

ANALYSIS

"All Lovers Love the Spring" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"Despite her rendition of life's opposites Miss Gordon's irony is classical in tone rather than modern, the irony of high seriousness. Unlike most twentieth-century writers, she tends to dignify her characters rather than to demean them in the eyes of the reader. In this regard it is instructive to compare her treatment of hopeless spinsterhood in 'All Lovers Love the Spring' with James Joyce's analogous story 'Clay.'

In the Joyce narrative--which despite its fine economy has been too highly praised--Maria, the unfortunate reject, is reduced in stature to a degree which finally threatens to compromise the reader's natural pity. Lacking beauty, intelligence, and even the vestige of feminine charm, she is alternately sentimentalized and ridiculed in a tone that earns for her a measure of contempt as well as sympathy. On the other hand, Miss Gordon's old maid has something to offer a man, and consequently her plight is more lamentable. Like Maria she is homely, a fact which her cousin Roger, whom she has secretly desired, is unable to overlook. But she is not stupid, nor is she totally devoid of womanly grace. Thus her wasted life, which is spent in service to an aged mother, is ironic on a level which suggests the tragic. And while Joyce closes his story with the maudlin remarks of a drunken young man, thereby lowering the plane of irony, Miss Gordon's ending is lyrical, a description of the sensuous beauty of spring as celebrated in the responsive heart of a woman who clearly deserves a better fate than the neglect of her shallow and insensitive cousin.

Of course the difference between the two stories can be explained by the vastly differing outlooks of their authors. Joyce rejected the notion of a traditional Ireland and had little sympathy for his Dubliners, the products of a society he regarded as tawdry and sterile. Miss Gordon, in contrast, viewed the South of her time as a vital community which could gather in, with a certain degree of love and charity, its misfits and eccentrics. In such a community the ironies of existence are at least partially reconcilable and hence protected from the unrestricted exercise of pride, Joyce's chief sin as a writer of fiction."

Thomas H. Landess, ed.
Introduction

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
(U Dallas 1972) 4

"Natural imagery also functions significantly in the brief but technically excellent 'All Lovers Love the Spring.' This story like 'The Petrified Woman' and 'The Brilliant Leaves' turns upon a lover's failure; but unlike the other stories of love denied, the pathos of this one is tempered by its delicately comic overtones. It is a spinster's tale, but the jilted lady who narrates the action in the first person displays no rancor or self-pity. She views her past and present experience with a competent degree of equanimity manifested in her wry assessment of her own situation and that of her former love, now an old friend and her associate in small town community projects.... The gently deflative irony...characterizes the lady's narrative manner and, to her credit, she directs it against herself as well as others. Her irony can accommodate not only self-deprecation but also a tender regard for the rather mediocre man whom she had once loved, and whom she may love still.

Even more than in the case of the boy in 'The Brilliant Leaves' Roger Tredwell's failing is simply his dullness. As a boy he had impressed the Fuqua girl with his energy and imagination. A more or less constant companion to her brothers, Roger played the role of leader in all their games and provided always new ideas and new projects. The girl seems to have taken him as an exemplary image of masculine initiative, glamour, and sovereignty. Nevertheless, she seems not to have been inordinately romantic in her expectations. Rather, from the spinster's recollection of their first and only date, Roger is shown to have

been prodigiously vapid and uninspiring. On that occasion he had displayed neither the ardor of a potential lover nor the courteously assumed considerateness of a gentleman but, not caring for the party they had gone to and without consulting her desires, had simply taken the girl home even before the early curfew set by her mother.

Roger Tredwell is shown to be the kind of man...who can exhibit imagination and assertive spiritedness only with respect to the world of physical objects or the world of ideas, while completely lacking these qualities in sexual matters. The narrator does not comment on her reaction to the reversal of her youthful hopes so we do not know the extent of her disillusionment. Since she remarks that she has rejected several proposals of marriage which she has not since regretted, one might conjecture that the specific disappointment has generated a general cynicism on her part, a resistance toward love and men somewhat after the pattern of rejection suggested in stories like Peter Taylor's 'A Spinster's Tale.' This may be true, although I think it more likely that the woman copes resourcefully with her disillusionment and continues to regard even the deflated Roger as her only possible object of attention.

It is Roger, after all, who marries early another woman, his equal in mediocrity but superior to the Fuqua girl in physical beauty. In any case, though the man has failed her, literally by marrying another and spiritually by his inability to utilize his inherent imaginative capacities in a sexual manner, the woman still manifests the soul of one capable of a strong and naturally feminine love. The conclusion of the story establishes one final view of the spinster against the significant backdrop of a natural setting. Here Miss Gordon again uses the natural image of the seasonal pattern to suggest that prescriptive order of proper instinct which is one of the continuing preoccupations of her short fiction. In this case the woman is shown to have imaginative and instinctual resources adequate to the situation. She has taken a respite from caring for her invalid mother and has indulged her recently acquired avocation of searching in the surrounding forest for mushrooms. In the woods she comes upon a pear tree in bloom, and her response to this revelation of natural beauty indicates the sensitivity and resilience of her spirit....

The understated wonder and muted joy of the passage, accompanied by some pathos, suits very well the tone of the story as well as the self-possession and spiritual poise demonstrated by the feminine narrator. One does not need to belabor the suggested correspondence between the tame pear tree and the woman to see that she is presented as a successful lover. Simply her manner of apprehending and responding to nature's bounty indicates a finely tuned, dignified, and delicately erotic soul. The woman's capacious spirit here contrasts with the basically petty character of the man of the story. We cannot imagine that Roger is capable of being stirred to wonder in the way that the spinster is shown to be. In her own fashion the woman has successfully fulfilled the sanctions of her sexual role even though, because of the masculine failure of her intended lover, she has been denied the more usual feminine mode of perfecting love. An elemental failure in sexual role is balanced in this story, or almost balanced, by an elemental success which partially turns the story from irony towards something more positive. The admirable lady has succeeded in not falling into the usual dryness of the spinster."

