

ANALYSIS

"Old Red" (1963)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The elderly Maury recalls the main incidents of a life outwardly uneventful but for him rich with significance. Despite all pressures, especially the need to win worldly success and the demands of family upon him, Aleck Maury has had the strength of purpose to make his avocation--hunting and fishing--his vocation. Always he proceeds according to well-worked-out rituals and reads a sacramental significance into his ventures. His single-mindedness is epic in quality. Maury is a Ulysses figure, always seeking the new and untried, or an Aeneas figure, remaining constant to his aims through many wanderings.

Reviewing his life since he was a boy, Maury realizes that he has brought all his resources of skill caution, and patience to bear upon the chase and that he has succeeded as few men ever have. He has been as devoted to the techniques of sport as any true artist must be to the techniques of his calling. As a man of imagination himself, he pays tribute in 'Old Red' to this quality in a friend of his by noting how rare it is: 'He's a man of imagination. There ain't many in this world.' His total involvement in his pursuits generates interest in the details of sporting lore that fill the novel and a nostalgic atmosphere as he recalls his ventures. The quest is both inspiring and sad. Whereas Maury attempts the impossible, the attempt gives him dignity....

Social obligations and the conventions of society mean little to a man who is driven to compensate for the few years allotted him by his desire to fathom all the secrets of nature he can. Symbolically, Maury becomes the one who is persecuted by the conventions his relatives represent as he feels his own identity merge with that of 'Old Red,' the hunted fox. Just as 'Old Red' barely escapes destruction by heroic effort, so Maury knows that, old as he is, he must struggle to the end against restrictive pressures."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 17-18, 12

"[In] 'Old Red'...the action is rendered in the consciousness of Aleck Maury, a character based on her own father. Mr. Maury is a compelling figure whose stubborn independence and total commitment to the ritual of the hunt are almost epic in their implications; yet Miss Gordon, in her fidelity to experience, also reveals the inevitable ambiguity of such unmitigated individualism, the price that others must pay for Mr. Maury's single-minded pursuit of his own will. In this respect such stories are akin to the 'poetry of inclusion,' where tension always serves to adjust the abstract vision to the concrete world of possibility. The result is an heroic mode that is closer to Homer and Dante than as an exemplum of goodness devoid of flesh and blood. Yet 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."

Thomas H. Landess, ed.
Introduction
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
(U Dallas 1972) 3-4

"In 'Old Red.' Mr. Maury comes to visit his wife's girlhood home, Merry Point, and is virtually captured by her mother and his daughter Sally. In this story he comes to realize that he is no longer hunter but hunted: in order to preserve his freedom in the face of encroaching old age, he sees that he will have to resort to the wily tactics of a fox. He has taken up fishing now, after having to relinquish the hunt; and it serves him well as a solitary occupation in which he is deeply in communion with nature, pitting his wits and his skill against living creatures in their own environ. That Maury is seeking some sort of answer to the

mystery of being becomes even more apparent in these stories of his later life, wherein he desperately moves from place to place, looking for sufficient creature comforts (which ironically have to be provided by women) while he can pursue the only activity for which he has any zest.

The first paragraph of 'Old Red' indicates his changed position. Maury is deprived of some of his autonomy; and by use of a familiar symbol in her writing--the window--Miss Gordon indicates his feeling of entrapment: 'When the door had closed behind his daughter, Mister Maury went to the window and stood a few moments looking out.' He is a guest in someone else's--not master in his own--house; he is expected to behave in a 'sensible' manner; he feels that his daughter has assumed some sort of command. There are overtones of *King Lear*, where in Lear is treated as a naughty child by his 'pelican daughters,' though certainly Sarah is more likely--one would think--to prove a Cordelia to him than a Goneril or Regan. But all his life, it seems, as he says in a later story, he has been in servitude to women. And in 'Old Red' he still thrashes against that imprisonment.... He tells himself that he will stay only a week, 'no matter what they say.'

If 'Old Red' is the first story in which Mr. Maury's active misogyny [Feminist intolerance] appears, it is also the first time we are aware of his gluttony; it is as though his insatiable hunger for the texture and concreteness of life is expressed in his voracious appetite as well as in his constant search for a new body of water and plentiful fish. At the dinner table, relishing the hot batter bread and Merry Point ham, Mr. Maury hears his daughter and her new husband and his wife's mother and sister ask him what he does with this time.... This is the traditional *carpe diem* theme, turned to the modern world, where indeed linear time is man's enemy. And Aleck Maury, for all his moments of mythic awareness of what Mircea Eliade calls the Great Time, of time opening out into eternity (which is what he experiences in hunting and fishing), cannot live in that sacred time. He lives in *profane duration*, time which is measured by a standard outside human life and which carries on inexplicably toward an end of things.

