ANALYSIS

"Mr. Powers" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"'Mr. Powers' is told from the point of view of a city couple, Jack and Ellen Cromlie, who have moved to the country. They 'take on' a white tenant named Mr. Powers and later discover that he is an accused murderer and is to be tried for killing his six-year-old son with an ax. Mr. Powers had come home unexpectedly and found his wife in the embrace of the hired hand; and, in a moment of blind anger he had taken his ax and unintentionally struck his son. The country woman who brings the story to the Cromlies is outraged by this 'murder,' but Miss Gordon shows that Mr. Powers' crime, paradoxically, is the product of his virtue; for he has acted only because he loves his wife and because he has, like Tom Doty, the simple man's deeply ingrained sense of honor."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 114-15

"'Mr. Powers' is a story specifically concerned with economics and its role in the hierarchy of traditional human values. Again the setting is the rural South of the early twentieth century, where sharecropping was a socially accepted arrangement between the haves and the have-nots. In this case both the landowners, Jack and Ellen Cromlie, and the tenant, Mr. Powers, are white: but their relationship is essentially the same as the one between whites and negroes like Joe. The Cromlies own timberland, and Mr. Powers, a 'poor white,' offers to clear the dead wood and sell it for firewood 'on shares,' assigning half of the profits to the Cromlies and keeping half for himself.

Ellen is the more pragmatic of the two Cromlies, worried about the financial risk and concerned that as city people she and her husband may be exploited. When she notices how little in the way of household goods the Powers's bring to their rented cabin she considers lending the tenants some plates and a tablecloth, but she resists her charitable impulse until she knows something more about the character of the family. 'I'm going to be a Christian,' she tells herself. 'I hope I'll always be Christian to people, but I'm going to stand on my dignity. I believe it pays, with tenants.' The use of the word 'pays' is significant here, because it undercuts the nobler part of her resolve. Yet practicality, after all, is not without its precedents; for she knows of instances in her own family history where tenants have taken advantage of generosity, interpreting it, perhaps, as a weakness to be probed.

Then the arrangement with Mr. Powers becomes more complex when the Cromlies learn that he has been indicted for homicide, the accidental killing of his own son while in a jealous rage. The Cromlies discuss the matter, and Ellen is sympathetic. 'We are going to let him stay,' she asks. 'Jack, we *are* going to let him stay, aren't we?' At this stage her higher impulses dominate; but, as before, she soon begins to entertain doubts, particularly when Jack learns that Mr. Powers in all likelihood will go to prison for ten or twenty years. The terrible prospect of this sentence increases the Cromlies' sympathy for their tenant, yet economic considerations begin to cloud Ellen's mind.

When Mr. Powers announces that the family is moving back to his father-in-law's house she demands of Jack, 'Did he say anything about the wood?' Jack, who emerges as the more charitable of the two, replies, 'We didn't get around to that.' Ellen objects to the fact that Mr. Powers wishes to leave his mules in their stable, fearing once again that they are about to be used. Jack's explanation is casual, an appeal to the economic logic of the situation; but as he speaks he reveals his true motive for leniency: his compassion for a doomed man.

Ellen then remembers that Mr. Powers is scheduled for an immediate hearing, and once again her better nature prevails over her pragmatism and she drops the subject. But even after the man is indicted and

released on $1,000 bond, she worries about the trees which occasionally fall in the nearby woods, concerned that Mr. Powers is poaching in their timber. Jack refuses to investigate the matter; and though his excuses are reasonable enough, it is apparent that he does not want to discover the truth. Ellen is put out with her husband and vows she will confront Mr. Powers herself. It is both pragmatism and pride which prompt this statement... The conflict of the story is clearly established in the character of Ellen.

And at this point Miss Gordon is faced with a technical problem which tests to the utmost her skill as an artist. Had she chosen to depict Ellen as finally dominated by economic concerns the resolution of the story would have been simple: a dramatic confrontation with Mr. Powers rendered through dialogue and action. But the burden of her narrative, predictably enough, is the dominance of *caritas* over pride and self-interest, and the result of such a resolution is not action but inaction. Hence it is necessary for her to resolve the conflict within the consciousness of her central character.

