

ANALYSIS

The Strange Children (1951)

Caroline and Allen at 108 Perry Street,
New York City. (*Ward Dorrance*)



Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"I use Lucy's eye more, much more than her mind... But I wanted the innocent eye for the sake of the brilliance of its recording--not to mention the innocent ear.... Sometimes Lucy hears things she can't understand. But a child, I imagine, registers tones of voice, registers, that is, anything that is important, anything that is said with feeling, even if he or she doesn't understand the feeling.... Lucy's story--what happens to Lucy--is the basic theme, but what happens to four others sets of people is intertwined with her story. They are all strange children, as it says in the Bible [Psalm 144]. Lucy's name, of course, is significant. She is smarter than the average child--at least she sees farther. Why is St. Lucy always represented as carrying her eyes about if she can't see farther than the next one?"

Gordon
Letter to Ward Dorrance (1950)

"I wanted more range than I could get through the child's intelligence or sensations... I remember, years ago, reading *River House* and admiring the way you managed the denouement--by a sudden change of view point in the very last paragraph of the book."

Gordon
Letter to Stark Young (1951)

"My story purports to be the story of something that happened to a child and it is that story on one level of action, but it is also and chiefly, I think, a story of what happened to her father. In the first part of the story the child seems nearer to her mother. She goes to look at the waterfall with her mother but she looks at the stars with her father. Halfway through the book there is a shift of emphasis from mother to father. When she falls off her pony, it is her father who picks her up and at the last she is standing beside her father, with his arm around her."

Gordon
Letter to Flannery O'Connor
"A Master Class: From the Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon"
ed. Sally Fitzgerald, *Georgia Review* 33.4 (1979) 843

"The novel is both dramatic and subtle, and 'suggests without special pleading the contrast between the aimless and the consecrated life'.... *The Strange Children* is a 'deceptively quiet' novel. 'No scene, no dialogue is recorded that falls outside [Lucy's] orbit'."

Anonymous
Review of *The Strange Children*
Atlantic Monthly (November 1951) 97
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) 235

"Through the eyes of a precocious, nine-year-old girl, visitors to her home on the Cumberland river are seen impressionistically, while a Holy Roller meeting heightens complex emotions and leads to an elopement'."

Anonymous
Review of *The Strange Children*
Bookmark 11 (November 1951) 34
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 235

"The tone of the novel is 'detached, worldly wise.' 'Placed against the aimless vegetating and religious fanaticism of the native neighbors'...[Lucy's] cynicism and romanticism provide satiric perspective."

Anonymous
Review of *The Strange Children*
Kirkus 19:403 (1951)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 235

"In this 'novel of conversations...the atmosphere is consistently fascinating, but one cannot help feeling that if little Lucy could be got out of the room, all the grownups would breathe easier and speak more freely'.... Lucy is spoiled and 'something of a pest'."

Anonymous
Review of *The Strange Children*
New Yorker (15 September 1951) 131-32
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 236

"Caroline Gordon is 'distinguished'...The tale is characterized by...an 'extremely polished style'... The novel develops 'along a series of more or less straight lines which only converge with the belated--but intellectually battering--punch of the climax and swiftly following conclusion'.... With the elopement of Tubby and Isabel, 'the insubstantialness of Isabel's nature...becomes clearly similar to the insubstantialness of Undine' and 'the elopement becomes inferentially as fatal for Tubby as the embrace was for Sir Huldbrand.' Similarly, the snake handling scene reveals the purpose of the line of action involving Catholicism, the Holy Rollers, and Agnosticism... At the end...'apparently conflicting currents and cross-currents [are] seen clearly to be coordinating parts of a unified whole.' The import of the novel is that 'all we creatures on this mundane earth, rather than just Lucy herself, are more or less in the nature of 'strange children'."

Henry Cavendish
Review of *The Strange Children*
Chicago Sunday Tribune (23 September 1951) 10
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 236

"Reviews *The Strange Children* and Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*. Gordon's 'tidy economy and cool ambivalence' contrast with Styron's 'complex and even turgid' first book.... 'Technically skillful'... *The Strange Children* is written with 'dispassionate control,' and successfully epitomizes a way of life."

Ruth Chapin
"Twilight of the South"
Christian Science Monitor (4 October 1951) 15
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 236-7

"The 'children' are the grown-ups 'living in spiritual aridity' who 'talk too much, drink too much, know too much.' Life is deflected with words. Lucy is 'sophisticated like her parents, but without loss of passion, imagination, will.' The love triangle [Kevin-Isabel-Tubby] 'reaches a climax...just as a Holy Roller revival meeting...comes to its own violent conclusion.' Lucy is 'less complexly naive and innocent' than Henry James' Maisie [*What Maisie Knew*]. Gordon is 'more interested in the adult relationships' than in what they mean to Lucy; hence, the 'long, revelatory, allusive conversations to which a child like Lucy would automatically shut her ears and mind.' However, Lucy shares in evil, betrays and is betrayed. 'The treatment of evil is explicit' in the novel and 'the ultimate concern of most of the characters...is religious'."

Robert Gorham Davis
"An Evil Time for Lucy"
New York Times Book Review (9 September 1951) 5, 20
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 237

"Though Lucy is odious--'of all American brats in fiction she is outnastied only by Carson McCullers' megalomaniac heroine in *The Member of the Wedding*--her elders are infinitely worse.' Gordon 'conveys beauty admirably' but though she 'shows beauty as truth, she knows it is not love, at our level'.... In her South Gordon 'shows how all that spirit or heart could desire of perfect setting and "gracious living" [is] wasted by those who don't obey the first commandment'."

Anne Fremantle
Review of *The Strange Children*
Commonweal (16 November 1951) 155-56
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 237

"Reviews *The Strange Children* and Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*. Faulkner's novel is not 'top-drawer'; rather it is meandering and displays 'a positive contempt for style.' On the other hand, *The Strange Children* 'is limpidity itself in comparison. Not that it's an easily analyzed affair; it isn't, but the style is crystal clear and the import rather simple'--'another of those 'adults as seen through the eyes of youngsters' stories.' The novel is characterized by little exterior action, with emphasis 'exclusively on interior strains and stresses.' The symbolism of the crucifix runs throughout. 'Perhaps Miss Gordon means that until people like these modern beautiful and damned learn the meaning behind the little crucifix, they, too, will continue to be very strange children, indeed'."

Harold C. Gardiner
"Two Southern Tales"
America (6 October 1951) 18
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 238

"In *The Strange Children*, which studies the effects of religious experience, and of the lack of such experience, 'it is the agnostics who are supposed to come off badly and [who] are the strange children of the title.' But the problems of the adults are 'humanistic,' religious, and serious. Because as chosen narrator Lucy's power of judgment is beyond her power of statement, she cannot do justice to the expression of

these problems which 'would, one feels, have reached full stature had they been presented out of range of little Lucy.' Gordon's style is good."

Hazel Hawthorne
"Varieties of Experience"
New Republic (29 October 1951) 28
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 238

"Gordon's 'most richly rewarding work' is 'concerned with the abiding themes of man's destiny, his search for certitude, the littleness of his time under the sun, and the vanity of all his works' [Psalm 144]. The scene is explicit, the time 'somewhat less explicit.' Lucy is the 'pivotal character,' though the author retains the rule of narrator and 'the reader is not limited to Lucy's observations, perceptive as they are, or to incidents to which the child is a witness.' The exploration of human destiny and vanity in the 'complex characters' of Tubby, Isabel, and Kevin is 'immeasurably enriched and illuminated' by juxtaposition with the MacDonough family and friends and the Holy Roller meeting."

Coleman Rosenberger
Review of *The Strange Children*
New York Herald Tribune Book Review (9 September 1951) 5
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 239

"Reviews *The Strange Children* and William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*. 'A single theme, openly arrived at and stated again and again, runs through both these novels by Southern authors: chaos. Caroline Gordon finds it in seemingly sane persons who suddenly do violently insane things.' The 'author's answer in each case is religious faith.' Gordon's answer is 'Catholicism: the faith of Kevin Reardon, the one man who is able to stand up to chaos and cope with it.' Except for Lucy, the Lewises are spectators in the drama. Isabel Reardon and Uncle Tubby 'seemingly sane and intelligent and "normal" have blundered into what is certain to be chaos.' Only Kevin is in control of the situation. The final switch in point of view is 'effective and not incongruous as far as the narrative goes'.... It is a successful, effective novel... One comes to see that the careful opening development is what makes the conclusion possible'."

Louis D. Rubin, Jr.
"What To Do About Chaos"
Hopkins Review 5:65-68 (1951)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 239

"It is 'a book consciously filled with fine things, most of them tremendously effective'... The 'tremendously skillful shift' by which 'we suddenly assume Stephen Lewis' terms' [is] a 'sort of last minute denial, perhaps, of the framework that has been so carefully (we thought) established'."

Carl Hartman
"Charades at Benfolly"
Western Review: A Journal of the Humanities 16:322-24 (1952)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 240-41

"Reviews Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, Gordon's *The Strange Children*, and Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* which focus on 'the girl with a special sensibility--or at least the girl who is a special case of sorts' and 'all of which, literally or metaphorically, send their heroines to school'.... Gordon's book is superior to Jackson's in its transmutation of 'the event in time into the timeless action...the case history into the universal case.'

There are 'two recording minds': Lucy's and the author's, though in the end Lucy is reduced to the role of extra while her father 'thinks out the envoi.' The tensions of the book arise from the 'varieties of religious experience.' The diverse personalities share a common 'fascination with the phenomena of spirit,' and pursue 'a truth, or a firmness, or a communion not possessed.' The word 'strange,' meaning 'foreign, alien, the world cut off from spirit,' appears constantly and reaches a brilliant climax in the revelation that Isabel is insane, and that Kevin has borne this. [The novel is a] marriage of comedy of manners and parable with tragic implications'."

Robert B. Heilman
"Schools for Girls"

Sewanee Review 60:299-309 (1952)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 241

"In this perceptive, impressionistic, and finally unresolved novel the adults are the "strange" ones.' Lucy's life is substantial, contrasted with that of her parents and their friends: she at least 'lives in the moment'; they 'live for a moment to come.' Lucy is 'at the center of the book' and 'the author's revelation of the decay in personal values is aimed at the consciousness of the reader,' for 'what Lucy sees...has no intellectual message for her.' Her 'only positive act is to steal a crucifix, to participate for a time in the corruption which leads to the undefined moment for which her life is being prepared'."

Hughes Riley
Review of *The Strange Children*
Catholic World (January 1952) 313
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 241-42

"Reviews seven novels by different authors, among them Gordon's *The Strange Children*, 'a novel that seems to have grown naturally and without strain.' Gordon is recognized as 'one of our best novelists' and this 'seems to me to be her best book, possessing as it does a richness of substance beyond anything I have found in her earlier writing.' The reader shares in the gradual 'illumination' which Lucy experiences--'the small hard extra bit of understanding we can sometimes wrest' from ordinary everyday living. Crucial objects and events in the novel take on 'natural overtones' of mystery and significance: the crucifix, the story of Undine, a game of charades, a pony, a revival meeting, the love affair between Isabel and Uncle Tubby, their elopement--though these larger meanings 'are not insisted upon by the author'."

Frederick Morgan
"Seven Novels"
Hudson Review 5:154-60 (1952)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 242

"Discusses in some detail five or six novels but focuses primarily on *The Strange Children* wherein Gordon's 'fidelity to the tradition of "naturalism" [natural as distinct from Naturalism] as she has defined it emerges with a mature authority.' By contrast with Eudora Welty whose acclaim is merited, and with Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers, whose fame exceeds their achievement [Porter is great, McCullers mediocre; by lumping these two together this critic loses some of the credibility she gains by her praise of Gordon]. Gordon has 'suffered a curious lack of appreciation.' Her 'unmodishness' may be responsible for her lack of wider recognition. Gordon is 'the conservator in contemporary Southern fiction of the great classical tradition of the nineteenth century novel as formulated by Stendhal, Flaubert and somewhat later, Henry James.' *The Strange Children* is a 'finely thoughtful work,' Here Gordon is 'most powerfully' the conservator of 'the heritage of "naturalism" [Realism] and thus of the mainstream of the great fiction of the western world'....

In *The Strange Children* Gordon achieves with 'dazzling effect--something that...the early novels only timidly hinted': the novel of manners in which 'social comedy is complicated and, in the end, dominated by the perilous likeness it bears to tragedy.' The novel of ideas is Gordon's 'proper domain'; here she gives rein to a 'powerful intellectual scrutiny suppressed in the earlier novels in favor of an ambivalent mystique of localism and historicism'." [The last statement is inadequate.]

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South
eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Johns Hopkins 1952) 325-37
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 243-44

"*The Strange Children* manages the seemingly impossible device of revealing a complex hierarchy of meaning through the use of a nine-year-old child as the central intelligence. [Compare *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James] As modern fiction has shown again and again, the dangers of using an immature consciousness for this task are manifold... But the choice of Lucy Lewis, whose favorite reading is the beautifully ambiguous tale of 'Undine,' as central intelligence is subtly right for Miss Gordon's motive, a

motive adequately laid down by her epigraph: 'Rid me and deliver me from the hand of strange children whose mouth speaketh vanity...'

It is, of course, the ironic triumph of the novel that the strange children are the grown-ups in it and that Lucy is the wisely clairvoyant agent of judgment on them. But unlike those intolerable children of modern writing she is not all innocence and imagination; nor, as in the counter-romantic to this view of child-life, all cunning and sexuality. She is, rather, a little vessel which responds to the tremors and passions of the adult world in which she is both familiar and stranger, but always with that instinctual knowledge of good and evil which seems to be the burdensome gift of innocence....

Benfolly [is] a country house in Tennessee, where a group of neurotic and self-destructive intellectuals, both Northern and Southern, are gathered in the hectic communality of an alcoholic house party. The question of the limits of Lucy's ability to re-translate the action for us is solved by Miss Gordon's subtle modulations from the child as central intelligence to an omniscient narrator when the material becomes unmanageable for the child. This violates that strict determinism which is sometimes thought to control the point of view in the naturalistic [Realistic] novel, but, as even the most cursory examination of *Madame Bovary* or *Ulysses* will reveal, these small shifts of perspective are always useful when the limitations of the perceiving sensibility require them. Miss Gordon's sharp awareness of this possibility is evident in the endorsement she gives to the method of the 'Roving Narrator' or the 'Technique of Central Intelligence' in *The House of Fiction*....

