

ANALYSIS

"The Ice House" (1931)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"When I say 'If that ain't a Yankee fer ye!' I am not expressing a judgment on Yankees. I am merely recording the attitude, deplorable as it is, of two Virginia urchins in 1866... I *know*, from observation, from history, from family tradition and so on that such would have been the attitude of these urchins. The phrase, however, is sort of makeshift. I wanted to end the story on 'Thar ain't a whole man in ary one of them boxes,' but neither Allen or Andrew would admit that what had happened was clear with no more than that said, so I had to go a little further than I wanted to go."

Gordon
Letter to Sally Wood Kohn
(21 February 1931)

"The Yankee contractor is a symbol of the revolutionary change in American society, the acceptance of materialism as the final value in the state. It is this which has triumphed in the Civil War. The defeat of the Confederacy destroyed in the Union the restraints of the checks and balances which took into account the depravity of man, at the same time as socially the values of a traditional hierarchy of relationships were smashed. Death, of course, is the final comment on the matter. It reduces it to dust and the bare bone. By implication life conceived only in terms of the material aims makes of it a living death, by denying the spirit. The contractor is the embodiment of this denial in his own person and as representative of the Yankee attitude."

Andrew Nelson Lytle
"The Forest of the South"
Critique I (Winter 1956) 7

"A bizarre humor lightens the horror of 'The Ice House' wherein two southern boys dig up Yankee skeletons for a federal contractor who fraudulently and haphazardly places the bones among the coffins he has brought with him. Such an entrepreneur is a favorite Agrarian symbol, the capitalist who without conscience pursues his own gain."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 14

"The best of these three Civil War stories is 'The Ice House' ["The Forest of the South" and "Hear the Nightingale Sing"], which deserves to be better known. It is written in a spare, terse style somewhat reminiscent of Hemingway's early stories that Miss Gordon may have learned from him; the matter and the manner, however, are her own. The time of 'Ice House' is two years after the end of the Civil War. The place is somewhere in the South in and around an old ice house where the bodies of Union soldiers were hastily buried during a battle in 1862.

The characters are two Southern boys--Doug, age sixteen; Raeburn, age fifteen--and a Yankee contractor, whose name is never mentioned. The boys have been hired by the contractor to go into the ice house to dig out the skeletons of the Union soldiers while he remains outside to arrange the bones in the pine coffins which he will later deliver to the United States government at so much 'a head.' The boys arrive on the job early, work all day hacking out skeletons, and are told by the contractor at the end of the day that their services will not be required again.

The older boy, Doug, is surprised; for the contractor had said that there would be another day's work. But the boys take their pay and prepare to leave. Doug, however, hangs back to see what the contractor is going to do. He watches for a few moments and then calls Raeburn to him, and together they spy through

the bushes at the contractor standing before the semicircle of pine coffins scratching his bald head. Suddenly he stoops and begins to distribute the bones in the coffins that are still empty. 'What you reckon he's doing, Doug?' Raeburn asks. 'He's dividing up them skeletons so he can git paid double,' Doug says. The boys get up and slip off silently through the underbrush. When they come to a fork in the path Doug stops. 'There ain't a whole man in any one of them boxes,' he says; and he slaps his leg and rocks in laughter, 'If that ain't a Yankee for ye!'

It is not too surprising that a reviewer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* took offense at this story and called it 'little more than a Southern jibe at Yankee slickness,' but it is surprising that Andrew Lytle, who approves of the story, reads it in much the same way.... To read 'Ice House' in purely regional terms, however, is to misread it. Miss Gordon is not so naive as to believe that acquisitiveness is the exclusive property of Yankees. Indeed, her story suggests something very different, as a careful reading shows.

