

ANALYSIS

The House of Fiction (1950)

Carolyn Gordon (1895-1981) and Allen Tate (1899-1979)

"The commentaries and biographies 'add to the worth of the volume' for the 'serious student of the short story form'."

Robert Cromie

Review of *The House of Fiction*

Chicago Sunday Tribune (16 July 1950) 6

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) 234

"An 'admirable anthology, especially the appendices on the art of fiction and the analyses of fifteen stories. The authors' 'standards are moral as well as artistic,' following their belief that 'failures of form are usually also failures in moral sensibility or moral intelligence.' Their criticisms of the faults in certain Hemingway, Maugham, Hawthorne, and James stories 'do not seem tendentious or dogmatic'; the total effect of the book is affirmative. The authors 'try to do for the short story what Aristotle in the 'Poetics' did for Greek tragedy.' The collection is 'thoroughly traditional,' authoritatively representing 'the intensive technical and symbolic analysis that the New Criticism developed for poetry.' The authors, for example, favor naturalism [Realism] and symbolism, with the symbols operating 'dramatically and descriptively on the naturalistic level.' Thus, 'purely romantic or allegorical art is rejected,' and 'because of the emphasis on moral responsibility, the stories are predominantly pathetic or tragic.' Six of the nine living American writers included are Southerners."

Robert Gorham Davis

"Inside the Short Story"

New York Times Book Review (30 July 1950) 4

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 234

"This anthology 'is probably the first to be grounded avowedly and almost entirely on the principles which Henry James enunciated or implied in the prefaces.' The list of authors 'is almost definitive for all aspects of the short story.' The fifteen appended commentaries are 'perceptive' and 'the bibliography reflects the direct critical line from James'."

Sidney E. Lind

"Advice to the Hungry Reader"

New Republic (11 December 1950) 22

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 234

"The editors' 'selections, without exception, are distinguished'... The appended analyses and criticisms of individual stories, based largely on the views of Henry James, 'are...frequently controversial, and always stimulating'.... As opinions their comments deserve respect, but they cannot be regarded as categorical statements of fact. Otherwise, *The House of Fiction* is an 'admirable book,' perhaps 'the best' of similar recent anthologies, all indebted to the work of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Finally, the essays on certain fictional elements such as point of view or tonal unity are 'excellent.' The volume should be enjoyed by any reader 'who respects integrity and artistry' in short fiction."

William Peden

"From Poe to Welty"

Saturday Review (17 June 1950) 18

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 234-35

"One of the latest competitors' to Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Fiction*. Gordon is 'a fictionist in her own right good enough to appear in several of the competing anthologies but modestly omitted from this one.' The inclusion of certain pieces by Hawthorne, Poe, and Bowen 'gives the book a variety that its

guiding principle [the 'tradition of naturalism'] does not suggest.' *The House of Fiction* is 'less burdened by critical apparatus than *Understanding Fiction*'... *The House of Fiction* is 'the best of its kind so far'--of 'greater scope' than Mark Schorer's *The Story*, and 'with more adequate [though fewer] commentaries than Robert B. Heilman's *Modern Short Stories*'."

Robert D. Jacobs

"Best of Its Kind"

Hopkins Review 4:59-60 (1951)

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 238-39

"It is in the critical anthologies that 'influence' is most strongly felt'.... Allen Tate and Gordon [Gordon did by far the most work on the book]...see the form of the short story as organic and objective, and they see its principle means of achievement represented in a technical competency in dealing with the problem of 'authority'." Thus, the 'influence of Henry James is obvious' in *The House of Fiction*. 'The question we need to ask...is whether the Jamesian concept (brilliant as it was) is sufficient to do justice to all of the fiction written since his day.' Tate and Gordon imply a recognition of this problem 'when they bring techniques other than Jamesian to bear upon certain stories in their anthology.' In dealing with the short story today, 'most of the criteria, the criteria afforded the highest critical respect, was supplied by Henry James.' Yet we must now allow those criteria 'to blind us to other values than those which James had pointed out'."

Ray B. West, Jr.

"The Craft of the Short Story:1951"

Western Review: A Journal of the Humanities 15:84-86 (1951), 157-60

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 239-40

"Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate view ["The Fall of the House of Usher"] as an important step, but a step only, in the grand progress toward the mastery of 'creative, active detail' which came into this tradition of fiction with Flaubert, to be perfected later by James, Chekhov, and Joyce.' To them, since the story has 'not one instance of dramatized detail,' it is still only half-realized."