We need only look...at the moving end of *The Strange Children* to see her method in operation. We have just had the great cathartic climax of the Holy Roller meeting of the poor whites and the taking up of serpents.... Little Lucy, through the cruelly casual thoughtlessness of her parents, has been exposed to all this and, now, to complete her turmoil, her fall from virtue in the theft of a crucifix belonging to one of the house-guests is suddenly and humiliatingly discovered.... The real horror of this is in the revelation by Kevin that Isabel is mad. It is at this point that the child, as central intelligence, delicately modulates into a more encompassing one which is that of her father's and, beyond that, through language, tone and selection of detail into that of the omniscient narrator, or, more properly, the author herself....

It is right that this concluding integration of themes should be stated through a larger vision than that of a child's. Lucy's burdens in the strange dissolution of loves and friendships that has taken place at Benfolly are profound. But it requires a more practiced judgment than hers to restore the troubled movement of all the characters' lives into the universal channels of love and hate, of death and peace and rebirth. In this passage, somehow recalling in its cadences the great final lines of Joyce's 'The Dead,' there is no solution, only a momentary resolution into a new possibility of being.

I have scanted in this accomplished novel those elements of wit and erudition which are a new and altogether successful area of achievement for Miss Gordon, and, as a matter of fact, a province that few women writers in this country have essayed. Into this impressively knowledgeable complex of reference, the issue of religion naturally enters. Miss Gordon's conversion to Catholicism has been public knowledge for some five years but there is little overt concern about religion on the part of the protagonists of the novel written concurrently with her reception into the church....

It is the child, Lucy, who in her seemingly senseless theft of Kevin's crucifix dramatically reveals the drive which they all unknowingly harbor for a savior.... There is a kind of incandescence and we recognize that two ways of knowing have been exhibited for us, through the dramatic mode of 'naturalism,' as possibilities of salvation [Catholics and Holy Rollers]. We have not been told; we have only, in the strict aesthetic of Miss Gordon's understanding of naturalism [Realism], been shown.

It is possible to say that *The Strange Children* which, incidentally, at one level is a fascinatingly malicious *roman a clef* of some pretty well-known literary figures, is the first work in which Caroline Gordon exchanges the frame of reference of a vanished hierarchy of caste and grace, represented by the Old South, for the universe of order provided by the more durable scheme of Catholicism and its idea of grace.... Alienated means no longer merely to be cast out from a social class or a local society, but a removal from God to whom we have become strange children."

Vivienne Koch
"The Conservatism of Caroline Gordon"
Southern Renaissance (1952) 333-37

"The sly irony springing from the child's perceptive nine-year-old mind is sustained for the whole of Miss Gordon's unusual and poignant novel.... [Gordon is] the most original and suggestive of writers. I have not come across anything so daring, so free from the burden of dead tradition in a long time."

Anthony Curtis
New Statesman and Nation (1952) 552
Great Britain

"Discusses seven novels focusing especially on *The Strange Children* which 'marks a definite departure for Miss Gordon,' her 'best--and also her most profound--work.' Many critics were at a loss to evaluate its theme: 'the necessity of spiritual regeneration or re-birth through suffering or immolation.' A 'moral and philosophical attitude informs the entire novel.' Gordon's is 'a talent already recognized as one of the finest that contemporary American writing has to offer'."

Lawrence T. King
"The Novels of Caroline Gordon"
Catholic World (July 1955) 274-79
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 245

"In *The Strange Children* 'a new note is faintly sounded.' At the end, Lucy 'stands with her father looking up at the stars.' This 'muted emphasis on a religious theme prepares us for its full development in *The Malefactors*' where at least Tom and Vera 'discover the way up and are re-born.' As the South has faded from Gordon's novels, 'religion has taken its place, and the way is up'."

Willard Thorp
"The Way Back and the Way Up: The Novels of Caroline Gordon"
Bucknell Review 6 (December 1956) 1-15
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 257

"*The Strange Children* 'displayed a new talent for capturing the flavor of modern intellectual and spiritual dilemmas'.... 'One is always left in a Gordon novel with admiration for her technique, her ironic revelations, her accuracy in observation'."

John M. Bradbury
Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-1960
(U North Carolina 1963) 57-63
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 267

"*The Strange Children* [is] 'the most satisfying volume that Miss Gordon has published'.... She 'gives full play to the substantial body of ideas demanded by the conflict she poses: the life of religious faith and the pursuit of regeneration versus intellectualism and cosmopolitanism.' Here her style 'takes on a richer quality' and 'her manipulation of the point of view...is especially worthy of remark.' The irony that adoption of Lucy's point of view affords 'enriches the book throughout.' Kevin 'stands for the true religion... On the other hand, the Lewises 'suffer from the curse of the abstract and the immobility of the objective stance.' In Tubby, Gordon 'makes her case for the pressing need for religion to counteract the decadence of Western man' and underlines this 'by viewing it, stark and unmodified, in the light of a child's holistic morality'.... *The Strange Children* is 'the most readable' of Gordon's novels."

Chester E. Eisinger
"Caroline Gordon: The Logic of Conservatism"
Fiction of the Forties (U Chicago 1963) 186-93
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 270-71

"*The Strange Children* (1951) presents through the central intelligence of the nine-year-old Lucy Lewis a view of the adult world which surrounds her as she attempts to relate herself to it. The most remarkable facet of the novel is the consistency with which Miss Gordon maintains point of view and the thoroughness

with which she charts the development in Lucy of moral and religious awareness. Kevin Reardon, a visiting friend of the family, explains that she is named after Saint Lucy whose name means light: one so named should be able to experience an accession of light as Lucy in fact does.

Miss Gordon depicts with subtlety the tensions between Lucy and the adults about her, 'the strange children' of the title 'whose mouth speaketh vanity.' If Lucy is a 'changeling' to her mother, Sarah Lewis is, for the girl, an object of pity as she drudges for the guests, of bewilderment as she suffers from a hangover, and of antagonism as she tries to prevent Lucy from going with Uncle Tubby and Isabel Reardon for a swim. Tubby MacCollum is a 'successful' poet whose work about the Civil War, *If It Takes All Summer*, has been immensely popular; he has visited the Reardons in France recently, and Isabel has telegraphed him to meet her at the Lewises. Stephen Lewis, Lucy's father, is a lapsed poet and an amateur historian, too intellectual to be capable of spontaneity. Lucy notes her parents' tendency to disparage their friends; and in her mind's eye, she sees the dismembered bodies of these people lying about the lawn when her parents are done with their gossiping.

Throughout, Lucy thus modulates her sensations and thoughts from the conscious plane to the unconscious, passing from articulate utterance to the half-formed impressions and the psychic fluctuations of the stream of consciousness. In addition, she frequently juxtaposes the perceptions of the moment with dim recollections of her past in France and elsewhere. She is shaken by the discovery of Tubby and Isabel embracing in the woods, intuitively understanding what is happening though she is unable to define her reactions precisely. Evil thus disturbs her before she knows enough about it to come to terms with it.

Lucy Lewis continually learns about her elders and is able to use some of this knowledge for her own enlightenment. Her own imaginativeness and spontaneity are symbolized through her involvement with the characters in the romantic tale of *Undine* which she constantly ponders. And like Undine, Lucy acquires a soul and learns of both the sufferings and the satisfactions which knowledge brings. She regards the world of pretentious intellectuals with the asperity of Aleck Maury, her grandfather; the old man regards his daughter, her husband, and their friends as fools who bore him. Lucy would agree with her grandfather that unspoiled nature is more vital than the 'civilized' life of her parents and their circle. She experiences a peace in contemplating the waterfall, for instance, which she finds nowhere else at Benfolly.

Lucy illustrates in her own actions the basic truth that evil impulses divide human nature. She cannot retain an unsoiled virtue in the decadence that surrounds her. She steals a crucifix from Reardon. When she returns it, she confesses her theft in a kind of penance rite. The eyes of the crucifix have fascinated her, and they will undoubtedly have a renovative effect upon her in the future. She finds the same depths of understanding in Reardon's eyes, and she feels especial remorse at her theft when she learns that he is buying her a pony. The eyes of the crucifix and Reardon's awaken in her a sense of moral perspective, but she is reluctant to face the implications of inner change. But Reardon's spiritual presence is so compelling that she cannot evade the man who acts upon her like a 'hound of heaven.'

Lucy has gotten further in moral enlargement than most of the other characters have. But in the last two pages, light breaks into the soul of Stephen Lewis and the point of view shifts to him. Born under Scorpio he realizes now the true meaning of this zodiacal sign, 'The House of Death--unless a man be reborn.' He sees that he and all men have desert places to cross and that life is a pilgrimage involving both a progression and an unknown goal. [The goal is salvation, eternal life.] Stephen at last surmounts his intellectual pretensions and his arid way of discounting spiritual experience.

No longer will he be able to do as he had done when he belittled Reardon's vision of the saint who succored him after an accident in France. Sarah had been impressed with Reardon's recital and had complained of her husband's callow comments upon it. She asserts, in fact, that Stephen's intellect inhibits his feelings and prevents them both from being able to grasp life's ineffable dimensions. But at the end Stephen is ready to admit that transcendental values may [do] exist.

The coda at the end is in sequence with an earlier high point when Lucy in a dream had seen all the Benfolly adults now journeying through a dark wood; her father and others separate to go each his own way. From another path comes Isabel carrying a trencher with a man's head on it, that of a Captain Green

murdered by his personal servant in the Civil War. Isabel scares away her husband and Tubby, her admirer; and we have intimations that she is a sinister person. The people are traversing not a forest but a wasteland on the edge of a chasm; and they can only be saved from death by turning back to the arduous path they had come by. Lucy thus sees modern man as both a victim of spiritual paralysis and a wanderer in a wasteland; her perceptions are essentially those of Stephen when he views his own plight and that of his family and friends. The visions are so closely connected that the modulation in point of view in the last two paragraphs from Lucy's to Stephen's represents no violation of aesthetic probability.

In *The Strange Children*, Miss Gordon is fascinated with the subject of religion. Lucy represents the receptive mind, the person who has not lost the ability to feel. Unless one becomes as a little child, Miss Gordon implies, he will never be able to see God. Stephen Lewis and his friend Tubby are agnostics by intellectual preference, temperamental dryness, and excessive pride; Sarah Lewis's Uncle Fill voices a militant, unsophisticated skepticism. Sarah possesses the religious temperament without religious conviction; the Holy Rollers, who hold their meetings on the Lewis farm, possess religious conviction but are wayward, extreme, and mindless.

Kevin Reardon is a Roman Catholic and a source of truth. As a result of his accident, his vision then, and his devotion to his wife, he has achieved humility, grace and religious knowledge. He had, as a young man, spurned the religious devotions of his father; his conversion is one way whereby he makes peace with a parent he had only seen that one time since childhood. Reardon in acknowledging his Heavenly Father has acknowledged his earthly father as well. Reardon is distressed by the irreligion of his friends, particularly as that reaches sacrilege when, in charades, Tubby impersonates a priest, acting out the name Parnell, which, according to Tubby, means 'priest's mistress.' The Lewises perceive finally that their patronizing judgments of Reardon as drifter and religious pretender are mistaken. The madness of his wife also seems to mirror the madness of a world that does not appreciate Reardon's values.

Madness in Isabel is paralleled by the frenzy let loose in the meeting of the Holy Rollers. They follow the teachings of Arnold Watkins whom God had commanded to follow the text "They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them." So they tempt providence by charming rattlesnakes; as a result, Terence MacDonough, Lewis's tenant, is bitten and barely escapes death. A more genuine faith than theirs can actually subdue savage beasts. Thus Saint Marthe tamed a wild dragon with her girdle; and Reardon, born on her day, has lived to subdue the beast in himself through a life of discipline which neither the evangelical Rollers nor his agnostic associates attain.

The conflicts of the characters within the self and with each other are genuine; in retrospect the situations the people are in, their spiritual dilemmas, interest us most. The tone is, if anything, neutral and understated, and the characters are seen with...objectivity. For Miss Gordon's characters, heroic action is not quite possible. As for her one heroic person, Reardon, we do not see the truth about him soon enough for the novel to center upon him as well as upon Lucy Lewis."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 33-38

"From the beginning of her career, Caroline Gordon has been implicitly a religious writer.... Miss Gordon has been attracted...to the Church as an institution; to the moral code of the Christian commitment; to the asceticism, the mysticism, and the redemptive promise of Christian faith.... Her novels and short stories, in effect, raise the question: how can I be saved from the abyss that yawns at the feet of every mortal?' This question was asked in the first story Miss Gordon published, 'Summer Dust'.... In most of Caroline Gordon's subsequent stories and novels that same question is raised, usually in secular terms; but the answers are never without religious implications....

[What is] depicted for our admiration...is...the capacity of these heroes for self-sacrifice, for giving themselves to an ideal. Thus the brave deed...is, somehow, a redemptive act. In *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*, Miss Gordon moves to 'redemptive acts' firmly placed in a perspective where we can speak really rather than metaphorically of redemption. As to how these acts are redemptive Miss Gordon does not explicitly say, but the whole bent of her talent has been to get us to see and to make us feel that

they are. The lucid style, the illusion of an objectively created world, and the appeal to history, to cultural anthropology, to Classical myth have been resorted to with the aim of convincing us...

Like her grandmother, Lucy has a sharp eye for the follies of other people, and she is very aware of how inconsistent adults are. She notices that her mother opens her mouth too wide when she talks, and she is quick to point out to her mother when *she* tells a lie. Lucy also has a dignity, an innocence, and a natural intelligence that set her apart from everyone else in the book, particularly from the self-conscious and somewhat pretentious adults. She likes things and people because of what they are in themselves, not because they are like or unlike something else. For example, she feels drawn to a family of poor whites who are tenants on her family's farm, and she is quick to sense that they are being patronized by a visiting Northerner. She is able to see the tenants as they are in their ramshackle house and in their somewhat 'trashy' condition (which the Northern visitor would like to see alleviated); but she can still admire and even envy them for having what she cannot have: a sense of family unity and cohesion.

Despite her very attractive qualities, her almost intuitive moral sense, and the fact that the point of view is closely identified with her throughout most of the novel, Lucy is not the moral gauge by which the other characters are to be judged. For in Miss Gordon's vision, Lucy's point of view is necessarily limited: first, because she is a child; second, because she lacks what the children of the poor white family have to guide them, a religious faith. Part of the author's strategy...is to get the reader to identify with Lucy's point of view in order to expose the limitations of mere unaided natural goodness....

