ANALYSIS

The Garden of Adonis (1937)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"1. Classical mythology: a youth slain by a wild boar but permitted by Zeus to pass four months every year in the lower world with Persephone, four with Aphrodite, and four wherever he chose. 2. A very handsome young man." [Adonis was so handsome goddesses fought over him, but like superficial love based on appearance, he did not live long.]

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary
Barnes & Noble (2003) 27

"Gordon 'belongs to that well-educated guerrilla band of Southern regionalists who about a decade ago took up where the Confederate Army left off in its fight against the Yankee cultural and economic invasion'.... In *The Garden of Adonis* she 'opens up at close contemporary range to kill off the Yankee opinion which attributes the evils of sharecropping to Southern landlords.' The narrative 'is as involved as the writing is simple,' employing shifts of setting and consciousness.... The implication of the novel is that 'if plantation life still offered its pre-Civil War social opportunities,' the events of the novel would not have occurred."

Anonymous
"Literary Guerrilla"
Time (1 November 1937) 86-87
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) 211

"Gordon's purpose is not to critique the tenant-farmer system but to 'depict a set of persons all in the same "mess"'...'as much through individual character and temperament as through the effects of any "system".... 'There is valid human nature in the behavior of the persons in the story and an understanding of it in the author,' especially in the 'sound psychology that motivates the unexpected tragedy' which engulfs Allard and Ote Mortimer."

Anonymous
"Owners and Tenants in Southern States"
Springfield (Mass.) Republican (26 December 1937) 7
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 212

"The novel 'derives its title from a quotation out of *The Golden Bough* describing the baskets or pots filled with earth which were tended chiefly by women, and whose plants, fostered by the sun's heat, sprang up rapidly but, being rootless, soon withered away.' The 'moral' of the story is here implied: the transitory satisfactions which come to the personages of the novel who have various love affairs are spiritual gardens of Adonis'.... The characters are vivid, the setting gives significance, and the lower class Southern speech rhythms are accurate.... *The Garden of Adonis* is 'thoughtful, intelligent, restrained...[with] technical excellence in the details."

J. H. M.
Review of *The Garden of Adonis*
Saturday Review (6 November 1937) 19-20
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 217

"'As a sociological document' the novel is 'a provocative study.' Gordon's intention is 'to show the Southern share-cropper, the plantation owner, and the industrialist in conflict and in character; to explore their strata in relation to economic dependence and emotional outlook.' In terms of the conflict, Gordon has

succeeded... 'Ote's murder of Ben is 'a Faulknerian twist... Gordon has attempted a 'desperately difficult task' in trying to write of the contemporary scene."

Augusta Tucker
"Southern Conflicts"
New York Times Book Review (7 November 1937) 7
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *A Reference Guide* 219

"A good bold live book. The first fourth equals anything you ever did.... There was the pure desperation of hopeless poverty in that simple sounding narrative."

Katherine Anne Porter
Letter to Gordon (16 January 1938)

"When the novel is in the country, it's absolutely at your best level. The whole handling of the story of the croppers is very strong and moving, and the countryside is rendered as well as possible."

Robert Penn Warren
Letter to Gordon (undated 1938)

"*The Garden of Adonis* [is] set squarely in modern times--the period is the depression--where for the first time in Miss Gordon's work the poor whites are of [equal] interest with the denuded aristocrats of the land...[with] the theme of alienation. It is a major, a recurrent theme in Miss Gordon's writing, but it inhabits another world in the books from about 1945 on. It is often expressed in her early novels by fraternal antagonisms. Both *Green Centuries* and *Penhally* end with brother killing brother. In each case the victim is the brother who has 'sold out' to the enemy--in the first instance, to the Indians; in the second, to the North. In *The Garden of Adonis* the alienation theme is situated more complexly in the dispossession of *all* the characters from their roots in the land.

Ben Allard, a descendant of the Allards in *None Shall Look Back* (it should be mentioned that Caroline Gordon has, like Faulkner, worked out a vast genealogy of over a century and a half of families in Kentucky and upper Tennessee which builds up a huge historical dossier for her to draw upon), is a landlord who really cares about the land. He is murdered by one of his most loyal tenant farmers, Ote Mortimer, a young man of considerable integrity and force, displaced from his job in the auto factory, and trying a return to the land. He is a good worker but he has not the patient love which is needed to redeem the soul and when he finally kills...Allard at the end of the novel it is a symbolic act which rejects just such a love. The novel tells a parallel story of the aristocratic but poverty-stricken Carters who marry into the Camps, a wealthy Northern industrial family whose activities have dispossessed them."

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953, 1966) 330

"In one segment of *The Garden of Adonis* (1937) Miss Gordon depicts agricultural life in the South, now devitalized as it was at the end of *Penhally* but containing within it sources for renewal if they can only be discovered by those who work the soil. The farm recession of the 1920's and the Depression of the 1930's have caused much poverty; but men have also been careless of their agrarian heritage and have listened to the false gods of a mechanized culture. For all these reasons, a mode of existence which sustained men in the past can no longer do so.

The poverty of those who till the soil is equaled by the shiftlessness or the futility of their lives. Under the best circumstances the Sheelers would always have been failures. But even for admirable individuals life on the soil is rigorous, and rewards for the deserving Ote Mortimer and the conscientious Ben Allard are meager. Just as in *Penhally* affection ends in violence, so in this novel Ote turns upon his symbolic father, Ben. When Ben is unable to lend Ote money to marry the pregnant Idelle Sheeler and objects to his cutting the shared timothy and clover crop early. Ote in a fit of rage attacks with a single-tree from his mower the man who loves him. The assault presumably results in Ben's death, and demonstrates how even

well-disposed individuals, motivated by affection and by passion for the earth, survive precariously, if at all, in a hostile age....

Jim Carter...derives from a genteel but poverty-stricken family; and like Ote and Ben, he is a victim. If anything, he has suffered more than they have from the defeat of aspiration. His rigorous, conventional mother has sacrificed him for her other children and has prevented him from following his bent as a dog-trainer. He is defeated in his marriage to Sara Camp by a certain lack of imagination but also by her rootlessness and selfishness. And given his situation, his subsequent love for Ben's daughter, Letty, is hopeless. Jim and Sara are interesting characters...

The title indicates that Miss Gordon has made use of mythology to give her novel added ramifications of meaning. When the two strands of the story are viewed together, the epigraph of the novel, from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, assumes a complex significance. The men are Adonis figures whose fates are determined, in part, by women who act irrationally when motivated by sexual passion: Sara disorganizes Jim, Idelle is false to Ote, and Letty betrays her father. Through myth Miss Gordon underlines her agrarian theme and bridges the two strands of her book.... The distinctive art that re-creates the lives and psychology of the poor white characters compensates for whatever impression we form of the novel as divided in structure and conception."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 19-21

"*The Garden of Adonis*...is about the contemporary world: the drought-stricken depression years of the 1930's, and the hero is a farmer who is killed in an apparently futile attempt to keep a field of clover from being destroyed....the same story Miss Gordon tells in *Penhally* and will tell again in other novels--the stand and fall of an ordinary person who is extraordinarily heroic. What is really unusual about *The Garden of Adonis* is that Miss Gordon does not depend as she had in her other novels on factual history and historical paradigm; instead, she uses a mythical one, a technique probably suggested by T. S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land*.

