

ANALYSIS

The Women on the Porch (1944)



Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The book could explore the relationship between mother and daughter, the way two women struggled for power and control. 'It will be pretty Russian,' Caroline told a friend. 'The two lunatics will furnish the chorus. I'll try to restrain myself when it comes to those lunatics but they are tempting'."

Gordon (1937)

Nancylee Novell Jonza

The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon

(U Georgia 1995) 177

"The porch is a sort of *stoa* to Hades. If the story has any form it is that of a myth, Eurydice and Orpheus." "I know that Orpheus and Eurydice is an awfully old story, but I thought that if I let hell yawn between husband and wife there might be some little interest in the situation." [Catherine] "in herself did not amount to much, but...the things she had in back of her, even in its decadence, made her in a way the equal of her intelligent, gifted husband.... The woman represents the earth. It may be fine, rich soil or it may be barren. But anyway, it is earth. The man represents the mind of the modern, rootless American. You remember when he comes out of the house he says, as if surprised, 'I don't belong anywhere'."

Gordon

Letter to Ward Dorrance (undated, c. 1942)

Letter to Edmund Wilson (17 May 1944)

Letter to Sally Wood (undated)

"Gordon says *The Women on the Porch* does not symbolize Southern decadence but what happens to old women 'just as often in Michigan and Massachusetts'."

Gordon
David Ragan
"Portrait of a Lady Novelist: Caroline Gordon" (portrait/interview)
Mark Twain Quarterly 8:18-20 (1947)

"You've done it this time. It's a major novel."

Sally Wood
Letter to Gordon (undated, July 1944)

"It's theme is this: 'In the world of today the dead are more alive than the living, memories more tangible than reality.' The chief quality of the novel is 'a sustained mood of doom that pervades every walk of life,' and lives on hopes for and recollections of death. 'The cold rage of author Gordon's mood and prose gives *The Women on the Porch* literary distinction'.... The novel is a 'desolate, often poignant, hypersensitive study of life in death'.... Catherine is the chief of a dozen characters who move through [the novel] like shrouded figures on their way to the graveyard'."

Anonymous
"Come, Die Along With Me."
Time (22 May 1944) 99-100, 102
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) 223

"The pasts of these three aging women are sketched with great delicacy and sound a ghostly note throughout the book,' and 'it is in her talent for creating by suggestion that Miss Gordon's distinction lies,' making the reader feel more than the author tells."

Anonymous
Review of *The Women on the Porch*
New Yorker (3 June 1944) 73-74
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 223

"The atmosphere of the novel 'is produced in part by echoes and excerpts out of the race's poetic past,' from the Greeks and Dante to Hart Crane. It is a 'strange, absorbingly fateful novel,' with 'a nice touch in the handling of animals.' The dachshund and stallion 'are as vividly alive as any other personalities in the novel.'"

Florence Haxton Bullock
"Full of Beauty and Naturalness"
New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review (7 May 1944) 3
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 224

"Use of 'the experimental methods once used by Eugene O'Neill... The grandmother, aunt, and cousin assume 'the cryptic poses of the three fates'.... Italicized writing represents 'Catherine's subconscious divinings'... 'Some very lovely and lush moments'..."

M. L. S.
"It's Like O'Neill"
Springfield (Mass.) Republican (4 June 1944) 4d
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 224

"Gordon's situation is an important, contemporary one: 'How shall the reasonably cultivated Southerner make peace with his past, work with his present, live--with some tolerable efficacy--today?' Jim Chapman 'is actually much better realized as a character than is Catherine, whose actions seem not so much motivated within herself as shaped by the most casual of circumstances.' The 'most touching episode...is the one in which Aunt Willy shows the stallion at the fair.' Gordon uses 'modified stream-of-consciousness technique' to take the reader back and forth in the minds and histories of the characters...[in] 'a novel in which 'the shadows of the past' sometimes obscure 'the lineaments of the present'....The characters 'seem to

have been hopelessly damned in their several ways from infancy'... Gordon's writing is the 'most sensitive' in the passages devoted to [Jim Chapman]."

Lorine Pruette

"Shadows in Dixie"

New York Times Book Review (21 May 1944) 6
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 224-25

"A novel 'for those who like fine and evocative writing' ranging 'far out to the periphery of experience'... It is a 'rare treat'... The story-line peeps 'in and out of the book like a meandering stream..., or, better, like a convenient thread...with which to tie up' observations, personalities, and 'the brilliant single strokes of poetic realization that make up the book.' Gordon lavishes upon even minor characters 'the ultimate powers of her perception' and in her characterization resembles Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. Her poetry appears 'sometimes in a sentence,' in a 'sustained lyricism'...or at a chapter closing [e.g., Chapters 9, 13, 15, 17]. Every page is 'marked with her devotion to the craft of writing'."

Nathan L. Rothman

"Escape' to Tennessee"

Saturday Review (27 May 1944) 24
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 225

"A 'far from casual' novel that invites comparison with the novels of Virginia Woolf. The characters 'are illuminated from within.' This 'vision turned inward' would, 'in the hands of a lesser artist, result in confusion. Here, there is none.' But the 'sterile fascination of the past'...may prevent the novel from having a wide appeal, though this will be due chiefly to the fact that the characters 'are all neurotics.' Only Red, the horse, 'has enough heart to win a race'."

Marion Strobel

"An Unhappy Marriage"

Chicago Sun Times Book Week (21 May 1944) 3
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 225

"It is 'an interesting novel, beautifully written'.... In *The Women on the Porch*, Gordon 'continues to reveal her absorption in the Southern materials handled so magically' in *Aleck Maury*, *Sportsman*, and *Penhally*, but here 'her frame of reference is extended' from New York to Tennessee and back again... Similar to Marianne Moore in authentic knowledge and sensitivity, Gordon writes prose that is 'perhaps the most unaffected and yet the most classically accomplished written by any American woman today'."

Vivienne Koch

"Regions of the Heart"

Briarcliff Quarterly 1:222-27 (1944)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 228

"*The Women on the Porch* 'is a serious book, and one applies stiff standards to it in appreciation of the talent and ambition of the author.' It is the best novel that Miss Gordon has written'; its technique is 'really professional and fine'."

Theodore Spencer

"Recent Fiction"

Sewanee Review 53:297-304 (1944)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 230

"In this novel her absorption in Southern materials is paradoxically counterpointed by extending the frame of reference, moving from New York to Tennessee and back again. New York, as one might expect, although treated realistically enough is shadowy in comparison with Miss Gordon's South, where every aspect of setting, terrain and speech is seen with the fine clarity with which she can trace a leaf or a bug. But the novel evokes not only a rich and vaguely sinister South to which Catherine, the expatriate heroine, returns when her marriage appears threatened by her husband's infidelity, but also it introduces a kind of allegorical sociology..."

Miss Gordon appears to be covertly arguing, as indeed she had argued more openly in *The Garden of Adonis*, that love cannot flourish without roots and that these roots lie in the land of one's birth, preferably (is this can be managed) in an ordered and predictable local society. To this end, she shows Jim Chapman, the husband, a deracinated middle-westerner teaching in New York, to have a barren emotional life of which his present affair is only a symptom. But Jim is sufficiently developed as a character for one to judge whether deracination was a cause or an effect of his problems....

In *The Women on the Porch*, the heroine, who in her emotional turmoil instinctively flees to the South for comfort and security, shrinks back in alarm at the static, almost paralyzed composure of her relatives in Swan Quarter. Her eventual rejection of a life as the wife of her cousin, and as the mistress of his land, a land she loves, does suggest that the claims of the South upon its lovers are trembling under the pressures of new and inevitable alignments outside it.... The 'love' conflict [illustrates] the more fundamental hostility between the two cultures symbolized by Jim, the rootless intellectual, and Catherine, the land-loving Southerner. The result is...beautifully written and with the minor characters swiftly and memorably established."

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953) 331-32

"In *The Woman on the Porch* 'can be seen for the first time the proper order and arrangement of events to form the complete pattern of Caroline Gordon's 'plot'. Here the temporal pattern--which in her earlier novels Gordon has shown 'as ending in the observable motifs of withdrawal, flight, and death'--is seen 'to have its roots in eternity'.... Though here Gordon 'does not desert her naturalistic [Realistic] method,' nonetheless 'something supernatural enters into the dramatic framework of the novel.' The symbol of water 'as both destruction and salvation permeates the novel.' The death of the stallion suggests 'the carnal element that must be shattered before grace can grow.' The events of the novel are 'agonies of child-birth rather than of death.' Gordon's 'one story' all along has been: 'man's search for grace in a fallen world.' In her work nature without grace cannot 'afford man a path to salvation'."

Louise Cowan
"Nature and Grace in Caroline Gordon"
Criticism 1:11-27 (1956)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 248-49

The Women on the Porch (1944) is the last of Miss Gordon's books in her earlier manner and the first of her books in her later manner. The technique is that of the Flaubertian narrator, in which the author enters the minds of many people. A more explicit use of the Joycean stream of consciousness prevails here than in her preceding books; and these explorations into the unconscious possess much lyrical intensity. Many of the details have symbolic value: as in *The Garden of Adonis* and *Green Centuries*, mythology enlarges the meaning of character and incident.

The central drama concerns Catherine Chapman, scion of a decaying family of Tennessee aristocrats, and her husband Jim, a history professor in New York. He is unfaithful to Catherine, inexplicably even to himself, after several years of placid marriage. As in *Green Centuries*, Miss Gordon knows the difficulty of maintaining human relationships in a world in which meaningful values exist precariously. The city, for example, is a kind of queen bee in wild flight which leads all her inhabitants to destruction so long as they remain passive, careless, and uncritical in their personal lives.

Both Catherine and Jim must experience hell and be rescued therefrom before they appreciate each other. New York is hell, an inferno, wherein values that ought to be esteemed are lightly discounted. Jim has lost the dedication that led him to compose a history of Venice; and he gets no sustenance from friends, less even from Edith Ross, the superficial intellectual who becomes his mistress. He realizes his loss only after Catherine has been gone a few weeks; by the time he leaves in pursuit of her, the intensity of his feeling reminds us of Orpheus' plaints for Eurydice in the early scenes of *Orgeo ed Euridice*. In a letter to me Miss Gordon states that when she was writing this novel, 'I was haunted by Gluck's opera... Both by the

music and by his version of the Orpheus story...it was chiefly the form of the opera which impressed me. At any rate, I was conscious of parallels between the form of the opera and that of my novel.'

Jim has never identified himself with any thing, person, or place: 'I do not belong anywhere. There is no place anywhere that is a part of me.' In his relationship with Catherine he had known a steadiness and strength that nothing else has ever given him. The portrait in the Chapman apartment of Catherine caressing a unicorn hints at her unusual nature, her purity (the unicorn is a symbol of chastity), and her reserves of spirit. Jim's reading Dante emphasizes the inferno-like nature of his surroundings and brings him to a new awareness, for he perceives that he has indeed departed from 'the straight way' 'in the middle' of his life. He perceives, moreover, that sexual intimacy gives knowledge of another person impossible to come by in any other way: 'Did the woman who once truly received a man become the repository of his real being and thenceforward, witch-like, carry it with her wherever she went?' He has never before realized the sanctity of marriage as a relationship built on sex but going far beyond it.

Catherine has gone to her family homestead, Swan Quarter, hoping to find, in tradition and proximity to the land, values that will steady her. Since the death of her Uncle Jack in a fall from a horse, Swan Quarter has been the home of three elderly relatives who remind us of the Fates or Norns. As frustrated and barren women, they are the presiding powers at her journey's end. In poignant sequences Catherine's grandmother and Aunt Daphne Passavant relive their tragedies. Catherine Fearson remembers the anguish of the war and her lover's wound; he lost the power of speech and lived apart from others while Catherine, feeling she may have betrayed him, married his brother. Aunt Daphne recalls how her lover had jilted her on her honeymoon night; a friend of hers had arranged this match as a joke, leading the man to think that Daphne had a fortune. The admirable Aunt Willy Lewis has learned to live without delight and refuses love simply because she has become accustomed to doing without it.

Instead of being a refuge for Catherine, Swan Quarter becomes a more disheartening hell than the city had been. Like Eurydice, Catherine will be rescued by a determined mate who has learned her true worth. The atmosphere in these sequences is close to that of Gluck's opera. Most often home and grounds are seen at night or in an autumnal setting. For Catherine, the house contains ghostly presences which seem to prophesy evil and force her into Tom Manigault's company the night after Aunt Willy leaves for the fair to exhibit Red, her fine stallion. Close to the end, Jim comes from New York through a desolate September landscape; he arrives at dusk, feels his passion for Catherine revive, and knows uncontrollable jealousy when Catherine confesses to an affair with Tom.

As the shadows lengthen, like an infuriated Othello he virtually strangles her and is only saved by her insistence that he cease. While Jim's fingers had been about his wife's neck, he had seemed to look into an abyss; and this abyss still yawns before him until his reconciliation with her. Husband and wife prepare for a new life after the terrors of this long night. They decide to leave just as light is about to scatter the darkness and the shadows clouding their souls. Aunt Willy's homecoming with her report of Red's accidental electrocution hastens their departure. In Red's death we [see] that the unassisted life energies are not so strong as they appear to be; their power is limited, and they fail to provide in themselves any durable basis, moral or metaphysical, for existence.

Catherine is not only a Eurydice figure, but like Cassy Outlaw she brings to mind such other forsaken women in legend as Ariadne or Iphigenia; in her patient overcoming of suffering she is like Saint Catherine, her namesake; and she seems also a Persephone figure who has retreated for a season into Hades. Jim brings Catherine out of hell away from the darkness of decaying Swan Quarter; yet in some sense Catherine also rescues him from his own spiritual hell. Her dream of a dead man's spirit for whose safety she is responsible would seem to indicate that she stands in this vital relationship to Jim. As in Gluck's opera, the characters experience both the pangs and the delights, and then the transcendent power, of love. Jim and Catherine now know the truth that their mythological prototypes learned before them, that the claims of love are overpowering and cannot be lightly foregone: 'For Love's every captive humbly rejoices; / None would go free that ever wore his chain!'"

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 30-33

"In *The Women on the Porch*, her concern shifts from objective realism toward subjective hallucination.' The method shifts 'from linear narration toward orbicular scenes folded within scenes; in fact, one almost feels that scene rather than characters 'develop.' In *The Women on the Porch* the social 'decline has been perfected,' and the novel 'radiates from a problem of adultery,' in a 'very special gothic' mode. Chapman 'is the perfect contrast to Aleck Maury' and Gordon is from this point on concerned with 'writers who do not write': these historians and scholars are 'really paralyzed poets' of several types."

Radcliffe Squires

"The Underground Stream: A Note on Caroline Gordon's Fiction"

Southern Review N.S. 7:467-79 (1971)

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 289

"Any novelist who is widely read in modern literature and who is aware of the current state of intellectual thought is bound to be influenced by the current attraction to the introverted, paralyzed hero, a protagonist Miss Gordon scornfully rejects.... In her sixth novel, *The Women on the Porch* (1944), Caroline Gordon was ready to deal with the modern hero, the paralyzed intellectual, not because she had renounced her belief in the traditional hero, but because she had devised a way of having him escape the labyrinths of his tormented mind, reside in the world of flesh and blood, and assume ordinary human responsibilities. Even the paralyzed hero, then, would fit the definition of the traditional hero if he could be made to act in a meaningful way.

On the literary level, *The Women on the Porch* might be read as the story of a marriage that has gone wrong. Catherine Chapman, a thirty-five-year-old woman, suddenly discovers that her husband, Jim Chapman, a brilliant scholar and professor of history, has been having an affair with his young assistant, Edith Ross. Catherine hurriedly packs her suitcase, takes her dog, and leaves New York for Swan Quarter, Tennessee, where her grandmother, her Aunt Daphne, and her cousin Willy live on the land settled by their pioneer forebears. Presently, Catherine, shocked and hurt by her husband's infidelity, allows herself to be drawn into an affair with a cousin, Tom Manigault, who lives on an adjoining farm with his mother Elsie Manigault and a visiting New York architect, Roy Miller.

Back in New York, Jim Chapman comes to realize that he does not love Edith Ross. Without his wife, Catherine, life is futile and meaningless. He takes the train to Swan Quarter; and after an emotional bout with Catherine in which her affair with Tom Manigault is exposed, a reconciliation is effected. The novel ends with Jim Chapman's stooping to replace a slipper on his wife's foot: While 'still holding it in his hand, he bent lower and set his lips on her bare instep.'

In summary, *The Women on the Porch* sounds quite different from the kind of novel it actually is; for it is neither a love story nor a domestic tragedy. The relationship of Catherine and Tom Manigault is treated indirectly. There is only one scene in which the lovers embrace; the beginning, the early stages in the development of the affair, and Tom's dismissal are simply alluded to. The relationship of Catherine and Jim is more fully developed, but it is presented mainly through flashbacks. The reconciliation at Swan Quarter takes place in the space of less than six pages, and there is little psychological or emotional analysis of Catherine or Jim Chapman. The point is not that Miss Gordon has failed to do her job properly, for her interest is less in the social or physical texture of her characters' lives and much more in what these lives can be made to suggest.

If *Women on the Porch* lacks the density of surface texture that novels such as Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* have, it has instead the suggestiveness of James's *Portrait of a Lady*. And the reason, of course, is that, like James, Miss Gordon's interest in her materials, despite a seeming preoccupation with surfaces, is ultimately in the moral implications of her narrative.

