

## ANALYSIS

"The Enemies" (1938)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

[This story won second prize in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1938*.]

"It is very lurid, about a man whose enemy is about to be hanged. The enemy (colored) tells the man to give him ten minutes after the hanging and he'll be with him. When the ten minutes has elapsed the man cuts his throat and goes forth to meet the ghost on his own ground."

Caroline Gordon  
Letter to Sally Wood Kohn  
(8 January 1936)

"The Enemies' contains perhaps the most unequivocally successful of the masculine lovers in the person of its Negro protagonist.... In regard to its strict economy of incident 'The Enemies'...is...austere in plot... Its spare but highly dramatic use of detail suggests the technique of the traditional ballad, as does the speech of the Negro characters who repeat certain phrases of grief as if they were intended as a sort of formal refrain. The story is also unique among Miss Gordon's works for its evocation of the supernatural element. [Spirits, ghosts, or "presences" appear in three of her novels: *The Women on the Porch*, *The Strange Children*, and *The Glory of Hera*.] Even more than the other stories the considerable power and significance of this one is concentrated in its climactic moment, which, but for the ballad-like atmosphere of the narrative as a whole, might appear overly dramatic.

The action is set in the front room of a cafe where an old Negro couple and Gunter, a huge black man accompanied by his dog, watch out the night and await news of the execution of the murderer of Gunter's wife. The execution has been witnessed by two Memphis newspaper reporters who agree that it is the first time in their long coverage of hangings that they have seen a Negro step up on the scaffold without singing or preaching before his death. When a small boy returns to the cafe to report the murderer's last actions he notes the same facts. Upon hearing this account the waiting Negro woman exclaims: 'Kill my chile, cut'er th'out en ain't even say he sorry before he go to meet Jesus.'

The boy also carries a message from the condemned man to Gunter, who had earlier tracked down the murderer with his dog. The condemned man had asked a doctor how long it took a hanged man to die, and, informed it usually took six or seven minutes, had commanded the boy to tell Gunter he would be with him in ten minutes. As he waits, Gunter chants to himself a refrain of recollected love and subsequent betrayal... At one moment Gunter's refrain is interrupted by the sound of steps outside the cafe door, but they pass on, and the other people in the room prepare to eat breakfast while Gunter continues to sit stolidly at a table in front of the door with his dog at his feet. His apparent intention has been to give the spirit of his enemy time to move from the scene of the execution to the cafe where he expects to confront it.

The climactic action of the story is not totally unexpected, but it is powerful in its impact and skillfully rendered. It is shown through the eyes of the other people in the cafe, particularly through those of the young boy whose horror arrests him in the act of eating. Gunter suddenly slashes first the throat of his dog then his own throat, but before killing himself he cries out: 'Coming!... Coming. I gives you your time and you didn't get here. Now I'm coming!' And, finally, the mother of the murdered girl exults conclusively and appropriately enough: '*Done gone to meet him!* Oh, my baby. She can res' easy now!'

It is clear that the aggrieved husband kills the dog, then himself, in order to pursue and confront the spirit of his wife's murderer who has failed to keep the promised meeting with Gunter. Gunter thereby demonstrates the intensity of his love through his willingness to die himself in order to further avenge the

murder of his unfaithful wife. Both the simplicity of his assertiveness and the courage he exemplifies in his resolution are impressive.

In this respect the story bears comparison with Faulkner's somewhat similar 'Pantaloon in Black' where another hulking black man demonstrates through violence the remarkable intensity of his devotion to his dead wife. However, 'The Enemies' differs from the Faulkner story in a way which indicates the typical concentration of focus in Miss Gordon's portrayal of love. The action of 'Pantaloon in Black' is framed by a white man's misjudgment of the Negro's state of mind, since he considers only the violence and apparent irrationality of the Negro's action as worthy of note. By concluding the story with this patent failure of a white to understand a Negro's grief, Faulkner quite pointedly emphasizes ironies involved in that enveloping social action, which is a real issue in this particular story as well as in the whole of *Go Down, Moses*. By contrast, Miss Gordon seems to isolate the immediate plot of her story from the surrounding social context. She barely alludes to it in the initial scene depicting the two white newspapermen. The reporters do not reappear at the end of the story and their brief comments at the beginning, though somewhat callous, are understandable in view of their profession. They have seen many hangings.

