

ANALYSIS

"The Brilliant Leaves" (1937)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The Brilliant Leaves' is a story of a boy's coming of age, rather suddenly and brutally. It is also a story in which Fate plays the decisive part. [Evelyn was] a young Diana, in love with her own virginity, or shall we just say she is too full of herself.... If she hadn't been too full of herself she would have paid more attention to the boy's love making, wouldn't have gone climbing about on the rocks and wouldn't have been killed. Her death comes about through too much joy of animal living."

Gordon

Letter to Robert Penn Warren (undated)

Letter to Lambert Davis, Editor, *Virginia Quarterly Review* (undated)

"James E. Rocks' remarks on the symbolism of the leaves in his article...follow closely the earlier readings of Mr. Lytle and Mrs. Cowan. Rocks sees the story as one of masculine betrayal, but like the other commentators identifies the source of betrayal, too simply I think, with the boy's inability to control the whim of the girl. Consistent with that interpretation Rocks fails to see the other significance of the symbolism. The leaves are the seasons, Rocks says somewhat noncommittally, 'symbolic of some aspect of their tragic love'.... On two occasions the girl's eyes are described as resembling leaves at the bottom of a stream. These images not only look ironically to the pathetic conclusion of the story, as Rocks notes, but seem to indicate, more or less explicitly, the girl's awareness of the moral injunction latent in the season."

James E. Rocks, "The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon"

Tulane Studies in English XVIII (1970) 115-35

cited by 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) 111 n.8 & 9

"In 'The Brilliant Leaves' Miss Gordon reverts again to the theme of inadequate love, but in this, her most popular story, she demonstrates her ability to manage a more effective union of action and symbol. 'The Brilliant Leaves' has probably received more critical attention than any other of Miss Gordon's stories. It has been accorded the especially perceptive scrutiny of Andrew Lytle and Louise Cowan, who both have commented in some detail on the meaning of the story and on the technical proficiency with which its meaning is rendered. Both Mr. Lytle and Mrs. Cowan have observed that the story hinges on the boy's failure in love, and both have remarked on the symbolic significance of the autumnal leaves which figure as the title and central image of the story.

Lytle explains concisely the parallel between the girl's plight and the remembered tale of her aunt's disillusionment. He says that the fall from the cliff, related at the end of the narrative, recalls thematically the earlier incident in which the aunt, as a young girl, had been deserted by a cowardly lover. [This was not Jimmy's aunt, it was Sally Mainwaring.] As a result of her disillusionment the aunt had become a confirmed spinster. According to Lytle, the similarity of the two incidents resides in the similar masculine failures, the first being a failure of courage, the second a failure of foolish indulgence, or in lack of responsibility. For Lytle the boy's inadequacy seems to consist precisely in his lack of sovereignty. And his failure can be viewed as somewhat like the failure of temperament exposed in the husband of 'The Petrified Woman.' Lytle also alludes to the young man's innate mediocrity and dullness as indications of his natural inadequacy as man and lover. He further comments on the significance of the leaves as a symbol of mortality. The leaves suggestive of the waning year reinforce the fact of the girl's death and, by another association which Lytle points out, correspond to the waning love of the young couple. In each case the primary connotation of the imagery is decline or mortality.

Similarly, Mrs. Cowan seems to stress the boy's fatal inability to exercise control in his relationship with the girl, though she sees the leaves as a more complex symbol which suggests different things in the course of the story. According to Mrs. Cowan the boy is betrayed 'by his trust in the benevolence of the surrounding world.' She maintains that, at the end of the story as he runs over the dead leaves to summon help, the boy seems to sense this betrayal. He has finally come to understand the real significance of the leaves as 'dead and dry bits of vegetation, cut off from their source' and thereby representative of the 'life of innocent joy and delight irrecoverably gone and the dazzling and exciting life of adventure and passion heartbreakingly deceptive.'

Mr. Lytle and Mrs. Cowan are convincing for the most part in their similar interpretations of the young man's failure and in their similar appraisals of Miss Gordon's deployment of the seasonal symbol. The boy does exhibit a sort of mediocrity of spirit in following the girl's whimsy instead of asserting his own better judgment. The leaves do seem to connote the harsh reality of death overtaking and canceling the exuberance of youthful romance. I suggest, however, that the symbolism of the story also entails another more positive quality and that the nature of the boy's inadequacy may be designated more precisely when it is associated with this further meaning of the seasonal imagery.

