

ANALYSIS

How to Read a Novel (1957)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"A practicing novelist advances stimulating theories both on the novel and on its enlightened and pleasurable reading.' Gordon criticizes 'readers who demand what she feels are the wrong satisfactions from fiction--that it be amusing, moral, superficial, or ideological'."

Anonymous

Review of *How to Read a Novel*

Booklist 54:162 (1957)

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan

Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide

eds. Robert E. Golden and Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 258

"*How to Read a Novel* explains the development of the novel, citing practitioners and critics and yet it is 'an unacademic, informal study' directed toward the laying aside of 'preconceived notions of what a novel must be'....'A visiting tour of master craftsmen from Sophocles to Hemingway, pointing to this, steering away from that'....'The goal of the author [of any novel] and the reader is the same--the perception of life as it really is, in other words, the grasp of truth,' [the highest priority in the tradition of Realism] and...the 'key-note approach for both is that of humility'."

Anonymous

Review of *How to Read a Novel*

Kirkus 25:623 (1957)

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 258

"The impact of art' is the 'stimulating...subject' of this book. Gordon 'distinguishes with the utmost nicety between reading for 'enjoyment,' for 'amusement,' and for 'recreation'."

Anonymous

Review of *How to Read a Novel*

The New Yorker (2 November 1957) 197

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 258

"In this book the author 'does not try to be original,' relying rather on 'other practitioner-critics.' She attempts only to present what is 'orthodox in the best American colleges in the last twenty years.' [that is, New Criticism] The 'key is the "great technical secret": the central intelligence, which combines narrative techniques and dramatic techniques, as, for example, those in *Oedipus Rex*. The book 'puts a rather heavy burden on technique and appreciation of technique.' [as do Modernist novels].

Robert Gorham Davis

"It Isn't Life That Counts"

New York Times Book Review (27 October 1957) 6

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 259

"A book for the better reader....The analysis of well-known novels makes this double as a work of literary criticism'."

Mary E. Kelley

Review of *How to Read a Novel*

Library Journal 82:2127 (1957)

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 259

"For teachers or students, 'Miss Gordon's advice is the most helpful in print today.' The book 'attempts to answer two questions: "What is a novel?" and "How should it be read?"' Gordon achieves her purpose with 'the profundity, lucidity, and readability gained in a long career of successful writing'."

Frederick Trautman

Review of *How to Read a Novel*

Quarterly Journal of Speech 52:222 (1957)

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 277-78

"Much of our scholarly and critical work of the highest seriousness has, in fact, employed this same dialectical opposition between artful showing and inartistic, merely rhetorical, telling....Caroline Gordon is...explicit in her search for the 'constants' which 'all good fiction, from Sophocles and Aeschylus down to a well-constructed nursery tale' will show. Her advice is deliberately kept on the highest possible level of generality: 'If one is going to write or read fiction, it is of paramount importance to be able to recognize these 'constants' when one comes upon them, or, if they are not present in a work of fiction, to mark their absence. This generic search for the constants in all good literature or all good fiction can be useful for some purposes--indeed, some of the most interesting questions about literature and life cannot be answered in any other way...After reading Miss Gordon's definition of the constants found in 'all good fiction,' we cannot be surprised at her manner of dismissing the works of Aldous Huxley and, indeed, all 'novels of ideas'....In judging his peculiar kind of satiric fantasia we must appeal to criteria very different from those appropriate to Miss Gordon's own excellent stories--stories which display, one need hardly mention, all of her constants."

Wayne C. Booth

The Rhetoric of Fiction

(U Chicago 1961) 27, 30-31

"*How to Read a Novel* offers an advanced course on the subject and perhaps provides a more valuable insight into Miss Gordon's own body of work than does *The House of Fiction*, since here she not only analyses theme and technique but also advances aesthetic theory as well. In this collection of essays one can see clearly the connection between the fiction writer's narrative mode and his total vision, which for her is finally moral in essence. Thus the technical failure of Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters* is attributable to a lack of artistic integrity, an unwillingness on the part of the French novelist to submit to the world's body and his consequent attempt to force life into the procrustean bed of his own innate perversity."

Thomas H. Landess

Introduction

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium

(U Dallas 1972) 3

"Miss Gordon, who has also taught in a number of colleges and universities in various parts of the United States, has established a reputation as a distinguished teacher. For years she conducted courses in the novel and the short story at Columbia University, and she has served as a writer-in-residence at several American universities...She believes that students are often encouraged to write before they have a clear notion of what a short story or a novel is. As a consequence, much of her instruction has been devoted, in reality, to teaching the reading of fiction to those who hope someday to be able to write fiction well....