Instead of employing the maimed hero as her prototype, however, Miss Gordon invokes the ancient Adonis myth, taking as the epigraph for *The Garden of Adonis* a quotation from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The epigraph describes the spring ritual practiced in Western Asia and in Greek lands in ancient times of making 'gardens of Adonis, which were baskets or pots filled with earth, in which wheat, barley, lettuces, fennel and various kinds of flowers were sown and tended for eight days, chiefly or exclusively by women. Fostered by the sun's heat, the plants shot up rapidly, but having no root they withered as rapidly away, and at the end of eight days were carried out with the images of the dead Adonis, and flung with them into the sea or into springs.'

The purpose of this ritual, Frazer explains, was to promote the growth or revival of vegetation. In very early times 'Adonis was sometimes impersonated by a living man who died a violent death in the character of the god' and sometimes 'by human victims slain on the harvestfield.' The purpose of these ritual murders were to propitiate the corn spirit in the belief that the spirits of the victims would return to live in the ears of corn fattened by their blood.

While it is not essential that the reader be familiar with the myth of Adonis in order to understand *The Garden of Adonis*, such knowledge helps us see what Miss Gordon was attempting in this novel. Her Adonis is a Tennessee planter named Ben Allard; and, like other of Miss Gordon's heroes, Allard loves the soil above all else; and as a result, his constant concern is to make the crops that he and his tenants plant thrive. But Allard works under terrible handicaps: his land has suffered a drought for two years; the bankers who hold a mortgage on his plantation will not extend him credit; his tenants are a shiftless, careless lot--except for the Mortimers, who resemble Allard in his devotion to the soil.

In the Mortimer family there is the father, old Joe, who is seventy years old, and his wife Nora and their son Ote, aged twenty-four, who has just returned from a three-year stay in Detroit. The Mortimers are self-sufficient, hard-working, decent farmers; but they are also stubborn and somewhat difficult to manage.

Allard's other tenants are the Sheelers, shiftless, no-account people with 'nasty' ways. Ironically, Ote Mortimer falls in love with one of the Sheeler girls, Idelle, and this love affair eventually precipitates the tragic conclusion of the novel in which Ote Mortimer kills Ben Allard.

The novel begins with the arrival of the Mortimer family on Allard's farm, and the point of view shifts almost immediately to the son Ote, who is one of the major characters in the novel. In the first chapter, Ote's murder of Allard is foreshadowed by a dream in which Ote sees himself lying dead in his coffin. In the second chapter, Allard is introduced; and the conflict that is to arise between him and Ote is established. When Allard suggests that, instead of planting alfalfa, they plant a new kind of clover called 'Lespedeza,' Joe Mortimer immediately gets a stubborn look on his face; and Allard feels an immense weariness descend upon him as he thinks of all of the thousands of veiled and stubborn eyes, like those of Joe Mortimer, that he has looked into. Such people were 'like dumb, driven cattle' who 'were so mortally afraid of being driven they would do *anything* to bring your efforts to naught....'

Allard foresees the time when he will grow so weary of such tenants that he will lie down and let them shovel him under. Although Ote's father refuses to plant the new type of clover, Ote readily agrees to do so. Ironically, this field planted with Lespedeza brings about the fatal conflict between Ben Allard and Ote Mortimer. Allard also plants tobacco 'on shares' with the Mortimers, but the drought ruins the entire crop. Only the field planted with hay and Lesperdeza does well. In the second course of events, these crops would have grown to maturity and would have been cut; but Ote's affair with Idella takes a turn that makes Ote desperate for money: Idelle is pregnant and wants Ote to marry her. In his desperation, Ote turns to the only source available--to the field which he and Allard have planted on shares. Although Allard advises Ote that the hay in the field cannot be mowed without ruining the Lespedeza planted with it and warns him to stay out of the field, Ote, when he learns that Idelle has run off to marry his rival, Buck Chester, hitches up the mower and drives it furiously into the field. Allard tries to stop him by standing in the path of the mower, but Ote jumps down, picks up a singletree and strikes Allard dead.

Although Ote Mortimer kills Ben Allard, we can see that he is only the instrument of Allard's destruction. He acts, symbolically, for the culture and the society within which Allard lives--a culture and a society basically hostile to the agrarian values that Allard represents. And this is another basic difference between the culture that produced the Adonis myth and the one that destroys Ben Allard. This contrast, suggested by the epigraph from *The Golden Bough*, is Miss Gordon's way of underscoring her meaning and of giving authority to her point of view. This contrast also provides a clue, if one is needed, for reading the novel in the right perspective.

In addition to the country people--Ben Allard, the Mortimers, the Sheelers--there are also a number of town people (among whom must be counted Allard's son and daughter) whose basic values and way of life are antagonistic to and destructive of the agrarian values represented by Allard. It is these town people in whose name Ote symbolically acts. In a sense, the rest of the novel is devoted to creating characters and actions which dramatize that antagonistic culture and makes us feel its destructiveness.

Among these town characters are two important families, the Carters and the Camps. The Carters, an old Alabama family, were once farmers; they now live in a halfway world between the town and country, just outside of Countsville, Alabama. Carter, the father, was born on the farm; but he gave up farm life to study law. He died at his desk in town of a heart attack at an early age, leaving his widow and seven children. Members of the Carter family who figure prominently in this story are the son Jim, his sister Helen, and their mother. Jim Carter, being the youngest son of an impoverished family, is unable to go to college. He has a genuine talent for raising dogs; but, at his mother's insistence, he gives up his dogs to go to Saint Louis to work at insurance advertising. Eight years later, he returns to Countsville to take over the local office of the insurance firm. Helen Carter, his sister, is important principally because it is through her that the Carters are brought into relationship with the Camp family.

The Camps, whose name was originally Kampschafer, had come to Alabama from New Jersey, bringing with them a business that manufactures baby diapers and a product called simply 'fascinex.' The Camp family consists of the father, a small, white-haired, 'cultured' man and the mother, a small, white-haired woman who thinks that money grows on trees and who sees her children through 'rose-colored glasses.' The

children, Joe and Sara, have been to 'the best' Eastern schools, have traveled widely, and have been allowed to have pretty much what they wanted--including an elaborate swimming pool with a guest house that has a bar and a Jamaican Negro in attendance.

The Camps and the younger Carters represent a way of life diametrically opposed to the principles embodied by Ben Allard. Like the modern Nicholas Llewellyn of *Penhally*, the Camps and Carters have no strong attachments except to money. Helen Carter deliberately pursues and marries Joe Camp because he is rich. Their elaborate wedding is paid for by Camp money. Jim Carter, who has a little more principle than his sister, elopes with Sara Camp after a drunken party. The Carters, the Camps, and the money culture they represent are brought into conflict with the agrarian world of Ben Allard through Allard's daughter Letty and his son Frank. Like his friend Jim Carter, Frank Allard has left the country to go to work in town for an insurance company; and his sister Letty, bored with country life, leaves her father's farm whenever she can to visit her brother in Countsville. There she meets Jim Carter at a time when he has quarreled with and separated from Sara. Letty pursues Carter, who first resists but later succumbs to her charms.

