ANALYSIS

"Her Quaint Honor" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"'Her Quaint Honor' is perhaps the best story in this group of four, primarily because it reveals with the greatest subtlety and precision the essential complexity of human experience. It is easy to miss the complexity, however, if one views the action as mere social commentary; for once again the subject is the relationship in the South between the white man and the black, a relationship which Miss Gordon, like any sensible writer of fiction, views in human rather than in ideological terms.

On a cursory reading the meaning of the narrative seems to be obvious. Jim, the narrator, decides to sell his garage and to farm his grandmother's land, an occupation which is consistent with his own inclinations and with the traditions of his family. He asks Tom Doty, a Negro who has been connected with his family for years, to make the crop with him; and in putting such a proposition to Tom, Jim incurs implicit obligations to the Negro; for in recent years Tom has prospered with Mr. Bannerman, a white landlord.

Tom readily accepts Jim's offer, however, and things go well until their tobacco is picked and stored in the barn for curing. At this point Jim makes an error in judgment which leads to financial disaster: he hires Bud Asbury, a white man with a reputation for dissipation, to cure the tobacco. Asbury is attracted to Tom's light-skinned wife, Frankie; and when he makes advances to her, he incurs Jim's wrath, they fight, and Asbury is driven off the farm. But as a consequence the crop is ruined and brings no more than half of its potential value.

On the surface, then, the action is simple in its linear movement, a low-profile graph of tragedy: Jim, by choosing Asbury to cure his crop, has inadvertently created a volatile situation which leads to economic ruin, not only for himself but for Tom Doty as well. Yet a closer examination of the motives which lie behind the action suggests that the story is more heroic than tragic in its implications, though the heroism defined, as in 'The Long Day,' is an imperfect one, tarnished to some degree by the nature of the fallen world in which all human action takes place.

In order to understand the meaning of Jim's sacrifice--for he is surely the hero, however flawed--we must examine Miss Gordon's use of the first person narrator, a point of view which provides the principal key to the inherently complex meaning of the action. For one thing, every first person narrator is, to some degree, fallible, for no one can view his own behavior or the operation of his own consciousness with complete understanding and objectivity. Even in retrospect, it is finally impossible for such a narrator to transcend the limitations of self, the ultimate barriers of individual experience; and some of the finest values in modern fiction have been realized by writers who use these limitations rather than struggle to minimize them.

In 'Her Quaint Honor' Miss Gordon has chosen to cut with the grain, and Jim in telling his story reveals an ignorance of the meaning of his own actions which creates not only an exquisite irony but also the subtle ambiguity of meaning which marks this work for special attention. The first part of the narrative, which is told after a lapse of years, establishes the instinctive commitment of Jim to family ties, to the land, and to the vocation of farming. His decision to seek out Tom Doty, who has come from good black people and hence can be regarded as dependable, further suggests his traditional attitude toward the business of life--which is carried on between people who can trust one another. Tom in turn knows Jim's background and feels he is dealing with a reliable person--a man of honor who will 'do right by him.' The Negro also knows the idiosyncrasies of Jim's grandmother and feels his wife can get along with the old woman, a necessary condition for success if the couple is to inhabit the tenant cabin.

Things go well from February to August, despite the fact that Jim is not quite as sensitive as Tom to the proprieties of the situation and tries to force the relationship between his grandmother and Frankie before the time is ripe. Then on the advice of his uncle, Jim bails Bud Asbury out of jail in order to perform the most delicate phase of tobacco farming, that of curing the leaf. Asbury is an expert at the task, but he is also an alcoholic; and unbeknownst to Jim he begins to drink again; and the light-skinned, blue-eyed Frankie catches his eye. At this point the narrative poses a difficult problem in ethics, one which is so qualified by nuances and corollaries that any absolute solution may be beyond the scope of ordinary men.

First, it is necessary to understand the action in its social and historical context, however difficult such a concession may be to the contemporary reader. Jim, the narrator, is after all a Southerner of his generation who is recalling the incident after a number of years have elapsed; and as such he is entitled to be heard on his own terms. His feelings in the matter are polygenetic, more so than he is willing to admit to his implicit and undefined listener, who may, in fact, have a very important influence on Jim's construction of what has taken place.

When Asbury makes tentative advances to Frankie, the Negro woman rebuffs them with courtesy and finesse. Jim, unaccustomed to such conduct, is puzzled; but he immediately thinks about his black friend: 'And I was worried about Tom. Tom is a boy that thinks a lot of his raising. I don't reckon he'd ever spoken an out-of-the-way word to a white person in his life--until that night.' In this statement we already see the conflict building within Jim--a complex of tensions created by his loyalty to Tom and to the racial code they both understand and live by. It is a code based on the principle of social hierarchy, which demands responsibilities of both the landlord and the tenant, the white and the black. Tom on the one hand must 'keep his place'; Jim on the other hand must insure the safety and dignity of Tom, who is under his protection.