She accomplishes this end through a subtle use of natural description which prepares the reader for Ellen's final decision to let Mr. Powers alone in his final ordeal before the bar of justice. One evening as she is walking with her daughter on the hillside she is impressed with the beauty and serenity of the landscape, 'the wooded hill that rose steeply on the right, with the Jasper road curving between it and the river, and stretching away on the other side of the river beyond the old covered bridge the flat fields that were still covered with late corn and tobacco.' And then occurs the image on which her final understanding of the problem is to turn: 'Some of the blue haze that had been over the whole county all day still lingered in these far fields, but the rest of the valley was bathed in bright, flickering light.'

At that moment, while she is immersed in the scene, she sees a wagon drawn by two mules appear over the hill. This sight seems as appropriate to the landscape as the woods, the fields, and the evening light; and the wagon driver handles his team with an ease and grace which suggest his natural place in the scheme of the world surrounding him. Ellen is overcome by a sense of beauty not unlike that which Keats suggests in 'Ode on Melancholy,' a beauty which is unique and evanescent, which can never be experienced again and hence must be preserved in the memory if it is to have any continuing life. But while the physical objects of the scene are easily captured and held by the mind's eye, the light, which invests the moment with its unique quality, is another matter; and she reflects that: 'the bright, flickering light that was so much a part of it all would grow dimmer and more unreal until finally it would vanish forever. You could not prison light in the memory.'

The word 'prison' is the key that unlocks her finer impulses, because it leads directly to the problem of Mr. Powers, whose fate is all but sealed. And indeed the mule driver, who shouts to his team in a loud clear voice, is the tenant himself, a fact which the child immediately recognizes. The girl cries out to her mother, who tells her to be quiet. Faced with the prospect of confronting her 'exploiter' she is suddenly moved by his tragic plight and begins to understand why Jack, a man and therefore more likely to identify with Mr. Powers's terrible predicament, has been unwilling to pursue the matter of the unpaid debt. The light, which contains a number of traditional meanings, has struck her consciousness with all the power and certitude of grace; and she is redeemed from the petty considerations which have prevented her from extending to the man her innately predominant charity. It remains only for the child to bring this higher impulse to the level of conscious articulation:

"'Didn't you want to speak to him mama? You said you wanted to speak to him.'
Ellen shook her head. 'No, she said. 'I don't want to speak to him'."

Thomas H. Landess
"Caroline Gordon's Ontological Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 65-68

"'Mr. Powers' was, she said, the life and works of Mr. Suiter, a friend of the Tates' new tenant farmer, Mr. Norman; she hoped Suiter didn't sue her for libel or take after her with an axe. In the story, a young couple from the city let Mr. Powers work at their country place and then find out that he has attacked his wife with an axe [No, not his wife: "Jim finally picked up an axe and went after the feller with that."] and accidentally killed his son instead of his wife. *Scribner's Magazine* bought it for $200. Caroline commented

that *Scribner's* took only her stories 'dealing with murder, sudden death and the like, which is not as inconvenient as it sounds, my mind running as it does'."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 91

"Jack and Ellen Cromlie and their daughter Lucy are the new owners of an estate much like Benfolly. Jack contracts with Mr. Powers and his family as tenants, and they move onto the place. As Ellen literally and figuratively looks down on their cabin from her hilltop, she frequently speculates on the Powers family. She, however, is only comfortable with them on an employer-employee basis; she considers offering Mrs. Powers some of her spare dishes, but decides against it because too much friendliness with the tenants might make it harder to keep them to their contract. Through a neighbor, Ellen learns that Mr. Powers will soon be coming to trial for accidentally killing his son while swinging at his wife's love with an axe. Ellen's response to this news is annoyance with her husband for failing to make inquiries about Mr. Powers before letting him on the place, and she is also irked that her overly easy-going mate does not press Mr. Powers for the wagonload of wood he owes them.

Although Ellen cannot deal with Mr. Powers on a personal basis, and he remains 'Mr. Powers' throughout the story, her meditations on the landscape show that, subconsciously at least, she is aware of *the injustice of the class system*. She notices 'that it was strange that one patch of ground should be in the deep shade and the one adjoining it in brilliant summer.' At the end of the story, as she watches Mr. Powers, again from a distance, she reflects, 'You could not prison light in the memory.' She knows that Mr. Powers faces prison, but can only articulate that knowledge by displacing it onto an aesthetic observation. As she delineates Ellen's monetary and aesthetic evasions, Caroline Gordon shows *how the tenant system dehumanizes landowner as well as tenant;* if the owner really looked at the tenant as a person, the recognition might be unbearable." [This Marxism is irrelevant to the story. Italics added.]

