

ANALYSIS

Old Red and Other Stories (1963)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The best of the stories have 'an unerring sense of place.' When Gordon 'is dealing with the rural South ...she can scarcely be faulted.' The 'rhythm and detail of Southern middle-class life is her intimate possession' and she is 'able to draw the proper degree of feeling from the commonplaces of that existence.' Gordon 'occasionally demonstrates that there is no substitute for sympathetic understanding of the intricacies of a way of life'... In this collection the most striking successes are the stories of Aleck Maury-- 'the sensual, the natural, man at bay.' Maury 'is unable to realize his gifts in worldly terms.' Increasingly 'his way of life is an indulgence, a leisured pursuit, out of step with individual progress and material ambition.' Paradoxically, his lifestyle is an 'evasion of responsibility and a confrontation of reality.' The characterization of Maury is 'wholly convincing' in 'widely varying circumstances.' In the Maury stories objects are 'felt as well as perceived.' Here, there is 'the impact of environment, not the rhetoric of staging.' Hence, the reader is a participant, not just an audience."

Gene Baro

"A Leisurely Hunter, a Man at Bay"

New York Times Book Review (20 October 1963) 4

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan

Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide

eds. Robert E. Golden and Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 266

"A collection which is 'technically very winning'... The southern stories have 'sight, smell, intonation, phrasing'... 'Old Red' and 'The Presence' are the most poignant stories... Gordon has probably 'given these stories exactly the tone and touch she desired'."

Henrietta Buckmaster

"Condition of Kinship"

Christian Science Monitor (31 October 1963) 7

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 268

"One of the purest and best disciplined talents of the last 30 years.... The present sampler...shows a lapidary skill that can be admired even when she's polishing chestnuts.' [?] The best stories are 'Old Red,' 'The Presence,' and 'The Last Day in the Field.' "'The Presence' is cunning in strategy; 'The Last Day,' as 'true as a tuning fork'."

R. V. Cassill

Review of *Old Red and Other Stories*

New York Herald Tribune Book Week (20 October 1963) 22

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 268

"Gordon is 'always in complete control, reworking her materials to achieve a dream-like quality of large, nebulous softness, of sustained tension never quite relieved.' She writes well of 'the small stealthy death, the squandered opportunity, the unconsummated caress, the unacknowledged desire or disguise or defeat'... 'Old Red' [is] 'really satisfying'... Her South 'rings true'."

John Leonard

"Monsters, Butter-Pastry, Saltines"

National Review (31 December 1963) 571

summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 271

"Miss Gordon's unobtrusive style is so deceptively simple that it is easy to call it artless.' This volume 'constitutes a fine sampling of her work in the short story form.' The best stories have to do with her own

milieu... Gordon has an 'uncanny ear for local speech patterns.' 'Stories such as "One More Time" and "The Ice House" actually remind one of Hemingway in their purity and intensity'."

John C. Pine
Review of *Old Red and Other Stories*
Library Journal 88:3224 (1963)
summarized by Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 271

"Miss Gordon's use of symbolic naturalism is most clearly seen in her short stories. 'The Brilliant Leaves,' 'The Presence,' 'Old Red,' 'Her Quaint Honour,' 'The Petrified Woman,' and 'The Forest of the South' are some of her best and some of the best written in the present century.... The short stories pre-eminently reveal her use of the vivid detail for establishing mood, for conveying subtleties of psychological shading, and for achieving the expansiveness of meaning that in literature we associate with symbolism. Almost any of the stories illustrate Miss Gordon's method and accomplishment.... In these tales the situations and the details are realistic even while they convey a more than literal, an almost indefinable, intent. An individual image or metaphor often conveys the essence of a story, although other details elaborate further the significance of the work."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 10-11, 13

"*Old Red and Other Stories* (1963) contains thirteen pieces, nine of which appeared in the earlier collection. Altogether, Miss Gordon has published during her career in book form twenty-one stories, enough to fill one volume the length of one of her longer novels. And yet, curiously, she is better known as a short-story writer than as a novelist. Two of her best-known stories are 'The Captive' and 'Old Red'; three other short stories also appear frequently in anthologies of modern fiction: 'The Last Day in the Field,' 'Her Quaint Honor,' and 'Brilliant Leaves.' These five, along with stories not as well known to the general reader, have given Caroline Gordon a reputation, at least among critics, as one of our best short-story writers....