When the old friend, Tubby McCallum, arrives in a green convertible, Lucy is smitten by his charm and gallantry... Kevin Reardon...became religious and he has now returned to America to assist in setting up a contemplative order. Reardon's wife Isabel was a promising poet when she married Reardon, but she has now ceased to write.... Tubby McCallum...tells the Lewises that Isabel and Reardon are not getting along well together. Isabel is disturbed by his preoccupation with religion, and particularly with his plan to give his money to a religious order. As Tubby tells the story, it appears that Reardon is unkind, even cruel, to Isabel and that he keeps her locked up at home so that her friends could not visit her. Steve and Sarah Lewis, to whom Tubby tells most of this story, become aware that Tubby and Isabel have been having an affair and that they have arranged to meet at the Lewises' in order to continue it. The Lewises, of course, are prevented by their position as hosts from interfering.... What eventually happens is that Tubby and Isabel elope.

The story of the Reardons and Tubby McCallum occurs in the background. In the foreground is Lucy who hears--often overhears--and sees what is transpiring in the adult world; but Lucy also has her own adventures.... It is not until Lucy discovers that Reardon has offered to buy her a pony that she becomes acutely uncomfortable about the stolen crucifix. After Reardon's wife leaves him, Lucy returns the crucifix and confesses that it was she, not Jenny, who had taken it....

When reading this novel on the allegorical level, we might classify Lucy as a kind of innocent young Everyman setting out on the road of life. On the way, she encounters forces of good and evil contending for possession of her soul: the evil ones, those represented by Isabel and Tubby; the good by Kevin Reardon. The decision that Lucy makes, to follow Reardon rather than Tubby, provides both a resolution of the action and, implicitly, a comment on the issues raised by the conduct of the adults....

[Gordon's] ways of getting around Lucy's limited perception are various, but the most elaborate is through the use of a fairy tale that to some extent parallels the characters and the events in *The Strange Children*. The first reference to the fairy tale occurs in Chapter I. Lucy is reading *Undine*, and before the close of the chapter, we are aware that the strangers who visit the Lewis farm are strange people indeed. Readers familiar with *Undine* are also made aware before the novel closes that the events of that story and those of *Strange Children* are significantly related.

Undine...is a fairy tale about a fisherman and his wife who, after they lose their child by drowning, are visited by Undine, a capricious, roguish maiden, who comes mysteriously to them and is reared by them in the place of their lost child. A knight, Huldbrand von Ringstetten, takes shelter in their cottage and falls in love with Undine. They are married, and Undine in consequence receives a soul. But her relatives,

particularly her Uncle Kuhleborn, a wicked water goblin, cause trouble. Huldbrand neglects Undine and becomes interested in the proud Bertolda, who is humbled when she discovers that she is the lost child of the fisherman and his wife. One day in a boat on the Danube, Huldbrand, tormented by Undine's kindred, rebukes his wife, and she is snatched away from him into the water and is seen no more. Huldbrand proposes to Bertolda, and they are about to be married when Undine rises from a well, goes to the knight's room, and kisses him; and, as a consequence, he dies.

The parallels between the two works are not exact, and the endings are different, but a number of important similarities exist. The arrival of Uncle Tubby at Benfolly, which comes at the beginning of the book, is rather like the arrival of Huldbrand von Ringstetten at the home of Undine's foster parents; however, Tubby's character is much more like that of Undine's Uncle Kuhleborn, the wicked water goblin. The connection of Tubby to Kuhleborn is suggested by words italicized in the following quotation: 'A big, curly-headed man sat at the wheel. His coffee-colored suit was splashed here and there, as if he had driven *through the river* instead of over it.' The parallel is continued as the action begins to unfold. Uncle Tubby seems to have an extraordinary fondness for water. He visits the waterfall in the woods near Benfolly, takes Isabel and Lucy swimming, and is fascinated by the river that flows underground in the caves beneath the Lewis farm.

The parallel of Isabel Reardon to Undine is even clearer, for it is significant that Isabel's first poem was titled 'Water Bearer' and that, though she is not drawn to the water as Tubby is (she shivers when the underground river is mentioned), she permits Tubby to take her swimming. Like Undine, Isabel is 'tortured' by her husband; she weeps and, again like Undine, is carried off from her husband--by Uncle Tubby. And, though Isabel is not a changeling as Undine was, she was clearly an unusual child for a Minnesota farmer to have borne. She is as roguish and as capricious as Undine and is never completely tamed. Kevin Reardon, who most resembles the knight Huldbrand, is a Christian gentleman of high estate, or what passes for it in the modern world; and he falls in love and marries the beautiful, unusual daughter of humble people. His wife, whom he has rescued from her soulless existence, is snatched from him by her spiritual 'kin.' Reardon's attachment, however, is to the Virgin rather than to a mortal woman. He does not die at the end of the novel, as Huldbrand does, but is simply stunned and grieved by the loss of his wife.

The parallels between *Undine* and *Strange Children* are not thoroughly developed in the novel, nor are they meant to be; for Miss Gordon is not depending upon the earlier work to give her novel external structure. What parallels there are direct us toward other levels of meaning, particularly the moral; for the parallels are the author's way of making a moral judgment on actions that would seem to be beyond the reach of such judgment. Since Tubby and Isabel are not Christians, Sarah Lewis says of Isabel, 'the ordinary canons don't apply' to them; but Miss Gordon, by linking them imaginatively to the underworld of water spirits and by setting them in opposition to Christian values, has suggested a moral judgment. What Isabel and Tubby have done is evil not just because it has violated the Sixth Commandment, or the sacredness of the marriage vows, but because their affair is selfish and destructive of other human beings.

Like the author of *Undine*, Miss Gordon establishes conflicts between people from an underworld and characters who represent Christian virtues, and Kevin Reardon, of course, represents the latter. Before his conversion, Reardon has a vision in which the Virgin Mary appeared to him as he lies with a broken leg beside his wrecked automobile. His sense of her immense and monumental presence lends him the physical and moral strength necessary to drag himself to a nearby spring and eventually to save himself and his wife. That same presence, which he later tries to ignore, remains beside him. There are obvious strategic difficulties in presenting such a religious experience in a novel that is so firmly anchored in the real world, particularly for readers who are also likely to be as skeptical of religious visions as they are of fairy tales.

However, Miss Gordon employs strategies calculated to circumvent these difficulties. Instead of presenting Reardon's religious experience directly, she doubly removes it from the reader's view by having Sarah Lewis, who has heard the story from Reardon, relate it to her husband. Then, in order to accommodate the kind of objections that readers might make, Miss Gordon has Steve Lewis remain skeptical. Sarah is convinced, but Steve neither believes nor disbelieves; he merely cites historical accounts of visions and instantaneous conversions. Sarah, angered by her husband's skepticism and by his purely intellectual response, quarrels with him: 'You know everything, don't you?... Just mention anything and you

can tell us about something else somewhere just exactly like it...' Sarah's anger is convincing. She and her husband have quarreled before, and the conflict between them is part of the unhappy reality of their daughter Lucy's world. But Sarah's anger is also a rather clever device to disguise the fact that Lewis' intellectual response is being disparaged.

Sarah's attack is also a defense of Kevin Reardon's visions: if there have been historical accounts of visions and instantaneous conversions, then why not one in our own day? Unsympathetic readers, of course, will not be convinced by that kind of argument; and Kevin Reardon's vision will be dismissed as, at best, hallucination; at worst, as a kind of insanity. But with this attitude Miss Gordon also comes to grips. Indeed, it might be said that she structures the novel to raise the question as to which characters are sane and then provides the answer.

It is through the relationship of Kevin-Isabel-Tubby that the question is raised, but it is through Lucy's relationship with these other characters that the answer is provided. The question about Isabel's sanity is first raised when Tubby tells the Lewises that Reardon keeps Isabel locked up and will not let her friends visit her. Tubby suggests that Reardon is mistreating his wife. The first real indication that Isabel is indeed mad comes to the reader during a game of charades played in the Lewises' living room. Isabel participates in a tableau contrived by Tubby that Reardon regards as blasphemous. During the performance, Isabel goes berserk; and, when Reardon subdues her, Tubby regards Reardon's actions as cruel and inhuman and attempts to interfere. Indeed, the suspicion that it is Reardon rather than Isabel who is insane is introduced through Lucy. She not only thinks that Kevin Reardon is the strangest man she has ever known but decides that *'He's crazy. That's what they've been talking about all along. He's crazy.'*

By using Lucy in this way, Miss Gordon is exploiting Lucy's limited powers of perception and is also preparing for the final revelations that Isabel is indeed crazy and that Tubby is both depraved and insane for eloping with a madwoman. 'Did you ever tell [Tubby] she was mad?' Sarah Lewis asks. Reardon replies, 'I tried to, once....' But Tubby had not believed him.

The deep immorality of what Tubby has done is developed through Lucy's relationship with Kevin Reardon on the one hand and with Isabel and Tubby on the other. These two sets of characters may be considered as forces from another world contending for the soul of an individual mortal, for that of Lucy, the prize. Clearly, she is attracted to Uncle Tubby. It might even be said, though Miss Gordon does not say it, that Lucy 'falls in love' with Tubby. When Tubby begins paying attention to Isabel, Lucy is hurt and humiliated; but she likes Isabel, too. Moreover, there is a resemblance in appearance and in actions between Lucy and Isabel. Isabel is aware of this resemblance; and as part of her campaign to win Lucy, she heightens it. They both have long, blonde hair and are slender and small; Isabel dresses herself in the same colors that Lucy wears. Isabel and Lucy are both somewhat capricious and willful; and, as children are likely to be, they are concerned only with the gratification of their own desires. Isabel is, of course, not a child; but she has never grown up. She has never been made to suffer disappointment and, consequently, has never developed the ability to love selflessly. This quality she shares with Undine, her fairy-tale counterpart.

The fact that Lucy acts like a child is not alarming, of course, since that's what she is. But the question raised by the struggle over Lucy is whether she will mature or will remain, like Isabel, a spoiled child. Her parents make few demands upon her, and Lucy is for a time openly attracted to the secret, self-indulgent underworld of Tubby and Isabel and is repelled by Reardon and the demands of his world. Unlike Uncle Tubby, who pays her flattering compliments, Reardon is quiet and preoccupied. He drives over to Gloversville every afternoon at three o'clock to say the Stations of the Cross. And, as we have seen, Lucy even concludes that he is crazy; but, at the same time that Lucy is afraid and suspicious of Reardon, she is also subconsciously attracted to him and symbolically to what he represents. This attitude is dramatized in her theft of Reardon's crucifix.

During dinner the evening of the guests' arrival at Benfolly, the discussion centers on religious subjects; and the question of 'Holy Roller' theology comes up. Lucy, who is friendly with a poor-white family, the MacDonoughs, who are Holy Rollers, is asked to explain their religion. Uncle Tubby puts his arm about Lucy's shoulder and, drawing her close to him and shaking her a little, says, 'Come on, *belle dame*, speak a

few words [in the Unknown Tongue]!' Lucy disengages herself from Tubby's embrace and, while explaining what she knows, steals a glance at Reardon. She feels as she looks at him, smiling with his head on one side, that he is considering how best to do her a kindness. Then she thinks that, of course, he does not know the crucifix is missing because he has not been back to his room. When Lucy immediately decides that she will take the crucifix from its hiding place and return it, that thought makes her so happy she feels like singing.

Lucy is delayed by her mother, who insists that she help clear the table; and then, as she runs upstairs to replace the crucifix, she is stopped by Isabel who draws her into her bedroom and presents her with a gift, a little cloisonné box which is just the right size to hold the crucifix. Lucy thinks 'Do you suppose *she's* giving it to me because she knows I've got the little man?' When Lucy goes back downstairs with Isabel, she learns that the adults are going to play charades and that she will be permitted to stay up and watch. She thinks that, in the confusion of the game, she will be able to slip into Reardon's room and drop the crucifix on the floor beside his bed. But, in the excitement that follows, Lucy forgets about returning it; and, by the time the evening is over, she has decided that Reardon is crazy and is no longer concerned about not having returned the crucifix.

That night as Lucy sleeps she has a dream that dramatizes her predicament. She and her father and mother are walking through a forest 'such as the Knight Huldbrand had wandered in, but the road was not plain and every now and then they stopped not knowing which way to turn.' Her father, who is walking with his head up, will not listen to her mother who says that the road goes 'this way.' The mother leaves her father and goes away. When she comes back, her hands are full of white flowers. Lucy's father does not respond to his wife; instead, he points to another way down, one on which Mrs. Reardon and Mr. Reardon and Uncle Tubby are coming. Mrs. Reardon is in white and is carrying a tray on which reposes a head that is muttering; and, when Uncle Tubby and Mr. Reardon hear what the lips are saying, they cry out and run away. But Mrs. Reardon keeps walking forward. The trees get thinner and thinner, and Lucy sees that the country she and her parents are walking through is not really country at all; it is only the brink of a great chasm into which they will fall if they do not turn back.

Lucy's dream also dramatizes the central conflict of the novel. The way taken by Mrs. Reardon in the dream represents the evil way of life being taken by a number of characters in the novel; and the path taken by Sarah, who returns with her hands full of white flowers, is the other way, the one represented by Kevin Reardon, the spiritual way. Lucy too is looking down the wrong path. It is not just her theft of the crucifix or the fact that she is attracted to Tubby; the point is that she is beginning to see life as Isabel and Tubby see it. This fact is suggested by her belief that Reardon is crazy, and by her leaving them only because her mother calls her home.

Lucy eventually finds the right path as a result of being administered two rather severe shocks. The first occurs when she and her friend Lois and the cook Jenny wander into a thicket looking for blackberries and come upon Tubby and Isabel in a sexual embrace. Lucy does not fully understand what is happening; but, as she looks into Tubby's eyes, she sees in them a profound self-deception: 'his gaze had merely happened to fall upon her face. He had seen her and he had not seen her. And if she and the others had not stood there he would have stared straight before him in the same way, as if he were looking beyond whatever was before him, at something that was not there and never could be there, no matter if you looked all your life.' After this encounter, Lucy confronts her parents who are arguing about the nature of Reardon's vision.... Her mother believes in it enthusiastically; her father, in his skepticism, reaches for historical parallels. When Lucy rushes from the room where her parents are arguing and leaves them there together, she almost immediately encounters the person from whom she is attempting to flee, Kevin Reardon, who asks whether she has seen the lost crucifix. As we have observed, Lucy gives Reardon the impression that Jenny, the Negro maid, is the culprit.