Miss Gordon's comparative reticence regarding the historical social context has the effect (again like the similar reticence of many ballads) of focusing one's attention upon more primal, more natural, possibly more fundamental, concerns. Politics as history has little to do with this story, although politics, simply, has much to do with it. The city here is represented as the custodian of the written law. As such it has an interest in defending the written law through its punitive measures, and, as such, it hangs the murderer of Gunter's wife. Once it has secured its version of retributive justice the city has no further interest in this particular matter. Its written law and its actions in defense of that law are closely connected with the body. It acts upon the person by acting on the body; and, once the law has been avenged by the purely physical fact of the hanging, the city rests. It does not attempt to pursue the spirit of the offender because presumably the disembodied spirit cannot harm the bodily city and may be said not even to exist in the eyes of the physical polity.

Gunter, as lover, acts in terms of the unwritten code of vengeance which takes up where the politics of the written law leaves off. This code demands that a personal offense be avenged personally and that a violation of the spirit demands a total, including, of course, a spiritual, redress. Just as the city's written marriage laws are insufficient to make the whole marriage in the first place, so its penal laws are insufficient for the same reason: they are directed to only one part of the reality which they presume to regulate. However, the unwritten law pays due respect to the written. Gunter has not killed his enemy but has allowed the city to do that. Furthermore, Gunter's action is conditioned by the fact that he has been told the murderer expressed no remorse over his crime. Had the criminal sung or preached before the trap sprang open under him the retributive sanctions of the unwritten law would have been satisfied and Gunter would not be obliged to pursue the man's spirit. However, since no repentance was forthcoming, further vengeance is required to obtain a complete justice. Like the good hunter that he is, Gunter gives his quarry a sporting chance by waiting for him to make the first move. But when the ghost of the hanged man fails to appear, Gunter is left with no honorable course other than that of the chase.

After the interests of the city have been served Gunter acts to secure the further and private justice demanded not by the citizen but by the husband-lover. The chase will be conducted in the area of disembodied spirit with which the city, as city, is not primarily concerned. In a way the chase itself, and the deed of self-destruction making it possible, can be viewed as Gunter's attachment to an unwritten law which may be older, and possibly nobler [debatable] in its comprehensiveness than the city's law.

The same deed through which he affirms the unwritten law of vengeance also confirms Gunter's fulfillment of his multiple station as husband, lover, and hunter. His action unifies his various roles and their attendant obligations. His love is at once sensitive and assertive, and he does justice to the dual principles of sovereignty and devotedness which are entailed in both the code of marriage and the code of the hunt. Probably no other masculine character in Miss Gordon's stories of love exhibits a comparable capacity for heroic service of the beloved. Gunter's fulfillment of manhood is instinctual and elemental; and because it is so, it seems particularly forceful. Most of the other masculine lovers Miss Gordon portrays are relatively bloodless [debatable, given Rives Allard and Rion Outlaw in particular] and consequently less

successful in living up to the natural demands of their sexual role. Thus, if his racial identity means anything, it would seem to mean that Gunter is somehow more closely allied than his white counterparts to those natural instincts which are normative with respect to a man's conduct in his capacity as a lover....

Despite the fact that it depicts a rare instance of masculine competence in the man-woman relationship, 'The Enemies' can hardly be construed as Miss Gordon's image of hope. Like the other stories of love it depicts a fragile bond: here the man succeeds in love, but the woman fails. Gunter's achievement takes place within an ironic or possible tragic context. The woman, who has been unfaithful, may not be worthy of his heroic act. The sobriety of vision which accompanies even the few successful lovers of Miss Gordon's fiction suggests the problematic character of what seems to be her view of love and nature.