Among the new stories, 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' is the longest and most controversial.... Complaints miss the point. Miss Gordon has used facts about Andre Gide, not to say something about him, but to say something about life itself, something she had been saying in a number of other stories and novels.... 'The Presence' is a new story about Aleck Maury, a Maury who is now seen and judged from the standpoint of Christian faith.... It is faith, Miss Gordon suggests, that Maury has always lacked.... [Maury] feels his alienation but is not able to cross the chasm of doubt.... 'The Petrified Woman'...is told in the first person by a narrator looking back on a childhood experience.... The real petrified woman is Cousin Eleanor... [one of the] women who hate what is natural and who attempt to dominate their men.... The point of the story: Eleanor's deadness and Tom's degradation....

'One Against Thebes,' a rewritten version of Caroline Gordon's first published story, 'Summer Dust'...is reorganized, rather severely cut, and considerably heightened in tone.... Miss Gordon has converted a loosely constructed realistic short story into a highly suggestive poetic one. 'One Against Thebes' is about evil, as was 'Summer Dust'; but the evil has been given a historical-mythical basis in addition to a Naturalistic one.... The reference to Thebes and to Heracles are intended to place a small girl, the protagonist, in a tradition which the author sees as coming...from Classical times...expressing the truth of the Greek myths and their applicability as paradigms for our own times.... 'One Against Thebes'...shows that, though her fiction underwent significant changes after her religious conversion, the religious implication was already present in her first published short story."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 128-34

"The two collections of short fiction which Caroline Gordon has published to date, *The Forest of the South* (1945) and *Old Red and Other Stories* (1963) constitute distinguished contributions to the body of modern fiction. And her stories of love are not the least significant part of this contribution. Yet, with a few notable exceptions (for example, the popular 'Brilliant Leaves'), these stories have not received the

recognition and critical regard which their intrinsic excellence and their relevance to the understanding of Miss Gordon's total vision would seem to warrant.... Criticism has tended generally to favor those stories dealing with Aleck Maury or those emphasizing the Civil War or post-war South, possibly because subsequent critics have shared Mr. Lytle's feeling that Miss Gordon's central vision is her historic image of the crisis and decline of a traditional society. Though this assumption may be sound, it is unfortunate if it leads to the neglect of other aspects of her art which are perhaps more uniquely characteristic of her distinctive version of the human condition."

John E. Alvis

"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 85-86

"*Gyroscope* [ed. Yvor Winters] published 'Summer Dust' in the Fall 1929 issue--her first publication--and asked to publish 'The Long Day' in March 1930. 'Summer Dust' had been turned down by every magazine in America, but it was still the best writing she had ever done, she wrote Sally Wood.... Very soon, Caroline got word that Edward J. O'Brien was using 'Summer Dust'...in his *Best Short Stories of 1930* and, furthermore, wanted to dedicate the book to Caroline.... 'The Dragon's Teeth' [1961] is a revision of 'Summer Dust'... She cut out many details in the story of the little girl who, on a hot summer afternoon, becomes aware of injustice and prejudice, while the little girl's father, who did not appear in the original, tells his children stories of Heracles. 'The Dragon's Teeth' was renamed 'One Against Thebes' when it appeared in *Old Red and Other Stories* two years later."

Ann Waldron

Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 71, 81, 362

"To *Old Red and Other Stories*, she added 'Emmanuele! Emannuele!' and omitted from it eight stories which appeared in *The Forest of the South* (1945). The order of the remaining stories is reversed; instead of moving from the past forward, as did the earlier collection, the stories range from the near past to the distant past, ending with the pioneer story 'The Captive.' The only exception is 'One Against Thebes,' which was her recent reworking of her first story, 'Summer Dust,' in the context of the myth of Heracles. By assigning first place to 'One Against Thebes,' Caroline may be suggesting that her readers reappraise her work from her new Catholic and Jungian perspective, as she herself had done."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 217

Michael Hollister (2018)