None of the commentaries on 'The Brilliant Leaves' attempt to deal with what constitutes a pivotal crux of the story, namely, the problem of whether or not the young couple have yet consummated their love. Certain details suggest that they have. At the beginning of the narrative the boy is shown as being quite anxious not to arrive early at the trysting place and thus be obliged to wait for the girl. His unchivalrous concern for his own conduct (when he does finally arrive the girl is awaiting him) suggests the supercilious casualness which often follows upon a sexual conquest. Later, the girl refers somewhat coyly to their love in the previous spring and observes 'It's different isn't it?' The boy, apparently offended by the serious implication of the girl's remark, then asks with some resentment why it is different and forces the girl to blush at his directness.

Subsequently the young woman asks if he likes to do things together, and his pointed reply, 'Some things,' evokes her complicit laughter. The boy leads the way to an area of the forest which still retains summer's green and which reminds him of the June woods, the scene of their earlier amatory adventures. There he is confident enough to risk an intimate caress which, though this time resisted by the girl, seems to occasion no embarrassment to either of them, implying probably an earlier intimacy accepted by both. Considered singly none of these specifics would definitely indicate sexual experience, but taken together they strongly imply that the love has been previously consummated. If this be the case then the boy's failure becomes more clearly intelligible.

The girl desires now a different sort of love which the boy is unprepared to accept. She wants to establish a better common bond upon some shared intimacy other than the merely sexual. She has outgrown the initial ardent ways and now wants the boy to be similarly more mature in his affections. This is what she apparently has in mind when she asks him, 'don't you like doing things together?' The boy's answer indicates clearly enough that he does not want to think about their love in the girl's way and has not yet grown up enough to desire a more mature quality. Accordingly, his refusal to accommodate himself to the girl's maturity and his renewed insistence upon further sexual experience make him indirectly responsible for the girl's actual death; since she proposes the fatal attempt to ascend the precipice partly, it seems, as a kind of desperate gambit by which she hopes to solidify their bond through a dangerous romantic adventure taking the place of, but equally as intense as, the boy's proposed sexual adventure.

In a way the boy has forced her to take this risk by not responding to her appeal for a better kind of love. His final failure to assert himself and forbid the girl's whimsical and dangerous proposal suggests only a compounding of his earlier and more morally serious self-indulgence. For, ultimately, the young man's failure in love can be seen as essentially an inability, willful or otherwise, to grow up. His inadequacy in this respect is counterpointed by the symbolism of the leaves, to which it stands in contrast.

I believe the brilliant leaves of the story and its title connote more than simply mortality or decline. Like the similar autumn imagery of the Keats ode they present the season as the harvest time of fruitful maturity as well as the moment of the year's waning. They function as an indication of the imperative rhythms of

nature which summon the lovers to imitate the natural physical order and thereby perfect their love. The pathos of the story arises from the fact that the girl alone senses the injunction of the seasonal pattern and allows the urgency of it. The boy wants, whether consciously or unconsciously, to arrest the ripening of his affection and to maintain a summer or springtime ardor, the time for which should now be past. His attention to the one place in the wood which still resists the autumn's advance comments obliquely on his situation. Furthermore, his lack of purpose indicated by his inability to envision any definite social role for himself ('I suppose if you're ever going to make a living you better get started at it') emphasizes his immaturity.

In 'The Brilliant Leaves' Miss Gordon's recurrent theme of failure in regard to sexual role is identified with yet another mode of elemental inadequacy. The boy's failure can be interpreted as something like the typical masculine counterpart of Sally Maury's failure in 'One Against Thebes.' The young girl is repelled by the sensual element which she perceives to be a component of adult love, whereas the adolescent boy associates the commerce between the sexes too closely with its physical aspect. Both views are shown to imply a pathetic resistance to wisdom in exercising the sexual role: both negations clearly entail serious consequences. In 'The Brilliant Leaves' the contrasting natural standard is implied more strongly than in most of the other stories through the symbolic counter of the seasonal imagery and through the contrasting example of the girl's instinctively right behavior."

