

ANALYSIS

"Hear the Nightingale Sing" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"In 'Hear the Nightingale Sing' a mentally unstable girl and a stubborn mule defeat a homeward-bound Yankee when he stifles his humane instincts and attempts to steal the mule, only to be thrown and killed by the animal's brute force."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 14

"'Hear the Nightingale Sing' is an untraditional handling of a traditional Civil War situation: a Yankee soldier tries to take a pet mule away from a high-spirited, young Southern woman. Instead of killing the soldier, which is what the traditional 'belle' would do under the circumstances, Miss Gordon's heroine only dreams of doing so. She does struggle with the soldier over possession of her mule, but she is easily thrust aside, and the soldier rides away. Miss Gordon's heroine does triumph, however. The mule throws the soldier and tramples him to death. This ending also comes as a shock; but again, the shock has been well prepared for."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 119-20

"[Lieutenant] John Munford ['The Forest of the South'] is the serious abolitionist... The Indiana soldier in 'Hear the Nightingale Sing'...betokens the political triumph of the Lieutenant's breed.... This bluff giant may be treated as a counter for the second stage in the North's self-conversion into Leviathan. He is Grant to Munford's Sumner, in blue because his neighbors wear that color, chauvinist but not presumptuously self-righteous. This boy's Unionism is therefore of the accessory variety. He expects Rebels to hate him. No houses are destroyed in his campaign, only stock stolen and a little food seized from hungry mouths. And his feminine antagonist is almost sane, even once she is done with him. For those reasons the homeward-bound Yankee of this account comes to a fortune appropriately less severe than that of his 'formal cause.' He is merely killed.

But if the two stories are different they are also alike. Again there are three stages of the unfolding--one before the soldier appears, another with him inside a nameless Southern farmhouse, and the last after he has expropriated for 'government' the special pet of the protagonist Barbara, her spoiled mule Lightning. With each turn the mood of atrocity deepens and the soldier comes closer to expiating his share of responsibility in its creation. In addition, there is once again a further complication from the presence of a Confederate soldier (this time inferential). Finally, even though Barbara is closer 'kin' to the angry Tennessee girl who haunts Munford's memory, the war has cut her off from the normal feminine life almost as much as it restricted Eugenie. The young Yankee who has been a strange mixture of house-breaker-thief and gentleman caller in her home is left crushed in the woods, and her putative lover, Tom Ladd (for whose sake she so cherishes the mule) is assumed to be just as lost to the purposes of life.

In the opening section of 'Hear the Nightingale Sing'...the character and earlier life of Barbara are established in the reader's mind. Furthermore, the complication is anticipated. For Tom Ladd's gift to her girlhood, the one contact with an interrupted love left in the young woman's world, is missing--broken from his tether in the forest hiding place in which her family conceals its mounts. Barbara is alarmed and goes searching for her 'baby.' The enemy, she knows, is close at hand--marauders such as those who had some months before emptied the smokehouse on the plantation where she resides. As this spirited girl hunts her animal and, once she has found him, after Lightning is led into the cellar beneath her house, she thinks back on the way in which she acquired the mule and a world (only two years gone) where such an acquisition

could occur. The restrained drama of the scene plus the recollections bring us to the departed Ladd and to what Barbara is keeping alive through her 'no count' toy.

Ladd had established a bond between himself and this young neighbor girl--a bond which perhaps was an appropriate preliminary to courtship, in view of her age--in offering her the colt of a fine old mare... Ladd loves horses. Barbara loves all creatures, perhaps too much, and prizes her mule all the more for the sake of sad rememberings concerning work mules whose labors she had attempted to interrupt as a child. Since the affection between the young couple has remained unspoken, Lightning and his upbringing become the idiom of its continuance. For Ladd had gone to the war just before Barbara got a proposal out of him. The girl, in his absence as before in her adolescence, has only the pet for expression of her loving nature. Indeed, it is the center of her life--fed and attended to even though her family suffers from hunger and lack of direction. Barbara's affectionate childish banter to the mule is the language Southern women reserve for children, favorite animals--and lovers. It defines the purpose Lightning serves in the diminished compass of her powerful will to be. However, as the song sung by a wandering soldier passing through her woods reminds her, will is not enough. Love has no place in the universe she has left, only a few ironies touching upon that subject.

