

## ANALYSIS

"Summer Dust" (1929)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"An impressionistic short story. Gordon is a great student of Flaubert and is great on getting things there so concretely that they can't possibly escape--note how that horse goes through that gate, the sun on the neck and then on the girl's leg and then she turns and watches it slide off his rump. That is real masterly doing, and nobody does it any better than Caroline. You walk through her stories like you are walking in a complete real world. And watch how the meaning comes from the things themselves and not from her imposing anything."

Flannery O'Connor  
*Mystery and Manners* (1969) 79

"Summer Dust" is a different kind of story from the rest of those collected in *Forest of the South*. There is the same enigmatic quality, the understatement, the restraint, and the feeling that a great deal more is being implied than is actually said [Hemingway's "iceberg principle"]; but where Miss Gordon's stories are usually dramatic and more or less 'objective' accounts of heroes seen at a distance, the point of view in 'Summer Dust' is more closely identified with the protagonist, Sally Ellis, a young girl living in the country somewhere in Tennessee or Kentucky; and the point of the story is deeply involved in Sally's emotional responses. Miss Gordon's technique for rendering this emotion is to give us, one after the other, four incidents unconnected in time and place. We do not see the logic of these connections, but we are made to feel them through the tone, the rhythm of the sentences, and certain key phrases and images.

In Part I of the story, Sally is on her way to pick peaches with an old Negro servant and her grandchildren. Sally is very much aware that she is not one of them, and, as she walks along the dusty road, she says to herself, 'I am not a nigger. I'm the only one who's not a nigger.' The peach trees happen to be in the yard of a house rented from Sally's family, and the white woman who lives there is enraged when Sally and the Negroes come to get 'her' peaches. 'Naw, they ain't youah peaches,' Aunt Maria says. 'They's Miss Molly and Mistuh Ed's peaches.' When the woman calls that 'Miss Molly Murray and Mistuh Ed Murray is lowdown dawgs,' Aunt Maria, smiling, replies, 'They may be dawgs, but they laks peaches. Come on, chillun, pick 'em up.' Sally, however, 'didn't pick up any peaches. She didn't want any peaches.'

In Part I, Sally has had an introduction to human meanness and suffering; and, repelled by them, she longs for a better world. This yearning is brought out dramatically in the incident of the peaches, but it is also underscored earlier in this section when Son, a Negro boy, runs ahead, making the trail of a great snake in the dust. Sally thinks of the snakes that her brother and the old cook Marie always kill and hang on the fence and of the yellow place they make so that 'you couldn't climb there.' Her mind then recalls some words of a fairy tale: "'But what will I eat?' asked the little Princess. 'Roots and berries; do not be afraid, my child,'" said the fairy godmother.'

In Part II, Sally is in the dark woods on her black horse; and she is carried to a place where she thinks nobody had been for a long time. But she finds the moss crushed and what appears to be half of a golden earring. Immediately her imagination transforms that object into a gypsy woman going through the woods. In Part III, Sally and her brothers, Tom and Alec, are driving to Ellengowan to visit their grandparents. On the way, they talk about going to see Aunt Silvy; and, when Sally asserts that she is not going to see the old Negro woman, Tom says, 'You better. She'll put something on you.' Tom tells Sally that Aunt Silvy is a hundred and fifty years old and that she likes to drink blood: 'That's what makes her so strong.' But Sally is forced to go to see 'mammy,' a ritual that all visitors are obliged to perform. Sally walks to the cabin alone and reluctantly steps over the threshold into the dark cabin.

At first it is so dark she can see nothing, and she stands still until a voice calls out, 'Who dat?' When she replies, 'It's Sally Ellis,' the voice says, 'Whyn't you come heah and shake hands with me? Wheah youah mannahs?' Sally takes the old woman's hand and remembers the awful stories she has heard about her and thinks that her strangely sick smell is the odor of the blood she has eaten. Finally, Aunt Silvy's daughter calls her away; 'You bettah run 'long to the house. Them boys'll eat up all that ice cream.' Sally runs as fast as she can to the house, not out of hunger but out of very fear.

