She explained the 'conflict of the action' in *Penhally* was 'the conflict between the European idea of the preservation of the family by the handing down of property from father to son and the pioneer idea of individualism which led each man to believe that he could carve enough material goods out of the wilderness for himself and his children'.... 'Caught in the tide of the new South' [descendants of the first Llewellyns] would 'become small town bankers and merchants and speedily rid themselves of the land which was the symbol of their fathers' victory over the wilderness'.... 'My method is to present an event through the eyes of several observers and then press it further in succeeding chapters...so that members of one generation contemplate and re-value, according to their own lights, events in the lives of their fathers and grandfathers.' In the novel there would be 'a constant weaving back and forth until the lives of the four heroes stand out in a distinct pattern'....

The defeat of Penhally and the Llewellyns was prefigured from the first paragraph of the novel. But Caroline was hardly bewailing the passing of a noble society. If anything, she was turning a sharply critical eye on both her family history and that of the Old South. [Realism] The criticism was covert, however; her narrative strategies tended to mask her underlying purpose.... The *underground stream*...was a mysterious, creative element connecting the Llewellyn family to the world beyond....a metaphor for Caroline's fictional technique....[Modernism] Caroline created the Penhally estate as an objective correlative to the action of the narrative.... No one in the novel really understood anyone else... In the end only the reader was in a position to see and understand the entire picture. It was very hard to untangle the family lines, but to some degree it was not necessary. By adopting the various perspectives, and by testing the reliability of each character in turn, the reader could assemble the pieces and understand the significance of it all. And that was part of the meaning of Caroline's story. The reader had to be the artist, creating order out of apparent chaos and tragedy.... [Comparable in this respect to more Expressionistic works of Modernism such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, published two years before *Penhally*, and to *As I Lay Dying* published the same year. Italics added.]

On the surface *Penhally* appeared to champion conventional mores and patriarchal society. Caroline built her novel around the exploits of the Llewellyn men, her heroes.... Despite...conventional images of women, Caroline focused much of her narrative on the lives and problems of women through the stories of her four female characters: Alice Blair, Lucy Llewellyn, Emily Kinloe, and Joan Parrish. Sometimes heroines, sometimes harpies, these women's stories spoke of pain and misunderstanding. Other minor female characters further emphasized Caroline's interest in the plight of women: in fact, women's screams served as bookends to *Penhally*. In the opening scenes of the novel, a black woman named Violet wailed: she was about to give birth to a mulatto child... At the end of the novel, an unnamed woman cried out at another horror, that of brother killing brother....

No matter her color, a woman's lot was desperate, her choices limited. A woman could hope only to be pretty or wealthy, and to be able to choose wisely. An ugly or poor woman would probably end up a spinster, living an uncertain life dependent on the munificence of others. A woman who married unwisely might end up...worse than...the spinster. Or she might suffer the humiliation of having a profligate husband, given to foolish spending, idle ways, or illicit affairs. In short, a woman had little control over her own destiny.... A woman judged harshly often appeared in a more complimentary light when her own thoughts were revealed, or when her behavior was examined by other women....

Caroline allowed almost every other character to criticize Alice... Still, Caroline made Alice the most reliable and most perceptive commentator on the novel's events.... Alice was able to deflate the romanticizing pretensions of the Llewellyn family. She also articulated the tragic aspects of the lives of southern women, especially their economic dependence and fear of miscegenation.... Lucy was a powerful witness to man's inhumanity to woman.... In episode after episode, Caroline revealed Lucy's strength and her dedication to Penhally.... There were enough resemblances to Caroline's life to make Emily a rather tongue-in-cheek self-portrait... She was 'spirited'.... Emily's role in the narrative was that of a chorus or observer, offering insight and commentary...