The next shock administered to Lucy is of a different order. It is the gift of a pony that she had been wanting all summer, but it comes from the man she has wronged. On the way to the county, Lucy's mother tells her that Mr. Reardon has asked to pay for the pony. Lucy is staggered; this gift clearly marks the trail before her: 'She would not turn her head. There was no use looking back now.' Lucy wonders whether Mr.

Reardon knew about the crucifix 'back there' when she lied and told him Jenny had probably taken it. She concludes that 'he knew something that she didn't know. Was this it?'

As it turns out, Reardon had not known that Lucy took the crucifix. When Lucy herself tells him, Reardon is astonished to hear that she is the thief. When he speaks to her about it, his voice is harsh; but, when he sees her tears, he softens and puts his arm about her shoulders. When Lucy's mother asks what ails Lucy, Reardon replies, 'Nothing. She's all right.' Lucy it seems, is more than all right; for she is well on her way to discovering what Mr. Reardon knows that she does not know. The stealing and the return of the crucifix symbolize this discovery. When Lucy takes the crucifix she is smitten by its physical beauty; but, on a deeper psychological level she...is unconsciously attracted to the way of life symbolized by the crucifix. This attraction is suggested by her response to Reardon at dinner the evening of the Reardon's arrival at Benfolly. But Lucy is also attracted to the wild, self-indulgent life represented by Isabel and symbolized by the cloisonné box that Isabel has given Lucy; and it is during this period that Isabel's hold on Lucy is strongest and that Lucy thinks Reardon crazy.

In a subtle way, the crucifix Lucy has stolen draws her into a relationship with Reardon somewhat analogous to the relationship of Isabel and Reardon. In stealing from her parent's guest, Lucy has violated a sacred trust. Moreover, in keeping the crucifix and allowing the blame to fall on Jenny, Lucy has committed an injustice to another human being and has betrayed the man who has befriended her. In returning the crucifix, Lucy not only atones for her sin; she also manifests other important Christian virtues. In the first place, her action is prompted by compassion, for she gives the crucifix back not because she is afraid she will be found out, nor through pride masking as humility, but because Reardon is visibly suffering because of the loss of his wife. Moreover, Lucy might have lied and allowed Jenny to take the blame; instead, she confesses her guilt and takes as her punishment Reardon's reproach. It might be said that Lucy has made her confession and that Reardon has been both the injured party and also her confessor.... The return of the crucifix assumes meaning only after the reader is made to feel, through Lucy's deliberate self-abasement, the depth of her compassionate response to Reardon's suffering....

The MacDonoughs and their friends who are Holy Rollers have fixed on one verse of the Bible and made it the basis of their religion: 'They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.' The founder of this sect had interpreted these words to mean that he must take up snakes; at revival meetings he would hold a rattlesnake and even allow it to coil about his neck as a sign of his faith. Yet, when he was thirty-six, he had been bitten by a young rattler and died. He was buried in the Lewis' woods and 'is still regarded as a martyr by the faithful.' The MacDonoughs are among the faithful; and, as the novel opens, the Holy Rollers are preparing to hold a revival meeting at a brush arbor they are constructing beneath the hill on which the Lewis home sits.

During dinner the evening of the Reardons' arrival when the Lewises and their guest are chattering in a brittle way about Kevin Reardon's pious old father, the words and the music of a primitive hymn being sung by the Holy Rollers drifts in through the open windows. Uncle Tubby is amused, of course, and makes what he regards as clever remarks not only about the crudeness of the Holy Rollers in particular but about religious faith in general. Of the guests, only Kevin Reardon is seriously interested in knowing the details of the theology of the Holy Rollers.

Miss Gordon introduces the Holy Rollers for a number of reasons. In the first place, they are interesting in themselves; secondly, the MacDonough tenants on the Lewis farm help lend the novel solidity: we see them not only in their revival meeting but also as they perform their chores and as Mrs. MacDonough nurses her baby. More important, though, their solid presence is a counter-weight to the otherworldly atmosphere created by the Reardons and Uncle Tubby. The MacDonoughs are ignorant, unsophisticated, and physically unattractive people, but the father and mother are both unambitious for the material things of this world, and they are also people of deep religious faith. Like Kevin Reardon, Mrs. MacDonough has had mystical experiences: she has spoken in the 'Unknown Tongue,' which is 'The proof that you have received the Gift of the Spirit.' Mr. MacDonough contrasts to Stephen Lewis, who, like Jim Chapman, is a paralyzed intellectual. Both a selfless man and a man of faith, MacDonough is not interested in using others for his own gain--he wants to see them saved--and he demonstrates his faith by picking up a rattlesnake at the revival meeting.

The world of the MacDonoughs also functions in the novel as a way of commenting on the other actions. The story of Isabel, of Kevin Reardon and Uncle Tubby, of Lucy and her parents, and of the Holy Rollers is brought together at the end of the novel. Almost at the precise moment that Mr. MacDonough is bitten by the rattler, it is discovered that Isabel and Tubby have eloped. Lucy returns the crucifix to Reardon who is all but crushed at the news of his wife's desertion and of his friend's treachery. On the final page of the novel, Lucy's father raises the meaning of these actions to a higher level of significance: 'He told himself that it would have been no great matter if that man [MacDonough] had died tonight, for all men, it appeared to him now, for the first time, die on the same day: the day on which their appointed task is finished. If that man had made his last journey tonight he would not have gone alone, but accompanied by a larger presence, as the friend standing behind him had been companioned when he, too, lay at the point of death, in a strange country and in a desert.'

Thus *The Strange Children* has been, on its highest level, a novel about evil and about the necessity, for those who would escape it, of religious faith. Evil--call it what you will--has existed in all places and in all times and is committed by those who are blind to the deepest fact of religious faith--that temporal life is nothing; eternal life, everything. Only those who are reborn are saved from final destruction. However, Miss Gordon does not state her meaning this directly. To do so would be inartistic and, for most readers, unconvincing. She makes her point indirectly and negatively through Stephen Lewis who is not a Christian but a learned man who sees the truth but cannot experience it. All he can feel in the presence of this insight is the terrible anguish of its deprivation: 'He saw that those days, those years had been moving toward this moment and he wondered what moment was being prepared for him and for his wife and his child, and he groaned, so loud that the woman and the child stared at him, wondering, too.'

W. J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
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"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 *roman à 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.... In January, 1946, Gordon and Tate divorced, to remarry a few months later, in April. Whatever personal exigencies shaped her subject matter, the effect of Gordon's change in style and material was to expand her analysis of heroism.

In the novels, 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. 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.... 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.... Each novel climaxes in revelation.... Stephen Lewis' vision of spiritual pilgrimage at the end of *The Strange Children* marks his development from the cold intellectual towards the whole man, whose reason and faith work together....

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, 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....

Just as her use of classical myth allows her to disclose archetypal patterns in every age, so Gordon's Christianity gives shape to the universal search for religious meaning and expresses human responses to the ineffable.... *The Strange Children* implicitly argues that spiritual insights are best articulated and given form by the Roman Catholic church. Kevin Reardon, a recent convert to Catholicism, profoundly affects the values of the Lewis family, the central characters in the novel.... Perhaps of all of Caroline Gordon's novels in which point of view is so important, *The Strange Children* has been more scrutinized for the skillful way in which Lucy Lewis, the young daughter of Stephen and Sarah Lewis, functions as third-person limited narrator.... None has examined in detail Lucy's powers of vision or the way that her point of view concentrates the tensions in the novel between enthrallment and freedom.

Lucy's imaginative powers are so great that through her we can see the progress of a soul as it moves from intimations of a supernatural reality to faith and vision.... The fairy tale *Undine*, which Lucy reads over the course of the novel, parallels the action: 'Like Undine, Lucy acquires a soul and learns of both the sufferings and the satisfactions which knowledge brings.' [McDowell] Through her exposure to the fanatical snake handlers but most of all through her contact with Kevin Reardon, a devoted Catholic, Lucy learns that her conscience...her spiritual life--cannot be ignored. Her lesson suggests in miniature the growth of such adults as Kevin Reardon and Sarah and Stephen Lewis, and contrasts with the failures of Tubby MacCollum, Isabel Reardon, and Uncle Fill Fayerlee.

Lucy, more adult in some ways than her parents and their friends, has the gift for seeing through actions to real intentions and meanings. She also is more empathetic than others and has, in essence, the imaginative ability to project herself beyond her own small vantage point. In her intuition, truth is often expressed in hallucinatory, dreamlike images, as when, for example, she reflects on her parents' habit of criticizing their friends and imagines them literally tearing people in pieces.... Her criticism of adults frequently crystallizes in such concrete images. Thus she perceives the 'vicious circle' of the adults' constant drinking as a kind of monster, 'lowering at her from under beetling brows, its full, voracious mouth twisted a little to one side.'

Lucy's perceptions of herself are telling as well. She thinks of herself as a changeling, a word that her mother actually uses jokingly to account for Lucy's physical features, which do not resemble those of either parent. Yet Lucy accepts the label because it sets her apart from the adults, just as she habitually insists that she will never be a writer like her parents. More importantly, the connotations of the term *changeling* emphasize Lucy's extraordinary ability to understand some people and events better than her parents can. She knows, for instance, far more about the McDonough [MacDonough] family (the tenants on the Lewis' land) and their religion than do the intellectual adults. Also, she perceives more about Jenny, the black cook, than her parents, who are usually too busy to think about others. When Lucy imagines herself in Jenny's place, she conjures up an amazingly vivid scene....

Similarly, as Lucy listens to Tubby, Sarah, and Stephen speak of their time together in Paris, she creates a scene, in this instance, imagining a location and objects she has never actually seen. 'She had been in Paris then, with her nurse, but when they talked about how after supper they would go out in the bay and, wearing special glasses, dive to look at the flowers that grew on the bottom of the sea, she could see the flowers, too: pink and blue and purple, star-shaped, some of them, others round, like little Banksia roses.' Lucy's imagination has nearly magical properties, but her perception of the divine needs strengthening.

Although Lucy can sense unseen forces in the natural world, she does not always distinguish clearly between fanciful illusions and truer intuitions. Her changing reactions to Kevin Reardon and Tubby MacCollum map her growth from childish play to a more mature imagination. Before her first meeting with Kevin, Lucy is more interested in fancy. Amusing herself out-of-doors, she sees the crape myrtles lining the walk as 'guardians': 'In the fading light one of them took the shape of a mediaeval warrior'... The passer-by is Kevin who, like Tubby, initially seems more responsive to Lucy than her father. More seriously attentive than Tubby, Kevin is also a better guardian: he teaches Lucy moral awareness. Tubby, on the other hand,

teases Lucy, playing court to her until his real 'Belle Dame,' Kevin's wife Isabel, arrives at the Lewis home. Such allusions in the novel to romantic poetry underscore this distinction between enthralling and liberating imaginative play and clarify the dangers of mere romance.

Tubby first calls Lucy 'La Belle Dame,' and with him she shares her love of the fairy tale *Undine*. Innocently captivated by magic and romance, Lucy identifies very easily with Undine, a bit of make-believe consonant with Tubby's addressing her as Sabrina, the water nymph in *Comus*. Notably, Tubby appears just after Lucy has read the description of Huldbrand, a noble knight at first, but one whose selfishness and pleasure-seeking eventually destroy him and his wife Undine. Tubby's identification with Huldbrand becomes more explicit as his deluded infatuation with Isabel, corresponding to Huldbrand's illicit passion for Bertalda, leads him into a fatal adventure.

Before the Reardons' arrival, Tubby attends Lucy, who willingly plays with him and leads him to a grove near a waterfall, which Tubby later calls 'her elfin grot.' In her naivete, Lucy is flattered by these references to Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci.' As she moves through the woods, touching a wand of plum to the leaves about her, she even thinks of herself as '*full beautiful..a fairy's child...*' However, the mysterious and beautiful lady who charms the knight is also a vampirish seductress who damns him to a death-in-life. The horrible, real 'Belle Dame' in the novel is not Lucy, but Isabel Reardon.

In the beginning Lucy is so infatuated with Tubby that when Kevin asks her to show him the woods she tells herself that she will never take anybody to the tree near the waterfall where Tubby carved their initials. During that previous scene, Tubby had also carved the initials of another love, thus anticipating his betrayal of Lucy and his childish obsession with Isabel. When questioned about the other initials, Tubby tells Lucy that the letters stand for Imogene Maria Louise Lointaine, his 'little girl's' name. We learn, of course, that the 'I' stands for Isabel. 'Lointaine,' which is French for 'remote' or 'far away,' signifies Isabel's literal distance from Tubby at that time but also her exotic quality. To Tubby, she is a romantic image of the seemingly unattainable and exquisitely desirable lady.

Lucy's enchantment with Tubby actually dulls her imagination, blinding her to all but what she wishes to perceive. For example, she is incredulous of the legend of Saint Martha, which her parents and the Reardons discuss, but she has no trouble accepting the equally fantastic story of Undine. At one point, Lucy even tries to imagine what it would be like to be in love with a woman who was a stream. Providing another significant insight into her devotion to romance, Lucy hides the crucifix that she steals from Kevin behind the volume of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and once the sacred object is out of sight, she tries to forget that she actually stole it.

Her love of romance at first prevents her from attending to a more important reality. Ominously, when Tubby associates Lucy with the Lady of Shalott, he invokes the pattern of the Arthurian legends, in which the lady's unrequited love for Lancelot leads to her death and prefigures the kingdom's downfall. Lancelot 'was in love with Guinevere,' Isabel reminds Tubby; and Tubby, more an erring knight than an errant one, is also preparing to cuckold his lady's husband. However, the traditional links between King Arthur and Christ imply a more hopeful outcome to this love triangle. Arthur's disappearance is balanced by the promise that Camelot will be restored in the future, an analogy to Christ's expected Second Coming. Though apparently undone by his too tolerant love, Arthur eventually will be the greater winner, and likewise, in *The Strange Children*, Kevin is that hero whose faith and love will bring him glorious rewards. Though his greater service is a tacit spiritual guide to the Lewises, Kevin has already proven his heroism by saving his wife following an automobile accident; in spite of his own severe injuries, Kevin repeatedly crawled to a stream and brought back the water that preserved Isabel's life.