Wayne C. Booth

The Rhetoric of Fiction

(U Chicago 1961) 202

"*The House of Fiction* (1950); second edition, 1960) and *How to Read a Novel* (1957) are both invaluable for defining the kind of fiction which Miss Gordon writes. That she evolved her theory of fiction over a period of years is evident in her practice and in her pronouncements, which have come late. Ford, Flaubert, Chekhov, James, Crane, and Joyce, her admired forebears, confirmed her belief that fiction must embody a heightened psychological reality.

As these writers did, she maintains that narrative art must be concerned with the conduct of life, especially with the relationships of people to one another and with the changes in these relationships. Aware of Aristotle and the example of Greek drama, the novelist will be sensitive to the 'complications' arising among individuals which follow upon the 'discovery' of crucial knowledge. Like all the Greek dramatists, he next devotes his skill to the 'resolving' of these complications, a process that depends upon the 'peripety,' the decisive change from one state to another.

In his analysis of personal relationships, the novelist must attempt to convey every nuance in the values and every shade in the feelings embodied in his characters. 'A direct impression of life' will be the result, especially if he uses with a craftsman's skill the vivid detail and the vivid image to evoke his characters, their situations, and their emotions. In sum, the modern writer of fiction will control his energies in order to secure the greatest immediacy for the impressions he wishes to record. He will appreciate the resources provided by tone and style in attaining unity, precision, and consistency of effect.

One characteristic of fiction since Hawthorne, Flaubert, and James, Miss Gordon asserts, has been the writer's recourse to vivid metaphors to render his vision; the more evocative of such metaphors function organically as symbols. The intensity of the artist's vision can also endow character, incident, and speech with more than ordinary import. So the artist will succeed to the extent that he gives his experience

significance through the use of symbolically rich situations, characters, and images. So also, according to Miss Gordon, 'the most characteristic literary trend of our time is a fusion of Naturalism and Symbolism.' [By "Naturalism" Gordon means *natural*--especially detailed rendering of the natural world--as distinct from the mode of Zola or Dreiser, what on this website is called Realism. Naturalists such as Zola and Dreiser were urbanites who rendered city life rather than the natural world, expressing a materialistic Atheist vision, whereas the agrarian Gordon renders the natural world a lot, expressing a transcendental vision of Nature as a source of archetypal truths evident in classical mythology, psychology, history and Christianity. The fusion of Realism with Symbolism is characteristic of Modernism.]

With her study of James, Miss Gordon further refined her views on the technique of fiction. He it was who taught her the virtues of a restricted point of view and its importance for determining both form and spiritual authority in the novel. Nineteenth-century writers had made most frequent use of the 'omniscient' or 'panoramic' point of view which they alternated with a restricted or dramatized point of view when they focused on the individual scene. With Flaubert resort was had to a 'concealed narrator' who interprets the action by inhabiting the minds of several characters, at the same time that he does not obtrude as spokesman for the author. It is therefore possible for the character to react directly to his experience as in a first-person narrative but to have these reactions interpreted implicitly by the author's superior intelligence which not only inhabits the character's consciousness but ranges above it.

The 'central intelligence' that organizes a late James novel is an even more sophisticated interpreter of the action than is the concealed narrator. In this method the mind of one person constitutes an organizing medium as it develops his impressions, his evaluations of experience, and his growth in moral awareness. In this method we have the immediacy of the first-person mode, the flexibility of the omniscient mode, and the penetrativeness of the mode of the concealed narrator. The method of the central intelligence goes furthest in the dramatizing of the interior life.

As for Miss Gordon's own fiction, such a central intelligence operates at its purest in her two latest novels. In them the moral sensibilities of the leading characters organize the action as these protagonists reflect upon it and assimilate its implications. In her earlier books, Miss Gordon used the Flaubertian concealed narrator, since she did not confine the psychological drama to one person's mind. At the same time, she approached in them the method of the central intelligence because there is more exhaustive analysis of the mind of Catherine Chapman, for example, in *The Women on the Porch* than we find in novels not written in the Jamesian tradition. In any event, the main formal problem for Miss Gordon has been the securing of maximum 'organic' authority for her presentation of life. This she has endeavored to achieve by an ever sharper demarcation, and an ever more sophisticated manipulation, of the mind which interprets the experiences dramatized in her novels.