A conventional interpretation of the story would find Alice Blair and Joan Parrish ultimately responsible for the chaos and destruction accompanying the sale of Penhally. That's what happened, the moralist would say, when women were not restrained by strong men. But more than Joan's ambition, Chance's stubbornness and selfishness brought on the defeat of both Penhally and the Llewellyn family. If Chance had spoken out for the women, Penhally might have been saved. Joan probably would have built her hunt club elsewhere; no one would have been hurt. But Chance could not think of anyone but himself, and so he brought more suffering down on the women he loved. He would kill his brother in rage."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 100-108

"Caroline Gordon's uneasiness with a woman-centered world or literary tradition is evident in her first novel, *Penhally*, whose title resonates with the name of Benfolly, Gordon and Tate's first true home. The brevity, the experimentation with structure, the elusive narrative voice, and the emphasis on female consciousness of 'Summer Dust' are gone. In their place is a tightly ordered chronicle of the South from 1860 [no, 1826] through the early twentieth century in which Gordon records the demise of traditional Southern autocratic and agrarian ideals.

Andrew Lytle, novelist and close friend of Caroline Gordon, argues that, despite Gordon's concentration on male heroism and defeat, the 'theme of prevailing interest' in her work is 'what Life, the sly deceiver, does to womankind, but particularly to the woman of great passion and sensibility.' He explains: 'It is not that men do not come in for their share of sorrows and disappointments; it is, rather, that Life, represented in the only possible hierarchy of institutional and organized society. It has a masculine determination.' Lytle's statement supports Gordon's 'nocturnal' version of creation, her belief that sporting men created and abandoned the universe, leaving women little or no opportunity to determine their own fates. Identifying herself as a 'masculine' artist, Gordon shares Lytle's inability to imagine either a society or an art without this strong, and, certainly for her, debilitating determination. Gordon will not draw powerful, creative

women who redesign the patriarchy so as to include women's needs and values; she draws women who destroy it.

As in much of her fiction, the carefully constructed yet ambiguous imagery of the novel's ending reveals Gordon's themes, and thus serves as a fitting introduction. A young man on the verge of committing fratricide notices that the old family house, turned hunt club, is in perfect balance, 'everything correct, even symmetrical.' The symmetry, however, belies the lack of proportion and insight that has plagued the Llewellyns since before the Civil War and will now eradicate the family. In both the apparent symmetry of the house and the symmetry that structures Gordon's novel, for contrasts with content. Like the new mistress of Penhally, Joan Parrish, Gordon tries to keep order through balanced structure, but Gordon understands that there are no true proportions--the abyss is ever-present.

The Civil War is used in this novel as an historic occasion, resonating with the kind of metaphoric and mythic significance that allows Gordon to interweave various levels of human experience. While on one level, the war signifies fraternal discord, as brothers fight for control over ancestral land, more subtly, but just as powerfully, the war signifies sexual discord caused by women who will not serve and often do not desire men. As Jane Gibson Brown argues, the women in *Penhally* are associated with the Greek goddess Artemis and the Pleiades, virgin sisters, whose intense sexual energy is not directed at or by the male. Gibson asserts that 'final ruin is brought to the house of Penhally by women who aggravate and widen the tension that exists between various sets of brothers who control its fortunes.' As Artemis maintains her freedom through her virginity and gains power in a world where her own mother was abandoned by the unfaithful Zeus, Gordon suggests that women who are not bound by heterosexual love can subversively take on the role of the hunter, the destroyer.

Although Gordon claims in 'Cock-Crow' that her fiction represents her lifelong study of the 'life and times of the hero,' *Penhally* portrays the absence of the heroic impulse. Gordon's would-be heroes are so distracted by their particular desires and their unsatisfied relationships that, although the novel revolves around the idea of inheritance, no character is able to rise above self-defeat, act constructively, and project ideas of value or honor onto a changing world. Men bequeath the land to their sons or nephews in hopes of maintaining a stable and ordered history, but women, through their refusal to marry heirs, their uncontrolled energies or obsessions, and their contrary points of view or silences, create conflict.