While the fanciful play of a young girl is understandable, Tubby's flirting and scheming with Isabel indicates a profound immaturity. A more romantic figure than Kev, Tubby is no hero. That he later runs away with Isabel, though she is married, would be sign enough of his immoral self-indulgence, but that he has unwittingly eloped with a mad woman shows the extent of his delusion. Like the knight Huldbrand, Tubby is so bent on satisfying his passion that he cannot truly see the object of those desires. What Lucy reads in *Undine* about the knight's search in the Black Valley for his illicit love Bertalda can be applied metaphorically to Tubby's perverse romance. In the 'sinister' woods, the knight thinks he sees the form of 'a

sleeping or swooning woman.' Even though it is too dark to see her clearly, he is convinced that he has found his Bertalda and bends to her: 'a flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the valley. He saw quite close to him a hideous and wasted countenance, and a dull voice cried: 'Give me a kiss, you love-sick shepherd!'

If Tubby corresponds to Huldbrand, he also resembles in some unfortunate ways Comus of the masque in which Sabrina appears. A diabolical reveler--Dionysian in his lust for drink and sexual intercourse--Tubby tempts Lucy to romantic enthrallment. The magic potion he proffers is the illusory promise of pleasant fantasy as a way of life. Although Tubby pretends with Lucy that an invisible servant is at his command, he is no sorcerer with actual power over the imagination; instead, he is the victim of his own delusion. At the waterfall, this time with both Lucy and Isabel, he quotes 'Kubla Khan' without irony: like the potentate of Xanadu, he exults in his fanciful creations, but since he does not recognize the transitory nature of any 'vision in a dream,' neither can he appreciate the sublime sources to which the stream can lead him. Tubby's danger grows as Isabel more and more assumes the role of the Belle Dame.

Even before she dresses to look like Lucy--thus revealing her childishness as well as her intention to usurp Lucy as Tubby's lady--Isabel is an enchanting figure, whom Lucy pictures even before she sees her as nymphlike. At her arrival, Isabel greets Tubby, imploring him, '*don't* shut your wild, wild eyes,' another ironic echo of the Keats poem. Despite her words, Isabel's eyes--not Tubby's--are those of the enchantress: 'the color of the periwinkle blossoms that grew in the old graveyard at Merry Point,' Isabel's eyes are another sign to the reader of Tubby's doom.

At the waterfall, Isabel coaxes Tubby to take them out in a boat. Instead of suggesting regeneration, the water here becomes the locus of further enchantment. Lucy, looking on or overhearing much of the lovers' play, thinks of her fairy tale, specifically of the episode in which 'The false Bertalda had held her golden necklace above the water, to make just such a shimmer, on that voyage that she and Undine and the Knight Huldbrand made down the Danube.' Just as this incident marks Undine's betrayal by her knight and the beginning of Huldbrand and Bertalda's troubles, in the novel Tubby and Isabel's sporting in the water shows their increasingly reckless indulgence of their perfidy. Disastrously for Tubby, he forgets the fate of the knight who pursues La Belle Dame. In Keats' poem and, by implication, in *The Strange Children* the deluded man ends up 'alone and palely loitering.'

More than simply succumbing to his delusions, Tubby actively rejects the vision that could save him. He is responsible for much of the blasphemous talk in the novel, and in the game of charades (in which he insists that Parnell means a priest's mistress and proceeds to act out that etymology), his sacrilege offends Kevin deeply and sends Isabel into a mad fit. At the end, when Stephen Lewis imagines Tubby 'standing at the edge of a desert that he must cross,' his friend's face is 'featureless, his eye sockets blank.' Essentially, Tubby's elopement with Isabel has condemned him to traverse a wasteland on a quest that does not promise salvation. Because of Lucy's earlier description of Tubby watching Isabel, this second image of the death's-head is all the more powerful. Lucy had observed, 'The black branch fell straight across his face; his eyes were black holes in what might have been a skull; only the glass that he twirled in his hand gleamed in the light from the window.'

Although at first Lucy may think of herself as a changeling, '*not anybody to save*,' her identification with Sabrina, the nymph who releases the chaste Lady from Comus' spell, and with that other good spirit Undine indicates that Lucy is finally not the Belle Dame but the creature who gains a soul and thereby salvation. The peculiar lightness that Lucy feels after she has glimpsed Tubby making love with Isabel in the woods marks a transitional state. First, the lightness expresses her sense of belittlement and consequent self-effacement following Tubby's betrayal, and second, it signals her spiritual ascent now that she is freed from the bonds of enchantment and comprehends Tubby's perversity.

When, satyrlite, Tubby gazes at Lucy, it is clear not only that he has no use for the young girl but that he has chosen an empty vision: 'The wreathed leaves fell away to reveal the brown, burnished head. Glossy as a new chestnut, the head hung motionless among the softly oscillating green leaves.... They [the eyes] had stared straight into hers. But his gaze had merely happened to fall upon her face.... And if she and the others had not stood there he would have stared straight before him in the same way, as if he were looking

beyond whatever was before him in the same way, at something that was not there and never could be there, no matter if you looked all your life.' While Lucy may not fully understand what Tubby and Isabel are doing, she knows instinctively that he has betrayed her. Running from the spot, Lucy notices 'that her feet felt lighter than usual, and brittle.' She imagines herself floating, and when she pricks a finger as she pushes through briars, 'the tiny pain seemed to augment the lightness that she still felt in her hands and feet.'

This phantomlike lightness reveals Lucy's disorientation as well as a kind of death. She feels unreal, as if her existence is unimportant because Tubby has looked through her. Yet an allusion to Dante's *Divine Comedy* suggests a second meaning. Lucy wonders what her companions Jenny and Lois 'would say if she told them that she did not know the way out of the woods. This path they were on did not seem like any path she had ever walked on before.' Figuratively, Lucy has started on a different course now that Tubby has disappointed her. In *The Paradiso*, Dante's body is lightened as he leaves mortal limitations behind and approaches God through divine revelation. So Lucy has begun a spiritual ascent, though her meanderings in the woods now most resemble Dante's confusion at the start of his pilgrimage.

Tubby's perfidy ends Lucy's enthrallment with romance, but her spiritual maturation is yet to come. When her conscience has moved her to return the stolen crucifix to Kevin and to confess that she lied in implicating Jenny in the theft, Lucy shows that her sense of morality has won over her selfishness and that she now has come knowledge of the crucifix's meaning. Nonetheless, she is still a little girl, whose spiritual growth is limited by the maturity of her intellect and the extent of her experience.

The powerful shift in point of view from Lucy to Stephen at the conclusion of the novel acknowledges the limits of the child's mind, although the reader remains fully appreciative of that childlike blend of emotion, intuition, and reason, the receptivity to knowledge unavailable to the purely rational mind. As Vivienne Koch has outlined, because an omniscient narrator subtly intrudes throughout the novel 'when the material becomes unmanageable for a child,' the modulation from Lucy to Stephen Lewis's point of view does not jar. In William Stuckey's words, 'Part of the author's strategy...is to get the reader to identify with Lucy's point of view in order to expose the limitations of mere unaided natural goodness.' Yet, most importantly, the shift to her father's consciousness testifies to Stephen's final enlightenment. Frederick McDowell summarizes this point well, pointing out that Stephen 'sees that he and all men have desert places to cross and that life is a pilgrimage involving both a progression and an unknown goal. Stephen at last surmounts his intellectual pretensions and his arid way of discounting spiritual experience.'

Just as surely as the novel exposes the snares of the undisciplined imagination, it reveals the emptiness of a purely intellectual response to life. Stephen is habitually guilty of cutting himself off from his own spirituality by transforming any such experience into material for footnotes. For example, when Sarah describes Kev's vision of Saint Martha at the car accident, Stephen tries to classify and gloss it: 'He is evidently a born mystic.... I believe the intellectual or inner vision is regarded as higher than the apparition, which is thought to come to those whose spirits burn with a grosser flame. But there are many records of instantaneous conversion.' As Stephen proceeds to tell of the conversion of Saint Margaret of Cortona, Sarah complains, 'You know everything don't you?' During the ensuing argument, she informs her husband that neither one of them has any spiritual life and faults him for resisting her criticism. 'Well, you can look up to Kev Reardon now,' Stephen retorts.

Lucy understands enough of this overheard discussion to think that her parents do not love each other any longer. 'It seemed to her that her life up till now had been only a dream, a happy dream.' Waking to the reality of a life without spirituality, Lucy envisions the three of them in a prison cell whose key has been thrown away--the kind of nightmare confinement in which Ugolino and his sons met their deaths.

A character with a more exaggerated tendency to dissect matters of faith with reason alone is Uncle Fill Fayerlee. The scene in which Uncle Fill strives to dispute theological questions with Stephen, while Tubby and Lucy explore the cave in front of which Uncle Fill sits, is an evocative and structurally important one. This episode, in the penultimate chapter, comes so near the climax of the novel that it almost seems to precipitate what follows. Later that night the Holy Rollers hold the arbor meeting at which Mr. McDonough [MacDonough] is bitten by a rattlesnake. Afterwards, during the efforts to save Mr.

McDonough's life, the Lewises discover that Tubby and Isabel have eloped; Lucy confesses to Kevin and returns the crucifix; and the action culminates with Stephen's concluding vision. The encounter with Uncle Fill does foreshadow these events by highlighting the spiritual conditions of the major characters and revealing the inadequacy of reason as the sole instrument of the mind.

Uncle Fill is a peculiar sight: the fat man dressed in white sits before a cave from which a stream flows, and a black boy pours buckets of cooling water over him. He seems oblivious to the symbolic meaning of the water that surrounds him. Similarly, in Tubby's brief excursion into the cave, although he senses the deeper magic of the place, he is not receptive enough to the regenerative powers of the stream: "Damn it," Uncle Tubby said, "I'd turn spelaeologist if I stayed around here. I feel it coming over me now". Tubby does not delve very far into the cave because he is too bent on playing the cavalier, again addressing Lucy as Belle Dame in Isabel's absence. Like Kubla Khan, Tubby may intuitively recognize the sublimity of the water and the cave, but he does not realize that, in effect, these powers menace his pleasure dome.

Lucy nearly ignores Tubby during this scene. Looking out from inside the cave, she sees her parents and Uncle Fill as if framed. This curious perspective focuses her attention on them so that she overhears her mother telling Uncle Fill that they are going to Mr. Warfleet's to buy a pony, what Lucy has been begging for but has despaired of getting. As yet she does not know that Kevin is planning to buy the animal for her. When she learns this fact, her conscience goads her to return the crucifix.

By refusing to become involved in Uncle Fill's arguments against the Virgin Birth and the prophecies of Christ's birth, Stephen prepares us for his eventual reintegration of spirit and mind. Sarah, trying to be polite to her relative but also trying to suggest the importance of religion, is no match for the old sophist, who declares, 'God Almighty gave me my intellect...and He expects me to use it. But what does the author of the Gospel of Matthew use *his* intellect for? For glozening and cozening, forsooth!' Once they have all made their escape from the garrulous Uncle Fill, Steve tries to justify his rude silence. Even he cannot 'take' Uncle Fill's obsession with rationality, no longer finding such excess amusing, as Tubby does.

For all of his litigiousness, Uncle Fill raises an important point: 'I tell you, the man that can swallow the God of the Old Testament has got a strong stomach. And if we can't put any credence in the Old Testament how we going to put any credence in the New?' A God who is both destroyer and savior is ineffable and frightening, difficult for humans to accept. When Robert Heilman examines the significance of the novel's title, he explains that the characters are all 'strange' in being 'cut off from the spirit'; but he does not fully consider the context of the title, which comes, of course, from Psalm 144. The psalm, a king's prayer for deliverance, asks God to destroy the nation's enemies and then stretch out his hand to David and his people, thus invoking the awesome and awful power of the divine.

The individual's faith must be capable of enduring the inscrutable and the terrible, for a vision of the divine is a violent and disrupting experience. The Holy Rollers, for example, show just how fearsome the powers of God can be and how strong and tensile must be the faith that encounters him. This group of religious fanatics handle snakes during their services because of a literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-18, verses in which the resurrected Christ proclaims how his disciples may be recognized: 'And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.' Although Caroline Gordon does not necessarily argue for such a literal interpretation of the gospel, she does not question whether the Holy Rollers are responding to real experiences of the supernatural. The speaking in tongues and the visions of these farming people are not satirized. In fact, though Tubby has the advantage of education and culture, his irreverent attitude towards the Holy Rollers as well as his other blasphemies expose him as foolish. As we would expect, Kevin, Sarah, and Stephen are more respectful.

In the final chapter, the four adults and Lucy arrive at the brush arbor meeting in time to hear the testimonies. Characteristically, Tubby slips out early--to run away with Isabel. But the others attend to Mr. McDonough's account of his mysterious and awesome vision of God.... 'PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD!' the message painted on 'Holy Roller Rock' in large white letters, is, after all, a fit motto to display near the entrance to the Lewises' land; well might someone be 'nervous,' as Sarah says, to see those words.

'The implicit tensions of the book arise from the pull among the varieties of religious experience,' Robert Heilman writes. Yet Holy Roller, Roman Catholic, or skeptic may encounter the divine. The preacher in the Holy Roller meeting tells his congregation that Jesus will come to a person after he or she believes; among the assembled Steve recognizes the thought and exclaims, 'Good God!...he's quoting St. Augustine!' Gordon here insists that experiences of a larger order are essentially the same and are available to all. Some, however, are more receptive than others. Or as Heilman phrases it, 'Some see light on the road to Damascus, some don't.'

Creativity bent on selfish pleasure-seeking and reason idolatring to the exclusion of other kinds of knowledge are both imprisoning. When the imagination and the rational mind discipline each other, then the individual can perceive subjective and objective realities clearly. This enlightenment is liberating. Bound, however, by his own egocentricity, Tubby in the final chapter proposes a toast that foreshadows his unfortunate but self-determined end: 'We will drink to the emancipation of all of us,' he said. 'Can't tell when it'll be, but it's bound to come.' He held his glass up and made them all touch glasses with him. 'And to the day and the hour,' he said, 'for when shall we four meet again, in thunder, lightning and in rain...?' Tubby's echo of the witches in *Macbeth* reminds us of his entrapment by romantic magic, but ironically he also alludes to the time when such perversity will be punished, for his references to the thunder, lightning, and rain recall the traditional accounts of the Last Judgment.