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 (1972) 98-101

"Caroline wrote a short story with a Montecagle setting, 'The Brilliant Leaves,' which she told Red Warren would be her last. The reason Ford was able to keep producing the way he did, she said, was that he realized long ago that he couldn't write short stories. 'I am quite seriously determined never to try my hand at another,' she said. 'I can face a lifetime of incessant toil writing novels but each short story takes as much out of you--me, anyhow, as a novel and then you have to start all over again.'"

Ann Waldron

Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 169

"Two stories that do not quite seem to belong with the rest of those in *The Forest of the South* are 'Brilliant Leaves' and 'Summer Dust.' 'Brilliant Leaves' is a beautifully constructed minor tragedy in which a boy and a girl who have been separated for the summer are reunited in the woods at a summer resort where their families have cabins. The boy has been working in town, and the girl has remained at the resort with her family.[?] As the boy walks through the woods to meet his girl, the ground is covered with brilliant red leaves of fall. The couple finds a little out-of-the-way spot in the woods where the trees have kept their leaves and the grass is still green. After an interlude in which their love is rekindled they go for a hike and come upon a waterfall, Bridal Falls, where the girl wants to climb up the steep rock, and the boy reluctantly consents. The climb is high and the rocks slippery because of the water.

As the girl steps from one rock to another, she slips and falls backward onto the rocks below. The boy clammers down and finds her, moaning, her eyes open. 'I've got to get some help,' the boy says, and goes racing off through the dead leaves toward the cluster of summer houses 'that no matter how fast he ran kept always just ahead of him' and seemed in danger of sliding 'off the hill and leave him running forever through these woods, over these dead leaves.' Andrew Lytle has suggested that 'Brilliant Leaves' is about the boy's failure to live up to his responsibilities as a man: in permitting the girl to have her way, he indirectly contributes to her death. But his interpretation seems too moralistic a reading; moreover, the boy is too young to assume such responsibilities. Because he loves the girl and does what she wants to do, 'Brilliant Leaves,' it would seem, is about the tragedy of death that comes in the midst of life. Its final impact is somewhat like that of *Romeo and Juliet* or, to select a more recent example, *A Farewell to Arms*."

William J. Stuckey

Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 125-26

"The Brilliant Leaves' [is] a tale of a tragic lack of understanding between lovers in an autumnal forest. 'The Brilliant Leaves' displays Caroline's natural symbolism at its best. Although men refuse to accept the message of the brilliant leaves, women recognize that all things must mature and die. As in 'Old Red,' for women, time is essentially static in that everything fits into a larger pattern that is unchanging.

'The Brilliant Leaves' opens with Jimmy's mother and aunt weaving the lives of the people in the white houses into a pattern with their talk. They turn to years past when 'high spirited' Sally Mainwaring had 'climbed down a rope ladder to meet her sweetheart while her father stood at another window,' shotgun in hand, but when 'she got to the ground the lover had scuttled off into the bushes.' This anecdote sets the pattern for the action that follows. Evelyn wants to follow the progress of nature to a mature love, but Jimmy is unable to rise to the challenge. Like Aleck Maury with his sport, Jimmy wants to seize and hold the love of June and refuses to recognize that his adversary, Time, will win.

Nature mirrors the lovers' reality. Evelyn and Jimmy meet in the autumnal forest where their love had grown in June. When Evelyn comments that 'It's different,' Jimmy refuses to acknowledge the truth of her remark. He replies, 'I know a place where it's still green.... I was there the other day. There's some yellow leaves but it's mostly still green. Like summer.' In that green spot, Jimmy makes a sexual advance, but Evelyn wants something more. She wants to try to achieve something together as mature lovers would, in this instance to climb beyond the significantly named 'Bridal Veil Falls.' When Evelyn loses her footing and falls, Jimmy is unable to save her. As is often the case in Caroline's fiction, man's absorption in his own needs and desires leaves woman vulnerable to a tragedy from which he cannot save her.

With imagery that reinforces its major themes, Caroline ends 'The Brilliant Leaves' with Jimmy running away for help as Evelyn lies alone and dying among the ferns. Jimmy persists in his masculine refusal to heed the message of the dead leaves and continues to try to outrun time. Significantly, he is running toward the white houses that contain the women who can place his tragedy in the stable pattern of events. Without them, he will be 'running forever, through these woods, over these dead leaves.' With powerful imagery, Caroline once again represented the hopelessly incongruent aspirations of men and women that are the key to her work." [Here the Feminist critic reduces the complexity of the story to a single theme and claims that the "key" to all of Gordon's work is the thesis that heterosexual relations are *hopeless*, as if Gordon was a dogmatic radical Feminist like herself. In Gordon's fiction there are many examples of heterosexual couples who have *hope*, otherwise they would not keep trying.]