The setting up and working out of the relationships between various pairs of young men and women constitute a good portion of the novel. The meaning of those relationships, however, is suggested by a number of important parallels. As we have noted, Helen Carter pursues and marries Joe Camp because of his money; Jim Carter marries Sara Camp when he is drunk because he senses that she feels 'insecure' and requires his social position. Carter also has a rather protracted affair with a prostitute in Countsville named Babe Worsham. Because of boredom, Letty Allard pursues Jim Carter and invites him to seduce her. The love affairs, if I may call them that, are a tepid combination of lust, convenience, and greed in which the women are the aggressors and the men are little more than passive victims.

Miss Gordon's way of commenting on the lives of these young townspeople is to contrast them to two genuine love affairs; those of Ote Mortimer and Idelle Sheeler and, by means of flashback, of Ben Allard and Maggie Carew. Ote's love for Idelle, though misplaced--for Idelle's principles are not much higher than those of prostitute Babe Worsham--is at least a genuine passion. He does the pursuing; and, in order to win Idelle's favor, he has to 'take her away' from a bootlegger named Buck Chester. Ote is so passionately attracted to Idelle that he is driven into a mad fury when he finally loses her. In contrast to Ote, Jim Carter cares almost nothing for Sara Camp. His most passionate affair is with Babe Worsham, and he is rather easily seduced by Letty Allard.

The most telling comment on the young people in this novel, however, is made by the contrast with the love of Ben Allard for Maggie Carew. Allard had loved Maggie for something like ten years and had planned to marry her, but he caught her one day in the embrace of another man. Maggie tried to smooth things over with Allard: 'She had cried and talked a lot. He hardly listened. When she stopped he shook his head. 'It's no use, Maggie. It's like you were dead. You are--to me.' Ben Allard was only a boy at the time, but from then on, he rarely allowed his mind to dwell upon either Maggie Carew or Ed Ruffin, her lover.... It had been like tearing out a piece of flesh--for he had been in love with Maggie Carew....'

Miss Gordon does not explicitly make the connection to the pairs of lovers, but the reader can only interpret this scene in the light of all the tepid affairs that have gone before. Moreover, as Allard recalls his love for Maggie Carew, Jim Carter, his son's friend, whom he trusts as a man of honor, is preparing to seduce his daughter in Allard's own house. The juxtaposition of Allard's response to his fiancée's infidelity with Carter's shameless betrayal of his host's trust is the author's way of suggesting an essential difference between Allard's world and that of the Carters and Camps.

It is also significant that Carter's betrayal of Ben Allard's trust and Letty's flight from her father's house occur shortly before Allard is murdered by Ote Mortimer. Indeed, because Allard is upset about his domestic difficulties, he speaks sharply to Ote when warning him to stay out of the field of Lespedeza. And Ote's troubles with his woman and his shortage of money, as well as his conflict with Allard, precipitate his violence. In that final scene, then, everything comes to focus; and the loss of the field becomes an objective correlative for the loss of all that Ben Allard stands for. It also makes us aware of him as the victim of a sacrifice that is meaningless to everyone but him. But, whether the world recognizes it or not, Ben Allard is a hero; he is a man who stands for what he believes, even to the point of giving up his life. For Miss

Gordon, there is meaning not only in that act but in what the act stands for--the concept of life that made it possible.

Although the use of the mythical paradigm employed in *The Garden of Adonis* is, on the face of it, a technique different from anything Miss Gordon had used before, in principle it is significantly like the historical paradigm. For considered in perspective, the mythical paradigm is simply the historical paradigm pushed back in time. To be sure, the Adonis myth would not have for modern readers the kind of authority that the life of Nathan Bedford Forrest would; but it is more flexible, and, if skillfully used, is convincing in its own way, through the authority lent the writer in both the conception and creation of the fictional model of the paradigm. The important thing, in other words, is that the writer be convinced and that this conviction be communicated to the reader through tone rather than through attempts to provide numerous realistic parallels to the myth.

To be sure, explicit references to Adonis in the title and in the epigraph are ways of calling the reader's attention to the parallel and of inviting him to see what the novel very indirectly suggests: that, though the killing of Ben Allard was precipitated by events that occurred during the 1930's in Tennessee and Alabama, it was also a timeless story about the conflict between the creative and the destructive sides of man. To put this another way, Miss Gordon seems to suggest that the death of Ben Allard, which is in part cause by the drought and the depression, could not have been prevented by man-made remedies as some novels in the 1930's were suggesting. Times and conditions may change, but man does not. And man, or the destructive element in him, is responsible for the killing of heroes like Ben Allard."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 55-61

"Much of Caroline Gordon's shorter fiction is concerned with exploring the theme of sexual love, yet in none of her stories is the subject treated in an optimistic or uncomplicated manner. There are no happy lovers in Miss Gordon's stories, and there are few characters who prove themselves adequate to the demands of love. Miss Gordon is peculiarly tough-minded in her treatment of sexual relationships, and her view of the conditions necessary for successful love seems highly exacting. Passion itself is rarely dwelt upon in the stories although it figures prominently in Miss Gordon's novels, especially in *The Garden of Adonis*. Within the more restricted context of the short story she seems to prefer the strategy of employing situations involving sexual love, or sexual awakening, as a means for dealing with issues of somewhat wider significance.

What really interests Miss Gordon is not the ebb and flow of the appetite with its attendant complications but those primal sanctions which underlie and qualify sexual love. Among these she is most concerned with the relative roles of man and woman, with that fundamental need of woman to find a source of strength in the man, with the connection between sexual love and nature's bounty, with the subtle rhythms of the enamored soul awakening to love or maturing in it, with the strong passions of the blood for family, place, honor, vengeance.... She treats love as a serious business which entails grave, occasionally tragic, implications."

John E. Alvis
"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 86-87

"*The Garden of Adonis*...identifies [Gordon] all the more strongly with the Agrarians whose tenets infuse this novel especially. As in *I'll Take My Stand* [1930], where John Crowe Ransom defines industrialism as 'the contemporary form of pioneering,' in *The Garden of Adonis* Gordon's characters who endorse such 'pioneering on principle, and with an accelerated speed' find themselves as unsatisfied as the pioneers in their abandonment of social and religious codes. One of the main protagonists, Jim Carter rejects the sportsman's role and the agrarian society of his youth to become, in notable contrast to a hunter like Aleck Maury, one who hunts only women and seeks his own physical pleasure above all else. Although Caroline Gordon prefers agrarian values to the narcissism of a man like Jim Carter, agrarianism

does not go uncriticized in the novel: Ben Allard, the proponent of that older economic and social structure, is nearly as responsible for his downfall as those who cause it directly.