Yet the literal level of objects and physical beings and ordinary actions, though a means to an end, is as always, firmly there. As the novel opens, two Tennessee countrymen are seated on the gallery of a run-down country store and gasoline station near Swan Quarter, which is to be the setting of much of the action of the novel. Suddenly they hear the sound of a motor. As they look up toward a distant hill, a speeding car appears. It moves on down the road, appearing and disappearing behind trees and shrubbery; and it finally

stops beside the gasoline pump. The driver, a young woman, leans out and says, 'Fill her up, please.' It is Catherine Chapman, and her voice is 'as dry as the dust that lay thick on her face, her hands, her long, light brown hair.' The dust, like the car with its New York license plate, the dog named Heros--indeed, the flight of Catherine herself--are all symbolic.

What the symbolism points to becomes increasingly clear as the action of the novel moves forward. Swan Quarter, which was built by Catherine's pioneer forebears and to which she is now fleeing in her time of unhappiness, turns out to be an isolated place shut off from the outside road by a thicket of bushes, vines, and saplings. Catherine fights her way through the thicket and arrives, her stockings torn and her legs bleeding from the brambles, on the lawn of the 'gray spreading bulk of the house.' On the porch of the house sit three women. For a moment it seems to Catherine: 'that she had never seen these women before; and then she knew them for her aunt, her grandmother and her cousin and she called out their names and ran toward them.' The three women are like the three fates; and, in running toward them, Catherine in a sense runs to meet her doom; for the three women in their different ways represent living death.

The grandmother is so old and senile that she has to be cared for like a child, but she manages to keep the other women in the house under her control. Toward the close of the novel, she suffers a stroke that separates her completely from the life around her. She recovers physically, but mentally lives during Civil War times; and she addresses her daughter and niece by names of long-since dead relatives. The niece, Catherine Chapman's Aunt Daphne, is a tiresome old maid whose chief interest in life (or death, it might better be called) is in collecting, classifying, and in eating mushrooms. Among her favorite specimens is the one *Trompette du Mort*. Daphne's preoccupation with mycology, as she calls it, aptly symbolizes the life-in-death quality of her life. Catherine's cousin Willy, the third woman on the porch, is a more lively and also a more complex character than Daphne. Like Daphne, Willy is unmarried; but she is not, like Daphne, unmarriageable. But Willy has devoted herself to the care and support of her mother and her aunt. She runs the farm, or tries to, and makes a bad job of it.

Cousin Willy's 'meaning' is crucial to the novel, for it is principally through her that Miss Gordon comments symbolically on Catherine and on her relationship with her husband. Cousin Willy has come into possession of a fine chestnut-colored stallion, the Tennessee waling horse named Red. When she is persuaded partly by Catherine and partly by her tenant and manager, Mr. Shannon, to exhibit Red at the county fair, Red takes first prize; and Willy has dreams of breeding Red and raising colts.... Miss Gordon makes no explicit moral judgment about Willy's ambition, but it is clear that, like the other two women on the porch, Willy is living a kind of underworld existence. She rejects the honorable proposal of marriage offered her by Mr. Shannon; she refuses an offer of \$10,000 for Red, and she decides, instead, to carry him off to another horse show. Red, however, does not survive the first showing at the country fair; and his destruction puts the final cap of meaning on Willy's actions.

The death of Red occurs because of loose boards on his stall at the Fairgrounds and a naked electric light bulb that hangs outside the stall. Willy sees the loose boards; but being a woman who knows less about horses and carpentry than she should, she merely pushes Red's head back through the opening, saying, 'Bad boy...you're a bad boy.' Mr. Shannon, who is taking his orders from Willy, looks about for a tool; and, when he can't find one, he slips the board back in place and hammers it with his fist. 'I'll have that fixed tomorrow,' he says. But tomorrow is too late, for that night, Red pushes through the boards again, chomps just once on the electric light bulb, and is electrocuted.

The horse Red provides the most important symbol in the novel. Shortly after she arrives at Swan Quarter, Catherine discovers Red and insists on riding him. News of Red's death, along with the return of Willy to Swan Quarter, coincides with the reconciliation of Tom and Catherine Chapman. On the level of allegory, Red stands for brute primitive force. In her possession of Red, Willy (the masculine name a shortened form of Wilhelmina) has attempted to fill the role normally filled by a man. Her spinsterhood, her refusal of Mr. Shannon, and her dream of conducting a stud service symbolize Willy's attempt to avoid the woman's role assigned her by fate. Readers who take what is called 'an enlightened view' [Politically Correct view] of the role of women may raise objections to this reading, but Miss Gordon here and in other places makes it plain that woman's proper role is to serve and to follow. When woman attempts to lead and direct, the moral order is disrupted and disaster ensues.

This point is more fully developed in the sections of the novel dealing with the Manigault family. Elsie Manigault, an Eastern woman, married Edward Manigault whose family originally owned the farm that Elsie and her son Tom now own jointly. Edward Manigault left the farm and went East to practice law. Tom was reared in New York, but he returned to Tennessee to live the life of a farmer. He is a kind of throwback to his rural ancestors, a 'natural man,' as someone in the novel calls him. Tom's mother, a 'cultured,' well-cared-for beauty, has followed Tom to Tennessee, mainly because she cannot stand Tom's being independent of her. She tore down the old brick house, which was unpretentious and substantial; and, with the aid of the architect, Roy Miller, she built what appears to be a replica of Mount Vernon but is really a copy of Catherine's ancestral home in Virginia. In Tennessee, strife has developed between Tom and his mother; and they have divided their farm by putting a fence through the middle of it. Tom runs his half, and Mrs. Manigault runs hers; and no question exists about which is the better manager. Elsie Manigault, who raises horses, makes one mistake after another; and her only salvation from disaster is an almost endless supply of money.

Elsie Manigault is one of those rigid, aggressive, vain, cold, and beautiful women who are encountered in other of Miss Gordon's books. Having abdicated the usual duties and responsibilities of womanhood--the caring for a household, the rearing of children--she has no real life or culture of her own, or nothing to which she is deeply committed. All she has is money and the desire to run things. Her son, Tom, being a real man, resists his mother's attempts to dominate him and that naturally displeases her. Behind this attempt at domination, Miss Gordon shows, is an attempt to emasculate her son. What Elsie Manigault really prefers are effeminate men, like the architect Roy Miller, who kisses her hand and praises her figure--without involving her in any meaningful emotional relationship.

Tom, ideally, is the kind of man Catherine ought, under other circumstances, to have married. He is physically powerful, capable of action and of taking Catherine, even of driving Roy Miller off the place when he discovers him involved in a homosexual relationship with a houseboy. But Tom is not Catherine's 'fate.' He is younger than she; and, more important, he has been damaged by his mother. Catherine sees that, despite his masculine assertiveness, Tom is still emotionally tied to his mother... This perception loosens Tom's hold over Catherine and causes her to think, 'I have made a mistake... I have taken the wrong road and it is too late to turn back.' It is not too late, however. The return of Willy and the death of the stallion alter the atmosphere at Swan Quarter. When Catherine is left with only her husband to turn to, the road back to life is clearly marked out for her.

Jim Chapman, who symbolizes Catherine's true fate, is Miss Gordon's chief means of extending the implications of her story into the world outside the novel. He is also the most complex and interesting of these characters. Chapman is a Midwesterner from Mount Hope, Ohio, but his father was a transplanted Vermonter, a doctor who had accumulated enough money, sold his farm and came to town to live out the rest of his days,' Doctor Chapman observed; but a Vermont farmer 'would stay by his land till he died and then have to be carried off feet first.' Jim Chapman speculates, 'was there something in the [Ohio] land itself that repelled human attachment? Perhaps it was too fertile. Roots put down easily are not as enduring as those which make their way through the interstices of rock...' Jim and his problem become, by the end of the novel, the embodiment of a more widespread human one.

Jim Chapman is a historian, an intellectual, a man with no meaningful past of his own. He is drawn to older cultures and to people from them because he senses qualities in them that he himself does not possess. They are people with a strong sense of their own identity, a knowledge of the past--particularly of their own ancestors--a feeling of kinship with their families, and a love of their own particular spot of earth. Chapman himself realizes his deficiencies: 'The truth is that I have no character... I have no prejudice...no instincts, no convictions that are readily translatable into action.' And, when he encounters the face of someone who has the qualities that he lacks, a face 'alert, disciplined, histrionic rather than contemplative,' he wants to 'shatter' it.

Though a historian, Jim Chapman is also something of a poet. At least, he has a poet's feeling for language, and he gives expression to what are by now rather commonplace views of the general human condition. For example, as he is walking about New York, Chapman pauses and looks up at the 'great

building whose lighted windows jeweled the dark': 'All over the city, people in their cubicles of stone or concrete or steel, lay as tight against one another as bees to their cells of wax, and even beyond the confines of the island the great, crowded ramparts flung themselves on and on until if one traveled far enough one might come to a building whose four walls housed one man and his wife and children.' He implicitly compares the lives of people living in cramped apartments to 'Bees, in their solitary cells, [who] do not control their own destinies' and then he is moved to a rhapsody of despair and decay....

Jim Chapman is a poet of the *Waste Land* school, and Miss Gordon shows that his vision is to some extent an accurate reflection of a moral confusion implicit in the lives of some of these characters, particularly in Jim himself. Indeed, Jim must be seen, in part at least, as responsible for the waste land in which he lives. He is incapable of acting [like J. Alfred Prufrock]; he can only feel and analyze his predicament; he cannot struggle against it. There are times, we are told, 'when in an illusion that was part dream, part waking he seemed to be suspended precariously over an immense pit. He half knew what lurked in its depths, but his concern was not with avoiding the descent; he rallied his febrile energies in order that he might experience the fall. His detachment from the scene was the ultimate horror.'

This realization takes place on the train while he is traveling from New York to Swan Quarter to see Catherine. During the trip, Chapman encounters two young men, both Southerners, men of action. One young man is apparently the editor of a large-circulation magazine; the other is an air force officer; both of them, with their vitality, their self-assurance, and their ability to act, make Chapman acutely aware of his own deficiencies. It is the soldier in particular that he envies. 'I wish I was one of them,' he thinks, 'for it is something, in this life, for a man to know where he is going, even if the appointment is with the minotaur.'

The scene that most forcefully drives home to the reader, if not to Chapman, the terrible nature of his failure occurs in the wood near Swan Quarter. He and Catherine have confronted each other; and Catherine, rather defiantly, has blurted out the fact of her infidelity. In his fury, produced not by outraged principles or by jealousy [debatable] but by the inhuman, almost mechanical desire to see suffering in Catherine's eyes, Jim chokes her. She fights her way free. Jim, somewhat stunned and shaken, leaves the house and enters the woods. There he flings himself down beside a spring. As he lies there, he relives the recent past and longingly contemplates a suicide that he is too cowardly to commit. He stands then as though 'to go back.' 'Back to what?' he says; and, as he does so, a shadow detaches itself from the foliage and moves into the light. In a moment, Chapman sees a man's figure with a pack on his back, and he then recognizes him as a pioneer forebear of Catherine's who had settled this part of the country. He is the son of Irish John Lewis to whom the land on which he stands was deeded after the Revolutionary War.

This remarkably effective scene--particularly since it ought not to work at all--deserves a detailed examination. The best way to appreciate what Miss Gordon does is to consider the scene in the light of what is needed at this point in the novel. This episode is to be the turning point in Jim's life or, to use Miss Gordon's term, the peripety (actually, the change in Jim's fortune began earlier on the train); and, after this scene, Chapman is to be aware of the extent of his failure and is to return to his wife. What is needed is a dramatic confrontation that will precipitate the change but one which will grow out of and be consistent with the setting, with the scenes that have preceded it, and with Jim's character. Miss Gordon's choice is seriously limited by her setting, for what could happen at Swan Quarter that could lift the veil from Chapman's eyes? There is the emotional bout with Catherine and his flight to the woods, but what could possibly happen there that would bring him to the brink of self-knowledge?

The obvious solution would be an interior monologue in which Jim is made to sort through past experience and find the proper answer, but that is not Miss Gordon's method. She wants the recognition to grow out of a real encounter; the struggle must be externalized. And her solution is as ingenious as it is effective: she has Jim encounter a figure from the past, an ancestor of his wife's; and, though this figure may be conjured up by Jim's disordered brain (Miss Gordon does not clear up the mystery; indeed she is not concerned about that), it has nevertheless, in the fictional sense, a literal reality. John Lewis' son is brought before our eyes, a silent man in buckskin who builds a fire and cooks the bloody tongue of a buffalo. Then, after he has been seen, Miss Gordon has him rest beside his fire while Chapman harangues him: 'The land is cursed, it is an old land, ruled by a goddess whose limbs were weary with turning before Ireland rose from the sea. An ancient goddess whom men have awakened from an evil dream...'

As Chapman speaks, the shadowy figure regards him with a mocking eye.... [The] meaning of this scene is suggested by the gestures of the man from the pioneer past. He lays down the morsel of flesh that he has been eating, takes up his pack and rifle, and moves toward the stream. For his kind--the man of action, principle, and courage, whether of the present or the past--the type of warning uttered by Chapman is without meaning. For Chapman's 'Waste Land' vision is simply the mirror image of his own inner life. He mistakes his personal dilemma for a general human one.

Chapman recovers from his paralysis, however. After his encounter in the woods with the spirit of John Lewis, he stumbles back to the house; and, after a series of small gestures, he and Catherine are reconciled. Then he kneels and kisses the instep of Catherine's foot. This gesture is that of a repentant husband, but it is also Miss Gordon's way of dramatizing the fact that Jim Chapman has reached 'out to a world outside himself--that world which, from time immemorial has been personified in the feminine consciousness. In resuming his responsibilities as his wife's husband, he has acted in a meaningful and, for him, a heroic way.

Though Jim Chapman is the technical hero of the novel, Catherine is closer to the paradigm. She is the spiritual as well as the lineal heir of John Lewis. She has the principles in this family, and she is the one who first acts on principle. She leaves her husband when she discovers that he has been unfaithful to her. She does enter into a love affair with another man; but, when she realizes what life with that man would be like, she turns him away. And, at the end of the novel, she makes it possible for her husband to return to her. She greets him on the steps of the house at Swan Quarter and prepares for him a symbolic cup. The cup contains coffee rather than wine, but it serves the purpose. She is ready to resume her domestic duties. If it is a man's duty to act and to lead, it is a wife's to respond and follow. It is this principle that lies behind Catherine's conduct toward the close of the novel. Had she chosen Tom Manigault rather than her husband, she would have abandoned the high road for the moral wilderness; and, though this wilderness might have been delightful for a time, Catherine would eventually have lost her way without a compass to guide her and would have become another of the strange women on the porch.

The Women on the Porch is an impressive performance and deserves to be better known to students of American fiction. In the history of Caroline Gordon's development as a novelist, it is of great importance; for it marks a new departure in her fiction. In her earlier work...the search for a hero confined her largely to the past, and in *The Garden of Adonis*, her one novel set completely in the contemporary world [the references in the novel to Chance Llewellyn still farming would seem to date the action as in the 1920s], she depends heavily upon her hero's connections to the premodern world. Thus, it could be said that Miss Gordon has always avoided a confrontation with the modern myth--until *Women on the Porch*. In this novel, she meets the myth head-on. True, in her use of John Lewis, she depends again on history; but the main issue of the novel is worked out in the actions of Jim Chapman as he moves from a paralyzed hero to a man of action. Miss Gordon's strategy is to grant the reality of the 'Waste Land' world but to show that it is primarily a reflection of an inner rather than an outer world.

There are, of course, arguments that can be brought against this position--such as the irreducible reality of the 'Waste Land' to the men who see the world in this way; but that is an abyss into which Miss Gordon refuses to look very intently. For, as she might argue, once the reality of this subjective vision is admitted, the paralysis must also be accepted. Miss Gordon's strategy, furthermore, is to give several perspectives on the 'Waste Land' world. We see that world through the eyes of Chapman but we also see Jim Chapman from outside, and as a result see how much of that world is the product of his background and his sensibility. Also, we see another world, that of Swan Quarter, which might have been presented as a 'Waste Land' but is not. Indeed, Miss Gordon suggests through symbolic imagery that the three women on the porch and the subterranean world that they inhabit is as old as Western civilization itself. We are not to think of Swan Quarter as the 'decadent South' nor even as decadent twentieth-century civilization. It is, rather, another instance of the kind of underworld that has existed in all times and all places where there has been a like failure of will.

The experience of Catherine at Swan Quarter, her early involvement with the life there, her affair with Tom Manigault, the Manigault establishment with a woman in possession of the land and men relegated to positions of inferiority and subservience to women--all of these perversions of the natural order act as a

backdrop for Catherine's final act: the rejection of this world. Catherine's actions and the final perspective we get of the life-in-death world of Swan Quarter cast a strong light on the 'Waste Land' world of Jim Chapman. Moreover, Chapman's experience is not unique in literary history. There have been other men in other times and other places faced with similar problems. The crucial difference has been in the way men have responded.