Miss Gordon's use of symbolic naturalism [symbolic Realism] is most clearly seen in her short stories. 'The Brilliant Leaves,' 'The Presence,' 'Old Red,' 'Her Quaint Honor,' 'The Petrified Woman,' and 'The Forest of the South' are some of her best and some of the best written in the present century."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 8-11

"Two of the most important books in the canon of twentieth-century criticism [are] *The House of Fiction* (1950) and *How to Read a Novel* (1957), The first of these, written with Allen Tate, is one of the best textbooks ever published on the subject, and serves to instruct the writers as well as the reader. Particularly valuable is the appendix which contains, among other things, the clearest analysis every given of point of view, that unique element which distinguishes fiction from all other literary compositions. In her analysis the student is led to the heart of the problem that the novelist and the short story writer must face in coming to grips with an action; and, though Miss Gordon's discussion is as complex as the subject itself, she exposes with remarkable clarity the basic narrative methods available to the writer."

Thomas H. Landess
Introduction
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium

"Caroline Gordon obviously believes that the use of any given technique implies a moral position; she does not take the inhumanly 'objective' stance that [Wayne] Booth attributes to the 'realistic' movement in modern fiction. In *The House of Fiction*, for instance, she subscribes to the position that a 'given technique is the result of a moral and philosophical attitude, a bias towards experience on the part of the author; and as the author begins to understand what it is in life that interests him most, he also becomes aware of the techniques which will enable him to create in language his fullest sense of that interest. Material and technique become in the end the same thing, the one discovering the other.' An even clearer example of this position can be found in...*How to Read a Novel*."

Robert S. Dupree

"Caroline Gordon's 'Constants' of Fiction"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 34

"As teachers in universities and colleges, Gordon and Tate became aware of the need for a textbook that would show students how to read analytically. Their *The House of Fiction* helped to spread the ideas of New Criticism throughout the nation.... Although Tate and Gordon shared the skepticism of other New Critics that writing could be taught, they wanted in *The House of Fiction* to provide young fiction writers with appropriate models.... According to Gordon, the artist is better able to recognize successful innovations in literature than the formal critic.... [Katherine Anne Porter said the same.] *The House of Fiction* was one of a number of textbooks that changed the method of teaching literature in American higher education. As William Van O'Connor remarked in 1962, 'English departments nowadays look at literature pretty much as writers do,' and that largely as a result of the New Criticism....

The 1960 edition of *The House of Fiction* quotes at length Dante's exposition of the four levels of meaning in literature: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. In adding this material to the anthology, Tate and Gordon [mostly Gordon] stress the importance of symbolic naturalism [Realism] in fiction. Though Gordon concedes that the 'anagogical level is not ordinarily the concern of fiction writers, who write of events that take place in this world, not the next,' both she and Tate hold that the supernatural infuses this world and actively affects human lives. In fiction they look for depictions of the world that are compatible with their belief....

Gordon and Tate, especially in their joint endeavor *The House of Fiction*, endorse the techniques of symbolic naturalism [symbolic Realism] for recording the experience of mystery in this world and suggesting the archetypal patterns of human existence. They see the technique in its historical and literary context as the fusion of two separate traditions--symbolism and naturalism [Realism]. Elsewhere Gordon examines Baudelaire's sonnet 'Correspondences' to show how he presents details so that the objects and experiences of everyday life 'lift us from the natural level to the supernatural level.'

To clarify their use of the term *naturalism*, Tate and Gordon distinguish the Impressionist tradition, on which they focus *The House of Fiction*, from the branch of Naturalism exemplified by the works of Zola, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Dos Passos. Writers such as Flaubert, Chekhov, James, and Joyce 'perfected the art of dramatizing the Enveloping Action [the social background or the life from which the story comes] without offering it to the reader in large chunks: the art of making the inert detail move.' For further lifting 'the objective detail of his material up to symbolic level,' as he does in 'The Dead,' Joyce receives the highest tribute: 'If the art of naturalism consists mainly in making *active* those elements which had hitherto in fiction remained inert, that is, description and expository summary, the further push given the method by Joyce consists in manipulating what at first sight seems to be mere physical detail into dramatic symbolism.'