John E. Alvis

"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 101-04

"All Lovers Love the Spring' is a quiet horror story told by a forty-two-year-old spinster who is very proud of the fact that she is a Fuqua, a family that has been prominent in and around Fuqua, Kentucky, for generations. Her 'third cousin, Roger Treadwell, is president of the First National Bank...president of the Chamber of Commerce and permanent treasurer of the Community Chest and chairman of the board of directors of the hospital.' Miss Fuqua is even more impressed with her own family and her own childhood which she unintentionally reveals to have been passive and dull. When she was sixteen, she went to Bardstown Academy; and her cousin Roger went to Webb. The first night Roger came home from Webb, he asked her for a date to go to a dance. Miss Fuqua tells exactly what she wore and what food she and Roger consumed after the party. She also remembers that she knew she should not go inside a place 'like Shorty Raymond's' so that she and Roger ate their 'sandwiches, Coke, and orangeade' outside.

The final revelation about Miss Fuqua comes at the end of the story when she announces that she has taken up the hobby of hunting and eating mushrooms. The hobby gives her an excuse to get away from her invalid mother who, we finally learn, has dominated her all of her life. Out in the woods under a blossoming pear tree the 'petals looked like sea shells. I stood under the tree and watched all those festoons of little shells floating up over my head, up, up, up into the bluest sky I've ever seen and wished that I didn't have to go home. Mama's room always smells of camphor. You notice it after you've been out in the fresh air."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 119

"In 'All Lovers Love the Spring'...Gordon tells her story in a comic mode through a narrator who is a survivor. Unlike Eugenie Mazereau or Barbara, however, middle-aged Miss Fuqua is a denizen of the New South that precludes both tragic losses and heroic gestures. In every sense of the phrase, she is a lady in reduced circumstances. Like Caroline herself, she fondly remembers her childhood when she lived in a 'handsome old brick house' presided over by her father, 'quite a learned man.'

With her brothers and her cousin Roger Tredwell, the hero of her girlhood, she would play in the silver poplars behind the house. Her father is now dead, the house has been burnt down, and Miss Fuqua is left alone to care for her invalid mother. Roger has married a paragon of silliness and become a 'booster' of the New South. His unromantic appearance prevents Miss Fuqua from even indulging herself with fantasies of unrequited love. 'He had taken on weight since he got middle-aged, and the Tredwells turn bald early. When a man gets those little red veins in his cheeks and his neck gets thick, so that it spreads out over his collar, there is something about a dinner jacket that makes him look like a carp.'

Miss Fuqua, however, is one of Caroline's characters who can be a successful lover without a successful union, and perhaps may represent a hope Caroline held for herself in her current discouragement. As a lover, Miss Fuqua loves the spring, but with a realistic appraisal of its place in her life.... Like the pear tree, Miss Fuqua does not need a man to prop her up. Her spirit is still capable of rising like a wand in the forest of the New South. Caroline, however, does not choose to end Miss Fuqua's story on this lyrical note. Miss Fuqua must return to mundane life and Mama's camphor smelling room. Another of Caroline's women characters resumes her secondary but necessary role as caretaker of the endless vicissitudes of everyday life."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 170-71

"A middle-aged woman whose family had once been wealthy, Miss Fuqua appeared to be an eccentric spinster; she lived with her mother and devoted herself to collecting mushrooms. Her first-person monologue revealed she was a woman who celebrated life through her humor and creativity.... Caroline developed the character in her own image."

Nancy Lee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 239

In Gordon's novel *The Women on the Porch* (1944) Daphne is a wounded Feminist type who was deserted by her husband on her wedding night and thereafter chooses to hunt mushrooms rather than men. In "All Lovers Love the Spring" (1945) the spinster is not a Feminist type. She is spiritually though not physically attractive, is wise to reject the men who want to marry her and hunts mushrooms out of aesthetic attraction and love of Nature, as compensation for what she has missed in normal life. She will never have a child but in the end she is able to transcend her deprivations by identifying with a pear tree, a traditional symbol of fertility, as it is with respect to Caddy, an allegorical personification of Nature in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) by Faulkner.

This spinster is a lover of Spring with a fertile imagination: "Pear branches rise up like wands." This pear tree is magical in lifting her heart with transcendent joy, raising her vision to the sky in an expansion

of vision further evoked by reference to the sea and encouraging hope for the future: "Most of the blossoms hadn't unfolded yet: the petals looked like seashells. I stood under the tree and watched all those festoons of little shells floating up over my head, up, up up into the bluest sky I've ever seen." Although she is elevated by Nature here rather than directly by God, Nature is God's creation and she has a nun's capacity for sublimation. Gordon frequently uses trees as symbols, beginning with the sugar tree symbolizing a family tree on the first page of her first novel *Penhally*.

As a "member of the Y.W.C.A. board," this spinster must be a Christian. Here on the fallen earth she wishes that she didn't have to go home to care for her dying mother, but as a Christian she believes in going home to God, evoked by "floating up over my head, up, up, up..." The blossoming pear tree is reborn every Spring just as a Christian is reborn through Christ. In this way, the pear tree evokes "the tree," as the cross of Christ has been called, the most fruitful of all trees, the bounty of Christ, who died to give her and all believers eternal life--then rose again in the Spring.

Michael Hollister (2020)