Early in the novel Jim Chapman thinks of a student he had once helped translate Dante, and he quotes to himself the lines at the beginning of the 'Inferno': 'In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.... I lost the true way...' These lines (a foreshadowing of the later scene in which Jim Chapman encounters John Lewis) do more than tell us that Jim Chapman is living in a kind of hell, though that is certainly part of their function. They tell us, too, the reason for Jim's having lost his way: he has nothing to guide him through the dark woods, nothing but his own unaided intellect. This reference to Dante also indicates that the kind of problem confronting Jim Chapman was also faced by another intellectual in another age. Dante, to be sure, found the 'true way,' and Jim does not. He does at least find his way out of the woods of Swan Quarter and reestablishes his marriage with Catherine, but in a sense he still is still wandering about the mouth of hell.

The problems raised in *Women on the Porch* and the solution alluded to by the reference to the *Divine Comedy* are a foreshadowing of the direction that Miss Gordon's fiction and her own life were in the near future to take."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 68-78

"Prompted at least in part by her desire to reach a larger audience, Gordon drew increasingly in the three novels written after *Green Centuries* (1941) on the materials of her own life, even modeling certain characters after herself, her husband, or their friends. This quality of the *roman a clef* marks *The Women on the Porch* and, more notably, *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*. In some instances, when the books were published, they were read as a kind of highly crafted gossip.

That these years were difficult ones for the Tates may well have invited such speculation: in January, 1946, Gordon and Tate divorced, to remarry a few months later, in April.... In each of the three novels, the central male character is an artist who can no longer write: in *The Women on the Porch*, he is Jim Chapman, now a history professor. In *The Strange Children*, he is Stephen Lewis, a poet and intellectual with a great knowledge of southern history. And in *The Malefactors*, poet Tom Claiborne is protagonist. The narration is restricted entirely to Tom's eyes, so that first his inability to write, then his return to creativity become the overriding concerns....

Critical emphasis on point of view in the novels is appropriate; for one of the main purposes of these works is to make the reader perceive reality as these major characters do, to disclose the limitations of their views as well as to show the recovery of spiritual meaning through corrected vision. For the reader, then, and for the main characters, each novel climaxes in revelation. In *The Women on the Porch*, Jim Chapman's vision of his wife's pioneer forebear attests to his waking from a deluding system of values.... For all three male protagonists, the difficulty in producing sound art is paralleled by difficulties in their marriages. A matrix for regeneration, symbolically uniting the male and female principles of reason and intuition, marriage--like art--is a life's work, but one consecrated by a vow.

The climactic reunion of husband and wife, as plot and as metaphor, discloses the protagonists' new wisdom. Growing out of egocentricity and an unhealthy, though fashionable, schism between feeling and thought [T. S. Eliot's concept, "dissociation of sensibility"], the central female and male characters mature when they realize that the bond between them promises love and a purpose to life, not dreary duty or entrapment. Thus, these couples recognize the beauty and significance of the mundane and transcend this world, not by ignoring it or seeking escape, but by seeing in the objects and the experiences of this physical existence the possibilities of spiritual order. Ultimately, each individual is able to appreciate a larger mystery, to feel love for others, and to participate in a community.

In [*The Women on the Porch*] she focuses on modern individuals who marshal the resources of the intellect and the psyche in order to overcome the monsters within the self, then, having triumphed, seek to love and guide others. These modern protagonists--most of whom resemble Allen Tate or Hart Crane--are artist figures whose fictive lives dramatize on the broadest scale an entire society's spiritual stagnation and its possible recovery.... With...conscious use of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, joined by the deliberate allusions to Dante, *The Women on the Porch* is structured as a descent into and a return from hell. While Jim rescues his wife from the grotesque climate of Swan Quarter, she rescues him from the intellectual hell in which he has trapped himself.

Since the characters have created their own hells, they must recognize their predicaments before they can mutually resolve to cherish relationship and return to an active life. Throughout the novel, subconscious forces urge each character to confront the hell he or she has mistakenly chosen. These glimpses of chaos--through Gothic 'presences,' as well as dreams and exaggerated perceptions--guide the characters in choosing the proper way back.... Catherine's journey to Swan Quarter is, from the first, ominously similar to a descent into a hellish world, where grotesque characters obsessed by their failures in love move and speak, and where ghastly presences of the past stir memories of unsatisfied longings....

Returning to the home where the women--without men--sit on the porch, peculiar and estranged in their barren self-sufficiency, Catherine realizes the cost of life without true relationship between the sexes, realizes also the impossibility of escaping into the past, and eventually chooses to return to her husband. Just as Catherine comes to understand her role in her marriage, so Jim learns his responsibilities as husband. The subplots illuminate the choices each must make: Catherine does not wish to be like her aunt Willy, whose personality is so stunted that she cannot give herself in love to a man; not like her cousin Daphne, a grotesque character who spends her days collecting mushrooms and savoring the hurt inflicted upon her by the man who abandoned her on their wedding night; nor like the grandmother old Catherine, whose senility has trapped her in the past. Finally, Catherine must realize that her tryst with Tom Manigault, who becomes her lover while she is at Swan Quarter, contains no real possibility for fulfillment.

So, too, Jim eventually perceives that his relationship with Edith Ross is an adulterous, false one and that his marriage is a bond to be honored. In an analogous search for meaning in his work, Jim finds that the literature he teaches requires more than intelligence; it demands a felt response to the archetypal truths it embodies. By the conclusion, Jim, as an intellectual who also perceives a spiritual reality, is able to evaluate past institutions and traditions--unlike Tom, a farmer and a man chained to an inadequate tradition of agrarian values [misleading on agrarianism, a consistently positive value system in Gordon] in much the same way that he is bound by his mother's wishes....

Without a guide, Catherine is moving into some kind of inferno, but she does not comprehend where she is. Her first sight of her cousin, aunt, and grandmother is a hallucinatory omen of death: 'The faces, the immobile bodies swam in western light. For a moment it seemed to her that she had never seen these women before'.... This quality of hallucination marks many of Catherine's ruminations and observations because she does not willingly confront her situation. Beginning in the first chapter as she travels to Swan Quarter, the repressed memories of her husband's note to his mistress thrust themselves into her conscious thoughts. However, so intense is her desire to stifle these recollections that only fragments rise into her consciousness. Not until Chapter 3, when she is settled in at Swan Quarter, does the reader learn in detail what has prompted her flight.

Although the betrayal that Catherine feels prevents her from dealing with her emotions towards her husband, in her dreams there are premonitions of her eventual reconciliation with him. Stopped overnight at a hotel on the road to Tennessee, she dreamed of being buried alive--a sign, as yet unrecognized by her, of her mistake in leaving Jim. Later, at Swan Quarter during the time she is deliberating whether to return to Jim, Catherine has a 'grisly dream'.... In this inversion of the Eurydice myth, Catherine is responsible for her husband's salvation. She tries to repress such thoughts, though she admits to herself that she is running a risk: 'If a great fissure came in the center of your being, you might turn your vision inward' so that 'people in the outer world would become ghostly.' On this night, she telephones Tom, then sneaks out of the house to meet him. Waiting for her lover, alone out in the foggy night, she hears a car coming and panics, expecting to be raped by a carload of drunken men. To her relief, the driver is Tom.

Not long after that frightening episode, however, she senses that a force has been trying to warn her of some evil. Outside in the yard, she muses that the house has always been haunted, recalling how as a child she had often felt presences who disturbed her play: 'The presences had been then only companions whom one could not conveniently address. After she became a woman they had seemed at times to menace or at least to prophesy evil. Four nights ago their voices had driven her out of the house, into the fog, into the arms, she recalled, with a secret smile, of her lover.'

Despite these warnings against her liaison with Tom, Catherine continues to resist her duty to her husband, even refusing to act on the revelation that she can never truly love Tom. Again out in the woods with her lover, Catherine tells him she is planning to go to Reno for a divorce. Yet by the end of the chapter, it is clear that her relationship with Tom can never be a mature one. Filled with images of death--the mushroom *Trompette du Mort*, for example--and references to Catherine's new-felt detachment from Tom--such as her daydream of being alone on a beach--the chapter ends with an insight into Tom's obsession with his mother....

The climax comes after Tom has left her there in the woods. Listening, she notices that 'the hush was oppressive, as if some power somewhere had abruptly stilled all sounds. I have made a mistake, she thought, I have taken the wrong road and it is too late to turn back. Am I lost? She trembled. It seemed to her that she was alone in the woods and the glittering light had a voice...and the air all around was quivering with the wild, high-pitched, despairing cry that brought her to her feet and sent her racing towards the house.' What the careful reader understood early in the novel Catherine grasps incompletely even now. She, like Dante, has lost her way in a dark wood in her middle years (she is thirty-five, we learn), but unlike the poet, she has not fully realized that she is in an inferno--one of her own making.

Similarly, her husband Jim perceives only gradually how to correct her error. A man without faith or fidelity, he betrays commitments to his wife and his work. Living in a false community with those who share his condition, Jim Chapman first must see the decadence and death-in-life that surrounds him before he can regain his integrity. Appropriately, Jim's literal movement in the book is from the city to the country and, then by implication, back to the city. Man's physical structure and social construction, the city is the image of a rational, egocentric system, now the locus of meaninglessness.

Jim's present companions include members of his department at the university, among whom is his mistress Edith Ross, and several writers, most of them friends from years ago when they were all making their way in the literary world. Paradoxically, this is a community where words are cheap: 'They have grown light and anybody can pick them up.' Only late in the novel does Jim realize that a man's *word* means nothing when his *words* have lost their potency. Recalling an anecdote about a message to the eighteenth-century governor Blount, which arrived 'much stained' with the blood of the carrier, Jim asserts that language should be as valuable as life itself.

In modern American fiction, William Van O'Connor remarks, the city is not 'a symbol of civilization, and civilization is not longer an expression of natural law.' In *The Women on the Porch* that certainly is the case: the city is a hell. Unsurprisingly enough, Jim's awakening to that horrible insight is due in part to a new understanding of Dante, whose works he teaches. An encounter in a restaurant with a student who is studying Dante with Jim is the context for several warnings that the scholar has lost his way. The eager student reads aloud to Jim lines from Canto 8... 'And as we ran on that dead swamp, the slime / rose before me, and from it a voice cried: / "Who are you that come here before your time?" Filippo Argenti, one of the Wrathful, asks the question in *The Inferno*, and Dante responds, 'If I come, I do not remain'; then he righteously curses the damned one. Chapman, however, is leading the morbid and damned existence. The manner in which the first lines of the poem haunt him after a cursory reading is a sign that he is just beginning to understand his plight.

There is, moreover, some indication of Jim's major error in the allusion to the fifteenth canto, which the student says he would like to hear Chapman read. Set in circle seven, round three of *The Inferno*, Canto 15 describes Dante's sorrowful meeting with Ser Brunetto is committed to this circle of hell for his crimes against Nature, and although Jim cannot literally be accused of sodomy, as Dante uses the term, he is

among those writers who prostitute their God-given gifts and idly spend their powers in illicit and debasing pursuits.

Thinking that he can escape the student and his own uncomfortable thoughts, Jim leaves the restaurant, where the noise rises 'as suddenly as shrieks from Dante's damned,' and hails a cab. However, in traveling towards Chapman's destination, the cab passes the destroyer *Normandie*, anchored in the river. We are hereby reminded that the world is as chaotic and as menaced by self-serving, greedy and aggressive powers as in Dante's day. Jim's mind turns to Europe: it is September, 1940; France has already fallen, and 'The Germans are dropping bombs on Buckingham Palace.' All too aware of this hellish world, Jim can only focus on his own impotence to alter it. Yet his ruminations subconsciously affect his behavior: he decides not to visit Edith and orders the cab driver to his apartment.

A man who has compared himself to Count Dracula--with a box full of keepsakes from his family home, which was long since sold--Jim has 'never felt at home but once' when, before his marriage, he lived on Eighth Avenue and was busy writing, truly creating. One night as he wanders about the city, we see some of the causes of his present restlessness and estrangement. The city constrains its inhabitants, deforming human growth. Occasionally, Jim sees through these deformities to the uglier values of the men who have created this condition. Thus, his mind leaps from the bizarre sights in his environment to memories of his affair with Edith....

Seduce, meaning literally 'to lead aside,' well describes the courses Jim and others in his world have taken, for they have turned away from significant relationships and work. The extent of Jim's misdirection is illuminated by his encounter with the bum who interrupts his introspection. In spite of the repellent smell of the disinfectant on the bum's clothes, Jim invites the man to accompany him to a bar, where he buys him a drink and dinner. While the man is eating, Chapman continues to ponder what he should do about Edith and Catherine. In an internal debate between two imagined voices, one of which articulates his wife's position, Jim is surprised to realize that he does not intend to marry Edith.

Feeling some responsibility to make conversation, Chapman abruptly turns to the bum, who, in the course of their talk, recites a Latin passage on the snares of Venus to show his learning. In response, Jim quotes the refrain from the *Pervigilium Veneris*... Jim has now become very aware, as he tells the bum who cannot decipher Jim's words, that he has never adequately understood the Latin himself. 'Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make love'--the refrain of the *Pervigilium Veneris*--gives hope that Jim will return to his wife and to truly worthwhile work. What began as disturbed and erratic thought processes and a chance meeting with a grotesque character have led to insight. But Jim's problems are still unsolved. Leaving the bum, he takes a cab for home. Depressed, however, by morose thoughts about marriage, he sends the cab driver back uptown.... Tate's translation of *Pervigilium Veneris* was completed in 1943. The citation in *The Waste Land* [Eliot, 1922] of lines from this medieval Latin poem may have brought it to the attention of the literary world. Caroline Gordon's allusion to the poem recalls the voice of *The Waste Land* poet and links Jim Chapman as a man of letters with Tate who was working on his translation while she was writing *The Women on the Porch*....

In a bar, Jim encounters Bob Upchurch, a former poet who is currently lecturing at universities and working on literary magazines, and Ed Ware, a newspaperman who would 'have been better off if he's stayed a leg-man.' Jim has already had a few drinks, so that when he meets his friends, 'He had the impression that he was standing at a little distance from the table and yet his senses registered with unusual precision all that went on.' This 'new, critical self,' in a detachment exaggerated by drunkenness, notices how his friends have aged and how they have compromised their skills as writers for money. Memories of Hart Crane's death suggest from what ailment these writers suffer: 'Crane, a stubble-haired, pop-eyed fellow, who seemed to live only for poetry and had ended his life when it failed him, had had a jerky, nervous voice and was an insufferable egotist.' Jim has similar thoughts about Bob, whose poetry was influenced by Crane.

The blasphemous belief in poetry, as well as an egotism that precluded love of others, would place such poets in one of the circles of hell. Jim complains that he has been unable to write but he fails to extend his criticism to himself... Ed Ware translates... 'He has lost his Muse by being silent... Apollo no longer regards

him.' This further echo of the *Pervigilium Veneris* links Jim's writing troubles with his failure to love and nurture his wife. Though he now perceives how deep his love for Catherine is, he does not know how to get her back.

Gradually Jim persuades himself that he is on the brink of an abyss. Leaving his friends, he stands alone out in the night. While drunk, Jim is receptive to an insight he might not have permitted himself if sober. He views the inhabitants of the city as drones in a hive, dwelling in 'their solitary cells' and not controlling 'their own destinies.' His metaphor contains a forceful truth, and his rhetoric is nearly overwhelming: 'And the queen?'.... The city represents man's power to control and shape his world; however, instead of bringing man satisfactory order and encouraging the best in human effort, it creates a deadly pandemonium of souls.... Although his drunkenness may explain the uninhibited excesses of his language, it does not detract from the truth of his observation, but emphasizes his usual resistance to the subconscious.

Yet Jim needs to attend to his intuitions, for--Caroline Gordon would agree with Jung--subconscious activity not only compensates for the individual's condition but also offers some cure. A dream that he remembers on his trip to Swan Quarter presents one such prognosis and remedy. After a strange fantasy about a young soldier whom he meets on the train, Jim concludes: 'I am going crazy'.... If the insanity is a personal disorder, it is also the disease of an age, as Jim's evaluation of his literary friends and as the causes of the Second World War suggest. In the universal search for value, the few who can find a worthy course of action become heroes; those who cannot act or who act only for selfish purposes are less than men....

[LeRoy] Miller serves in the novel as another failed artist, one whose difficulty in creating is compounded by his homosexuality. In Caroline Gordon's view, Roy's sexual preference is unnatural, and he is associated with Ser Brunetto Latino, who has been condemned to the ring of the sodomites. Reinforcing the imagery of the novel, Catherine Chapman sees Roy as a product of the city.... Not only the creature but, in a sense, the creator of the city, Roy brings the estrangement and useless activity of the city dwellers to the country. Unlike Roy, who seems unable to motivate himself to work and is finally expelled from Big Pond because he seduces the black houseboy, Jim begins to seek significant action to remedy his stagnation and despair. He is regretfully aware that he is too old to join in actual battle.... He catches a train to Tennessee, deciding not to notify Catherine of his arrival until the next morning....

Jim's 'minotaur' is less tangible than enemy soldiers. As his dream of swallowing the globe suggests, the battle is within. He must fight against those internalized values that make him neglect his soul for the unworthy pursuit of pleasure and commercial success. On the train he meets a young man, Edmund Napier, and becomes engaged in a conversation that again stirs up a swarm of irritating thoughts. Jim is so exasperated at the young man's self-satisfaction that he is outrightly rude to him. At one point he briefly envisions Napier stepping... 'into a plane'... In this grotesque vision, the technological products of civilization bombard the earth from the disemboweled young man who has 'swallowed' so much of his country's ideas and conventions. Significantly, Jim is becoming increasingly critical of an age that assigns too little value to words and undue worth to selfish consumption of goods. As history professor, he is well equipped to measure the age against others and to call it to task....