Mr. Maury manages to get away from the house to fish by making his way to the Willow Sink--not much of a pond, but better than nothing. On the way an image rises in his mind, one that comes to him less frequently in his old age: 'the wide field in front of his uncle's house in Albermarie, on one side of the dark line of undergrowth that marked the Rivanna River, on the other the blue of Peters' Mountain. They would be waiting there is that broad plain when they had the first sight of the fox.' He recalls one fox to whom the hunters have given the name--Old Red, who always showed himself on the ridge. The hunters always hope to cut him off before he made it to the mountain. But he always lost them. 'A smart fox, Old Red.'

That evening, lying awake in the room where he had slept the night after his wife died, the moon shining brightly on the wallpaper, the shadows all advancing toward him, Aleck thinks of Molly [Mary]. It was as though she has been retreating from him throughout their marriage. The death of their first child and her turn to religion had made them opponents. 'For many years they had been two enemies contending in the open... Towards the last she had taken mightily to prayer.' She had prayed over him, constantly seeking to make him what she thought he ought to be. But toward the last, during her illness, she must have realized that she had 'wasted herself in conflict,' and had neglected to be ready for 'the real, the invincible adversary [who] waited...' Struggling to go to sleep, Aleck suddenly finds himself in his reverie in the midst of the fox hunt. 'He was always of those going around to try to cut the fox off on the other side. No, he was down off his horse. He was coursing with the fox through the trees.' Aleck has identified himself now with the quarry. 'The trees kept flashing by, one black trunk after another'....

He gets up and smokes a cigarette. Afterwards he plans his stratagem for the next morning. He will tell his daughter that his old kidney ailment has recurred and that he'd better return to Estill Springs for the waters, which had helped him last time. He knows that if he hurries, he can have a fly in the water half an hour after he gets off the train.... 'Old Red' records a narrow escape for Aleck Maury."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 21-23

"Her short stories such as 'Old Red,' 'The Captive,' and 'Her Quaint Honor,' which originally appeared in small-circulation magazines, 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.... The best known and perhaps the best of Caroline Gordon's short stories is 'Old Red,' a story about Aleck Maury, who is also the protagonist of Miss Gordon's second novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*....

The novel is, of course, more leisurely, more detached, more indirect; and the short story is more intense, more tightly structured. The novel depends for its effects upon the piling up of incidents and details; the short story upon dramatic structure and symbol. The novel is told in the first person by Maury; the short story, from the point of view of the central intelligence, that is, through Aleck Maury's eyes. In the novel we are never very close to the essential Maury, for the first-person point of view as used there is a way of keeping the reader at a distance. In 'Old Red,' because we see the world through Maury's eyes, we come to share his view of the world. Indeed, Miss Gordon has structured her story in such a way that we actively participate in the discoveries Maury makes about himself and about his world.

'Old Red' is also a subtle story that brief analysis cannot do justice to. It begins quite simply and matter-of-factly with Aleck Maury arriving for a visit at his mother-in-law's house--and then gradually reveals Maury's passion for fishing; his half-comic, half-serious battles with his wife over his addiction to sport; and finally his realization that he Aleck Maury, not the world, is queer. In structure and technique, we are reminded of Henry James's 'The Beast in the Jungle' and James Joyce's 'The Dead,' but Aleck Maury is a hero very different from either John Marcher or Gabriel Conroy. Maury withdraws from the world in order to live, not in order to avoid human involvement. Thus, though the story is ironic, the ironies support rather than undercut Maury's sensibility.

One of the chief ironies is that Maury has voluntarily given up his sport (temporarily, of course) in order to visit what is left of his family: his daughter Sarah and her husband Steve and his dead wife's mother-in-law. While in the midst of his family and off his guard, so to speak, he is attacked and his whole existence is called into question. The old war that has been carried on by his wife is resumed by his daughter, Sarah, who is outraged that her father will not give up one afternoon of fishing to attend the funeral of a cousin, the oldest lady in the whole family.