Remarkable in *The Garden of Adonis* are the ironic effects that the omniscient narrator achieves with her manipulation of time. Arranging the past and present to highlight the inconsistencies and duplicities of human behavior, the narrator, as in *The Waste Land* [T. S. Eliot, 1922], allows the reader to articulate the appropriate indictments. The epigraph and title of *The Garden of Adonis*, drawn from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, attest to Gordon's affinity with T. S. Eliot and the 'mythical method' he endorsed. Certainly, the image patterns of the novel are familiar to the reader of *The Waste Land*. Industrialism--represented by the machine and the capitalist--is perceived as a menace to the human spirit; the drought suggests the spiritual wasteland of modern life; and sex becomes an expression only of physical appetites.

As in *Penhally*, agrarianism in *The Garden of Adonis* is an imperfect ideological and social system, but as metaphor it teaches the individual to perceive his needs in relation to other people and thus infuses private lives with public meaning.... Those characters who defend a failing system distinguish themselves by resolutely standing against the battering of time and social change, and because the focus is not on the characters' development but on their steadfastness, the five early novels repeatedly depict the adherents of new values destroying those who believe in an established order. *The Garden of Adonis*, then, portrays an archetypal conflict between discipline and license, order and anarchy, as William Stuckey explains, 'man, or the destructive element in him, is responsible for the killing of heroes like Ben Allard.'

Applied ironically to the twentieth-century inhabitants of this industrialized region of Kentucky [Alabama], the Adonis myth helps to interweave the various subplots of the novel.... The characters' lives are paralleled thematically and the episodes do illustrate a single idea--the need for regeneration in a society that supplants enduring values of love and religious faith with fashionable hedonism. So emphatic is this *Waste Land* theme that a character like Ed Trivers appears to have been introduced merely to represent the unpopular spiritual view of life. Once he delivers his sermon, he disappears from the novel.... [But the implications of the sermon do not disappear.]

Gordon is intent on criticizing southern society in the 1930s by contrasting Ben Allard with such selfish, ineffectual males as Jim Carter and the Camps. Thriving businessmen, the Camps are stereotypes of industrialized life and, as such, are not examined with much sympathy or given many complexities of personality. Jim Carter and Ben Allard, however, are more intriguing characters, who ironically have both contributed to the decline of the southern community.

Unlike Aleck Maury, Jim Carter feels no real devotion to sport. The hunt in the 1930s is a debased, romanticized pastime. As in *Penhally* where Joan Parrish turns the family estate into a hunt club, the women in *The Garden of Adonis* threaten to take over sport entirely: 'Those rich Yankees had a way of turning sport over to their women.' Formerly a sportsman, Jim becomes a lady's man, then little more than a rake. Jane Gibson Brown describes him very appropriately as 'a married man whose numerous sexual adventures reveal him to be an amoral predator, the human equivalent of the economic system that has destroyed Allard and Ote.'

Jim thinks that he can exercise his power over women, but in fact, he is controlled by them. Once he considered being a professional trainer of hunting dogs, only to give up his work with Uncle Joe Burden when his mother asked him to accept an office job in St. Louis so that he could support his sisters in style.... Jim never questioned whether buying transparent velvet for his sister's evening coat was worth abandoning his profession as a trainer. Nor has Jim even realized what he has given up by starting to work at such an early age. Some years later, in fact, his mother warns him against sacrificing too much to his sisters.... Now thirty-five years old, Jim perceives that he is in danger of being emasculated by the women around him. When he begins to play tennis with Sara Camp and to linger with her and her guests around the pool, he warns himself that he could well turn into...a man who 'didn't want to have anything to do with women, really, but...liked all the flutteration.' Jim accurately diagnoses his problem--he knows that he can never 'see a woman in distress without wanting to comfort her'.... He cannot resist flattering Sara when she elicits his pity for her continual trouble with fortune hunters. He tells her, 'There's nothing wrong with you.... And if it's any comfort to you, you can take it from me you've got a hell of a lot of sex appeal.'

Jim enjoys his role as comforter, though he knows he should not encourage the women to tell him 'their hearts' secrets.' He does not want intimacy without sex, but as it turns out, he is incapable of being truly intimate with a sexual partner. Eventually, he understands that in saying goodbye to Babe Worsham, he was inordinately cruel to suggest that she had been having sex with him only because she was hoping for money. In retrospect he accurately labels his speech to her as 'the basest action of his life.' Forsaking a true sportsman's vocation of training dogs, Jim now participates in competitive games such as tennis or recreational pastimes such as swimming--activities that do not unify the male community, that do not demand a rigorous discipline of the self, only sound technique and the desire to win. Even in his personal relationships Jim seems a debased kind of hunter. Comparing his final scene with Babe to a hunting incident, he recalls the day he was fishing in a boat and saw a rabbit, desperate to escape a pack of hounds, dive into the river and swim 'straight for the boat'.... 'He picked the rabbit up and threw it out. They had it torn in pieces before it hit the water'....

It is during his honeymoon with Sara that Jim remembers Babe Worsham and how he treated her. Even here his future estrangement from his wife is anticipated. When he tries to hide his thoughts about Babe from Sara, she becomes suspicious and angry, but he does not try to make amends. That Jim and Sara eloped one night when they were both drunk has already called into question the seriousness of their commitment. The day after the runaway marriage, Sara's brother Joe Camp embarrassedly assures Jim that he regards his new brother-in-law as 'a gentleman...a Southern gentleman.' Yet, for Jim, the role of gentleman has deteriorated until it means only preserving an appearance of civility.

The night before Jim commits adultery with Bess Watkins, he finds himself once again in the comfortable role of assuring Bess of her own attractiveness. As with Sara, his speech is a prelude to love-making: 'He put his hand up and ran it over her shining hair. "You have pretty hair," he said.'... It is ironic that Jim, who is about to break his own marriage vow, condemns the ungentlemanly behavior of Bess's husband. When Cally in *None Shall Look Back* divided people into 'those that'll fight for what they think right and those that don't think anything is worth fighting for,' she provided categories still applicable in the 1930s. For Jim Carter, there is nothing worth fighting for, except perhaps for his own pleasure. In fact, when he later learns that Sara has been having an affair with Rice Bolling, he arranges to meet Rice at the club at ten o'clock. He ponders over the curiously familiar sound of their exchange, then remembers: 'In the old days such remarks were preliminaries to a duel.... But he was only going over to the club to talk things over.' Worried that he may become 'a eunuch,' Jim Carter is never unsexed, but he is not fully the man he could be, precisely because he is more preoccupied with sex than with honor.