The action is framed by aggravating cries from women. As the novel opens, Nicholas, the master of the plantation, feels harassed by the 'infernal noise' of two women, a slave (probably his mistress) and his senile stepmother. One hundred years later, at the close of the novel, a woman screams as she witnesses the death of Nicholas's heir and namesake, shot by his own brother. Between these cries, the gradual extinction of the Llewellyn patriarchy is dramatized. Within each of the three sections of the novel, Gordon presents a series of triangles. At the focal point of each is the male heir to Penhally; he struggles in vain to maintain control over his land, his family, and his passion, but women offer steady resistance. Although Gordon uses various centers of consciousness to tell her story, she follows most closely the perceptions and actions of the men who control the land and cannot understand or do not explore the motivations of their female antagonists.

Part one of *Penhally* begins in 1826 and ends with the surrender of the Confederacy after the Civil War. Nicholas Llewellyn, Penhally's master, is a powerful, distant, manipulative, and irascible old bachelor. Childless, and thus without an apparent heir, Nicholas blames not only his younger half-brother but also women in general for upsetting the traditional lines of inheritance. His half-brother, Ralph, who would inherit Penhally, was frustrated by Nicholas's autocratic rule and established his own house. Nicholas attributes Ralph's desire to live apart from the family as a fault inherited from his mother who, according to Nicholas, 'had been the beauty and the heiress. Something of a hoyden, too.' Angered by Ralph's actions, Nicholas decides to choose his own heir; he bitterly reflects upon the fact that he is childless because Charlotte, the cousin he wanted to marry, preferred another. He cannot account for the fact that she married a poorer cousin, the inquisitive and distracted Jeems, rather than the inheritor of Penhally. Despite the fact that Nicholas believes that women are largely responsible for the family's disintegration, he continues to see himself as their protector....

The old places are indeed falling about people's heads, and those who have least control over the political and social structures--Violet, the slaves, and 'old Mrs. Llewellyn'--cry out in recognition of their displacement and powerlessness. Gordon, however, demonstrates how those whose race and gender make them most vulnerable to the existing order highlight the fragility of those in power. Because Nicholas's sense of manhood and identity is derived from his ability to protect the women in his family and keep the blacks productive yet invisible, the cries of these women signal not only his personal failure but also the flaws inherent in the slave-owning patriarchal structure.

Mrs. Llewellyn, the fourth wife of Nicholas and Ralph's father, cries because she fears separation from Violet, the young black slave who cares for her. Nine months pregnant, Violet is the 'property' of Ralph, who is moving to his new home, Mayfield. Nicholas, furious at what he sees as his half-brother's disloyalty to family and tradition, has ordered that all of Ralph's possessions be moved with him; these include his slaves. Unwilling to take Violet away from his stepmother, Ralph countermands his brother's will and orders Violet to remain. Since neither brother will speak to the other, Violet is left homeless, separated from her husband, Reuben, who now belongs at Mayfield. Pregnant, Violet is the victim of the conflicting and irreconcilable demands of the landowners and fears she will lose her child. As a slave, her only recourse is to cry and to irritate the brothers until they reach a compromise--one that necessarily will undercut their authority.

Ralph must free Reuben, and Nicholas must yield to his stepmother and allow Violet to remain on his land with her husband. Gordon's pointed description of the way in which the authority of the white, aristocratic slave-owner is challenged by those least able to assert power--the black female slave and the elderly white matriarch--proves her awareness of the fragility of plantation society and marks her as a critic of that order. The animosity between the brothers also inheres in tradition. It arose upon the death of their father, when Nicholas took full possession of the land, an act that was not supported by a will but by old Virginia custom. Ralph argues that his father, influenced by Jeffersonian thought, meant to divide the property. When Ralph marries, he and his wife want their own home and leave Penhally, rejecting the familial dynasty. The silent and bitter quarrel between brothers becomes even more intense during the Civil War, when Ralph mortgages his land to support the Confederacy and dies a pauper, while Nicholas, who refuses to give money for the cause, buys Mayfield and includes it in the family estate.