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 99-100

"It was the story of a man who accidentally killed his son when he threw an ax [He did not "throw" the axe: "The double-bladed axe, swinging backward..." If he had thrown the axe he would not have hit his son. Italics added.] at a hired man caught in adultery with Mrs. Powers. Caroline jokingly said she hoped the real Mr. Powers--a Mr. Suiter, apparently of local reputation--'would not sue her for libel or take after her with an ax.' But the story was about more than a freak accident; in fact, the killing happened before the story even began, and the focus was not really on Mr. Powers at all, but on Jack and Ellen Cromlie, a young city couple who had just moved to the hill farm and, unknowingly, agreed to rent a cabin to Mr. Powers and his family.

The hill farm and Cromlie house was Benfolly, right down to the iris, tulip, and jonquil bulbs planted on either side of the brick walk. Like Allen, Jack was a writer with overdue articles, pestering publishers, and little practical knowledge of how things worked in the country. Ellen, the main consciousness of the story, was another of Caroline's self-portraits, just as Lucy Cromlie, the daughter, was modeled on Nancy Tate.

Ellen Cromlie knew more about country ways than her husband, but she had been away from the country for awhile, and she feared the local folks would think them ignorant. Although she would have preferred to find something out about Mr. Powers before renting the cabin, Ellen trusted he was a good man. 'Powers,' she mused. 'That's a good country name. I reckon he's all right.' When she watched the family move in, she immediately sympathized with their poverty and considered helping them, but decided against it when she remembered her Aunt Molly's tenant problems. 'They all said it was better not to start being too intimate with your tenants,' she reflected. 'I'm going to be Christian. I hope I'll always be Christian to people, but I'm going to stand on my dignity,' she said. 'I believe it pays, with tenants.'

When Ellen learned about Mr. Powers's infamous past, she became hysterical. Then she was forced to consider what it meant to 'be Christian to people.' Her meditations--on Mr. Powers, his wife, and their

future--were tied to her close observations of the countryside around the small hill farm and the way the bright, flickering light covered the valley and altered one's perspective."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 88-89

"Gordon reinvestigated [the] coupling of criminality and victimization in women [?], but, in 'Mr. Powers,' she approaches male violence indirectly and relies on the same kind of ambiguous imagery that she mastered in 'Summer Dust.' As in that story, much of the action of 'Mr. Powers' occurs outside narrative focus; readers are situated in the bewildered consciousness of the confined and conventional white woman who is fascinated by the strong, energetic, and *criminal* Mr. Powers.

Unlike the earlier stories, Gordon omits the complicating issue of race, sacrificing her earlier explorations of the potentially subversive liaison that can be forged by white women and blacks who desire change [This Feminist critic is always pushing her political agenda]. 'Mr. Powers' is a story whose range is more limited, but Gordon accepts these limitations in order to grapple with the consciousness of the woman who has both the luxury and the misfortune to be *held captive in the protected world of the white, American, middle-class woman* [Nonsensical Feminist rhetoric; italics added.]

The very title unites the reader with the female protagonist, Ellen Cromlie, as both try to fathom the unfathomable man who is represented by the generic, masculine title and the descriptive surname that Ellen ironically affirms to be a 'good country name.' Gordon uses society's courtesy label, 'Mr.,' to suggest that Ellen Cromlie's civility allows her to maintain desired distance from the poor white tenant, who is awaiting trial for *accidentally* slaying his six-year-old son. [This critic has already convicted Powers by calling him a "criminal," above. Italics added.] It also reflects her distance from the power this 'man of deeds' characteristically exercises.

Gordon sets her plot around the mythic idea that man's violence or fall is precipitated by woman's infidelity, particularly sexual infidelity. (Ironically, in this autobiographical writer's own life, it was the men, father and husband, who lacked faith, and Gordon who raged.) Mr. Powers used a double-edged axe to try to kill a hired man who was sitting up late at night with his wife [He was implicitly doing more than sit.]; as he swung the axe behind him, it 'caught the little boy in the side of the head and felled him to the ground.' Shunned by the community and awaiting sentencing, Powers seeks out newcomer Jack Cromlie, a writer from the city, and obtains permission to bring his family to live on the Cromlie hill farm 'on shares' of lumber that he promises to cut from the dead or dying trees in their woods.