Part IV deals with another experience but nevertheless draws together the images and themes of the three earlier sections. When Sally Ellis is walking down a country road with her brother Tom, who is now sixteen, they meet an older cousin Robert; and the two boys begin to talk about a country trial that Robert has been recently involved in. From their conversation, it appears that Robert and another boy have been intimate with a girl named Ada Peters; and the trial was being conducted in order to determine the father of her baby. The other boy, Virgil Stokes, had admitted 'it was him all right'....

In the conclusion of this story, the imagination of Sally rejects the sordid world evoked by the conversation of the two boys; and she conjures up in the language of the fairy tale a place superior to this predatory world in which appetites are supreme. In 'Summer Dust' Miss Gordon simply juxtaposes these two worlds--the natural one devoid of any redeeming vision and the fairy-tale one evoked by the protagonist's reading. Many years later, after her religious conversion, Miss Gordon rewrote this story, gave it the title of 'One Against Thebes,' a mythological underpinning, and sharper religious implication.

What is especially interesting about 'Summer Dust,' Miss Gordon's first published short story, is that it reflects with uncanny accuracy the direction her own personal life was to take, as well as the future development of her fiction. Sally Ellis, like Lucy Lewis of *Strange Children* and Vera Claiborne of *The Malefactors*, unconsciously rejects the brutality and ugliness of this world in favor of the enchanted world of the imagination. The artistic implications are clear enough, but the religious and mystical implications become clearer only when seen from the vantage point of Miss Gordon's 'Catholic' fiction. What Sally Ellis really longs for is a transcending religious experience."

William J. Stuckey  
Caroline Gordon  
(Twayne 1972) 126-28

"In 'Summer Dust' Sally Maury, the child protagonist and central intelligence of the story, is shown walking down a dusty road with her Negro nurse and two Negro children. The Negro boy traces a pattern in dust of the road which the girl sees as a 'great lalloping snake.' In 'One Against Thebes' the rather casually introduced image of the earlier story is transformed into a controlling symbol for the ensuing action. By shifting the point of view from the child to an omniscient observer Miss Gordon is able to bring the child's inward reactions into clearest focus....

Images of snakes and reptilian creatures continue to occur to the girl; and...they suggest vaguely sinister associations. Later, she will intercept a furtive glance from the Negro boy which reminds her of the malevolent stare of a serpent. She thinks of the ice house which Son has told her is infested with snakes. She recalls a family tale about Son's killing a black snake when he was a baby, and at the end of the story she steps to the side of the road to avoid the snake trail that Son has made. This final gesture introduces a long reverie in which the girl's aversion to crawling things and the reality they suggest to her combine with snatches of mythology she has learned from her father. She recalls her father's recounting the story of Hercules' triumph over the Lernean Hydra and other fabulous tales of serpents and dragons.

For a moment, by means of this imaginative reconstruction, Sally Maury attempts to invest the things she fears with those attractions of fantasy that the myths seem to contain. But finally even the romanticized dragons of the mythological lore are for her simply other kinds of snakes, fearful and repellent. She can find no way to manage her aversions by appealing to the imaginative forms given her by the adult world and reverts instead to a passage she recalls from her *Green Fairy Book*...

The iterative reptilian images of the story suggest the sexual import of the experience of growing up, an experience which it seems the girl attempts to reject in favor of the 'crystal palace' of her fancy. And in both

versions of the story the girl's withdrawal seems to be conditioned by her overhearing a brother and a friend discuss a local case of statutory rape. Sally Maury seems partly to understand the talk of the older boys and to recoil from the awareness that is being forced upon her. However, the sexual element is only a part of the maturing process which she is challenged to meet and accept.