'Ice House' begins with Doug 'waiting where the paths forked as Raeburn came through the woods.' This first sentence hints at what is to be an important difference between the two boys. Doug is a 'go-getter'; Raeburn, as we gradually learn, takes life more leisurely. Doug's first remark is to chastise his friend for his lateness. 'I thought you wasn't coming,' Doug said. 'I thought you'd just about give it out and decided you wasn't coming.' Raeburn's response indicates that he puts other things above money-grubbing: 'I had to get my breakfast. I ain't going to work for nobody on an empty stomach.... Tain't more'n six o'clock anyhow.' At heart, Doug is a Ben Franklin moralist. 'Well,' he says, 'the way I look at it is if you going to work for a man you ought to work for him.' Up to this point, even experienced readers may be unsure about whose side the author is on in the moral tug-of-war. And it is an important part of her strategy to remain hidden, allowing the reader to respond for himself. There is always the risk, of course, that the reader will make the wrong response.

A writer like John Steinbeck, for example, would not take such a risk; he would make certain that the characters were properly tagged. Miss Gordon does take the risk, for her strategy is to direct the reader's response through art rather than through sentiment. When she shifts point of view to Raeburn, we see him watching his 'skinny shadow racing with him, over the new green shoots of pokeberry and sassafras,' and we learn that 'it occurred to him that it was the middle of April. The dogwoods were all in full flower. Channel cat ought to be biting.' This passage is the first clear signal of the author's attitude, but still it is one that requires an unconventional response. Anyone familiar with the Aleck Maury stories knows, of course, that Miss Gordon sympathizes with Raeburn's longing to go fishing; but the sympathy is not forced on the reader. The superiority of Raeburn's longing is presented through contrast to the work that Doug is willing, even anxious, to do; dig skeletons out of the frozen ground. Indeed, it is from Raeburn's point of view that what the Yankee contractor and Doug stand for is, finally, to be judged.

When Doug says, a paragraph or so later, 'Handlin' a dead Yankee ain't no more to *me* than handlin' a dead hawg,' his declaration does not derive from the author's regional prejudices. Rather, it is her attempt to characterize Doug. Furthermore, the actions of the Yankee contractor are not simply the author's way of jibing at 'Yankee slickness'; they indicate that the contractor, like Doug, exhibits morally repellent values. The contractor is superficially affable, and, like Doug, an early riser who talks the language of the go-getter: 'Now what we got to do is fill the boxes up. The sooner we get done the sooner you get your money.... Ain't that right, Bud?'

With the same care and restraint with which she has introduced the three main characters, Miss Gordon proceeds to describe the grisly contents of the ice house. Her description of the dead soldiers, though unsparingly realistic, reveals an attitude very different from Doug's or the contractor's: 'The skeletons were level with the earth. There was a man's skull on top of the pile. The eye sockets turned toward the door, the ribs and long leg bones slanting away diagonally across the heap, as if the man had flung himself down face forward to look out over the field. Where the light from the open door fell the bones were pale, almost white, but the bones that showed here and there underneath were darker. There was moss on some of them.' The description of the skeleton lying 'as if the man had flung himself down' makes us suddenly aware of the humanity of those who died, not as an enemy soldier to be despised, but as a man who lived once and who even while dying had turned himself in order to 'look out over the field' where the fighting had been and perhaps was still going on.

This apparently objective description has actually pointed us toward the major contrast in the story, that between those who have made a personal commitment to a cause and those who, like the contractor, merely profit from it. After the author has made us feel the humanity of the dead soldiers, she proceeds to describe the corruption that has taken place and the calloused attitude of the living whose only concern for the dead is the profit that is to be made from them.

After the boys enter the ice house, a kind of opposition between them and the contractor develops. This conflict is natural; he is an outsider, and they are friends. But the significant opposition is not, as Andrew Lytle apparently believes, between the Yankee as the embodiment of unchecked materialism and the boys as innocent and sensitive to the physical nausea of death whose 'feeling and reflections are all for life.' A close look at the dramatic structure of the story shows that, on the contrary, Miss Gordon continues to maintain the differences she has already established between Doug and Raeburn and that, as the story nears its close, these differences take on more sinister implications. These differences are also even more indirectly indicated. Doug does the work quickly and efficiently. When Raeburn volunteers to get down into the slimy pit to hack out the skeletons, Doug insists that he stay on. 'It'd just be wasting time now if we change places.' During the lunch period, Raeburn is so nauseated he cannot eat his lunch; Doug has not such difficulty. And Doug's concern with the skeletons is all business: how he is paid, by the day or so much for the job? Raeburn, on the contrary, talks about fishing and tells the Yankee contractor the best way to catch a channel cat.