The situation is brought to a head when Bud Asbury steps outside of the house and orders Frankie to follow him. Here corresponding tensions are created within Tom, for he must either forfeit his manhood or violate the code which has made his relationship with Jim possible. Tom instinctively chooses the latter and moves toward Asbury. But Jim interposes himself, tells Tom to sit down, and the Negro obeys with an obsequiousness which is painful. Then Jim, who places more of the blame on Frankie than she deserves, tells her to sit down as well.

He steps outside, orders Asbury off the land; and when the latter refuses, the two white men engage in a vicious struggle. At one point Tom volunteers to help; but Jim insists that the Negro stay inside, threatening to beat him if he disobeys. After clubbing Asbury and sending him along his way, Jim calls Tom and they rush to the barn, but the precarious curing process has been untended too long, and their crop is worth only half its potential value as a result of Jim's determination to dismiss Asbury. The last two paragraphs, however, epitomize the greater dilemma both men have faced and suggest some of the subtler implications of that dilemma....

Tom's statement is simple enough in its meaning: he would rather retain his marital prerogatives than make a few hundred dollars more on his crop, though he still pays his respects to the code by referring to Asbury as 'Mister.' His manhood, then, is without its price, though it has been mitigated to some extent by his immediate surrender to Jim at the crucial moment of confrontation. Does this surrender proceed from his trust in Jim or does it proceed from the deficiency of a spirit broken by the code? These questions, I would suggest, are impossible to answer with any certitude. They contain within them the ambiguity of life itself, and there is evidence to support either contention--or both.

On the surface the case of Jim seems easier to deal with. For one thing, he is not faced with the same dilemma. Loyalty to his friend and loyalty to the social code demand of him exactly the same course of action, and the profanation of his family home is additional motivation for him to fight Bud Asbury. But the important thing to note is that Jim acts immediately and instinctively, with little or no concern for the economic consequences of his action. He regards neither Asbury nor Tom as merely a means to an economic end. Each is measured against a traditional code of conduct, and Asbury's misbehavior demands punishment.

Thus Jim acts out of 'honor,' as the title of the story suggests; but it is a 'quaint' honor, extraordinary, perhaps even exotic, as foreign to outsiders as the practices of the aborigines. The reference here to Marvell is, I think, only obliquely important. Certainly the 'honor' in both cases is related to sexual conduct; but the 'Her' of Miss Gordon's title is more than a flesh-and-blood mistress, more than the Negro woman, Frankie, the only significant feminine character in the story. The 'quaint honor' is also that of the South, the 'lady' whose complex modes of behavior are so curious and frustrating to those who try to convert her to their own peculiar abstractions.

Jim's ultimate failure to understand his own conduct is typical of the traditional man, whose *daimon* is essentially intuitive because it feeds on a symbology of acts and anecdotes transmitted through the daily lives of men and women who have never thought deeply about the nature of their society. In fact, Jim is not even sure in retrospect just why he acted as he did. He seems to be telling his listener he fought Asbury to save the white man from Tom's razor. But a close reading of that final paragraph indicates considerable ambiguity; for in addition to saving Bud Asbury, Jim also saves Tom as well by acting as surrogate in a fight which could have ended only in the Negro's destruction, whatever the outcome.

And given Miss Gordon's careful development of the friendship between the two men, black and white, it is easy to believe that it was Tom rather than Asbury for whom Jim makes his sacrifice, as well as for the social code, however confused Jim may be about his own motives. But the painful and inevitable consequences of that sacrifice, aside from the economic loss, is a severing of the close ties of friendship between the two men; for the final paragraphs, in which Tom speaks somewhat reproachfully to Jim, direct the reader back to the beginning of the story, where a Negro named Tom Doty is spoken of in the past tense, as one who worked on Taylor's Grove a long time ago.

In 'Her Quaint Honor,' as in the other stories discussed here, the reader senses a strong elegiac tone, a nostalgia for something lost in the passage of time. It is easy enough to conclude that what Miss Gordon misses is the Old South, the lush rural landscapes, the sunlight through the locusts, drowsy summer days, leisurely conversations on the piazza, the fetching and toting of bandanna-headed Negro mammies. But she is too sensible and tough-minded for such sentimental stereotypes, which were more a creation of the New York stage and Tinpan Alley than of genteel Southern ladies.

What Miss Gordon sees of value in the passing order that she depicts is the capacity of human beings to behave out of a sense of man's unique place in the hierarchy of nature. Her fiction...is epic in design, created in order to affirm and sustain the possibility for heroism in a society where traditional ontology still prevails against the incursions of modern ideology."