As the term *symbolic naturalism* implies, Gordon and Tate evaluate fiction according to two fundamental principles: how masterfully the illusion of reality [Realism] is created and how well the work fuses levels of meaning. To encourage both well-crafted and morally responsible works, they dictate certain practices for fiction writers. For example, they favor a story without auctorial comment, one that 'renders' rather than 'tells.' Consequently, Hawthorne is faulted for commenting on the issues in 'Young Goodman

Brown' and is accused of moralizing because he was unable to solve the technical problem of authority--that is, point of view. Not unexpectedly, Crane's concealed narrator, like Flaubert's, is preferred to Hawthorne's intruding commentator, and Henry James's method of the central intelligence is held in greatest esteem....

James's image of the house of fiction, which Tate and Gordon quote on the title page of their anthology, implies that the artist's observation and recording of human experience and the demands of fiction as created, crafted object, are not meant to conflict.... The best artists are those who not only make details vivid and effectively render a scene but also shape and control the meaning of the story through those same details.... These twin dictates of verisimilitude and unity shape the arguments."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 11-15, 26-27

"*The House of Fiction* came out in the summer of 1950, with both Caroline and Allen listed as authors. Allen freely conceded that it was mostly Caroline's, since she had written most of the commentaries on the stories and a large portion of the appendices, discussions of points of view and tonal unity in fiction. He said that he had wanted to include one of her stories, but that she felt that it would be improper.... Used for years in colleges across the country, the anthology was a success, and there are many people whose ideas of fiction were formed by it....

In her commentaries, Caroline used a great many of Henry James's ideas, ideals that she had articulated, shaped, and refined in her classes. She stressed the value of technical analysis to identify the 'central intelligence,' the 'omniscient narrator,' or the 'effaced narrator,' the 'long view' and the 'short view.' Her commentaries are informed by a moral sense. She sees the devil as the controlling symbol in Faulkner's 'Spotted Horses,' and God serving the same function in Flaubert's 'A Simple Heart.' Although she had always claimed that she was no more a critic than she was a poet, she proved without a doubt that she was a very fine critic indeed.... Caroline would do most of the work for the second edition, as she did for the first."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 273, 350

"*The House of Fiction* (1950)...would become a staple in the college classrooms of America. The title comes from Henry James's remark that the house of fiction has many windows, many points of view, determined by 'the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.' The thirty 'windows' the Tates selected consist of what they considered the masterpieces of American, French, British, German, and Russian writers. Half the writers were American, and almost half of those Americans were Southern friends of the Tates such as William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, Eudora Welty, and Peter Taylor.

The writers by whose standard the others are judged are Gustave Flaubert, Henry James, and James Joyce, prominent gods in the New Critical pantheon. As stated in the Preface, the Tates believed that the short story had 'obtained something of the self-contained objectivity of certain forms of poetry.' This is an expression of the New Critical tenet that a work of art is a unified, organic whole that can be analyzed and understood from internal evidence, with little or no assistance from biographical or historical information. Stories that fit this criterion, or aspire to it, are those that the Tates selected.

The popularity of *The House of Fiction* as a textbook was due not only to the fact that the stories were chosen according to the reigning theory of the day, but because for half the stories the Tates provided commentaries in which they explained the techniques by which these writers achieved their effects, particularly the use of point of view. As they state in the Preface, 'we assumed that people cannot be taught to write either masterpieces or family letters, but that young persons (of whatever age) can be taught moderately well how to read.' Caroline wrote many of these commentaries, some of which appeared first as articles in journals.... Ironically, her fiction was and is relatively unknown, but her standards for fiction

helped form the taste of a generation of Americans through *The House of Fiction*, although it contains no story of hers."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 187-88

"She took the title from Henry James's metaphor about fiction: it was a house with many windows, dependent on an individual's unique angle of vision.... In addition to writing part of the appendices, she wrote commentaries for twelve of the fifteen stories. Allen provided the analysis for three of the stories: 'The Dead' by James Joyce, 'The Beast in the Jungle' by Henry James, and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by Edgar Allan Poe.... The immediate response to the book was good... *The House of Fiction* became a standard textbook in many college classrooms, influencing several generations of students and teachers."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 266, 277, 286

Michael Hollister (2018)