That Doug is as practical as the Yankee contractor is further shown by his failure to sense the probable feelings of Mrs. Porter, a neighbor woman to whom the Yankee goes to borrow a ladder. Raeburn senses immediately how Mrs. Porter will feel. 'Do you reckon they'll lend him a ladder?' Raeburn asks. 'Shore they will,' Doug says; 'Tain't nothin' to lend anybody a ladder.' When Raeburn reminds Doug that Mrs. Porter had three sons killed in the War by Yankees, Doug laughs: 'This feller never killed no Confederates.' We see in this exchange between Raeburn and Doug a corruption deeper than the Yankee contractor's. The contractor is merely an outsider; but Doug, a Southerner, ought to at least sense how Mrs. Porter will feel. His final remarks on the Yankee's shrewdness--dividing up the skeletons to get paid double--is not just a jibe at Yankee slickness; it is a comment on Doug himself and, by extension, on the qualities that he embodies. The final scene, in which Doug slaps his thigh and rocks with laughter in high appreciation of Yankee cunning, bears comparison to the conclusion of *The Hamlet* by William Faulkner, a novel on somewhat the same theme."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 121-24

"The Ice House' is a simpler story.... In a tone of dry mockery it completes the declension begun and extended in 'Forest of the South' and 'Hear the Nightingale Sing.' With the old American order of well located, civilly connected families decimated...something new is left to feed upon the remains of Connecticut and Mississippi, Indiana and Tennessee-Kentucky. Miss Gordon's name for this culture is 'opportunity.' Its form is that of a puffy decadent Federal contractor whose version of the carpetbagger's 'main-chance in the South' comes in the unrecovered bodies of his countrymen, left for collection and proper burial near the battlefields where they fell. In this 'forest' they tangled. But it is still possible to employ what is left of them, to bind up the nation's wounds in a profit.

As we consider the nameless contractor of this story, we should recall what came after Lincoln, what occurred in the last four decades of the previous century. Jay Gould is hardly what the New England idealists had in mind as a consequence of their (and their minions') blood and labor. Neither does he represent anything good for the farmers of Indiana. By reason of exhaustion, heavy casualties, and consequent default, *business* (instead of politics or war) has become the accepted way of improving upon and ordering the national reality.

That society is dead we are informed not only by the bodies gathered like meat in the ice house but also by the absence of women and kindred from the context of their excavation. As a principle, there is in this narrative only the self ('by the head')--only appetite--and therefore as characters only the atomistic individuals who follow these appetites. The contractor's byword, 'opportunity,' cannot easily coexist with

the traditional network of interdependencies, courtesies, and multidimensional associations that had been the commonweal. For, unto itself, it takes out of that ancient milieu even the memory of its sacramental sanctions.... Union, as personified by Miss Gordon's contractor, has become absolute, much to the ultimate dismay of its most metaphysical exponents [such as Emerson].

Doug and Raeburn, the Southern boys hired by the visiting entrepreneur to dig up carrion, are, in their attitudes toward the dead Yankees, an extrapolation of Barbara's callousness in the final scene of 'Hear the Nightingale Sing.' These perfectly 'detached' and ingenuous observers are once more rendered in three stages. First, the place and time (plus their characters) are established. It is 1866, four years since the winter day when the dead from the battle were deposited in a Southern ice house. Furthermore, they are nothing to these young men, 'no more than...a dead hawg.'

Doug and Raeburn speak of catfish, of their employer, and of the attitude of the blacks towards the handling of the dead. They mention other men who would not do this work; and, for a time, they get a little sick from the stench of their occupation. But silver is scarce in their neighborhood. Moreover, they like to work together. Even so, their minds are on the fishing to which they almost gave the day in spite of the money, on that and their honor in giving the Yankee what he pays for. And they come away largely unaffected by the job. The author makes of them completely natural young Southerners of their generation. And she also gives the contractor his humanities. It is part of the strategy of her fabling--lends authority to its burden. By means of such details we are made to know for ourselves what the principals could not fully tell us.