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 134-36

"The Brilliant Leaves' [was] written after one of her walks around then early abandoned village of Monteagle. It was the 'story about a girl who was a reckless climber and fell off the brow' of the mountain. Years later Caroline said she heard the tale from an old lady who 'popped out of the bushes' during her walk: 'I have never been sure the old lady was real, popping out at me like that. I never saw her again.' Quite probably, Caroline invented both old lady and story. During the summer Monteagle was full of elderly women, but most left by December, when cold winter winds descended on the mountains. Based on fact or not, however, Caroline used childhood memories and local history in 'The Brilliant Leaves.'

She began the story with a favorite scene--that of two women sitting on a porch. Eighteen-year-old Jimmy listened to his mother and her sister gossip about the Monteagle regulars, especially about Sally Mainwaring. She had been wild in her youth, Jimmy's aunt said. 'High-spirited,' his mother conceded. But Sally had ended up an old maid: her father frightened away her lover just as she was climbing down a rope ladder to meet him.

Caroline used the opening story as a bench mark for the later action. Jimmy escaped the confines of the porch gossips to meet his lover, Evelyn, the niece of Sally Mainwaring, in the woods. There Jimmy tried to seduce Evelyn, but she wanted to explore the woods, not make love. Even after Jimmy proposed to her, she kept her distance, eventually talking Jimmy into climbing Bridal Veil Falls. On the way, Evelyn slipped and fell. Caroline ended the story with Jimmy running for help that would be too late. Later she said she

wrote the story 'for the sake of the last paragraph.' As a child she once had to run 'a quarter of a mile on a country road to get help for a man who was dying,' and she thought that road would 'go on forever'....

Perhaps Evelyn was too wild and headstrong for her own good; she brought on her own death because she did not know her limits. But perhaps Evelyn was not wild enough, or wild in the wrong way. If she had been more like her Aunt Sally, if she had paid more attention to her lover and to the conventions of courtship, then she would not have challenged the cliffs. Instead she chose to do something that young women did not generally do. She dared to act outside the norms of society, and her actions cost her life. The story of Sally Mainwaring could also reflect on Jimmy. Sally had not been afraid to elope, but her weak-willed suitor allowed himself to be easily frightened away. Jimmy had been no more forceful in his pursuit of Evelyn. He knew the dangers of Bridal Veil Falls but did nothing to talk his girlfriend out of the climb or protect her.... Evelyn died 'full of the joy of animal living,' Caroline said. That was the danger a woman faced when she took risks, or the wrong kinds of risks. One false step would send the unwary climber hurtling down on the rocks."

NancyLee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 174-76

The title image of "brilliant leaves" points to the ground covered by a "red carpet" of fallen red leaves, evoking a red carpet leading to the altar at a wedding. Since the leaves are brilliant, they are clearly visible, just as the present state of her relationship with Jimmy is clearly visible to Evelyn. The word "brilliant" also connotes light, an archetypal symbol of truth. Her relationship has changed like Nature in the progress of seasons. Her eyes are "brown like the leaves that lie sometimes in the bed of a brook." Red is associated with passion, brown leaves with death. Evelyn's feelings are moving on like a brook but she can see that her satisfaction with merely passionate infatuation is dead. At the waterfall, when Evelyn leans over the ledge to look down at the plunging water, Jimmy says, "Don't try to see too much."

She has already seen enough to try to make Jimmy jealous by telling him that "Pinky Thomas wrote me." This may have prompted Jimmy to propose: "He had not known that she corresponded with Pinky Thomas." The color pink in "Pinky," contrasting with red, suggests that she is not passionate about him. But when she and Jimmy first kiss, her lips "felt firm and cool, not warm and soft as they had been when they kissed goodbye in June under the same tree." She calls him "Dimmy" instead of Jimmy, a name used by his aunt that "made him mad" because it suggests that he is still a little boy--and perhaps a little dim. She says of their relationship, "It's different, isn't it?" But he doesn't understand. She calls him "silly" and "His face hardened. 'Why is it different?'" He wants to resume their infatuation as if it is still June, wanting to go to a "place where it's still green." When they hear Bridal Veil Falls, he says "It's not very pretty around there" but she says "I bet it's prettier than it is here." They follow a road toward the falls where there is "no red carpet." Along this road she "laughed out loud like a child."