As I hope I have indicated, Miss Gordon does portray some characters as positive embodiments of sexual conduct considered in its most comprehensive sense, as embracing the essentials of manhood and femininity. At the same time, it is obvious that such successful lovers as Gunter or the spinster of 'All Lovers Love the Spring' remain separated from the beloved in their achievement. Miss Gordon portrays successful lovers but does not portray a successful union. This seems strange because, when the thematic implications of the stories are examined, it appears that Miss Gordon does not really demand more of men or women as lovers than has always been demanded of them. The man should evidence courage, assertiveness, spiritedness and sovereignty, though these should be accompanied by forbearance and courtesy in consideration of the woman. Woman as the object of love should be warmly sympathetic, spirited enough though modest, gentle, and single-minded in their devotion. For both men and woman the traditional quality of 'truth'...and the elemental quality of a large capacity for devotion are shown to be requisite for mature love. All of these qualities are simply those we naturally associate with the proper enactment of the masculine and feminine roles.

Furthermore, Miss Gordon seems to imply that nature instinctively instructs one in these norms so that they are not difficult to ascertain. Successful love does not depend upon some sort of esoteric knowledge, but only upon proper elemental response to simple elemental injunctions. Nevertheless, despite the accessibility of instructive norms which indicate the way to succeed, Miss Gordon's [short] stories all depict the frustration of love and nature, and one must ask why they persistently do so.

Contrary to what one might expect, the answer does not seem to lie in Miss Gordon's view of history. That is, the stories do not seem to connect the failure of love with the phenomenon of fundamental cultural change whereby the South has moved further away from its 'forest,' the prescriptive order of nature. This theme does appear in Miss Gordon's fiction, but it is not insisted upon in her stories of love, which tend to suppress enveloping action to concentrate on the timeless aspects of human acts. Even though their setting is the modern world, the stories previously discussed do not deal primarily with 'modern' love but with love simply. Thus one must posit a more basic and comprehensive reason for the failure of love. I suggest that this timeless cause of love's frustration is connected in Miss Gordon's mind with the doctrine of original sin. As a result of his initial fall man has become separated from the world of natural norms, and in his fallen state finds it difficult to obey the counsels of perfection latent in nature. Man needs help to become fully natural. Lovers need help to form a perfect bond.

To put the matter in a somewhat different light, we may discover a tension in Miss Gordon's short fiction between two alternative perspectives on the order of nature. As the 'forest,' nature seems to constitute a generally beneficent source of moral and sexual principles the appreciation of which leads to proper conduct in one's sexual capacity. But concomitant with the vision of nature as a forest Miss Gordon depicts a Dantesque 'dark wood' of human incapacity which seems coeval with the natural standard and hence, in terms of its permanence, equally 'natural.' Within a sexually differentiated creation the human stands as the only element for which the proper fulfillment of sexual role poses a real problem.

One is reminded of the somewhat similar description of the sexual plight which Aristophanes proposes to the assembled company in Plato's *Symposium*... In Aristophanes' account the yearning for sexual union seems to image a yearning for an original integrity which has been upset as a consequence of human sin against the gods, specifically the sin of arrogance. As Miss Gordon presents it, the specific dilemma connected with the human attempt to reintegrate the sexes would appear to be that to accomplish a

successful union each of the sexes must somehow achieve qualities which pertain more properly to the other, yet not in such a way, or to such a degree, as to violate the proper role of each. The man must learn to share in the feminine principle of sensitivity and selfless devotion while maintaining his essential masculine sovereignty. The woman must not be overly dependent on the man yet must not allow herself to become self-regarding and indifferent. This is a difficult task and perhaps is intended by the gods [?] to be difficult since it is imposed as a sort of punishment, or possibly as an admonitory lesson.

Aristophanes professes to consider his tale amusing or comic, although he does not explicitly say what he finds amusing or comic about it. He does say, however, that Zeus later took pity on the offending race and modified the human anatomy so as to make sexual union at least possible. Therefore we may find Aristophanes' story comic because it has, perhaps, a happy ending. Miss Gordon does not explicitly indicate what kind of emotion is appropriate to her portrayal of the sexual condition, but the stories themselves may be thought more distressing than amusing, and generally, more ironic than comic. This may be because Miss Gordon does not think Aristophanes' solution a sufficient one. A finally sufficient solution might require even more forbearance and generosity on the part of the gods." [Gordon does not believe in "the gods," she believes in God.]