Although Nicholas prospers, money is not his motive. His compulsion is to be master of a traditional estate, to uphold the culture of old Virginia. He wants to provide generously for an extended family and to bequeath the land and responsibility to his heir. Enraged by what he perceives as Ralph's disloyalty to the family--but also, perhaps, by his own childlessness--Nicholas concentrates all his energy on Penhally. He will not support the Confederacy because he refuses to see how the politics of the larger world affect the traditions of Penhally. Outside of the family, Nicholas believes, values change and old structures topple, but he commits himself to sustain his own land and familial traditions.

Of course, in the fictional world designed by Caroline Gordon, Nicholas bequeaths not stability but conflict, born out of his insular, exclusionary, and autocratic vision. While the conflict is played out between brothers, it is rooted in gender and racial traditions that do not change despite war and changing times. The love triangle that dominates part two of the novel arises from a new generation, but one that is not regenerated. Angered that Ralph plans to divide Mayfield between his two children, Charles and Lucy, Nicholas surprises the family by naming John, the son of Charlotte and Jeems, rather than Charles, as heir of Penhally. John, however, is more drawn to the unconventional Alice Blair than he is to restoring agrarian, aristocratic traditions. In an apparently arbitrary and disruptive act, Alice Blair, a cousin from Virginia, initiates discord that reverberates through the rest of the novel.

Quite early in part one, Gordon introduces the enigmatic, powerful, and beautiful Alice Blair. Although Alice's perspective remains unexplored, we first see her as John sees her: a spirited and daring equestrienne who successfully but unnecessarily fords a dangerous flooded stream during a storm. In nature, Alice is a strong, willful, and playful presence, but in the society of Penhally, she becomes a controlling, cold, and designing woman who, like Charlotte, leads one man to believe she loves him and then suddenly marries the other. Illuminated by the cold reflection of moonlight, this woman, whom Brown identifies as an Artemis figure, is exhilarated by horses and seeks control of the untamed forces of nature. Like the

goddess, she is profoundly disinterested in heterosexual romance. John cannot understand but intensely feels her allure.... The coldness or distance with which she responds to both Charles and John and her decision to marry Charles soon after she learns that Penhally has been willed to John and thoroughly repulsed by Charles, she marries Charles either out of perversity or, according to Brown, because marriage is 'expected of her.' Perhaps she understands that Charles will be unable to control her.

Indeed, she is correct. Charles does not survive the war, and John continues his pursuit of Alice. Nicholas, who refers to Alice as 'spoiled little hussy and deceitful, too, like all her mother's people,' will not permit the marriage. In apparent ignorance of the conflict between the traditional patriarch, Nicholas Llewellyn, and the fiercely independent Alice, John asks Alice to marry him. John's powerlessness is underlined by Gordon, who makes him an observer rather than participant in the scene.... The contest is between Alice and Nicholas. Nicholas would establish a world where he has the money and power to lead both John and Alice, like horses, 'induced' to do his bidding because of 'a biting rig,' but Alice, he knows, will not be led. 'It's her blood'; she prefers to ride alone through more wild terrain. Although Nicholas believes he has won this struggle, Gordon does not vanquish Alice Blair. Her daughter-in-law, a wealthy, bored, spirited woman who also knows how to master horses, eventually becomes mistress of the estate.

Alice leaves Penhally, and a disappointed John assumes responsibility for the land, which has been decimated by war. He is, however, no true master, but Nicholas's pawn and a pawn to tradition. John, almost out of weariness, marries Ralph Llewellyn's daughter, the long-suffering, domestic, energetic Lucy. In a conventional, sentimental Civil War novel, this joining of the heirs in marriage would resolve the quarrel between Ralph and Nicholas that divided the house. Gordon, however, will not allow the easy ending; patriarchal authority has been undercut; Alice Blair has been only momentarily repelled; the old order will be toppled.