Jack's wife, Ellen, like the practical Gordon, is more wary of landlord/tenant relationships than her husband. She wonders if they should check the man's background, but realizing that her husband had already struck the deal, she 'pretended that she hadn't spoken.' Although Mr. Powers proves himself an unreliable tenant who cuts down saplings and fails to pay the Cromlies their share, Ellen, at the story's end, decides once more not to speak and permits Mr. Powers to violate their agreement. Her change in attitude is the heart of Gordon's study, and that change is reflected in the way that Ellen uses or avoids language.

Ellen's reluctance to speak at the beginning and end of the story springs from different motives, but none reflects an implicit trust in male authority. In the first instance, the deeply cynical [overstates] Ellen does not challenge her husband because she recognizes the gesture's futility; her cautious words will not alter the situation. At the end, her silence represents her generosity and profound empathy with a man about to be imprisoned. In the body of the story, Ellen has no problem asserting her point of view or listening to her husband's, but their conversations expose little more than their superficial interest in, and patronizing attitude toward, the country world that surrounds their hill farmhouse.

The Cromlies neither read the local paper nor talk, without condescension, to people who are not from town. Yet their house rings with the kind of strong and opinionated voices that dominated the landowner's house in 'The Long Day.' As in that earlier story, those sounds always seem to be artful acclamations that disclose little about the subject of discourse and a great deal about the speaker's desired public image. To get beyond Ellen's public or commonplace voice and examine her private consciousness, Gordon presents

passages that vividly describe Ellen's meditations on the landscape. Her associations expose her faith in her own intuitive nature and *her skepticism regarding ideals of either divine protection or human justice*. [She is a Christian, not a skeptic. Italics added.] The first time we gain such entrance into her consciousness occurs when Ellen anticipates the words of a local gossip who comes to tell her Mr. Powers's history....

Ellen's association of Mr. Powers with those patches of ground that are darkened by the swift and seemingly erratic movement of the clouds prepares her to see him as a hapless victim of circumstance. Even before she has knowledge of his crime, she absolves him of responsibility; the self-protecting Ellen must believe that Mr. Powers's rage was justified and that he is powerless to avoid his fate because he lives in the same unpredictable and uncontrollable world she inhabits. Privately, she views Powers as the victim of an arbitrary universe; publicly, she views him a tenant taking unfair economic advantage of her family.

Throughout the story, Ellen's apprehension of the erratic universal order is revealed through her obsessive desire to remain in a protected circle of light. Both husband and wife become prisoners of that light, enthralled watchers of the dark world that borders their own. Using language in cynical and sophisticated ways, the Cromlies are able to separate themselves from both Mr. Powers and the society that will judge and punish him. Their self-imposed isolation, idleness, and uneasiness are evident in passages where Gordon frames Ellen's private contemplation of Mr. Powers, *within the Cromlies's public mockery of his situation*. [Quote the alleged "mockery." Italics added.] Gordon cuts abruptly between the sarcastic tone that governs public dialogue and the lyrical prose of Ellen's private meditations....

While the Cromlies ironically joke about Powers's stature as an anonymous and fierce outlaw and speak of the society that will sentence him in an equally anonymous and condescending way, Ellen secretly imagines him quite differently. '[M]oving about in the dim light' of her consciousness, Powers chills Ellen. The work of the woodsman recalls, of course, the work of the axe-wielding *criminal* [?] (and *perhaps the acts of the pen-wielding Gordon*). Ellen imagines Mr. Powers not only as the slayer of innocent life, but also as the mythic 'new Adam,' whose imprudent actions are often called heroic [?], and the Biblical father asked to sacrifice his only son. [What is this woman talking about?] His violence may bring light into the fallen world as he hacks away in the wilderness, transforming woods into fields, natural chaos into open land. All of his energy and strength, Ellen meditates, will be imprisoned by a society built, ironically, upon the consequences of such actions. [?] [Italics added.]

Gordon contrasts Mr. Powers's wordless deeds in the wilderness with Ellen's self-confinement in the domestic sphere. Her voyeurism [?], her propensity to gossip and to joke about the Powers family, and her condescending hospitality...reveal both her fascination with the man and her need to buffer herself against identification with his plight and his crime. Gordon, as author, shares Ellen's fascination. Fearing the wilderness that surrounds her, Ellen views Powers's human drama with the detachment not only sanctioned by but demanded of her social and economic status, as Gordon presents her protagonist and her drama through the kind of *artistic detachment required by the New Critics*.... [Aesthetic detachment originated in ancient Greece. This uneducated Feminist has no historical perspective. Italics added.]