Earlier in the story when the children accompanied by the Negro nurse have gone to pick peaches on the land of one of her family's tenants, the girl encounters the bitterness of the tenant toward her grandmother and uncle. She is so distressed at the tenant's expression of hatred for her kin that she only 'pretends to be gathering the fruit which she now has no heart to touch.' She is attracted in a childish way to a visiting friend of her brother who is kind enough to show her some attention. But the boy deserts her rather abruptly when he is beckoned by an older girl. She has been frightened by her brother whom she has called a fool: 'She who calleth her brother a fool' he says, 'is in danger of hellfire.'

Through these early incidents the young girl begins to sense the friction and resistance that are concomitant with maturity. The mature world exhibits casual malice; it assesses one's worth on its terms, not one's own; and it entails strict responsibility for one's actions. Furthermore, it seems to offer nothing in compensation for the realm of freedom and self-sufficiency that it violates. Sally prefers to think of the silver poplar trees... She relishes the wondrous aspects of her enlarging awareness of things around her, but she does not want to grasp the unifying principle of her new experience, which is nothing less than the natural rhythm of fertility, struggle and decline.

In both versions of the story the critical moment in the movement from innocence to experience involves the girl's exposure to the realities of senility and death. On a family visit to a neighboring farm she is made to observe the customary courtesy of calling upon the arch-matriarch of the household, an ancient Negro woman who, Sally's brother says, eats blood to keep alive. In 'Summer Dust' the girl is frightened and repelled by her contact with the old Negroes, though in that story it is not quite clear how the child relates this experience to her other moments of fear and disgust. However, in the later 'One Against Thebes' the same incident is related in a manner that leaves little doubt of its import. And, in accord with the structural dynamics typical of the revised version, it is explicitly linked to the central symbol of the story....

The recognition of death and the attendant infirmities of man's unredeemed, natural estate, together with the grasp of the consequences of the sexual role, are the usual lessons connected with coming of age. A child reveals something of his potential as an adult by the manner in which he accepts or refuses to accept these lessons. In the case of Sally Maury the world of fleshly infirmity and 'reptilian clasp' seems to be rejected along with what she comes to view as the disgusting consequences of sexual maturity. At least this seems the resolution indicated by the girl's withdrawal to her fairy-tale world at the conclusion of 'One Against Thebes.' The earlier version of the story concludes with the same dream of Fairy Godmother and crystal palace, but some of the incidents in 'Summer Dust' tend to make the resolution of that story more ambiguous than that of the revision.

For example, in 'Summer Dust' the girl makes an excursion into the woods with her horse and seems to become aware of the plenitude and dignity of integral nature in that setting. It appears that she may have some dim awareness that her own sexual role has a place within this scheme of bounty. Furthermore, in 'Summer Dust' the girl pursues her brother until the final scene of the story when we see that she is now content to be on her own as if she had come to realize her own resources and something of the dignity of her new station. Partly because of these considerations one cannot be certain whether the passage reflecting the girl's fantasy indicates her attempt to withdraw from her natural role or whether it is a kind of celebration of her acceptance. She may see her coming maturity with all its consequences as a kind of investiture of royalty, a queenship, as, in a way, it is meant to be. Possibly Miss Gordon undertook to revise the story in order to resolve this ambiguity.

The elimination of the forest scene and the emphasis on the snake symbols in the latter version would seem to support the conjecture. Likewise the girl's assertion of independence is given a different context and a different meaning in the revised story. Here she merely refuses to deny her older brother when he suggests she would look better with her shoes on: 'I don't care... It's summer time!' Her refusal to wear shoes here indicates less her independence than her refusal to accept the rules of decorum appropriate to her

new maturity. Finally, however, the resolution of the action must be viewed in the light of its relationship to the title of the story and the lines quoted from *Oedipus at Colonus* which serve as epigraph to the later version: 'That way you shall forever hold this city, / Safe from the men of Thebes, the dragon's sons.'