In contrast to Tubby's flippancy is Steve's revelation as he stands in the yard, hugging his daughter against him and watching a Perseid fall: 'But the other stars that shone so high and cold would fall, too, like rotten fruit--when the heavens were rolled up like a scroll and the earth reeled to and fro like a drunkard and men called upon the mountains to fall upon them and hide them from the wrath to come.' The truth of Kevin's vision Stephen has finally accepted, 'for all men, it appeared to him now, for the first time, die on the same day: the day on which their appointed task is finished. If that man [MacDonough] had made his last journey tonight he would not have gone alone, but companioned by a larger presence, as the friend standing behind him [Kevin] had been companioned when he, too, lay at the point of death, in a strange country and in a desert. But all countries, he told himself wearily, are strange and all countries desert.' Unlike that image of Tubby as a walking death's-head crossing a wasteland alone, Kevin and Terence MacDonough are aided on their journeys by 'a larger presence.'

Stephen considers now his own pilgrimage, 'and he wondered what moment was being prepared for him and for his wife and his child, and he groaned, so loud that the woman and the child stared at him, wondering, too.' Whatever is in store for them, it is clear that Stephen now accepts his responsibility as spiritual guide for his wife and daughter and that, as a family, they may very well have escaped that prison created by excluding spiritual reality from their lives. Nonetheless, the horrible presentiment Lucy had of the three of them locked in a cell forever has been dispelled for no simple pastoral. Like the king who prays for deliverance in Psalm 144, Stephen can only hope that he is worthy of the conflict to come and that ultimately he and his family will find meaning in their arduous journey."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 118-32

"The first novel Gordon wrote after her conversion, *The Strange Children* (1951)...is the story of a young girl's attempts to make sense out of the intricate entanglements between her parents and a group of friends who have come to visit at her family's Tennessee farm. With Lucy, the nine-year-old girl, as the central intelligence, the novel follows the slow and often painful growth in her understanding of the 'strange children' of the title--the adults who people the farm.

Almost all of the adults of the novel are somehow warped or blighted. Lucy's parents are Aleck Maury's daughter Sarah and her husband Stephen Lewis, who had appeared earlier in *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*. They are now even more cynical than before in their cold intellectualism. This is particularly true of Stephen. His life centers on his poetry and his Civil War research--and on his enjoyment of showing off his knowledge of a wide range of subjects, usually at the expense of others. Though not quite so arrogant as her husband and more open to experience than he is, Sarah is of the same ilk, a cynical intellectual. Lucy says

that her grandfather Aleck Maury finds them boring, and so does she. She can see that their lives are focused on talk rather than action, and that their words are almost always in some way critical of others.

Also living on the farm are the MacDonoughs, a poor tenant family who are fanatic religious fundamentalists. Their lives of intense religious commitment and emotional expressions of faith stand at the far extreme from the Lewises' intellectualism. Their lives focus on one thing: Jesus. Little else is important to them, as Lucy notices: 'They hardly ever mentioned the radio or politics or even the Depression. They mostly just talked about God. When Mr. MacDonough or Mrs. MacDonough said "Jesus" you felt as if He were in the next room.' When her parents talk about religion, in contrast, the wonders of faith shrivel to the dryness of scholarship for scholarship's sake. 'Up at the house you didn't feel like you were likely to see Jesus,' Lucy observes, 'though her father and mother talked about him a good deal, too'...

Other 'strange children' come to visit the farm. First to arrive is 'Uncle Tubby,' a poet and friend of the Lewises, who has recently struck it big in the popular market. Tubby is a dashing figure, yet he is also a snob. Furthermore, he is very devious. Then come Kevin Reardon and his wife, Isabel. Kevin is a recently converted Catholic and a millionaire; he is considering giving away his fortune to the Church to establish a contemplative order. Isabel does not share Kevin's faith and is clearly upset about her husband's financial plans and their marriage in general.

At the farm, the interaction between this odd [strange] collection of adults becomes at times filled with tension and cruelty. The central conflict involves Tubby's efforts to draw Isabel away from Kevin; he sees himself as a knight on a quest to save a damsel in distress. Kevin, meanwhile, appears to be on the brink of insanity; his commitment to the Church seems to be merely an overzealous reaction to a vision he reputedly had after an automobile accident [This is an Atheist critic calling a Christian hero crazy; in contrast, the critic McDowell quoted above accurately calls Kevin "a source of truth."]. 'I tell you that lick on his head turned him queer!' Tubby says, and his observation seems fair.

Lucy cannot quite understand all of what is happening, but she can sense the dissonance and danger in the interplays of the adults. For her, a child in the process of growing into adulthood, the problem becomes not just one of comprehending the adults' actions but of discovering how she will structure her own life in the apparently chaotic adult world. She seems to have few alternatives. She can see the pettiness and arrogance of her parents, and says at one point that she will grow up different from them. And although she is fascinated by the zeal of Kevin and the MacDonoughs, their religious commitment seems otherworldly and mysterious. More comforting to Lucy is escaping the harsh realities of the world by coloring them according to the lights of the story *Undine* and by daydreaming of becoming a horse trainer. Neither of these pursuits, however, provides her with a satisfactory way to approach the world: the former is merely an escape into fantasy and the latter an unrealistic dream (she seems to have little riding ability), a retreat from the world of people to that of animals. Lucy's emergence into adulthood seems destined to transform her into one of the 'strange children.'

But then, at the end of the novel, everything is turned around when Tubby and Isabel run off together. Suddenly the true nature of events becomes clear. Asserting a dependable saneness that stands in marked contrast to the instability of the others, Kevin reveals that Isabel has been hopelessly insane for some time. He says that, despite his warnings, Tubby had refused to believe this, and preferred to see Isabel's instability as a reaction to her marriage with Kevin. Once seen as a crazy religious fanatic [by this Atheist critic], Kevin now emerges as the symbol of stability and order. His Catholic faith, we are now shown, provides the way of deliverance from the world of 'the strange children,' and the answer to the exhortation from Psalm 144 from which the title comes: 'Rid me and deliver me from the hand of strange children, whose mouth speaketh vanity.' (The MacDonoughs brand of faith, in contrast, appears at the end wild and disordered... [This is more Atheism. Mr. MacDonough implicitly survives--he is *saved*.])

Lucy acknowledges her acceptance of Kevin's new role when she returns his crucifix, which she had earlier taken. Even Stephen, the most callous character in the novel, is stunned by the strange turnaround in events, and experiences a religious epiphany. At one point earlier in the novel, he had gazed at the stars and listened while Tubby had mused on the far-distant future when the moon, he said, would eventually crash into the earth; but when he looks at the stars now, Stephen envisions a Judgment Day wrought by God, not

by gravity. After thinking of what Tubby had said about his (Stephen's) Scorpio zodiac sign ('The House of Death--unless a man be reborn'), he sees two falling stars, and thinks of the day when all the stars will fall... Then comes a vision in which the pattern of his life takes a new shape....

With this daring vision, the point of view unexpectedly shifting from Lucy to Stephen, *The Strange Children* ends. As Kevin's emergence as the mainstay of order forces a reevaluation of the characters, Stephen's vision changes the focus of the novel: *The Strange Children*, we see now, is as much a novel about the workings of divine grace as it is a novel of adolescent initiation. By drawing us away from Lucy at the end, Gordon emphasizes that divine grace may enter into the lives not just of the young at heart and those who repent (as Lucy does when she returns Kevin's crucifix) but into anyone's, even into that of the cold and unfeeling Stephen. We can see now that the novel contains a pattern of conversions (or at least experiences that may lead to conversions; what Lucy and Stephen do with their new knowledge is not spelled out) in which a shock experience forces a reevaluation of one's life, and prepares one for accepting God's grace....

By turning these things around so drastically at the end, forcing a complete reassessment of the characters and the novel's focus, Gordon hoped to shake up the complacent modern readers whom she viewed as her audience. She wanted to shock their sensibilities so that, like Stephen at the novel's end, they would readjust their vision of the world in light of the divine."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 100-05

"*The Strange Children* would capture very well the tone of life at Benfolly. An English reviewer, Anthony Curtis, writing in the *New Statesman and Nation*, commented on how the pattern of the grownups' lives emerged--'the lack of money, the incessant drinking, the rich meals, the conversational tearing to pieces of their friends'.... Andrew Lytle settled down at Benfolly in the fall of 1930...and wrote his first book, a biography of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the slave trader who became a Confederate general. 'We were becoming artists,' Lytle said many years later, describing life at Benfolly as pastoral-agrarian, reflecting the Garden of Eden. 'We had a very fine accidental community. We had a common background and inheritance; we understood things the same way'."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 85, 272-73

"In characters and setting, *The Strange Children* is her most closely autobiographical novel. Caroline, Allen, and Nancy reappear as Stephen, Sarah, and Lucy Lewis, the son-in-law, daughter, and grandchild of Aleck Maury. Stephen is in a poetic drought and is writing about the Civil War. Sarah paints a little and tries to manage the servants and house guests at Benfolly.

The family receives an unexpected visit from their old friends Kevin and Isabel Reardon, and a poet, Tubby, with whom Isabel is having an affair. The germ of this incident is the unanticipated arrival of Edmund Wilson, Louise Bogan, and her husband at Benfolly in 1931 on an afternoon when the cook got drunk. Kevin and Tubby are composites of many of Nancy's courtesy uncles, including Wilson, Ford Madox Ford, Hart Crane, John Peale Bishop, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, and Malcolm Cowley. Isabel is a similar composite of Bogan, Laura Riding, Katherine Anne Porter, Zelda Fitzgerald, Jean Stafford, and others. [Zelda relates to Wilson in that he promoted Scott Fitzgerald, who had to learn from experience that Zelda was insane, just as Tubby will learn of Isabel. Porter was a genius born in poverty who lived a hard life yet produced great work and she is slandered by this critic's identification of her with immature, rich, spoiled and crazy Isabel.]

The intensely autobiographical nature of this novel indicates that Caroline was using it to judge the Tates' earlier life from the perspective of her conversion. The verdict was not favorable, as the title, taken from Psalm 144, indicates: 'Rid me, and deliver me from the hand of strange children, whose mouth speaketh vanity.' The adults in the novel are the strange children; they are so taken up with the vanities of the flesh and the intellect that they cannot confront reality directly. As little Lucy notices, 'Her father's and

mother's friends hardly ever said what a thing was, they said what it was like.' This is also the way they discuss religion, feeding it into various intellectual or psychological systems to keep it at a safe distance from themselves. Sarah comments to her Uncle Fill, 'Of course, everybody isn't as intelligent as you or me, Uncle Fill, but nevertheless I think it's a good thing for people to have a religion. I don't think people get along very well without any religion at all.'

Sarah's comments, Kevin Reardon's recent conversion, and the activities of the 'Holy Roller' tenant farmers point the way for Stephen Lewis, who resists it throughout the novel. He enters into theological discussions with the Holy Rollers and Sarah's Uncle Fill as intellectual workouts. He says of Kevin Reardon's conversion, 'I respect his courage...but I don't understand what has happened to him.' He goes to watch the fervent fundamentalists handle poisonous snakes as an act of faith and rushes to call the police and the doctor when one of them is bitten, only to find that Tubby has run off with Isabel. The last lines of the novel indicate that Stephen knows he must change his life but is resisting the pain and difficulty. He thinks of Tubby as 'standing at the edge of a desert that he must cross.... He saw those days, those years had been moving toward this moment and he wondered what moment was being prepared for him and for his wife and his child, and he groaned, so loud that the woman and the child stared at him, wondering too'....

The Strange Children is a fascinating novel... The central intelligence is that of the child Lucy and the use of what Caroline called her 'innocent eye' is masterful in pointing up the adults' futile lives. Caroline named her for St. Lucy, a third-century martyr who is usually depicted as carrying her eyes on a platter but can see more clearly than others; this saint was also invoked by Allen in his poem, 'The Buried Lake' (1953). She explained, 'I use Lucy's eye more, more than her mind. In fact, I use that hardly at all.' The fact that Lucy cannot interpret events makes the novel difficult for the reader to interpret as well. In particular the significance of the shift to Stephen Lewis's point of view at the end of the novel can seem puzzling.

What Caroline said about her life before her conversion also describes the reader's experience of the novel. 'In life, as well as in the writing of novels, faith is the key to the puzzle; the puzzle doesn't make any sense unless you have the key.' The reader does not need literal faith to understand *The Strange Children*, just a *more overt presentation* of the need for faith as the key. [This Feminist critic is confessing here to Atheism and a limited ability to comprehend subtle fiction. Italics added.]... In another curious symbiosis of life and art, Allen decided to enter the Church and was baptized... Caroline was overjoyed, but she could poke fun at Allen's intellectual approach to Catholicism."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 191-93

"Caroline created Uncle Tubby, whom she sometimes called the villain of her tale, to resemble Edmund Wilson, Ford Madox Ford, Malcolm Cowley, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren in turn.... Isabel Reardon [is] the villainess, a mad women poet originally from Minnesota with whom Tubby had fallen in love. Caroline used incidents from the lives of Katherine Anne Porter, Louise Bogan, Laura Riding, Jean Stafford, Mary McCarthy, and even Zelda Fitzgerald to fashion Isabel's personality and history....

Caroline also planned to use her Benfolly tenants, the Normans, thinly disguised as the MacDonoughs, in her novel. Since the book was ultimately about the need for religious faith, the MacDonoughs would have a pentecostal revival, called a brush-arbor meeting, that would attract the attention of the Lewis family and their friends, and dramatize the true nature of the 'strange children'.... The Normans used to...'crouch in the bushes and observe the goings on in the big house, (much the way we go to the zoo,) while the guests would hang over the balcony of the big house and observe the Normans with an equal amount of curiosity and lack of comprehension'.... Caroline...wanted to use Henry James's technique of a central intelligence, and she thought Lucy's perspective was 'superior to that of the grown people because it [was] *pure*.' Lucy might hear things she could not understand, but she would still 'register' the important things happening around her...

Caroline...attended 'Holy Roller meetings' with her former cook, Beatrice, and Beatrice's husband, Mose. The black pentecostal church services were not unlike the revivals of the southern poor whites that Caroline wanted to portray in *The Strange Children*, so she sat at the meetings and brazenly took notes....

The Strange Children had become the story of one man's conversion, because, Caroline believed, the spiritual fate of the Lewis family depended on its patriarch, Stephen, Caroline's fictional version of Allen. Stephen's wife, Sarah Lewis, 'would like to have some religion but her life [was] shaped by her husband who [was] too much of an intellectual' to approach the church with humility, Caroline said.... It would take several sets of strange children, including a friend who saw visions, to move Stephen out of his arid intellectual world into a life of faith....