Ellen's fears and her understanding of her privileged status as landowner conflict with her instinctive liberality and identification with Mr. Powers. Early, she stifles promptings to provide him and his family more comfort because, she says, 'I hope I'll always be Christian to people, but I'm going to stand on my dignity. I believe it pays, with tenants.' Conscious of injustice, the insecure Ellen acts less generously than her husband does, but Gordon shows Jack's impulses are also founded on rationalizations that allow him to maintain his distance. When Ellen prods Jack to confront Powers about the lumber he has cut and the money he owes, Jack, who makes his money through words rather than deeds, is quick with an excuse: 'Well, I hotfoot it over there this afternoon and save two trees. What do I get for my afternoon's work? Eight dollars. I can make two hundred if I can get on in the house and finish that article.' Husband and wife are uncomfortable with the subdued power of Mr. Powers and with the prospect of his imprisonment. Their thinly disguised economic rationales allow them imaginative distance from the man and his circumstances. Ellen, however, cannot keep the distance and becomes obsessed with the story of Mr. and Mrs. Powers.

Imagining Mr. Powers 'moving about in the dim light among the fallen green boughs,' Ellen watches, from her high front porch, as Mrs. Powers prepares meals in the back of the tenants' cabin: 'A small

woman, with an untidy mass of blond hair, she moved slowly about from kitchen to porch and back again, wearing always a faint, excited smile.' While her imagination leads her to imagine their human relationship, her consciousness of the conventions of labor and class lead her *to ignore Mr. Powers* and consider Mr. Powers *only in terms of their economic arrangement*. [Not true. Italics added.]

As the year turns toward its end, the passive couple, Ellen and Jack, have their yard prepared for new spring life by a black boy, and they wander over the garden as lords of the manor. Ellen, however, is haunted by her apprehension of radical change, of the approach of winter: 'Sometimes Ellen, standing on the walk, would look back into the hall and think how the house that was spread out now, with all its doors and windows open to the sunshine, would contract and darken soon with winter.' No matter how vigilant she is, Ellen fears that she will lose her protected, sunlit world. As she contemplates the 'bright flickering light' of a fall sunset and sees the downward motion of Mr. Powers's passing wagon, Ellen, once more, identifies with him.... Noting how the strong and active Mr. Powers can slow but not stop his downward journey, Ellen watches his figure recede into the dying day of the dying season and wishes she could retard time's movement. Again, her attention is fixed on the erratic play of light. Soon, she imagines, both she and Powers will be propelled into *separate prisons*; both will lose the light that gave her momentary understanding of his plight. [Italics added.]

In connecting their fates, Gordon shows that *Ellen would like to reject all of those rational distinctions that separate landowner and tenant, domestic woman and criminal man*. [There is no evidence of this. Italics added.] The final words of the story are spoken by that once-articulate protagonist who, realizing now the hollowness of her words regarding law, justice, and fairness, decides to maintain a generous silence: 'No,' she said, 'I don't want to speak to him.' Thus, Gordon leaves her readers with a vision of the criminal 'man of deeds' and the once prudent woman of words facing their separate prisons. Mr. Powers will be imprisoned; Ellen will be locked into the isolation of her darkening hill house; even the memory of her sympathy with Powers, her memory of the 'bright, flickering light,' will grow dim....

'Mr. Powers' and 'The Long Day' are stories of muted brutality in which the active and *criminal male*, [Both men accused by this Feminist are implicitly innocent.] about to face literal imprisonment or extinction, is set against the receptive and conventional female, whose facility with language and apparent deference to law and convention mask her personal uncertainty and profound skepticism in regard to ideas of justice and individual autonomy. While many of Gordon's female characters seem intrigued by the power and violence of men, Gordon herself seems intrigued by woman's paradoxical connection to both the outlaw man and the society that works to inhibit the energy with which she is so fascinated. By creating such fictional women, who appear attracted to destructive power, Gordon exposes the melancholy consciousness of the imprisoned woman who, having 'missed her own powers,' guiltily acknowledges her affinity with the violent male who has accidentally killed his offspring."