Looking around the table as Sarah delivers her lecture on his outrageous behavior Maury catches 'the same look in every eye.... That look! Sooner or later you met it in every human eye. The thing was to be up and ready, ready to run for your life at a moment's notice. Yes, it had always been like that. It always would be. His fear of them was shot through suddenly with contempt.' Before Maury falls asleep that night, he is already planning his escape the next morning to Elk River, one of his favorite fishing haunts.... Maury...escapes 'captivity,' not in order to 'find himself' as a Romantic hero might, but to live a life that, whatever its private pleasures, is disciplined and severely controlled....

Aleck Maury, Sportsman and...'Old Red'...have been her most popular [fictions].... There is in each a pattern that modern readers have come to expect--the clash of conventional and unconventional behavior and the moral triumph of the latter." [This is countercultural, in contrast to Gordon's usual conservatism.]

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 11, 112-14, 140

"Writing to 'A,' [Flannery] O'Connor recalls that 'Old Red' taught her how to use a symbol, 'and I sat down and wrote the first story I published'."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 29

"'Old Red'...she referred to as her 'story about Allen and Dad,' and said it was not one of her best, just a kind of trick. She wove into the story scenes from the past summer--her father visiting his 'white-haired, shrunken mother-in-law, his tall sister-in-law who had the proud carriage of the head, the aquiline nose, but

not the spirit of his dead wife... Maury plans to escape from the women and hide out at Estill Springs. In a marvelous analogy, he imagines the way Old Red, the much-hunted fox of his childhood in Virginia, escaped the hounds."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 120

"'Old Red' is usually considered her best story, and is certainly the most frequently anthologized and analyzed. In 'Old Red,' Caroline introduces her best and best-loved fictional character, Aleck Maury, who was modeled on her father. Caroline discovered the 'germ' of her story during her last stay at Merimont when James Gordon [father] took Allen fishing with him instead of attending the funeral of an elderly female relation.

'Old Red' focuses on the dichotomy between masculine and feminine conceptions of time. Time seems to stand still for the women of 'Merry Point': the furniture, the activities, even the slant of sunlight remain as Aleck Maury remembered them. The women still act as if time were their ally and they had all the time in the world. For the men, in contrast, time is an adversary to be pursued and caught, the ultimate masculine sport. Doing is much more valuable than being, so accomplishments are the measure of success. [It is Aleck's wife who is disappointed in him because she thinks that he has not accomplished enough.] Despite the pleasant weather, Aleck's son-in-law works compulsively on his essay. Aleck himself evaluates his time in terms of what he has learned about fishing and what he has caught.

Caroline herself lived in constant tension between what she regarded as the masculine accomplishments of publications and the endless process of feminine domesticity. In one of her most beautifully rendered passages, through Aleck Maury she envisions the gender-differentiated conceptions of time that are central to her works and go her life: *'Time, he thought, time!....'* Caroline's ambivalence is further demonstrated when Aleck Maury's daughter Sarah, the Caroline-figure [oversimplification], wants him to attend an old kinswoman's funeral. He identifies with the wily, hunted fox, Old Red, suggesting that Sarah and the other women are the potential captors. Escape is necessary so he leaves the feminine preserve of Merry Point to continue his own hunt for time as he pursues sport throughout the South."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 116-17

"Carrie's father loved to talk about the heroes of Greek and Roman myth--Heracles, Prometheus, Aeneas, and Odysseus--but Carrie's favorite stories were her father's tales about hunting and fishing--about his battles with a sly fox named Old Red and his success with Old Speck, a lure with 'powers bordering on the supernatural,' Carrie believed. She would never forget the way her father held his audience captive. He had a fine voice and a sure sense of dramatic structure.... The fox resembled her father's fictional counterpart, Alexander Maury, a wily old man who would not be caught by the snares of his family.

With gentle humor Caroline sketched in her father's rebellious stance and sardonic wit. Mr. Maury would not unpack his bags--he wanted to be ready to get away quickly from 'Merry Point.' At the dinner table he also made a point of tucking his napkin 'well up under his chin in the way his wife had never allowed him to do,' Caroline wrote. Her portrait was loving, yet laced with a critical perspective reinforced by the parallels between the old man and the fox: both made their lives out of struggle and escape.

Caroline incorporated both the Meriwether and Gordon perspectives in the story. 'Aleck' Maury was both an admirable man and a pitiful escape artist. He had succeeded in taking control of his life, pursuing the art of fishing with a zest and passion. But the price he had paid for that control and the pursuit of his art was great. Like Old Red, Aleck could not relax. He found no comfort in his family; he had to be always alert, ready for escape. Yet although Aleck had only scorn for the women of Merry Point (and a bit of condescending sorrow for his son-in-law), he clearly depended on them: his independence would have meant less without the struggle, without the game.