Caroline...struggled to dramatize Stephen's religious awakening. Throughout the novel Caroline tried to emphasize how important Stephen's faith or lack of faith was to those around him, but she could do so only by rendering dramatic scenes through the consciousness of her 'central intelligence,' Lucy.... When it came time to reveal Stephen's turn toward faith, Caroline decided she needed 'more range' than she 'could get through the child's intelligence or sensations'... Finally she decided to end the novel by switching to Stephen's point of view and consciousness.....

The fall publication of *The Strange Children* did little to alter most people's perceptions of the Tates. Caroline had used so many identifiable incidents and characters from her own life that many readers thought the novel was little more than thinly disguised autobiography. Caroline would always insist that she was creating fiction, not recounting her life, but there were numerous similarities between Allen and Stephen Lewis, herself and Sarah Lewis. And however much she might dissemble in life, in the autobiographical fictions of *The Strange Children*, Caroline had written a devastating analysis of Allen and of their marriage.

Throughout the novel Stephen Lewis belittled his wife's intelligence and mocked his wife's family, just as Allen did. He used his intellect as a weapon and a shield: to inflict pain on people who annoyed him, like Sarah, and to ward off any direct encounter with life. He could 'keep things from happening,' Sarah thought, by simply turning every person and event into an abstraction to be analyzed. Although he never voiced any direct objection, Allen was probably not comfortable with Caroline's fictional portrait of him. Sometimes he would joke with his friends about how dangerous it was to be married to a novelist who might include uncomplimentary portraits in her fiction. But if Allen was seriously upset, he hid it well.

Perhaps Allen could afford to be gracious, since Caroline did not treat herself any better in fiction. Unlike Caroline, Sarah Lewis was a mere shadow of her husband: she had no intellectual life of her own. When not organizing the household or trying, in vain, to keep the peace between her husband and her neighbors and family, Sarah attempted to paint, but she never thought her work was good enough and so she often destroyed it. Like Caroline's earlier heroines, Sarah was an intuitive woman, sensitive to the spiritual side of life, but unlike Caroline's earlier heroines, she was helpless to respond to those intuitions.

Caroline was equally harsh toward the other women in her story. Jenny, the cook, had secret knowledge that she longed to share with Lucy, but she did not have the ability. Lucy, perceptive and precocious, realized she would turn out to be no better than the parents she often scorned. Isabel Reardon was the proverbial madwoman in the attic: she could no longer write poetry, and she could not be cured of her mysterious mental illness; she could only escape from the Lewises' third-floor bedroom into a life of sadness. The only person to appear in a sympathetic light was Kevin Reardon [Terence McDonough, also, is a religious hero.], who, in some respects, also resembled Allen: diagnosed as suffering from latent homosexuality, he could never work with a psychiatrist because he had 'read as much as the fellow had.' The only peace he could find was in the Catholic church, but even his faith did not give him the strength and wisdom to deal with his wife and her madness.

How Caroline expected anyone to ignore autobiographical parallels amazed even her sympathetic readers. Caroline's friend Sally Wood had a difficult time reading *The Strange Children*. Sarah Lewis resembled Caroline too closely, Sally thought; she could not view the novel dispassionately. Far from anticipating such responses, Caroline thought the religious theme of the novel would alienate most reviewers. Few critics, however, objected to the novel's pervasive Catholicism.... [Some] objections to the novel concerned the character of Lucy. [Reviewers contradict each other]: Not only did some reviewers criticize Caroline for abandoning Lucy's viewpoint at the end of the novel, but others found Lucy an insufficient narrator....'something of a pest'...'more stupid than childlike' [*New Yorker*]... In *Commonweal*

Anne Fremantle declared that Lucy was odious... [These attitudes are typical of Feminists toward *all* children, including the unborn. These critics are irritated because they identify with the adult intellectuals exposed by Lucy as less perceptive than she is. See Fraistat for a competent analysis of Lucy.]

Caroline, however, believed she had made a 'modest contribution to the form of the novel' by combining Henry James's technique of the 'central intelligence' with 'the innocent eye' of a child.... The ending of *The Strange Children* revealed Caroline's willingness to fashion her work in support of a more conservative ideology.... Yet *once again* and perhaps unconsciously, *she undercut her conservative message* with a literal and figurative underground stream... [How so?] *The literal stream defined the boundaries of Caroline's fiction world...* [How so? Explain. Italics added.] It also served as symbol of the unconscious, of creativity, and of life itself. [Hence it has *no* "boundaries."] Those who were sensitive to the presence of the underground stream [the symbol]--Sarah and Lucy, primarily--were also sensitive to spiritual forces. Those who ignored the stream--most notably, Uncle Tubby--did so at their own peril.

The figurative underground stream was one of saints [?] and images of feminine power. Just as in *The Women on the Porch*, Caroline created an unusual path to salvation, concentrating on two female guides who brought the message of faith to the world: St. Martha and the Virgin Mary. St. Martha brought about Kevin Reardon's conversion and continued to sustain his faith: he sometimes tried to 'put the woman out of his mind,' but then he felt 'a kind of severing pain' and 'a period of desolation' until St. Martha rejoined him. In the novel Stephen Lewis scoffed at the idea of such a vision, but Sarah believed. In a sense Sarah was a modern-day St. Martha, constantly caring for the needs of others at the expense of her own soul.

Caroline described in the novel how the original St. Martha had subdued the dragon, the archetypal villain of fairy-tale worlds. Caroline also hinted that Sarah had similar power. Kevin sensed Sarah's affinity to the saint, or at least her perceptive nature. He consulted her about what he ought to do with his statue of St. Martha, and he revealed his vision to her. But at the novel's end Sarah had not yet come to understand or exercise her power. In life Caroline could respond to her spiritual promptings and, ultimately, lead her family to faith, but in fiction Sarah could not, at least not until her husband stopped ridiculing the spiritual life.

When he was not scoffing at visions, Stephen Lewis often ignored or avoided confronting questions of faith. Caroline demonstrated this in a long and apparently disconnected scene near the end of the novel, a confrontation between Stephen and Sarah's uncle Fillinger Fayerlee, a lonely old man who wanted to believe in the Virgin Birth. Needing a rational explanation of the mystery, and sensing Stephen would be a worthy colleague for such an intellectual exercise, Uncle Fill attempted to draw Stephen into the argument. But to his wife's embarrassment and annoyance, Stephen scorned the old man: he did not dare to question.

Belief in the Virgin Mary and in saints like Martha was [is] an important part of the Catholic faith. In *The Strange Children* Caroline made that belief the key to faith. She invested her female characters with knowledge, sensitivity, and untapped power. [Isabel?] She even gave one of her female characters the most important voice of narrator and central intelligence... Caroline often found herself defending her decision to end *The Strange Children* in the mind of Stephen Lewis. Inevitably she would point out the various incidents in the novel where Lucy looked to her father for consolation.... She [asked] that her reader consider the theological context of her work. 'Anybody reading my work from now on will get more out of it, I believe, if he takes into consideration the fact that I am a Catholic,' Caroline said, 'for any book I write during the rest of my life will be some kind of testimony of faith'."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 279-80, 283, 289-90, 292-96

"*The Strange Children* [is] her sixth novel and the first in which she made use of a Jamesian central intelligence. Benfollly clearly provides the setting for the story which is that of a young couple, the scholarly lapsed poet Stephen Lewis and his wife Sarah of the Aleck Maury series (representatives there also of Gordon and Tate), who in the end come to a realization that the world of intellectuals they have aspired to be a part of is in reality a spiritual wasteland. The focus of the narration is that of their daughter,

nine-year-old Lucy Lewis, and it is she who first responds to the one Christian, a Catholic, among the Lewises' sophisticated guests and so precedes her parents in spiritual enlightenment."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 67-68

"In...*The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*...she turns her attention to the salvation of the frustrated, intellectual man who needs to locate his authority and assume responsibility. As Zeus and Hercules, despite the extraordinary power of Hera, dominate her last mythic novel, *The Glory of Hera*, Stephen Lewis and Thomas Claiborne assert their point of view and their desires over their respective wives at the close of both these novels. Thus, Gordon, as female artist, writes stories in which *she mutes the powerful potential of women* [Untrue of characters such as the powerful rich woman Joan Parrish who buys Penhally and the Christ-evoking landowner and battlefield nurse Susan Allard in *None Shall Look Back*. Italics added.] and so that she can rescue her wayward and frustrated modern men.... Their authority rests on their ability to accept their place in the scheme of Christian salvation. These men will translate and adapt the spiritual intuitions they receive from women into their art and speech.

Gordon always suggested the possibility that a new order might be born if responsible and dedicated men were sensitive to the needs of women and would be informed by feminine knowledge and spirituality or intuition. That possibility seems to be the promise behind the marriages of John [No, Rives] and Lucy in *None Shall Look Back*, Aleck and Molly in *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*, Cassie [Cassy] and Rion and Archy and Monon in *Green Centuries* [Monon is an Indian squaw, Archy a patriarchal warrior]--but, over and over, the promise is unrealized. Gordon's early heroes and heroines are so untutored by the past and so busy subduing the chaos in their new worlds that they do not look beyond their worldly struggles. Nor do they contemplate the 'presences' or supernatural forces that always lurk in the background of Gordon's fiction. These 'presences' can either curb or exacerbate the chaotic tendency toward which she believes Western civilization is descending.

In Gordon's earlier fiction, instances of enduring love between men and women are few.... Characters in Gordon's early novels and stories either vaguely feel, fear, suppress, or discount supernatural or spiritual forces. Ellen Cromlie of 'Mr. Powers' believes in a power reflected in nature, but she fears even its shadow and works to keep herself in her own circle of light. The fact that these supernatural presences are often felt by women or described in feminine terms further diminishes their influence in Gordon's masculine world. Her male characters are so fearful of the power inherent in the 'evil' or destructive woman that they reject the feminine 'presence,' be it menacing or inspirational. [Feminist propaganda]

In her earlier fiction, Gordon steadily explores the quests of the plantation patriarch, the devoted sportsman, or the detached man of letters who feels the need to curb the power of the subversive woman, be she the restrictive and conventional wife and mother or the evil...seductress. Although these men often strive to dominate or protect, they exhibit great weakness. Either they have difficulty creating a coherent vision of the aesthetic, historic, or moral order that they believe should exist, or they cannot execute their vision. For Gordon, the crisis for modern men and women arose from individuals who strove to retain hollow traditions [Christianity is not "hollow"] and gender roles in a changed world.... Women, particularly white women who have the choice, all too often simply withdraw and, like Ellen Cromlie, remain in their protected circles of light.

In her novels of the fifties, Gordon allows her hitherto a spiritual male protagonists to achieve a supernatural or spiritual vision from women that authorizes them to assume *control over the abyss*. [How do you "control" death or Hell? Italics added.] That the Catholic Church legitimizes such power leads many readers to evaluate Gordon's later works, especially *The Strange Children* and *The Malefactors*, in terms of her Christian vision.... In her 1944 novel [*The Women on the Porch*] Gordon ambiguously depicted Jim Chapman as either *the deadly snake who destroys female power* [Feminist illusion. Italics added.] or the Orphic hero who rescues Catherine by leading her out of the static realm of Swan Quarter and toward the city, where, together, they will confront a world of lost values and of violent and authoritarian rule. [This is the plot, not the Feminist illusion.] In 1951, Gordon leaves a similar male protagonist, Stephen Lewis of *The Strange Children*...groaning over...the dangers inherent in a life not predicated on faith and spirituality.

Unlike the enigmatic vision of Jim Chapman, Stephen Lewis's vision is Christian and clear. He experiences an awakening in which he realizes he must cast off his cynical, intellectual philosophy of life, but he has not attained the stature of the prophet and knows not what he must do after that. The novel ends not with action but with his groan of recognition....

If we are to save our culture--and save our marriages--intellectual man must construct and articulate a moral vision, which is derived from the intuitions of women who serve as unresisting vehicles for divine revelation.... [This Feminist critic sounds as if *she* might resist divine revelation.] Like Jim Chapman, Stephen Lewis has a vision of death and the destruction of the world, but here, instead of using the mythical imagery of a Great Goddess who reasserts her authority over the world of men [worshipped by Feminists], Gordon chooses to use Christian imagery and the language of Saint John....

Gordon's central consciousness, ten-year-old [various critics call her variously 8, 9, and 10] Lucy Lewis, 'cannot make the necessary revelation, and Miss Gordon has the child's father, in his knowledge of the family's despair, take over...in the concluding pages.' While the shift in narrative voice is surprising, it is not arbitrary but very well planned. Lucy, the soul-searching Undine figure in this novel...must be rescued from the dangers represented by the erring hero--here Tubby MacCollum--and the materialism, evil, and madness of the woman writer, Isabel Reardon, as well as the incoherent vision of her mother, Sarah Lewis... Isabel is revealed as a mad seductress and frustrated poet consumed by her need for admiration... Isabel is perceived by Tubby and many other men as *la belle dame sans merci*; like Cleena, she consumes men. In contrast, Lucy's mother, Sarah, enthralled in her domestic role, is the 'cumbered' St. Martha....

Having substituted a passion for men for her passion for art, Isabel neglects her poetry and, three husbands later, appears at Benfolly to ensnare the unsuspecting Tubby MacCollum. Isabel has become a sun worshipper, a woman captivated with masculine gods, and she assumed traditional feminine stereotypes to captivate them, becoming a perfect mimic of all that is seemingly innocent, helpless, and beautiful. Underneath her beauty and calm, she is suicidal and terrified of caves, the feminine space associated with ancient goddesses and fertility.... She is terrified of her own internal abyss, of the feminine power within her that may lead to alienation in the patriarchal world. Constantly enticing men to rescue her, Isabel has distorted her creative potential. She is so fearful of exploring inner space that she spends all her artistic talents creating a beautiful surface for men....

As a foil to Isabel, Gordon represents Sarah Lewis as another kind of woman artist, one who seems to have accepted the reverse of Isabel's role. Unconcerned with her appearance, considering always the needs of others, Sarah is a painter who rarely has time to paint. Throughout the novel, she is depicted as the restless and relatively unattractive caretaker, providing her family and friends with food and maintaining a smooth and well-ordered environment for the selfish people with whom she shares her home. Like St. Martha, the sister of Mary Magdalene and Lazarus who complained to Jesus that she was forced to assume all the domestic chores while Mary sat at Jesus' feet, Sarah is the 'troubled' and 'careful' woman who lacks what is necessary.... Too busy and fretful, Sarah, like Martha, is unmindful of the public realm and, having no singleness of passion, should not be an agent of salvation.