Anne M. Boyle
Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 73-79

Mr. Powers is fortunate that none of these Feminist critics will be on a jury deciding his fate. Waldron is so mistaken she thinks Mr. Powers "attacked his wife with an axe." Jonza thinks wrongly that he "threw an ax." Makowsky pays so little attention to the story she overlays its meanings with her irrelevant Marxism. Gordon was not a Marxist. Boyle repeatedly calls Mr. Powers a "criminal" before he is tried for a "crime" that was actually an accident. Feminists convict men of all evil because they are men.

"Mr. Powers" is about charity and forgiveness. Feminists are about blaming men. They do not blame the wife at all, though she initiated the tragedy by having an affair with the hired man. Judge Pryor knows Mr. Powers as a hard worker who lived on his place for five years. His judgment carries a lot of weight in the story because he is a judge: "The judge thinks a lot of him. Says he's always had this quick temper, like all the Powerses, but he's all right if you handle him properly. He's a hustler, too." In contrast, the hired man is immoral in committing adultery with his employer's wife and is described as "mean." Society and its legal system are inclined to be unforgiving, as are some members of the community. Mr. Powers is charged with murder. Jack says that "they all think" that he will get off "with a light sentence. Ten to twenty years. He could hardly expect to get off with less than that." This should strike the reader as shocking, since the

killing was an accident. At most the charge should be involuntary manslaughter, as Ellen says. But even so, Jack says "Manslaughter and assault and battery with intent to kill.... He could get life for that." Mr. Powers did not immediately attack the hired man when he found him with his wife at midnight: "There had been a good deal of shouting back and forth and calling of names." No doubt Mr. Powers ordered the hired man off his place. Apparently the hired man would not go and leave Mrs. Powers alone. "Jim finally picked up an axe and went after the feller with that."

Any prison sentence will destroy his family, since they are poor and dependent on his labor to survive. They have another child who will lose her father. The name Mr. *Powers* is ironic since he has so little by worldly standards. Jack and Ellen Cromlie worry about money, but they own a forest and can afford to be charitable. An implicit moral standard is set when Ellen decides "she would not offer the plates or the tablecloths to Mrs. Powers, not just yet anyhow, saying, 'I hope I'll always be Christian to people, but I'm going to stand on my dignity. I believe it pays, with tenants'." A better Christian would be more generous. On the other hand, after they learn what Powers did, Ellen insists to Jack that they allow the Powers family to stay as tenants. But then she does not want Jack to allow Mr. Powers to keep his mules in their stable until he pays them with some of the wood he cut and agreed to share: "I wouldn't let him get away with it. I just would not do it." Mr. Powers has a greater duty to his family than to his debtors. He needs money for his family to live on at least for awhile before he gets sent to prison. The story ends with moral progress as Ellen becomes more charitable, like Jack, by not approaching Mr. Powers about the wood. Implicitly she has progressed to the point of not wanting even to embarrass Mr. Powers.

The situation is a moral test for all four of the major characters. The poor agrarian Powers couple turns out to be more forgiving than the affluent urban Cromlies. When she learns that the Powers are still living together, "Ellen was curious about the character of the woman who had been the cause of the affair. According to the neighbor Mrs. Foster, Mrs. Powers "had a bad character" all her life, "ever since she was big enough." Yet like the Feminist critics, Ellen blames only the man. She cannot understand "why she's stuck to him through all this." Implicitly, Ellen would not forgive Jack, even if she initially caused the tragedy: "It's terrible to think of them being there together. What do you suppose they can find to say to each other?" Not only have the Powers stayed together, Mr. Powers is *happy*, though he faces a prison sentence, as evinced by his whistling in the last scene of the story. He must have forgiven his wife for her infidelity and she must have forgiven him for the accident.

The spiritual powers of Mr. Powers are ironic since he is accused of murder, but they are more important than worldly powers, just as the spirit is more important than the flesh. He is honorable, loyal, hardworking, and able to transcend his circumstances. The Powers couple stayed together because they love each other, whereas Jack Cromlie sees their marriage in terms of who has the most power, which no doubt reflects how he sees his own marriage: "Probably the first time in her life she's ever had the upper hand of him, morally, I mean. They've changed places at one fell swoop. Whatever her sins have been in the past, his are greater...since this killing." Jack and Ellen lack the power of love and forgiveness that Mr. and Mrs. Powers display.

Michael Hollister (2020)