Both of them are immature and Jimmy lacks character. When Evelyn asks him if he has been playing much tennis, he replies, "There wasn't anything else to do," as if he never reads or does anything but play. He's lazy: "You lay off all summer and it shows on you all right. But I don't reckon that makes much difference." He may never even have had a job: "Dad wants me to go in his office,' he said. 'I reckon I better start. I suppose--I suppose if you're ever going to make a living you better get started at it.'" Immediately after saying this he asks Evelyn to marry him, but he is clearly not prepared to be an adult, let alone a husband. Evelyn's reply indicates that she is not ready for marriage yet either, and knows it: "'They wouldn't let us,' she said, 'we're too young'." If they were mature enough to get married they would not let their parents stop them.

Evelyn has already fallen for Jimmy emotionally before she falls literally. Although she will not agree to marry him yet, she says "I'm perfectly *crazy* about you." Later she says it again: "I'm *crazy* about you." The word *crazy* is italicized. And when she wants to climb up into Bridal Veil Falls, he says, "Are you crazy?" The falls have a series of steps, like a romantic relationship. When they get close enough, "he felt the cold drops of moisture as her cheek brushed his. "'It is like a bridal veil,' she said." Climbing into the falls with him is a romantic adventure like a rehearsal for marriage: "Don't you like doing things together, Jimmy?" When he answers "Some things," he is probably thinking of sex. But she takes off her red socks. When they

start climbing to the "first step" of the falls, she touches his cheek affectionately and says "I *like* doing things together." Doing such things together is the "first step" toward maturity and marriage. It is evidence of true love as distinct from mere passionate infatuation.

Some critics have blamed Jimmy for not dissuading Evelyn from the climb, but she is quite determined. While he lags awhile before going to their rendezvous place because "He didn't want to get there first and just stand waiting," Evelyn "was already there." The anecdote about Sally Mainwaring on the first page of the story sets up a parallel with Evelyn, who fears being abandoned by Jimmy as Sally was by her suitor when he got scared off by her father with a shotgun. Evelyn does not want to become "an old maid the rest of her life" like crabby old Sally. Jimmy's mother calls Sally "high-spirited," but is corrected by his aunt, who calls her "wild" and says to the mother, "You always get things wrong." The parallel suggests that Evelyn is wild like Sally, an implicit criticism that connects with her being "crazy" in love. Both fathers in the parallel are proven wise. If Sally's suitor really loved her he would not have given up after once running away out of fear of her father. That she never married may have had something to do with her being wild, masculine, and imperious: Jimmy's mother remembers Sally being "the first woman I ever saw ride astride" with an attitude that reminded her of "Queen Elizabeth reviewing the troops." Perhaps the suitor never saw Sally again because he took advantage of the opportunity to escape her.

At the critical moment before she falls, Jimmy "thought he would go first and then he decided he could help her better from his side. 'Go easy,' he said. She stepped lightly past him." Both of them are responsible for the accident, she for being "wild" or "crazy" or just impulsive and not watching her step closely enough on a slippery place, he for letting her lead the way when she had never been here before and for not holding onto her hand or her clothing to steady her while she moved ahead past him. It is ironic that just before they start their fatal climb, he surrenders responsibility, saying to her, "You're the doctor."

In the last paragraph of the story, Jimmy has to take responsibility perhaps for the first time in his life. He is a tennis bum rich enough to vacation at a cottage all summer every year and look down on neighbors who are common people he considers too mediocre to think about: "They always looked just alike, those houses. He wondered how his mother and his aunt could sit there every afternoon talking about the people who lived in them." Now, however, feeling responsible--if not for Evelyn falling at least for running to get help in time--he fears getting blamed. Now the common people in the houses he has looked down on will become *his* judges. If she dies, and Gordon has said that she does, irresponsible Jimmy will not be able to look down on them anymore: "If he did not hurry they would slide off the hill, slide off and leave him running forever through these woods, over these dead leaves." He does not think about Evelyn at all, only himself. At the bottom of the falls, she is a "brown heap" like dead leaves.

Michael Hollister (2020)