Jim is more critical of himself, as well. Only recently has he thought of his affair as adultery, instead of 'a diversion, an excursion that anybody might be permitted to make.' Jim can now pinpoint the moment that propelled him on his infernal journey; it was the night he became jealous of Catherine, sensing that she could have taken as her lover the painter Koenig, who had been doing her portrait. His suspicions cause him to perceive her as someone completely unknown: 'The woman with whom he had been in love, to whom he had been married for years, had disappeared, leaving a stranger in her place. He had regarded the stranger with aversion and had set out to win another woman.'

Without analyzing his fear that Catherine's feelings towards him could change, that she could prefer another man, Jim refuses the responsibilities of his marriage. He understands the seriousness of that action now in his acute depression, perceiving himself as 'suspended precariously over an immense pit.' When a marriage is endangered, the individuals whose souls have been committed to that union are menaced too. Jim 'strove to realize that he was falling, and could not. She was gone and since then he had been absent from himself. Was the sexual act surrounded with mystery because it was, in essence, magical? Did the

woman who once truly received a man become the repository of his real being and thenceforward, witchlike, carry it with her wherever she went?' Previously insisting that he was a scholar, not a gentleman, Jim has deliberately divorced his intellectual powers from his emotional and moral self. His impulsive trip to Swan Quarter begins his movement towards psychic reintegration as well as literal reconciliation with his wife. The rebirth that his dream of the continents has prefigured is at hand.

In the country, then, Jim shows himself to be a caring husband whose humility and respect for Catherine indicate his effort to reconcile spirit and mind. Moreover, in realizing what mysterious forces operate within a marriage and within the human soul, Jim taps psychic powers that move him to prophesy, to judge his age and its myths, and to call for love and fresh vision. Yet violence must precede the revelation, for Catherine, in spite of her intuitions and guilty conscience, is stubbornly resistant to reconciliation.

When Jim arrives at the Carthage station near Swan Quarter, he sees Catherine waiting for him and 'she seemed to him the embodiment of all that was desirable.' This renewed sexual passion signifies Jim's strong urge to be reunited with his wife, but any talk of that is thwarted by Catherine's plans to visit the Manigaults on the way back from the train station. Finally when the estranged couple do arrive at Swan Quarter and Jim learns that Catherine intends for him to sleep in a separate bedroom, he humbly asks her, 'Aren't you ever going to forgive me?' His wife rather spitefully confesses that she has been living with Tom Manigault for three weeks, and she challenges her husband with 'Do you want me back now?' Jim loses control. He tries to strangle her. 'He had taken hold of her because he wanted only one thing, not to be alone in the abyss into which her words had plunged him.' Only when her frantic hands tearing at his wrists make him conscious of his action can he break himself out of his trancelike violence.

The near murder is not merely a sign of Jim's strong jealousy; it testifies to his desperation when he sees Catherine abandoning him. Important here is the image of the abyss, prevalent throughout the novel as metaphor for Jim's dangerous psychic condition. Earlier Catherine had intuited that a person with a 'broken heart' risked succumbing to a narcissistic self-preoccupation during which other people became like ghosts. By her husband's action, she is nearly plunged into the next world, but the violence of Jim's behavior pulls her out of her ghastly self-absorption. Instead of remaining with Catherine, however, the reader follows Jim outside where he roams alone through 'the deep woods' all night lone.

Jim's wanderings in the woods mark the real resolution of his psychological crisis, just as Dante's meanderings eventually lead him to Virgil, then Beatrice. In this scene Gordon clearly intends no simple contrast between the city and the country as metaphoric homes for the human psyche. Jim himself is his own hell, to borrow a Miltonic formulation. His values and his perceptions determine the estrangement he feels, or they make communion possible. One of the 'living dead' like Count Dracula and an estranged wanderer like Cain, Jim has never felt at home in any place because he was searching for the wrong kind of refuge; and in his aimlessness, he unfortunately has preyed on others.

Having nearly killed his wife, Jim flees from the house, insisting, 'I do not belong anywhere. There is no place anywhere that is a part of me.' Stopping to rest beside a spring, a symbol in Gordon's work of regenerative possibilities, Jim recalls the horror of the last hour, 'like a man who, snatched back from a precipice, collapses on the ground for a moment, then tip-toes back and peers over the edge, fathoming the depths of the abyss in order to convince himself that he is safe.' As night draws on, he considers, then rejects suicide, but his self-deception is interrupted by revelatory hallucination. Jim thinks he sees on the opposite bank a man wearing a pack. Surmising this vision to be the image of Irish John Lewis' son, Catherine's forebear who settled the land, Jim addresses him, 'I would advise you not to settle.... The land is cursed. It is an old land, ruled by a goddess whose limbs were weary with turning before ever Ireland rose from the sea. An ancient goddess whom men have wakened from an evil dream.'

In the furor of prophecy Jim warns of a homelessness of the spirit: 'It is No Man's Land.... That is the enchantment. The land will turn brittle and fall away from under your children's feet, they will have no fixed habitation, will hold no one spot dearer than another, will roam as savage as the buffalo that now flees your arquebus.' But this pioneer 'will not listen.' Assuming gigantic stature, the figure--who represents all American pioneers--advances across the stream to find his land. Jim stumbles into some dank spot between two poplars and sleeps.

Jim's prophetic vision corrects the past for its pursuit of a delusory dream, the dream of Caroline Gordon defined at greater length in *Green Centuries*, published three years before *The Women on the Porch*. Man cannot re-create Eden either in the wilderness or in the city. He reclaims his spiritual birthright not merely by cultivating his own plot of land or by drudging away in his little cell. He must seek relationship with others and, together, make a pilgrimage through time.

The mundane but highly important gestures of relationship between Jim and Catherine conclude the novel. Joining his wife in making a pot of coffee, Jim perceives that their life is imbued with a significance that makes even small actions meaningful.... Tom Manigault's affair with Catherine does not promise such an enduring commitment, something Catherine has finally acknowledged. We learn that Tom has visited Catherine during the night 'to find out what was going on' between the husband and wife. Catherine told him nothing--excluding him now from her life with Jim.

At this point in the narrative, Catherine's aunt Willy returns home to report that her stallion Red, which she had been showing at the fair, has been accidentally electrocuted in his stall. Willy, who had turned down the trainer Mr. Shannon's marriage proposal earlier, is now pathetically bereft of hopes for anything but a solitary, unfulfilled life. Scared of intimacy, Willy reacts to Quent Shannon's proposal as she did to the freak show at the fair--where the sight of the man and woman married in a block of ice repelled her. Ironically, in refusing relationship, Willy has condemned herself to a cold and confining solipsism; thus, her failure in love is a poignant foil to Jim and Catherine's just salvaged intimacy.

Outside in the yard a snake still moves, Caroline Gordon notes, suggesting that temptation and selfish impulses have not been eradicated from the world. However, Jim's gesture--kissing his wife's bare instep--acknowledges his new-felt love and sense of duty towards her. His authority and caring, now revitalized, allow him to speak for both of them: 'Come,' he said and heard all the echoes stir in the sleeping house. 'We will bury him [the stallion], as soon as it's light. Then we must go.' They will return to the city, where--it is implied--they will work together.

'You must remember it's a circle we're traversing--not necessarily vicious.' So Jim Chapman once remarked to Aunt Willy... The circles are...metaphorically the completed patterns of their lives--variously felicitous or unfortunate. The image of the circle suggests again the influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* on the novel: for some, the circles are rounds in hell, self-created infernos. Others escape--transforming those closed spheres of solipsism into symbols of the eternal, into the spiraling steps towards greater spiritual reality."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 96-118

"The possibility for renewal was presented less ambiguously in the works that followed *Green Centuries*. With the publication of *The Women on the Porch* (1944), Gordon's work clearly entered a new stage, which had been foreshadowed by *Green Centuries* and which would last until her Catholic conversion in 1947. In the early 1940s, with the world locked in war, Gordon (like her husband Allen Tate) began to search for a system of order to transcend the dark nature of life. This quest is reflected in her one novel and several stories from this period.

In theme and focus, these new works resemble those coming before, with Gordon still exploring man's painful fate as seeker of order in a forbidding world. Once again she works with the tensions of this quest, particularly those evolving from the realization that personal heroics are in the end futile. But there is a crucial difference between these and the earlier works: where the early works ended with the triumph of chaos and confusion, the ones from the 1940s conclude with disorder being brought into check.

Out of the depths of despair, Gordon's characters reach an understanding that there is a larger tradition, one which transcends personal heroics and which can bring order and unity into their lives. At this point in her career, Gordon appeared uncertain about the nature of this tradition, and seemed to waver between two alternatives, Christian and classical. Probably because of this uncertainty, coupled with the tentative nature

of her faith in the possibility of achieving order, these moments of reconciliation are presented with no trace of dogmatism. We find, rather, at the end of these works, only a sense that some kind of order and sanctity is available to man, and that it lies waiting to be discovered out there in the whirling confusion of life.

The Women on the Porch, although loosely structured along the lines of the Orpheus-Eurydice myth, suggests that this sanctity lies in the Christian heritage. As Tate did in *Seasons of the Soul* which was written at about the same time, Gordon here strips away man's unsatisfactory pursuits at achieving happiness until all that is left is the sanctity of Christian faith. Again like Tate in *Seasons*, Gordon does not conclude with a victorious Christian vision, but merely suggests, even more tentatively and ambiguously than Tate, that such faith is possible and viable.

Although the point of view shifts among a number of characters, thus giving us fairly full portraits of many of them, the focus of the novel is on Catherine Chapman and her husband Jim. The novel opens as Catherine flees New York City to her ancestral home, Swan Quarter, a farm in Tennessee. Catherine has discovered that Chapman, a history professor, has become involved with one of his young female assistants. Catherine's flight is an impulsive rejection of her husband; she also hopes to discover how to reorder her now shattered life.

Swan Quarter, it turns out, is an appropriate place for Catherine to reassess her life. There live her grandmother, aunt, and niece (the 'women on the porch'), all of whom in one way or another have retreated from involvement in life. Eventually Catherine take her own lover, Tom Manigault (a neighbor), and decides to marry him after she obtains a divorce from Chapman. Meanwhile, Chapman realizes that his affair is empty and meaningless, and heads for Swan Quarter to seek a reconciliation with Catherine. When Catherine tells him about her affair with Tom, he is so shaken with rage that he strangles her; only Catherine's struggling fingers bring him out of his fit...

Up until the very end, *The Women on the Porch* appears to be another of Gordon's novels portraying man's futile struggle against life's chaos. The action all along contributes to the bleakness: Catherine and Jim separate, Tom and his mother fight constantly, Mrs. Manigault's friend Roy Miller is caught in a homosexual liaison with a black youngster, the woman at Swan Quarter live monotonous and blighted lives. These characters' efforts to renew their lives finally prove unsatisfactory, for they represent denials of life and of the responsibility to care for their loved ones. Mrs. Mangault's return to her farm is borne out of hate for and jealousy of her son Tom; Catherine's and Chapman's affairs are meaningless indulgences that threaten to destroy their marriage; Aunt Willy's devotion to her prize horse Red cuts her off from a man who loves her; Cousin Daphne, once cruelly jilted, turns for solace not to people but to her hobby of collecting mushrooms. The list could go on.

Chapman's reflections upon life in New York make it clear that the environment at Swan Quarter is not solely to blame: 'All over the city, people in their cubicles of stone or concrete or steel, lay as tight against one another as bees in their cells of wax, and even beyond the confines of the island the great, crowded ramparts flung themselves on and on until if one traveled far enough one might come to a building whose four walls housed one man and his wife and children.'

What allows the Chapmans to achieve their ultimate reconciliation, while those about them flounder in failure is their recognition of the sanctity of their marriage. Long before they come together at the end, and even during those moments when they are acting out their betrayals of each other, both know, if not always at the conscious level, that they have gone astray. In New York, with Catherine gone, Jim wanders the city aimlessly, haunted by lines from Dante's *Inferno*: 'In the middle of the journey of our life I came \ to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost'.... Catherine also thinks of her life in terms of a Dantean journey, though not so explicitly as Chapman. At one point she dreams of descending into a long dark tunnel, guiding a man who stands between her and another woman. The dream clearly embodies her situation with Jim and his illicit lover, and she recoils from the man's hand on her shoulder. But then comes a realization of her role as Beatrice for this man who 'hovered between life and death': 'She was about to shake it off when somebody on ahead called back to her that she must be vigilant, that the man's safety depended on her alone.'

Despite these warnings from within, Catherine and her husband continue to commune with the abyss and seem destined for destruction. The crisis occurs when Chapman shows up at Swan Quarter and learns of Catherine's infidelity. Utterly abandoned to his jealousy and his desire to hurt her as she has hurt him, he strangles her; her tugging fingers save her from death because they break his emotional spell, causing him to release her. Though he is not sure exactly how he knows or even if he is right, he senses that Catherine's gripping hands are reaching out to save not only her life but his. This realization, which he will ultimately confirm later, paves the way for his quest for wholeness and reconciliation.

Before Chapman can reach this state of fulfillment, however, he must first come to terms with the rootlessness of his life. This occurs later that evening when he wanders alone about Swan Quarter. At the farm's spring he encounters either the ghost of, or his own imaginary projection of (it is never made clear) the original Lewis who settled the land after the Revolutionary War. Chapman speaks to the figure, telling him not to stop and settle but to move on. Speaking from his own knowledge of how the Lewis family later splits apart, he says that the land is cursed and that his children 'will have no fixed habitation, will hold no one spot dearer than another, will roam as savage as the buffalo that now flees your arquebus.' The figure says nothing, but only--so it seems to Chapman--looks back at him in mockery. Chapman eventually flees from the figure, hands before his face, fearing to look again into 'the bold, shining stare of his eyes.'

What does Chapman fear seeing in those eyes? A true reflection of himself as homeless wanderer. For Chapman is the modern equivalent of Orion Outlaw from *Green Centuries* [overstates]; he is a man without roots, a man, as Chapman himself admits at one point, with 'no instincts, no convictions that are readily translatable into action.' On the train to Swan Quarter, he sees some soldiers, apparently headed for the distant battle lines of World War II, and he envies them: 'But I wish I was one of them, for it is something, in this life, for a man to know where he is going, even if the appointment is with the minotaur.' This sense of purpose and this possession of ideals that one can act upon are what the figure of the ancestral Lewis also possesses; and Chapman's admonitions to him to move on ring empty, coming from a man whose intellectual confusions and fear of commitment have made him a mere dabbler in life. But the pioneer will settle the land of Swan Quarter, despite Chapman's warning, because it is good fertile land and it has been deeded to him; to do otherwise out of worry about how his descendants will perform would be to shirk his own commitment to do his best for himself and for those who depend upon him.

By the time Chapman sees Catherine the next morning, he has reached an understanding of the events of the night and now acknowledges his need for commitment. He realizes that this commitment must begin with his wife; he now knows that his love for her is of the utmost significance and that she is a figure, like Dante's Beatrice, who will guide him along the way of spiritual development. Moreover, he knows that their marriage bond is sanctified--holy and eternal and unbreakable. And so when Catherine's slipped falls from her foot, he stoops down at first to pick it up, but then to kiss her foot, offering her his forgiveness and reverence. He is ready to resume--begin, actually--his life.

With Chapman and Catherine's reconciliation, Gordon closes *The Women on the Porch*. Though she has suggested that the way out of the modern malaise is Christian faith, she has done so without forcing the issue, and so subtly that it is possible to miss her message. The ending is indeed more ambiguous than my retelling of it, for Gordon was at this time avoiding in her art and life a definitive Christian resolution. In 1944, she was still without faith [overstates], still a seeker, still unsure about the validity of Christian belief. But as this novel shows, she was reassessing her earlier pessimism and actively considering Christianity as a way out of the darkness." [This critic misses the Christian implications in her earlier work, such as the importance of Susan Allard the battlefield nurse in *None Shall Look Back*, who is Christ-evoking.]

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 90-94

"Cousin Daphne, the mushroom collector, has led a lonely life since she was abandoned on her wedding night when her husband found out she had no money. Aunt Willy's life will be equally bleak; she will have to nurse her mother, who has a stroke toward the end of the book, and she turns down a proposal of

marriage from Quentin Durward Shannon, the tenant farmer who is helping her train her horse. The horse, a discard of Elsie Manigault, a neighbor modeled on the rich Mrs. Hunter Meriwether, blossoms under the care of Willy and Quentin. When the horse is electrocuted, Willy's one remaining interest in life is gone. Elsie Manigault has built a new house, for which the architect was Roy Miller, a homosexual from New York; he has to leave after he makes advances to a black houseboy. Catherine has an affair with young Tom Manigault, in an episode that was certainly not autobiographical. She returns to New York when Jim Chapman--Orpheus--comes to fetch her....

The reader goes into the minds of Catherine, Willy, Daphne, Jim Chapman, Tom Manigault, Elsie Manigault, even Maria, the cook... In Jim Chapman, the ineffectual man of letters makes his first appearance as Caroline's new heroic type. ["heroic"] Daphne and Willy are two of the most interesting women in all of Caroline's books, and both are doomed to bleak, unfruitful lives. The author condemns Roy Miller's homosexuality [but] the brilliant writing and the close observation of nature redeem the book... [This novel was written 40 years before condemning homosexuality became an offense against Feminist Political Correctness considered beyond redemption. By the 1980s dogmatic Feminists considered brilliant writing irrelevant and *all men* beyond redemption.]