In 'Old Red' Caroline also developed her self-portrait, creating a fictional alter ego she would use repeatedly in the years to come. In many ways the portrait was an extension of Ellen Cromlie, the main character Caroline had used in 'Mr. Powers' several years earlier. Like Ellen, Aleck Maury's daughter Sarah was the spitting image of Caroline: she had black eyes, a quick laugh, and a rather sharp tongue. Aleck reflected that although Sarah was thin, she 'looked so much like him.' Then Sarah made a sarcastic comment about one of his stories, and her father decided 'she was, after all, not so much like himself as the sister whom, as a child, he had particularly disliked. A smart girl, Sarah, but too quick always on the uptake. For his part he preferred a softer-natured woman.'

In addition to her self-portrait as Sarah, Caroline developed the character of Stephen, Sarah's husband, to reflect mockingly on Allen. Stephen was 'infected already with the fatal germ, the *cacoethes scribendi*,' Caroline wrote. He sat around thinking about sonnet forms and tried to write essays on John Skelton, but he was in many respects a ludicrous figure. Aleck Maury realized Steve didn't even know where he was, not even when he sat fishing. According to Maury, his son-in-law's face was abstracted, 'like that of a person submerged.' Steve was 'dead to the world and would probably be that way the rest of his life,' Maury realized with pity....

Although the story had little action, it was one of Caroline's finest stories. The characters were fully developed, the narrative perspective tightly controlled, and the conflict compelling.... Aleck's pursuit of sport was noble and heroic; it was also foolish and selfish. Just as in 'Old Red,' Aleck could devote his life to sport only by deliberately cutting himself off from family and friends. He was always willing to learn something new, to sit at the feet of other 'masters,' but he usually refused to share what he had learned. And his dedication to his art forced him--and his family--to accept a wandering life."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 16,127-28, 138, 143

"Perhaps more has been written about 'Old Red' than any other work by Caroline Gordon.... Through Aleck Maury, Gordon's readers experience both a joyful liberation from the confining female consciousness and a melancholy recognition that the freedom is willfully constructed and precariously maintained by a desperate man. He is unable to envision personal and permanent meaning in the life of the mind, the heart [no, he follows his heart], or dedication to work or duty.... From Washington Irving's Rip Van Winkle (1819-1820) to Ernest Hemingway's twentieth-century protagonist Nick Adams, readers find many precursors to Aleck Maury [including Thoreau]....

Gordon allows Maury to present himself as a self-made man, a sportsman who *has no past to remember fondly* [false], no innocence to lose. Before becoming the passionate hunter, Maury only remembers a life devoid of companionship, beauty, and excitement....[false] As an adult narrator, Maury is able to interpret his past, to forge a connection between the stark landscape and the loss of his mother.... Maury turns to nature to locate what most children seek in their parents: intellectual and physical stimulation, joy, and the comfort derived from a recognition of one's connection to a larger, seemingly unconquerable being. [This contradicts the false statements above.]

While Maury is drawn in the tradition of the American Adam, he is presented in much more naturalistic, and thus more desperate and alienated circumstances than most lone men in the wilderness. Nina Baym might well classify his story as one of the 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood'--that is, novels in which a solitary man flees the destructive and restrictive female-dominated society for the 'beckoning' feminine [?] wilderness.... [Baym] concludes that a woman would be 'unlikely to write' one of these classic 'American' novels because the 'portrayal of woman is likely to be uncongenial, if not basically incomprehensible, to a woman.' Such a narrative, however, did not seem 'incomprehensible' to Caroline Gordon....

In their domestic novels set in the west, women writers stripped the American Adam of his hunting shirt and moccasins, fetching him out of the forest and into the town.... Gordon manages to keep Maury in the best light. Unlike the others, Maury exercises a keen sense of sight, a passionate appetite, a lifelong desire to learn, and a wonderful capacity to tell stories. The family is a group of bored, boring, and less engagingly articulate men and women who, according to Maury, lead wasteful lives.