Thomas H. Landess
"Caroline Gordon's Ontological Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 68-73

"Her stories such as 'Old Red,' 'The Captive,' and 'Her quaint Honor'...have been reprinted in widely circulated anthologies; their inclusion has helped establish Caroline Gordon's reputation in schools and colleges as an important short story writer.... Caroline Gordon [has] a reputation, at least among critics, as one of our best short-story writers.... [After this, 1972, the Feminists took over higher education and literary publishing and excluded Gordon for being politically incorrect.]

'Her Quaint Honor' is told in the first person by an insensitive narrator who is so preoccupied by the money he hopes to make from his tobacco crop that he is incapable of appreciating the moral character of his Negro tenant, Tom Doty. 'The first year I was at Taylor's Grove,' the narrator begins, 'I raised ten thousand pounds of tobacco. Five thousand pounds of lugs and seconds and five thousand pounds of prime leaf. And, boy, was it prime! I ought to have got thirty cents for that leaf, the way it was selling that year. But I didn't get but fifteen. That yellow wife of Tom Doty's was the cause of that.' Then he proceeds to tell a tale that reveals the drunkenness and sensuality of a white man who attempts to seduce Tom Doty's wife, Tom Doty's fury, and the narrator's 'heroic' sacrifice of his tobacco crop in order to keep Tom Doty from cutting the white man, Bud Asbury, with a razor.

What the perceptive reader sees, of course, is that the narrator is a man with few interests outside of making money, that the only 'fault' Tom Doty's wife has is being too much alive and that Tom Doty is a hero, a man with a deeply ingrained sense of honor. For, even though his color puts him in a position inferior to Bud Asbury, he is ready to fight to save his wife's honor."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 11, 112, 118

"The 'quaint honour' of the title is a double-edged irony. The narrator would be completely incapable of appreciating the witty conceits of Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress,' but he would probably agree with its cynical sentiment that chastity is not worth preserving in this world, particularly in this case where the honor at issue is that of a black woman and loss of profit is involved." [This obtuse Feminist reverses the meaning of the story by implying that Jim does not care about the black woman he defends.]

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 150

"Later she would change the title of the story to 'Her Quaint Honor.' It was a gentle, comic look at the relationships between whites and blacks, men and women, in the modern South.... She got the idea for 'Frankie and Thomas and Bud Asbury' from her brother Bill, who had moved back into the neighborhood to farm. During one of his infrequent visits to Benfolly, Bill told her about 'Mister Lee Jones, the confirmed drunkard who [was] a genius at firing tobacco.'

Once, when Bill's wife was away, Bill brought Jones home to take care of his dark-fired tobacco. According to Bill, Lee Jones 'took a fancy' to the black cook, Frankie. When Edward, Frankie's husband, 'objected strenuously,' Bill finally had to choose 'between genius and Frankie,' and he 'took up a tobacco stick and told Lee he would make knots on his head if he didn't go on down the big road.' 'You'll regret this,' Lee went off yelling. 'You don't know how to fire tobacco. You'll ruin your whole crop!'

Caroline used Bill's story with few changes; she even used her brother as the first-person narrator. She switched some of the names: Lee Jones became 'Bud Asbury,' Edward became 'Tom Doty,' but Frankie's name remained unchanged. 'Frankie was well named,' Caroline wrote; 'She and Tom were just like the niggers in the song. They were willing to work but loving came first.' Caroline included the character of her grandmother, called 'Miss Jinny' in the story, for additional comic relief, and she told the story simply, indicating in the first paragraph that the story would end with the crop being ruined. But by using the first-person narrator, 'Jim,' Caroline explored the ironies and problems of the situation.

In the end Jim chased Bud off the property, and by doing so, destroyed his crop of prime leaf tobacco. He knew he had to do the noble deed, to protect the honor of a woman and the sanctity of a marriage, even if that woman was 'that yellow wife of Tom Doty,' but he still felt uncomfortable, unsure. 'A man has to fight if somebody tries to take his woman,' Jim said at the end of the story. 'It struck me as a funny business. Always has'."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 189-90

As in a number of Gordon's stories, most obviously in "The Forest of the South," the plot depends upon honor as a traditional Southern virtue. Faulkner likewise emphasizes Southern honor, as in "Raid," where Granny Millard outwits the Union Army, but he often satirizes absurd notions of honor, as in the case of Quentin Compson, a romantic adolescent who commits suicide to "redeem" the honor of his sister Caddy, a normal affectionate girl who merely loses her virginity and personifies Nature in *The Sound and the Fury.* Faulkner tends to debunk so-called heroes, whereas Gordon celebrates true heroes such as Jim in "Her Quaint Honor" for defending Frankie's honor and Tom's dignity at great economic cost to himself.

Michael Hollister (2020)