These boys can work skeletons as if they were so much cordwood because of what has already been done to these unidentifiable cadavers, because the remains have been there for some time, and because the movers are young and apparently little affected by the late war. For all these reasons, and for one more. And that is, of course, the imputed significance given this 'government property' by the government's representative.

In the middle portion of this story, the contractor is introduced--his person, his amiability, and his 'practical' philosophy. Here the boys get their job done, and the horror of it is represented vigorously to our imagination. Skeletons are lifted out of the ice house, placed in a wheelbarrow, and rolled out of sight for confinement by the contractor in his row of coffins. There is also in this section considerable foreshadowing of Miss Gordon's macabre denouement. For the boys begin to suspect, in the course of the day, that their employer is not treating his 'charges' properly. They talk to keep their minds off the business at hand, and the bloated old Yankee leaves for a time, expecting to borrow a ladder from one of his former enemies, just as if there had been no war. The skeletons break up in the hands of their manipulators, and the odor rising from the bones is that of 'an abandoned slaughter house.' But the day draws to a close, and the contractor returns empty-handed.

In the story's conclusion, after the boys have recovered enough Yankee remains to fill the contractor's boxes, to their small surprise but general relief, he discharges them, saying, 'I don't believe I'll be needin' you boys tomorrow.' However, they wait around and, to check out their suspicions, spy on the old man from behind a clump of buckberry bushes. These doubts are confirmed. For as they soon discover, the old Yankee has decided to save himself trouble by dividing up the bodies in such a way as to fill his coffins with one day's paid labor. After Doug and Raeburn have left the scene, they laugh: 'If that ain't a Yankee for ye!' For now they are certain: 'There ain't a whole man in ary one of them boxes.'

Clearly the boys are saying more than they know, are offering a judgment of the invasion whose detritus has been for a time their problem. All unilinear, simplistic approaches to the human condition carry in themselves the potential of such fracturing as they have identified. Miss Gordon is observing in her Civil War stories (as she observed in *None Shall Look Back*) that Americans, in the middle of the past century, went through a series of such approaches. The contractor embodies one in which they were finally united. Like 'The Ice House,' it was an ironic conclusion--a wry comment on the high cost of all such Unions in death."

M. E. Bradford
"The High Cost of 'Union': Caroline Gordon's Civil War Stories"

"Maxwell Perkins returned [the story] saying that they had too many 'tragic and gruesome' stories. In 'The Ice House,' set in 1866, two boys in Virginia are hired by a Yankee to dig the skeletons of Yankee soldiers out of the pit of an old icehouse and load them into coffins, which their employer hauls off. The two realize that the man is spreading the skeletons out over more coffins to get more money. 'That ain't a whole man in ary one of them boxes,' says one of the young men. 'If that ain't a Yankee fer ye!' says the other in the closing line of the story."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 91

"In... 'The Ice House,' Caroline traced the roots of the materialistic tenant system and New South to the chaos, moral as well as political, of Reconstruction. Two young Southerners, Doug and Raeburn, are hired by a Yankee carpetbagger to remove the skeletons of Union soldiers from their temporary interment in an old ice house. Doug gradually loses his abhorrence of the rotting corpses and becomes interested in working hard and making as much money as he can. When he and Raeburn spy the contractor dividing the skeletons to fill more coffins and earn more money, Doug laughs admiringly. He is a harbinger of the New South, emulating the Yankee pursuit of lucre until he is oblivious of the corruption he must handle to attain it. The South has become an ice house that no longer serves its function of preserving old traditions, but is merely a dumping ground for a meaningless jumble of corrupt Yankee ways."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 100-01

"Set in Virginia in 1866, 'The Ice House' was the tale of two boys hired by an enterprising Yankee to dig up the remains of Union soldiers buried four years earlier in a mass grave in the old ice house. Caroline thought it was perhaps the best story she had written so far; she painted the grim scene and the boys' contrasting reactions to their task in swift, vivid strokes....