Her chief critical concern is not with *what* fiction ought to say about human experience but with how it should be said....About the proper hero of fiction she argues that, since a novel is an imitation of an action and since characters can only be revealed by what they do, the hero must necessarily be a man who acts. And, traditionally, he is a man who 'has certain characteristics and is faced always with the same task: the overcoming of evil that good may flourish'....Fielding's *Tom Jones*...is a suitable hero because, for all of his faults and all of his own misfortunes, 'he is always ready to drop whatever he is doing to help somebody whose fortunes are lower than his own.' The two main characters of Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* are not suitable heroes because they are too unambitious; they are too much the heroes of 'self-expression' whose energies are absorbed in being rather than doing'....

The protagonists of writers like Andre Gide and Jean Paul Sartre are not heroes at all, for they are incapable of acting. The protagonists of Miss Gordon's own novels, of course, do resemble the traditional hero she describes; but, as we have seen, these heroes inevitably do not come from the modern world but from cultures of the past. Furthermore, two of Miss Gordon's novels have shown the modern world to be deeply hostile to the concept of heroism that she holds to be timeless... Any novelist who is widely read in modern literature and who is aware of the current state of intellectual thought is bound to be influenced by the current attraction to the introverted, paralyzed hero, a protagonist Miss Gordon scornfully rejects."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 14, 18, 22, 67

"At times, Gordon detects Christian affinities in authors who do not profess the faith, so that, for instance, she reads Kafka's work as Christian allegory. After showing that Yeats's poem 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' characterizes the friend 'in terms of objects he loved,' she concludes, 'That kind of patient, passionate portrayal of natural objects is a recognition of the natural order which I can only call Christian, "Christian in hope".'

Especially in her discussion of Henry James's novels, Gordon looks for the archetypal pattern of Christianity. Her reading of *The Golden Bowl* depicts Verver as a hero who must 'save his country from a menace,' comparing him to Saint Martha subduing the dragon--in this case, Verver's wife Charlotte. She sees Maggie as a heroine living by the principle of Christian charity...James, Gordon summarizes, 'was able through his genius to apprehend the archetypal patterns of Christianity and to use them as no novelist before him had used them. But it took him a lifetime to do it. *The Golden Bowl* is the only one of his major creations that is a comedy in the sense that Dante's great poem is a comedy, the only one in which virtue is wholly triumphant over vice....

Gordon desires to impose critical standards that would correct the more popular secularism of the age. In contrast, for example, to what M. H. Abrams calls the 'Natural Supernaturalism' of the romantic poets, Caroline Gordon values the Christian pattern underlying western civilization not as a myth revealing man's most noble image of himself but as testimony to God's active participation in the physical world. Abrams explains that the impulse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was, in varying degrees, 'to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine.' However, like T. E. Hulme, who deplored the deification of man as a weakening of religion, the Fugitive poets and Caroline Gordon condemned the romantics for promoting such a split between the truly supernatural and the natural....As James Rock comments, Caroline Gordon's acceptance of 'Hulme's classic position of religious orthodoxy and of man's inheritance of original sin' is one step away from her conversion to Roman Catholicism, a religion offering a transcendent view of life and grace to mortals....

Like the criticism in *The House of Fiction*, Gordon's stance in *How to Read a Novel* is essentially practical, as the title indicates, and is best understood as a writer's reflections on her craft. Little of the material is original, which she readily admits; moreover, she makes many of the same points in *The House of Fiction* and in the essays she published in various periodicals...Gordon's colleague at Columbia University Robert Gorham Davis points out that since Gordon intends to present to a general audience 'that view of the novel which has become orthodox in the best American colleges in the last twenty years,' the book is not to be faulted for synthesizing the ideas of others.

The discussion of point of view, which ranges over four chapters, draws heavily upon Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* and, of course, James's own writings on the subject. The chapter on plot, 'Complication and Resolution,' applies the terminology of the *Poetics* to the novel, using two very different plots--those from *Oedipus Rex* and Beatrix Potter's *Jemima Puddle-Duck*--to suggest the relevance of Aristotle's concepts to any well-constructed narrative. 'The Decline of the Hero,' a chapter providing insight into Gordon's fictional themes, deplores the failure in the modern novel to portray heroic action....

The first and last chapters, 'How Not to Read a Novel' and 'Reading for Enjoyment,' repeat Gordon's strictures for both reader and writer. The good novel does not argue for a personal moral code...The novel

is not primarily an argument....The good novel does not include only pleasant happenings but presents the complexity of life. It does not try to be popular for popularity's sake, and it is not mainly concerned with ideas, except as they are embodied in action."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 24-25, 31-32

"One of her primary concerns now as a writer was understanding the reading public she faced, so that she could develop a fiction that would speak to her readers; consequently, in her major work of criticism, *How to Read a Novel* (1957), she explored the reading process and what readers bring away from the experience. Gordon's ideas on reading are significant for a full understanding of her postconversion fiction, for she began to shape her works in ways that she hoped not only would provide for a good story but also would force secular readers to expand their vision towards the divine....