Orville Prescott in *The New York Times* called it a 'cryptic and peculiar novel.' He added that Caroline had more power over words than most and was also equipped with greater perception into the secret depths of human psychology than most."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 222-23

"Mannie [cousin Marion Douglas Meriwether] was 'like a sister' to Caroline who kept in touch with her throughout her life. Their relationship is the prototype of the childhood friendship of Daphne and Agnes in Caroline's novel *The Women on the Porch* (1944)....

'My hero is a professor of history at Columbia.' Most of the novel does not take place in New York, but at Swan's Quarter...where Catherine Chapman has fled after learning of her husband's infidelity. The house, the farm, her grandmother, and her marriage are in a state of imminent collapse. Further, Swan's Quarter is a world of women in retreat from men. Her cousin Daphne was abandoned by her husband on her wedding night, her Aunt Willy is a spinster, and her increasingly senile widowed grandmother lost the support of her only son because he broke his neck while drunk. This bleak and sterile world is hardly a feminist retreat where women develop their strengths unmolested by men. Instead Gordon seems to be suggesting that despite their selfish pursuits, men are necessary to women. Women who isolate themselves from men by regressing to a childish state of presexuality stagnate and fester....

Despite this realization, Catherine tries an alternative retreat, an affair with her cousin, Tom Manigault, a neighboring farmer, and even considers marrying him. 'There would be the succession of country pleasures which so absorbed and delighted her. It is the life I was made for, she thought, the life I have always missed.' Catherine, however, chooses her husband and New York, even though, or perhaps because, he tried to strangle her when learning of her adultery. This *seemingly bizarre decision* [This critic writes from a lesbian perspective, rejecting heterosexuality. Italics added.] announces the increasingly diminished stature of women in Gordon's fiction. [Not at all.] While it may be practically impossible to live with a man [all men?], it is impossible to live without him because Gordon's women, while intuitive and emotional, lack the masculine intellect which she considers superior [Each gender has strengths the other lacks.] She would later find this sentiment encapsulated in a line from the theologian Jacques Maritain, which she used as the epigraph to one of her later novels, *The Malefactors* (1956): 'It is for Adam to interpret the voices which Eve hears.' That is exactly what historian Jim Chapman does in the last lines of the novel when Catherine and Jim learn that Willy's prize stallion, 'Red,' has accidentally been electrocuted. 'We will bury him as soon as it's light. Then we must go,' Chapman declares to the silent and subdued Catherine. Bury the past and go on to the future is his interpretation of the voices of Swan's Quarters.

In autobiographical terms, *The Women on the Porch* (1944) suggests the ways in which Caroline has come to terms with her own past. She knows the pastoral utopia of her childhood summers at Merimont is

no longer accessible to her. Indeed, she questions what she learned there, and demonstrated in her earlier novels, about women's courage in the face of masculine abandonment and betrayal. Now she seems to be blaming the victim [simplistic Feminist falsehood], inadequate Catherine [On the contrary, Catherine is implicitly his savior.], as she blamed herself for Allen's infidelity both in her 1933 letters to Sally Wood and in *Green Centuries*.

In Catherine's obedience to the voice of Jim's superior intellect, Caroline seems to be relinquishing her own aspiration to artistic equality with Allen [irrelevant]. She may be telling herself that her waning success in the face of Allen's waxing reputation may simply be a result of gender: not just social conditioning, but an intrinsic difference. Both get the raw material, Eve's 'voices,' but 'it is for Adam [Allen] to interpret' them. Willy's destroyed horse is named 'Red,,'; Caroline's most acclaimed short story was and is 'Old Red.' Over the next thirty years Caroline would write only three more novels and a handful of short stories. They are not her best work.... Caroline was still smarting from the lack of response to *Green Centuries* and her lack of status in the literary world at a time when Allen's reputation was at its zenith."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 159-61

"She used the 'women on the porch' image in a short story, 'The Brilliant Leaves' (1937), depicting the inevitable masculine betrayal as leading women either to the porch or the precipice.... In this sixth novel...she goes beyond tragedy, deserting the daylight--and essentially masculine--realm of her ancestral heritage to enter into the nocturnal, feminine regions of the underworld, exploring a death-experience into which the psyche can enter and from which, with help, it can emerge. 'I was haunted by Gluck's opera [*Orpheo ed Euridice*], both by the music and by his version of the Orpheus story,' she wrote: 'I was conscious of parallels between the form of the opera and that of my novel.'

In *The Women on the Porch*, which she completed in 1943, the fate of the woman is perceived to be not necessarily either the porch or the precipice; as in Gluck's opera, the god Amor can restore the soul willing to take the risk of loving. *The Women on the Porch* thus marks a turn in Gordon's work: from this point on events that have been seeming to flow in one direction are shown to be headed on a quite different course. Readers have noted Gordon's changed style and method in this sixth novel: she moves from a former naturalist [Realist] technique to the oneiric and the visionary, from 'linear narration' to what Radcliffe Squires speaks of as 'orbicular scenes folded within scenes,' or--as she herself described the new technique--interspersed sections of past and present 'like "broken colours," to use a painter's term.' In a letter to a friend she speaks of being as excited over this technical innovation as Uccello was over the discovery of perspective. An even more basic change, however, is her shift to what we might call, along with Bakhtin, a polyphonic technique. She uses the intertwined voices of her multiple interior monologues--at least eleven separate consciousnesses, in addition to the chief narrator's--as probes into a fictional universe constituted less by a central set of characters than an entire segment of human experience. This is perhaps only to say that she is writing with her eye more on the unifying inner form of the novel than on such elements as the delineation of character or sequential plot as ends in themselves....

Responding to critics who say *The Women on the Porch* should have depicted more of the intimate life together of its main characters--Catherine and Jim Chapman--Gordon confided to Sally Wood, 'None of my books ever seems round enough. They are always too lean somewhere.' This 'leanness' stems precisely from her concern for a greater scope and less subjectivity than the novel ordinarily provides. Her aim is hardly character portrayal. The myriad interior voices of *The Women on the Porch* make up a *heteroglossia* which is concerned to reveal not simply the psychological lives of individual personages but their placement in a cosmos of some ontological significance, in which a particular movement of soul takes place. What is emphasized here, then, is the many-voiced chorus of the feminine psyche, which, in evoking generations long dead, establishes a matriarchal order defying time, in which masculine consciousness is an intrusion and a challenge. The cosmos so construed is nonetheless epic, even if it is depicted in only one stage of epic action--the *catabasis*, or descent to the underworld. In this subterranean realm of *memoria* in which the past lives on in its ghostly apparitions to trouble the present, the central subject of this novel is still, as in all of Caroline Gordon's fiction, the heroic life and its intuitions of a future.

In *How to Read a Novel* (1957), Gordon points out that the proper hero of a fiction is a man of action who engages himself with the objective reality of an enclosing world, a world that, she maintains, 'from time immemorial has been personified in the feminine consciousness.' But the feminine consciousness, too, can go astray. *The Women on the Porch* is about the obsessive structures that feminine sensibility can build, into which women can escape and by which they are then entrapped. What it shows is that for the inner life to resume its flow, for the underground spring to be accessible to the psyche, for the muse once more to descend and the hero to return to his austere path, the masculine and feminine polarities within the psyche must be brought together in a unity of being.

Gordon sets up typological reverberations within her novel by means of parallels and allusions to various 'cabalistic' situations, the most familiar of which are the expeditions to the underworld depicted in *Odyssey* XI, *Aeneid* VI, and the whole of the *Divina Commedia*, with, further, the myths of descent to Hades--Persephone's to embrace and thus placate death, Orpheus' to bring back Eurydice, and Heracles to recover Alcestis--reinforcing the mysterious pattern finally fulfilled in the harrowing of hell. Her purpose in using the mythological and poetic references is to gather them together in a focus upon the integration of the psyche--its redemption from the dead. Hence though in this work, as in all her other novels, the large cosmos remains epic, with the hero's fidelity to his calling still the main issue, *The Women on the Porch* concentrates on a single aspect of that epic cosmos: the wedding of the masculine and feminine elements of the psyche and the journey to the underworld as requisite to that *conjunctio*. In emphasizing the marriage bond, however, Gordon is concerned not simply with domestic life or erotic fulfillment but, on one level, with the life of the soul; on another, the future of civilization.

The marriage central to the novel, however, has been violated by Jim Chapman's adultery; and his wife, Catherine, like the snakebitten Eurydice, feels the cold assaults from the regions of the dead. She seeks refuge in her remembered childhood retreat, Swan Quarter, an isolated preserve cut off from the world by a Styx-like river and guarded by a trio of women. They sit on the porch in the forbidding guise of priestesses at the entrance to an underworld: Catherine's grandmother--old Miss Kit--who, lacking the courage to marry the man she loved, dwells now in a spectral world of 'presences'; Aunt Willy Lewis, a spinster who has accepted her stoic destiny of self-abnegation; and a more fragile creature of blight and shame, Cousin Daphne Passavant, frozen twenty years ago, at the desertion of her bridegroom on their wedding night. The joylessness of these three is reflected in the black servant, Aunt Maria, whose son Jesse is serving a life term in prison, a lot Maria endures with malediction and bitterness. Catherine later ponders Maria's unnerving detachment, inadvertently characterizing her own situation: 'If your heart were broken, if a great fissure came in the center of your being, you might turn your vision inward, might from then on contemplate only what could be seen in those shadowy depths. People in the outer world would become ghostly...' Swan Quarter is a matriarchal realm where regret and chagrin prevail, where standing on the verge of a fearful choice, Catherine is postulant to a blighted sisterhood.

She has fled to this sanctuary, a threshold leading to the domain of shades, from a rootless society of soullessness and repetition, rushing on her flight as one plunges toward oblivion. With the black dog, Heros, at her side on the drive down from New York to this borderland between Tennessee and Kentucky--and between life and death--she feels the precious vital fluid leaving her body like ichor from her veins, sees only the 'insubstantial shapes falling away on each side...' and thinks with Eliot and Dante, 'who would have thought death had undone so many?' Dust, moths, darkness, thirst, loneliness--these mark her flight toward the dark waters of Lethe. Arriving at Swan Quarter, her way is blocked by elderberry bushes with their black fruit, she abandons her car and strikes out on foot, with the dog, snakelike, cutting through the underbrush. Plunging into the thicket, her legs bloodied by thorny vines, 'She ran forward... Women were sitting on the porch...'

Despite their seeming passivity, these women are, in a sense, the ancient Erinyes, guarding their stoa to the underworld and, as at Colonus, the doorsill to their ambiguously sacred grove, which can prove either curse or blessing. These 'great ladies,' as Sophocles speaks of them, represent aspects of the feminine psyche that, when injured, become furies; as the archetypal psychologist James Hillman points out in *The Dream and the Underworld*, the Erinyes possess a chthonic aspect, which 'refers in origin to the cold, dead depths and has nothing to do with fertility.' In the porch of this ancestral home Gordon depicts the vestibule

to hell; Dante's trimmers are here, those who have not dared exist. And the women in this territory--virgin, 'unravished bride,' widow, mother--have made the great rejection. All are captured in a state of stasis, imprisoned in their own furious refusal to yield to the deepening of the soul that suffering and loss offer as recompense.

Symbol of this preoccupation with non-existence is Daphne's mushroom collecting: in gathering to herself the *amanita phalloides* and the *trompette du morte* she has overmastered both love and death. Hillman reminds us that mushrooms, for forest people, 'are the souls of the dead springing up into the land of the living' and that in Italian folklore, the spot where a mushroom grows indicates the 'planetary figures or archetypal bodies of the underworld.' Daphne is a kind of queen of the underworld, a Persephone gathering her dead souls as though they were flowers and, alone in her room at night, telling them over and fingering their strange substance. She struggles to find a word to describe a specimen she holds in her hand: its color is 'neither gray, nor green, nor yellow, but some unnamed color, a color a plant might develop growing in an underground cavern, or in another world.'

On one level, certainly, *The Women on the Porch* is a study of the dimensions of the feminine--not only the living, but also the 'presences' at Swan Quarter, seen by the grandmother and felt by the others. Aunt Willy has come to believe that those people 'could get into any house--*if there was somebody to let them in.*' Catherine remembers the shades that have always been at the house; she has known them from childhood. They had been then 'only companions whom one could not conveniently address.' But after she was a grown woman, 'they had seemed at times to menace or at least to prophesy evil.' And now, as she thinks, they drive her from the house to meet, in the woods, her lover Tom Manigault.

Old Miss Kit intuitively knows that Catherine is on the path that leads to the spring. 'But there is some one there before her, the woman who is always on that path,' the place where she, Miss Kit, had stood so long ago waiting for the man she loved and whom she lacked the courage to marry. 'They have been here all the time,' she now knows. 'I cannot think why I never saw them before.' They have been with me all along!' The veiled woman whose face she cannot see is both herself and death; and yet, as Hillman comments, the persons in dreams (and visions) are not mere images of oneself or of the persons whom they seem to represent: "They are shadow images that fill archetypal roles, they are personae, masks, in the hollow of which is a numen.' These numinous presences in Gordon's novel, pervading the liminal situation that the underworld represents, have the power to lead to the 'lady tree'--the tree by the spring--all those who are willing to come.

In her state of blank despair, Catherine is at once Eurydice, Alcestis, Psyche, and Persephone, separated from her husband, dying for him, and continuing to search for him, though summoned to wed Hades--making her journey to the underworld both to rescue and to be rescued. She has been seized by what Hillman calls 'the Persephone experience,' when the soul feels itself 'caught in hatefulness, cold, numbed, and drawn downward out of life by a force we cannot see... We feel invaded from below, assaulted, and we think of death.' Catherine's kinship with Persephone is indicated by a silver compact her husband had given her, embossed with sheaves of wheat and round fruit (like the pomegranate), which falls out of her pocket on her first tryst with Tom but which she later recovers. But there remains the Psyche urge, the desire in spite of hurt to find her lost love, and the Alcestis impulsion to save her husband: in a 'grisly' dream she and another woman are descending with a man into a long, dark tunnel: 'the man was dead...'

Catherine has thought herself free to leave an unfaithful husband; but the world now available to her is either one of non-life, as manifested by the women on the porch, or of pseudo-life, as demonstrated in her desperate sexual encounters with Tom Marigault. She tries to persuade herself that to cast her lot with Tom would be to dwell in these lower regions in a natural bliss as in an Elysian Field; she could, she thinks, embrace the life of nature for which she feels herself intended. But there is to be no such earthly paradise for Catherine. Tom's manhood has been wounded from his childhood by his mother's lack of love; and Catherine comes to see that no woman will ever be as attractive to him as is his hatred of his mother.

The nadir of this non-existence, the lowest circle of this underworld, is depicted in the sacred image venerated by Tom's mother, Elsie Manigault. Forced by the war in Europe to return to the States and to stay in Big Pond, the plantation adjacent to Swan Quarter, Elsie is bored and volitionless, since, contrary to

what her son believes, she is incapable of either love or hate. No longer on the porch but caught in the frigid bonds of narcissism, she turns from diversion to diversion, finally seeking sustenance in the memory of her dead father, whose portrait sits in a heavy silver frame on her desk. But the reader knows that he was a dishonest and avaricious man, with neither talent nor competence: he had only 'the wisdom of an old tired organism,' 'of the old possum that lies all night in its hole...'

This is a controlling image in the novel, the opposite pole from the heroic--the cold Dis of this underworld. It represents the destiny of all those who, in a refusal to risk, make the decision to stay with what they have, in a state of immobility, even at the cost of life. The image, as a possibility, is as applicable to Jim Chapman and his New York group of friends--the intellectual cohorts who have rejected the muse and made of the city a wasteland--as it is to the women at Swan Quarter who are trapped in a vestibule of the underworld. For Chapman, too, even though he teaches Dante at his New York university, has wandered into a dark wood where ego has replaced psyche, where death has replaced life, and the muse is silent.

If the portrait of Elsie's father exemplifies the lowest realm of this cosmos, then one might say that its highest region, though manifested neither in the wasteland of New York nor the underworld of Tennessee, is indicated in the lines of a poem twice quoted by Jim Chapman, the first time to a momentarily befriended homeless man and the second to a former poet and colleague. The poem is the *Pervigilium Veneris* (*The Vigil of Venus*), a late Latin poem lamenting the silence of the muse. This lyric sequence, in its first stanzas an expression of the *carpe diem* theme, deepens into a general lament for the loss of love and song. The poet speaks in his own voice, out of his own silence, comparing himself to the Amyclae, the citizens of a village destroyed because they were silent, in contrast to the violated Philomela, who, metamorphosed into a swallow, makes of her injury and grief an utterance of beauty. The context for the lines quoted by Chapman is the last stanza of the poem, which Allen Tate, Gordon's husband, translates as follows:

She sings, we are silent. When will my spring come?
Shall I find my voice when I shall be as the swallow?
Silence destroyed the Amyclae: they were dumb.
Silent, I lost the muse. Return, Apollo!
Tomorrow, let loveless, her lover tomorrow make love.