Even though he moves her to hurry and to hide Lightning under the house, the soldier is a greater threat to her fabric of illusion than Barbara at first perceives. A dauntless heart however stirs first to front its troubles and only then pauses to call them by a name. The Southern girl's 'complication' is swift. She is injured in leading the animal down back steps. Then she quarrels with her sister about the arrangement. Soon thereafter the Yankee is at the door. Barbara's blood is up as when now dead mother and missing father belittled Tom Ladd in her presence. And though the young man (seemingly on his way home on leave) eats up the meager supper ready for the residents of this poor house, his intrusion is answered with even more spirit. Older sister Sophy and twelve-year-old Cummy are in Barbara's charge. And she therefore presides over the interlude, straining the Indiana boy and never allowing him the advantage. He is not uncivil, and steals his supper as if it had been given. The war has hardened him to these 'necessities.' But he teases Barbara a little, saying 'Damn Reb' just to vex her.

To him it is a game with a very diminished but still viable set of rules which he plays with these enemies. He seems to have no sense of the degradation issuing from the parts enacted by both sides. Barbara, for her own part, already wishes she could kill him. She leaves the interloper eating and returns to the parlor. He follows shortly to offer thanks and begins to fasten his cloak. Then parts shift swiftly as the soldier begins to sing. Brother and sister return to the house from the porch and the Yankee is for a moment almost converted into a young man come a courting. Something stands above politics for Southern girl and Federal soldier. He admires the house, speaks of things in common, and then returns to his song of spring and sorrow in love. It releases common memories and preoccupations. His home is far away in space as Barbara's is in time; and home means families and, as Andrew Lytle says, 'the right relationships between the sexes.' She softens and begins to recall the 'night of Marie's wedding' when Tom Ladd almost became hers. This interlude objectifies the price of war at the persona level and thus brings it back within ordinate boundaries. Love, like Philomela, should not be betrayed. Revenge is the certain issue of such errors. But it is only a moment that is created by song.

The soldier hears a noise. Lightning is predictably restless in the cellar. And his need for a mount overcomes the home-hungry soldier's fear of an ambush. Now we come to the third division of 'Hear the Nightingale Sing.' It is brief and telling. Barbara of course interferes with the Yankee's theft of her pet. With no ceremony, he throws her to the ground and is thereafter not at all convincing when he attempts to explain away this violence which flared momentarily in his eyes and through his hand as an effort to 'protect' his prize of war. Such behavior belies his song and his earlier conduct. We assume that it comes of a habit developed to protect himself from the truth of his life in the South. But the boy doesn't wait to tell us more. He refers his Southern victims to the winded horse he had abandoned a few miles up the road, ignores Cummy's warning that the mule is unmanageable, and mounts it running toward the woods. Exactly according to Barbara's earlier wish and present imagination. Lightning--'brute instinctual force in a sterile form'--swiftly dispenses with the hateful rider.

With mule recovered, Tom Ladd (the only one who could handle him) is still lost. There is no one to 'play the man's part.' But the war, 'gone beyond its restricted concept' in the lone Federal, once more is identified as a peril to conqueror as much as to conquered. Our last view of the Yankee specifies what is foreshadowed in the remainder of the story: his death fits his (and his species) error in that, with his eyes kicked in, he has been symbolically castrated--denied in fact the home and civil existence suggested in his song which he has already forfeited in spirit.

Further confirmation of this view of the episode appears in Barbara's parting response to his curiously situated remains (spread out against a tree). She denies her enemy burial, thus denominating him inhuman. This is the same girl who felt sympathy for slaves and would not let her father's hands crack a whip over a pulling team. Yet when she follows her cold triumph with 'let's go home,' we sense how the tenuous fancy which she still sustains in her pet may explain the transformation of so gentle a person into an embodiment of hate. That is to say, the moods of Barbara in the context of the story's total action drive the reader to a judgment concerning all of the subjects which it examines. Personal outrage, given and returned, is an emblem of moral and political outrage. Barbara has no 'place,' only (like Philomela) a memory and a deep feeling of injury.

Thanks to himself, the soldier never gets 'home' either, never even recovers personhood in Christian burial. The devastation of the South swallows both. What this means to a total nation similarly 'savaged'--what it says of the process occasioning that dreadful wasting--should not be far to seek."

M. E. Bradford

"The High Cost of 'Union': Caroline Gordon's Civil War Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 120-23

"She revised one of her first short stories, 'Chain Ball Lightning,' and called it 'Hear the Nightingale Sing.' In the story, after a Yankee soldier takes a Southern girl's pet mule by force, the mule bucks and the soldier is killed."