The domesticated, intellectual son-in-law is judged a sensible but woefully misdirected young man infected by 'the fatal germ, the *cacoethes scribendi*': the incurable itch to write.... Maury believes that his mother-in-law, devoted solely to traditional values, has largely wasted her life and now passively yearns for those increasingly rare occasions when she again can cook and care for others. His sister-in-law, Laura, has spent her life 'drying up here in the old lady's shadow.' For his daughter, Maury reserves what might be seen as his meanest verdict: 'Mr. Maury regarded her critically. It occurred to him that she was, after all, not so much like himself as the sister who, as a child, he had particularly disliked. A smart girl, Sarah, but too quick always on the uptake. For his own part he preferred a softer-natured woman.'

Early in the first section, such harsh, authoritative judgments are not undercut but reinforced by the author, who suggests through tone and imagery that the lives of these women and the place they dwell are stagnant and degenerating traps that Maury has managed to elude. Gordon prepares her readers to seek escape, and we sympathize with Maury's ability to range beyond their dark world: 'His mind veered from the old house to his own wanderings in brighter places.' By continually contrasting Maury's exuberance with the wasted lives of the three women and his intellectual son-in-law, it becomes difficult for the reader to judge him unequivocally.... Maury's determination to envision time, his enemy, as a brilliant, moving force that can be sought, wrestled, and enjoyed lends him a dignity and vitality that the rest of the family seems to lack....

As the work progresses, however, Gordon shows her readers that Maury's values are faulty.... When he watches his daughter sitting at the breakfast table, mulling over coffee and cigarettes when others have begun their day's work, he dismisses her as another wasteful and dispassionate woman. Having recognized in Sarah an intelligent, well-read woman who exhibits love and care, the reader does not necessarily accept Maury's rather severe judgments. As Maury's own defensive nature surfaces, we realize that he criticizes those around him because this keeps him from surveying and questioning his own life and values. Indeed, he uses this defensive posture to keep at bay the 'black fear' that haunts him; in his self-imposed isolation, he is alienated from the world [but united with Nature].

By the end of the first section, the reader's opinion of Maury has undergone many changes. In the last paragraphs, we see him through the eyes of his loving and...unresentful daughter. Gordon accomplishes this shift as she exposes Maury's exclusion of his daughter. 'Disregarding' Sarah, Maury shows his son-in-law his favorite lures and speaks of his passion.... Absorbed in the beauty of the handmade lures, the two men do not interrupt their concentration as the fiery coal falls upon the rug, but the excluded woman does. Her care allows them their 'undivided and unfrustrated' reverie, and she finds in the voice of the dedicated, single-minded, and passionate male a beauty that establishes her aesthetic sensibilities and her potential for love. Aleck Maury, we realize, is the daughter's own first love. Her love endures his disinterest in her, his separations, and his self-involvement--and it is probably the same love that contributed to Gordon's later decision to devote a novel to her father's life.

Seeing Maury from this very tender point of view, readers pause, as the first section is ended. Although they may not sympathize with Maury, they become interested in his character and understanding of his devotion. In the second section, Gordon quite adeptly blends Maury's passion for fishing with his remembered love of hunting and concentrates her attention on Maury's primary fear of death. As Maury's thoughts return to those days when he used to love to hunt, before he became too heavy and infirm, readers are prepared for the final section in which the hunter and hunted converge. Maury imagines himself as Old Red, the fox, as it struggles to elude death....

When Gordon described 'Old Red' to [Sally] Wood as a 'kind of trick,' she may not have given herself credit for its numerous, sophisticated tricks. Like the trickster, Gordon adopts a mask. Her story contains...a series of neat shifts in point of view that cause the reader to avoid judgment. These perspectives reinforce the notion that you cannot distinguish the hunter from the hunted, the captive from the captor. Gordon leaves the reader with the most sympathetic view of Maury identifying with the fox, but also with a reminder of a more complicated convergence of consciousness that occurred earlier in the third section. Maury's wife, Mary, the hunted, is transformed into first the captive wife, and later the huntress who was 'wearing him [Maury] down and would have had him in a few months, another year certainly,' but who had died, like Gordon's own mother, after a long illness.

This important section begins the final section, in which a startled Maury awakes from sleep with thoughts of his own mortality. In his half-conscious state, the sixty-one-year-old man sees the room from the perspective of a frightened child. The furnishings assume a monstrous and threatening life, and his thoughts turn to the one woman he loved, his dead wife.... [So he is not a "misogynist" after all.] Maury sees the wallpaper, the furnishings--the domestic space--as threatening. His feelings of vulnerability and loss lead him to consider his wife whom he had first seen through the eyes of the hunter. His desire to possess her wild beauty, his capture of her, transformed her into his antagonist....