If Caroline Gordon represents the subversive feminine power through Alice Blair, in Lucy Llewellyn she depicts that power domesticated, when Artemis surrenders her spirit and independence to the male. Lucy is betrothed to her cousin Kenneth Llewellyn, who jilts her when her father loses his land. Forced to take up residence at Penhally, she does not outwardly express the anger or resentment that she must feel toward Nicholas, who prospers at her father's expense. Instead she assumes the duties of the plantation mistress with such unbounded vitality and cheer that Nicholas, who initially judged her as having 'too much spirit,' begins to respect her. Once more, Nicholas's vision proves limited. Lucy is not the natural or appropriate mistress for Penhally. Although Nicholas and Lucy have much in common as victims of spurned love who invest their energy in the land and work to reestablish Penhally, their motivations differ. Nicholas sees Penhally as a buttress against the crumbling values of the public world, while Lucy uses it as the last prop of her collapsed identity. She marries not John but the land, knowing that she lost her first love because her father lost his land. Penhally is her means of regaining not only her inheritance, but also her lost respect as a betrayed lover.

Neither Nicholas nor Lucy, however, can restore the past. The land will not spring back into fertility; John can never love Lucy as he loved Alice Blair; and Lucy cannot regain her sense of value. Increasingly bitter, Lucy turns inward and haunts the house with her silent brooding. Gordon, distancing the reader from Lucy, describes her through the eyes of John.... The slight control that John and Lucy have over their lives unravels bit by bit through John's inability to change and Lucy's silent preservation of outworn values. Southern culture has been transformed not only because of their defeat in war but also, more interestingly, because of the unresolved gender and race issues that weakened the patriarchal structures in the antebellum world. While John and Lucy are both victims of romantic rejection, neither is critical of the ways of the past; neither has the imaginative energy or self-confidence to see the weakness inherent in the patriarchal conventions.

At the end of part two, the family is sundered when Lucy discovers her son, Frank, having an affair with a visiting cousin. Lucy's anger at this breach in traditional morality and hospitality is heightened by the fact that her son risks family and fortune for the woman he desires, which no one had done for her. She forces John to drive Frank from Penhally. Frank marries his cousin nonetheless and later commits suicide, having witnessed her continual infidelities. Again, women's passions introduce chaos into the patriarchal family,

but the society's inability to cope with women's passions or desire for freedom and control seals the fate of the old order.

In the last part, Gordon completes the irony inherent in the plot as Lucy and John's grandsons, Nick and Chance, repeat the feud of their ancestors. Of course, the wife of Alice Blair's son promotes the discord. Not having learned from previous generations, John Llewellyn, upholding tradition, bestows Penhally upon his eldest grandson, Nick, despite the fact that Nick cares little for the land. An unlikely farmer, Nick leaves the management of the farm to his younger brother Chance and prospers as a banker. Although Chance loves the land, he runs into financial difficulties and Nick sells it to Alice Blair's son, Douglas Parris, and his wife, Joan.

Douglas Parrish is a typical character in Gordon's later fiction. A befuddled intellectual absorbed in studying the past, Douglas comes to the South to gather information about his family. Not at home in the present, he allows his wife to assume all social and business responsibility--and she proves to be very successful.... Like Nicholas and John, Douglas Parrish is committed to the past, but is uncritical of it. Living the life of the leisured, well-educated, aristocratic gentleman in a changing modern world, Parrish surrenders masculine authority to his wife. Like Charlotte, Alice, and Lucy, Joan Parrish is an energetic and apparently impulsive woman whose life force cannot be consumed in sustaining outmoded traditions or her marriage to a distracted scholar.

The power and spirit that is submerged in Alice Blair and unnaturally channeled in Lucy Llewellyn is embodied by the determined Joan Parrish. Her powerful need to control is intuited by Chance Llewellyn even before he realizes her designs. As they walk over the grounds of Penhally, she is described almost mythically from, again, the distancing point of view of the traditional-minded male.... While her husband is fascinated by the dead and dying culture, she, with a 'gigantic woman's hand,' demolishes not only the phallic trees but the Llewellyn family, as she buys Penhally on impulse, along with two neighboring estates, and transforms it into a magnificent hunt club. Artemis has gained ascendance, and Chance, blaming his brother, commits fratricide and sacrifices himself to the law. As the extinction of the family is completed, we remember Chance's thoughts about inheritance and personal legacies....