John E. Alvis  
"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"  
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 88-91

"Her approach to fiction, with its central union of archetypal and Christian vision, did not fully emerge until her story 'One Against Thebes' (1961, originally entitled 'The Dragon's Teeth'), which is a rewritten version of her first published story 'Summer Dust' (1929). Both versions are about a young girl confronting the disillusioning knowledge that comes with growing up, but there are some important differences, which reveal Gordon's new interests. The original story follows the basic plot pattern of her early work, with a character, here Sally Maury, confronting the chaotic nature of life with no satisfactory way in which to order it. When Sally has the upsetting experiences of overhearing a tenant call her parents ugly names and her brother and a friend talk about sexual adventure, she retreats into the comforting world of fairy tale. But her fairy-tale vision is finally an inadequate guide for growing up, because it is a retreat from life and provides no realistic interpretation of it. The story ends with her mind drifting from the hot summer into a pleasant dream world, where a fairy godmother promises to lead her, the little princess, away on a cloud to a distant crystal palace."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.  
*Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South*  
(U Mississippi 1985) 114-15

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

"In 'Summer Dust' Carolyn [Caroline] continued to explore the possibility of turning her family stories into fiction. This time she modeled the central character, Sally Ellis, the grandmother of old Ellen Llewellyn, on herself. Just as her grandmother had been a woman of creative imagination in Carolyn's earlier story, Sally took the role of artist-seer, sensitive to the nuances of injustice and oppression in the personal relationships that surrounded her, responsive to the flights of fancy transforming everyday appearances.

Carolyn set the episodes in the same family landscape, although she changed some of the names and the situations of the houses. In the first section Sally walked with Aunt Maria, a black woman working for her grandmother, and Maria's children, eight-year-old Olivia and eleven-year-old Sawney, called 'Son.' They traveled down 'a dusty country road' between 'the House,' where Sally's grandmother lived, and 'the Old Place,' rented by a poor white tenant. At the Old Place they picked peaches for Sally's mother, much to the dismay of the tenant, Mrs. Wilkins. The entire episode made Sally uncomfortable: Son taunted her, giving her a worm-ridden peach; Mrs. Wilkins cursed Sally's mother; and Sally could not bring herself to pick the peaches after all.

In the next episode Sally rode deep into the woods by herself. When the trees became dense, she clung tightly to the neck of 'the Black Horse,' becoming almost one with the animal, amazed to discover she could 'go anywhere' the horse went. Soon Sally discovered an earring in a quiet, secluded place. It belonged to a

gypsy woman: Sally was so sure that she thought she could see the woman in the woods. Later, leaving her horse and walking bravely into the darkening forest, Sally discovered an owl 'in the gloom beneath the branches' of 'a half-fallen tree.' The owl 'stared at her for a moment,' then 'scuttled away among the leaves.' Sally 'watched until it was out of sight' before leaving the woods.

In the third episode Sally went on another journey, this time to a birthday party at Ellengowan, a Woodstock-like estate, with her brothers, Tom and Alec. Both of the boys pestered Sally on the drive: Alec, the younger, by poking his sister in the ribs and daring her to fight back; Tom by telling stories of the old black woman Aunt Silvy, clearly modeled on Carolyn's memory of Aunt Emily. Aunt Silvy was 'a hundred and fifty years old,' Tom said, as strong as 'ten nigger men' because she had a habit of eating 'little niggers....and white chillun too if she can git 'em.' Neither Alec nor Sally wanted to speak to Aunt Silvy, but once they had arrived at Ellengowan, only Sally was forced to go to the back of the house and say 'howdy' to the old crone. Nearly collapsing when forced to go into Silvy's dark cabin and shake her 'bird-claw hand,' Sally quickly left the cabin.

In the last episode Sally was once again on the road, tagging along with her brother Tom. Once again Tom teased Sally unmercifully, trying to get her to leave him alone, but Sally would not go anywhere until her brother's friend Robert appeared. Then when Tom told her to 'go down the road a piece and pick some blackberries,' Sally went because she was afraid of what Tom would say to her. The boys wanted to be alone to talk: Robert had to testify in a case of statutory rape. Just out of eyesight, Sally caught snatches of Tom and Robert's conversations. When she heard them laugh about how easily their friend Virgil got off, she decided it was time to go home. Tom would not go with her, so she went herself, walking fast, 'bringing the dust up around her in a cloud.'