In a note to his translation, included in his *Collected Poems*, Tate makes an instructive comment on the passage: 'this long, gentle meditation on the sources of all life [the generative love of Venus genetrix] comes to a climax in the poet's sudden consciousness of his own feeble powers. What shall I, he says, like Philomela the swallow, suffer violence and be moved to sing?' Tate saw in this lyric poem the cry not only of the poet but of the people who lose their voice; he must then ask, 'is the poem not telling us that the loss of symbolic language may mean the extinction of our humanity?' [Currently, Feminists "on the porch" have killed the classics.] In *The Women on the Porch*, Jim's twice quoting from the poem indicates that not only is the marriage of Catherine and Jim at stake, but, in the general silence of the muse, the life of culture.

The ultimate reach of the heroic quest, the high calling of the poet, which is an overt theme in Gordon's later novels, is here used in her work for the first time. The poet's task, she maintains, is to keep his eyes on the heroic life, something Chapman in his disillusion and cynicism has failed to do. He is a failed poet; and his intellectual discipline, history, has become for him a source of despair, the emptiness of his life leading to his extramarital affair. He has cut himself off from the springs of both love and poetry. The loss of Catherine shocks him out of his routine; and in a state of drunken despair he begins his search for his true identity.

According to Jung, Hillman's precursor, this painful quest for the self must lead to a confrontation with the 'shadow,' its unacknowledged counterpart if the self is to be integrated. Caliban for Prospero is such a dark twin, and Poor Tom assumes this role for King Lear. Catherine Chapman encounters her shadow in the rejected and unlovable Cousin Daphne and shrinks from any comparison to her. Similarly, it is in the repulsive 'hobo,' a streetperson, formerly a scholar, that Jim must find his repudiated self, the disgusting and pathetic mortality which has gone unacknowledged in his life. The 'bum,' as Jim refers to him, is a 'thing of darkness' that must be accepted as his own by a purely gratuitous act of kindness before the way

will moderate its downward plunge. But once Jim withdraws from the apartment of the woman of his attention, not so much with resolution as with certainty that he will not again enter 'that thicket,' the chaotic events of his life begin to trace out an unexpected design. With a minimum of volition, he boards a train bound for Carthage and Swan Quarter. It is a journey of transition; in a surrealistic vision of the future, he sees the boy across from him stand on the seat, step into an airplane, and sail into the sun, disemboweling himself and scattering from the gaping wound the fruits of technology to fall upon the infertile earth.

Chapman's scorn and hatred of technology--his disguised fear of the future--are repeated later at Swan Quarter in his admonitions to one of the presences, a spectral frontiersman whom he encounters after an event of violence sufficient to shake him from his torpor. The recognition takes place when, exhausted and defeated, he makes his way to the still black pond in the woods, turning instead toward the spring at the 'lady tree,' seeing on the other side of the pond a shadowy figure in a buckskin coat stopping for a moment to rest. Gordon's technical artistry is made manifest in this remarkable scene, for which she has prepared the reader early in the novel in Aunt Willy's memory of recounting to Jim the story of Old Irish John Lewis and his son, her great-great-grandfather, the first settler of the land. Jim's last attempt to retain his daylight self, his carefully preserved ego, occurs in his confrontation with this phantom who has emerged from the abyss and whom Jim recognizes as the son of Irish John. In an act of hubris, an attempt to change history, he counsels the shade against colonizing in this territory: 'I would advise you not to settle on this land,' he says. 'The land is cursed. It is an old land, ruled by a goddess whose limbs were weary with turning before Ireland rose from the sea. An ancient goddess whom men have wakened from an evil dream.'

The man impassively cooks and eats his meal, rises, and, despite Jim's increasingly frantic warnings about the technological demons that life ahead in his future, goes impassively on his way. His bold gaze leaves Jim stricken with a sense of his own impotence and falsity. This encounter is Jim's visitation by the presences, and in it they correct his view of history: history is made by the unheeding heroes who have no care for the ultimate outcome of their struggles, who are impelled by a divine call, like Rion Outlaw in Gordon's preceding novel *Green Centuries*, to make their westward journey. The resolution of the novel is swift and complete: both Catherine and Jim have been purged of their false selves. Orpheus has found Eurydice and discovered her to be Alcestis; she has guided him, as her dream had warned her she must, through the tunnel. In an infusion of grace, Chapman abases himself, kisses the instep of Catherine's foot, and prepares to flee the underworld with her 'when it's light.' They are now looking toward morning, then, whereas our first view of Swan Quarter was at dusk.

This ending has puzzled readers, even such astute ones as Andrew Lytle. The reconciliation between husband and wife comes, on the natural level, out of the blue. But in the strictly restrained events of the last few pages Gordon traces the workings of what to Sally Wood she called the 'circumnatural,' describing this quality as a sense of 'the intangible verities that lie about us and are yet not supernatural.' She is no doubt speaking of the dimension of myth and archetype, the ancient psychic patterns that still prove valid in any experiential search for human wholeness. And though her eventual *telos* is the grace-filled canvas of her later novels *The Strange Children* (1952) and *The Malefactors* (1956), which increasingly make room for the overtly supernatural, nevertheless, the mythic level of *The Women on the Porch*--specifically, the soul's defining itself in terms of darkness and death--remains a necessary stage in the course of her completed *oeuvre*. But *The Women on the Porch* is important not only in the author's body of writing and not only in the larger canon of Southern literature. It is an important milestone in the course of the novel, for it enlarges the scope of that medium so that, finally, its limitations of facticity and rationalism are set aside, to allow expression in our own day of the mysterious borders of life dealt with perennially by the great literature of the past."

Louise Cowan
Preface (1993)

The Women on the Porch (1944)
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1944, 1996) v-xvi

"At first she thought she would write the novel about her grandmother and Aunt Loulie... 'I am really a sort of reporter of my family,' Caroline told Katherine Anne [Porter].... The main action of the novel would take place at Merry Mont; the women in the title would be her grandmother and aunts. As she prepared to write, Caroline decided to take a new angle on the story. The main characters would no longer be a mother

and daughter, caught in a death struggle for power and control. Rather, the story would focus on the marriage of Jim Chapman, a professor of history from Columbia, and his wife, Laurie. The narrative would begin with Laurie's flight from New York.... Caroline [feared] that Allen was having an affair with his secretary, Mildred Haun, just as Jim Chapman in *The Women on the Porch* had taken up with a woman he worked with.... [She] knew 'Laurie must be wounded unto death.' She would flee to Swan Quarter, her grandmother's home, and find her grandmother and elderly kin sitting on the porch....

Renaming her main character Catherine Chapman, Caroline decided the novel would hinge on Catherine's discovery of her husband's infidelity. Setting the novel in the summer and fall of 1940, she used references to the war to heighten her exploration of personal and marital turmoil.... She experimented with a more subjective narrative which became almost hallucinatory in nature through the use of myth and modified streams of consciousness. Her goal was to bring what she called the 'circumnatural' into fiction, those 'intangible verities that lie about us and are yet not supernatural'--the mythic past, an individual's history, a society's collective spirit, all just as real as any other event, she thought. As a 'dramatic force,' the circumnatural acted on the present, shaping the outcome of narrative and character in significant ways, she believed....

A major portion of [the novel] developed through interior monologues. Almost every character would lapse into reverie, and Caroline interspersed the interior monologues with flashbacks. Old Mrs. Lewis, Catherine's grandmother, would begin her monologue in bed, reflecting on the sights and sounds around her, but as she went back into memory, her stream of consciousness would dissolve, and scenes from the past would take over. In this way Caroline was able to mix meditation with drama, reveal the past, and intensify the mood of madness and isolation.... It would take 'the masculine mind to deliver the constation at the last,' she thought. Chapman was 'the interesting, the important person in this book'; the women would be interesting and important only in relation to him.

The women were the living dead, doomed from the start. They were frivolous, frustrated, and 'raging,' with the impulse to order things but not knowing how to order them,' Caroline noted. They had the capability for action, but it was 'unconsidered action and never the kind of action' that would extricate them from difficulties, but only plunge them deeper into the mire. The women needed to be 'held in subjection,' she told herself. Barring that, they needed to be rescued--by the man.... For all her pronouncements, she could not always keep her characters from taking on lives of their own. The women on the porch--Old Mrs. Lewis, Aunt Willy, and Cousin Daphne--would not remain 'shades from the underworld,' perhaps because Caroline allowed them to tell their own stories, stories of disappointment and of survival. The women would not be 'held in subjection,' and they would not really be rescued by men; they would either rescue themselves or accept their lot with grim resolution.... The man's salvation depended on the woman....

The Women on the Porch was...a subtle yet scathing analysis of her relationship with Allen, and Caroline would always feel that the book contained some of her best writing.... Although she would always downplay the autobiographical parallels in her novels, *The Women on the Porch* was a profoundly personal book, richly haunting and difficult to read for all its deceptive simplicity.... Marion Strobel, writing for the *Chicago Sun Times Book Week*, even compared the book favorably to the novels of Virginia Woolf.... Caroline...admitted to friends that she *was* obsessed with the past, and consequently, the present in her fiction seemed pale in comparison...she said the past would take its place better when she had gotten more control of her method....

After publishing six novels, Caroline felt her fiction deserved serious critical attention, and she was beginning to realize such attention would not be forthcoming because, for her, the literary world might be divided into two camps: Allen's friends and Allen's enemies. Caroline did not expect the latter camp to give her writing its due: indeed, she felt that writers and critics who had suffered from Allen's acerbic essays or political machinations often took out their frustrations on her novels. No, Allen's friends were the only hope she had for serious analysis of her achievements.... Caroline did receive some thoughtful appraisals of *The Women on the Porch*. Red Warren compared the book to her other near masterpiece, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*. The earlier novel was 'a classic and here to stay for quite a spell,' he said, but *The Women on the Porch* was its equal in sustained effect, more than its equal, perhaps, since it had 'depths of implication'

not found in *Aleck Maury*.... The writing is perfection, line by line.' The book 'has to be read in the spirit in which one reads a poem, with that kind of attention to detail and movement,' Red wrote....

Much of her sympathy for Catherine was implied, not expressed. Consequently, many readers, including Allen, missed the nuances of characterization and complained that Catherine's actions lacked motivation. But the novel included ample justification drawn from Caroline's own marriage. Jim had an affair out of jealousy and fear: fear of his wife's independence and ability to create a life without him. To get even, to assert his own independence, Jim pursued another woman. His adultery was not an act of passion or even lust, but of retribution and the desire for possession.

Although Catherine withdrew from Jim emotionally, Caroline suggested that Jim brought this withdrawal on himself. By making fun of the way Catherine talked, by belittling her friends and teaching her to see the world in terms of abstractions instead of relationships. Jim had systematically destroyed Catherine's self-esteem. He had stripped her of the feeling of independence, of choice, in much the same way that Allen had belittled Caroline. Yet through fiction Caroline could imagine another type of relationship. She always insisted that she was inverting the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, following the pattern of Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. But Caroline's inversion went beyond Gluck's happy ending. Below the surface pattern of Jim rescuing Catherine, Orpheus rescuing Eurydice from the shades of the underworld, Caroline suggested that Eurydice alone actually had the power and responsibility to save her husband. Caroline created a menacing land of shadows, not Hades but 'No Man's Land,' a land at once empowering and terrifying because it was so entirely feminine.

Caroline shared this idea of a 'No Man's Land' with many of her contemporaries, but she advanced it with her usual indirection. Through imagery and delicate foreshadowing, she emphasized how Jim had no hope of salvation until he abandoned his analytical powers and relied on a more feminine, instinctual nature. Caroline revealed Catherine's unfolding understanding of herself and her power. And finally, she proposed that Jim would not find his true self without Catherine's help. When, succumbing to absolute fear, he attempted to strangle her, she would rescue them both, the fulfillment of a dream prophecy given early in the novel... The man's salvation depended on the woman....

In the novel's final pages, Caroline created a powerfully disturbing scene in which Jim would become convinced that the land that was his only hope for redemption was ruled by Cleena, 'an ancient goddess whom men have awakened from an evil dream.' Implying that Cleena or some other goddess had put the land under an enchantment, dooming all to a bitter life of wandering, Jim beseeched her for help. His perspective was unreliable--he was literally and metaphorically lost in the wood--but Caroline used his frenzied outburst to complete her revision of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. In place of the Greek god Hades, she offered a female deity, who actually was no menacing presence but a Danaan maiden, a champion of the arts, whose ancestors had once reigned over an idyllic civilization.

Caroline closed her story of *The Women on the Porch* with one final image of reconciliation: Jim bending down to kiss Catherine's bare foot. The scene resolved both the surface and the underground patterns of meaning: Jim appeared to be leading his wife away from her underground world, but at the same time he was humbling himself, becoming a suppliant to her unacknowledged power. Many readers would comprehend only the conventional surface patterns of the book, dismissing the women as lonely neurotics or people without hope. Those who sensed the personal dramas and subtext of Caroline's narrative too often settled for easy interpretations: Catherine Chapman was Caroline; Jim was Allen; the Lewis family was yet another version of the Meriwethers. But Cousin Daphne was also a fictional self-portrait: like Caroline, she had a passion for mushroom hunting that most people misconstrued as a death wish.

Caroline's fondness for Daphne led her to write another short story about a similar character, Miss Fuqua of 'All Lovers Love the Spring.' A middle-aged woman whose family had once been wealthy, Miss Fuqua appeared to be an eccentric spinster; she lived with her mother and devoted herself to collecting mushrooms. Her first-person monologue revealed she was a woman who celebrated life through her humor and creativity. Daphne's monologues did not go as far, but Caroline developed the character in her own image.

Similarly, several of the male characters in *The Women on the Porch* had complex parallels to the men in Caroline's life. Jim Chapman may have been yet another fictionalized version of Allen, but he was also cast in the physical image of James M. Gordon [her father]. Tom Manigault, Catherine's lover in the novel, had more than a few connections to another J. M. Gordon figure, Jim Carter of *The Garden of Adonis*. Like Carter, Tom Manigault was an Aleck Maury gone wrong. Yet he was also a fictional portrayal of Allen Tate: a man almost possessed by his abnormal relationship with his mother.

In the end, in highly complex and evasive [subtle?] ways, Caroline was once again dramatizing the struggle between the Meriwethers and the Gordons, symbolized as an almost primeval struggle between men and women. Perhaps she was trying to resolve in her art the growing tension in her own marriage. But just as she was unwilling or unable to admit to problems with Allen, she was unwilling or unable to make her narrative insights explicit. [Why should she, if they are implicit?] In life as well as in fiction, she had to deny her heroine's wisdom and strength. [The opposite is true.]

In one of Jim Chapman's monologues, Caroline compared her hero's rootless wandering to that of a more sinister figure, Count Dracula. Remembering how his mother's house had been sold and his keepsakes packed away for storage, Jim wondered if he would do better to carry the remnants of his family with him, 'like the boxes of his native Carpathian earth that Count Dracula took with him to London.' The image haunted Caroline. She had moved too often; she realized how dangerous it was to end up without roots and homes. But did she really have any choice but to become a wanderer herself? Soon after the publication of *The Women on the Porch*, Caroline had to pack up all her belongings once again. In the summer of 1944, after less than a year in Washington, the Tates moved to Sewanee, Tennessee, so Allen could become the editor of the *Sewanee Review*....

The profit on *The Women on the Porch* would be only thirteen dollars."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 188, 213, 226-27, 234-39, 242, 251, 330

"In *The Women on the Porch* (1944) and the novel that would follow it, *The Strange Children* (1951), Gordon, echoing the fairy tale 'Undine,' allows us to hear the watery voice of the lost and alienated woman in search of a soul.... Gordon is no longer primarily interested in portraying tragic drama of an historical past or a realistic present. She consciously explores the ways in which the intellectual man and the intuitive and increasingly inarticulate woman may find love and salvation in the fallen world. First, in the wonderfully suggestive and elusive novel, *The Women on the Porch*, and later, in *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*, Gordon investigates how the loss of both spiritual faith and faith in human love affect her twentieth-century lovers, who bear, of course, striking resemblance to Gordon and Tate. In the 1950s, however, as her marriage...unraveled, Gordon began to center her work on the precepts of Catholicism....

Echoes of Persephone's descent into the underworld are...apparent, but most evident, perhaps, is Undine's and Huldbrand's connection to Eurydice and Orpheus. Like Persephone, Eurydice died an untimely death; shortly after her marriage to Orpheus, she was fleeing from the unwanted advances of a shepherd and trod on a snake, which bit her. Orpheus, a poet and musician, charms the god of the underworld and requests the release of Eurydice. In both Virgil's and Ovid's versions of the myth, Orpheus's attempt to rescue Eurydice fails because he cannot resist the single charge from Hades; as he leads her out of hell, he looks back upon Eurydice and she slips into darkness. Gordon, however, preferred Christoph Gluck's version of the myth from his opera *Orfeo and Euridice*, where Eurydice returns to the land of the living with her love. Gordon weaves together elements from the tragic fairytale Undine, with this more hopeful version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth to create a very ambiguous ending for *The Women on the Porch*....

She transposed the structural design of the classical myth onto incidents from her own life.... She sets her story of failed love against two backgrounds: the matriarchal Merry Mont 'in the final stages of decay' and the patriarchal world of urban America in the years preceding engagement in World War II.... Gordon...reveals the power and pre-eminence of the Great Mother, the goddess of nature who ruled the world before her displacement by the 'sporting gods' of men.... Using repetition and varying her tenses

among the progressive, the past, and the conditional, Gordon communicates a sense of the inevitable recurrence of nature's cycles and the unchanging human response to those cycles. Gordon's readers, along with her protagonist, enter the clearly patterned, lethargic world of ritualized and hollow living....