Gordon believed that most modern readers read only for entertainment, and by this she meant that they sought through their reading merely to have their beliefs and values pleasantly reinforced. This kind of reader, she wrote in *How to Read a Novel*, 'demands that his own moral code shall not be infringed upon, or his feelings lacerated by an unpleasant happenings in any books her reads'; in other words, demands 'that the emotions aroused in him by the reading of any work of art shall not overflow into real life but shall be 'earthed'--and not far from his easy chair.' She goes on to say that this reader does not want to be improved by his reading, and she compares him to a picnicker who would rather rest in a valley than climb the surrounding mountains to enjoy the sweeping vistas. 'If we spend all our time picnicking in the valley,' Gordon writes, 'we may come to feel that there is nothing worth seeing outside of it, may be tempted to dismiss as vain imaginings the wonders that our more energetic friends tell us they have viewed from the mountaintop and, losing touch with reality, become prisoners of our own inanition.

In contrast to this safe and easy reading (in Gordon's terms, reading for amusement) is the more difficult but more rewarding enterprise, reading for enjoyment. To read for enjoyment, the reader must lay himself open to the reading experience, repressing for the time being his prejudices and opinions so that they do not overshadow the author's subject matter and point of view. Attaining this detachment and humility, Gordon says, is a very difficult accomplishment, one which few achieve. But it is only through striving for this openness and self-effacement that a reader may learn more about life and himself. 'The truth of our own lives,' Gordon writes, 'is written in the lives--and the looks--of others. To see ourselves as others see us is always a rewarding experience even if it is sometimes trying.'

Gordon quotes Melville's phrase, 'shock of recognition'--by way of Edmund Wilson--to describe the knowledge a good reader gets from a worthwhile book: this shock is a crystallization in the reader's mind of 'ideas, opinions, even emotions, of which the reader himself was only half aware.' This moment of truth joins thinking minds from throughout the centuries in a joyous camaraderie. Giving her readers that 'shock of recognition' is what Gordon sought to do with her post-conversion fiction. She knew that this would be no easy task, given the fact that, in her eyes, the modern reading public was for the most part lazy and complacent. Moreover, she saw this reading public as being primarily unmoved by religious elements; for Gordon, now a Catholic, these spiritual matters were now at the heart of her vision."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 97-98

"Allen wrote to compliment her on *How to Read a Novel*. The book distills a great many of Caroline's ideas about the novel, and pays tribute to Flaubert, James, and Joyce, her second Holy Trinity. She used Joseph Warren Beach and Percy Lubbock to buttress her arguments....The book is...wonderfully instructive and entertaining for any aspiring writer or serious reader."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 344

"*How to Read a Novel* is really a written version of the way she taught her students to read fiction. It contains explanations of techniques, such as point of view and tone, and examples from Caroline's masters, such as James, Joyce, and many others. *How to Read a Novel* is also a defense of the kind of fiction Caroline herself wrote, one that demands much of the reader. She states, 'No matter how intelligent we are, as readers we are always more interested in what a character in a novel does than in what he thinks. All great novelists know this instinctively.' Many of her readers might dispute this assertion, but this credo is one reason Caroline Gordon is a writer's writer [literary], not a popular [commercial] author. Her works are often beautiful examples of technical mastery."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 212

"*How to Read a Novel* had twelve chapters, dealing primarily with the techniques of fiction, for example, 'Complication and Resolution,' 'The Scene of a Novel,' 'The Center of Vision,' and 'The Effaced Narrator.' Adopting a conversational tone, Caroline often quoted other critics and writers, creating a sort of patchwork-quilt effect. Her manuscript was not highly original or even systematic, but it was interesting, especially her first two and final chapters, called 'How to Read a Novel,' 'The Novel as an Art Form,' and 'Reading for Enjoyment.' In these Caroline defined and defended her beliefs about what a novel ought to be and in doing so chastised many of the reviewers who had misread her novels. Caroline believed that the best parts of the book were her chapters on Henry James. 'I think that I am the only person who knows what James accomplished as a novelist, who, at the same time, can write decent English'."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 346

"In...*How to Read a Novel*, Gordon warns her reader that 'he must try to understand what the fiction writer has accomplished before he allows himself to express an opinion on how--or why--he went about accomplishing it'."

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

Michael Hollister (2018)