Ann Waldron

Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 232

"'Hear the Nightingale Sing'...concerns a woman left alone to face hostile intruders, in this instance marauding Yankees. In a world full of the hopeless human misery of slavery, Barbara had tried to restrict her affection to animals of whom she is, like Caroline, 'overfond': 'When she was a little girl and Uncle Joe would bring a team in to plough the garden in spring, she would look at the mules standing with their heads hung, their great dark eyes fixing nothing, and she would think how, like Negroes, they were born into the world for nothing but labor, and her heart would seem to break in her bosom.' The incident not only indicates Barbara's obsession with animals, but prepares the reader for her revolt when she is no longer among the pitying privileged, but is one of the underdogs herself.

The man for whom Barbara forms a pitying attachment, Tom Ladd, possesses some of the quiet harmony she sees in animals. 'He had what her father called "the gift of silence." But sometimes, sitting in company, you would look up and find him watching you and it would seem that he had just said something or was about to say something. But what it was she never knew.' His gift to her is as ambiguous as his silence. He presents her with a mule, Lightning, who throws and tramples the Yankee soldier when he tries to steal the animal from Barbara. According to Andrew Lytle, the Yankee 'dies by the feet of the brutal instinctual forces released by war, symbolized in the sterile mule. The gift of the mule by Ladd to Barbara stands for the hopelessness of their relationship. It does destroy the enemy, but it can stand only negatively in Ladd's stead.'

Right relations between men and women are blighted by the curse of slavery which turns Barbara's affections from humans to animals, and then by the war which removes Tom Ladd. The scene in the parlor in which the Yankee soldier tries to act like a guest, after forcing the women to share their meager supper with him, is an acerbic parody of courtship. He sings a song about the nightingale that Barbara associates with her last meeting with Tom Ladd. The only emotion Barbara can muster is unadulterated hatred and her

fantasies involve mutilation, quite a change in so tenderhearted a girl. 'She looked away, thinking how you could set your thumbs in the corners of those lips and rend the mouth from side to side and then, grasping in your hands the head--the head that you had severed from the body--you would beat it up and down the boards of the well sweep until you cast it, a battered and bloody pulp, into those grasses that sprung up there beside the well.' The violence of Barbara's feeling is in proportion to her frustration and impotence in a world she does not understand and for which she had not been prepared."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 168-69

"'Hear the Nightingale Sing' described another encounter between North and South: this time the northern soldier would be killed when he tried to take a cherished mule named Lightning from a seemingly defenseless southern girl. Caroline had written the story, originally called 'Chain Ball Lightning,' in the late 1920s, but she had never been able to sell it. When Max [Perkins] agreed to publish her stories, she revised it according to suggestions Allen made."

Nancy Lee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 243

The mule becomes a symbol of the South during the devastation of the Civil War: hungry, vulnerable, stubborn, loyal, rebellious--sterile in a ruined land, but dangerous even so because he cannot be broken. For example, after the war some confederates continued to kill Yankees and their sympathizers, most notably snipers in Missouri. The name of the mule, Lightning, suggests that defeated Southerners may strike back at any time in the storm of war. Barbara loves her pet mule like a baby, but she is knocked down when she tries to protect it, filling her with hatred of the enemy. The Yankee soldier is like a carpetbagger after the war who exploits the South and takes what is left of value for himself. The North is on the back of the South like the Yankee soldier trying to ride the rebellious mule. Barbara recovers her mule but, sadly, except in memory she will never be able to recover all that is evoked by the song about the nightingale singing that she recalls from Marie's wedding, when Tom Ladd might have asked her to marry him. Yet even that dream is sterile like the mule, because Tom is unlikely to return from the war and besides, "all the Ladds drank themselves to death."

Barbara blames both sides in the war: "it doesn't matter which side they're on. They come and take everything." But it is ironic when she tries to protect her mule and the Yankee soldier taking him away tells her that "you oughtn't to have come interfering," because this is precisely what Southerners thought about Northerners invading their lands. Her sympathy for mules is conflated with her sympathy for blacks: "like Negroes, they were born into the world for nothing but labor, and her heart would seem to break in her bosom" when she saw mules getting whipped. She even identifies her mule with an innocent black child: "He had eyes as large and dark and mournful as a Negro baby's." Implicitly, Barbara is one of those white southerners, like Rives and Susan Allard in *None Shall Look Back*, who did not approve of slavery and treated their black servants like members of their family.

Michael Hollister (2020)