Gordon's protagonist has been so jolted by her husband's betrayal that she wants to travel back through time, through the landscape of her past, and leave no mark of ever having existed... In *The Women on the Porch*, Gordon uses the landscape symbolically, to reflect the desires or consciousness of her characters, mythically, to suggest the endless repetition of experience, and realistically, to demonstrate how meaningful and empowering can be the return to a place that holds historic or aesthetic significance. Living in a New York apartment, Catherine is described as a detached and isolated observer of her husband's life. Unaware of her own desires, she seems to have no job, few friends, no children, no 'passion.' Her husband [is] also depicted as alienated from the country... Both characters lose their sense of self and mission because they have no place to recall them to themselves, no landscape to spark their passions.

Only through her return to Swan Quarter does Catherine realize the importance of an environment that reflects self and purpose.... By shifting her point of view and allowing the reader direct entry into Catherine's confused consciousness, Gordon shows readers how lost the submerged Catherine had been even before her recognition of her husband's adultery.... Like so many of Gordon's submerged characters, Catherine does not recognize her position in the universe or evaluate her circumstances... Catherine Chapman appears to be one of Gordon's most puzzling characters, but this may be because, at first, she embodies so thoroughly the cultural stereotype of privileged Southern womanhood. Throughout the first half of the novel, she is seen to have lost touch with herself.... She seems incapable of reflection and will. Her husband, Jim, describes her as 'a scatter-brained girl' and a 'cold woman, really, moody or subject to sudden, inexplicable withdrawals.' Gordon presents her in very stereotypical, feminine terms: a passive, unthinking, dreamy, beautiful, silent woman who tries, rather unsuccessfully, to please her husband....

Gordon is very certain that a power lay dormant in Catherine... She knows that there is something 'in the back of her,' something representative of the earth, something equal in power to, but different from, man's mind... She strives to represent Catherine's power...in the masculine world of language. Like her creator, Catherine's power may not be revealed, but is suggested through her passion for the land, the animals, and the beauty of the natural world. Like Gordon, too, Catherine is curiously unlike her intellectual mother, Agnes Sewell, who, when widowed, became a professional journalist. Named after Saint Agnes, the virgin martyr who was cast naked into a brothel and later killed after being stabbed through the throat, Sewell is a New Woman who maintains her virgin-like detachment despite the fact that she is surrounded by an adoring yet rather vacuous crowd of young people--particularly young men.

Like Susan Allard of *None Shall Look Back*, Catherine's mother is not harshly drawn, although she is never portrayed as being intimate with her child. Gordon presents her as a successful writer, if less successful parent, who is able to live in a man's world. Yet, in her language and her reveries, she retreats from not only her daughter and her ever-crowded dining room and returns to the submerged and secluded feminine landscape of her childhood--to Swan Quarter. Such retreats lead Jim Chapman to wonder, privately, how this landscape has affected both women.... Gordon implies that neither mother nor daughter builds a relationship with the other because both are divorced from the place that provides them self-definition. As the changeling Undine, Catherine is unconnected with her mother, and having no profession, no passion, her only attachment is to her rescuer--who, like Huldbrand, betrays her.

Both women are attracted to Jim because of his intellectualism and dedication. He fascinates Agnes because he has written a book about Venice--like Swan Quarter, a watery place. Catherine is first intrigued by her mother's esteem for him, but later is captivated when she imagines him as the only serious man in her frivolous world. Not understanding that Jim's rootlessness sets him as far adrift as Agnes and Catherine, both women imagine him as their anchor, a means of attaining soul or purpose.

Chapman seems attracted to both women largely because they are so quaintly out of place. Jim is so unattached to place, family, or possessions that when his mother died, he asked that all but the books be sold. Although a friend of his mother's decided to pack up a few keepsakes for Jim, he leaves most of his inheritance in a storage warehouse. Jim realizes he 'never felt at home but once in my life,' when he was

alone writing his book, in a cramped and unheated studio. Upon his marriage, Chapman felt compelled to leave that studio and support his wife as a rather unproductive and frustrated college professor. Both Jim and Catherine, suffering from the loss of ancestral place but maintaining traditional gender roles, withdraw from one another. While Catherine sinks into dreamy isolation, Jim finds a mistress.

Gordon uses a painting of Catherine to reveal her growing isolation and Chapman's increasing inability to fathom his wife's nature.... According to legend, the elusive unicorn could only be caught by the still and passive virgin, the 'fair, long-limbed girl,' as Jim continues to imagine her. Catherine, whose name was shared by a saint known for her vow of virginity, has been spiritually and imaginatively untouched not only by her husband, but also by the world. She inhabits a world of 'improbable foliage'; the dreamy, absent look in the picture captures her lack of participation in the life around her.

What Jim sees in the painting, however, reflects his gendered perspective, his faithlessness, and his self-doubt. Concentrating his attention on the single horn of the unicorn, he erroneously imagines that Catherine and the painter have cuckolded him. Catherine may have betrayed him, but not with another man; she left her husband in an emotional or spiritual sense and inhabits a private and fanciful space. At Swan Quarter, however, as Catherine first struggles against a fairytale landscape of thorny thickets and barbed vines that grow unchecked around the family home, she begins to move from her pastoral dreamland to a world where she will choose to cuckold him with the very manly Tom Manigault.

Unused to self-reflection, Catherine is unconscious of the significance of her journey, but a strong, internal force propels her. (Throughout this novel, supernatural presences propel characters in much the same way that the gods intervene in the lives of mortals in *The Glory of Hera*, Gordon's last novel.) Imagining that she has come to the rotting plantation so that she can figuratively submerge the still-vital part of herself in the waters that surround Swan Quarter and share the buffered and stagnant existence of the other women on the porch, Catherine is startled to discover that the landscape does not anesthetize her. The sights she sees and the voices she hears awaken her.

Despite her attempts to stifle thought, an internal voice prompts Catherine to a creative dialogue: 'But I am all right, she thought'.... Such voices are woven throughout Gordon's novel. Emanating from the landscape and reflective of a modernist's sense of dislocation, they engage characters in the larger spiritual, political, or social worlds. Catherine's voice empowers her to understand the effects of her passivity and isolation. These voices, which Catherine admits she has heard throughout her life at Swan Quarter, take on different tones and sometimes tease, sometimes cause her to remember who she is and what she desires.

Caroline Gordon interrupts the story of Catherine Chapman's awakening to present the stories of the three women who, feeling betrayed by heterosexual love, have silenced a vital part of themselves. Catherine's cousin Daphne's story is the least complex. In childhood, Daphne and her cousin Agnes, Catherine's mother, found a rock house on the slope to a cave, and played in it each day. After transforming the natural world into a domestic landscape, the two girls created the women who would people their world.... Locating their power, as Gordon's women often do, on 'the slope to a cave,' the girls, Godlike, create a 'female world of love and ritual' until Agnes, the older child, leaves Daphne when she began 'having beaux.' Interestingly, both girls derive their names from virgins. Agnes is named after the martyred, patron saint of young girls.

Daphne derives her name from the Greek goddess who, pursued by Apollo and feeling his breath on her neck, begs her father, the river-god, to protect her; she becomes rooted into the earth, transformed into a laurel. When Agnes leaves their virginal world, Daphne, even in her mature years, 'could not ever remember having experienced a greater sense of desolation'--not even on her wedding night when her husband deserts her after realizing she is poor. Indeed, Daphne, like the virginal goddess, never pursued husband or lover, but spends her time searching the damp forest for mushrooms--'a hobby, of course, not a passion.' First attracted to the deathlike feel of the fungi, Daphne displays particular interest in the more poisonous varieties and explores damp caves, hunting for the rarest specimens. In returning to the moist feminine landscape of her childhood where such mushrooms thrive, Daphne seeks to re-inhabit the purely feminine world.

Catherine's Aunt Willy, the second woman on the porch, is also repelled by the world of heterosexual love. More masculine than virginal, she cares little for girlhood play and, after her brother's death, takes over the management of the family farm, cares for her aged mother, and raised her prize-winning stallion, Red. Romantic, heterosexual relationships both intrigue and repulse this woman, who wonders about her niece's liberality in regard to sex and, taken into a speakeasy by a neighbor, is intrigued by a flirtatious woman.... Gordon's treatment of Willy, like her treatment of Daphne, is ambiguous, but her gaze at the woman suggests her latent lesbian identity. Both she and Daphne are described as uninterested or repulsed by men, fascinated by powerful women, and anxious about their own identity.

Willy is tempted to experiment with heterosexual love, but finally realizes she cannot accept the marriage proposal of her friend, Mr. Shannon, a widowed neighbor; she tells him: 'I couldn't... I--I wish I could. But I couldn't.' While many of the autonomous or masculine women in the novels of Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow who feel betrayed by romantic and heterosexual love accept a marriage of convenience or companionship, Willy cannot. She channels her sexual energies into the land and her passionate devotion to her horse. The forces in nature appear to favor Willy's virginal or lesbian tendency [Vaguely put: Is this critic saying that Nature favors virginity, homosexuality, or bestiality?]; when she turns her attention from her horse to Mr. Shannon and agrees to dine with him, her horse is electrocuted by a freak accident that she would have prevented.

Little is known of the history of the oldest woman on the porch, Catherine Lewis--who shares the name of the protagonist--until midway through the novel when, having suffered a stroke, she begins to relive her past. We learn that she was engaged to Ned Lewis of Oak Quarter the day before he enlisted in the army during the Civil War. Like the traditional lady, she made her knight a scarf, a sign of their engagement, which he faithfully wore. The scarf, however, did not protect him. He suffered a debilitating wound to his throat--a trope quite familiar to Gordon's readers.

The wounded Ned cannot bring himself to visit Catherine when he returns from the war. However, she--not imagining the emasculating nature of his injuries--seeks him at the creek the two used to visit. She discovers there not the man she remembered but a frightened, fierce-looking stranger who, in shame, frustration, or anger over his lost voice, lifts his hand against her. Gordon describes the scene through Catherine Lewis's eyes: 'I knew he was holding on to the tree to keep from shaking...' Catherine cannot bear Ned's physical lack of control or manly force, and Ned, ashamed of his inability to speak, tries, vainly, to exert masculine authority through his outstretched hand. Unable to accept a weak or emasculated knight, Catherine marries Ned's brother, John.

Ned Lewis's wound, his loss of voice, is significant not only in this novel but throughout Gordon's work. It reflects loss of power or control over one's self and one's circumstances. Loss of voice often leads Gordon's characters either to surrender themselves to the chaotic forces that always exist outside their private and well-patterned circles of light or to submit themselves to another's will. Throughout Gordon's fiction, the frustrated who cannot or will not speak become immersed in a chaotic landscape that they cannot transform. The many instances where language is aborted or perverted can be catalogued: necks are subjected to violent wounds; bestial screams arise from the throats of betrayed men and women; characters speak 'through' their animals; 'watery in-takes of breath' drown words and submerge characters in horrifying pools of experience from which they cannot extricate themselves. Gordon, always fearful of the loss of her own voice, plays out her fear through her characters.

As Catherine Chapman takes her place among the women on the porch, the reader realizes that she shares many of the character tendencies that have so paralyzed her relatives. Some, like Grandmother Chapman, are afraid to surrender outworn conventions; some, like Willy and Daphne, are ignorant of or fearful to embrace new roles. Like Daphne, young Catherine has a propensity to retreat into an idealized world of girlhood virginity; like Willy, her passion for animals or the land can become a substitute for human love; finally, like her namesake, Catherine may very well repudiate her wounded and weak lover and accept the attention of a more virile and self-controlled man.

Some of the 'presences' that haunt this old house whispered to grandmother and granddaughter alike, prodding both to take action, to take a lover. Tom Manigault, a strong, handsome neighbor ten years

younger than Catherine, seems to offer her a very seductive alternative to her old life with Jim Chapman. Catherine feels that the landscape welcomes her new lover.... The supernatural presences of *The Women on the Porch* remind readers of the Presences that haunted Gordon as a child and compelled her to write. They shake Catherine out of dependency and paralysis; then, they lead her into an adulterous affair by tempting her with a return to childhood innocence on the land that she loves. Although they jolt her out of her world of 'improbably foliage,' they bring with them their own menace.

Ironically, the life Catherine first envisions for herself is one that will be grounded in very probably foliage. Like her grandmother, she turns to Tom, who seems devoted to her and the land.... Catherine seems more absorbed in landscape than in lover, more like an artist than a wife, as well she might be. Superficially, Tom may seem ideal, but Gordon indicates that he is, in fact, another improperly parented child, a loveless lover. His passion is for his mother, a beautiful and undemonstrative woman who cannot show love for her son. Tom's devotion to the land and the older Catherine is only an expression of his mother-love. It is his way of sublimating his feelings of loss and lovelessness--and Catherine realizes this....

Catherine is saved from the paralyzing past because of, first, her very astute and realistic vision--which she, perhaps, unjustly attributes to the influence or 'infection' that Jim has exerted over her--and then, because of Jim himself, who, like Orpheus, journeys into the land of the dead to rescue her. Even before Jim's arrival, Catherine's dreamy and preferred vision of the future is undermined by her habit of objectifying her place in the world--a habit that she blames on her marriage to Jim....

Catherine's ability to view experience objectively leads her to understand Tom's relationship with his mother and her own desire to live in a world of fantasy or art rather than the tense, struggling world of the living. Such an ability is both constructive and destructive. Although here it allows her to see the falseness of her dream with Tom, it also accounts for her habitual detachment. She has always behaved as the object, and has a desire to be absorbed by the landscape; she was a wonderful object in the eye of the artist Dave Koenig. With Tom, however--who is younger and, in many ways, less experienced than she--she at last becomes self-conscious and then an actor or, perhaps, an artist constructing her life rather than its object. Even before Jim's arrival, when Catherine considers marriage to Tom, she looks at the landscape and realizes her error.... Gordon's landscape resonates with light as Catherine comes to self-awareness, until a despairing cry sends 'her racing' back to the house of stilled time. When Catherine returns, she finds her grandmother 'laying in a pool of blood,' her memory lost after having had a stroke. Catherine's self-awareness may also vanish if she must take on the responsibility of her grandmother.

In *The Women on the Porch*, Caroline Gordon interweaves a series of twin stories that show the need for balance between the female and the male, the private and the public, the natural and the urban, the past and the present. Transposed against Catherine's experiences, as Undine or Eurydice submerged in the feminine landscape of Swan Quarter, is a portrayal of the Dantesque hell that the paralyzed Orpheus, Jim Chapman, experiences in New York City. Like the fading hull of the warship *Normandie*, he has lost his masculine drive; he has remained stationary too long, while all he has loved falls into confusion.... Full of despair, Jim commits himself, for the first time in years, to action. Having realized his disaffection with his mistress and his way of life, he decides to make two desperate journeys. In the fall of 1940, he volunteers to travel to Italy to obtain information that he hopes will be politically helpful to the State Department, and incite the United States to become actively involved in the struggle against fascism. But first, he will return to another past love and visit Catherine at Swan Quarter.

Chapman's train journey through the South is cathartic. Hatred and nostalgia for both the land his fellow human beings alternate. He sees the landscape first as a 'great, companionable beast,' then 'gaunt and ravaged.' Jim believes he is descending into madness and death. Confronting his own brutality and his feelings of emptiness, he begins to achieve the same kind of distanced vision of himself and life that Catherine has experienced. He recognizes his loss and his emotions: 'Indeed, since his wife had gone from him he had felt a deeper depression than he had ever before known'.... Here, Gordon implies that not only do Catherine and Jim's out-of-self experiences during their separation affirm their mutual bond, but also that at least Jim believes (and fears) the female body contains the power to contain or 'possess' the real being of her lover. Although Gordon prepares us for reconciliation between the lovers, this new inkling of feminine power complicates the issue, as does Jim's propensity toward brutal violence and Catherine's

toward silent and cold withdrawal. Catherine and Jim must confront their power as well as their feelings of betrayal.

Gordon renders this confrontation in what is, perhaps, her most horrific scene. Worse than the scalping of Jinny Wiley's children in 'The Captive,' worse than the extermination of the Indians in *Green Centuries* is Gordon's description of the murderous rage that consumes Jim Chapman after he hears Catherine's very cool acknowledgment of her infidelity. Gordon depicts Jim's attempt to strangle his wife in a long and detailed passage: 'He slowly advanced upon her'.... As in the fairy tale of Undine and myth of Eurydice, the would-be male rescuer is responsible for his lover's descent back into the realm of death. So enraged is Jim by both Catherine's sexual behavior and her assertiveness that he hopes [he does not take the time to hope or think] his violent attack on the throat will silence Catherine and force her into the hell that Jim, the frustrated Orpheus, now inhabits.

Chapman imagines that his violence and Catherine's suffering must result not in her song but in her wordless reflection of his own horror. Catherine's 'watery intake of breath' signals to him his control--she shares his abyss, 'the abyss into which her words had plunged him.' His last desire is that Catherine, whom he wanted to see as the chaste and empty vessel--the subject of art, not the adulterer or the artist herself--join him in silence and death. Indeed, Gordon's Orpheus, having lost the power of voice, having lost his dominion over his wife, desires nothing less than to reproduce in his wife his own outraged, despairing and frustrated consciousness: 'But he was not satisfied with the expression that confronted him'....