Stephen Lewis, in his better moods, refers to his wife as his 'homespun Cassandra.' A woman who believes in the spiritual or the supernatural and craves faith, Sarah has the intuitions, the secret knowledge of the prophet, but, as revealed in Lucy's dreams about her mother, men will not listen to her; in error, they turn to the more beautiful, less outspoken, and more dangerous Isabel.... Gordon clearly identifies with Sarah Lewis: 'I'm Professor Maury's daughter, fallen among thieves.' A woman whose thoughts are as scattered as her passions, Sarah first complains that her husband 'won't let anything happen' because he does not accept her prophecies or intuitions; however, in the book she is last seen standing behind him. Her silence...affords him the opportunity to witness and act.

At the end of *The Strange Children*, Gordon, as artist, assumes the role she assigns to Sarah; she prophecies doom and then creates a vacuum, a silence, and looks toward man to fill it.... Stephen sees that nature may very well fall back into chaos, and even the stars may fall, but he will be judged and must consider *his* wife and *his* child.... Our culture was built on faith in the individual rather than faith in a greater power; on self-interest rather than love [like Feminism]. Thus, in her later works, we witness her

progression toward traditional religious faith. Her dramatic scenes are designed to propel man into selfless action because, she believes, the modern crisis of identity has affected him more critically than it has affected women.... The women who nourish men, approve their knowledge...are valorized."

Anne M. Boyle

Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 168-76

The Strange Children is another masterpiece, considered Gordon's best novel by several critics. Sarah and Stephen Lewis have been seen rightly as resembling Gordon and her husband in their marital relations. This identification is encouraged by details such as the setting at Benfolly and seems apt enough with respect to Allen Tate, though he was far more accomplished as a poet and historian than Stephen, but not as much to Gordon, who made Sarah much less admirable a person than herself. Undoubtedly their daughter Nancy contributed to the characterization of Lucy. The Lewises are made enough like the Tates for the novel to be taken as an indirect yet public confession sublimated in art.

The villain, Tubby, resembles the powerful critic Edmund Wilson in a number of ways: (1) he is fat; (2) he attended Princeton; (3) he is "a man from New York"; (4) he is a very successful writer; (5) he has a scholarly interest in the Civil War; (6) he is an elitist intellectual; (7) he has affairs; (8) he is a rude house guest; (9) he is politically leftist; (10) he mocks spiritual experience of which he is incapable; and (11) he is selfish and cruel in his betrayal of friendship. Gordon and Wilson were friendly associates for many years but Wilson was a false friend who repaid her hospitality by refusing to review her work. She appears to sublimate her own hurt in depicting Tubby's betrayal of Kevin, who represents faith in God. Even the MacDonough children, though virtually uneducated, recognize that Tubby the man from New York is a pretentious fool and laugh at him behind his back. The rustic MacDonoughs prove to be more perceptive than the urbane Lewises. Stephen Lewis has always looked up to Tubby: "Let me tell you, Tubby's a mighty attractive fellow." The Lewises host and indulge Tubby. "Sometimes they would read poetry to each other or sometimes they would just talk about their friends," but sitting up there on the gallery, to Lucy and the MacDonough kids "It looked like they were animals that had been put in a pen.... The MacDonoughs thought it was funny just to look at them."

Tubby should not be reduced to Edmund Wilson. He is much larger than any one person, he is a social type in the tradition of Realism: an elite intellectual writer in the 20th-century literary establishment--he publishes in *Now*--in effect an Atheist who mocks religion and hence represents Satan in the allegory of Lucy's spiritual growth. That he is representative is evinced by all the models in addition to Wilson named by critics: Ford Madox Ford, Malcolm Cowley, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren. Tubby's union with crazy promiscuous Isabel and his refusal to believe that she is insane are proof of his bad judgment. Isabel will give him hell before he gets there. Although she may have been a good poet, she is compared to Hart Crane, a very good poet who was unstable enough to kill himself by leaping overboard. Lucy says, "You would have thought that she was not a grown woman...but a child who might leap out of the window." Her eyes are the same color as those "in the old graveyard." Tubby makes historical and literary allusions and jokes throughout the novel, demonstrating how clever he is, how witty and worldly, yet in the end he proves to be more stupid than he considers the literal snake handlers. Mr. MacDonough is a Holy Roller and he survives getting bit, whereas Tubby is an unholy roller with Isabel and he is doomed. Unlike those who see God, Tubby is "looking beyond whatever was before him, at something that was not there and never would be there, no matter if you looked all your life." In his spiritual blindness, "his eyes were black holes"--like a demon's eyes. "I be damn!" he says near the end.

The primary message of this novel is the same as that painted on "the Holy Roller Rock" at the gated entrance to Benfolly, on their neighbor's property: "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD." It is ominous that Tubby compares this Lewis gateway to the entrance to Hell. The rock alludes to Jesus calling Peter the rock of his Church. His metaphor of the rock has also been identified with Jesus himself. Snakelike vines are a motif in the novel, most clearly symbolic in clustering around the base of the rock "thick and dark enough to make a home for snakes." Sarah Lewis is intimidated by the rock and planted the vines to cover it up. When Lucy comes upon Tubby having sex with Isabel "under a mass of vines" in the woods, "*The vines were moving!*" Tubby and Isabel are analogous to snakes hiding around the rock. That preparing to meet God is the primary issue in life is emphasized by the irony that the Lewises repeatedly exclaim "My God!,"

"Oh, God," "Good God!," "Great God!," "God knows," and "For God's sake." Tubby says "Gad." Their excessive drinking and talking are like snaky vines covering up the rock of faith. Benfolly "looks like a merry-go-round" as the Lewises have reduced their lives to a joyride. "They themselves spent half their time drinking something that made them feel so bad that they had to drink something else to make them feel better and that something else made them feel like drinking something else again: what Daddy called a vicious circle." "Talk was all they seemed to care about." Their lives are a charade like the one directed by the sacrilegious Tubby that causes a psychotic breakdown in Isabel. According to studies over the years, religious faith improves mental health and happiness.

Although she became a Catholic herself and like other Catholics was critical of Protestantism, their theological adversary, in this novel Gordon affirms the essential points represented by the Holy Rollers, who in the spectrum of Christian sects are in sensibility and otherwise at an opposite pole from Catholics: (1) they are preparing to meet God; (2) they follow Jesus and no other; (3) they honor snake handlers who set an example of absolute faith in being willing to die for Jesus; (4) they believe that martyrdom for Jesus assures them of eternal life; (5) they not only recognize evil as symbolized by snakes, they handle it rather than ignore it, whereas the Lewises believe "it's more convenient to keep your eyes closed. Keep 'em closed as long as you can"; (6) they have genuine religious visions just as Kevin the Catholic had; (7) they are passionate witnesses for Jesus; (8) they are charitable neighbors in a Christian community--closeknit, as implied by the fact that the seven MacDonoughs sleep in the same bed, which Lucy thinks is better than sleeping alone; (9) they are humble and content in their poverty, though Mr. MacDonough makes only 75 cents a day--"I reckon it's the Lord's will that some make more than others," says his tolerant wife--in contrast to Tubby the leftist reformer who would like to see tenant farmers unionize; (10) they believe in spiritual values, not money or politics; (11) their families are happy, unlike the Lewises.

The innocent perceptions of Lucy are often incisive: "Grown people didn't expect you to answer what they said to you. Half the time, when they said anything to you, they were just talking to themselves. She had found that out a long time ago." Her naive perceptions are often evidence of the adult corruption around her, as when she recalls her father and mother traveling in Europe: "A lot of people came and went. In bedrooms, mostly..." Sometimes she acts as a conscience: "You told a lie," she tells her mother. "She always knew when they weren't going to do what they had said they would do." The Lewises are less honest than the Holy Roller Claude Lancaster, who killed his brother but of whom Mr. MacDonough says, "Claude's a roisterer and a whoremonger but ain't no man ever said he wasn't good as his word." The reader is likely to consider the MacDonoughs crude, especially since "they had no place to bathe," but Lucy says "They had better manners than she herself had." Her mother Sarah "took a nap every day after lunch. It was the only way she could stand life, she said," whereas Mrs. MacDonough is tireless, nurses her baby and "would go straight through anything; you couldn't imagine her giving up." Sarah is well educated, but Lucy thinks "She's got more fool ideas than any white woman I ever saw." That Lucy is being corrupted by her parents is evident in her attraction to Tubby, her rudeness, her profanity--"You needn't get me no damn dinner"--and most of all in her theft of the crucifix.

The crucifix is the most powerful of all symbols, a numinous image of God. Though she is just a child and does not know its symbolic meaning, Lucy does feel guilty and therefore is responsible for her act. In stealing God, Lucy is more successful than Lucifer, who tried to steal the position of God, then failed to steal Jesus in the wilderness. At one point, her father calls Lucy a "little devil." Children often act like little devils even when they have been taught not to do something. Like snitching a cookie or shooting a lot of classmates in their high school. Although she has been taught to say prayers, Lucy shows herself to be so deprived of spiritual guidance that she does not know the meaning of a crucifix. This fact generates one of the most resounding ironies in American literature, when Lucy refers to Christ on the cross as "the little man." Lucy here becomes a metaphor of Atheists who belittle Jesus, and of adults who are childlike in their ignorance of history, literature and religion, who have never been taught anything about Christianity, and who do not recognize God when they see Him. As Uncle Fill says, "All through the Old Testament you'll find man cutting the Almighty down to his own stature."

At least Lucy is still open to visionary experience. Unlike her parents, the MacDonoughs "hardly ever mentioned the radio or politics or even the Depression. They mostly just talked about God. When Mr. MacDonough or Mrs. MacDonough said 'Jesus' you felt as if He were in the next room. And when she was

down there, listening to them, she felt the same way. Once she herself had almost seen Jesus, coming around the corner of the house. At any rate, the lilac bush had shaken and there had been a radiance in the air.... Up at the house you didn't feel that you were likely to see Jesus, though her father and mother talked about him a good deal, too. *The man who fell among thieves.*" They reduce Jesus from God to a man. "Her father quoted the Bible almost as much as Mr. MacDonough did, but it sounded different on his lips.... Her mother talked to her about God sometimes.... It didn't sound like the same God, though. Or maybe it was just that the MacDonoughs were closer to Him." When her father refers to "spiritual life," her mother says "I haven't got any.... Neither have you."

As Lucy's guilt at having stolen the crucifix makes her circumspect, she begins to feel "that something terrible was going to happen to all of them if they did not do something." (Namely, return God to His rightful place.) Her feeling makes the symbolism of stealing God and hiding Him in a pretty box apply to the adults around her. She dreams that "this country they were walking through was no real country at all, only the brink of a great chasm into which they would all fall if they did not turn around and go back the way they had come." Cut off from the Spirit, they are the "strange" children of God who do not respect or even see their Father, just as Kevin lives most of his life without seeing his earthly father. "Such a strange world," Sarah Lewis exclaims. Kevin becomes a reflection of Jesus, yet Sarah calls him "just a poor little man" as Lucy called Jesus. Kevin is giving away his wealth because he is rich in spirit. The dirt poor MacDonoughs do not need more money for the same reason.

The revival at the end of the novel functions much like the Easter church service near the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, where themes and motifs converge in a dramatic climax. Faulkner's old black preacher is like Mr. MacDonough in appealing to the depths of the soul with archetypal symbolism and emotion rather than reason. Mr. MacDonough gets bitten by the snake at the same time that Tubby elopes with Isabel and the simultaneity implies that Tubby too is snakebit. He stole Isabel and Lucy got snakebit when she stole the crucifix. The Holy Rollers are "like the early saints." They have no church and so they gather around an old dead tree that once gave Mr. MacDonough a revelation in a vision. Traditionally the cross of Jesus is called a tree. The tree is dead but Jesus lives, having transcended death. "But it ain't dead to me," says MacDonough, identifying the tree with Jesus. "To me, it's already shining in its glorified body. This tree is the best friend I've got in this world." The lights of their revival meeting are celestial, "like stars come to earth." Mr. MacDonough "laughed like a child," for "except ye become as a little child ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The religious practice of the Holy Rollers is validated by their testimonies: "I ain't had a mean thought now in three weeks. I want to thank Him for keeping me pure in heart," declares Ruby MacDonough. And old Mrs. Agnew, a poor widow bent over with age: "I love the Lord. He has been my husband, my keeper, for lo, these many years."

When she comes to believe that her parents do not love each other and never did, Lucy wonders "What is going to become of me?" By repeatedly calling her a *belle dame sans merci* Tubby implies happily that she will become a *femme fatale* like Isabel. Lucy's name means light and she was named after a saint, but until she returns the crucifix she is in danger of becoming like Luci-fer. On the way to get the pony she has been promised, "The road coiled along...like a big snake." The evil consists in the deception by young Earl Warfleet, who has trained the pony to buck off a strange rider. Lucy is strange, cut off from the spirit, because she has no intention yet of returning the crucifix. She thinks she will forget about it. At home, however, the presence of Kevin--he has become her conscience--makes her feel so guilty she seeks comfort from her father, but not from her Father. "I am not anybody to save," she thinks. When Mr. MacDonough gets bitten by the snake and she is rushed out of the revival, Lucy starts crying and is comforted by Kevin, who assures the Lewises that while they try to help out in the crisis, he will take care of the doctor and "I'll take care of Lucy, too." He is associated with healing a snake bite, functions as Lucy's conscience, tries to answer her "prayer" for a pony, implicitly forgives her, and promises to take care of her. He is a Christ-evoking figure whose religious development was born in a vision of the Virgin Mary.

For a writer, Stephen Lewis is thoughtless with his rhetoric, as when he says, "he would be damned if he would make another trip to town that day." And when he learns that Kevin is going to "sell all his goods and give them to the poor," as Christ advised, Stephen realizes that his friend is truly devoted and exclaims "Well, I'll be damned." This is what he fears at the end of the novel. And that his own limitation will likewise damn his wife and child. However, in the allegory of Lucy's spiritual growth there are signs that

she is saved: Tubby is gone, she becomes charitable, she returns the crucifix, she "almost" saw Jesus, Kevin the Christ-evoking figure says "She's all right," and "She told herself that when she grew up she would be a very different person from her father or her mother." By the end Stephen respects the Holy Rollers: "I'm thinking about joining up myself." But he sits in the back, aware that he is cut off from the Spirit. He is suffering from a spiritual condition that afflicted T. S. Eliot before his conversion: spiritual paralysis, an inability to feel what he believes, in Eliot's phrase a "dissociation of sensibility," or as Hawthorne called it, a separation of the head from the heart--lack of soul.

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