Katherine Anne Porter, writing from Mexico, thought it a 'fine story,' a 'noble tale.' She told Caroline she went around 'reading it to people' and would be glad to 'send it around a little' to see if it couldn't find a 'wider circulation.... Perkins does not know what he wants,' she said, pointing out how he had refused two of her own best stories, 'Flowering Judas' and 'The Theft.' Caroline's stories were 'full of light, and very firm and sure,' and Katherine Anne was impressed with her use of dialogue. 'No one who has not tried it can imagine what it takes to get people in stories to talk like that,' she wrote."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 92-93

"The Ice House" superficially considered is a Gothic story emphasizing horror and death. The situation is Gothic, but this is a lot more than a story by Poe. It is also more than "The Upturned Face," the powerful Civil War story by Stephen Crane rendering a burial. This story is a deep analysis of human nature and the cultural history of the United States after the Civil War, well analyzed by several critics. The style has been compared to Hemingway with the suggestion that Gordon was influenced by him, but that is misleading. Both writers were Modernists with aesthetics derived from Realism rooted in Classicism, or Neoclassicism, especially Gordon, who studied Classical literature, whereas Hemingway was more influenced by the style he cultivated as a journalist than by ancient classics.

The time is 1866, less than a year after the surrender of the South. It is April, "the cruelest month" in *The Waste Land* (1922) by T. S. Eliot. Southerners such as Wilmer have not forgotten the war and would not do the job the boys take on: "He said he wouldn't tech it for *no* amount of money." Likewise Mrs. Porter, with the name of Gordon's close friend, also a Southerner, Katherine Anne Porter: "Mrs. Porter hates Yankees... They was three of her boys killed by the Yankees." Her hatred is natural and even seems more humane than the attitudes of the two boys, both of whom are only fifteen years old and apparently

were not much affected by the war, though Doug has the common Southern prejudice: "Handlin' a dead Yankee ain't no more to *me* than handlin' a dead hawg." Gordon identifies her friend with heartfelt grief and the refusal to lend the carpetbagger a ladder while separating her from hatred of Northerners with the facts that Katherine Anne Porter was born long after the war and had no children. A ladder is for climbing up and neither of the two Porters would help an opportunist exploit the dead for profit.

The carpetbagger is an urban capitalist, the opposite of an Agrarian: "Farm work's all right if you can't get nothing else to do, but a smart young feller like you wants to be looking out fer opportunity." In contrast, Raeburn's talk about fishing identifies him with the values and lifestyle of a rural Southerner and the "sick feeling" he gets doing this job differentiates him from both Doug and the dishonest carpetbagger. When Doug exclaims, "There ain't a whole man in ary one of them boxes," the irony is that the same applies to himself and the carpetbagger, both of whom lack the heart and soul to be a whole man. It is important to notice that Gordon makes Doug the Southerner just as opportunistic as the callous Northerner, transcending regional prejudice and making the last line of the story resound with irony: "If that ain't a Yankee fer ye!" Note also that blacks are contrasted to whites with the implication that blacks would not do such a job as these boys are willing to do: "Niggers don't like to have nothin' to do with dead people." As applied to the situation in this story, such blacks are more humane than these whites.

As usual in fiction by Gordon, this story is rich in irony and appropriate symbolic details, such as the contrast between the skeletons of men who gave their lives for a noble cause and the fat opportunist who cares only for himself, the forked paths that differentiate Doug from Raeburn in the first sentence, and the pun on Doug/dug, the more callous boy with an icy sensibility who insists on working in the burial pit digging up the bones. The inhumanity of any mass grave is emphasized by the fact that the skeletons cannot be recognized as individuals: "It's getting 'em dug out and getting 'em loose from each other that's so hard" and "Some of 'em was blowed to pieces." The story was published in 1931 but would become even more pertinent after the mass graves of the coming World War II.

Michael Hollister (2020)