In the economic realm, men fear losing power by going to work for another. Ben Allard's son Frank, who chooses to work in town, knows that his father thinks 'of him as only half a man' since he left the farm. Frank at least is realistic in admitting that a man cannot earn a living through agriculture anymore. Ben, however, thinks that even a tenant who does not own the land he farms leads a better life than those who go into business or industry. Although Ben virtually accuses his son of losing his value by 'living in town,' the older man himself has unintentionally encouraged the decline of agrarianism.... Ben Allard is the type of man much admired by his southern generation. 'An honest gentleman/citizen husband,' Ben leads his society against the forces of disorder. Despite his heroic stance, he is nonetheless innocent, lacking in judgment, and...inadequately armed.... By treating his tenant, Ote Mortimer, as a partner, as a surrogate for the son he cannot coax to work on the farm, Ben begins to lose some of the authority and respect he has commanded as a landowner. When he tries to reassert his power, instructing Ote not to cut the crop of clover they have grown together, Ote kills him.

Whereas the sacrifice of a scapegoat traditionally ensures the fertility of a people and their land, Ote Mortimer's murder of Ben, the Adonis figure in the novel, foreshadows only more destruction. Significantly, Ote kills his boss because he needs money to marry his pregnant girlfriend, a motive which, as Jane Gibson Brown points out, further connects the downfall of the landowner Ben Allard with the plights of the pairs of lovers in the novel. Initially, Ote returned from working in a Detroit automobile factory to find the farm a relief from the drudgery of the assembly line. The dream Ote had repeatedly while he was working up North signifies how industrialized labor tortures the human spirit: 'Dead he was and lying in his coffin, only the coffin was the same board that he lay on during his working hours. But even though he was dead the chassis kept moving on over him just the same and as each chassis arrived his

living hands reached up our of his dead body to screw on the bolt. The same bolt he had screwed on for eight hours a day for nearly a year. He would be screwing it on now if they hadn't laid him off.' The farm, however, promises no real rejuvenation, though Ote appears at first to be moving towards a better life as he and Idelle Sheeler fall in love and plan to marry. Eventually Idelle betrays him; she runs off with Buck Chester because she is pregnant and cannot endure the disgrace of waiting for Ote to earn money for the license and a home.

Ote's potentially meaningful life has not been destroyed simply because the values of industrialism--represented by the Camps' business--have invaded the South and cause a decline in morals. As Ed Trivers declaims, men and women fail in their love for each other and individuals fail to live up to worthy ideals because humans are selfish and fallible by nature. The various subplots reveal that failures in love, like the failures in values, represent a universal condition, or as Louise Cowan states the theme of the novel, 'nature itself is the inadequate garden, since it cannot sustain and nourish man, the essentially rootless plant.

This lesson is underscored by Ed Trivers' sermon. Urging his congregation to consider their spiritual lives, Ed tells the farmers that the satisfaction of growing a crop of rye, for instance, 'ain't nothin.' The congregation sings a hymn with a similar message: 'Oh, ye young, ye gay, ye proud, / Ye must die and wear the shroud.' Ote and Idelle, young people to whom the message is directed, are too preoccupied with themselves to attend to the verses. Throughout the sermon, as Ed describes the sexual temptation he and Mrs. Taylor had to overcome, and during the singing, Ote so eagerly anticipates another rendezvous with Idelle that he can concentrate only on her promise for 'tonight'--ironic in the context of a hymn that speaks of eternity.

The secular world portrayed in *The Garden of Adonis* is too much concerned with temporal things, and the manipulation of time in the novel makes us conscious of its passing. Although Lytle finds the structure of the book disjointed, the flashbacks are meant to develop the theme of infidelity in love. Ben Allard's memories of Maggie Carew show that illicit love and betrayal are not new 'sins.' Ben does differ from Jim, however, in his reaction to the unfaithful woman. Whereas Ben was deeply in love with Maggie and still dreams of her, once he learned of her affair he refused to see her again, insisting, 'It's no use, Maggie. It's like you were dead. You are--to me.'

Notably, Ben remembers Maggie at the point that he suspects his daughter Letty is infatuated with the married Jim Carter: 'But then the times, he had told himself on the few occasions he had permitted himself to speculate about his daughter's emotions--the times had changed. Young girls had different manners these days. Perhaps even their emotions were different.' Because Ben no longer applies his former standards, he encourages a change in values. The younger generation, indeed, seems to countenance infidelity or at least treat it more casually, so that Jim, for instance, seems much less morally outraged over Sara's affair than was Ben over Maggie's. Jim's hurt pride is stronger than any moral consideration.

Not only does Ben's flashback to Maggie permit this contrast between the men's moral outlooks, but the parallels between Maggie and Letty are telling. Ben realizes that his daughter Letty physically resembles Maggie Carew, Rose's first cousin, more than her own mother, and Letty has Maggie's temperament, too. Lacking her mother's 'winsomeness,' Letty is a flirt, never faithful to any of the many men who care for her. Yet her father suppresses any suspicions of Letty's involvement with Jim until the two have already run away together. Again, the pattern of the past has prepared us for this event. Like a Maggie Carew who takes her own pleasure without considering what is moral, Letty cuckolds her fiancé.

Through the point of view of Letty herself we see how strongly she desires Jim. She dwells on her memories of him. His words, which she remembers when she is alone in her room at Hanging Tree, echo again in her mind when she is with her fiancé. Similarly Jim's memories prepare us for his promiscuity. His flight with Letty is no more auspicious than his drunken elopement with Sara. Responsible for one failed relationship after another, Jim has not even asked himself if he is at fault. We learn his history in the long flashback that takes place one morning at Letty's home, before he rises from bed and goes downstairs for breakfast. Since it is Jim's mind selecting the memories, the patterns become all the more revealing, for they reflect his repeated selfishness and insincerity in love.

There is no reason to believe that Jim Carter has learned from his failed relationships how to be intimate with and love a woman. Nor does Letty seem to have changed. The first night she met Jim, after returning from a dance with a man she did not even like, Letty entered the dark, supposedly empty house, and Jim--a stranger to her then--startled her by speaking from the dark living room. Scared at first, she let him comfort her. Much later in the novel when this same incident is recounted through Jim's viewpoint, we have learned of his past and identify his role as comforter with his role as seducer. By then we also appreciate the irony of the first meeting between Letty and Jim: that same day Jim had received his wife's letter requesting a divorce.

Repeatedly, love between man and woman is imperfect, and as Ed Trivers' sermon makes clear, human selfishness accounts for the failures. The only person in the novel to try to correct the spiritual depravity of his contemporaries, Ed is too undeveloped a character to be presenting a solution for all members of the society. In fact, there seems to be no character in *The Garden of Adonis* who can evaluate society, no one who invests his imagination in worthy pursuits. The energy that once might have been channeled into making the land productive is now expended in more landscaping, as the Camps spend their money to transform their property into a prospect. Consequently, Jim finds himself admiring the beauty of their artificial lake, all the while 'calculating the cost of the operations.' This artificial garden of Adonis is indeed a decadent one, the scene for Jim's flirtation with Sara and for the sexual teasing that eventually leads to their unhappy marriage.