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) 106-10

"Another story [like "The Ice House"] likely to be misread is 'The Enemies,' an early story on one of Miss Gordon's major themes, personal honor. 'The Enemies' begins with the sheriff 'meeting two dark figures at the head of the stairs.' 'Step, up, boy,' the sheriff says. And 'the Negro manacled at wrist and ankle took his place on the iron trap.' The sheriff says, 'Anything to say, boy?' And the condemned man replies in a 'throaty voice,' 'I ain't got nothing to say, Boss.' The trap is sprung, and the body falls with a thud to the floor below. The reaction of the two white newspaper reporters is depicted. They are blasé. One of them lights a cigarette before answering the question of a young Negro, 'Is he dead, Boss?' The reporter for the *Press-Scimitar* replies, 'As a door nail or will be in another minute.'

The scene then shifts to a café where three people are gathered--a grizzled old Negro man, an old woman fanning the fire, and a gigantic young Negro man whose eyes are red-rimmed. The boy, Eugene, appears with the news of the death; and our first impression is that the family of the man who has been executed is waiting in numbed anguish for news of the death. We learn, however, that these are the dead man's enemies. The old woman is the mother of a young woman he had murdered; the old man, the father; and the gigantic younger man, the husband. The old woman, Aunt Perea, wants to know if he repented before he died. When Eugene says that he did not, she is driven nearly out of her mind. The husband of the murdered woman sits brooding in a rocking chair, his coon dog at his feet. He alternates between spasms of grief over his dead wife and boasts about his physical prowess. 'Thirty-four years old, sound as a nut. Ain't no man on Big Bend can put me on my back. Ain't no man anywhere on the river....'

The narrator then focuses on the boy who is being urged to eat by the old man, Uncle Lias. The boy puts a morsel of food in his mouth but then lets it fall. Uncle Lias looks around at the dog lying flat on the floor.... On the face of it, this is a rather familiar story. like Faulkner's 'That Evening Sun,' about terror and violence among primitive Negroes. But it is not told simply for the shock and horror. It is a story about honor and revenge. To the white reporter, the murderer is 'dead as a doornail,' but to Gunter, husband of the murdered woman, he is still 'out there,' still to be dealt with. The slaughtered dog, the suicide, and the fanatical cry of the old woman are not meant to display the primitive emotions of the characters but to suggest the passionate depth of their feelings."

William J. Stuckey  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(Twayne 1972) 124-25

"'The Enemies' [is] a lurid tale 'about a man whose enemy is about to be hanged.' The enemy promised to join the man ten minutes after death, but when he did not appear, the man committed suicide to 'meet the ghost on his own ground,' according to Caroline."

Nancylee Novell Jonza

"The Enemy" ["The Enemies"] is her only published horror story and her only tale exclusively concerning blacks. The parents and husband of a murdered woman wait for news of the murderer's execution. When the husband learns that the murderer showed no penitence, he kills himself and his hunting dog to avenge his wife's honor in the next world. Unlike Faulkner, Caroline did not attempt to imagine the black experience from inside.... She chose an omniscient narrator, making 'The Enemy' the only story in her first collection, *The Forest of the South* (1945), that is not told by a first-person narrator or through a central consciousness. The narrative voice is the chorus-like one of traditional ballads, which are also tales of rural love, violence, and grief. Her characters contribute to the effect with repeated utterances that resemble refrains... The choice of black characters may have more to do with her desire to achieve this rural balladic effect than any particular desire to address questions of race."

Veronica A. Makowsky  
*Caroline Gordon: A Biography*  
(Oxford 1989) 131-32

This story has four outstanding qualities: (1) the shocking original plot; (2) its religious significance; (3) the authentic Realism and (4) the detached economical style.