What survives at the end of *Penhally* is not a cultural or personal legacy passed down through generations but the beginning of a new world. It does not include the aristocratic values old Nicholas Llewellyn sought to make permanent in the days before the Civil War. A 'sporting' woman, a business woman, has assumed control, as the monstrous shadow of her gigantic hand demolishes the patriarchal world of the Llewellyns. Gordon's 'nocturnal version of theology' fades as the female huntress, Joan Parrish, rules and makes Penhally her own 'plaything.'

Thus, despite Caroline Gordon's professed imagining that 'the world had been created as a plaything by a group of men' ('Cock-Crow'), neither men nor their constructions so disturb and alienate this very stoic writer as do powerful women. In her first novel, Gordon set out to write a masculine and historical novel, describing the tragic defeat of an aristocratic culture and patriarchal family, but as the work unfolds, it is not fraternal or civic discord that destroys old traditions. It is women. Some of these women are victims who, through their cries, reveal masculine weakness. Others will not subject themselves to male authority. These powerful women who, perhaps like Gordon, take possession of the traditionally masculine playing field, are depicted as monstrous survivors, inhabitants of a wilder world that has existed through time. Charlotte Llewellyn, Alice Blair, Lucy Llewellyn, and Joan Parrish share a subversive power that Gordon fears. Left largely unexplored in this novel, they embody a discordant energy that she would like to subdue in her fiction. While their energy may be veiled or unchanneled, it returns to 'demolish' any attempt to create an ordered space...

In *Penhally*, Gordon created a tight, balanced structure that emphasizes the recurrent nature of human impulses and action in four generations of the Llewellyn family, a model of the aristocratic South. Carefully controlled imagery, classical allusions, and subtle foreshadowing reinforce the them of ironic repetition. Complicated and interwoven descriptions of gender and racial oppression are shown to have contributed to the demise of the patriarchy. Not only does the plot render this a 'conflicted story,' but the narrative technique as well. Authorial detachment allows Gordon to shift her centers of consciousness and

leaves the reader to evaluate the action. A great deal of action is neatly compressed in a skillfully crafted composite of panoramas and scenes that force readers to see how the personal, historic, and mythic dimensions of human actions are interwoven."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Farleigh Dickinson 2002) 56-65

Penhally is connected by name with Penally, a village on the coast of Wales that has also been spelled Penhally. The village is traditional, agrarian, quiet and peaceful like the agrarian Old South in Gordon's novel of which Penhally is a symbol. This place name connects the Old South with the European agrarian tradition that began in ancient Greece and Rome, as expressed in Virgil's *Eclogues*. Connections are a theme of the novel, most obviously in the repeated references to family "connections." *Penhally* is one of the best first novels ever published. As a rule first novels are not this good. Only two other exceptions come to mind in American fiction, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Sun Also Rises.* Unlike them, *Penhally* does not have a popular subject and is not easy to read, sensational, or sexy. Gordon has also been neglected due to popular prejudice against subtle complexity, liberal prejudice against conservatives, male prejudice against women novelists, and Feminist prejudice against anyone who disagrees with them.

Penhally is an unconventional Modernist novel much influenced by the Impressionism and techniques of Gordon's mentor Ford Madox Ford, for whom she was a secretary. There is no continuous plot line except as represented by the Llewellyn family and the decline and destruction of the Old South. The story is told through Impressionistic scenes that dramatize vital "connections" in the family history without the explicit connections of a conventional plot line, an economical method that omits continuous detailing in order to emphasize what is most important. Chapter 1 of Part I is set in 1826; chapter 2 is set 35 years later at the beginning of the Civil War; chapters 9 and 10 are set in August 1861; chapter 11 in April 1862; chapters 12, 13 and 14 in December 1862; chapters 15, 16 and 17 in January 1863; chapter 18 in July1863--all about the war. Chapter 1 of Part II is set in Autumn 1900, after which chapters 2 to 5 are undated. Likewise undated are chapters 1 to 8 of Part III, though they are implicitly set in the 1920s, leading into the Great Depression and the sale of Penhally by Nick Llewellyn the banker.