The energy misdirected in creating this bower of bliss parallels the ingenuity and drive behind the Camps' successful business. Joe Camp possesses that facility for 'improving' on the present and develops, with the help of a designer from the East, the 'Improved Fascinex'--*apparently a contraceptive*, as earlier descriptions of the Camps' products would suggest. Just as nature is remodeled according to the Camps' tastes, even the natural and sexual urge--traditionally controlled by social customs and mores--is exploited by them. The billboard advertisement for their products pictures 'a young girl smiling vivaciously and leaping high into the air,' the captions reading, 'Be as gay as the rest' and 'Use Fascinex. In three sizes.' A sign of that mentality which makes sexual relations a question of fashion rather than of morals, the billboard suggests metaphorically the Camps' selfish hedonism. [italics added]

When Jim Carter marries the Camps' daughter and joins the family business, he has most certainly betrayed the ideals of his heritage. Especially in comparison to a man like Jim, Ben Allard is a hero. He is one of the few people in the novel who can view the action through the perspective of history--meaning that has been ordered and defined by a community. But Ben's blind adherence to the agrarian system is flawed: he does not see whatever he does not want to deal with--whether it be his daughter's promiscuity or the unhappiness of his tenants. Ultimately, because he refuses to acknowledge these problems, he is destroyed.

Only the narrator offers us a large enough perspective from which to evaluate society. Especially through the manipulation of time and through multiple points of view, the ironies of the characters' searches for self-fulfillment are dramatized. Again and again the characters close to the land discover that the satisfactions the natural world can supply are only temporary, as the drought reminds them. For those who measure days by the cars passing on the assembly lines or--as Eliot remarks--by figures of 'profit and loss,' the pace of life and its meaning seem to be under human control. In reality, the characters are trapped in chronological time with no conception of a spiritual eternity; their only comfort is to try to live in a perpetual present where satisfying immediate physical and material wants becomes the purpose of human life.

In revealing these faulty conceptions of time, the concealed narrator implies a more embracing view. William Stuckey observes that Caroline Gordon's vocation of writing 'has over the years taken on the aspect of something approaching religious devotion.' Not only does she strive 'to efface herself as a person as completely as she can' so that the story appears to tell itself, but she carefully chooses impersonal techniques that enable her as an artist to 'recognize' as James Rocks explains, 'some coherent pattern out of the shifting planes of a seemingly disjointed reality.' *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* has dramatized that being a good storyteller is not enough: the true artist allows the reader to share in an expansive vision of experience, which has been shaped by intuited order."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 84-95

"Rarely do religious concerns surface in these early works; the major exception is *The Garden of Adonis.* Here one character, Ed Mortimer, stands apart from the others in that he spends his days studying and preaching salvation. At first glance, his life appears fraught with meaning and solace. Yet it soon becomes clear that he is cut off from the vital forces of life: after his experience of being 'saved,' he no longer shares, as he formerly did, in the warmth and friendship of those about him. His brother Ote says of him: 'He would speak to you, smiling, and then look away as if he didn't have time to listen to your answers, as if what you said couldn't make any difference to him. It was like he was studying something important all the time and didn't have timed to fool with other folks.' For Ed, earthly life is insignificant; the theme of one of his Sunday sermons is 'This world and all its pleasures.... Hit ain't nothin'.' But Gordon makes it abundantly clear in the novel that, to her, the world, its pleasures and its pains, is in fact *everything*. [This critic incorrectly calls Gordon an Atheist. Italics added.] Like Tate during this period, Gordon sees religious absorption as a denial of life; Ed's religious intensity resembles Cousin Cave's study of the classics--both are escapes into fantasy.... [This is an Atheist critic projecting his own beliefs, falsely claiming that these two characters represent the views of the author, who based her aesthetics on the classics and who became a Catholic.]

Gordon also makes it clear in these early works that she will take no part in the easy idealization of days gone by. Her attitude is close to Allen Tate's--at least that part of Tate which recoiled from back-to-the-farm Agrarian purists.... Even more than Tate, Gordon distrusted romanticizing the past, and often in her art she too directed her skepticism at the Agrarians. Indeed, much of her early work can be read on one level as a criticism of the Agrarians--at least the hard-liners. *Penhally*, for instance, is in a very real sense an anti-plantation novel [overstates] that works against the established tradition of the southern manor house where life is ordered, serene, and secure.... Gordon's message here is that there never has been a golden age, and that to idealize the Old South and see its ways as the answer to contemporary problems--as some Agrarians were doing--is to follow the lead of earlier local-color writers who romanticized the southern plantation, ignoring all the while the difficult questions of their own day and indulging in a saccharine nostalgia.

An even more explicit criticism of the Agrarian dream appears in *The Garden of Adonis*, which is set in the contemporary South. As Gordon shows it here, the South of the 1930s is a land wracked by drought, economic depression, and exploitation. Central to the novel are two characters who strive to realize the agrarian vision: Mr. Allard, who struggles to make his farm a profitable enterprise; and Ote Mortimer, one of Mr. Allard's tenants, who works the field with love and devotion. Mr. Allard's and Ote's efforts to transform the stubborn clay fields of abundance elevate them far above the other folks on the farm, who scratch and till merely to eke by.

Ye this is no glorification of the rewards of hard work. Terrible problems beset the two agrarian heroes, particularly lack of money and of rain, both of which lie beyond their control. Eventually these problems destroy Mr. Allard and Ote, and at the end total chaos reigns: in a fit of rage, Ote murders Mr. Allard when he cannot advance Ote the money he needs for marriage. Ote then takes off into the woods, his life now as lost as Mr. Allard's. The significance of the title now looms large. Like the ancient garden of Adonis, where plants shot up only to wither away because they lacked deep root systems, the modern South is unable to sustain a fruitful and spiritually fulfilling society. To live the Agrarian vision only initiates disaster."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 85-87

"Adonis gardens in Athens were small pots of seeds that were forced to grow artificially; the plants faded rapidly, symbolizing, supposedly, the brevity of sexual pleasure.... Her picture of Ote, the tenant farmer, is vivid and full of vitality, but he disappears for the entire middle of the book while Jim Carter...takes over. Unable to go to college--he was the youngest son of a poor widow--Jim gave up training dogs to take a job in St. Louis, but he returns to his hometown to work for the Camps, Yankee

industrialists who have moved there from New Jersey.... Caroline wrote to Max Perkins that Allen 'doesn't think it humanly possible for a man to be as dumb as Jim Carter'.... Caroline uses the Camps and their factory to repeat the Agrarian themes, returning--too late--[?] to the real tension in the book, the tragic dilemma of Ben Allard, the landowner, and Ote, the tenant.