What could be more dramatic than the opening scene of a hanging? The suicide of the hanged man's angry enemy, for whom the hanging is insufficient punishment. The originality of the plot depends upon a belief in the afterlife. Gunter kills himself because he believes so absolutely in life after death that he is willing to end this life to gain revenge in the next. That the hanged murderer also believes in the afterlife is evident in his promise to haunt Gunter. Aunt Perea the mother of Gunter's murdered wife makes this belief among the black characters explicit: "Kill my chile, cut 'er th'out en ain't even say he sorry before he go to meet Jesus. Oh, my God." The boy Eugene moans, "Oh, my Jesus" and Uncle Lias cries out "Oh, my sweet Savior!" At the end of the story Aunt Perea welcomes Gunter's suicide as heroic because she believes that in the afterlife his spirit will defend the spirit of her daughter against the evil spirit of her murderer.

The white newspaper reporters contrast with the outraged black characters in being callous about the hanging, as different from the black characters emotionally as white differs from black. This difference is so great it suggests that the white reporters also differ in *not* believing in an afterlife, as when one says the hanged man is as dead "as a doornail." The belief in racial superiority conveyed by the white reporters, as in using the term "nigger," is ironic in the context of spirituality. The degree of dignity that Gunter gains by his suicide would be lost if the author herself did *not* believe in the afterlife, because in that case Gunter would be reduced to a fool and her story would lose its force. Based on the belief in the afterlife implicitly affirmed in "The Enemies," it can be inferred that both the murderer and Gunter continue existence as invisible spirits. Uncle Lias says, "I hears 'im." According to mediums and paranormal investigators, vengeful situations such as this are common among spirits in the afterlife.

The religious implications are the essential meaning of the story. As usual, the critics miss it. Although the murderer believes in the afterlife enough to vow revenge against Gunter for hunting him down to be hanged, he does not sing or preach before he dies, indicating that he has no regrets, that he does not repent and try to save his soul. In fact he promises to continue doing evil after he dies. The black hood over his head symbolizes his blindness. Although Gunter is the victim and the hero for hunting down the murderer, he cannot forgive. He cannot abide by the biblical injunction, "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord." The worst horror in the story is that Gunter damns himself by committing the sins of suicide, pride, lack of forgiveness, and vindictive intent. The murderer stands on a literal "trap" for hanging, while Gunter falls into a spiritual trap. Ironically, "his voice rose higher and higher." Gunter reduces himself to the level of the murderer, hence the title of the story that makes them equals as enemies. The boy Eugene does not want to be touched by either one of the enemies: "I ain't touch you and I ain't let you tech me." Gunter's pride is evident in his boasting: "Ain't no man on Big Bend can put me on my back. Ain't no man anywhere on the river...." This makes it evident that Gunter is motivated to seek revenge beyond the hanging more by pride than by grief. Rather than express any love for his murdered wife he says only that they got along well:

"ne'er a cross word between us twel he come on Big Bend." The *objective correlative* for our alienation from Gunter is his slitting the throat of his dog.

Gordon is a master at the authentic rendering of black dialect, which evokes the illusion of real life more effectively than the standard English spoken by white characters, which sounds or looks pretty much the same regardless of who is speaking, despite southern accents, because black dialects are more individual, spontaneous and original. Authentic black dialect can bring a fiction to life immediately. Gordon is also a master greatly respected by other fiction writers for her realistic details such as: "Aunt Perea laid aside the turkey wing with which she had been fanning the embers"; "A sunbeam slipped through the dingy curtains, traversed the floor to fall on Eugene's outstretched hand." As is her custom, Gordon expresses her themes with classical and Modernist detachment, mainly through actions and dialogue, the exposition is dramatized and the symbolism is inherent in natural images rather than imposed, such as the trap and the black hood. The trap is a signature metaphor in the tradition of Naturalism, where it implies that a character is not at fault but the victim of society or environment or otherwise, whereas in Gordon characters are held morally responsible for their acts, even blacks in the racist South.

This great story has attracted few critics, probably because liberal academics do not want to recognize the existence of the afterlife. They are Politically Correct. Like the cynical white newsman in the story, liberals would rather be dead "as a doornail" than be accountable for their lives, contradicting the First Law of Thermodynamics that energy cannot be destroyed--it changes form.

Michael Hollister (2020)