Jim wants to silence his wife... As if Gordon cannot further explore the intensity or the implications of this scene, disembodied energy--perhaps the presences--seems to pull Jim's hands from his wife's throat. [The text says what stops him is Catherine's fingers resisting.] The two part, and the reader is left to listen to the male's cynical and suicidal musings as he stumbles outdoors and wanders through the night over the landscape of Swan Quarter. The power of the preceding scene, however, cannot be forgotten. Readers remember how threateningly seditious was the voice of the now independent Catherine to the unfaithful, intellectual, and emasculated husband.

Readers also remember Jim's love of Venice and attraction to water as he wanders over the grounds of Swan Quarter and happens upon the creek where Ned Lewis raised his shaking hand against Catherine Lewis. Jim sees, in a pool of water created by the creek, the frightening image of a mythical and greedy feminine lover who consumes men. Using long and almost unfathomable sentences, Gordon portrays Jim's suicidal thoughts.... Once the 'greedy mouth' has been satiated by the dark waves of self-annihilation, the loveless lover will become soulless and still. This is the dream and the nightmare of not only Jim Chapman but also of many male artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.... Having been subordinated for so long, she is a threatening, alien, and seductive lover.... Caroline Gordon...sets the scene to describe Jim Chapman/Allen Tate's location of...this ancient feminine power, on her grandmother's decaying land, in the dead of night, when the sun-god had disappeared....

Jim is spared communion with this watery lover by the entrance of an apparition--Irish John Lewis, the original settler of the land. Chapman, falling into his dry cynicism, 'courteously' warns this fellow against settling on the land because it is ruled by an 'ancient goddess' and demons that serve her. Through Chapman's ramblings, Gordon emphasizes the myth that has haunted her texts since *Penhally*, but here she presents the power and the danger of the ancient goddess from the point of view of Jim Chapman. And to Jim, of course, the goddess represents chaos, not civilization; the dominance of nature, not man. He is horrified by his vision of feminine rule: 'The land is cursed'....

After having tried to strangle his wife, Chapman foresees a horrific future in which modern man, in his attempt to subdue nature and erect his own civilization, has roused its vengeance. The world, he imagines, will become a sterile wasteland. The ambiguity of Chapman's visionary passage results from two interpretive uncertainties: How does Gordon relate the obscure Cleena to the myth of the ancient goddess? What kind of a plea does Chapman's cry to her represent? Chapman, in describing the unruly feminine power located in this landscape, this 'No Man's Land,' is warning the pioneer that the suppressed power in nature will arise with a voice 'louder than any you can utter.'

Clearly, Gordon *seems* to refer ["seems" contradicts "clearly". Italics added.] to the myth of the Great Goddess who supposedly was seen as the primary creative force in prehistory. According to Gerda Lerner, her influence was diminished and replaced by male gods during the creation of patriarchy. With 'the development of plow agriculture, coinciding with increasing militarism,' kinship and political structures changed, as did gender relations and religious beliefs. The power of the Mother Goddess was transferred to male gods. Cleena may be an aspect of this ancient goddess, or she may be aligned with the powers of light and art... Cleena is a rather obscure name in Irish myth....a fairy of doubtful character who lived near the seas and seduced young men...[associating her] with the 'greedy' love Chapman spies in the pool.... In another Irish myth, the fairy story of Cleena of the Waves, she is less threatening and, indeed, in need of rescue. This myth bears a striking resemblance to stories of Eurydice and Orpheus and Undine and Huldbrand.... The second myth also allows Cleena the chance of being redeemed by man.... Once more, the man proves unable to rescue the pliant woman, and she is returned to her soulless world....

While Chapman's reference to Cleena remains enigmatic, he warns Irish John that, on this landscape, nature--which had been subdued by such willful masculine pioneers as Irish John Lewis, Rion Outlaw, and Daniel Boone--can reassert its feminine power, turning the land to waste. Patriarchal culture will be destroyed; man's voice will be lost as Nature asserts its voice. Thus, he tells Irish John that it is better to avoid the deadly feminine landscape, better to flee from the feminine voice that will subvert the pioneer's culture (the European-American culture). In Jim's imaginings, Lewis fails to heed the admonitions, and Jim watches, first in agony, then in wonder, as the apparition fords the creek.... Bold and determined, Irish John Lewis, after nourishing himself, recommences his journey unheeding of Jim's warnings, inspiring Jim to continue his own quest, to return to Swan Quarter and root or rescue the Goddess, to claim his authority there. Despite past weakness, Chapman, like Lewis and Rion Outlaw, is inspired to continue the pioneer's quest and subdue the natural forces that, if ungoverned, bring chaos.

Critics are often bothered or baffled by the last impressionistic and cryptic pages of *The Women on the Porch*... Near dawn, Chapman returns to the house realizing he may have to hear not only the voices of Nature's 'contorting bushes' but also the voice of his wife, and he 'would have to listen.' He finds Catherine sitting on the porch; beside her is Tom's hat. When Jim demands an explanation, Catherine answers that Tom had come to find out what was going on between Chapman and her. Telling her husband that she didn't answer him--that she kept silent--both laugh and she asks his help in making coffee. They engage in weary but familiar, ritualistic conversation; their traditional gender roles are in place. Chapman, whom Catherine says was 'always a good fireman,' brings in the wood and lights the stove for his wife.' He says 'old-fashioned pots make excellent coffee,' and she answers 'Yes, if you take the time.' As they drink their coffee, Willy returns from the fair with the dead body of her prizewinning stallion Red, who was electrocuted while Mr. Shannon was entertaining her. The novel ends....

The snake that bit Eurydice's foot is as green, tender, bright, and vital as ever. Is Chapman the snake who bites [kisses] her 'bare instep' and takes her back to New York, a modern-day hell? Or is he the good fireman, Orpheus, soothing her injured foot, guiding her out of the land of the dead? Jim Chapman recognized the spirit at Swan Quarter who had the power to turn his world into a 'No Man's Land,' but he returns to his wife, knowing he must listen, but voicing his authority.

At the end of *The Women on the Porch*, Gordon does not authorize Catherine to speak. Readers are not told that she will follow Jim back to the city--but it seems likely. We know that, like Huldbrand or Keevan or Orpheus, Jim may prove a less than able rescuer. And Catherine, to whose consciousness we have not had access after her husband's brutal attack, can no longer be viewed as the dreamy and helpless virgin of Koenig's portrait. Through her depiction of Catherine's comfortable relationship with Jim, her ability to laugh and to speak lightly, her recognition that her familial landscape will not afford simple idyllic pleasures, Gordon suggests that her protagonist has attained a degree of self-knowledge and, perhaps, autonomy through her experiences at Swan Quarter. These orphaned children, at least, have taken something from the past."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 149-67

Compared to her first five novels, *The Women on the Porch* is contemporary rather than set in the past, more psychological than historical, more inward than outward, more symbolic than literal, more inclined to archetypal allegory, more Modernist than Realist, and the simpler plot more reducible to a single issue--will Catherine and Jim reconcile? This is also her most spiritual novel so far, the first with a clearly Christian framework and the first containing ghosts, spirits, or "presences." Her vision has enlarged to include the paranormal. As suggested by the title, this is also the novel most clearly a response to the dogmas of radical Feminism, as Gordon affirms the sacred bond of marriage. The three women on the porch are Feminist types. Implicitly, had Catherine chosen to divorce Jim, she might eventually have joined them on the porch in alienation, isolation and living death. She senses this when she realizes that marrying Tom would be a mistake, as evinced in part by his contentious relationship with his mother, who if she were not rich would be more obviously another "woman on the porch." She infers that she will not be able to satisfy Tom: "This land is not enough for him, Catherine thought, or his beasts or his friends or the women he will love." The last phrase implies that, even if they marry, Tom will love other women.

Gordon is Modernist in ways she has been in the earlier novels, using (1) the "mythic method" of allusions and parallels to ancient myths, (2) multiple points of view, (3) archetypal symbolism inclined to allegory; (4) non-linear narration due to flashbacks and memories. She remains fundamentally Realistic, but becomes *more* Modernist in techniques by (5) simplifying the plot to make the symbolism, aesthetics, and psychological development more evident; (6) deepening the psychology with stream-of-consciousness passages; and (7) including much more Expressionism in style (in the last third of the book), in particular sentence fragments, successive sentences leaping from one context to another--especially when Old Miss Kit the grandmother recalls the Civil War--and long periodic sentences: Ned in the river during a battle, Catherine and Tom in a long kiss, Old Miss Kit when she remembers working in her furniture factory, Jim when he considers drowning himself in the dark pool.

Although the plot will be resolved in one of only two ways, both of which are quite plausible and commonplace in broken marriages, Feminist critics find it difficult to accept that Catherine chooses to forgive Jim: Boyle says that "critics are often bothered or baffled by the last impressionistic and cryptic pages of *The Women on the Porch*." The ending is "cryptic" because Feminists lack the objectivity required to interpret literature or life well. They cannot transcend their self-centered dogmas. Feminists are "baffled" by Gordon's ending because they cannot imagine a woman making a choice different from what they would make. They are "bothered" because they advocate revenge rather than forgiveness. Catherine has it both ways: she has her revenge when she tells Jim of her affair with Tom and she also saves her marriage. The Feminist critic Jonza is so baffled she complains that Gordon was not explicit with her meanings and is so bothered she claims that both Gordon and Catherine are weak and unwise to forgive their husbands. Cowan is "puzzled" and claims that the reconciliation comes "out of the blue," as if it was not a possibility all along. Makowsky is so baffled she resorts to a Feminist cliché, that Gordon is "blaming the victim." Nonsense. It is ironic that the Feminists fail to see Catherine's "feminist" triumph and the authority she will enjoy in her marriage for the rest of their lives.

Jim Chapman teaches Dante, he translates Dante, and he applies the most famous lines from Dante to himself: "*In the middle of the journey of our life I came / to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost. / I cannot rightly tell how I entered it, so full of sleep / was I about the moment that I lost the true way.*" Motifs from Dante run throughout the book: being lost in a dark wood, going astray from the true path, seeing light versus shadow, descending into hell, and so on. Images of an abyss or a pit, traditional metaphors of Hell, are a motif expressing fears of both Catherine and Jim in which the psychological effects of a divorce elide with damnation in a spiritual sense. Yet the critics ignore the obvious Christian framework of the novel. All the main characters are suffering from a lack of religious faith, like those in Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and like the atheist critics who see no evidence of God in literature--or refuse to acknowledge it--just as they see none in life. Jesus is mentioned as "the Savior" as early as page 25 by the black servant Maria. While Aunt Willy is away at the Fair, Catherine takes over caring for Old Miss Kit her grandmother, she feels needed and becomes charitable, a step toward redemption that prepares for the last scene of the novel: "I must do everything as well as I can." Having made this commitment to reform herself, she becomes happy for the first time in the novel.

Catherine's dog, the little dachshund Heros, resumes talking: "He always talks when I'm happy." Dogs and horses are motifs representing primarily faithfulness and passion, respectively. Heros is introduced on page 5 riding beside Catherine, displaying the qualities of a good dog: faithful, forgiving, loving, and well behaved. Good dogs are faithful and forgiving even when they get abused, unlike Jim and Catherine. Good dogs are heroic in this way, hence the name Heros. In pretending to speak for Heros, even to write poems for him, Catherine identifies herself with the virtues of a good dog while trying not to be a bitch. In doing so she transcends inhibitions caused by injury, making a parallel to Ned, who lost the ability to speak well when shot through the neck in the Civil War: "They say he always puts everything into the dog's mouth." Some horses possess the same qualities as good dogs, such as the mare Tom rides to visit Catherine: "'I trained her myself,' he said. 'Comes like a dog.'" This line also hints that Tom might treat a wife the same way he treats a horse. "Did you break her?" Catherine asks.

Red is the color of passion and horses often represent sexuality in dreams and otherwise. Aunt Willy's horse Red is clearly her passion, her substitute for a man, but she does not ride, she merely shows him off. The text associates horses with sexuality when Catherine speculates about why Daphne's groom walked out on her: "It would be a little like finding you'd gone to bed with a horse!" When she recalls attending horse shows as a girl, Catherine sounds like she is describing orgasms: She "would get that feeling of sudden, almost uncontrollable excitement that you never got at any other time, that she had never got since--and then over only a few horses. It would be like that if she showed Red." Once before riding over to see Tom, Catherine gazes at Red who approaches and nudges the gate of the stable lot shut with his nose, as if acting as her conscience, faithfully accepting his own confinement. Riding a different stallion, she thinks, "There is nothing like having a good horse between your legs. It had been so long since she had ridden that she had almost forgotten how it felt." "She let go the reins and leaning forward, her eyes shut, rested her cheek against the stallion's red, shining back."

After winning first prize in the stallion class, Red pushes his head through his broken stall, attracted by a naked light, and is killed when he chomps on it because he is standing in wet manure. "He was back on all fours, like a dog," Aunt Willy said. "*Like a dog!*" Catherine whispered and wailed again. '*Red!* Oh Red!'" The comparison of Red to a dog turns him into a metaphor in the relationship of Catherine and Jim: Their marriage is broken like the horse stall and Jim took advantage of the break, attracted by a light that should have been beyond his reach. That light is a symbol important to recognize is evident as Jim repeats the word with emphasis: "*Light?*" In cartoons ideas are represented by light bulbs. Red and Jim got the wrong idea and disregarded restraints. In that limited way, the faithful horse Red became unfaithful. The timing of Red's death in the plot and the repetition of Aunt Willy's last line by Jim as the last words of the novel insist upon a parallel between the death of Red and the death of faithfulness. To die like a dog is a sad fate and Catherine feels that Red has been degraded by his mistake. Red is innocent because he is an animal but Jim is guilty because he is a man who behaved like a mere animal, a stud horse. Red is not at fault for standing in manure but Jim is responsible for the shit he causes. By the end of the novel, the unfaithful passions of Jim and Catherine are as dead as Red.

The novel ends with Catherine and Jim resuming their marital roles spontaneously, without thinking about reconciliation, demonstrating their bond in accord with what Gordon sees as the archetypal natures of women and men in marriage. After bringing home the body of her dead horse, Aunt Willy is afraid to think about the loss of her surrogate for a man in her life just as she was afraid to marry. She is a chicken who goes to feed the chickens rather than to bed where she will be alone. Catherine has identified herself with the death of Red, wailing in grief, and she urges Aunt Willy to "come to bed," which would be a way for her to reconcile with Jim, reviving passion--their Red. "But Chapman took her by the shoulders and made her stand quiet beside him. 'Let her alone,' he said," which is what he did when he lost Catherine and she left him. He accepts the will of Willy rather than try to impose his own will upon her. Submitting to Jim here, accepting his authority and standing quietly beside him, is implicitly forgiving him. Then Jim sees that the green woods--where he lost his way and considered suicide and where Catherine had liaisons with Tom--"appeared to have every leaf fresh-washed in dew." The image of "fresh-washed" is a metaphor of cleansing: Jim feels that Catherine has forgiven him and he has cleansed his soul by forgiving her, an implication reinforced in the next sentence by the "garden snake" spawned in "summer heat"--the devil in their Eden is jealous pride--which is gone now but hides in the dark. Next he looks over at the body of Red, now a metaphor of his dead passion in the affair with Edith.

Jim notices that Catherine is sitting at the table with her head bent. "She held her hands before her face," as if hiding her face, recalling the garden snake that hides from view and her own hiding from view when committing adultery with Tom. When her slipper falls off, Jim is about to stoop, or bow to her, and to slide it back on her foot, when he is overtaken by an impulse to do more than make a gesture as if he is a prince like the one in *Cinderella*. He has not behaved like a prince, but like the dirty dog Heros writes the poetry about: "*Sometimes I roll in manure, / Just to increase my glamour...*" Humbling himself and bending "lower," he kisses her bare instep, expressing love and forgiveness. He repeats the first word of the phrase Catherine spoke to Aunt Willy, "Come to bed." The novel ends with the implication that she will. It does not end with them going back to New York, the hell of the modern world, though they undoubtedly will--"we must go"--because psychologically they are in a different place now and implicitly will be able to transcend the waste land. Jim repeats exactly what Aunt Willy said, reinforcing parallelism and the metaphor of Red as passion that made a deadly mistake: "We will bury him, as soon as it's light." They will bury--forgive and forget about--his infidelity and hers. Ironically, it is Catherine's "mistake" that saves their marriage, by giving her the satisfaction of revenge, in its way an assertion of equality, and by provoking Jim to almost strangle her, the evidence of how deeply he loves and needs her, in contrast to Tom, who does not seem to need her. "As soon as it's light" indicates that he has not yet seen the light in the sense of understanding the whole truth.

The whole truth includes religious faith: Jesus is the light and the true way, as in Dante. The novel ends with a rebirth of their marriage that points to being reborn as Christians. Four years after completing this novel Gordon became a Catholic and later her husband became one. Jim kissing Catherine's foot is symbolic evidence that he may eventually see the light, because his act of love evokes one of the most well known acts of Jesus--washing the feet of his disciples. In doing so, Jesus acted as a servant. By implication, Jim is now declaring that he is Catherine's servant. He is promising to give her the authority over him that husbands should give their wives, deferring to the intuitive wisdom of women, just as wives should defer to the wisdom of husbands, as Catherine is already doing when she stands beside Jim.

Michael Hollister (2019)