The two female characters in the book are the girl Ote loves, a tenant farmer's daughter out to get all she can from whomever she can, and Letty, the landowner's daughter. Letty is perhaps the most uninspiring young woman in modern literature, interested in nothing. Even her suitor suggests she raise dogs, or find something to engage her interest. She is totally unaware of what goes on her father's farm, knows neither the names of the tenants nor whether they're dropping tobacco plants or setting them.... Ben Allard, the landowner, is modeled loosely on Caroline's Uncle Rob and other Meriwether men who were unsuccessful farmers, but he has none of their humor.... Maxwell Perkins [her editor] wrote her that by Christmas *The Garden of Adonis* had sold only 2,800 copies. The trade, he said, was 'all against books about sharecroppers or poor whites'."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 173-74

"*The Garden of Adonis* is set in the environs of contemporary Clarksville. As Caroline had decided when she planned and began it in 1931, the novel initially concerns the irreconcilable conflicts of the planter and his poor white tenants. At the end of *The Garden of Adonis*, the planter Ben Allard is killed by his tenant Ote Mortimer in a dispute over when to mow some hay. Although their conflict is agrarian, their motives actually arise from various instances of adultery and infidelity. Ote Mortimer has just learned that his fiancee, carrying his unborn child, has eloped with the prosperous bootlegger Buck Chester. At the same time, Ben Allard has discovered that his unmarried daughter Letty has run off with the married Jim Carter. Jim Carter was responding to the adultery of his wife Sara who, in turn, had been acting in retaliation for Jim's affairs with two local women. Jim's tangled and sordid history takes up the central third of the book, interrupting the Ben Allard--Ote Mortimer main plot....

Caroline abandoned the novel when she learned of Allen's adultery in the spring of 1933 and took refuge in her father's consciousness in *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*. To profit from the success of *None Shall Look Back*, at her publisher's urging, she returned to her abortive novel early in 1937. In the interim, the focus of the book had shifted from the tenant system to betrayal in half a dozen permutations. Unsurprisingly, Caroline considered *The Garden of Adonis* her least favorite novel. Structurally it is her weakest, though the novel does contain some stunning descriptions and characterizations."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 140-41

"The title referred to vegetation rites honoring the Greek god Adonis.... She thought the title appropriate since the Antaean theme ran through all her books: the land was a source of strength, and those who lost touch with it usually withered and died. Caroline developed this theme through two parallel stories of illicit love. The first story focused on Ote Mortimer and Idelle Sheeler, two tenants at Hanging Tree, the farm of Ben Allard. The second story involved the affair of Ben's daughter, Letty Allard, and Jim Carter, a married man. Caroline emphasized in each story how her characters had lost touch with their agrarian roots. Letty had grown up at Hanging Tree, but she knew little about her home and cared even less. Although her father was having financial troubles, Letty did not scruple to take all the money he could give to buy clothes and visit the city. Throughout the novel Caroline stressed Letty's shallow nature and self-absorption: she was a 'garden of Adonis' in miniature.

Letty's lover, Jim Carter, apparently knew and understood more about life at Hanging Tree after a brief visit. Caroline devoted a great deal of the novel to a description of Jim's childhood in the country, a childhood very much like that of Aleck Maury, devoted to sport. But Caroline spared little sympathy in her characterization of Jim: he was an Aleck Maury gone wrong. Forced to abandon country pleasures for life as an advertising writer, Jim had little moral fiber. He would spend the rest of his life blaming women for his troubles: first his mother, who insisted he take a job at age seventeen; then his wife and her family, who

expected him to solve their business problems. Even though he recognized the vital rhythms of life at Hanging Tree, he would not respect them.

Caroline obviously intended the story of Letty and Jim to reflect on her original narrative of Ote and Idelle. At first the life and love of poor white tenants appeared to have an advantage over that of the more wealthy city dwellers. Although Ote had been away in Detroit for several years working in a factory, he had not lost his love for or understanding of the land. Idelle came from shiftless stock, but like Ote, she was industrious, destined, it would seem, to make something of herself. Caroline underscored the pastoral innocence of Ote and Idelle's love, their respect for the land and willingness to work for their future. But ultimately Caroline revealed the shallowness of their love. When Idelle found herself pregnant, Ote would resort to violence. Desperate for money to marry, he would destroy crops and in the end would kill his boss and friend, Ben Allard....

Jim Carter, the Aleck Maury/Gordon figure, was threatened by the aggressive women aligned with the Meriwether connection; yet he was also a dangerous threat to them because he was fundamentally shallow and selfish. Caroline attempted to portray Ben Allard and Ote Mortimer as men sensitive to the natural world, as men also threatened by women like Letty and Idelle who were out of control. But she also hinted at the terrible problems Letty and Idelle faced: problems brought on by men like Ben and Ote.... Ben Allard was the only link between the two stories, but Caroline did not use Ben to reflect on what had happened. Once again, she created a novel that, when read from a conventional moralistic point of view, seemed to suggest that the irrational nature of women threatened both men and the overall state of society. But in the undercurrent of women's concerns, Caroline almost turned such conventions upside down. Perhaps the destruction of society was not due so much to the irrational power of women, but the unrestrained unreflective passions of men?...

In the late fall *The Garden of Adonis* appeared, but it garnered little critical attention.... Caroline ignored the reviews.... The novel, which had taken nearly five years to write, clearly showed the suffering she had endured during that time... The world of *The Garden of Adonis* was in chaos; even the land offered no hope of regeneration, parched by drought, seemingly forgotten by a capricious deity."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 183-84, 190-92

"Caroline Gordon's fourth novel, *The Garden of Adonis*, perhaps best exemplifies the lovelessness and sterility of the world from which both Venus and Demeter have disappeared, a world where love, ritual, or ceremony bring no magic. Babe Worsham sits on the porch of a cottage...gardened by her silent father, who watches the comings and goings of Babe's loveless (and already married) lover, Jim Carter. As Carter abandons and cruelly humiliates Babe--in what he realizes, during one of his 'rare moments of self-examination,' is 'the basest action of his life'...Babe silently disappears, and Jim Carter goes on to betray his wife by running away with Letty Allard, the younger sister of an old friend, a woman of little character who nevertheless reminds him of Babe Worsham.

The Garden of Adonis is often cited as the novel that Caroline Gordon did not like. Taking close to six years to complete...it intrigues because of Gordon's difficulty in completing it, and because it offers her first study of contemporary life--which she depicts, again, as a wasteland, devoid of love and meaning. The novel is less well structured and perhaps more narrow in theme than Gordon's other works, but these 'flaws' seem to have been conscious if reluctant choices that Gordon made as she worked to recreate the world she inherited from those modern male artists whom she most admired: T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, and Allen Tate. Gordon had great difficulty translating the 'mythic method,' used especially by Joyce and Eliot, to her own fiction, and her habit of intimating rather than stating seem contrary to the fixed structure of the myth she had chosen to follow.

Although usually described as the most pessimistic of her novels, *The Garden of Adonis* opens on a note of optimism. Ote Mortimer, an energetic and gregarious young factory worker from Detroit, finds himself out of a job and back on Southern land. He joins his aging parents as sharecroppers on the farm of Ben Allard, a good-hearted man who is ill-equipped for modern farming. Despite his notion that sharecroppers

are, by and large, little more than stubborn cattle, Ben Allard takes an interest in young Mortimer and respects his work. Ote, with his 'knack' for mechanical things and dedication to hard work, should be able to help Ben, particularly if he follows the advice of Chance Llewellyn, the character from *Penhally* who most loved and understood the land. Thus Gordon prepares readers to see that divisions between class, generations, and talent need not be obstacles as these men work together to revitalize the land.