Just as in 'Old Mrs. Llewellyn,' Carolyn created a fully realized world with finely drawn characters. Although each section could stand individually, the parts were not at all disjointed. Several motifs bound the episodes into a coherent whole: references to eyes and sight and the dust covering the roads, quotations from the *Green Fairy Book*, and the recurring pattern of a journey. In one sense the story could be read as one young girl's retreat into fantasy, a retreat prompted by the girl's unwillingness to face the rude facts of sexual and emotional maturity. But 'Summer Dust' could support a completely opposite reading. Sally, as artist-seer, was forced to confront injustice and oppression, yet she was not mastered by it. She could find delight in the natural world, in the way the sun 'sent little needles of light' through the leaves of the trees; she could transcend her everyday experiences through acts of imagination. Rather than surrender to despair, she learned to rely on herself. In her final walk back to the house, Sally rejected her brother's company, surrounded herself in a cloud of dust, and rehearsed a scene, presumably from her *Green Fairy Book*....

Although Sally may have been retreating into fantasy, she was also creating her own world, guided by the wisdom she had acquired on her recent journeys. Most of that wisdom developed out of pain and an understanding often ignored in one of the most perplexing parts of the story. In the first section, when Sally was on the road with Aunt Maria, Olivia, and Son, she remembered how Son had looked at her earlier. 'His eyes were very bright; his lower lip hung down until she could see the red part next to his teeth.' At that point in her reverie, Sally exclaimed to herself, 'I'm not a nigger.... I'm not the only one who's not a nigger!' Over and over again, she repeated, 'I'm not a nigger!' Nothing in the episode justified the repetition, much less the vehemence of the exclamation.

Yet the remark could be understood as the beginning of Sally's realization that, while she might not be black, she was not unlike Son. Sally even gave Son her treasured copy of the *Green Fairy Book*, instinctively understanding their common state. The discussion Sally overheard about the judge's response to statutory rape reinforced an underlying assumption: women and blacks were both vulnerable, all too dependent on the whims and considerations of others."

NancyLee Novell Jonza  
*The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon*  
(U Georgia 1995) 68-70

"The story, divided into four sections, seems to have little plot; however, several motifs, including visual imagery, patterns of journeys, and references to fairy tales, unify the work.... Reminiscent of Sarah Orne

Jewett's 'A White Heron' in narrative voice and theme, both are told by non-authoritative narrators about the choices a young, sensitive girl will face as she grows up... With its loose plot (or plotlessness), its suggestive language, and unresolved tensions demonstrates Gordon's desire to tell the story of this young girl in a nonlinear, nontraditional, and non-authoritative way.... As the story ends, the reader is first shocked by the recognition of the unresolved but intricately related layers of oppression and discrimination to which this young girl has been initiated. Secondly, the reader wonders if the child's imagination--sustained by thoughts of nature, beauty, love, and maternal protection--will empower her, shelter her, or destroy her."

Anne M. Boyle  
*Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon*  
(Fairleigh Dickinson 2002) 46-48

This story is not included in either edition of Gordon's short stories. It is superceded by its later, revised version, "One against Thebes" (1961). Her first published story, "Summer Dust" reveals much about her fiction as a whole. The foundation of her fiction, as in this story, is meticulous convincing Realism filled with authentic details of place and time and character. Gordon is so expert at creating an illusion of real life that her Realism appears to be literal but is in fact symbolic, with imagery that is consistently archetypal: windows, doors, gates, paths, mountains, caves, springs, trees, groves, snakes, horses, dogs and so on. In "Summer Dust" (1929) she uses Modernist techniques of Impressionistic structure she learned from her mentor Ford Madox Ford and used in her first novel *Penhally* (1931).

Michael Hollister (2020)