Once captured, Aleck realizes, Mary is no longer the alluring prey. Delivered into cultural and biological *captivity* [?], she established a new identity as pursuer, the domestic woman, the restrictive wife and mother from whom the wandering, curious, and pleasure-seeking male flees. Maury evinces a sympathy that had not surfaced earlier, but it is a curious sympathy that demonstrates his belief that woman is less strong and much more impressionable than nature. Sadly, he realizes he has possessed Mary and marked her with his own desire, creating an even more desperate and alienated hunter.

In Gordon's world, men's dissatisfaction with life and their unhappiness stems from the transformation that occurs in women once they are 'caught' by men and domesticated by *patriarchal* conventions [No, this is Feminist propaganda, these are Victorian conventions, established and sustained by Victorian feminists such as Sarah Hale the Editor of *Godey's Ladies Book* and Sophia Hawthorne. Manners and morals were the dominion of women, not men, who yielded to their matriarchal wives in the home while claiming the world outside the home as their patriarchal dominion. Italics added.]

Instead of desiring mastery, Mary wants possession; instead of nature, she desires religion; instead of pleasure, she sees a dark world of sin and duty.... Maury does not specifically explore how their child's death affects Mary, but returns to thoughts of his own influence over her. He acknowledges that in the moment of his possession of her in the yard, she had become a different woman. She seeks possession herself, possession of not only her child but also its father. Thus, Gordon reiterates that, in Maury's consciousness, the act of his domination changes the character of his prey; for him, Mary is no longer the free and wild being with 'dark and startled' eyes, but the woman from whom Gordon herself takes flight...

Readers cannot know if Gordon shares, explores, or rejects Maury's view of his wife because Mary does not appear apart from his reflections. In this tale, as in so many others by Gordon, the artist is half-masked, leading readers to wonder what kind of possession Gordon's father had over his daughter--and how this led her to write his 'autobiography' and to pursue artistic approval from her literal and literary fathers." [This Feminist cannot understand a daughter loving a father, nor why Gordon would pursue artistic approval from her father and from the best contemporary fiction writers even if they are male.]

Anne M. Boyle

Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon
(Fairleigh Dickinson U 2002) 90-94, 106-112

Some of the Feminist critics are just like the women Aleck Maury seeks to escape: Cowan finds Aleck guilty of "active misogyny"; Jonza convicts him of being "foolish and selfish"; Boyle claims that his life has been "devoid of companionship, beauty, and excitement." Aleck disagrees: "No man living, he thought, knew better how to make each day a pleasure to him."

In weighing the case such critics make against Aleck, the reader should consider the implications of race: Sympathy for blacks in general is unanimous in American literature. It is a long tradition that white characters are morally defined by their attitudes toward black characters, as in the most beloved American novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck runs away from Miss Watson and the Widow with Jim for essentially the same reasons Aleck avoids his matriarchal family. Aleck was born in the Old South and conditioned by the prevailing racist customs of his culture, hence, like Huck, he refers to blacks as "niggers." Nevertheless, in this story Aleck is the only white character to express positive attitudes toward the black characters, most of whom are servants of the white women with whom Feminist critics identify.

As a boy, Aleck was mentored in fishing by Ben Hooser, "an aged Negro" with "smiling eyes.... A fine nigger, Ben, and the only man really that he'd ever cared to take fishing with him. But the first real friend of

his bosom had been old Uncle Teague," another black man. Still another black man, the giant Ralph, initiated Aleck into the mystique of the hunt when he was eight years old, in "The Burning Eyes." In contrast, in "Old Red" his daughter Sarah is scornful when she accuses Aleck of preferring "the society of niggers!" Just as he is proud of his hunting and fishing skills, Aleck is proud of what else he has learned from blacks, especially conjuring and how to smell fish under the water. "D'you ever see a white man that could conjure?" "I'm probably the only white man in this country knows how to smell out fish.... I learned it from an old nigger woman... It's wonderful how much you can learn from niggers." At the pond, "a Negro cabin was perched halfway up the opposite slope" and Aleck praises the wisdom of it: "Ain't it funny now? Niggers always live in the good places." Except for those who must live in or near big houses obeying white women. Feeling oppressed himself, forced by his sisters to dress like a little girl until he was six years old, Aleck identifies with the oppressed race.

Michael Hollister (2020)