Such rejuvenation does not occur because women and sexual passions intervene. [too reductive] In her ironic use of the quotation from the opening chapter of Sir James Frazer's 'The Gardens of Adonis,' Gordon intimates that the past, when women would restore the land to fertility through ritualized action, is gone. The New Women who populate Gordon's fourth novel are anything but heroic. They are sexually active, assertive, and demanding. They lure men into sexual liaisons that compound men's futile attempts to hold the old world together, or they act rigidly or unfaithfully and retard men's creative energies. Like the women who raise the gardens of Adonis, they plant seeds in shallow pots; they act not out of the knowledge of ritual but out of ignorance or lack of concern for the creative processes that govern the natural world, including their own bodies.

Ben Allard's failure in farming is representative of his failure in love. When he sees the woman he loves, Maggie Carew, in the embrace of another man, Ben refuses to forgive her: 'He hardly listened. When she stopped he shook his head. 'It's no use, Maggie. It's like you were dead. Your are--to me.' It might be easier if Maggie were dead to Ben, but she is constantly there to remind him that women are no longer passive, chaste, or faithful. In his inability to listen to her and to forgive her, Allard refuses to accept the changed world. This destructive act so marks his life that he resembles the mythical and impotent Fisher King who cannot restore life to the wasteland he has created.

Ote also feels betrayed by a woman and, again, the betrayal leads him to a mindless murder of another kind. He falls in love with Idelle Sheeler, a beautiful but indolent young woman whose family is even below the Mortimers in the social order. Gordon associates Idelle with the natural world; unsophisticated, sensual, and naturally promiscuous, Idelle discovers she is pregnant by Ote and, fearing her father's rage, wants to marry. Ote unsuccessfully petitions both Ben for money or a cabin and his mother for a room for his wife, but Idelle, knowing that her father will turn her out as he did her sister, does not wait for Ote and marries the bootlegger Buck Chester. Full of rage, Ote begins to mow the undeveloped field of clover that both he and Ben had planted as their saving crop. When Ben Allard tries to stop him, Ote murders his landlord.

Threaded through this rather conventional plot are other stories of loveless lovers. Ben Allard's daughter, Letty, at twenty-four lapses into an engagement because she fears, as a single woman, she will no longer be invited to social events. The dull offspring of Ben Allard is incapable of sustaining an interest in anyone or anything--except, perhaps, the directionless and self-absorbed philanderer, Jim Carter, another of Gordon's hunters. Highlighting the similarities between Jim and Letty as cold and loveless lovers, Gordon allows the reader to listen to Carter's meditation on Letty's cool response to his flirtation, then rejection of her. In this meditation, Carter referring to himself in the third person, assumes the consciousness of Letty: 'She was going, she said, to marry somebody...'

Thus, Gordon draws Carter as the detached modern man in crisis. He is so out of touch with himself that he objectifies not only the women with whom he relates but also himself. He elopes with Letty, another New Woman, violating his marriage to Sara Camp (who also has been unfaithful to him), his friendship to Letty's brother, Frank, and the generous hospitality of his host, Ben Allard. Like the plants in the gardens of Adonis, the passions of the characters in Gordon's fourth novel are too shallow to find root. The root of their betrayal of themselves and one another may lie in gardens not well tended by their parents, who embraced the modern world too uncritically and educate their children with unsubstantial love and superficial values. Jim Carter's mother separated her son from his passion for training dogs so that he might make money for his sisters' marriages. His wife's mother embroiders pretty flowers as her wealthy and irresponsible children drink and lose themselves in paltry pleasures, while her father--who made his fortune making feminine hygiene products, which deny or camouflage sexual functions--largely ignores his children. In losing his business, he takes from his children the only thing he ever gave them--money. Ote's

mother, though she carries from cabin to cabin a picture of the Virgin with Son, shows no generosity to her own son when he turns to her for shelter for Idelle, a young woman terrified by her own shiftless father.

The children of the traditional patriarch Ben are left in an equally vulnerable position by the death of their mother and their father's betrayal by Maggie Carew. Like Babe Worsham, Ben Allard's wife, Rose, might have healed the Fisher King or the dying Adonis if only he could speak to her and love her. Readers know little of Rose, the woman associated with love and with flowers, because Gordon quite deliberately removes her from the wasteland of this novel. We gain a very indirect view of her through Ben's comparison of his wife to Letty, the daughter who acts more like the unfaithful Maggie: 'Letty was not beautiful. She was pretty....'

Rose and Babe are associated with the old-order goddesses of love or fertility, but they strive with modern Persephone, the goddess of death, for their beautiful Adonis. They are not the chosen lovers in this novel; both are betrayed by men with a propensity for womanizing or violent behavior. These men seek fulfillment with loveless lovers, with Persephone who cannot restore fertility. As in *None Shall Look Back*, sexual love can no longer be counted upon as a redemptive force; it is, as Ed Trivers, the evangelist preacher, tells his congregation, 'A flash of sun on a rainy day.... A mornin's favor. That's all...' In her next book, *Green Centuries*, Caroline Gordon re-imagines the beginnings of American civilization and explores the forces that turned the 'mornin's favor' into the modern wasteland."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson U 2002) 130-33

The Garden of Adonis is Gordon's variation on the major themes of Eliot's *The Waste Land,* the most influential poem of the 20th century. The garden that withers is a symbol of spiritual death in the modern world. Except for Brinkmeyer the critics are *collectively* adequate on this novel, though more emphasis should be given to the religious implications of pastor Ed's sermon and to motifs in the tradition of *The Waste Land*--loss of faith, lack of rain, failure of crops, wasted seed, and the sterility of love affairs. That most of the love affairs lack deep roots and wither away also evokes the parable of the sower by Jesus. The Adonis figures in the novel, most obviously Jim Carter, are ironic.

Notwithstanding the allusion to myth as the title, the novel itself appears to be straightforward literal Realism because of the extensive depiction of the poor white tenants on the farm of Ben Allard. No longer slaves, blacks have largely been replaced by poor whites. This novel is much simpler, less complicated by multiple family connections and easier to read than *Penhally* or *None Shall Look Back.* The Allards, family connections of the Llewellyns in *Penhally* and the protagonists in *None Shall Look Back*, survive in this novel in the person of Ben, who is weaker than earlier members of the family such as Susan, Rives, Cally, and Ned in *None Shall Look Back*. *The Garden of Adonis* is set in the Great Depression before the ending of *Penhally*, as Chance Llewellyn is still farming and has not yet murdered his brother.

The convincing Realism, the perfect rendering of southern poor white dialect, the authentic dramatizing of historical circumstances and the diverse representative characters elicited high praise from Katherine Anne Porter. Gordon's sympathetic portrayal of poor whites is unlike John Steinbeck's Okies in being unsentimental and is more comprehensive than the depictions of poor whites by Sherwood Anderson and by Faulkner, whose Snopes family is a negative social force. The Modernist technical features of *The Garden of Adonis* include the mythic method, detachment, subtlety, multiple points of view, archetypal symbolism, and the tendency to allegory.

Michael Hollister (2019)