The style of the novel appears to be literal Realism but actually contains symbolism from the opening phrase onward: "The shadows." Shadows become a motif with connotations that vary according to context. Here shadows evoke dual aspects of reality--cause and effect, light and dark--as well as the relationship of Nicholas to his younger brother Ralph and its consequences to their descendants. As a Realist, Gordon is most concerned with presenting what is true, hence her characters and situations are portrayed as complex, with both positive and negative aspects. This is conspicuous in her depiction of the first and most influential character in the novel, the family patriarch Nicholas Llewellyn. Also significant in the first paragraph is the big old sugar tree in the yard of Penhally, a symbol of the family tree and of the old agrarian lifestyle on a slave plantation, both sweet and "rotten at the heart by this time"--1826. Nicholas knows that the literal tree is vulnerable: Any wind storm might send it "crashing down on the roof." Ironically, he knows the literal tree "would have to go" and even thinks its removal would improve the view. Yet this is also true of the slaveholding social order that he himself personifies.

This novel is so complex and subtle that even its best, most reliable critics--Koch, Stuckey, Fraistat, and Bradford--may be challenged on their interpretations of Chance Llewellyn. Otherwise, Brinkmeyer is a biased urban liberal who dismissively equates all agrarian values with the slaveholding plantation society of the Old South; Makowsky the literal-minded Feminist with no literary education admits to her inability to "glean the facts from the consciousness of the various characters"; and Boyle the doctrinaire Feminist is at war against the conservative author, falsifies the text and imposes her dogmas upon it. Consistently in her book, Boyle falsely claims that Gordon always portrays women as destroyers who do not "redesign the patriarchy so as to include women's needs and values." That is to say, Gordon is not a radical Feminist destroyer. Boyle is blind to characters such as Susan Allard, the battlefield nurse, humanistic feminist, and Christ-evoking figure in *None Shall Look Back.* Boyle asserts that the social order of the Old South was destroyed not by the Civil War but by "society's inability to cope with women's passions or desire for freedom and control." She goes so far as to identify herself with Joan Parrish, the self-indulgent aristocratic villainess of the novel, "whose life force cannot be consumed in sustaining outmoded traditions," who has

"subversive power"--a modern business woman who "demolishes the patriarchal world of the Llewellyns" and "makes Penhally her own "'plaything'," transforming it into "a magnificent hunt club."

Moore believes that Chance has "no call" to murder his brother. Although murder is never justified, Chance has compelling reasons for calmly executing Nick, in particular for his cruel displacement of so many people from their home at Penhally just to further enrich himself, including members of his own family and dependent blacks, some of whom will soon die as a result. Nick the banker during the Great Depression has lost all feeling for humane "connections." Chance is not merely being nostalgic, as Koch says, nor merely resentful over Nick's inheritance as Boyle sees it, nor merely taking revenge for the sale of property as Fraistat seems to imply, nor in a rage at Nick's destruction of his life as Bradford asserts, nor because Nick taunts him at the hunt club as Stuckey says. Chance is a vigilante avenging other people--victims of the banker's callous greed. Least valid of all is the squinting partisan Feminist argument of Jonza that "More than Joan's ambition, Chance's stubbornness and selfishness brought on the defeat of both Penhally and the Llewellyn family. If Chance had spoken out for the women, Penhally might have been saved. Joan probably would have built her hunt club elsewhere. But Chance could not think of anyone but himself, and he brought more suffering down on the women."

Michael Hollister (2019)